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ESSENTIAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE CONCEPT OF CHARISMA

GEORGE P. BOSS

Charisma is a term which in popular usage describes the personal appeal of an extraordinary individual. Derived from a Greek word meaning "divine gift", the term is used generally to symbolize the inexplicable force of such a personality. The essential attributes of the concept of charisma have not been identified in anything like a systematic way, with the result that use of the term, even in learned discourse, is often extremely ambiguous. This paper, an analytic study, represents an attempt to identify the essential attributes of the term, with a view to making it more useful, particularly within the universe of rhetorical discourse.

Charisma, a popular term deriving from a Greek word meaning "divine gift," has become during the past few years a kind of counter word for describing the extraordinary magnetism of certain individuals. So vague indeed is the referent for charisma that scholars in the field of rhetoric have had only minimal interest in the concept, content to allow the term to be subsumed under the general rubric of sthos, or "ethical proof." Some scholars may well concur in the view of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who suggests that the word has proven meaningless through indiscriminate use. Yet if this logic be followed, the rhetorical scholar would give up on the term rhetoric itself. For—it will be remembered—no classic, academic term is so ambiguously and imprecisely used today in popular discourse.

I take the position in this paper that charisma, adequately defined, can represent a substantial concept—a concept of real value

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See Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "On Heroic Leadership," Encounter, 15 (1960), 3-11.

for rhetorical theory and criticism. The object of this study is to examine the concept of charisms and to suggest that it can and should be used to designate attributes of importance in rhetorical study.

ATTRIBUTES OF THE CONCEPT

Writers in diverse fields of study have attempted to identify one or more attributes of the concept of charisma, yet no one appears to have attempted a definitive analysis of the rhetorical aspects of the construct. The literature suggests three major dimensions for the concept: (1) qualities (or traits) residing in the person himself: (2) the perceived effect on the "listener-followers"; and (8) the necessities, or exigencies, residing within the particular sociopolitical situation. Yet when we proceed synthetically, from both the rhetorical and the sociopolitical perspectives, there are discernible nine attributes of the phenomenon of charisma which have genuine potential for use in rhetorical scholarship. These nine attributes, or constituents, may be summarized as follows: (1) the "gift of grace" (i.e., the "divine gift"); (2) the concept of the "leader-communicator"; (3) the "inspiring message"; (4) the "idolatrous follower"; (5) a shared history; (6) high status; (7) the concept of "mission"; (8) an important crisis; and (9) successful (i.e., positive) results. It should be observed that no attribute can be presumed to exist in the charismatic situation, in vacuo. I suggest rather-and the point is an important one-that each attribute is a constituent part of a whole. That is,

^{*}The specific determinants for charisma offered by Max Weber were these: 1. Recognition of leader by "those subject to authority"; 2. Leader's god or "heroic powers" must fall for him to lose charismatic power; 5. Followers have an "emotional form of communal relationship"; 4. Pure charisma is "foreign to economic consideration"; and 5. Charisma is a "revolutionary force." Max Weber, The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1984), p. 362. Davies also suggested five ingredients: "(1) the existence of leaders predisposed to make a charismatic appeal; (2) the weakness or strength of political traditions and institutions that inhibit the solution of problems through supermen; (4) a degree of political integration that causes people to turn to government rather than other institutions . . .; and (5) the existence of crisis." James C. Davies, "Charisma in the 1952 Campaign," The American Political Science Review, 46 (1954), 1085.

each interacts with and is indispensable to the other in the creation of a "charismatic event." The intimate relationships among the several attributes will be apparent from the discussion which follows.

