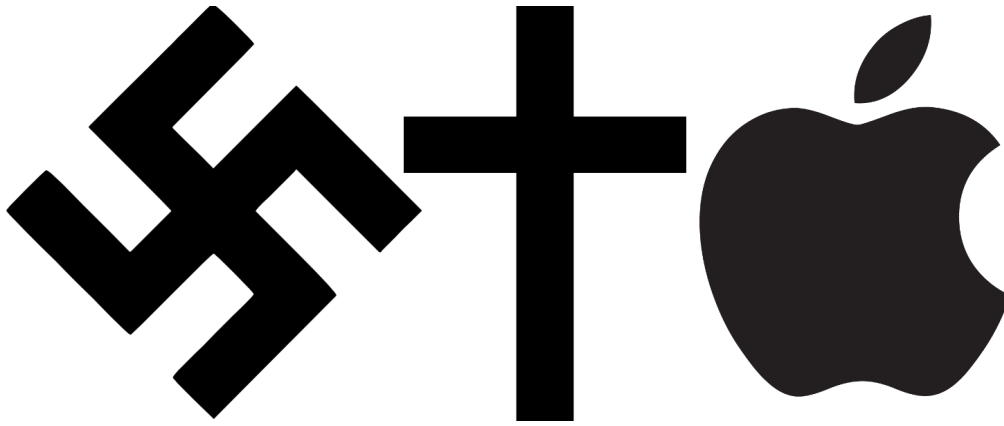


# Charisma

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**Epigraph:** “Great men are almost always bad men.” – Lord Acton

## Preface

START WITH A STORY! – “I SAW LIGHTNING BOLTS COMING OUT OF HIS HEAD!”

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Charisma is like pornography – it’s hard to define, but you know it when you see it. It’s like a magic aura that surrounds someone special which draws others in, inspiring devotion and loyalty. The word was first used in Christian circles in the first century AD to refer to miraculous powers conferred by the holy spirit, such as healing with hands, speaking in tongues, and the gift of prophecy. Today it means a kind of animal magnetism, an irresistible allure that attracts followers and inspires devotion.

My way of thinking about charisma is heavily indebted to the German sociologist Max Weber (1864 – 1920). Weber defined charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” The key words are “treated as.” The point is that charisma resides in the eye of the believer. In other words, charisma is not something a leader possesses regardless of what other people think, like red hair; it is something that is attributed to a leader by some people, and not by others. No one is charismatic in and of themselves; a leader is only charismatic *for a given person*.

All leaders must justify their claim to authority. The elected leaders in modern democracies base their authority on the electoral system. Religious leaders like the pope and the Dalai Lama appeal to tradition. In both of these cases, there is an independent source of authority that already has broad support. Charismatic leaders, on the other hand, do not appeal to any such independent source. They claim their authority comes direct from god, or from some other mysterious source that cannot be independently verified. In a sense, they authorize themselves. When people obey a charismatic leader, they do so not because he represents an organization or a tradition, but because they see him as someone with special powers.

Weber also thought that charismatic leadership was inherently unstable: “in its pure form,” he wrote “charismatic authority may be said to exist only in the process of originating. It cannot remain stable.” (Weber). In other words, charismatic authority is fundamentally dynamic. It is not so much a thing as a process. It evolves. [I recognize this by positing a five-stage model... the five stages of charismatic leadership... the last stage is self-destruction.. that’s why it’s unstable...]

But Weber did not distinguish between different types of charismatic leader; I do. In *The Sociology of Religion*, Weber states that he is not concerned with “the question whether the followers of a prophet are more attracted to his person, as in the cases of Zoroaster, Jesus, and Muhammad, or to his teaching, as in the cases of Buddha and the prophets of Israel.” This, however, is one of the most important questions I address in this book. I think Weber hit on an important distinction here, even though he didn’t explore it further. Namely, some charismatic leaders demand that people follow their advice, while other demand that people to follow in their footsteps – not just to imitate them, but literally to go wherever they go. In one case, the leader demands faith; in the other, he demands personal loyalty. I call the first type of leader a messenger, and the second a commander.

*Some final notes for the preface:*

1. Inclusion of some autobiographical material. Some readers will find this makes the book more interesting and intimate. Others will find it an unnecessary distraction, or worse, a display of narcissism. If you are in the latter group, please skip these passages.

