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Medieval Female Mysticism and Weber's Charismatic Authority



ABSTRACT

What is all the fuss about the female power in the Middle Ages, whether it be personal, social or political? In the following paper I try to investigate its striking socio-political aspects using Max Weber's theory on charismatic authority and Grace Jantzen's model on the political power of medieval female mysticism. Moreover, the paper presents *clara et distincta* what the female mysticism is, pointing out its legacy and future as well. The conclusion reflects on the fundamental correlation between medieval mysticism and Weber's understanding of charismatic authority as alternative to constructive rationality and social power.

KEYWORDS

Charismatic Authority; Max Weber; Female Mysticism; Sociology of Religion; Medieval Studies

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INTRODUCTION

The current paper is dedicated to present the medieval female mysticism as a charismatic authority in a Max Weberian sense, introducing a new socio-scientific approach in the flourishing field of interpretations. Until fairly recently scholarship has focused on mysticism especially as an individual experience with the ultimate reality neglecting its social dimension. In this work, I would like to underline the necessity of a socio-dimensional model of mysticism pointing out the phenomenon of medieval female mysticism. In the last three decades' scholarship, has seen an emerging multidisciplinary interest to female mysticism. Undoubtedly it is also a leading topic in feminist scholarship. The aim of this presentation is to show a new way toward the sociology of mystical experience using Max Weber's model concerning charismatic authority.

THE WEBERIAN APPROACH

Inspired by the social theory of Max Weber, I am trying to ask in what senses was medieval female mysticism a charismatic authority. The principle inspiration for this recent study is Weber's opus magnum *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* which is structured synchronically and analytically rather than diachronically as a grand narrative. Economy and Society is a kind of Summa of ideal types for the study of world history: they are meant to be corrected against the complexities of past societies. (D'AVRAY 2010) In this work Weber distinguishes four kinds of rationality. *Value* (alias conviction) rationality, *instrumental* rationality together with the concepts of *formal* and *substantive* rationality. Besides these four kind of rationalities, in this section I am oriented towards what we might call the dynamics of stability: powerful forces interacting in ways that reproduced existing structures, while incorporating new elements of strength. For Max Weber, new social structures can emerge under the influence of charismatic leaders, or rather of their followers, for his ideal-type is quite different from the modern usage of the word to mean 'magnetism'. (D'AVRAY 2010)

Weber defines "»charisma« as a quality, deemed to be extraordinary (...) of a personality, on account of which this person is judged to be endowed with supernatural or superhuman or at least specifically extraordinary powers or properties, which are not accessible to everyone else, or as sent by God, or as an outstanding model and consequently a »Leader«" (WEBER 1922. 140.)

In the light of another definition "charisma is the great revolutionary power in epochs that are in the grip of tradition. By contrast with the no less revolutionary power of ratio (...) charisma can be a transformation from the inside, which, born of necessity or enthusiasm, means a fundamental change in the direction of central convictions and actions with a completely new orientation of all attitudes to all specific forms of life and »to the World« generally." (WEBER 1922. 658.)

The Power of Charisma – specifically creative revolutionary force and will

In the case of Weber society is influenced by two big forces: a charismatic and a rational one. Meanwhile charisma revolutionize from the inside, the ratio does it from without. Charisma is a revolutionary force and will which impacts can change the attitude to the world and the acting directions in societies. This revolutionary power from within creates a central *metanoia* in the followers attitude. Charisma is a disrupting force in history, it breaks the power of rational and traditional rules and above all "overturns all notions of sanctity". Charisma does not know any kind of respect to the longstanding creations of the society. That is why Weber argues charisma

as a “*specifically creative revolutionary force of the history*”. Charisma and all of its transformations are highly intense social powers which can always change the status quo. (WEBER 2013. 1116–1117.)

The medieval period is not short of examples of movements started by ‘*charismatic*’ individuals, though they did not necessarily survive very long. (Aldebert, Valdes, Saint Francis of Assisi) “*In the case of Francis we meet a charismatic person, but he seems to expect to be obeyed even though he holds no office. Statements about »charisma« in Weber are statements about the image of the leader in the minds of the followers.*” (D’AVRAY 2010. 106.) On the one hand I am exactly arguing for the very strong interaction of charisma as one individual quality based on the particular experience with God or Jesus Christ, but on the other hand this private spiritual interaction becomes social through the strong effect among the direct followers and further in form of different institutionalizations. That simply means: charisma is authority.