The "Gift of Grace"

A prime attribute of charisma has been designated in the literature as the "gift of grace." Indeed this expression may be said to constitute the denotative base of the concept, charisma. The term, as noted earlier, was originally derived from a Greek word meaning "divine gift." This particular attribute is wider than either the concepts of "good will" or "trustworthiness"; yet it quite clearly partakes of "credibility"—as Bettinghaus suggests. The plural of the term (i.e., charismata) was developed in a special sense in the Judeo-Christian tradition. And various gifts, or "endowments" of charismata, were assumed to be conferred by the Holy Spirit. Thus, for example, the writer of 1 Corinthians identifies various "gifts" of the Holy Spirit, or "charismata," which may be distributed to individual Christians:

In each of us the Spirit is manifested in one particular way, for some useful purpose. One man, through the Spirit, has the gift of wise speech, while another, by the power of the same Spirit, can put the deepest knowledge into words. Another, by the same Spirit, is granted faith; another, by the one Spirit, gifts of healing, and another mirraulous powers; another has the gift of prophecy, and another the ability to distinguish true spirits from false; yet another has the gift of ecstatic utterance of different words, and another the ability to interpret it. But all these gifts are the work of one and the same Spirit distributing them separately to each individual at will.

The Christian Bible thus portrays the Holy Spirit-or the

²In its earliest appearances in English the term was expressed variously as charism and charisme, Bulwer in 1644 refers, for example, to "that Charisme or miraculous gift of healing." Conybeare, as late as 1852, wrote: "The gift of prophecy was that charism which enabled its possessors to utter, with the authority of inspiration, divine strains of warning." OED, IL 288.

^{*}Erwin P. Bettinghaus Persuasive Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 117.

⁵¹ Corinthians, 12.7-11, NEB.

"Other Christ"—as the repository and allocator of extraordinary individual powers, endowments of charismata. The point here is that in the Christian tradition, the original meaning of the term, "divine gift," was retained and given a very special anchorage in Christian theology.

Interestingly, the scholarly literature on charisma in some instances carries echoes of the Christian usage. For example, the noted sociologist Max Weber wrote: "The term of charisma will [here] be applied to a certain quality of the individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed withsupernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers and qualities." The influence of the Christian interpretation is readily discernible in Weber's definition."

It may be noted further that when an individual believes he has been chosen by some divine entity for a special mission and projects a conviction of messianic destiny, he extends his ethos beyond the ordinary standard. Ascription to such a communicator of the "gift of grace" then expresses his enhanced qualifications and his personal dynamism, as well as his safety. Charisma, Mommsen insisted, is "a form of spiritual energy." And in this connection it is instructive to observe some historical examples. Both Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt frequently invoked the guidance of God in their decision-making and were believed by many to have had divine sanction and enlightenment as a result of such identification. It may also be noted that when followers of a preacher ascribe to him the "gift of prophecy" and "the Spirit," they are in effect investing him with the "gift of

sWeber, p. 358. Ascribing "exceptional powers" to an individual corresponds to the popular view of the concept of charisma; yet a major cause for controversy concerning the treatment of the charismatic motif has arisen from Weber's claim that there are three bases for governance, the rational, the traditional, and the charismatic, corresponding respectively to the authorities of an elected executive, a king, and a religious leader. See Weber, p. 328. The argument of this paper, however, is that charisma describes a renowned leader, regardless of his base of authority.

⁷Cf. the factors of credibility discussed in D. Berlo, J. Lemert, and R. Mertz, "Dimensions for Evaluating the Acceptability of a Message Source," mimeographed report, Michigan State University, 1966, p. 22.

^{*}Wolfgang Mommsen, "Max Weber's Political Sociology and His Philosophy of World History," International Social Science Journal, 17 (1965), \$2-3,

grace." The same may be said of a political leader-communicator to whom exceptional administrative wisdom and political acumen are ascribed. The "gift" may surely be considered an extension of the concept, ethos; yet it is but one of the several attributes, or constituents, associated with the concept, charisma.