2. Almost everyone will take offense at something in this book. If you are a Christian, you will find my portrayal of Jesus wrongheaded and perhaps even sacrilegious. If you are a Mormon you will scoff at my depiction of Joseph Smith. And you don’t have to be an Apple fan to baulk at my comparison of Steve Jobs with Hitler. I hope I succeed in offending everyone equally.

3. Many others have written about charismatic leadership. If I mentioned them all this would not be a popular book, but a scholarly dissertation. Besides, in the age of Google, it’s hardly necessary for me to list the other thinkers on this topic.

In limiting myself mainly to explaining my own ideas, I do not wish to give the impression that they are the only good ones. I will mention only my most important sources of inspiration, and leave it as an exercise to the reader to dig more deeply.

4. A note on the word “cult” – I have avoided using this word as much as possible. It suggests that the dangers of charisma are limited to new minority religious groups. In this book I argue that the same disturbing dynamics exemplified in stereotypical cults are to be found in many other organizations, from political parties to companies.

NB. Cult has three meanings:

1. An organized form of worship (eg. the cult of Isis, the cult of the emperor, mystery cults of Rome). This is a neutral term. It is the oldest sense of the word. (2 Cent BCE)
2. A heretical Christian sect (bad) (1-4 Cent CE)
3. A new religious movement with a small number of followers, usually dominated by a charismatic leader (bad) (20 Cent CE)

5. In any work as broad as this, the author runs the risk of stretching himself to thinly, and making many mistakes about historical details...

## **Chapter One: The four types of charismatic leader**

Ancient literature abounds with stories about charismatic leaders. Many of those stories concern religious figures such as Moses, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), and Arjuna. All these characters are portrayed as gathering a large group of followers who make radical changes to their lives in response to the leader’s call to action. According to the Hebrew Bible, thousands of Jews followed Moses when he led them out of Egypt into the Sinai desert. According to various ancient Buddhist texts, thousands of Indians flocked to hear Siddhartha Gautama talk and joined the *sangha*, the religious community he founded. The Mahabharata, an epic poem composed in India in the fourth century BCE, tells the story of a warrior prince called Arjuna who leads an army into battle under the guidance of a divine being called Krishna.

Before I go on I should point out that when I discuss these characters here, I am referring to them *as they are portrayed in ancient texts*, and not to the historical figures on which these literary characters are supposedly based. For one thing, it is unlikely that these historical figures ever really existed, and even if there is some historical basis person behind the legends, we cannot know anything about their personalities. If the character of Moses, for example, is ultimately based on a real person, this person cannot have led the ancestors of the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt, since the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah did not come into being as a result of an emigration into Palestine from the desert. Archaeological evidence has shown beyond doubt that these kingdoms emerged from indigenous Canaanite groups who had never been to Egypt. When I talk

about Moses or Arjuna, then, I am simply using these old stories to illustrate different kinds of charismatic leader.

To return to our main topic; in the ancient texts, Moses, Siddhartha Gautama, and Arjuna are all *portrayed as* promising a kind of salvation (the good news). Moses promises to free the Jews from slavery. Siddhartha Gautama promises to free everyone from the eternal cycle of reincarnation. Arjuna promises to save the Pandava clan from its enemies. With Moses and Arjuna the fate is external or physical; with Siddhartha Gautama it is internal or spiritual.

But the promise of salvation is always conditional upon obeying the leader: “You will be saved from a terrible fate only if you do what I say.” Everyone must choose; either do what the leader says and be saved, or refuse and be damned. The precise language differs from culture to culture. Siddhartha Guatama does not talk in terms of *salvation* and *damnation*, which are Western terms derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition, but of *nirvana* and *samsara*. Nevertheless, in both cases there is the possibility of a bright future, and a contrasting terrible fate.

