The Notion of Charisma: Historicizing the Gift of God on Medieval Europe

La noción de carisma: La historización del don de Dios en la Europa medieval

Jaume AURELL

Universidad de Navarra. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Pamplona. España
ID ORCID 0000-0002-1683-0100
saurell@unav.es

Abstract: This article analyzes the transformations in the concept of charisma since its original use by Paul in the first century up to its last post-Weberian derivations in the twenty-first century. It argues for the desirability of a return to its Pauline origins in order to apply it to historical realities, specifically those referring to medieval Europe. Its aim is to return the debate on charisma to the historical discipline, beyond the presentist orientation of the social sciences. Specifically, I highlight the dangers of ignoring the theological and spiritual origin of the whole discussion on charisma, and of the concept itself, to avoid antiquarian alienation or presentist solipsism.

Keywords: Charisma, Saint Paul, Rudolf Sohm, Max Weber, Medieval Europe.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza las transformaciones del concepto de carisma desde su uso original por Pablo en el siglo I hasta sus últimas derivaciones postweberianas en el siglo XXI. Defiende la conveniencia de volver a sus orígenes paulinos para aplicarlo a las realidades históricas, concretamente las referidas a la Europa medieval. Su objetivo es devolver el debate sobre el carisma a las disciplinas históricas y teológicas, más allá de la orientación presentista de las ciencias sociales. En concreto, destaco la distorsión que supone ignorar el origen teológico y espiritual de toda la discusión sobre el carisma, y del propio concepto, para evitar la alienación anticuaria o el solipsismo presentista.

Palabras clave: Carisma, San Pablo, Rudolph Sohm, Max Weber, Europa medieval.

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JAUME AURELL

It is the fate of sociological concepts to suffer debasement.

(Bryan R. Wilson) [1]

While social scientists have generated a massive literature on charisma, historians have made relatively little use of the concept.

(David A. Bell) [2]

The notion of charisma – and its active use as a tool for social, political and economic analysis – was defined by Max Weber at the beginning of the twentieth century as captivating attractiveness or charm that enables one to develop tasks of political and religious leadership. However, St. Paul had already used the term to refer to a special gift received from God in one of his exhortations to the incipient Christian community of the Corinthians in the middle of the first century. The concept was taken up by thirteenth-century scholastic theologians, who preserved Paul's meaning, but always connected it with the related notion of grace. In the late nineteenth century, Protestant theologian Rudolph Sohm used it to explain the transition from an early Christian community based on charisma to a hierarchical Catholic Church around the third century. Finally, Weber transferred Sohm's theological concept to sociology. Appropriated and secularized by Weberian and post-Weberian sociology, charisma entered the core of the contemporary social sciences, generating an intense debate that lasts to this day.

This article analyzes the transformations in the concept of charisma since its original use by Paul in the first century up to its last post-Weberian derivations in the twenty-first century. It argues for the desirability of a return to its Pauline origins in order to apply it to historical realities, specifically

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[2] BELL, D. A., *Men on Horseback: The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020, 233.

those referring to medieval Europe. Its aim is to return the debate on charisma to the historical discipline, outside of the presentist orientation of the social sciences. Specifically, I want to highlight the dangers of ignoring the theological and spiritual origin of the whole discussion on charisma, and of the concept itself, to avoid antiquarian alienation or presentist solipsism. As Robert Yelle argues,

> If the study of religion is to have any relevance, it must be by providing a more accurate diagnosis of what "modernity" represents with respect to such ideas of sacrality and sovereignty. If this is not done, then we are left with either an antiquarianism that refrains from drawing the comparison between religion and secular modernity, and remains perpetually a mode of alienation; or a hopelessly presentist approach that, by never challenging itself with the real difference represented by other modes of being in the world, is trapped in solipsism[3].

In the first section of the article, I analyze the concept of charisma as it was originally defined by St. Paul and received by the authors of the first Christian centuries and scholastic theology. In the second part, I explore the bibliography published in recent years on the manifestations of charisma in the Middle Ages. Specifically, I will examine some key aspects such as prophecy, preaching, pardon, and miracles. Finally, based precisely on these last historiographical contributions, I critically approach some of the Weberian and post-Weberian theories, coming from the social sciences, about charisma, which from my point of view have distorted the historical analysis of its manifestations over time. I argue that the charisma is a historical reality that must be analyzed jointly by historians and theologians, or at least by historians with theological sensitivity or theologians with historical sensitivity, otherwise this concept cannot be fully understood.

THE ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT: GOVERNING CHARISMA IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

In some of his writings, Paul began to use the concept of *charisma* and *charismata* to refer to specific *gifts of the Holy Spirit* that some Christian belie-

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[3] YELLE, R., *Sovereignty and the Sacred: Secularism and the Political Economy of Religion*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019, 73.

vers in the nascent community had received, some of them for the service of the community and others to ostentatiously manifest the divine intervention[4]. This definition is certainly essentialist in nature, since it does not consider the semantic transformations that the concept suffered in the course of history. In particular, medieval theology subsequently emphasized the relationship between charisma and grace, to the detriment of its direct link with the Holy Spirit, as Paul had conceived it. In fact, he not only calls these gifts *charismata* [χαρίσματα], but also – even more properly – *pneumatica* [πνευματικά], especially in the letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:1 and 1 Cor. 14:1).

On the other hand, not all these charisms entailed a benefit to the community. The *glossolalia*, the gift of tongues, only benefited the one who received it, since he/she entered into communion with God, but not with the believers, who understood nothing of what the charismatic person spoke, as described in 1 Cor. 14:2-4. There Paul distinguishes the one who speaks "in tongues" and is not understood by the community from the one who "prophesies", who is understood and acts in the service of the Church. Certainly, the Apostle privileges in 1 Cor. 14 the charisms that edify the community (*prophecy*), but the essence of the concept of charisma is not limited to its function in the service of the community, because then *glossolalia* would not be considered a charisma.

In generating this new nuanced meaning of the word *charisma*, Paul undoubtedly took advantage of the versatility that the word *charis* in classical Greek, since it could mean at the same time grace, beauty, gift, or charm, and could refer to both the ritual of giving and receiving[5]. This concept has been

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[4] During the article I will cite the specific bibliography on charisma and its semantic evolution, but here I would like to highlight, on the one hand, the works dedicated specifically to charisma as conceived by St. Paul, such as VANHOYE, A., *I carismi nel Nuovo Testamento*, Roma: GBP, 2011; TIBBS, C., *Religious Experience of the Pneuma: Communication with the Spirit World in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007; LI, S. Y., *Paul's Teaching on the Pneumatika in 1 Corinthians 12–14. Prophecy as the Paradigm of ta Charismata ta Meizona for the Future-Oriented Ekklesia*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017. On the other hand, on the history of the concept of charisma, especially those written historians and political philosophers, especially see especially POTTS, J., *A History of Charisma*, New York: Palgrave, 2009, 12-50; LLOYD, V. W., *In Defense of Charisma*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. See also GRIEVE, A. J., «Charismata», in HASTINGS, J. (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, III, New York: Charles Scribner, 1951, 368-372. For the testimonies on charisma Ancient and medieval literature, RITTER, A. M., *Charisma im Verständis des Johannes Chysostomos*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972; BAUMERT, N., *Charisma, Taufe, Geisttaufe. I: I, Entflechtung einer semantischen Verwirrung*, Würzburg: Echter, 2001; and BROCKHAUS, U., *Charisma und Amt*, Wupertal: Brockhaus 1972; and EVENT-EZRA, A., «The Conceptualization of Charisma in the Early Thirteenth Century», *Viator* 44 (2013) 151-168.