The "Leader-Communicator"

The charismatic person is not simply a speaker lecturing on a subject on which he possesses special knowledge. He does not appear before a group of listeners with whom he will have no contact after his performance. Rather, he is a vigorous leader whose audience is composed of "idolatrous followers" and potential followers. In order for the communicator to be a "charismatic leader,' he must have about him persons who accede to his leadership. Wrote Weber: "What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his 'followers' or 'disciples'." The charismatic person is, in short, one whose leadership qualities are preeminent and well-recognized. However, as Gerth observed: "It is not our task to decide whether the leader has charismatic qualities. It is relevant only that the leader find sufficient followers who believe that he has those qualities and who acknowledge his claim for recognition."10 Moreover, the leader who makes such a claim must accept the obligations and duties of his role.

Besides leadership ability, the charismatic individual is seen to have demonstrated a heroic spirit; indeed, the leader-communicator's reputation in this regard is cumulative. For example, General Eisenhower, after his long and superlative leadership of the allied forces during World War II, was sought by both major political parties as their 1952 presidential candidate. Again, after Khrushchev backed down at the time of the "Cuban Missile Crisis," John F. Kennedy became, on the stage of the world, a more potent "candidate" for charismatic stature. Both men in

⁹Weber, p. 359.

¹⁰Hans Gerth, "The Nazi Party: Its Leadership and Composition," The American Journal of Sociology, 45 (1940), 519.

¹¹For an account of "the missle crisis" and Kennedy's part in the negotiations, see John A. Garraty, The American Nation (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 911.

their separate decades became, cumulatively, symbols of an heroic and extraordinary spirit.

In addition to having the trait of heroism, the charismatic leader seems messianic in his appeal—messianic in the sense that he is expected to bring "his people" to "the promised land" of their needs and aspirations. Hanna reported that "political messiahs" like Nkrumah and Nyerere, glorified throughout Black Africa, were looked upon as "saviors." In the same vein, Fagan wrote of Castro: "There is no lack of reports which mention that ... Castro was regarded by large segments of the population as the heaven-sent savior of the nation." In short, the charismatic person is perceived by his followers as the supreme solver of their particular problem, and as the supreme communicator of their desires, beliefs, and aspirations.

A leader is usually recognized by his nonverbal behavior in response to exigences, asswell as by his verbal performance in responding to them. The "charismatic leader" is seen to possess extraordinary skill in utterance. Those individuals who have evoked the label "charismatic"—leaders such as Churchill, Gandhi, Roosevelt, Hitler, and others—were all famous for their rhetorical talents. Above all, the bone fide charismatic person will exemplify superior ability to communicate orally. No historian, in reconstructing past eras, can ignore the spoken communications of these exceptional leader-communicators and the impact of those communications on national affairs—not if he seeks a thorough understanding of the times in which the leaders lived and moved.

"An Inspiring Message"

The message of the charismatic leader will contain what are seen as compelling verbal and nonverbal components. Arousing language often generates and ferments situations perceived as socially and politically significant. The parturition of charisma can be seen not only in symbolic actions but also in the verbal propagation of the charismatic leader's ideas. At some point, dy-

¹²William John Hanna, ed., Independent Black Africa: The Politics of Freedom (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1984), p. 20.

¹⁸Richard R. Fagen, "Charismatic Authority and the Leadership of Fidel Castro," Western Political Quarterly, 18 (1965), 277.

namic language—ordinarily both written and oral—becomes the method by which leadership is supported and validated. Galvanic and memorable communication will be made via radio or television, or in the face-to-face settings with "audience-followers."

Charismatic leader-communicators are known by their gospels; and their followers spread "the word." Slogans or statements are derived from the tenets, the "platform," or the mission of the messianic person. These are used as fundamental strategies in his campaign of leadership, and they are conspicuous projectors of his charismatic image. Yet the most vital presentation of the "inspiring message" will consist in the moving oral performance of the leader-communicator himself.

There are often, of course, inspiring nonverbal, symbolic dimensions to what is communicated. We have many noteworthy examples. The fasting of the charismatic Gandhi conveyed to his people his sacrifice, his deep convictions, and his "vision" for them. Again, the swastika of the Third Reich was symbolic of Hitler's catastrophic message of Germanic glory and world supremacy. The determined facial features and commanding presence of Winston Churchill and his "V"-for-victory gesture became to the allies charismatic, nonverbal symbols of the Prime Minister's extraordinary confidence and resolve. In sum, by means of verbal and nonverbal behavior the charismatic leader stimulates his followers to transcendent efforts, to Herculean acts in behalf of his cause, and to grander interpretations of himself.

