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Following the Charisma – Understanding Charisma Through Followers

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Aims:

• to consider the extent to which “charisma” explains leadership

• to examine factors surrounding “followership”
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”.

(Weber 1978: 241.)
It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma. . . This basis lies rather in the conception that it is the duty of those subject to charismatic authority to recognize its genuineness and to act accordingly.

(Weber 1976: 242)
It appears that there have been legions of self-appointed messiahs, gurus, or pied pipers (I use the terms interchangeably) throughout time.

Margaret Thaler Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*: 29.
Applewhite’s following:
= 41 (200 max)
Non-followers:
= 272,899,961 (US)
= 5,878,999,961 (worldwide)
* Includes large percentage of Buddhists. (West Coast Buddhists were original Nichiren Shoshu target population)
Rodger Kamenetz  
(1994)  
The Jew in the Lotus
“structural availability”
Easy

1. Atheism, Course in Miracles, Osho, Scientology, TM, Unitarians, Universal Life Church, Urantia, Jews for Jesus

Difficult

4. Amish, Jains, Judaism, Rastafari, Vodou

Very difficult

5. Australian Aboriginal, Cherokee, Druze, John Frum, Juche, Zulu
Barriers to conversion:

• non-acceptance

• inability / disinclination to satisfy required conditions, e.g.
  • ethnicity
  • language
  • caste
  • colour
  • dress code
  • finance
  • age

• difficult to satisfy entry requirements
“first generation converts”
degrees of commitment

• home membership
• negotiated obligations
Charles Taze Russell — the ‘dynamic leader’

Joseph Smith — the ‘prophet’

L. Ron Hubbard — the ‘magus’

A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada — the ‘guru’
Methods of acquisition —

- hagiography
- the “lieutenant”
- charismatisation
- curiosity
Conclusions:

• Charisma theory has focused attention unduly on the leader.

• Conversion depends on factors surrounding the follower.

• The structures of the convert’s life and of the religious community must be compatible.

• There are methods by which the leader can enhance his/her status.
The End