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Charisma, Diversity, and Religion in the American City— A Reflection

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Abstract: The faith leaders of North American cities actively engage in the civic affairs of their urban communities. Religious leadership, charismatic preaching, and, possibly, reputation of prophetic powers, continue to play important roles especially in the African American civic leaders' rise to public authority. The article reflects on the twenty-first-century significance of Max Weber's concept of "charisma" in interpreting the civic involvement of urban religious leaders in one city in particular, Baltimore. The article suggests that within the context of Baltimore's dramatic challenges associated with urban poverty, violence, and racial and socio-economic health disparities, charismatic religious leadership continues as a recognized form of communal authority especially among the city's African Americans. The article suggests that the gender dynamics of contemporary charismatic leadership appears strikingly similar to another time period and place, also analyzed by Weber—namely, medieval Europe. Just as an intense personal faith granted some medieval religious women authority and position they would not have had in the institutions reserved for men, so too the religious leadership and personal experiences of faith support the urban advocacy of African American women leaders.

Keywords: urban religions; African American preaching; Baltimore; women's charismatic leadership

1. Introduction

Religious communities and people of diverse faiths are integral to the culture of American cities. While *The Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Survey*, conducted in 2007, showed that on

average the urbanites, especially the young ones, are less religious than their counterparts in suburbs, small towns, and rural America [1], the observation should not be taken to mean that faith communities are marginal to the American urban experience. To the contrary, the churches of various denominational backgrounds shape the urban landscape, both visually and functionally, around the world [2] but especially in the United States. The faith communities and their outreach centers are part of all neighborhoods and appear to rise up at nearly every stretch of a street in the North American cities. These edifices rub shoulders with one another and with enterprises of completely different sort, schools, and commercial establishments, even corner stores specializing in liquor, tobacco, and fatty snack foods. Competition for attention is intense within this context of diversity and innovation; movements of secular and religious sort rise and fade, and the churches look for survival strategies that borrow methods from the world of commerce [3].

The backdrop of diversity, community building, and socio-economic uncertainties set the tone for this reflection on the place of religious charisma in a twenty-first-century American city, Baltimore. The colorful urban landscape of American religious diversity and innovation has received rich treatments by scholars such as Harvey Cox [4], Robert Orsi [5], and Diane Eck [6]. My contribution rests upon the scholarship concerning urban religious cultures but does not represent years of bibliographic research on this topic. Rather, this reflection is a scholar's examination of a country and a field fairly new to her. I am a Finn who immigrated to the United States eighteen years ago, and I am a medievalist who, after years of research and teaching in late-medieval religious movements, began another career uniting urban health issues, nursing, and the study of religious traditions. My earlier research and teaching concerned social aspects of medieval women's sanctity [7], prophetic women and institution building [8], and religious lay movements [9]—and, much to my surprise, some of these perspectives have proven quite helpful for understanding urban religions, their social relevance, and the place of charismatic leadership within them.

On the other hand, the contribution of my Scandinavian background has come through contrast, for often the strategies for urban health care that are employed around Baltimore are not the ones to be expected in Finland. In Finland the faith-based promotion of public health is virtually unheard of; in Baltimore diverse faith communities are actively engaged in civic and health issues, as I came to witness during my time of going around the city and writing the blog *Health and Faith in Baltimore* (2011–2013) [10]. I now educate college students in these issues through my service-learning classes. In these classes the students head out to do health-related community service and then bring their experiences back to classroom to connect the community work with the course readings. In today's secular and modernist Finland the prophetic and spirit-filled charismatic authority is limited to the internal operations of some Pentecostal communities; in Baltimore, and especially among the city's African American faith communities, I would argue, spiritually visionary leadership continues to be relevant religiously, socially, and politically.

