

CHARISMA AND CHARISMATIC TENDENCIES IN MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.'S LEADERSHIP STYLE

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Inasmuch as the leadership style of Martin L. King, Jr. is often discussed, debated, and about whom much is written, few if any, scholars have cast King and his leadership style within the context of Weber's notions of charisma, elective affinity and the routinization of charisma. We argue that King possessed the blessed "gift of grace," and that "gift of grace" was validated by the social audience that King led. We further argue that like charismatics of the past who rejected established rules, created new ones and issued a demand for social change (Tucker 1968), so was King. From state to state, and from time to time, King proved his mission by non-violently demonstrating against all established segregation laws. At times arrested, jailed, and if convicted, opted to remain in jail rather than to pay a fine for his conviction.

King also made effective use of rhetoric, metaphors and similes in speeches, alluded to myth and history, and the contents of his message were meaningful and relevant to those who followed him. If correct, then, Friedland (1964), Tucker (1968) and Willner and Willner (1965) would identify King and his leadership style to be charismatic on both psychological and sociological dimensions. In spite of that likely possibility, scholars have failed to cast King within that light, as previously stated. In this paper, five lines of arguments are made. They are that:

1. The situation in Montgomery, Alabama represented conditions conducive for the emergence of a charismatic personality among blacks.
2. Martin Luther King, Jr. possessed the blessed "gift of grace," and that gift was validated by the social group that King led.
3. As a charismatic leader, King rejected all established rules supporting racial segregation and issued a demand for change.
4. King's salvationist messages provided hope to racially distressed blacks and they followed him because his messages were in synch with their ideal and material interests.

5. The untimely death of King, and the process of charismatic succession, routinized or transformed the inherently unstable charismatic structure of King's organization.

THEORETICAL FRAME: CHARISMA, ELECTIVE AFFINITY, AND ROUTINIZATION

The term charisma refers to a gift of body and mind that sets an individual apart from ordinary men (Bendix 1962 299). A person also has charisma when that person is perceived to be endowed with supernatural, superhuman and exceptional qualities that are considered to be of divine origin (Gerth & Mills 1958 245; Bendix 1962 299).

Definitionally, pure charisma is the simultaneous existence of the psychological traits of the holder, and the collective perceptions of those qualities. Therefore, a leadership which is purely charismatic will emerge when the psychological and sociological conditions are simultaneously present.

The ideal typical conditions in which both qualities are likely to appear, and out of which the charismatic phenomenon is likely to emerge are:

1. an underlying condition of strain which creates relative deprivation, provokes inter-group tensions and conflicts, and produces pressure for social structural changes;
2. conditions of crises that intensify strains or impose new and sudden deprivation upon major segments of the population;
3. the perceptual reactions of individuals toward general societal conditions. (Willner 1968 35-36)

Thus, a leader whose appeal is messianic or salvationist, and offers deliverance from the disequilibria will be recognized as charismatic (Tucker 1968 742-743).

However, a charismatic leader must also be able to make effective use of rhetoric, metaphors and similes in speeches. The leader must be able to make allusion to myth

and history; must be able to deal with felt doubts, oppositions and crises (Willner & Willner 1965 63). Additionally, a charismatic leader's messages, particularly the ideational content must be carried by a social group, if it is to be efficacious (Gerth & Mills 1958 63). Ideas selected and followed by the group must give spiritual meaning to reinforce the ideological and material interests of followers. The congruence between ideas and interests is an elected one, and constitutes Weber's notion of "elective affinity."

Finally, a leader whose style and messages are appropriate and whose style and messages are compatible with the conditions will attract followers, and they will recognize that person to be charismatic. Followers of this leadership will be cognitively and emotionally different from those of other leaderships (Willner 1968 35-36). On the cognitive level, a charismatic leader will transmit the messages and followers will validate the mission by total acceptance. On the emotional level, charismatic followers will accept their leader with responses of awe, devotion, obedience, reverence, if not blind faith (Willner 1968 6-7). Still a leader who is charismatic must also prove his/her mission, if the affective and cognitive reactions of followers are to be maintained and, if the followers are not to desert (Bendix 1962 301; Gerth & Mills 1958 246-247). Other attributes of a charismatically led group which distinguishes it from the typical leader-follower relationship are: that leader and follower must stand outside the norms of routine workaday life, routine occupations and routine family life; reject rational economic conduct; and charisma is by nature revolutionary and intermittent or transitory.

The reversal of charisma's intermittent or transitory character is its routinization. Indeed, Weber (1947) writes, if charisma is not to remain inherently unstable, its intermittent or transitory structure must be "routinized" or transformed, thus, taking on a more stable bond.

The union of ideas and interests of followers within a charismatic community is the force behind the process of routinization. However, a charismatic leader's death is likely to strain the interests of followers and the question of succession must be resolved. Weber (1947 364) identified six possible solutions. Two are relevant to King's charismatic community. They are: 1) the origi-

nal charismatic leader designates a successor; and 2) the charismatic community designates the successor. The resolution of this problem is the depersonalization of charisma. Parsons (1947) describes this process as the exercise of charisma "second removed." That is, to dissociate charisma from the person and to place it in the objective institutional structure.