I refer to these ancient legends to illustrate what I think all charismatic leaders have in common, and what distinguishes them from other kinds of leader: they all promise a bright future to those who do what they say, and threaten a terrible fate to those who do not. The words of the prophet Isaiah encapsulate this idea (Is. 1:19-20, NKJV):

*If you are willing and obedient,  
You shall eat the good of the land;  
But if you refuse and rebel,  
You shall be devoured by the sword.*

There are, however, important differences between the ways that charismatic leaders justify their demands for obedience. In some cases, the leader is just a **messenger**; his orders come from someone else. The way to avoid the terrible fate of which he warns is simply to do what the message says. In other cases, the leader is more than a messenger; he is a **commander**, and the way to avoid the terrible fate is to follow in the leader’s footsteps – not just to imitate him, but literally to go wherever he goes, and accompany him on his journey. With messengers, it is *the message that saves*; with commanders, it is *the leader himself who saves*. In one case, the leader demands faith in the message; in the other, he demands faith in his leadership. Unlike the messenger, the commander asserts that he is personally necessary for salvation; he may not be *sufficient*, but you cannot attain salvation without him.

The earliest Buddhist writings portray Siddhartha Guatama as a messenger. True, crowds of people do follow him around wherever he goes, but this is just because they want to hear more of what he has to say. He doesn’t *demand* that anyone accompany him on his wanderings; he just wants them to follow his advice. Moses and Arjuna, on the other hand, insist that their followers actually *accompany* them on their journey, either away from Egypt (Moses), or into battle (Arjuna).

There are different kinds of messenger, and different kinds of commander. Some messengers preach moral advice (**prophets**); others teach a spiritual technique (**gurus**). Siddharta Guatama was definitely a messenger of the latter type. Similarly, some commanders offer to lead their followers out of danger to a place of refuge (**deliverers**), while others offer to lead their followers into battle (**holy warriors**). Moses was a deliverer, while Arjuna was a holy warrior. These distinctions are summarized in graphic form in Figure 1.

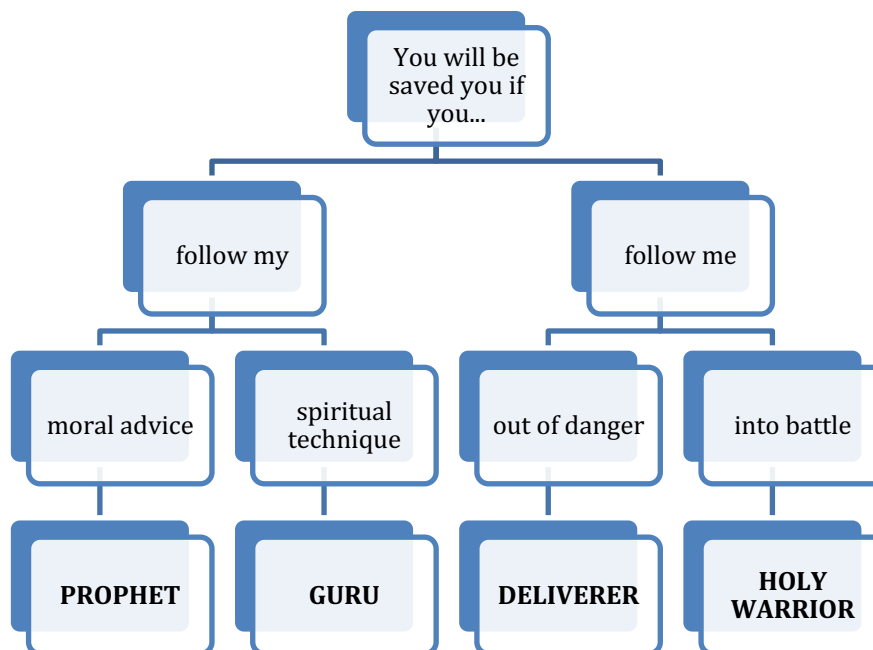
One story that presents an archetypal prophet is that of Jonah, as told in the Hebrew Bible. **TELL STORY OF JONAH**

The Hebrew Bible also gives us a better illustration of a deliverer – Noah. This is a clearer illustration than Moses, because although Moses is portrayed primarily as a deliverer, he starts out as a prophet (warning the Pharaoh), and towards the end of his life he morphs into a holy warrior:

*Moses 1 – the prophet:*

*Moses 2 – the deliverer:*

*Moses 3 – the holy warrior:*



What about **Jesus**? Probably just a prophet in reality (Jesus 1), but Paul re-imagines him as a deliverer (Jesus 2), John as a holy warrior (Jesus 3), and

various gnostic writings (eg. Gospel of Mary Magdalene) as a guru (Jesus 4)! I will discuss Jesus in more detail in chapter eleven.

