

WHAT RELEVANCE MIGHT WEBER'S VIEWS OF THE ROUTINIZATION OF CHARISMA HAVE FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND ORGANISATIONS? USE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

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Outline:

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Theory of charisma
- 3 Routinization of charisma in Weber
- 4 O'Dea's application to religious movements
- 5 Case study 1 – Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF)
- 6 Case study 2 - Alpha
- 7 Case study 3 – Pembury Baptist Church (PBC)
- 8 Conclusion

1 Introduction

Weber saw routinization of charisma as relevant to religious movements, albeit also to areas such as politics. In this essay we outline the hypothesis, apply it to today's Anglican¹ church and via three further case studies, and also indicate some limitations of the hypothesis.

2 Theory of Charisma

Weber's "charismatic leader's" right to authority² rests solely on exceptional or supernatural personal qualities. They attract others who see following them as a duty, and may form a new movement. Charismatic leaders often arise in times of trouble, solutions to which may conflict with normal life (e.g. communal ethic) and existing institutions. They generally come from subordinate parts of society³. Followers are "disciples" not administrators, chosen for personal reasons not abilities, social connections or dependency. A charismatic leader if unsuccessful may lose attraction and followers fade away⁴.

Weber sees charisma as one of three sources of authority, namely traditional, legal and charismatic, while emphasising these are "ideal types" that blend to form reality.⁵ Traditional authority is based on hereditary rights to rule, where law is personal. Legal authority is based on rational⁶ law and principles. Charismatic authority contrasts by being outside "everyday routine and the profane sphere"⁷, and not linked to rules, either intellectual or traditional. It is a revolutionary force that rejects the past, and frequently opposes everyday economic considerations (e.g. supported by gifts). Weber also distinguishes magical charisma, (ability

¹ We use the term Anglican to refer to the Church of England rather than the worldwide Anglican communion.

² Authority is distinct from power or coercion, since those directed by authority give consent.

³ Although Berger, 'Charisma', 948 notes that the Israelite prophets, which were Weber's ideal type for charismatic leaders, actually had initial positions inside the establishment.

⁴ Weber, *Charisma*, 50

⁵ Hill, *Sociology*, 150

⁶ i.e. based on rules of procedure and consequent moral neutrality.

⁷ Weber, *Charisma*, 51

to work miracles), from prophetic charisma, an individual who “by his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine command”.⁸

3 Routinization of charisma in Weber

Charismatic authority usually evolves into traditional or legal authority, a process Weber calls “routinization”. This reflects notably the interests of followers in continuation of the community, and the corresponding interests of administrators in stabilising their own status. These interests come to the fore when the original leader is replaced.

Ways in which leaders are replaced condition the path routinization takes, leading to traditionalisation (e.g. heredity, designation by the charismatic leader) or legalisation (e.g. designation by the administration). Routinization often entails dilution of the initial message of the leader for a mass-movement. It can involve taking of economic advantage by the administrators via creation of “offices” and raising of taxes on the “laity” to pay for them. Also there is regulation of recruitment to the administration. The end product may be a ruling group having at most a diluted form of charisma, but which can nonetheless become an independent source of authority to the current leadership.

These ideas are relevant to established denominations today such as the Anglican, with designation of leaders such as Bishops by the administration, professional clergy assessed by norms and paid from church offerings and accumulated wealth.⁹ Meanwhile a broad church such as the Anglicans may be particularly vulnerable to doctrinal dilution, by being open to the uncommitted.

⁸ Poloma, ‘Charisma’, 259

⁹ Admittedly, these date back to the inception of the church and beyond rather than being recent historical innovations.

These ideas also need extension, as witness recurrent uncontrolled renewal movements within the church, most recently from charismatics.¹⁰ Hill, following Berger's concept of radicalisation¹¹ of prophetic messages, suggest that a routinised church can retain "latent"¹² charisma which if actualised is a source of renewed innovation. This is a valuable extension of Weber's hypothesis.

4 O'Dea's application to religious movements

O'Dea¹³ applies Weber's routinization directly to religious movements via five themes, which we again apply to Anglicanism and also use as an additional toolkit for our case studies below. First, pure motivations become mixed. Whereas early disciples share fully in the attraction of the charismatic leader and his clear vision, once there is a professional clergy, they become also concerned with their material benefits, power and influence, and may adjust the message for self-interested reasons. Meanwhile, the laity become passive. Second, symbolic aspects such as worship and prayer move from spontaneous to ritualised. Efforts to repeat that original unplanned pattern lead, if not to formal liturgy, at least to formalisation and repetition that routinise the religious experience.

