

Women with charisma in religious contexts. Empowerment, Media, and Societal transformation

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Abstract - The word "charismatic" has the potential to conceal more than it discloses. Rather than shedding light on the matter at hand, what it does disclose is often more indicative of the cultural and historical milieu in which the term "charisma" was used. Here we provide an overview of the notion by following its development through time as it relates to gender, religion, and empowerment. Our investigation of the many interpretations of charismatic women in religious contexts brings us full circle to Max Weber's original concept of charisma and its following reinterpretations in the fields of social science and the humanities. This research article delves into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, examining how the idea of 'charisma' brought in both new possibilities and dangers for religious women.

Keywords: Nineteenth And Twentieth Centuries, Charismatic, Women, Empowerment, Religion.

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INTRODUCTION

The famous picture of Mother Teresa (1910–1997) often comes to mind first when one thinks about charismatic women in religion. The outstanding missionary nun's unique charismatic appeal is a common theme in the literature about her. Teresa was already admired by many people all around the globe as a "living saint" while she was alive. Even though the Roman Catholic Church did not formally recognise her until her canonisation in 2016, believers already looked to her as a saint. Gëzim Alpion has revealed that Teresa was the subject of intriguing debates that revolved on the difference between her 'charism' and 'charisma'. Spiritual directors, hagiographers, and Mother Teresa's closest followers understand the former as pointing to an inner spiritual quality, while researchers like Alpion use the latter to describe the magnitude and effect of her saintly reputation. Midway through the twentieth century, the word "charisma" began to be linked with the idea of "celebrity," but the precise point of convergence between the two has long been a topic of heated sociological discussion. [1]

The example set by Mother Teresa sheds light on the issue's core concerns. The mass media of the twentieth century helped spread her magnetic personality, but her extreme public profile also had the potential to cast doubt on her virtuous reputation. Some reporters went so far as to say "she's seeking publicity" in the '40s. But Teresa's moral authority was also enhanced by her

public platform; people paid attention to her not only because she was heard, but also because she spoke out about concerns that went beyond religion. She echoed Weberian notions of "charisma" at times of crisis, especially in pre-independence colonial India in the 1940s, when she portrayed herself as an exceptional, maybe revolutionary, leader (see below). Mother Teresa's detractors claim that she promoted her own cause by blending the personal and the public spheres, as well as religion and social action. [2]

By putting Mother Teresa in the context of a broader line of women who have been revered as religiously charismatic, we may see how she distinguishes apart. First, unlike other charismatic women who were either ignored or deliberately suppressed by the Church, she was canonised and venerated as one of the most beloved saints of the modern era. Second, neither Teresa nor her academics have attempted to pin Teresa's charismatic appeal on a physical kind of spirituality, in contrast to studies of other charismatic figures that date back to the Middle Ages. The bodies of women, however, have long been associated with ideas of religious charisma. The articles in this collection mostly cover the 1800s and 1900s, but as we'll see, the centrality of the body in the interpretation and reception of religiously significant women became clear as a key component of their authority, media impact, and capacity to effect social change. A quick review of the term

"charisma" and its historical origins is necessary for understanding its relevance as a lens through which to examine women's roles in religion. [3]

"Charismatic" and "charismatic" meaning "lovely" did not just appear. Even though Weber rethought and reformulated the idea, he did not create the word "charisma" out of thin air; as Irvine Schiffer pointed out, the phrase did not originate in twentieth-century sociology.⁴ Contrary to popular belief, its millennia-long past is filled with irregularities. The idea took on diverse connotations depending on the time and place in which it was utilised, understood, or forgotten. [4]

The purpose of this summary is not to pretend to be all-inclusive, but rather to highlight the key developments that took place from its first-century religious perception to its secular nineteenth- and early twentieth-century secular society, with an emphasis on gender and power. Paul was the primary author of the New Testament concept of "charism" as "the gift of God's grace," which he brought to Christian theology. One instance in Peter and sixteen in Paul bring the total number of occurrences of the phrase to seventeen in the Gospels. Paul used the phrase in a variety of contexts in his writings written between 50 and 62 CE. These included the more general idea of a gift or divine favour and the more particular idea of the Spirit's manifestation and descending to the apostles. It seems that the term's meaning was fluid and subject to change in the first century, given how unstable it is now. The Greek and Roman communities of Asia Minor were likely Paul's first encounter with the phrase because of its cultural prevalence there. Hellenic culture and the ancient Greeks both made use of the concept of "charis," which means "supernatural grace." [5]