[5] HARRISON, J. R., *Paul's Language of Grace in Its Graeco-Roman Context*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003, 2.

used, always in a religious and spiritual context, with an analogous meaning by civilizations of very different in character[6].

Applying the concept to the primitive Christian communities, Paul defines and describes these charisms and their proliferation among the Corinthians:

> There are different kinds of gifts [*charismaton*], but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts [*charismata*] of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines[7].

Yet, at the end of the same chapter, he introduces a certain hierarchy among these charisms, arguing for their regulation and ordering:

> Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts [*charismata*] of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts [*charismata*] of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts [*charismata*][8].

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6 BELL, D., «Sociodicy: A Guide to Modern Usage», *The American Scholar* 35 (1966) 696-714, here 702.
7 Saint Paul, 1 Corinthians, 12:4-11.
8 Saint Paul, 1 Corinthians, 12:27-31. Another similar passage may be found in the first letter to Timothy, 4:14. But the references to the charisma in the first epistle to the Corinthians are the most relevant critically, because they are almost certainly the oldest of the them, as it was possibly written between 53-54, while that of the Romans was written around 58-59 and that of Timothy after his first Roman captivity, around the year 61. For the different Paul's uses and meanings of this concept, see NJIRU, P. K., *Charisms and the Holy Spirit's Activity in the Body of Christ*, Roma: Gregoriana, 2002; and GIGNAC, A., «Charismes pauliniens et charisme wébérien, des "faux-amis"?», *Théologiques* 17, 1 (2009) 139-162.

We know that, in addition to the Corinthians, these charisms were also experienced at least by the communities of Ephesus and Rome. The *Acts of the Apostles* tells that twelve of the disciples in Ephesus, who only knew the baptism of John instead of that of Jesus, "spoke with tongues, and prophesied"[9].

Paul also uses this concept in the epistle to the Romans, most probably written some years after the letter to the Corinthians:

> We have different gifts [*charismata*] according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully[10].

Paul's ideas on charisma were taken up a few decades later by the author of the first letter of St. Peter:

> Each of you should use whatever gift [*charisma*] you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ[11].

Shortly after Paul and Peter's (or Peter's Letter author) original writings, the first Latin versions of the Gospels translated the Greek *charisma* by *gratia* or *charisma* without distinction – the word *gratia* (grace) emphasizing the gratuitous dimension of the gift, while the word *charisma* underscores the gift itself. At the end of the fourth century, these terms were fixed in the *Vulgate*, which was considered the official Latin translation of the Bible until well into the twentieth century. Its author translated the original "different gifts [charisms] by reason of the grace" [χαρίσματα κατὰ τὴν χάριν] (Rom. 12, 6) by *donationes secundum gratiam* ("gifts according the [divine] grace"). This definition of the original Greek stressed the divinity of the gift received by some believers.

From the first century onwards, the concept of charisma was endowed with a specific meaning as "free gift of extraordinary grace" until well into the

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[9] Acts of the Apostles, 19:6.
[10] Saint Paul, Romans, 12:6-8.
[11] 1 Peter 4:8-11.

nineteenth century – at least in all the territories with a Christian tradition. However, although it never lost its original meaning, from the fourth century, the concept did not play as essential a role in society and Church as it had in early Christianity. This progression from charisma towards institutionalization would also explain the early crisis of Montanism, a prophetic movement that already postulated a return to pneumatic origins at the end of the second century, emphasizing the action of the Holy Spirit – a tendency towards spiritualization that would become a continuous trend in the history of the Christianity, up to the Pentecostal and Pneumatological movements of the present day. This progressive disuse of the charisma was caused in part by the lesser experience of these extraordinary graces among Christians from the fourth century onwards or, perhaps more properly, to their lowered awareness[12].

Rethinking Medieval Charisma: Thirteenth-Century Scholastics

The concept of charisma was revitalized in the thirteenth century, in the debates of nascent scholasticism around the theological concept of grace. These discussions seem to be reduced to theoretical problems argued by a few intellectuals but, in reality, they responded to the proliferation and intensification of new forms of charisms among Christians, including new forms of preaching, intense prophetic activity, a greater sensitivity to the experience of miracles, the tendency to ecstasies and mysticism in the spiritual experience, and the emergence of the mendicant orders[13].

Some of the most influential intellectuals of thirteenth-century scholasticism took part in these debates on charisma and grace. Bonaventure recovered the term in his work *Breviloquium*, in which he equates the beauty of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to the splendor of the gifts (*charismata*) of holiness. He speaks of *gratia gratis data*, a concept which emphasizes the gratuity of this gift, a term reminiscent of that of *donationes secundum gratiam*, argued in Pau-

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[12] Blasi, A. J., *Making Charisma: The Social Construction of Paul's Publica Image*, New Brunswick: Transaction, 1991.

[13] Event-Ezra, A., «The Conceptualization of Charisma in the Early Thirteenth Century», *Viator* 44 (2013) 151-168. See also Rossi Monti, M., «The Mask of Grace: On Body and Beauty of Soul between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages», in Bedos-Rezak, B. M. (ed.), *Faces of Charisma: Image, Text, Object in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 47-75.

l's Epistle to the Romans (chapter 12, verse 6), as translated by the *Vulgata*. Yet, this free gift must be activated by good personal dispositions and facts: *gratia gratum faciens* [14]. Thomas Aquinas also uses the concept *charismata* in his *Summa Theologica*, relating it more to the concept of charity and love (the Latin *caritas*, from the Greek *agape*, used by Paul in his Epistles) than to that of the gift of grace (*charisma*). He includes the subject of the *charisma* always in connection with the treatise of Grace (in the *Prima Secundae*, of the *Summa Theologiae*, Questions 109-112). He distinguishes between freely given grace (*gratia gratis data*) and sanctifying grace (*gratis gratum faciens*), in parallel to Paul's distinction between charismatic gifts and charity in 1 Corinthians 13, emphasizing that "freely bestowed grace is of more value than sanctifying grace" [15].