The Pure Types of Domination and the Extraordinary Quality of Charisma

Weber distinguishes between three ‘*pure*’ types of legitimate authority: The validity of claims to legitimacy may be based on: 1. Rational grounds – resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal-rational authority). 2. Traditional grounds – resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them (traditional authority); or finally, 3. Charismatic grounds – resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority) (WEBER 1922).

Weber’s term “*charisma*” was differently interpreted and conceived during the last century. As Martin Riesebrodt argues in his study on *Charisma in Max Weber’s Sociology of Religion*, Weber’s charisma has received diverse and contradictory interpretations. Riesebrodt’s essay argues that this diversity is caused less by the inadequate readings of Weber than by inconsistencies in Weber’s own conceptualization. Weber introduced his concept of charisma in two different contexts (political sociology and sociology of religion). In his political sociology he formulates the ideal type of charismatic authority informed by Rudolf Sohm’s Canon Law. (SOHM 1892) “*Here we are interested above all in the second of the three types: rule by virtue of devotion to the purely personal »charisma« of the »Leader« on the part of those who obey him. For this is where the idea of vocation (Beruf) in its highest form has its roots. Devotion to the charisma of the prophet or the war-lord or the exceptional demagogue in the ekklesia or in parliament means that the leader is personally regarded as someone who is inwardly »called« to the task of leading men, and that the led submit to him, not because of custom or statute, but because they believe in him.*” (WEBER 1994. 312.)

Meanwhile, Weber connects it in his sociology of religion with the anthropological debate of the turn of the century on magic and religion, especially the debate on pre-animism initiated by R. R. Marett, and uses it as an alternative for concepts such as *mana* or *orenda*. (RIESEBRODT 1999) “*For example, not every stone can serve as a fetish, a source of magical power. Nor does every person have the capacity to achieve the ecstatic states which are viewed, accordance to rules of experience, as the preconditions for producing certain effects in meteorology, healing, divination, and telepathy. It is primarily, though not exclusively, these extraordinary powers that have been designated by such special terms as »Mana«, »Orend«, and the Iranian »Maga« (the term from which our word »magic« is derived). We shall henceforth employ the term »charisma« for such extraordinary powers.*” (WEBER 1993. 2)

“Both conceptualizations of charisma are located on quite different levels of abstraction, which Weber has not sufficiently clarified and systematized. This leads to inconsistencies, contradictions, and overgeneralizations. His claim of a supposedly anti-traditionalist or even revolutionary character of charisma is especially problematic. The article argues that while this claim may apply to certain types of charisma under specific conditions, many types of charisma actually seem to be integral parts of institutionalized and traditionalized social orders.” (RIESEBRODT 1999) If we are now turning to the core question of mysticism, we should keep in mind the aforementioned different understandings of Weber’s famous term CHARISMA.

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF MYSTICISM

In this specific context, I mean by mysticism what Jean de Gerson thought. The fifteenth-century chancellor of Sorbonne described it as an *“experimental knowledge of God through the embrace of unity love”* (The definition was also used by SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS (2015), SAINT BONEVANTURE (1987) and it reappears in the operosity of the outstanding German historian, KURT RUH (1990).

The social dimension of mysticism covers both the institutional embodiment of mysticism in groups and movements and the influence of mysticism upon the wider society and vice versa. Moreover, there are not just social but also political aspects to mysticism. *“The connection of questions of power to questions of mysticism is obvious as soon as one stops to consider that a person who was acknowledged to have direct access to God would be in a position to challenge any form of authority, whether doctrinal or political, which she saw as incompatible with the divine will. If defining mysticism is a way of defining power, then the question of who counts as a mystic is of immediate political importance.”* (JANTZEN 1994)

