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# **FOLLOWING THE CHARISMA: UNDERSTANDING CHARISMA THROUGH FOLLOWERS**

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## **Following the Charisma – Understanding Charisma Through Followers**

I have sometimes begun a module on new religious movements by telling students that I am the messiah and organising a mass suicide tomorrow. I ask them who would like to join me. Predictably, I have no success. The interesting question is how leaders like Jim Jones, David Koresh, Luc Jouret, and Marshall Herff Applewhite managed to achieve it when I cannot. What is the difference? Do I lack charisma whereas NRM leaders like Jones, Koresh, Jouret, and possessed it?

Discussion of NRMs has tended to focus on the leaders, partly because of our typical top-down approach to religions in academic writing, and partly because Weber continues to influence our thinking. Weber defined charisma as follows:

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.)

We are all familiar, no doubt, with his account of the further stages of ‘routinization’ and ‘institutionalization’, and his distinctions between charismatic, legal-rational, and institutional authority. However, a moment’s reflection should make us realise the problems of attributing leadership success to personal magnetism. What precisely does personal

magnetism consist of? If charisma simply means the power to attract followers, then charisma theory cannot meaningfully explain how NRMs take their rise. To say that leaders attract followers because of their charisma would simply be saying tautologous lay that they attracted followers because of their ability to attract followers. If charisma means personal magnetism in the sense of being personally attractive, it is questionable whether these leaders possess this attribute. Many of the prominent NRM leaders are not really attractive – at least to myself and many colleagues – as anyone who has listened to Sun Myung Moon or Marshall Herff Applewhite will attest.

Weber's analysis tends to be implicit in the anticult view of cult leadership. Margaret Singer describes "cult leaders" as self-appointed, persuasive, claiming a special mission or special knowledge, determined, domineering, and centring veneration on themselves, describing them as "Pied Pipers" (Singer 2003:8, 29). Indeed, one author has devoted an entire volume to "cult leaders" entitled *Malignant Pied Pipers: A Psychological Study of Destructive Cult Leaders from Rev. Jim Jones to Osama bin Laden*. The book covers the usual suspects: Jim Jones, David Koresh, Charles Manson, Shoko Asahara, Luc Jouret, Joseph de Mambro, Marshall Applewhite, as well as Osama bin Laden. The problem with the analogy, however, is that the Pied Paper led all the little boys and girls out of the city of Hamelin, whereas the majority of people do not follow any of these leaders. Although we all deplore the 39 collected suicides of Heaven's Gate, this is a very small number compared with the US population as a whole. In fact, 272,899,961 US citizens, and 5,878,999,961 worldwide did **not** follow Marshall Applewhite into suicide. Indeed, many who have joined an NRM did not even meet the leader. Instead of asking what it is about the leader and makes him or her attract a following, perhaps we should ask what it is about the followers that attract them to a particular leader.

In fairness to Weber, he was aware that followers also played a role in charismatic leadership. he writes, '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). Commenting on Weber's analysis of charisma, Stephen Turner (1993, 2003) argues that there is a kind of contractual relationship between leader and follower: the follower must share the leader's goals, the leader must be in a position to transform the disciple, the follower must have faith that the leader can achieve the set goal, and the leader must often demonstrate his extraordinary powers bypassing "tests".

In what follows I want to suggest a number of factors that make followers attracted to their chosen NRM. The first thing to observe is that there are definite patterns of "recruitment" (Judah/Melton table here) (Melton; in Hinnells 1997: 611). Rodger Kamenetz echoes the point that there is a disproportion of Jews that are attracted to Western forms of Buddhism, and speculates that this is due partly to their perceived loss of direction and lack of appeal that of synagogue membership, and also that the Chinese invasion of Tibet gave persecution and dispersion as a point in common.