Bonaventure and Thomas focused on the more theoretical aspects of the concept. However, intellectuals such as William of Auxerre, William of Auvergne, Hugh of St. Cher, Geoffrey of Poitiers and Roland of Cremona, focused on the practice of prophecy, one of the key charismatic dimensions of late medieval Europe. Philip the Chancellor of Paris introduced the idea of *gratia gratis data non gratum faciens* – a non-gratifying-grace, which is freely given but does not make its receiver worthy of eternal life and of God [16]. Philip refers to Paul's passage of the twelfth chapter in the first letter to the Corinthians already mentioned, as a source of his research. Alexander of Hales defined this non-gratifying-grace as "a gift infused with a rational nature without merits in itself, preparing him for

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[14] «Speaking more particularly, "grace" refers to the assistance that God gives human beings so that they might prepare themselves for receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is the condition by which we are able to perform meritorious deeds. This is called "gratuitously giben grace" [gratia gratis data]». (BONAVENTURE, *Texts in Translation Series. Volume IX. Breviloquium*, KARRIS, R. J. [ed.], Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2006, 174). See the whole Part Five: "On the Grace of the Holy Spirit",169-264.

[15] "Ergo gratia gratis data est dignor quam gratis gratum faciens" (THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*. Prima Secundae, Question 111, article 5, in ERNST, C. (ed.), *Summa Theologiae. Volume 30. The Gospel of Grace*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, 140-141. On Aquinas' conception of charisma, see BLANKENHORN, B., «The Metaphysics of Charisms: Thomas Aquinas, Biblical Exegesis and Pentecostal Theology», *Angelicum* 91 (2014) 373-424.

[16] "Gratia dicitur gratis data et non gratum faciens" and "Primo autem agendum est de gratia gratis data non gratum faciente et post de gratum faciente": these two quotes in *Philippi Cancellarii Parisiensis Summa de Bono*, WICKI, N. (ed.), Berne: Francke Bernae, 1985, vol. 1: 356 and vol. 2: 489. On Philip the Chancellor's conception of charisma, see also EVEN-EZRA, A., «The Conteptualization», 155-159.

his own salvation or for the edification of another"[17]. Non-gratifying grace (*non gratum faciens*) prepares its subject to be worthy of God, while gratifying grace (*gratum faciens*) makes the subject itself worthy and accepted by God. The former is a gift that is given for the sake of another, for the service to the community, while the latter can remain an individual practice.

These debates around prophecy as charisma influenced the discussions on preaching, another of the most relevant dimensions of medieval charisma. John of La Rochelle argued that all the gifts referred to by Paul to the Corinthians are sub-divisions of the gift of preaching. He notes that when the Holy Spirit acts inside a person, gratifying grace is present, while the non-gratifying grace is a manifestation of the Spirit alone without the actions of the receiver. In the thirteenth century, the set of abilities required for preaching were gradually perceived as a *donum* rather than a simply an *ars* – an evolution completely opposed to those of the *Speculum Principum* or the *Ars Mercatoria* which were being developed at the same time for the training of the new emerging political and economic elites[18]. Humbert of Romans argued that the grace of preaching derived from a special gift of God beyond the conventional training involved in any human activity – something that no book or master could teach.

These new ideas regarding charisma – focused on prophecy and preaching and emphasizing its gratuity – reflected two historical realities contemporary to these theologians' speculations, around the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century. First, the proliferation of prophecies since Joachim of Fiore and, second, the profusion of charismatic preaching from the beginning of the mendicant orders – such as Fulk of Neuilly and Francis of Assisi[19]. The new prophets and preachers established innovative forms of interaction with their audiences, creating new social and cultural mechanisms of persuasion and attraction. These charismatic actors might or might not have been part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy (and therefore per-

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[17] ALEXANDER OF HALES, *Summa theologica seu sic ab origine dicta "Summa fratris Alexandri"*, Florencia: Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1924-1948, vol. 3, 1025.

[18] MORENZONI, F., «Parole du prédicateur et inspirations divine d'après les *artes predicandi*», DESSI, R. M. and LAUWERS, M. (eds.), *La parole du prédicateur Ve-XVe siècle*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1997, 271-310.

[19] LEE, H., REEVES, M. and SILANO, G., *Western Mediterranean Prophecy. The School of Joachim of Fiore and the Fourteenth-Century*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1988.

form an *officium*) or of the scholastic community, but they possessed charisma for their service to the Christian community, which consisted of a capacity to persuade based on a creative sense that was perceived by the believers as something totally new.

The evolution of these social realities, in which charisma replaces technique and art, developed in contrast to traditional knowledge and theological speculation. The charismatic culture of the old masters, based on the corporal presence of the teacher, was replaced by the scholastic tradition and rational culture, based on texts, arguments, and representation. As Stephen Jaeger demonstrates, during the transition between the twelfth and thirteenth century, the old charismatic teachers of the schools such as Abelard and Hugo of St. Victor were replaced by the new scholastic teachers of the universities such as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure[20]. Ayelet Even-Ezra wonders, rightly, if it was this growth of systematization, formal education and "bookishness" – and the concomitant sense of the charisma *lost in transition* – which represented an acknowledgement of the opposite element, the unteachable gift[21].

THE EXPERIENCE OF CHARISMA IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

When moving to a reality of the past rather than discursive perspective, focused on the analysis of the events rather than on narratives, the historical interpretation highlights the context of the period in which the term has to be understood. In medieval Europe, the narration of miracles, the reception of prophecies, the practice of mysticism, and the experience of preaching were perceived as truly extraordinary actions of God, and the dynamics of contemporary leadership were irrelevant. The original Pauline idea of charisma as a gift of God and the debate around the role of grace in bestowing it among thirteenth-century scholars fit with the spirit and the context of what was happening in thirteenth- and fourteenth-centuries Europe.

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[20] JAEGER, C. S., *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideas in Medieval Europe, 950-1200*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994. See also MÜNSTER-SWENDSEN, M., «Medieval *Virtuosity*: Classroom Practice and the Transfer of Charismatic Power in Medieval Scholarly Culture, c. 1000-1230», in BRUUN, M. B. and GLASER, S. (eds.), *Negotiating Heritage: Memories of the Middle Ages*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2008, 43-63.

[21] EVEN-EZRA, A., «The Conceptualization», 164; and JAEGER, C. S., *The Sense of the Sublime in the Middle Ages*, Urbana, 2021, chapters 7 and 9.

Some collected volumes on charisma in the Middle Ages published recently confirm this reality. Nevertheless, these works do not approach charisma *per se* – how the gift of God is manifested in certain charismatic actions – but mediated by other realities: in the institutions rather than in the agents[22]; in charisma connected with the religious authority[23]; or in the projection of charisma onto objects[24]. But all these studies, and the historical sources available, anticipate the possibility of constructing monographs in the future, based on the concept as articulated originally by Paul and conceptualized by the late medieval scholastics.

