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# Charisma, Shamanism and Cults: The Construction of Evil

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CHARISMA, SHAMANISM AND CULTS:  
THE CONSTRUCTION OF EVIL

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Is charisma necessarily associated with moral polarization, violence, and destructive behavior? That is the question I wish to discuss today in a very truncated fashion, beginning with theory and then moving to the analysis of shamanism, which has been taken as the paradigmatic and original form of charisma. I'll conclude with a discussion of modern cultic manifestations.

Weber on Charisma

Early theorists of charisma did not correlate it with violence and the projection of evil. After all, charisma is a Christian religious term meaning the gift of grace; charismatics are 'touched by God' and the paradigmatic charismatic organization is the Jesus movement. Max Weber appropriated the concept of charisma as an ideal type of legitimate authority. He rejected spiritual interpretations, and instead gave a value-free sociological definition: "Charismatic authority is specifically outside the realm of every-day routine and the profane sphere..... charismatic authority is specifically irrational in the sense of being foreign to all rules" (Weber 1972: 51-2). It occurs in times of crisis, when tradition is failing, and is revolutionary in character. As Weber writes, "the governed submit because of their belief in the extraordinary quality of the specific person" (Weber 1972: 295). Whatever the leader says or demands is right solely because the leader said it. If it was said by someone else, its rightness would no longer be evident. In Weber's historical sociology, charisma is also doomed to be ephemeral. It is bound to be either destroyed or rationalized and institutionalized. The prophet will be inevitably replaced by the priest.

But prophets are not the only charismatics; the category also includes shamans, epileptics, and berserk warriors. Unlike prophets, these figures do not lead because of their message. Some have no message whatsoever. They are charismatic because they appear to exist in an intensified state of consciousness that attracts the follower <sup>1</sup>. Weber's theory of charisma

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<sup>1</sup> This is why the teacher is not a charismatic, despite the depth of the teaching offered. The teacher has faith, but not the excitement necessary to attract a following (Weber 1978: 514).

commitment is based on his belief that the intensity of the charismatic inspires and vitalizes onlookers through a form of emotional contagion <sup>2</sup>.

Weber's ideas about the essential characteristics of charisma are clearest in his discussion of shamanism, which he believed was the precursor of all later forms of charismatic advent <sup>3</sup>. For Weber, the central feature of shamanism was the capacity of the shaman to enter into a state of ecstatic trance.

Embodying powerful spirits, the shaman inspires the audience to a sense of

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<sup>2</sup> See Greenfeld (1978) on the Weberian theory of primary charisma. The transmission of emotions may be amplified by techniques of ecstasy: the erotic orgy, frenzied dancing and singing, mortification and self-mutilation, and oratory. As religion develops, these techniques for inducing a state of intoxication among the onlookers become more disciplined and new, more reserved forms of communion evolve, such as the contemplation of the exemplary prophet, or the detached action in the world demanded by ethical ascetics carrying with them the divine word.

<sup>3</sup> Although it is clear that for Weber the shaman was the first to make charismatic ecstasy his vocation, Weber actually portrayed two opposed forms of primal charisma: the charisma of the shaman-prophet, and the charisma of the berserker-warrior. The first type gives rise to religion, the second to politics. According to Weber, "the antagonism of political and magic charisma is primeval" (1978: 1173), and a great deal of his most interesting work is concerned with the interplay between these two opposing forces. Ethnographically and historically, it appears that genuine charisma is located in the shaman-like religious figures who may legitimize the warrior's conquests by their spiritual support, or in warriors who themselves exhibit shamanic ecstasy and thus combine the two roles. The type case for the latter is Mohammed.

escape from the ordinary miseries of isolation, pain, and the fear of death. The imagery is of selfless healing, vitalization and empowerment, not of evil.

### Shamanism and the Practice of Ecstasy

The reality of shamanism is more ambiguous than Weber's ideal type. The shaman's ability to overcome the boundaries of the self is typically symbolized by frightening abilities to read minds, change shape, see at a distance, use x-ray vision, predict the future and travel out of the body. While in trance, the shaman is also believed to unify with a spirit familiar in the animal world. Significantly, this animal is often a killer, such as a lion or wolf, indicating the shaman's ambiguous role as both protector and potential attacker <sup>4</sup>.