PRE-CHARISMATIC CONDITIONS IN MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

The situation in Montgomery, Alabama, before and after 1955, approximated many of the pre-charismatic conditions discussed earlier. Widespread psychological insecurity, extensive deprivation that adversely affected the black sub-group, and the institutional failure to remedy those conditions were all present. Most blacks lived in substandard housing, blacks had to ride at the back of buses where seats were assigned to blacks as a group. Many blacks experienced massive police abuses; many saw their houses and churches burned, their families threatened, and their friends and allies murdered (Jakoubek 1989 43).

Added to those deplorable conditions were the arrest, jail and conviction of Rosa Parks for refusing to relinquish, to a white passenger, her seat at the front of the bus for one at the back of the bus assigned to blacks. Parks' arrest, jail and conviction were the precipitating events that mobilized the black population in Montgomery, Alabama, and in turn, led to the founding of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) that later blossomed into the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to effect social change. Because the social order failed to remedy the conditions of strain affecting blacks, the situation in Montgomery, Alabama, was at best, anomic and propitious for the emergence of charismatic leaders and followers attracted to them. Such leadership and attraction were found in the relationship between King and those who were attracted to him.

King's profile as a new pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, his activist orientation in which he urged members to take a more active role in resisting segregation, to join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), to pass literacy tests, to pay their poll taxes, and to overcome other barriers that prevented them

from voting were keenly observed by most blacks (Jakoubek 1989 49).

Additionally, King's *saue* oratorical and persuasive sermons (messages), particularly, the message King delivered at the MIA organizational meeting earned King the leadership of the MIA. King also earned the leadership of that organization because of his salvationist messages that offered blacks deliverance from their distress, and because he offered his own leadership to lead those who were willing to follow. Thus, the appropriate conditions that fostered charismatic attractions were present. Those conditions, however, should be seen in conjunction with the social characteristics and the perceptive reactions of those who were to become followers of King.

First, many were ministers of the gospel and were fascinated with King's non-violent direct action and forgiveness philosophy: because that philosophy was closely akin to their Christian socialization. Second, many were professionals and quasi-professionals who had experienced dissonance because their status hierarchies were not equal. As a result, they gravitated to King because his messages offered a "quick fix" to their anger. Finally, many were the black masses who were generally victims of police abuses. They were at the bottom of blacks' status hierarchy with no way to go but up. King's salvationist messages offered a channel to upward mobility (Jakoubek 1989 42-51).

Within the Willnerian (1965; 1968) perspective, we may say that King presented himself to followers as their predestined leader, provided followers with a clear picture on racial issues, what they ought be; and provided the prescription for change.

KING AS CHARISMATIC LEADER

Prior to the Montgomery bus boycott, King remained non-charismatic. He neither possessed the extraordinary qualities that set him apart from other men nor did the audience give him recognition or validation. Nonetheless, we argue that those extraordinary qualities underscoring King's charismatic leadership were apparent during the Montgomery bus boycott (1955-56) and continued up to his death. King recalled that threats to his life forced him, in prayers, to ask for divine guidance. Further, that during a prayer, he experienced the presence of God in a manner he had never before experienced.

That a voice admonished him to stand up for righteousness and truth, and that God would be at his side (Jakoubek 1989 52). If correct, we believe that King was given the blessed "gift of grace". That "gift of grace" was validated or recognized by the social audience, inside and outside, Holt Street Baptist Church, in Montgomery, Alabama. Here, the comments made by those present, and the hand clapping, and arm waving oration given to King as he accepted the leadership position of the MIA (Jakoubek 1989 48-49) strongly suggest that King rose to the level of a charismatic leader because the message he delivered that night set him apart from others.

King took his messages of non-violence across the nation. He commanded blacks to protest non-violently against racial barriers to integration. At the same time, he urged blacks to show love, friendship and understanding to their white oppressors. King's non-violent philosophy found willing listeners in a culture that advocated violence against an opposition. Further King's philosophy of non-violence was an eruption of new forces linked to new ideas, and represented ideas that were generally articulated by holders of charisma (Jones & Answerwitz 1975 1098).

As the racial crisis widened, King took his exceptional leadership qualities, which seemed inaccessible to others, and incompatible with rules and actions that governed everyday life, to all segments of American Society, and proclaimed his mission to racially distressed blacks. Again, he urged blacks to breakdown racial barriers to integration by participating in non-violent protest activities. As such, many blacks responded to King's proclamation by surrendering themselves to his mission. At times, King was arrested, jailed, and if convicted, opted to remain in jail than pay a fine. We argue that King's protests and the demands he made for changes in the race laws were in synch with the revolutionary qualities of charisma. His activities were also analogous with the spirit of the charismatic saying: "It is written... but I say unto you...."