These texts show that a historical approach to some apparently *peripheral* manifestations of authority, such as preaching or prophesying, allows us to rescue other formulas of power that may become central due to the exercise of charisma. An extraordinary example of this is, of course, St. Francis who succeeded not only as a charismatic individual, but also avoided the routinization of charisma, which would explain his reluctance to fix a Rule for his Order: "and therefore if you are amazed and ask how an order which has no foundation there and rule it [the order] through his own self, and therefore it can indeed be shaken and buffeted, but cannot fail"[25].

But, beyond the model case of St. Francis, charismatic manifestations were recurrent in medieval times, with preaching among the most relevant of them. As Katherine L. Jansen and Miri Rubin have argued, medieval preachers "were masters of movement and gesture, each of which contributed to the effectiveness of the charismatic performance"[26]. As one of his contemporaries testified, the Franciscan Bernardino of Siena was a master in the art of persuading a crowd, "now sweet and gentle, now sad and grave, with a voice so flexible that he could do with it whatever he wished"[27]. In their collective

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[22] ANDENNA, G. et al. (eds.), *Charisma und Religiöse Gemeinschaften im Mittelalter*, Münster: Lit, 2005; D'ACUNTO, N. et al., *Il Carisma nel secolo XI. Genesi, forme e dinamiche istituzionali*, Verona: Gabrielli, 2006; FELTEN, F. F., *Institution und Charisma*, Cologne: Bohlau, 2009.

[23] HUTTON, R. R., *Charisma and Authority in Israelite Society*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994; JANSEN, K. L. and RUBIN, M. (eds.), *Charisma and Religious Authority. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Preaching, 1200-1500*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2010.

[24] BEDOS-REZAK, B. M. and RUST, M. D., *Faces of Charisma*.

[25] FRANCIS ASSISI, *Sermon* in Bibliothèque Nationale de France, lat. 3736 (incipit *Surrexis Elias* [*Eccl. 48:1*]), fol. 247v, quoted in D'AVRAY, D. L., *Medieval Religious Rationalities. A Weberian Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 82.

[26] JANSEN, K. L. and RUBIN, M. (eds.), «Introduction», *Charisma and Religious Authority*, 9-10.

[27] ORIGO, I., *The World of san Bernardino*, London: The reprint society, 1962, 26.

volume, Jansen and Rubin distinguish supernatural from secular charisma, and "probe that charisma through the preaching event in its plenitude"[28]. The religious prophet and preacher was believed to speak and teach with an authority derived from God. The word "charisma" was actually used by medieval preachers themselves, especially in the case of Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris, theologian and diplomats, to the fellow-delegates at the Council of Constance. He uses charisma as "a particular gift bestowed by God", in St. Paul's sense[29].

Prophecy is another of manifestations of charisma in the Middle Ages. Hugues of Saint-Cher declares that *Prophetia non est habitus, sed actus* ("prophecy is not a posture, but an action")[30]. This definition fits perfectly with the original definition of charisma, which emphasizes the gift as service to the community for a specific performance rather than something that imprints character for life, independent of the virtuousness of the gifted, as Thomas Aquinas remarked[31]. That is why the great subject of *sanctity* is not properly a charismatic manifestation, except in the saints' specific acts. The notion of prophecy was seriously debated by thirteenth century scholastics – Hughes of Saint-Cher, Philip the Chancellor, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure – and practiced by fourteenth-century visionaries, with a clear tendency towards messianism. The Catalan-Occitan Franciscan Jean de Roquetaillade was one of the key figures of medieval prophetism, and the typical model of charisma as counter-power. His prophecies consisted basically in a violent denunciation of ecclesiastical abuses, which brought him into disfavor with his superiors, resulting in his imprisonment in local Franciscan convents[32]. The manifestations of a messianism based on the original ideas of Joaquim de Fiore spread throughout Europe. All these are echoes, of course, of the great millenarian movement that especially affected late medieval Europe,

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[28] JANSEN, K. L. and RUBIN, M. (eds.), «Introduction», 3.
[29] BOSE, M., «Can Orthodoxy Be Charismatic? The Preaching of Jean Gerson», in *Charisma and Religious Authority*, 215-233. See also DEBBY, N. B.-A., «Italian Pulpits: Preaching, Art, and Spectacle», in *Charisma and Religious Authority*, 123-143.
[30] TORRELL, J.-P., *Recherches sur la théorie de la prophétie au Moyen Age, XIIe-XIVe siècles*, Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires de Fribourg, 1992, 5.
[31] TORRELL, J.-P., *Recherches*, 5.
[32] TORRELL, J.-P., *Recherches*, 231-250.

but in some places like Catalonia they acquire a special charismatic air of supernatural revelation[33].

Another promising field for historical analysis of charisma lies in the analysis of the notion of forgiveness. The gift of forgiveness is highly charismatic, since it is directly related to the capacity to give, which in turn refers directly to the gift of God that constitutes the charisma. However, the most purely charismatic forms of forgiveness are those that have not been previously ritualized or formalized, such as the sacrament of confession or the many feudal ceremonies that aim to make restitution for transgressions between lords and vassals. Geoffrey Koziol's *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* centered on early medieval France and under the prism of ritual studies, rather than charismatic studies, as he analyzes the ritual of supplication:

> Supplication is simply the act of begging a favor or forgiveness in a formal language of entreaty. A close synonym in our period would be "prayer"... One kind of supplication was of particular importance: that in which individuals begged pardon or favor from lords who were believed to hold their authority from God. These lords were not only addressed deferentially. They were also entreated with language and gestures that assimilated their authority to God's. We will call this kind of supplication "theophanic" or "regalian": "theophanic" because the individual who supplicated a lord in this way recognized the divine grace that infused the lord's office; "regalian" because the model for this kind of supplication was the supplication of kings and the King of kings[34].

Another of the most eloquent benefits in searching for the origins of charisma is the acknowledgment of its material projection. Stephen Jaeger argues that charisma can be understood as an aesthetic phenomenon that may manifest itself through any number of artistic and literary media[35]. He tried to expand the notion of charisma to "works of art and of characters represented in them, which or who can inspire the same sort of admiring wonder and urge

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[33] Cohn, N., *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchist of the Middle Ages*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970; Thrupp, S. (ed.), *Millenial Dreams in Action. Essays in Comparative Study*, The Hague: Mouton, 1962.

[34] Koziol, G., *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, 8-9.

[35] Jaeger, C. S., *Enchantment: On Charisma and the Sublime in the Arts of the West*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

to imitate as living charismatic figures"[36]. Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak and Martha Dana Rust have worked on Jaeger's intuition that "the terms 'charisma', 'aura', and 'enchantment' can be profitably rehabilitated as critical concept to analyze art, literature, and films, their aesthetics, their impact on the audience, and the psychology of both star and fan"[37]. This has opened the academic study of this field to aesthetics – particularly to art, liturgy, cinema, and literature – and confirms that the original Pauline concept of charisma serves modern realities and cultural manifestations[38].

CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE CONTEMPORARY CONCEPT OF CHARISMA

The mentioned studies on the experience of charisma in medieval Europe, well contextualized, make us question the contemporary secularized idea of charisma, reduced in fact to the concept of leadership in organizations.

The modern redefinition and use of the concept of charisma was originally carried out by German Protestant theologians in the nineteenth century. Rudolph Sohm reintroduced the concept as a scholarly critical tool in his analysis of the transformation of the *charismatic* primitive Christian community into the *hierarchical* Roman Catholic church[39]. Sohm also transferred the concept from the realm of experience, as explained by Paul, to the sphere of modern academic discourse. But he was more interested in its application of historical reality – the history of early Christianity – rather than in the theological discussions on grace as privileged by thirteenth-century scholastics. Sohm contrasted charisma with hierarchy, assuming that,

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[36] JAEGER, C. S., *Enchantment*, 11.

[37] JAEGER, C. S., *Enchantment*, 9.

[38] See the special volume of the journal *New German Critique* on the topic «Narrating Charisma» (2011), «Introduction» by HORN, E. See also ROACH, J., *It*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007. MACLACHLAN, B., *The Age of Grace: Charis in Early Greek Poetry*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, connects charisma and aesthetic theory. MORIN, E., *Les Stars*, Paris: Seuil, 2015, compares the reception of film stars with that of saints in the form of cult of relics and pilgrimages. DELOOZ, P., *Sociologie et canonisations*, La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969, emphasizes the reception of charisma or what Shils called the propensity to impute charisma. LILTI, A., *Figures publiques. L'invention de la célébrité, 1750-1850*, Paris: Fayard, 2014, analyses the charisma under the form of the modern celebrities. BINSKI, P., *Gothic Wonder: Art, Artifice, and the Decorated Style, 1290-1350*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, approaches the connections between charisma and art.

[39] HALEY, P., «Rudolph Sohm on Charisma», *The Journal of Religion* 60 (1980) 185-197.

The doctrine of the constitution of the ecclesia which was derived from the divine word, but in truth was apostolic, is that the organization of Christianity is not legal but charismatic. Christianity is organized by the distribution of gifts of grace (*charismata*) which at the same time enables and calls the individual Christians to different activities in Christianity. The charisma is from God ... And thus the service (*diakonia*) to which Charisma calls, is a service imposed by God, and an office in the service of the church (*ecclesia*) and not of any local community [40].

Sohm stressed the differences between the legal structures and the communion of believers. He thought that there was no obvious need for the institutionalization of the Church, according to the dicta of the Gospel, even as he highlighted its institutional benefits:

> With her Episcopal constitution the Church put on the armour which gave her power to withstand the storms of the coming ages. What the Christian faith lost in purity of inner substance it gained in power of external organization. Ideas enter not into the world of reality unharmed. The Church had prepared herself to gain possession of the world. (...) The original genuine idea of the Church perished that her temporal supremacy might be founded [41].

Somh's thesis states that the culmination of the process of hierarchization of the Church, completed around the third century, led to Catholicism. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century reacted against this institutionalization, seeking to return to the properly charismatic origins of the Church. For this reason, Sohm stresses the disjunction between charisma and ecclesiastical organization: when the latter increases, charisma declines. Indeed, Protestants claim that charisma – the signs of grace, including miracles and speaking in tongues – had ceased with the end of the apostolic age [42].

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[40] Sohm, R., *Kirchenrecht*, I, Leipzig: Dunker and Humblot, 1892, 26.

[41] Sohm, R., *Outlines of Church History*, London: Macmillan, 1895, 42-43. See Lowrie, W., *The Church and Its Organization in Primitive and Catholic Times: An Interpretation of Rudolph Sohm's* Kirchenrecht, London: Longmans, 1904. The shift from sect to Church was analyzed by Troeltsch, E., *The Social Teaching of the Christian Church*, New York: Macmillan, 1931.

[42] Ruthven, J., *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Biblical Miracles*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993; and Kydd, R., *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church*, Peabody: Herndrickson, 1993.

Rebus sic stantibus, Max Weber's reflections on charisma at the beginning of the twentieth century becomes the fourth turning point of the concept, after those of Paul, medieval scholastics, and Sohm. He introduced the concept into the language of the emerging field of sociology, as stated in the foundational statement:

> The term charisma will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary 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". (...) What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his "followers" or "disciples" [43].

In his re-formulating the concept, Weber refers to Sohm as his predecessor instead of (surprisingly) St. Paul, whom he quotes only indirectly in his reflections of charism: "It is to Rudolph Sohm's credit that he worked out the sociological character of this kind of [charismatic rather than bureaucratic] power structure (*Gewaltstruktur*)" [44]. But his criticism of Sohm is that the Protestant theologian limited the notion of charisma to a specific historical fact – the emergence of ecclesiastical authority in the early Church – while Weber seeks to endow it with a universal scope, both spiritual and temporal. The *secularization* of the concept – and its reduction to the sphere of power and domination – famously argued by Weber, arises from this perspective.

In his exercise of *sociologization* and secularization of charisma, Weber certainly gave credit to religion [45]. In his classification of the different types of

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[43] WEBER, M., *Economy and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, 241-242. The possible date of the articulation of this concept (later collected in this posthumous book) is around 1914, as argued by ROTH, G., «Introduction», in *Economy and Society*, LXXXVIII.

[44] WEBER, M., *Economy and Society*, 1112. Weber refers to St. Paul's reaction against the parasitic swarm of charismatic missionaries ("If a man does not work, neither shall he eat", 2 Thessalonians 3) rather than his explicit references of charisma as gifts of God (WEBER, M., *Economy and Society*, 245).

[45] The supernatural and secular dimension of Weber's charisma is well described in SPENCER, M. E., «What is Charisma», *The British Journal of Sociology* 24 (1973) 341-354; and SMITH, D. N., «Faith, Reason, and Charisma: Rudolf Sohm, Max Weber, and the Theology of Grace», *Sociological Inquiry* 68 (1998) 32-60.

legitimate power (traditional, legal, and charismatic), religious, magic and mythical origin is fundamental, since the source of the initial exercise of authority lies there. Nevertheless, the charisma is legitimized not by a gift of God but by the consensus between the one who exercises authority and his subjects and, more specifically, by external recognition rather than by the spiritual origin. In traditional societies, Weber argues, the authority of the leader could have been based on magical powers, either by their reputation as healers, sages, sovereigns, or heroes. Yet, as a universal category, and especially in modern societies, the *source* of charisma is, crucially, transferred from the individual who has received the gifts (as argued by Paul) to his followers or disciples, who maintain the person in that privileged secular-sacred state (as argued by Weber). The emphasis is therefore on the *recognition* of the charisma, rather than on its existence.