Ambiguity is evident in the very simplest societies where shamans are revered and trance is commonplace. For instance, the most powerful curers among the !Kung San of the Kalahari are also feared as eaters of souls. Furthermore, the !Kung conceptualize trance as 'death' and while entranced insult the natural forces they usually revere while struggling against magical destructive arrows aimed at them by malevolent spirits (Katz 1982). Similarly, the Nilotic Dinka correlate trance with convulsive throes of a slaughtered animal, and mystically attack enemies while entranced. At the death of their leading

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<sup>4</sup> This is, of course, also instrumental, since control of animals is crucial for hunting and herding societies. But it is not only control which is emphasized; there is also a participation in and identification with the animal world that is symbolically stressed in itself, focusing our attention on the shaman as one who is a mediator between society and the untamed forces of the wilderness. For instance, the Dakota shaman Lame Deer tells us that the shaman needs to be communing with "all those who move upon the earth, the animals. He is at one with them" (Lame Deer & Erdoes 1972: 146).

shaman (the Fishing Spear Master) they search out neighbors to kill and torture in violent revenge (Lienhardt 1961).

Evidence of the negative side of shamanism is also to be found in the way initiates usually enter into the shamanistic condition through an ordeal. Typically they are possessed by violent spirits who rend them to pieces, shred their flesh, dip them in boiling oil, eviscerate them and gnaw their bones. Understandably, those who are 'called' to be shamans usually resist the call, terrified of the agonies they will have to undergo. Nonetheless, they are compelled by the overwhelmingly powerful forces of the spirits who have selected them. Novice shamans not surprisingly manifest symptomatic behavior such as withdrawal, extreme depression, hallucinations, hysterical seizures, depersonalization and so on; as a result, they often appear to an outsider to be 'insane', or at least seriously mentally disturbed.

Ambivalence is also to be found in the typical shaman's performance which moves from imitation of trance to a real, but controlled, frenzy, followed by a journey to the netherworld, and then the triumphant return to daily life as master of the spirits. This drama of death and rebirth is a repetition of the shaman's own initiatory conquest over the demonic forces that threatened to engulf the fragmented self. As the audience members witness and participate in the performance, they too achieve a momentary and vicarious triumph over their own mortality. However, an intimate association with the spiritual forces of destruction necessarily makes the shaman both a force of good and a potential source of destruction, since whoever controls the power of chaos can also unleash it.

### The Attribution of Evil

Given that charisma, even in its simplest form, is always ambivalent, under what conditions does negativity become predominant? A number of answers

have been given that may be applicable to the present case. For example, anthropologist Lawrence Krader (1978) has argued persuasively that the degree to which shamans in the Arctic are perceived as good or evil is partially the result of the disruptive and anxiety producing influence of Russian colonialism. In Krader's formulation, charismatics traditionally performed both at the public level as representatives of the whole group in relations with the external world, and at the more intimate local private level as a magical personal healer. Their status under these circumstances was very high.

Colonial intrusion inevitably stripped shamans of their power, just as the society itself was stripped of its mythical charter and made aware of its inferiority to and dependence on the colonial administration. Reduced to a private role, the now impotent shamans were tempted to try to regain domination by manipulating and controlling the internal affairs of the small local group, just as they were formerly credited with manipulating the animals and elements. But where control over the dangerous external world was greatly valued, the attempt to magically control neighbors in the local tent group was met with fear and hatred <sup>5</sup>.

The relationship of charisma to social organization has been elaborated a more abstract fashion in Mary Douglas, who writes that "the weaker the social constraints, the more bodily dissociation is approved and treated as a central ritual" (1970:130). Conversely, ecstatic states challenge the social order of societies with more complex and inclusive public systems of classification and a

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<sup>5</sup> This dichotomy reflects Durkheim's analysis of the difference between religion, which is collective and moral, and magic, which is personal and immoral (Durkheim 1965).

high degree of social conformity and boundary maintenance. In these societies charismatic performers are stigmatized as insane and evil by the mainstream <sup>6</sup>.

The socially generated distaste for charisma has been analyzed as well by I.M. Lewis (1971) and Victor Turner (1982), who agree that more complex societies will tend to denigrate the immediate experience of ecstatic possession in favor of institutionalized authority relations. However, the weak and downtrodden remain susceptible to charismatic experience, which allows them a connection with spirits outside the accepted religious hierarchy. In following charismatic leaders, the marginalized deny the legitimacy of the mainstream social order and experience a subjective sense of power.

Ordinarily, the charismatic leaders of the downtrodden are ignored by the privileged, except when they are consulted as spiritual healers <sup>7</sup>. But the power

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<sup>6</sup> This analysis is borne out ethnographically in Siberia, where the simplest egalitarian societies, such as the Chukchi, do not have professional shamans. Rather, almost everyone has some capacity for trance, which is entered into quite easily (Bogoras 1909). In contrast, in more complex social formations, such as the Tungus - which has relatively complex, well developed clan structures, differentiated ascriptive roles, and complicated cosmologies - the shamanistic spiritual practitioner is set apart as a priest-like professional role requiring elaborate, expensive and weighty paraphernalia. Shamanism also necessitates a considerable degree of training, pain and the risk of social opprobrium (Shirokogoroff 1935).