Third, administration goes from effective to elaborate. What was initially just the essential to provide for needs may become an elaborate structure of committees and financing following traditional or rational-legal lines. This can become unable to adapt to changing circumstances¹⁴, partly as bureaucrats resist reform. Fourth, boundaries shift from the spirit to the letter, with dogma and ethics defined sharply. While partly essential to resist heresy and

¹⁰ The versatility and flexibility of Anglicanism, arguably due to "latent charisma" is shown by the fact two of our case studies of innovative churches and religious movements are based in Anglican churches.

¹¹ Berger, 'Charisma', 948

¹² Hill, *Sociology*, 172

¹³ O'Dea, *Sociology*, 90-7

¹⁴ O'Dea, *Sociology*, 93

help understanding of later members, this also leads to a deeper gulf between experts and laity, possible “infantilisation”¹⁵ of followers and attribution of magic to ritual. Finally, power shifts from conversion to coercion as the strong faith and voluntary adherence of initial adherents is supplemented by pressure of community opinion and even legal obligation, to counteract the risk of doubt that faith leaves open, and feared political consequences of lack of religious unity.

Again, the Anglican church today shows such routinization with for example focus on an elite priesthood rather than New Testament “priesthood of all believers”¹⁶ and corresponding adjustment of bible teaching away from the latter, also leading to passivity of the laity relative to free churches; focus on liturgy and ritual (such as the ASB); bureaucracy suited to a larger membership and income (e.g. 113 bishops and staff) but still hard to reform; and, despite religious toleration, links to the state that retain some scope for direct political power (e.g. via the House of Lords). A factor that could be investigated further is the role of ancient church buildings in cementing routinization.

On the other hand, the routinization approach of both Weber and O’Dea can be criticised for implying too monolithic a structure for a denomination; the Anglican church has both “Anglo-Catholic” and “Evangelical” wings under a single administration, with much less focus on ritual and the priesthood in the latter and no strong pressures for total uniformity.

In order to assess further the relevance of routinization for modern churches and organisations, we offer three case studies.

5 Case study 1 – Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF)

¹⁵ O’Dea, *Sociology*, 95

¹⁶ See 1 Peter 2:9

The “Toronto Blessing” at TACF during 1994-97¹⁷ was a period of charismatic manifestations that drew visitors from around the world. Some argue it arose out of a Weberian “crisis”¹⁸ of disappointment with the receding wave of the charismatic movement. Study of routinization is appropriate since TACF itself is ongoing and also as background for future revivals.¹⁹ Of course, in such a recent and short-lived movement it can be argued routinization had little chance to take its full course, although a counter argument is that intensifying modern pressure for efficiency and pragmatism could also speed routinization itself.²⁰

Some routinization was apparent even early in the Blessing, such as ritual in careful management of the daily charismatic services, including a Master of Ceremonies who would guide the meeting and prevent chaos, focus on music not preaching and key role of anonymous prayer teams. Even the experiences themselves (being slain in the Spirit) became routinized and expected in each service.²¹ Administration grew rapidly as TACF spawned many activities from international conferences to TV and radio, risking overload and quenching the revival.²² Rules were instituted, e.g. dancers at the back not to distract people. Poloma suggests TACF was also under pressure to compromise its doctrinal approach due to the desire to remain linked to the “conservative fringes of Christianity”.²³

¹⁷ Hunt, *Alpha*, 52

¹⁸ Hunt, *Alpha*, 51

¹⁹ As noted by Poloma, ‘Charisma’, 2, earlier charismatic revivals such as Azusa Street in the US were widely seen as being “quenched by forces of religious empire building...materialistic and rationalistic world views and extreme individualism” i.e. routinisation.

²⁰ Poloma, ‘Charisma’, 257

²¹ Warner, ‘Ecstatic’, 222.

²² Poloma, ‘Charisma’, 265.

²³ Poloma, ‘Charisma’, 268. As discussed below, this tension culminated in ejection from the Vineyard movement.

Going against the relevance of routinization is that Vineyard (and hence TACF) partly short circuited the leadership problem by neither having a prophetic-charismatic “front man”²⁴ nor stressing personalities in preaching, thus allowing widely-spread magical charisma to play a leading role. Arguably, this enabled the “Blessing” to continue in full force for four years while the church could remain vibrant thereafter, focused on “soaking prayer” encounters with God. Keeping the message a simple one of God’s love helped to overcome the routinization issue of mixed motivation. Ejection of the church from the Vineyard movement for not maintaining the level of orderliness the denomination required shows the conflict that charisma leads to rather than its routinization. But once excluded the leaders sought to set up a further grouping “Partners in Harvest” rather than staying free, thus suggesting pressures for routinization. Finally, an issue of debate is whether the cessation of the Blessing in 1997 was a result of such routinization as did occur, or a free move of the Holy Spirit. The latter suggestion indicates the inadequacy of pure sociological explanations of religious phenomena.