After this move, emphasis is placed on reception rather than on origin, as happened, from the middle of the twentieth-century, in other fields such as literary criticism and communication[46]. Charisma was redefined in terms of people's perceptions of and responses to a leader[47]. Weber stresses this as he explains that "what alone is important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his *followers* or *disciples*"[48]. While the charismatic individual in Paul and Sohm serves as a conductor of a current that the community shares, Weber's charismatic leader feels that the current of energy flows to him, in the form of his followers' adulation: "Weber's charismatic leader is less a conductor than a magnet, as the popular notion of the *magnetism* of a charismatic person attests"[49]. Thus, charisma resides in the person in Paul and Sohm, and in the community in Weber. The Weberian's "necessity of recognition" will have many consequences for the use of the concept in contemporary social sciences and, more specifically, in its reduction to the con-

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[46] See the foundational statements by JAUSS, H.-R., *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982; McLUHAN, M. and FIORE, Q., *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, New York: Random House, 1967; and JAEGER, C. S., «Charisma and the Arts», in ZUQUETE, P. (ed.), *Routledge International Handbook of Charisma*, London: Routledge, 2021, 351-362.

[47] WILLNER, A. R., *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, 15.

[48] WEBER, M., *Economy and Society*, I: 242, emphasis in the original.

[49] BEDOS-REZAK, B. M. and RUST, M. D., «Faces and Surfaces of Charisma: An Introductory Essay», in *Faces of Charisma*, 1-43, here 9.

cept of *leadership* in politics, psychology, communication, and management studies.

Although Weber had a genuine interest in the religious origin of charisma – and based some of his arguments on the figures of the shaman and the prophet – he soon shifted the concept to address a general theory of authority, returning the notion of charisma back to the discourse of a dynamics of power. In his politicization of charisma, he distinguishes between three types of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational: "traditional authority is bound to precedents handed down from the past; bureaucratic authority is bound to formal, intellectually analyzable rules; charismatic authority is irrational in the sense of being foreign to all rules"[50]. More or less consciously, with this classification Weber opened the way to the irrationality and *pathologization* of charisma, as opposed to the overly rational connotation Paul and Sohm gave it[51]. In addition, Weber stressed that charismatic authority becomes bureaucratic when its consensually sacred character is transferred from the person to the office, opposing again his secularized model to the spiritual one. As it becomes depersonalized, it soon becomes routinized, and thus loses its genuine charismatic charge, while Paul and Sohm's charismatic individual never loses its peculiar character of having been blessed by God's gifts for the benefit of the community.

Weber's reception in academic circles privileged charisma's secular, rather than spiritual, dimension. This specific reception was influenced, first, by an academic logic, since Weber's postulates on charisma developed in a context of the extraordinary growth of the social sciences over the humanities; and, second, by an experiential logic, since the concept of charisma as leadership became popular in various professional activities – especially in politics, entertainment, and business. Academic theory joined professional practice and media reception, providing the concept, since the 1940s, with a pervasiveness and ubiquity that Paul, Sohm, and Weber themselves could not even have imagined[52].

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[50] BELL, D., «Sociodicy», 704.
[51] See, against these Weberian derivations, ARENDT, H., *The origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Meridian Books, 1960; and MONOD, J.-C., *Qu'est-ce qu'un chef en démocratie*, Paris: Seuil, 2012.
[52] RAKDAU, J. R., *Max Weber. A Biography*, Cambridge: Polity, 2009, 390.

In fact, the popularity and appeal that the concept enjoys nowadays derives from a certain haphazardness in its academic and vital reception, due to the problems of Weber's translations into English, presented fragmentarily rather than systematically. Originally published in German during the first two decades of the twentieth century, his work spread to the global academic community after the Second World War, with the publication of his collected volumes of essays on power, economy and society, and law[53]. This late and fragmented reception led sociologists and political scientists – soon joined by psychologists, economists, and communication theorists – to emphasize the secular and political dimension of charisma as conceived by Weber, and to reduce it to the closer but less sophisticated concept of leadership.

In addition to this specific academic context, another unexpected media event led to the celebrity and enormous media impact of the concept. Daniel Bell explains that,

> The word charisma was introduced into American journalism for the first time, so far as can be learned, in Fortune magazine in 1949, when a writer used it to describe the qualities of John L. Lewis. The managing editor, scanning the first draft of the article, questioned the use of a clumsy foreign term that would be unintelligible to the reader, and struck it out. On the page proof, however, an eleven-character word was needed for the caption under Lewis' picture to justify the line, and over the loud objections of the editor, the word charismatic was inserted, because no comparable word with the same number of letters could be found[54].

By the 1960s, academically assimilated in the English editions of Weber's works and popularized by the media, the Weberian concept of charisma became hegemonic in both intellectual and popular dimensions. From

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[53] GERTH, H. H. and MILLS, C. W. (eds.), *From Max Weber. Essays in sociology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946; WEBER, M., *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, HENDERSON, A. M. and PARSONS (eds.), Talcott, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947. This was the first part of the whole volume *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, which Weber's widow had collected in 1921, and that was not entirely published in English until 1968, edited by ROTH, G. and WITTICH, C., and in *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society*, edited by SHILS, E. and RHEINSTEIN, M. in 1954.

[54] BELL, D., «Sociodicy», 704. On Weber's impact to German and American intellectuals, see also DERMAN, J., *Max Weber in Politics and Social Thought: From Charisma to Canonization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 176-215.

that moment on, few realized that the concept so greatly differed from the one originally coined by Paul in the first century, discussed by thirteenth-century scholars in terms of its relationship to grace, and developed by Sohm in the nineteenth-century – and reduced, in fact, to the idea of leadership. Thus, much of the literature specializing in charisma after Weber has no qualms about using the expression "charismatic leadership" or "charismatic leaders", which confirms the blurring of the boundaries – if not their open semantic fusion – between two concepts with very different semantic and semiotic roots. As Cedric J. Robinson summarized, "in Western social thought, charisma is a theory of the most extreme symbolic functions of leadership"[55].

From the 1960s, the unification of the secularized terms *charisma/leadership* provided fertile ground for social sciences that were more adaptable to professions rather than scholarship. American political scientists highlighted the dynamisms of political leadership[56]. Social psychologists opened up the field of research on corporate leadership, one appealing to business schools, generating a type of literature in a field that was, simultaneously, academic and popular[57]. Anthropologists focused on the analysis of religious leadership, both in traditional and post-industrial societies[58].