Old Testament in Hebrew. Athena bestows a favour upon Telemachus in the *Odyssey*, and in Zechariah, the Lord says, "I will pour the spirit of grace upon the house of David and upon the inhabitants of Jer-usalem". Two distinctive features of the *pneuma charitos* spirit of grace—its divine origin and the reciprocal nature of the interaction between giver and receiver—make the recipients the "chosen people" who reap the benefits of the gift. As he adapted them to the social circumstances of his day, Paul took these aspects and made them better. The first-century Christians of Palestine looked forward to the Parousia. Without the intervention of the state authorities, they hoped to preach the Gospel and establish a society apart from institutions. Each individual was seen as vital to the proper functioning of the ecclesia, or community of believers. The gift of charism was bestowed upon all people by God, but it was a communal quality rather than an individual one that might justify dominance, leadership, or power over others.[6]

Although the Christian community of the first century did not have any formal hierarchies of religious leaders, a system of charisms did exist. Paul could say without contradiction that the apostles possessed varying degrees of the divine gifts, but that some were more important than others. These gifts could be structural,

like the ability to teach, convert, or discern the spirit, or magical-miraculous, like prophecies, healings, or raising the dead. [7]

The responsibility of evangelism and church organisation fell on the shoulders of the apostles, prophets, and disciples, according to Paul. Bengt Holmberg posits that charism existed independently of institutionalised authority in the early Church. Everyone in the town of Paul was considered as equal. The Holy Spirit "democratically" bestowed charisma on everyone, regardless of their gender, race, or social standing. The religion made every Christian charismatic. This is why a number of academics have stressed that the early Christian community, in particular, cannot be seen through the lens of Weberian charisma. [8]

Paul and the early Christians failed not keep the charism's original vision alive. Postponing the Apocalypse was certain with the institutionalisation of the Church from 70 to 140 CE, particularly with Christianity being the religion of the Empire. [9] Taubes demonstrates that the first-century community, including Paul, had adopted a more anarchical stance towards politics as they anticipated the end of the world. The Church went from being an egalitarian ecclesia to a hierarchical organisation when the end did not arrive. [10]

One of the most significant developments in the history of "charisma" occurred during the early decades of the Christian period. [11] Charismatic leaders associated with the sacralisation of religious office were able to thrive in the communal, "democratic," non-gender-specific dimension. Bishops took on the roles of apostles and prophets in their dioceses, both politically and spiritually. A charismatic spirit was previously present in every Christian, but now it is reserved for the most senior members of the Church. Nonetheless, the Pauline charism persisted, particularly its mystical-spiritual component of an intimate communion with God, along with visions and miracles. Rather, it persisted in its underground life and once emerged from its subaltern status to challenge the ruling classes and the institutionalised Church at certain historical periods. [12]

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Focussing on their influence, media portrayal, and role in social change, this research uses a qualitative secondary data analysis method to investigate charismatic women in religious settings during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The study is based on a compilation of articles published in the most current edition of the "Women's History Review" that focusses on religiously charismatic women. Historical case studies, theoretical evaluations, and interdisciplinary viewpoints from disciplines like sociology, religion, and media studies are all part of these sources.

RESULTS

• Charismatic Authority and Female Empowerment

A recurring topic throughout Christian women's history is the distinction between office-based power and authority based on divine inspiration. Their anthology *Women of Spirit* begins with this passage. This is so, not because women are more inclined towards the emotive and intuitive, as men have supposed, but because it reflects the sociological fact that women for the most part were not allowed to claim authority of office, as pointed out by Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin in *Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (first published in 1979). "Indeed, the topic of women's charismatic leadership seems to have become so ubiquitous that it serves as a jumping off point for academics investigating the need of charismatic legitimization of religious authority. Even in religious settings where males predominated, the women who rose to the position of charismatic leader were able to break through gender norms.