6 Case study 2 – Alpha

The Alpha course began in the 1970s at Holy Trinity Brompton Church (HTB), but grew into a worldwide movement in the 1990s. The course is a structured introduction to Christianity designed for seekers and new Christians, comprising eleven weekly meetings and an awayday. Each evening there is a supper, a talk and a group discussion.

The Alpha movement does have a charismatic leader, Nicky Gumbel and hence there is a risk of routinization with leadership succession. Alpha could become fossilised, sticking with the “successful version” even when adaptation becomes essential. Even while Gumbel remains active, one specific issue could be with finance as the enterprise has become vast and the

²⁴ Although John Arnott was pastor of TACF, his was only one of many individuals to have a voice in the revival.

turnover also²⁵. Business pressures are to widen profit margins on Alpha material that all churches need to obtain to run the course, and high prices on conference attendance, although in my view this is not yet strongly apparent. Equally, there are 100 full time staff whose interests can diverge from evangelism per se and hence dilute the purity of the Alpha message, although countering this is that they tend to be recruited from enthusiastic “course graduates”. Some attempts are made to control content of talks and courses, which can be linked to the fact Alpha is effectively a consumer “brand” that needs some uniformity if it is to retain its public appeal.²⁶

Arguing against routinization is that the course in general and the Holy Spirit weekend in particular were from the outset a form of ritual, rather than rituals developing later. But since, unlike a service liturgy, the course is designed to be taken once only, ritual need not prevent the material being fresh and new for attendees. Offsetting any inertia from the full time staff there remains huge volunteer support for Alpha, with members of 14 of the 50 pastorates at HTB engaging in training days for churches around the UK.²⁷ Finally, in line with TACF, Alpha is far from coercive and remains very much a consumer choice oriented product, and indeed has been criticised for this approach.

7 Case study 3 – Pembury Baptist Church (PBC)²⁸

Kelley²⁹ suggests “conservative churches” can retain charisma and limit routinization. For example, unlike Anglicans, they may resist dilution of doctrine by restricting membership to the committed. Seriousness about the faith (e.g. insistence on its absolute truth), mutual

²⁵ HTB is the richest church in the UK, with an income of £3 million (Hunt, *Alpha*, 15).

²⁶ In fairness there is no persuasion to use videos rather than live speakers, which would tell of a definitive effort in this direction.

²⁷ Hunt, *Alpha*, 18

²⁸ We cite PBC as a typical local Baptist church about which the author is familiar rather than asserting it is in any way unique.

²⁹ Kelley, *Conservative*, 176-9

support in groups and not yielding control to outsiders also limit routinization. Such churches attract newcomers by the radical discipleship and commitment of their members.

PBC has a number of these features, in for example only admitting to membership those which have undergone a membership course and interviews by elders focused on orthodoxy, and being independent and self-governing. Biblical faith is emphasised as relevant for the whole of life and evangelism encouraged. There is a focus on serving, and small groups reinforce community. Focus on priesthood of all believers limits the clergy/laity split. Liturgy is kept to a minimum and spontaneity encouraged.

Challenges of routinization include maintaining freshness in worship and preaching. A ruling group of Elders may emerge, although frequent re-election should limit this threat. Succession from a charismatic pastor may cause disruption as those most committed to him leave. Wealth of adherents itself reduces zeal.³⁰ A challenge in the modern world is enforcing discipline on members. Another is ensuring desire to be seeker friendly does not compromise doctrine.

8 Conclusion

We have found the routinization hypothesis relevant for modern churches and church movements. We also highlighted that it cannot explain all such developments, partly because sociology itself is an inadequate approach to religious phenomena, but also inter alia in light of aspects such as latent charisma and economic factors such as consumer choice.³¹

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³⁰ This is the factor underlying the “decay of pure religion” that was lamented by Wesley (Kelley, *Conservative*, 55).

³¹ The fact conservative churches that are demanding of adherents are relatively attractive (Section 7) shows that consumer choice in religious matters is complex. Other economic factors in routinization may be the capital stock of ancient buildings cited in Section 4 as well as the role of wealth of the congregation cited in Section 7. A longer essay would be needed to assess these in detail.

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