However, in the second half of twentieth century, the same sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists who had been enthusiastic about the secularized Weberian concept of charisma began to realize that this concept had lost its authenticity, and was therefore difficult to apply without falling into anachronism and reductionism. Some political scientists, including Guenther Roth and Ann Ruth Willner, claimed that the concept of charisma had broadened to such an extent that it lost its distinctiveness and specificity, undermining its usefulness as a category of political and sociological analysis[59]. Psychologists such as Philip Smith noted that the trivialization of

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[55] ROBINSON, C. J., *Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1980, 156.

[56] SCHWEITZER, A., *The Age of Charisma*, Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984.

[57] BRYMAN, A., *Charisma and Leadership in Organizations*, London: Sage, 1992.

[58] BARNES, D. F., «Charisma and Religious Leadership: An Historical Analysis», *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17 (1978) 1-18.

[59] ROTH, G., «Charisma and Counter-culture», in ROTH, G. and SCHLUCHTER, W. (eds.), *Max Weber's Vision of History*, Berkeley: California University Press, 1979, 119-143; WILLNER, A. R. and WILLNER, D., «The Rise of Charismatic Leaders», *The Annals of American Academy of Poli-*

charisma elided concerns about issues of soteriology, eschatology and theodicy, reducing charisma to personality traits or emotional needs and dynamics of the group, such that the term's essentially religious qualities of charismatic authority and its links to wider sacred, symbolic and narrative fields have disappeared[60].

One of the most influential of these revisionist scholars was the sociologist Edward Shils, whose work represents a new turning point in the modern theory of charisma. He denied the reality of charisma in the contemporary world, claiming it only functions when embodied in its *pure forms* as identified by Weber: the shaman, the prophet, the *berserk*. The charismatic leader embodies an unstable form of it. The *disenchantment* of the world, he argues, gradually undermines and empties the true charismatic force lodged in an individual, since contemporary culture manufactures it, banalizes it, and reduces it to celebrity[61].

A variety of influential social scientists joined Shils' critique, emphasizing the reductionism of the Weberian concept of charisma. Joseph Bensman and Michael Givant proposed the term *pseudocharisma* to distinguish the *pure* spiritual charisma from its secularized imitations or reductionisms, in order to recuperate a more sublime idea of charisma[62]. Carl J. Friedrich claimed that charisma, as created by Weber and applied by his social scientist followers, prevents effective analysis of questions of power and politics[63]. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argued that charisma is useless "as a concept with which to analyze leadership in more complicated cases then those of medicine men, warrior chieftains, and religious prophets". ... the word has become a chic synonym for "heroic" or the "demagogic" or event just for "popular"[64]. Arthur Schweitzer noted that Weber's hypotheses on charisma

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tical and Social Science 358 (1965) 77-88; RATNAM, K. J., «Charisma and Political Leadership», *Political Studies* xii (1964) 341-354.

[60] SMITH, Ph., «Culture and Charisma: Outline a Theory», *Acta Sociologica* 43 (2000) 101-111.

[61] SHILS, E., *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, 127-134 and 256-175.

[62] BENSMAN, J. and GIVANT, M., «Charisma and Modernity: The Use and Abuse of a Concept», *Social Research* 42 (1975) 613.

[63] FRIEDRICH, C. J., «Political Leadership and the Problem of Charismatic Power», *The Journal of Politics* 23 (1961) 3-24, here 24.

[64] SCHLESINGER, A., Jr., «On Heroic Leadership and the Dilemma of Strong Men and Weak Peoples», *Encounter* 15 (1960) 3-11, here 7.

were historically acceptable and critically applicable only up to the end of World War I, but not beyond that[65]. Stephen Turner claimed that 'charisma has become mundane, or everyday, and has lost its special force not because it has become rare but because it has become commonplace'[66]. Finally, K. J. Ratnam denounced the emptying of the content of the concept, noting that,

> What often happens is that, being aware of the success of particular leaders, and finding this success in some ways extraordinary, writers take the easy way out by attributing it to "charisma" without giving due consideration to the fact that their explanations follow no recognized criteria and that, for this reason at least, the whole notion of charisma may be largely valueless and in many cases inappropriate in providing explanations[67].

In the end, these critics denounced that charisma has even been reduced by some social-scientists to a 'measurement by the semantic differential technique'[68]. This implies its reduction to a quantitative measurement, a dimension completely opposed to the original nature of the concept as articulated by Paul. No one can be surprised that Philip Rieff, the last member among the tribe of skeptics of post-Weberian charisma, has compared the condition of charisma in the modern world to a hairspray or deodorant – just an aesthetic complement – in a rather ironic and postmodern stance[69]. One wonders what will be the next criticism to social scientist charisma to be advanced, but it is arguable that its future is not so flattering.

Rethinking Charisma as an Event and as a Concept

The skepticism of these authorized testimonies leads us to conclude that perhaps the survival (and the interpretation) of the concept of charisma lies in the recognition and recovery of its original meaning, rather than in new de-

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[65] SCHWEITZER, A., «Theory and Political Charisma», *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16 (1974) 150-181, here 178.

[66] TURNER, S., «Charisma Reconsidered», *Journal of Classical Sociology* 3 (2003) 5-26, here 20.

[67] RATNAM, K. J., «Charisma», 341.

[68] BURKE, K. L. and BRINKERHOFF, M. B., «Capturing Charisma: Notes on an Elusive Concept», *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* xx (1981) 274-284.

[69] RIEFF, Ph., *Charisma: The Gift of Grace and How it Has Been Taken Away from Us*, New York: Vintage, 2007, especially the chapter 'Spray-on Charisma', 3-13.

velopments in the present, a proposal that historians and theologians might have a say in. History and theology are well equipped to contextualize and understand the dynamics of charisma, so they do not run the risk of denaturalizing the concept of charisma by a presentist approach or anachronistic interpretation.

In the end, the concept of charisma raises the essential question of divine action in historical agents. Those of us who are dedicated to the history of medieval Europe constantly feel this presence, at least in the psychology of the protagonists of the primary sources we study. The supernatural charisma of preachers, healers, prophets and forgivers is evident, at least for those contemporaries who witnessed their prodigious works and left some written trace of their experience. The scholar then faces a dilemma: (1) to believe in what those people believed or to take on the credulity of the people of the Middle Ages, or, (2) if s/he is not a believer, to resort to at least understand and adequately contextualize what is going on. Either position serves as valid historical approaches to avoid the danger of presentism – projecting modern standards of incredulity on the facts narrated by the medieval sources [70].