What about **Socrates**? In the early dialogues of Plato, he is portrayed as an *anti-guru* (Socrates 1), but in the later dialogues he was increasingly portrayed as the greatest guru of all time (Socrates 2).

What do I mean by the term **anti-guru**? I mean a skeptic – someone who distrusts *all* forms of charismatic authority. Notice that Socrates doesn't challenge the traditional and legal forms of authority – only those who claim some kind of special expertise.

**Ancient charismatic leaders:**

<b>PROPHETS</b>	<b>GURUS</b>	<b>DELIVERERS</b>	<b>HOLY WARRIORS</b>
Jonah Elijah Moses 1 Jesus 1 Muhammad 1	Buddha Pythagoras Socrates 2 Jesus 2 Muhammad 2	Noah Moses of Crete Moses 2 Jesus 3 Muhammad 3	Joshua Moses 3 Jesus 4 Muhammad 4

**Premodern charismatic leaders (1700 – 1900)**

*Prophets:*

*Gurus:* Israel ben Eliezer (circa 1690?–1760), *aka* the Baal Shem Tov.

*Deliverers:*

*Holy Warriors:*

**Modern charismatic leaders (1900 – 2016):**

<b>PROPHETS</b>	<b>GURUS</b>	<b>DELIVERERS</b>	<b>HOLY WARRIORS</b>
Hal Lindsey Ayn Rand Nelson Mandela ?	Bhagwan Jacques Lacan L Ron Hubbard	Jim Jones Charles Dederich Steve Jobs	Adolf Hitler Al-Baghdadi Osama bin Laden Hassan al-Banna

Leader	Bad news	Good news	Call to action
Jonah	Destruction of Nineveh	Nineveh saved	Repent
Muhammad	Hell	Heaven	Submit to Allah
Moses of Crete			
Buddha	Samsara	Nirvana	Eightfold path

Pythagoras	Ignorance	Become divine	Spiritual exercises Intitiations
Socrates	Ignorance	Awareness of ignorance	Question
Noah	Flood	New earth	Build ark
Arjuna	Defeat	Victory	Fight
King David	Defeat	Victory	Fight
Moses 1	Plagues	No plagues	Let my people go
Moses 2	Slavery	Promised land	Come with me
Moses 3	Promised land occupied	Promised land conquered	Fight the Philistines

“No radical distinction will be drawn between a "renewer of religion" who reveals a new meaning in an older revelation, actual or fictitious, and a "founder of religion" who brings completely new revelations. The two types are interconnected to one another. In any case, the formation of a new religious community need not be the result of the announcement by prophets, since it may be produced by the activities of non-prophetic reformers.” – Weber, Sociology of Religion

Charismatic leaders have to prove their charisma by performing miracles and magic tricks (no distinction will be made between “miracles” and “magic” here – all charisma is ultimately rooted in a belief in magic). Miracles include:

- Foreseeing the future (divination/clairvoyance/prophecy)
- Healing (including exorcism and raising from the dead)
- Cursing
- Transforming physical things (eg. turning water into wine)

I believe all magic is really tricks. This view is implicit today in the many books that tell you how to become charismatic, since they focus on specific techniques (tricks) for appearing more magical.

## CHAPTER LIST

1. The four types of charismatic leader
2. Modern prophets
3. Modern gurus
4. Modern deliverers
5. Modern holy warriors
6. Gathering followers
7. The inner circle
8. Megalomania

9. Martyrdom
10. After the leader's death
11. Ancient charismatic leaders: Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad
12. Is charisma good or bad?
13. Resisting charisma I: what can individuals do?
14. Resisting charisma II: what can organizations do?
15. Coda.

## **Chapter 6: Gathering followers**

It may be necessary for followers to perceive a certain inner-directedness in the charismatic leader. In other words, the charismatic leader must not appear to need followers, or look as if he is trying very hard to attract disciples. This is part of his aura of mystery.