Having said that, it was not always their intention to stand up to the patriarchal systems that kept other women in their place. It seems that they perpetuated gendered stereotypes rather than dismantling them, given that their magnetism was often associated with ideas about women's bodies and their 'natural' nature. They were not always in opposition to the Church's doctrines, as their own frequently mirrored those of the Church. Claiming divine inspiration did, however, permit considerable inventiveness on the part of the organisation. Andrea Graus demonstrates in her study on three French Catholic lay associations from the 1800s and 1900s that the mystic laywomen who established these movements all said that God had given them this mission. They were able to arrange their motions in novel and unorthodox ways (such as combined movements) because of this supernatural inspiration. However, apart from their own mystical inspiration, they aimed to establish a standard for the laypeople to follow via their actions and behaviours.

The idea of charisma, which had its origins in apostolic religion, was famously transformed into an analytical category within the burgeoning social sciences by Max Weber (1864–1920) in the early 1900s. He defines charisma as a "certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary," and this definition is often cited and used. Charismatic people were defined by the sway they had over their followers or adherents, since this trait could only exist if others in the individual's immediate vicinity also felt it. Charismatic people's extraordinary talents were a manifestation of their charisma, but for sociologists and anthropologists to study charisma, it had to be felt by those around them. Consequently, "charisma" was more and more examined through the lens of its social construction, where it acquired power.

Weber referred to this power as a "residual" authority, which challenged established conventional forms of authority and existed within the ever-changing dynamic between individuals, groups, and objects in relation to viewers. There was no magnetic quality absent of this first emotional acknowledgement.

This led to the reasonable conclusion that charisma does not originate from any one essential quality but rather is the product of an interaction between an exceptional person and their followers; this view eventually expanded to encompass many different types of personalities, the vast majority of whom did not identify as religious. Charismatic appeal was a term used to describe political figures, heroes of the battlefield, and cultural icons in the nineteenth century. This term appeared to overlap with celebrity and, later, with something social anthropologists found even more banal: fame, or being in the spotlight. People mostly used these titles to describe "great" persons, heroes, and leaders who set an example for others. Women were admitted later on, and they were mostly allowed to work in the entertainment industries, such as singing and acting.

The word "charismatic" entered common use in Europe and quickly became a synonym for "stage presence," "fame," or even more gendered concepts like "genius" or "greatness." As it entered common usage, its definition became increasingly more nebulous. Weber's reinterpretation of "charisma" occurred at the same time that a new sociological tradition was taking root, but some academics contend that he should be seen as having more in common with the term's theological ancestors than with the emerging "godless" fields of study.²⁸ Poet, industrialist, philosopher, scientist, and statesman Auguste Comte (1798–1852) released his "New Calendar of Great Men" (*Calendrier positiviste*) in 1849.

It is worth mentioning that June was the only month that included 'great' women, since it was devoted to Catholic saints. It appeared that the religious sphere was the safest place for women to be seen as charismatic. Weber's ideas on charisma and charismatic leadership have had an impact on many fields, including religion studies, anthropology, and Christian history. This has led to discussions on topics such as the persistence of charismatic miracle workers and how charismatic leaders in the past and present compare and contrast.

Although Weber proposed the idea of "charisma" as a tool for analysing bygone periods, not everyone shared this view. Using André Vauchez's distinction between "informal powers" and "institutional powers" (a hierarchical kind, like the ones held by priests and bishops as a result of their office), John Coakley voiced his scepticism in his considerations of the spiritual authority of men and women throughout the Middle Ages. He claimed that a person's charism—a spiritual talent connected to visions and revelations—was the foundation of their informal abilities. The fact that the Church's offices

were also believed to be founded on charisms, nevertheless, further muddled things. Put differently, according to Coakley, the concept of "charisma" according to Max Weber is a "quality of extraordinary leaders that arises from their own attributes and emphatically not from the routine authority of "everyday" institutions imposes a somewhat more rigid boundary between the charismatic and the institutional than what happens in the late mediaeval era would indicate. When compared to the "informal powers of prophets and visionaries," a priest's abilities would not have been considered less charismatic, in his view.

However, a recurring topic throughout Christian women's history is the distinction between office-based power and authority based on divine inspiration. Their anthology *Women of Spirit* begins with this passage. This is so, not because women are more inclined towards the emotive and intuitive, as men have supposed, but because it reflects the sociological fact that women for the most part were not allowed to claim authority of office, as pointed out by Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin in *Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*. Indeed, the topic of women's charismatic leadership seems to have become so ubiquitous that it serves as a jumping off point for academics investigating the need of charismatic legitimization of religious authority. Charismatic woman leaders were able to break down barriers between sexes in traditionally male-dominated religious settings.