### *Structural availability*

What we have to explain is not the personal “charismatic” qualities the NRM leader possesses, and processes of brainwashing and psychological coercion, but rather what it is that causes some people to follow but other people not to do so. Such explanation involves acknowledging a number of factors, the first of which Lorne Dawson calls “structural availability”. In other words, the worldview which is offered by the leader must be available to the seeker. One somewhat lighthearted book in my possession is entitled *The Convert’s Bible*: the anonymous author ranks 99 religious movements in all in terms of difficulty of joining. Among the “easy to join” movements are Atheism, Course in Miracles, Osho, Scientology, TM, Unitarians, Universal Life Church, Urantia, and Jews for Jesus. The “difficult” ones are Amish, Jains, Judaism, Rastafari, Vodou; and the “very difficult” include Australian Aboriginal, Cherokee, Druze, John Frum, Juche, and Zulu. It takes little reflection to see why. One obvious difficulty is finding leaders – or even followers – who belong to this last category. Another important factor is the fact that Zulu beliefs and practices are not part of the western *zeitgeist*, but are bound up with African culture, and phenomena such as ancestor veneration. Since most Westerners do not have African ancestors, there are obvious problems about appropriating such beliefs and practices. On the other hand, UFOlogy has been very much an interest in Western society, thus facilitating the rise of the Raelians and Heaven’s Gate. Increased global communication, which improved markedly in the 1970s and 1980s, enabled seekers to take up forms of religion that would not have been live options a century previously.

Barriers to entry may include straightforward non-acceptance (most of Applewhite and Nettles’ listeners did not join), and inability or disinclination to satisfy the required requirements: one might have inappropriate ethnicity, not speak the community’s language, be the wrong caste, colour, or age, or have insufficient financial resources. It may in some cases be difficult to satisfy entry requirements, for example circumcision, or satisfying Jehovah’s Witness elders on over 120 points of doctrine and lifestyle. There might be a strong disincentive for a white person to join a black Pentecostal church, to become a Rastafari, or to be converted as a white turban-wearing Sikh. While such conversions do occur, there is a strong psychological disincentive to the majority of spiritual seekers. Organisations like ISKCON, by contrast, being English-speaking, caste-free, and with western swamis have opened up access to Westerners. Where religious dress might be considered “culturally inappropriate”, the leader can dispense with traditional requirements: in Triratna, for example, founder-leader Sangharakshita did not typically dress as a Buddhist monk, or require followers to wear monks’ robes. At times there can be difficulties in complying with such obligations. Some years ago ISKCON devotees in Hungary informed me that many young seekers wore leather jackets and shoes, which presented particular problems when visiting a temple in the Hindu tradition, where leather is normally prohibited. In this instance the Society was prepared to compromise, since new seekers would otherwise have been involved in considerable financial outlay and might have reconsidered their commitment.

One may also be unable to satisfy the demands imposed by the religious community. Particularly in the case of new religions, meeting their expectations for belonging. Many NRMs are “high demand” organisations, requiring considerable commitment of time and energy to the movement. Eileen Barker has characterised the first-generation convert as displaying a degree of enthusiasm considerably in excess of those who belong to a conventional religion by birth (Barker 1989: 11). This is partly due to the fact that they have made a conscious decision to join, and hence positively want to take on board the commitment involved, but it is also due to the fact that NRMs are often inherently demanding of time and effort. Many of the so-called “youth religions” which gained a foothold in the West in the 1960s and 1970s typically involved communal living apart from mainstream society, for example the Children of God (now The Family International), the Unification Church, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Early Unification Church members were expected to become part of mobile fundraising teams, often selling flowers and candles for up to 18 hours a day, in addition to the spiritual life that membership entailed. An ISKCON devotee is expected to undertake 16 rounds of mantra chanting, occupying up to two hours daily.