"Idolatrous Followers"

A critical attribute of charisma is the concept of "idolatrous followers." These individuals are faithful listeners, responders, and doers. A charismatic career is ordinarily begun with the support of a small number of fanatical devotees. For example, Hitler gathered around him disciples such as Himmler, Goering, and Strasser. Gandhi had his cadre of disciples which included Nehru, Prasad, Rajogopalachari, and Kalelkra. Charismatic leaders do not achieve success without a following of devoted apostles who

¹⁴See the discussion of Gandhi, his followers and "symbolic action" in Allen H. Merriam, "Symbolic Action in India: Gandhi's Nonverbal Persuasion," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 61 (1975), 290-306.

help propagandize "the chosen one" and his purpose. In our own day, the media—particularly television—can become proselytizing, surrogate "disciples," making potential mass leaders visible to an incredibly large audience. In any case, just as the followers require a leader for sustenance of mind and spirit, so also does the leader-communicator require followers to strengthen his motivation for deeds of valor and to enlarge his area of power.

A notable quality of the listener-followers is their unremitting faith in the charismatic leader—a faith that is nartured by the communicator who is fully responsive to their shibboleths and predilections. Marcus has contended that "the 'true-believing' Nazi had implicit faith that under the Fuehrer's leadership Germany could master the destiny of history..." The desire to believe in some person—in his principles and capabilities—makes individuals more susceptible to a leader's message of alluring change. In calculating the persuasive impact of a charismatic communicator, the rhetorical analyst must therefore take into consideration the audience's special predisposition toward belief. By means of "social facilitation," by effective utilization of the audience's feelings of unity and conviction, the speaker may be able to induce a still stronger allegiance to ideas and programs. 16

"A Shared History"

The association of leader with follower is more intimate than that between the average speaker and a general audience. The former are involved together in almost a familial undertaking. Between listener-follower and the charismatic leader-communicator there will exist an inordinate "sense of community." Audience and speaker will have participated together in symbolic acts

¹⁵John T. Marcus, "Transcendence and Charisma," Western Political Quarterly, 14 (1967), 287.

³⁶Hitler, commenting on the typical German, wrote: "When from his workshop or big factory . . . he is swept away by three or four thousand others into the mighty effect of suggestive intoxication and enthusiasm, when the visible success and agreement of thousands confirm to him the rightness of the new doctrine . . . then he himself has succumbed to the magic influence of what we designate as mass suggestion." Adolph Hitler, Mein Kampl, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton, Miffin Company, 1945), p. 479.

and verbal events that demonstrate their common convictions. They participate as well in a common national culture-in its linguistic, social, political, and economic heritage. Indeed, their relationship epitomizes what Kenneth Burke has encompassed in

the concept of "identification."

Before loyalty will be pledged, the leader, to be truly charismatic, must have exhibited his willingness to live by and die for the myths of his associates. Willner and Willner have contended that in order to legitimize his claim to a position of authority the charismatic leader must be able "to draw upon and manipulate the body of myth in a given culture and the actions and values associated with those myths."17 Proof of his fidelity to the myths must be demonstrated by the right kinds of rhetoric and public rituals. Gods, heroes, and heritage must be revered. Willner and Willner argue further that a leader's charisma depends "upon his becoming assimilated in the thoughts and feelings of a populace, to its sacred figures, divine beings, or heroes."18 Hitler ingratiated himself with the Germans, for example, by maintaining that they were superior as intellects and warriors because of their Aryan blood and Teutonic origin, African leaders like Nkrumah understood the necessity of permitting and fostering native rituals in order to retain the loyalty of followers.