- **Charismatic Women in Modern Religious Context**

The breadth of 'charisma' and the scrutiny of its veracity expanded in the nineteenth century to include a wide range of persons who attracted public attention, including religious leaders. Famous people from their hometown might suddenly become famous all across the world. Thanks to technological advancements like the railway and telegraph lines, which linked the countryside with the city; the periphery with the centre, and to increased literacy, cheaper and mass-produced print and press, religious charisma could equally be transmitted along quickly unfolding communication lines. Thanks to this infrastructure development, the many laywomen who had heavenly favours bestowed upon them—be it ecstasies, possessions, or stigmata—were able to move around more freely and more openly than before. By embracing the language of circulation, popularisation, and promotion, the contributions to this issue firmly place nineteenth- and twentieth-century religious phenomena (and communities of believers) within modern culture, challenging the tendency within history to speak of them as existing on the periphery or even outside of a modernising culture.

"The distinction between "modernity" and "tradition" becomes blurred" when discussing folklore from the nineteenth century, and many of the articles show how this happened. Even the movements that were designed to wipe out traditional culture ended up enmeshing it. The gendered nature of the contrast

between "modernity" and "tradition" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and in the application of this dichotomy to concepts of charisma is evident. This is evident when one considers the term's use to characterise notable men, and it is also evident when one considers the very conspicuous presence of charismatic women in a public arena that is often associated with males. The public nature of physical religious experiences left women susceptible to social forces that wanted to control or ignore their magnetic charisma, especially if their encounters with the divine were connected to physical health and sickness, and if they were not confined by domestic or monastic confinement (or had already transcended such boundaries, like Mother Teresa).

A number of factors came together to make women's bodies the focal point of public discussions on religious and charismatic leadership, as well as the infrastructure that served as a link between "modernity" and "tradition," as seen in the articles included below. Sofie Lachapelle demonstrates in her article about local Marian apparitions in late nineteenth and early twentieth century France that the Assumptionist Order used very modern methods (such as popular travel guides, periodicals, and a growing tourist industry along railway lines) to promote a picture of the women who had the apparitions that matched their idealised pre-modern vision of a religious France. A charismatic canon was formed by merging elements from the Middle Ages and the early Modern era.

The public's focus shifted to a captivating woman's beauty as her star power grew. It was clear to women with religious aspirations in nations where the railway had already reached rural regions in the early 1800s and where public opinion was strong that they needed to be prominent in the press and the public eye. Once they got it, they saw that creating a public character may help them stand out more. In the same way that Mother Teresa eagerly embraced the spotlight, female mystics of the nineteenth century eagerly participated in the development of new technologies and infrastructure. They were instrumental in shaping these infrastructures, which they then used to their advantage. In order to disseminate their predictions, charismatic female mystics and their followers published their own journals, fashioned their own religious symbols to strengthen their faith, and lauded the mystics' gifts in poetry and music. This has been shown by Tine Van Osselaer for a Belgian mystic from the early twentieth century and by Kristof Smeyers for a female prophet from Victorian England. All of these things demonstrate that the mystic was cognisant of the power of charismatic promotion and the significance of their public persona.

So, even though they originated on a smaller scale, charismatic religious movements persisted long after the advent of modern technology. As contemporary society's arteries and veins opened up new channels for the religious charisma of women mystics, they adapted and became expert storytellers. However, it

should not be overlooked how this innovative environment also altered the very essence of religious charisma. As Bruno Latour put it, "railways and newspapers were more than just conduits;" they also "mediated," "transmitted," "distorted," and "modified" the phenomena's meaning. They shaped public perception and expectations to the point that the audience became a powerful authority that could make or ruin charismatics.

- **Media and Public Presence**

These views may provide intriguing inspirations to the fields of religious studies and celebrity studies, as the papers in this themed issue demonstrate the abundant presence of women and religious charismatics in nineteenth- and twentieth-century society. Most examples in late modernity took on distinct traits than models from earlier ages, with the exception of Mother Teresa, a religious charismatic lady backed by those at the top of Vatican authority and a number of political leaders. Ladies from the countryside or the proletariat who did not have any special link to the elites made up the majority of these ladies. They gave up their anonymity and challenged the existing social order because of their shared profile and the graces and talents that the public considered outstanding. Using three case studies from the early half of the nineteenth century, Leonardo Rossi's study reveals these contemporary characteristics as well as the societal changes in charismatic women. Following the trend of late modernity, Rossi emphasises the fact that three Italian women were famous and revered for their charisms (ecstasies, stigmata, predictions) rather than their privileged social status, as had previously been the case. Through their alternative mystic lives, ordinary women with extraordinary powers were able to break free of the private and constricted dimensions of the domestic and monastic spheres, which had previously seemed to confine earlier female models. This allowed them to rise to the status of public personae.