2. Weber in America

The multiculturalism of American faith communities comes with nuanced and, at times, competing social visions through which the religious establishments promote their particular understandings of communal life. The prominent social role that religious institutions play in the American cities did not

escape the attention of Max and Marianne Weber when they visited the United States in 1904. Lawrence Scaff has examined the Webers' three-month-long American sojourn in his recent book *Max Weber in America* [11]. The couple's trip occurred within the context of the World Fair in St. Louis and the associated International Congress of Arts and Science. At the invitation of some relatives and many academic institutions the Webers ventured to a few remote rural sites in Alabama and North Carolina, and cities such as Boston, New York, and Washington. Explorations to diverse faith communities were part of the agenda; at times Max and Marianne Weber divided the communities so that they could maximize their exposure to practices of various churches as well as "sects", as Weber named the less formalized religious establishments ([11], pp. 29–38). During the sojourn of 1904 Weber's attention was focused, as Scaff aptly makes clear, on American modernity, individualism, community organizing, and the economic impact of religious associations ([11], pp. 161–80). The question of prophetic, religious charisma was not yet the vogue word that it came to be in Max Weber's work from the 1910s onward.

The later popularity—and popularization—of the concept of “charisma” among American political and religious theoreticians paid tribute to Weber's observations of America's religious plurality and innovation as well as social relevance of spiritual traditions. As Joshua Derman has argued in his article “Max Weber and Charisma: A Transatlantic Affair”, the popularized concept of “charisma”, akin to religious star-power, found its way to American social theory only after a long process ([12], pp. 87–88). Derman demonstrated that initially the American political theoreticians used the Weberian concept of “charisma” to address the demagogic powers of Hitler, Mussolini, and other dictators ([12], pp. 72–81). By the 1950s, the concept's power of explanation shifted toward non-European societies as the American thinkers primarily employed it to explain the emergence of new societies in post-colonial Asia and Africa ([12], pp. 81–86); but by the late 1960s a broadened and rather diluted version of the concept “charisma” established itself as one of the theoretical lenses that the American intellectuals used to view their own pluralistic society. In the sphere of religion it proved to be particularly helpful in efforts to explain the 1960s rise of the New Age spirituality, its gurus, and the American fascination with self-actualization. Derman summed: “Max Weber found a place in American intellectual life because he proved himself useful for *thinking with*. He helped Americans articulate issues that mattered to them, address developments that loomed on their own social and political horizons” ([12], p. 88).

3. Civic Faith in Baltimore

The aim of my reflection is to focus on the twenty-first-century relevance of the concept of charismatic religious leadership in an American city, Baltimore, and, through it, other similar urban communities. Baltimore is home to about 620,000 inhabitants of whom about 64 percent are African American, about 32 percent White, and the rest mostly Latinos and Asian. The ethnic make-up of the city is not irrelevant to the question at hand, for especially among the American Black communities charismatic religious leadership functions as a gateway to civic authority [13]. This charismatic power is at times a matter of magnetism of a personal sort, but often the leader's inspired preaching and social relevance is attributed to the visionary, supernatural power that comes very close to Max Weber's prophetic understanding of the concept charisma.

From the American Black churches many civic leaders have emerged to play roles that reach well beyond the walls of their congregations, among them Martin Luther King, whose impassioned preaching at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, was a prelude to national and global civil rights leadership. Baltimore has had its share of visionary Black leaders who have united civil rights protests with prophetic preaching. Among the recent examples is Bishop John Richard Bryant, one of the national leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church. His impassioned, Pentecostal, preaching helped the revive Baltimore's Bethel A.M.E. church during the 1970s, attract attention to the plight of the city's black workers, and eventually propelled him to a national fame. I shall below suggest that the ethnic dimension of charismatic authority is an important topic to identify. It closely connects with Baltimore's uneasy history with segregation and racially unequal access to established, institutional power, religious or secular.