"High Status"

A further attribute of the charismatic figure is "high status." When one occupies the seat of office itself with followers' approval, sanctified by tradition or religious fiat, he gains "exaltation" by his ascension to that office. Sohm was referring to "status," for example, when he noted that the "Spirit" gave the ecclesiastical office its sanctification. The high status of a charismatic leader thus provides yet another basis for the idolatry of his followers.

However, on reaching a place of power the person is projected

³⁷Ann Ruth Willner and Dorothy Willner, "The Rise and Fall of Charismatic Leaders," The Annals, 358 (1985), 77.

¹⁸Willner and Willner, 82.

¹⁰Rudolph Sohm, Kirchenrecht, 1892, p. 26, cited in Carl J. Friedrich, "Political Leadership and the Problem of Charismatic Power," Journal of Politics, 23 (1981), 4.

into numerous new role necessities. Dekmejian has stated that "Accession to high office should be regarded as an imperative for the development of charismatic leadership." But the leader will now be called upon to be an initiator of ceremonies; he will be expected to abide by certain procedures and fulfill prescribed social functions. Because of his position and role, he will also be expected to produce "miracles," whether the reviving of a Lazarus, the achieving of freedom, or the rejuvenating of an ailing economy.

"The Mission"

That which sustains the charismatic, follower-leader relationship is a sense of mutual mission, which in most instances could be called an idealistic cruss le. The attribute of mission relates to some sociopolitical predicament that cries out for urgent resolution. Special efforts will seem essential to overcome formidable odds. Bendix has observed: "The charismatic leader is a man who demands obedience on the basis of the mission he feels called to perform." The leader-communicator, like Moses with his tablets, is perceived as carrying out "commandments," and it is these imperatives which validate his mission. The seductive "quest" is that which justifies the followers in submitting their destiny to the leader, whose "crusade" quite often is to assist his followers in satisfying their physiological needs. But frequently the charismatic mission may be to achieve "self-actualization" and humanitarian ends. "

By associating with a leader who has extraordinary capabilities, followers become partners in a sacred enterprise; they transcend themselves in subjecting their wills to the will of the inspired leader-communicator. Marcus has contended that "Em-

³ºFrom Richard H. Dekmejian, "The Dynamics of the Egyptian Political System: The Interaction of Charisma, Ideology and Institutions (1962-66)," Dist. Columbia Univ. 1966, p. 8.

²¹Reinhard Bendix, Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962), p. 301.

^{22°}Cf. the discussion of A. H. Maslow's hierarchical theory of human motivation as a contemporary organismic theory in James A. Chaplin and T. S. Krawice, Systems and Theories of Psychology (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1969), pp. 428-52.

pathic identification with the charismatic figure becomes the vehicle of transcendence; through it the individual alienates his alter-ego in the 'movement' but also finds a new identity in his relationship to the chilastic expectation the Hero embodied." ²⁸
Usually the mission and the leader-communicator become inseparable: to folow the charismatic individual is to pursue his goals—to seek his "holy grail."

Although it has been earlier stated that followers throng to a charismatic leader who reflects their shibboleths, traditions, and myths, such identification does not necesarily mean that they favor retention of the status quo—the social and political system under which they live. Enrolled under the banner of a crusade, the followers readily subscribe to innovative actions and programs. Berger argues that charisma represents "the sudden eruption into history of quite new forces, often linked to quite new ideas." The glory of the mission may well be its iconoclastic novelty. Followers and leader can exult in a climate of innovation as well as in the retention of revered rituals.

Another quality of the mission is selflessness. High-minded followers and leaders, because they are bent on common idealistic goals, often either renounce or minimize extensive economic benefits to be won from their achievements. They may indeed, like Gandhi, take a vow of poverty. Of this aspect of mission, Bendix observes: "The role of celibacy for the Roman Catholic clergy and the practical celibacy of many charismatic prophets have much the same significance." For the devotee of the crusade the rewards ought to be derived from the messianic quest itself. In religion or in politics the missions can be both pragmatic and philanthropic.