King's earliest disciples/followers of MIA/SCLC were recruited on the basis of his charismatic appeal. Chief among them were: Ralph Abernathy, a close friend, confidant and treasurer of the SCLC. Erma Dungee, assistant secretary to the SCLC, Major Jones, chaplain to the SCLC, L. D. Reddick, historian to

the SCLC, Fred Shuttleworth, secretary to the SCLC, to name a few. It is fair to assume that this inner circle was fully schooled in King's non-violent philosophy. Like King, they met the forces of hate with the power of love, physical force with soul force, and friendship and understanding of whites were cherished prizes to be won (Jakoubek 1989 51).

More specifically, many recruits responded to King's appeal because his messages were fraught with many of the ideas that Willner and Willner (1965 83) identified to be necessary for charismatic success. It was the cadence in King's voice, the body demeanor that King emitted, the Biblical metaphors and similes that King employed in making blacks' racial distress analogous to that of the Jews, and most of all, the allusions to myth and history that King frequently used. Here, King invoked Christian religious expectations in context with the possibility of black's deliverance from racial distress. Thus, blacks' frequent protest demonstrations were seen by King as preludes to the "Glory of the Coming of the Lord," and a precursor toward black's deliverance. Second, King's address to the Garbage Workers in Memphis, Tennessee (1968) obliquely portrayed himself as Moses (the law giver), who ascended the mountain top and viewed the "Promised Land," but failed to enter. Heretofore, King portrayed that land to be one in which barriers to racial injustices would be eliminated, and justice delayed and denied blacks would, "roll down like mighty waters and righteousness like a mighty stream" (King 1964b 51).

Despite King's charismatic appeal, we presume as Tucker (1968) contends about charismatic messages, that the ideational contents of King's messages, namely, the formula that his messages proposed for delivering blacks from racial distress and King's vision for a color-blind America significantly influenced the attraction followers and potential followers held for him. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1964a 33) that legitimated civil disobedience against all segregation laws, his narration as to why black Americans could no longer wait for full benefits of citizenship, his "I Have A Dream" (1964b 50-61) address that reinforced in the black mind that they were heirs or inheritors of certain inalienable rights guaranteed by the Constitution, and his vision of a color-blind America where:

black men and black women would sit down with white men and white women at the table of brotherly love, where little black boys and girls would join hands with little white boys and girls and walk as brothers and sisters, and where black men and black women would be judged by the content of their character rather than by the color of their skin,

were in synch with the ideal and material interests of followers and potential followers. Consequently, a charismatic relation was developed between King and followers. It was not a relationship based on mere leadership. But one in which the process of interaction described by Willner (1968) was evident. For on the cognitive level, King transmitted descriptive, normative and prescriptive messages which followers totally accepted. On the emotional level, the relationship between King and followers, particularly those in the inner circle, was consistently one of love, passionate devotion and awe; and followers responded to him by surrendering themselves to his mission. However, because charisma is inherently unstable (Weber 1947), King's charisma had to be radically transformed or routinized if it was to become a permanent structure.

Thus, the untimely death of King and his designation, before death, of Ralph Abernathy as successor set in motion the process of routinization through succession. Hence, the charismatic community approved Abernathy's designation as leader of the SCLC. Such designation and community approval of Abernathy depersonalized the personal charisma of King, and embodied it into the objective organizational structure, so that future leaders would exercise charisma "second removed" (see Parsons 1947 67). As such, we argue that Abernathy's authority was based upon "designation" and not on any personal charismatic qualities of his own. He faithfully carried out King's mission: to lead the black masses into a color-blind America. Highlights of Abernathy's achievements were: The Poor Peoples' Campaign and Settlement, both staged in Washington, D. C. in 1968.

With limited success, and with lamentations of failure, at King's grave site, Abernathy turned over the reign of leadership to King's charismatic community, and the Reverend Doctor David Lowery was designated as

leader of the SCLC. Lowery held the reign of leadership for over two decades and exercised charisma "second removed." Like Abernathy, Lowery's authority to lead came from the office and not from any personal charismatic quality. However, Lowery's age forced him to turn over the reign of leadership to the charismatic community, and by designation Martin Luther King III is the current leader of the movement organization. He too is exercising charisma "second removed," despite a lack of personal charismatic traits.

CONCLUSION

We argue that King was charismatic on both psychological and sociological levels, as defined by Weber (1947), Willner and Willner (1965), Tucker (1968), and Friedland (1964). King had an extraordinary gift of leadership and followers recognized or validated his mission by responding to him with passionate devotion, awe and love (Jakoubek 1989 48).

King rejected all established racial laws, created new obligations for followers, and issued a demand for a change in the race laws. At times, King was arrested, jailed, and if convicted, opted to remain in jail than pay a fine. King's rejection of racial laws and the demands he made for change in the laws were in synch with the revolutionary qualities of charisma, and made his commands to followers analogous to the spirit of the saying: "It is written...but I say unto you..." The ideational content of King's messages, the myths he articulated in his messages, and the sacred culture symbols that his messages evoked had an affinity with the ideal and material interests of followers. Consequently, a charismatic relationship was cre-

ated between King and followers. It was a relationship that was perceptually, cognitively and emotionally different from other leader-follower relationships. As a result, followers surrendered themselves to his mission and did not desert. Finally, King's untimely death, and the process of succession routinized or transformed the inherently unstable charismatic structure of his social movement organization.

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