I, Samael, am not in need of henchmen or followers, but only imitators of my doctrine: Gnosis. I do not follow anyone, nor do I want anyone to follow me. What I want is for each one of you to follow his own Self. I am only a lighthouse in the sea of existence, and I do not need clientele in order to subsist. Since I am against the slavery of souls, I do not want to enslave any soul, nor do I agree with executioners of ideals. Masters exists in abundance, and I am only one of many; thus, those who want to find the Masters will find them inside, within the profundities of their own inner consciousness. (Samael Aun Weor, *Inside the Vestibule of Wisdom*)

In fact, this is just an illusion; the charismatic leader is never as inner-directed as he makes out to be, and as his followers believe. If he were, he would never seek followers in the first place, and if people tried to follow him, he would flee. The fact that he often seeks out followers, or at least allows them to accompany him, suggests that he secretly needs others to confirm and validate his belief in his special role. The appearance of being unconcerned with gathering followers is often deliberately and assiduously cultivated; it is part of the ruse.

The same idea is also present in Hasidism:

In Hasidic discourse, the willingness of the leader to sacrifice the ecstasy and fulfillment of unity in God was deemed a heavy sacrifice undertaken for the benefit of the congregation. His followers were to sustain and especially to obey him, as he possessed superior knowledge and insight gained through communion. The "descent of the Righteous" (Yeridat ha-Tzaddiq) into the matters of the world was depicted as identical with the need to save the sinners and redeem the sparks concealed in the most lowly places. Such a link between his functions as communal leader and spiritual guide legitimized the political power he wielded. It also prevented a retreat of Hasidic masters into hermitism and passivity, as many mystics before them did. Their worldly authority was perceived as part of their long-term mission to elevate the corporeal world back into divine infinity.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasidic\\_Judaism#Righteous\\_One](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasidic_Judaism#Righteous_One))

Ruse: charisma is always fundamentally a hoax.

Contrast the charismatic leader with Superman, who really *does* want to keep his magic powers secret!

“I think the key thing about charisma is that the charismatic person doesn't need to try very hard to attract followers; hence, the mystery of the charisma. So, politicians are always trying to attract followers because they need them to win elections. Charisma need not be involved, just a sense of mutual benefit. In contrast, Jesus attracted people simply by his manner. It's not clear, at least in the early stages, whether he was in some sort of campaign to recruit people. It's true that he presented people with a compelling understanding of their plight, but until he realizes that he's the Son of God, it's not clear that he had some grand strategy to deliver them from their plight. Hitler is more complicated because he was actually stage-managed by Alfred Hugenberg, the media mogul, who had an uncanny sense of what would work in the mass media -- and trained Hitler accordingly. Hitler had been just another disgruntled WWI veteran before he ran across Hugenberg, who produced the 'Hitler look' in terms of dress and style.” (Steve Fuller, personal correspondence, 1 April 2016)

A related point is the appearance of humility. Eg. Samael Aun Weor:

Some time ago I said that I am a cosmic mailman, since I am giving the content of a cosmic letter. Therefore, my beloved brethren, the word avatar must never lead us to arrogance, since it only means nothing other than an emissary, a servant, a crew member who gives a message, an epistle, and that is all. (*The Avatar*)

Like the appearance of inner-directedness, however, the avowed humility of some charismatic leaders is just a ruse. In reality, charismatic leaders are narcissists, and believe they are superior to everyone else.

## **Chapter 11: Ancient charismatic leaders**

*Jesus*

Jesus was a prophet.

Jesus wasn't a commander. He didn't require everyone to accompany him as he wandered around Galilee. The only people he wanted to travel alongside him were twelve men, whom he seems to have chosen to be the future rulers of the twelve tribes of Israel. For everyone else, the important thing was not to physically follow Jesus around, but to follow his advice, which was simple: keep the law of Moses. Of course, Jesus had a particular view of what keeping the law meant, a view that was in stark contrast to those of rival sects such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Zealots. But it was the law that mattered, not Jesus. It was all about the message, not the messenger.

Nor was Jesus a guru. He didn't specify a particular spiritual technique, and he wasn't interested in enlightenment. He warned people about an external danger (the fiery pit), and held out the promise of an external utopia (the kingdom of god). To avoid the former and enjoy the latter, what mattered was following a moral code (to give up everything and serve others), not praying or meditating in a certain way.