"An Important Crisis"

Another attribute essential to the occurrence of charisma is a situation of "crisis" proportions. If one examines the environments from which figures acclaimed as being charismatic have

²⁵ Marcus, 238.

²⁴Peter L. Berger, "Charisma and Religious Innovations: Social Location of Israelite Prophecy," The American Sociological Review, 28 (1963), 949.

²⁵ Bendix, p. 302.

risen, significant crises will be discovered in the fabrics of their times. Bendix argues that "Charismatic leadership is a uniquely personal response to a crisis in human experience." Many leader-communicators—"deliverers" such as Gandhi, Nasser, Roosevelt and Christ—were propelled into prominence during periods of economic and social agitation and distress.

Most assuredly, the condition for charisma is more than a rhetorical occasion demanding an articulate response. Corrosive problems that cause physical or spiritual suffering may persist. Those dedicated to the mission propose themselves, their leader, and his "ism" as the solution. Charisma develops in the act of-the thing missions, of resolving crucial crises, or of sustaining adoration of "the truth."

"Successful Results"

Unless divisive problems are in the process of being resolved, unless the crusade appears to be accomplishing the purpose the leader has vowed it would accomplish, there is little likelihood of the leader's retaining his charismatic aura. Abstract goals may be achieved in the transformation of values and poliētes; yet it is more likely that the goals will be concrete and realistic. For example, a leader-communicator will be voted back into high office if a decent standard of living is restored to the people. If charisma is to flourish, achievement (i.e., "success") must be in clear evidence.

²⁶Bendix, p. 300.

²⁷Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (1968), 5.

Success is to some extent dependent on how effectively a leader uses power in defeating his enemies and in securing the welfare of his adherents. According to Shils, "Power is indeed the central, order-related event in the charismatic situation." **a When a charismatic leader-communicator becomes the dispenser of governmental largesse, of rewards and punishments, his charismatic aura is reinforced. If the expected dividends of leadership do not accrue to the followers—if a crisis is not resolved, the mission not accomplished, the followers not "satisfied"—the leader-communicator is apt to be abandoned. Of this phenomenon Weber asserted, "If he is for long unsuccessful, above all if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear." **a In short, failure can vitiate the rhetoric of the leader-communicator and destroy his charismatic identity.

CONCLUSION

A rhetorical concept of charisma has been offered as a construct useful in analyzing the rhetorical efforts of extraordinary leader-communicators. I have argued that the attributes, or constituents, of charisma do not treat of an ordinary speaker, audience, and situation, or of ethos in the traditional sense, but rather of an exceptional relationship between a leader-communicator and his listener-followers. The relationship is an intimate one of community and of continuity, sustained by "shared events" and sociopolitical crises.

If the several factors discussed here are recognized within a sociopolitical situation involving an extraordinary person, then such a "leader-communicator" should be thought of as "charismatic." Attributes then to be searched for, as belonging to him, are a "gift of grace;" special qualities of leadership, an inspiring message, and successful results. Attributes presumably possessed by such a leader should be "high status," "a shared history" with followers, a "mission-crusade," and a "crisis." Yet it must be remembered that all of these attributes derive value from the needs and aspirations of listener-followers, as each attribute creates and interacts with the other.

>> Weber, p. 360.

²⁸Edward Shils, "Charisma, Order and Status," The American Sociological Review, 30 (1965), 205.

For the rhetorical analyst these constituents of the charismatic situation can serve to identify truly charismatic speakers. The scope of analysis will then stretch beyond the standard categories of proofs, language, delivery, etc. Using these several determinants, the analyst can understand why the leader communicator should be judged to have "charismatic stature." As a rhetorical concept, charisma should relate to sociopolitical realities and not merely to "mysterious presence." Sociologist Talcott Parsons has aptly stated that "Charisma is not a metaphysical entity, but a strictly observable quality of men and things in relation to human acts and attitudes." With its several constituents identified, charisma can be a legitimate and fruitful concept in rhetorical studies.

²⁶Talcott Parsons, The Structure of Social Action (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1949), p. 668.