Another demographic feature of today's Baltimore is important to note as a backdrop to the question of charismatic religious authority. That is the city's struggle with poverty. The *U.S. Census Bureau's* most recent poverty estimate, published in Fall 2012, revealed that close to 25 percent of the city's inhabitants live below the federal poverty level [14]. There are the neighborhoods of East and West Baltimore, plighted with urban violence and some of the country's worst public health crises that relate to alcohol and drug abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, substandard housing conditions, and chronic illnesses, such as Type II Diabetes, coupled with high incidence of cardiovascular diseases. There are the formerly segregated African American neighborhoods, shaped by the city's discriminatory housing ordinances ([15], pp. 47–86). The educational and health disparities between the town's neighborhoods are reflected in the glaring findings concerning life expectancy and other indicators of population health: Baltimore's *Neighborhood Health Profiles* website, which contain a wealth of public health data about the city's various neighborhoods, demonstrates that life-expectancy between city's wealthy areas and its impoverished neighborhoods vary by twenty years in favor of the wealthy and well-educated [16]. The dark vision of the television series, *Homicide* and *The Wire*, both brainchildren of a former *Baltimore Sun* reporter David Simon, have made Baltimore's plight globally known. It has even prompted the city's former health commissioner, Peter Beilenson, to profile the city's public health challenges in the light of the gritty themes of *The Wire* [17].

The dramatic circumstances of poverty and daily fear of violence create a sense of social urgency characteristic of crisis—and breed intense expressions of faith. The prophetic preaching is not uncommon in these circumstances; it can even help the young to rise to early leadership. A documentary, *The Boys of Baraka* (2005), told the story of twenty-one boys from East Baltimore. All these at-risk youth were sent for a year to an experimental boarding school in Kenya. It is perhaps not surprising that one of the boys, De'von Brown, who seems to have successfully found his way out of the ghetto and is now a student at a local college, was also a fitness buff and a child preacher. The viewers of *The Boys of Baraka* follow De'von's life at his grandmother's home and then in Kenya. They are introduced to De'von's mother who shared her history of heroin addiction and, then, casually seated in a sofa and playing with her cell phone, invites De'von to demonstrate his inspired preaching. The rhythmic beat of the twelve-year-old's preaching quickly breaks sweat on his forehead and reduces his breathing to gasps of impassioned utterances. The boy's grandmother reveals that De'von wanted to be a preacher since he was three or four years old [18]. The promise of preaching may not mean much to children of wealth and stability but, as Kenyatta Gilbert has observed, impassioned

preaching for civil rights or social change has been a catalyst toward better for many African Americans and their troubled communities ([19], pp. 10–15).

In Baltimore inspired preaching, Pentecostal expressions of faith—glossolalia, falling backward, and faith healing—and often authoritarian leadership have created several financially and politically powerful Black religious communities. Their leaders are consulted by politicians and community organizers; their support sought by both proponents and opponents of divisive issues such as The Affordable Care Act (2010) and gay marriage. Public health and social outreach organizations seek their partnership. One of these communities, Bethel A.M.E. in impoverished Druid Heights—the church lifted to its new glory by the above-mentioned John Richard Bryant—was featured in *American Grace*, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell’s massive sociological study of American faith communities ([20], pp. 195–211). On a Sunday they observed the “long pastoral performance, which builds steadily in intensity” ([20], p. 199) of the church’s current and very popular leader, Reverend Dr. Frank Reid III. Many other of Baltimore’s financially, politically, and communally successful urban Black mega-churches could have been featured, among them internet and technology savvy Empowerment Temple as well as New Psalmist Baptist Church, which on its website lists close to sixty focus areas or ministries as diverse as family wholeness, health empowerment, foreign outreach, and ministry to the deaf.

4. Community Engagement through Inspired Preaching

In all these communities, inspired preaching and personal charisma of the leader—and his wife, “the first lady”—is the glue that holds communities together and prompts involvement in worship in the people gathered together to glorify God. The power attained or given to one is consolidated in the enlivened collective response of the many. At a spirited service of often well over an hour, if not two or three, both the preacher and the congregants need a cloth to wipe off the sweat and tears. It appears that the intense energy generated at worship services is a way to recharge the social commitment, social Gospel, which is quintessential to the African American understanding of faith ([20], pp. 279–84). In this fashion the Black mega-churches of Baltimore can gather together a storm of support for social outreach or civil rights related political causes. Such was the case, for instance, in Spring 2012 in the Empowerment Temple when hundreds attended a service that brought together the parents of slain African American Florida youth, Trayvon Martin, and the temple’s well-connected, charismatic pastor, Jamal Bryant. Many in audience wore hooded sweatshirts to commemorate the youthful outfit worn by Martin at the time of his death.

