

THE CHARISMATIC PRINCIPLE IN AN AMERICAN AND DEMOCRATIC CONTEXT

di
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Many movements inspired by charismatic leaders have had great influence on American culture and society. The paper will examine three leaders and the movements they led: Eugene Debs and Democratic Socialism, Dorothy Day and Catholic Personalism, and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Christian Nonviolence. In particular the paper will examine the charismatic messages, the charismatic leaderships, the social movement or movements inspired by this charismatic message and leader, the cultural impact of message and movement, the response of institutions, particularly economic and governmental institutions, and, finally, the history of principles and associations after the departure of the leader. The paper will end with reflections about the implications of this study (and related studies of charisma in American history) for Catholic social teaching and social and pastoral action, in the USA.

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Introduction

US history is marked by a remarkable array of charismatic leaders, many associated with movements for social reform. Indeed historians of movements to abolish slavery, win equal rights for women, strengthen the role of labor in industrial organization and end racial segregation almost always concentrate attention on charismatic leaders, on whom such movements were often dependent. It seems clear that many of these movements, and the ideas associated with their charismatic leaders, have had great influence on American culture and society. Yet there was always resistance, and considerable conflict, with the result that the degree and quality of cultural change and institutional accommodation is in dispute.

In this paper I will examine three charismatic leaders, Eugene Debs, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Dorothy Day. We will consider the charismatic message, charismatic leadership, the social movement inspired by this charismatic message and leader, the cultural impact of message and movement, the response of institutions, and, briefly, the history of principles and associations after the departure of the leader.

The paper may assist the general discussion by calling attention to the importance of voluntary associations and the social movements built around such associations in receiving, spreading, and implementing the charismatic message. In almost every case in American history the charismatic leader began by addressing people gathered in voluntary associations, including Churches. In each case message and movement led to conflicts. In the case of Debs, he grew impatient with trade union leaders who affirmed his vision but had to respond amid immediate, practical responsibilities to union members. Dorothy Day's witness to Christian social responsibility inspired many bishops, priests and religious but also stirred conflicts when she and her followers took the side of labor unions, the poor, and the marginalized. And one recalls Dr. King's difficulties in leading the civil rights movement often divided by religion, class, regions, and generations. And in all three cases problems arose when the leader applied the foundational charismatic principle to the problem of war.

These cases also call attention to the resistance as well as the accommodation of institutions, which may welcome some innovations and reject others, or subtly transform principles in the very process of adopting them. To take but one example, provision for conscientious objection may accommodate resistance to war, but in the process marginalize the moral questions about public policy and civic responsibility posed by advocates of peace. Thus accommodation is often a two way street, as institutions respond to cultural and social pressures but, at the same time, supporters of charismatic leaders often have to ask when, if ever, prophetic principles can be moderated to accommodate other important ideals and interests.

Eugene Victor Debs and Democratic Socialism

Eugene Debs was born in Terre Haute, Indiana in 1855. He dropped out of high school at age of 14 to take a job as painter in railroad yards. He eventually became

a railroad fireman and a leader of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. Like many nineteenth century labor associations the Brotherhood emphasized self-improvement and Debs attended night school, served as President of the local literary society and in 1879 he was elected City Clerk. Later he served in the Indiana state legislature. These early experiences shaped a strong commitment to democracy and shared civic responsibility that informed all his later work.

As he rose to leadership in the Brotherhood, Debs became increasingly concerned that the railroad unions ignored the needs of unskilled workers, whom he visited regularly across the Midwest. In 1893 he organized the American Railway Union to unite all wage earners on the roads. A year later the union won a massive strike. Empowered by this victory the members in 1894 responded to pleas for help from striking workers who manufactured Pullman sleeping cars. Ignoring Debs' plea for caution, the union decided to boycott all lines carrying Pullman cars, effectively bringing railroad traffic in the Midwest to a halt. Railroad executives won a court order outlawing the boycott and persuaded President Grover Cleveland to send federal troops to Chicago to break the strike. Debs was jailed for violating the court injunction. This experience, and other recent episodes of official violence, convinced Debs that workers were victims of a one-sided class war. He emerged from jail radicalized and with other labor leaders he helped organize the American Socialist Party. Five times he was the socialist candidate for President, the last time in 1920 when he won a million votes while in federal prison for opposing World War I.