<sup>7</sup> These curers who have their roots in the ecstatic experiences of the disenfranchised are attractive as healers because, in Lewis's model, the elite have an uneasy conscience over their dominant position. This malaise leaves them psychologically prone to spiritual afflictions thought to emanate from anti-

to cure can also be envisioned as a power to harm by those who benefit from the rationalization of society, and the curer is then liable to be denounced as a witch or devil. However, the witches reviled by the privileged for their personal supernatural power can be the hope of the marginalized and the alienated, for the same reason. The charismatic has the potential to tame and embody the spirits feared by the establishment; they reject the world as it is, and offer the disaffected an ecstatic communion through immediate and vivid contact with ultimate power.

To reiterate: charismatic shamans are universally attributed ambivalent characteristics. They can kill as well as cure, and are feared as well as adulated. They are persons who struggle against inner fragmentation, and gain their authority as a result of their capacity to experientially relive their conquest of chaos and death through their public performances. Krader shows how this capacity becomes demonized under conditions of colonialism and cultural malaise; Douglas demonstrates that social complexity correlates with the attribution of evil to charismatics; Lewis and Turner argue that the charismatic, reviled as a witch by the mainstream, can appear as a savior to the alienated. Clearly, these are the conditions characteristic of modernity, and help explain the nature of present-day terrorist organizations, which are very often based in charismatic cults.

### Cults, Charisma, and Terror

Of course, throughout history, there have been social uprisings for purely practical causes - lowering of rent, fairer wages, better conditions for workers,

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social malevolent spirits and from witchcraft directed at them by those they oppress. The shaman, as representative of the spiritual powers of the weak, is believed to have the power to control these hostile forces.

and so on. But in a world where the old order has been lost and new one not yet born, and where the imperial authority of the West is both resented and yet impossible to avoid, the demand may be for something far more radical: an "age of bliss in which the faithful would preside over societies without injustice, illness or conflict" (Adas 1979: 287); in other words, a thirst for the millennium. This thirst is intensified and given direction within cultures marked by Judeo-Christian-Muslim religious annunciations favoring notions of the end of time, redemption of the good and damnation of the evil, the appearance of the Messiah, and so on. To meet these eschatological demands a leader cannot be a pragmatist, but must instead be a savior or Mahdi who can inspire the self-sacrificial fervor necessary to overturn the unjust world.

Under these circumstances, charismatic annunciations are driven towards an increasing apotheosis of and identification with the leader and a demonization of opponents. Absolute self-righteousness and ruthless hatred against the corrupt world are likely to become the center of the charismatic message - as a Medieval rhyme put it, "the children of God, that we are, poisonous worms, that you are" (Cohn 1970: 87). The liberation struggles of many nations and groups have been marked by these sorts of polarized charismatic annunciations. The "Shining Path" of Peru is one version; another is the terrorist organization of al-Qaeda.

As expected, world-rejecting forms of charisma are especially potent in the third world, where revolutionary social movements unite desires for liberation with political action, stimulating the selfless commitment of a following in the struggle against imperial powers; a struggle which rational consideration would preclude as too risky. Leaders in this millennial messianic mode combine powerful dramatic personalities with transcendent messages of transformation and calls for the destruction of corrupt oppressors. Believers

offset their own fears by affirming their leader's absolute authority and goodness, following cultural formats (Willner 1984).

The charismatic community views all outsiders as apostates or devils. The collective is defiantly affirmed as a only way of being for the devotees, who live together, give up their former identities, repudiate family and friends, and selflessly pledge themselves to achieving the apocalyptic vision of their leader. The end result can be a group loyal to an individual who certainly appears outside of any conceivable form of rationality. But it is evident that the cycle of paranoia and violence we have witnessed in modern terrorist cults is not located solely within the psyche of the leader. Unlike his shamanic predecessors who were part of daily life, the modern charismatic is placed outside the ordinary world and regarded as a messiah by followers. This expectation places huge pressure on the leader, who cannot compromise with reality, but must instead pursue the elimination of all that does not permit his apotheosis. Thus, deviant groups labelled as evil and insane will tend to live out that label in practice.

In conclusion, charisma is by nature ambivalent and polarizing. In its simplest form as shamanism, it is based on the practitioner's dramatic struggle against chaos and death, re-enacted in a vitalizing public performance. Under these conditions, the shaman, though feared, is rewarded by social status. But in more complex social formations, the shaman is increasingly marginalized and regarded as evil and dangerous; simultaneously charismatics serve as nodal points for mobilization of the marginalized. In modern times, a history of colonialism, a strong sense of cultural alienation, and a desperate hope for the millennium are factors that exaggerate the tendency of charismatic groups toward acts of apocalyptic violence that aim to purify a corrupt universe. As long as these conditions prevail, we are unlikely to see an end to terrorism (for

more on the actual trajectory of charismatic movements in modernity, see Lindholm 1990, 1992, 2003).

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