The strongly felt urban presence of the Black religious powerhouses would probably have a counter-cultural impact in a city where the African Americans are a minority. In Baltimore, however, where two-thirds of the population is African American, the charisma of the powerful faith leaders often arrives in support of secular leadership. Baltimore’s current mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, for instance, shares this culture of close alliances between faith and civic leader. The visionary pastor of her church, Douglas Memorial Community Church, Sheridan Todd Yeary served in her mayoral transition team and is actively involved in urban policy.

One may wonder what exactly would Max Weber say about these types of alliances, common in Baltimore in which the powers of personally and religiously charismatic spiritual leaders significantly

shape the communal and political affairs of the surrounding city? Might these serve as prime, modern, examples of the alignment of personal charisma of a religious leader and the institutional demands of the bureaucratic, elected officials? The question of Weberian charisma is further complicated by the dimension of “inherited,” intergenerational leadership, for many of Baltimore’s charismatic and socially powerful African American preachers are sons and/or grandsons of equally powerful religious leaders. For example, Jamal Bryant of the Empowerment Temple is the son of Bishop John Richard Bryant; Frank Reid III of Bethel A.M.E. Church is the son of Bishop Frank Reid, Jr.; Sheridan Todd Yeary is a “third-generation” preacher, as is stated in his biography the church’s website. It appears that Max Weber’s categories of visionary, charismatic leadership, as outlined in Gary Dickson’s introductory article, are relevant but intermixed in the African American mega-churches of today’s Baltimore. The prophetically powerful and politically charismatic leaders of the Black churches work in close collaboration with the city’s elected officials, engage in urban civic issues of a broad range, and often embody generations of preaching expertise in service of challenging social issues facing today’s American cities.

5. African American Charismatic Women Leaders

The civic relevance of Baltimore’s religious leaders is not limited to the African American pastors of the mega-churches—nor is it limited to men. While the leaders of America’s Black mega-churches are typically married men, and women’s institutional leadership opportunities few, the prophetic and civic religious leadership is a significant gateway to the African American women [21], the most religious population group of all Americans, as is indicated in *The Washington Post and Kaiser Family Foundations 2012 poll of Black Women* [22]. In Baltimore these religiously inspired, socially committed African-American women are the movers and shakers in their local communities. Their input is especially felt in the fields of social affairs and health care—they are the ones I often see when I follow the city’s diverse faith communities and their involvement in urban health issues. There are the Baltimore organizations such as Bernice Tucker’s Women Accepting Responsibility and Debra Hickman’s Sisters Together and Reaching, both especially focusing on women and HIV/AIDS. Among these women are pastors of smaller faith communities and storefront churches, which line the troubled blocks of Baltimore’s Greenmount Avenue, for instance. Their contributions are significant in faith-based health and community events such as Transformation Explosion (August 2011), Days of Hope (Summers 2011 and 2012), and The City Uprising HIV/AIDS days (2011, 2012).

The issues that the women of faith deal with in the inner city of Baltimore involve the most daunting urban challenges—heroin and other drug addictions, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, human trafficking, domestic violence, gangs. I have had the privilege to follow many of these women in action both in the streets of Baltimore and in prophetic, prayer revivals. Their leadership in inspired sermons, prayer, and Pentecostal healings is a match to the more publicly visible African American male preachers. These women’s sermons lift the congregation from their seats. Moved by the spirit the congregants, on their feet, shift their weight, dance, raise arms, and hop about. They support the ones whose feet tremble at the power of the emotion. Their praises fill the room with a symphony of affirmations, short utterances, sobs, clapping of hands, and clicking of the tongue. The women’s sermons are often preludes to spiritual healing, resting in the spirit (falling back), and casting

out spirits. The adjutants prepare for the moves of the spirit. Water jugs await the speaker to replenish herself; cloths for wiping the sweat from her brow are ready. Tissue boxes circulate among the congregants and white sheets are available for those who rest in the spirit at the front of the gathering. Of course, not all the worship gatherings reach to these heights, but female faith leaders of Baltimore certainly participate in the inspirational preaching that is characteristic to African American communities around the United States. These significant preaching contributions of the nation's Black women are reflected in their considerable presence in the Norton anthology of African American sermons, *Preaching With Sacred Fire* [23].