Debs occasionally used Marxist slogans about class, and he occasionally offered personal support to revolutionary workers prepared to use violence, but he was a uniquely American democratic socialist. His ideas had more in common with midwestern populism than European socialism. He was an evangelist for economic justice and democratic politics, a supporter of popular protests and a critic of half-way reform measures. He was impatient with theory and detached from the passionate factional battles within the labor and socialist movements. He was a working class hero, but on practical matters most workers turned to conservative trade unionism working to improve local conditions and to politicians who could deliver concrete benefits. The United States, alone among industrial countries, failed to develop social trade unions or effective socialist parties. Debs successors, Protestant minister Norman Thomas and independent political intellectual Michael Harrington were important voices for civil liberties and social justice, but they worked closely with the non-socialist unions and Democratic party reformers. Democratic socialism was, at best, what Harrington called 'the left wing of the possible'.

Debs' vision, rooted in his early experience in Terre Haute, was profoundly democratic. He traveled the country to support striking workers, to promote class solidarity through industrial as opposed to 'business' unionism, and to do what he could to build a labor party. Class conflict was real, but almost entirely one way, and Debs was passionately committed to defending workers and overturning capitalist power. But his vision was inclusive, far removed from rigid, doctrinaire Marxism of so many of his socialist colleagues. His charisma arose from his ability to envision a future of democratic participation and shared responsibility beyond the conflicts of

the moment. There was also a pastoral dimension to Debs' leadership as he made fiends easily, maintained associations with other radical leaders whose ideological rigidity or revolutionary zeal he simply ignored. His democratic idealism gave him solid ground to challenge prevailing class power, to critique reforms dependent on elites, and to bear witness to democratic responsibility by accepting jail rather than silence in the face of what he regarded as injustice.
Beyond the long discussed question of why the United States never developed socialist alternatives, there were shortcomings in Debs leadership. He failed to develop an effective program that could tie democratic ideals to popular aspirations. To the degree his party did come up with practical proposals, they were absorbed by mainstream politicians. In later years working class families would recall the way in which conservative unions, machine politics and religious congregations combined to support families, sustain hope, and enable them to achieve growing levels of civic participation. Socialists, at odds with all three, could assist with protests but never found distinctive constructive proposals to offer aspiring families. Secondly, Debs never organized his own followers to maintain the democratic socialist voice in cultural dialogues and democratic deliberations. There were few organizing centers for socialist analysis and deliberation. And finally Debs life and work posed the central and perennial question confronting democracies: how to develop a spirit of solidarity to inspire public, and peaceful, work for the common good. That problem remains. Others, liberals, Marxists, technocrats, faced with that problem turned to elites, Debs refused that option in favor of faith in democracy. 'Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds there is nothing that you cannot do for yourselves.' (From an address on Industrial Unionism delivered at Grand Central Palace. New York City, 18 Dec. 1905). That kind of commitment to democracy and acceptance of democratic rules of the game may be the missing ingredient in US politics, culture and religion.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Christian Nonviolence

Martin Luther King was the son and grandson of Christian pastors. He attended segregated public schools in Georgia, graduating from high school at the age of fifteen. He received his B. A. degree in 1948 from Morehouse College, a distinguished Negro institution of Atlanta from which both his father and grandfather had graduated. After three years of theological study at Crozer Theological Seminary, he enrolled in graduate studies at Boston University where he received a Ph.D. in 1955.