Therefore, historical research should suspend judgment – or, at least, resort to other methods – both concerning the existence of God and, concomitantly, the existence of charisms. It is enough to scrutinize the historical evidence of persons who witnessed those charisms, and insist on their truth – at least to them if not us. Charisms should be analyzed with the same rigorous standards required for any investigation of the past. It simply requires a special sensitivity to deal with events that are obviously far removed from ordinary historical facts. Miracles and divine action in charismatic agents are not scientifically observable, but neither is any other event in the past. This revalues the concept of charisma as a tool that contributes to understanding supernatural events witnessed in the past, even if it cannot add any degree of

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[70] On this kind of debates, see the inspiring work by DAVIS, N. Z., «On the Lame», *American Historical Review* 93 (1988) 572-603. See also GREGORY, B., «No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion», *History and Theory* 47 (2008) 495-519, here 519. This article was a response to FORLAND, E., «Acts of God? Miracles and Scientific Explanation», *History and Theory* 47 (2008) 483-494.

certainty about them – as any historian can about any event in the distant past.

In their work on miracles and charisms in early modern Europe, Erik Midelfort, Stuart Clark, Peter Burke and Carlos Eire have attempted to examine the past on its own terms, and accept the transition to modernity as a complex process in which the redefinition of the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural did not always follow the Whiggish or Weberian upward and progressive line [71]. These scholars have highlighted that in the early modernity charisma found other forms of manifestation than in the Middle Ages – especially in ecstasies, visions, levitations, and bilocation – but they equally emphasize the idea of the divine intervention, and reinforce its counter-factual and counter-power dimension. Three early modern Castilian nuns, for example, enjoyed such celebrated charismas that they were able to deal with emperors as equals, decisively influencing their decisions: Theresa of Jesus was well known and appreciated by Philip II; Sor Luisa de la Ascensión ('la monja de Carrión') received the visit of Philip III to seek her advice on political and religious matters; and Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda exchanged more than 600 letters with Philip IV, a treasure not only as a historical resource for that period, but more specifically for issues related to charisma [72]. Miraculous physical phenomena associated with mystical ecstasy became more pronounced than ever before among Catholics, becoming evident in the figures of the Spanish nuns and other Italian religious such as Joseph of Cupertino [73].

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[71] MIDELFORT, H. C. E., *Exorcism and Enlightenment: Johann Joseph Gassner and the Demons of Eighteenth-Century Germany*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005; and CLARK, S., *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. BURKE, P. connects charisma with sanctity in «How to be a Counter-Reformation Saint», in GREYERZ, K. VON (ed.), *Religion and Society*, New York: Allen and Unwin, 1984, 45-55.

[72] EIRE, C. M. N., *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila: A Biography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019; GARCÍA BARRIUSO, P., *La monja de Carrion: Sor Luisa de la Ascensión Comenares Cabezón*, Madrid: Patrocinio, 1986; EIRE, C. M. N., «Incombustible Weber. How the Protestant Reformation Really Disenchanted the World», in STERK, A. and CAPUTO, N. (eds.), *Faithful Narratives: Historians, Religion, and the Challenges of Objectivity*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014, 132-148; COLAHAN, C., *The Visions of Sor Maria de Agreda: Writing, Knowledge and Power*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994.

[73] SUMMERS, M., *Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, New York: White Crow, 1950; THURSTON, H., *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952. For Joseph of Cupertino, see PASTROVICCHI, A., *St. Joseph of Copertino*, New York: Andesite, 2015.

Yet the experience of charisms and miracles is not limited to medieval and early modern periods. There are many testimonial and documentary evidences of these divine actions in the last two centuries, which at least deserve to be approached with a rigorous methodology that the *original* concept of charisma can provide. The case of Padre Pio is well known among twentieth-century Christians, but similar testimonies have been collected and lived among the Sufi, Buddhist, African, Shamanic, and Jewish communities. Carlos Eire argues that

> Levitating saints raise questions that no good historian should avoid. Never mind the metaphysical questions, which historians dare not touch. Aside from the fact that they reify the social construction of reality, levitating saints allow us to peer into the very process of cultural change. Their flying and hovering reveal complexities about an epistemological revolution that up until very recently was assumed to follow a steep and well-defined upward curve: the triumph of rationality over primitive credulity and superstition. When Max Weber argued in the early twentieth century that the Protestant reformation was instrumental in the gradual "disenchantment of the world" – in Friedrich Schiller's phrase which Weber liked to quote – and the rise of rationalism and empirical science, the miraculous and supernatural had already been stripped of legitimacy[74].

Some of the most influential historians of the twentieth-century, such as Ernst Kantorowicz, Victor Turner, Natalie Z. Davis and Lynn Hunt, dealing with subjects related to politics and religion, make this understanding of the complex dynamics between the temporal and the spiritual possible, as they have been able to symbolize and infuse the sacred into seemingly secular social and political life[75]. Bloch's classic study on the thaumaturgical kings, published in 1924, was not connected by any of his reviewers with the

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[74] EIRE, C. M. N., «The Good, the Bad, and the Airborne: Levitation and the History of the Impossible in Early Modern Europe», in PLUMMER, M. E. and BARNES, R. B., *Ideas and Cultural Margins in Early Modern Germany. Essays in Honor of H. C. Erik Midelfort*, London: Ashgate, 2009, 307-323, here 322.

[75] BLOCH, M., *Les Rois Thaumaturges*, Paris: Université de Strasbourg, 1924; KANTOROWICZ, E., *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957; HUNT, L., *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*, London: Methuen, 1986.

concept of charisma[76]. It was a perfect counterpart to the Weberian concept of charisma and to the multiple studies that, during these years, were using sociological and political-scientist methods on the emergence of the secularized masses. As Sergio Bertelli concludes, "Bloch's book contrasted the figure of the medieval king, to whom was attributed supernatural powers derived from his *Christomimesis* (imitation of Christ), to the political leader, who derive his authority from popular investiture by his party and/or electoral base"[77]. Postmodern society is certainly more sensitive to supernatural action than modern society, as Paul Freedman and Grabrielle M. Spiegel have argued[78].

From Paul to Weber, and from the Ancient Corinthians to medieval thaumaturgical kings and contemporary Padre Pio, the concept of charisma and its historical realizations have changed significantly in meaning and form over time. That is, in fact, the fate of sociological concepts: their semantic slippage over time, since they are extraordinarily sensitive to changes in context. However, historical criticism must be alert to these changes of the meaning of concepts, to avoid reductionism or anticontextualism. Contemporary scholars are increasingly seeking to recognize the traces that charisma has left in the past. Their reflection on the vicissitudes of the notion of charisma, and its evolution as a concept and as a tool of historical interpretation, may contribute to a more interdisciplinary debate and a proper distinction between Pauline charisma and post-Weberian leadership.

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[76] See for instance, the review on BLOCH's, *Les Rois Thaumaturges*, published by Gordon Hall Gerould in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 24 (1925) 445-449. Nor did Jacques Le Goff in his preface the new edition, Paris: Gallimard, 2010, although he suggested the link between Bloch and a new political history inspired by anthropology.

[77] BERTELLI, S., *The King's Body. Sacred Rituals of Power in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, xv.

[78] FREEDMAN, P. and SPIEGEL, G. M., «Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies», *American Historical Review* 103 (1998) 677-704.

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