- **Societal Impact and Transformation**

The many contributions to this themed issue imply that the charismatic person and her audience engage in a reciprocal relationship regarding the creation and public perception of charisma. Changes in the dissemination of media are one of the most noticeable contrasts with the early modern era. As mentioned earlier, a large audience was captivated by the process of developing charisma and the discussion around the authenticity—or lack thereof—of charismatic leaders in the media of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The civic and religious authorities would either take steps to prevent the women's popularity from spreading beyond their local sphere of influence or utilise it to their advantage when it reached critical mass. The publicly displayed embodied charisms really elicited a range of reactions, from scepticism and censorship to admiration and support.

The local clergy as well as the congregations at the Vatican were both summoned into action by the religious authorities. The bishops stepped in when charismatic authority was seen as a threat to the

charisma of power. The spiritual order of the community may be disrupted at times by the charismatic leader's fame and influence, but it was also their responsibility as ordinari of their dioceses to keep the peace. On a more macro level, the Holy See oversaw the investigation and treatment of a handful of religious heroines. In addition to dealing with situations involving charismatic women accused of fake mysticism, phoney piety, and claiming to be holy, the Holy Office persisted in its work throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, proving that it was not a remnant of the early modern era. It was expected that the clergy would let the ladies to become renowned and promote their fame as an exemplary social figure when no signs of suspicion or opposition to the Church could be found. The charismatic leadership of these women is a common thread in recent religious scholarship on late-modern mysticism and ecclesiastical control mechanisms. The researcher is able to combine approaches, viewpoints, and findings via the use of a double interpretive lens, which enables us to see these women as both religious charismatics and popular superstars.

Emma Aubin-Boltanski's piece revolves on the intricate dynamics between a female mystic, her adherents, and the Maronite Church. She zeroes in on Catherine Fahmi, a mother and laywoman who has been active in a developing network of Christian female mystics in Syria and Lebanon since the 1980s." Aubin-Boltanski situates Fahmi within a tradition of corporeal mysticism and demonstrates how the patriarchal and conservative society in which she lives, along with the Church's restrictions on women's participation, shape her own interpretation of these scripts, leading her to create subtle forms of critique and resistance that are similar to Foucault's "counter-conduct."

CONCLUSION

Gender norms and expectations were significantly rethought and reshaped in the nineteenth and twentieth century. These women achieved a level of spiritual power formerly reserved for males in institutional roles by virtue of their professed heavenly inspirations and unusual physiological experiences. Charismatic leadership offered a special method for women to gain influence inside patriarchal religious systems, according to the study's authors. The results highlight how women's bodies are fundamental in displaying and justifying charismatic leadership. Questions of religious legitimacy and power revolved on women's bodily experiences during the 19th-century renaissance of somatic piety and mystical conceptions of holiness. There were intricate power and resistance dynamics brought about by this embodiment of spirituality, which served to both uphold and question modern gender standards.

Additionally, the research shows how modernising influences, especially new media technologies, have a significant effect on how female religious charisma is built and spread. Charismatic women could build public personalities and reach audiences beyond

their immediate areas as a result of the proliferation of print media, railroads, and other forms of communication. The present concept of religious authority and fame was shaped by this mediatisation of charm. In addition, the study showed that religious, civil, and medical authorities' reactions to charismatic women's rising public impact were diverse and often contradictory. The wide range of reactions, from acceptance and appropriation to hostility and suppression, mirror deeper social conflicts over the place of women in society, the essence of spirituality in the body, and the function of religion in a secularising world.

Finally, this research adds to our knowledge of the ways in which religiously-motivated women of charismatic character influenced and participated in contemporary social development. These women shook up religious and gender norms by using their bodies to express spiritual authority and by taking use of new communication technology. Their lives and the way others saw them provide light on the complicated relationship between gender, religion, and modernity in the culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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