Yet, the economic ramifications of African American women's spiritual and social engagement in Baltimore's urban affairs often share one feature—the work does not benefit women financially. Virtually all the charismatic, Black female faith leaders, including the ones who don the title Reverend, earn their living elsewhere. Many of them appear to struggle with the same financial challenges than the people whom they serve or gather together in worship. Many a storefront church or a smaller faith community proudly displays the name of their female leader but it is not equally clear that the community is able to support its spiritual leader financially. The economic vulnerabilities associated with all spiritual endeavors may have its share in explaining the challenges that Black women leaders encounter. Their contributions and strong voices are needed in the struggling urban neighborhoods that continue to exist in the state of a sustained crisis. The city leaders and medical establishment, including Johns Hopkins Hospital, reach out to these women to establish partnerships with the surrounding community. Yet, women's charisma and communal commitment does not translate into economic stability or, much less, the financial rewards of some charismatic male spiritual leaders ([21], p. 66).

6. Continuities from the Past

There is more research to do, places to visit. While I currently have more questions than answers about Baltimore's urban religious culture and the place of health in it, it is striking how the conditions of economic struggle seem to perpetuate religious strategies that are many hundreds of years older than their modern circumstances. The sainted women of the late-medieval cities, the *sante vive* or living saints studied by Gabriella Zarri ([24], pp. 87–164), rose to fame with power of their prophetic, visionary experiences, and interwove their piety with the destinies of the people in need. The most noted of them, such as Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), successfully secured both popular and broad institutional recognition through her partnerships with other women, religious leaders, and secular rulers ([8], pp. 671–76).

The prophetic inspiration and holistically felt deep religious commitment toward the surrounding society continues to lift women to charismatic positions of leadership but not necessarily to financially and institutionally stable circumstances. These continuities demonstrate trajectories that intertwine opportunity with oppression. One of the continuing contradictions is particularly striking—the women's own physical suffering, sacrifices, coupled with their contributions toward the alleviation of the suffering of the others. Many medieval women rose to sanctity through a path that was paved with their own suffering and with the healing miracles done to others ([25], pp. 220–38). Many modern, urban African American woman rise to a position of community leadership by engaging in the promotion of health, even though they are part of an ethnic group that bears the burden of a broad

range of health disparities, as has been demonstrated in several reports of the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that Max Weber's concept of *charisma* offers a helpful perspective or a tool to *think with* when seeking to understand the complex ways in which religion, authority, and social affairs interconnect in the context of a modern American city. Here I have focused on the particular example of Baltimore, its African American preachers, and their commitment to socially and politically engaged, often prophetic and Pentecostal, faith. The city is also a home to a large Catholic population; historic and culturally active mainline, mostly White, Protestant churches; Jewish congregations; and a growing Muslim population of immigrants from Near East and Africa. These communities are actively engaged in the cultural affairs of the town and they too commit to urban outreach in multiple, comprehensive ways, including homeless shelters, soup kitchens, employment centers, and health care. Yet, their leaders do not seem to strive toward a similar mix of personal and prophetic charisma, local politics, and immersion in urban affairs as is characteristic of the involvement of the city's African American faith leaders. It seems that the magnetism of the African American preachers of either gender is still one of the most significant ways to instill a sense of spiritual and civic sense of the community in a twenty-first-century American city. This charismatic aspect of faith is necessary in mobilizing people for just causes, to fight against disease and for good health care, to demand decent housing, and to eradicate prejudice.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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