Such lifestyles are not live options for the majority of people, and hence the leadership may decide to compromise on its expectations. For example, it became possible to join the Unification Church as a “home member” rather than a full-time one. Swami Prabhupada initially prescribed 64 rounds of mantra chanting per day, which would have taken six hours at least, but when his followers protested, he settled for 16 – a more achievable hour and a half (Satsvarupa 1983:60). Converts themselves must be in a position to join, in terms of the way their lives and social relationships are structured. Although there have been examples of professional people abandoning their occupations and families to join an NRM, this is uncommon, and the controversial new religions of the 1960s and 1970s tended to attract youth rather than older people not necessarily because young people are less experienced and more gullible, but because they were more readily available for the NRM’s lifestyle, having few commitments, perhaps being in a gap year, or being willing to interrupt or abandon their education. Reciprocally, the way in which various NRMs of the 1960s and 1970s were structured tended to be more conducive to single young people, who were in a position to move in to a communal group; hence joining as an individual – or possibly with a friend – was typical. By contrast, the religious organisations like the Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses do not require seekers to quit their jobs or abandon their families – unless, of course, their employment is incompatible with the organisation’s tenets. Such differences are reflected in the forms of evangelism in which different spiritual groups engage. Thus, the Unification Church was initially more inclined to invite single seekers to join a residential community, while the Mormons and Witnesses, by house-to-house visitation, are more likely to encounter householders, and encourage the conversion of entire families rather than individuals. That is not to say, of course, that joining an NRM would make no difference to one’s family life or lifestyle. A Jehovah’s Witness would be expected to find the time for house-to-house evangelism, and to cease celebrating festivals such as birthdays and

Christmas, which may well be a source of deep regret for the children in a household, but nonetheless achievable.

### *The qualities of the leader*

All this does not mean that the qualities of the leader are not relevant. On the contrary, as I have argued elsewhere (Chryssides 2012), there are different types of religious leader, and it is important that the leader presents credentials (real or fictitious) that establishes him or (less frequently) her as having the appropriate status. I have distinguished between the dynamic leader, the prophet, the magus, the guru, and the messiah (not an exhaustive list), arguing one's prophetic role can be established by an inaugural vision, the magus by amazing feats or miracles, the guru by a lineage, and a messiah by inspiring confidence that he or she is appointed by God and can save the world.

This sometimes involves the creation of hagiography, or "self dramatisation", as one scholar has called it. Sun Myung Moon, L. Ron Hubbard, and Raël, to name but three, are all credited with a remarkable history, which is attested by followers, but seems questionable to those outside the organisation. Both Eileen Barker (1993: 198) and Lewis F. Carter (1998 loc.3348) note the role of the "lieutenant" – a second in command, whose role has a number of functions. The lieutenant may be responsible for the administration of the movement, or may help to spearhead missions to promote the organisation. As Eileen Barker points out, those who have authority in an NRM can facilitate what she calls "charismatisation" – in other words, they show the convert how to venerate the leader, for example by bowing before the image of the Rev and Mrs Moon.

Most obviously, however, the lieutenant attests to the authenticity of the claims made on behalf of the leader. If these seem questionable, this serves to arouse curiosity on the part of seekers. Indeed, the role of curiosity is one which has tended to be neglected in the study of how NRMs arise. (In the advertising industry, it has been reckoned that inviting curiosity is likely to be more effective than stating facts about a product.) Did Raël really encounter extraterrestrials? Did Hubbard really and among pygmies and learn from Beijing magicians? Could Moon really be the messiah? In the case of Moon's messiahship, it was typical for Unification leaders not to divulge Moon's status directly, but to invite workshop attendees to pray about it. Few, if any, would be likely to declare that they have prayed and been told by God that was not the messiah; hence the prayer had a twofold function – not only did it confirm Moon's messianic status, but it accorded the seeker profound spiritual insight to make such a recognition.

### **Conclusion**

While acknowledging Weber's observation that there are leaders who have remarkable qualities and can inspire others, my discussion has suggested that this is by no means the whole story, and that, if we are to explain how new religions take their rise and develop, we need to pay more attention to "followership", and less to "charismatic leadership".

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