As it can be seen according to Grace Jantzen, mysticism is always political and interconnected with questions of power. Jantzen argues that mysticism has undergone a series of social constructions, which were never free of gendered struggles of power. The main research question is the following: what is mysticism? Is it an individual/private/subjective direct experience with God or does it have political and social implications as well? According to Jantzen mysticism is always a question of defining and delimiting authority. Mysticism is a great agenda of power. In Christianity struggles for authority have always been significant, especially in the medieval period where struggles increased and mysticism was an overwhelming phenomenon. Is it possible to say that in epochs where struggles for authority are dominant, mysticism is an often-presented phenomenon? Jantzen gives a brief sketch on some ways whereas mysticism has been socially constructed in the Christian West. In her investigation, she uses Foucault as initial standpoint, then she builds a historical background of mysticism based on Bouyer and McGinn and creates a philosophical background with the help of Swinburne and Alston. Jantzen affirms that who is considered as a mystic changes time by time.

Mystics have played prominent roles in the doctrinal development of their traditions, in reform, in renewal, and protest, and sometimes in secretarian, messianic, and millenarian movements. (JONES 2005) Visions have given authority and power to women and at the same time have made these women insiders of the Church too. With the help of visions, women have become able to change the world, build convents, found hospitals, preach and their visions made them role models for other women with a deeper self-development. Saints and mystics are rule breakers. Unconventional and unpredictable people. (PETROFF 1978) In summary, it can be observed that mysticism showed itself not only as a special kind of rationality but as one special kind of social power as well.

This very important correlation between mysticism and charismatic authority was suddenly reflected by many gender inspired authors in the 1980s, (PETROFF 1978; JANTZEN 1995; BYNUM 1987) Therefore I ought to focus on this feminist approach. *“In the high and late Middle Ages, numerous women visionaries across the European continent, including among many others the famous Gertrude the Great and Mechthild of Helfta, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, and Teresa of Avila claimed authority for themselves as spiritual teachers and based that claim at least in part on the visions they had received. The construction of mysticism could no longer exclude women.”* (BYNUM 1987. 13–30). This affirmation is also valid to Saint Angela of Foligno who is the leading figure of my scholarly interest.

Issues of gender have become prominent in the study of mysticism since the 1980s. This is only partly a reflection of the attention to such issues within the study of religion as a whole. More significantly it is because, within many mystical traditions, women are better represented and have made more distinctive contributions than in other religious contexts. Leaving aside the unbidden nature of mystical experience, environments and ways of life associated with mysticism (such as asceticism, monasticism, and writing) have also favoured women. Even in patriarchal societies these contexts have been less subject to restrictive customs of ordinary society. Acknowledging the presence and contributions of women mystics is only part of the story, however. There are also specifically feminist critiques of how the lives, writings, and influence of women mystics continue to be evaluated in ways that fail to do justice to their distinctive contributions. A number of French women thinkers have taken particular interest in how some women mystics have been able to work beyond the restricting oppositions dogging so much of Western culture (male–female, body–soul, reason–emotion etc.) Simply to say, in the context of emerging feminist critics, alternative forms and approaches to rationality and power were expected and found in the reflections on medieval mysticism. (JONES 2005)

The legacy and future of mysticism

Scholars as well as practitioners have recognized mysticism not just as a constant motif within religions but as a key to what is most important in religion. As such, mysticism tends to figure prominently in revisionist global theologies, metaphysical system building, New Age thought, debates about the relationship between world religions, and interdisciplinary approaches to art, language, society and human consciousness. (JONES 2005)

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

I think we could have two main benefits through the reflections on the fundamental correlation between medieval mysticism and Weber’s understanding of charismatic authority as alternative to constructive rationality and social power. The first benefit I call as diachronic, which means the new approach to medieval mysticism with the sociological tools of Weber’s theory. In this way we will be able to deliberate medieval female mysticism from the carcer of modern individualism and open up new spaces for understanding medieval societies as well. However, for a social scientist the second benefit would be more interesting. In the time after the fall of communism and after the new political and cultural matrix in entire Europe, one can observe insecurity concerning modern rationality and democratic power – not only in Central and Eastern Europe at all. Social sciences could have a chance to contribute to original approaches and visions in searching for new ways of thinking and using power.

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