In 1954, King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Always a strong worker for civil rights King was, by this time, a member of the executive committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In Montgomery local activists, centered in his Church and the local NAACP chapter challenged segregation with a bus boycott and before long their eloquent young pastor was their spokesman. The boycott lasted over a year, King

was arrested, his home was bombed, he was subjected to personal abuse, but he emerged as the leader of a spreading movement for civil rights. He and other ministers formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Between 1957 and 1968 King traveled over six million miles and spoke over twenty-five hundred times. A massive protest in Birmingham, Alabama, caught international attention. Birmingham and later Selma sparked national mobilization and eventual passage of landmark civil rights legislation. King was awarded the Nobel Peace, but violence in northern cities, King's decision to oppose the Vietnam war, and his plans to lead a massive march of poor people on Washington divided the civil rights coalitions and sharpened partisan divisions. On the evening of 4 April 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee where he was supporting striking garbage workers, he was assassinated.
More than any American of his era King practiced Christian nonviolence and democratic politics. From Montgomery on King responded to local initiatives and local people, sometimes as in Montgomery drawn to leadership he did not seek, then once launched, called time and again to intervene in local struggles where his presence was affirming and supportive. CORE members who rode buses into southern cities and students who sat in at lunch counters welcomed King's support but made their own judgments about strategies and tactics. King's words inspired activists and touched the conscience of observers, his presence drew attention to racist violence and brought connections which could assist the process of negotiation of particular demands. Remarkably King maintained this style of movement leadership, working with multiple local and national groups, even in situations where others were unsympathetic with his commitment to nonviolence or his willingness to negotiate compromise solutions. With angry young militants on a Mississippi march, with northern protesters less engaged with religion, even with Black nationalists King always tried to find common ground and embrace all in a wide ranging movement for social change.
As with Debs his charisma was intimately linked to an almost pastoral care for those he saw as his people. Always he was alert and responsive to personal experiences, anxious to embrace everyone into the wide movement. In the last struggle of his life in Memphis, this pastoral tone was evident. He came to Memphis to help striking sanitation workers even though he was skeptical about the possibility of success and feared it would distract attention from the planned 'poor people's march'. Emotionally and physically exhausted he was moved by the courage and commitment of these impoverished workers. He returned to their meeting hall a second time on the night before he was killed. There he spoke eloquently of his vision, and seemed to anticipate what was to come.
King's charismatic vision had three central components. Oldest and deepest was his commitment to the liberation of African Americans from the legacies of slavery and segregation. He understood better than most the levels of personal, social and political oppression they were up against. His commitment to their cause was relentless, effective and wise. Second was his commitment to Christian nonviolence, not as a tactic or strategy, though he believed nonviolence could 'work', but as arising from principles of human dignity and solidarity essential both to Christianity and democracy, principles he would not compromise even in the most conflict-ridden circumstances. Nonviolence led him to an expanding global vision associated with the Nobel Peace Prize, his travels abroad, and his anguished decision, against the

advice of almost all his associates, to publicly condemn the Vietnam War. And the third component of his vision was solidarity, an ever expanding vision of a single human family. This commitment to solidarity, the good of everybody, even the oppressor, was evident in sermons, clarified as an agenda in his last book, and enshrined forever in the iconic 'I Have a Dream' Speech of the 1963 March on Washington. It is the ground of nonviolence and the frame that allows for truthful conflict.

King was murdered, of course, the poor people's march was a failure, and the war on poverty, which he hoped to expand, was sharply curtailed by a new administration a few months later. After King was gone the country turned in a conservative direction, placing civil rights organizations on the defensive and weakening many components of reform coalitions, especially labor unions. The many organizations working for civil rights continued their work, but the loss of King's charismatic ability to maintain unity in the movement and build supportive relationships across racial, religious and cultural boundaries exposed how dependent reform hopes had been on his leadership, despite his efforts. Yet the substantial achievements of the civil rights movement are evident and ensure that honoring King with a national holiday is not entirely a domestication of his challenging message. Placed near the center of national symbols, King's democratic dream and call to radical Christian discipleship remain important resources for disciples and citizens.

Dorothy Day and Catholic Personalism

Dorothy Day was an American radical who supported labor, worked for women suffrage, protested against war and mingled with the cultural avant-garde of the World War I era. In the 1920s she became a Catholic and in 1933 she met French itinerant philosopher Peter Maurin who helped her find Catholic ways to express her American democratic values. Together they founded the Catholic Worker movement to offer a depression-era Catholic alternative to communist agitators among the workers. Their radical newspaper found an audience among Catholics anxious to respond to the depression within the framework of faith. Houses of hospitality in urban centers attracted young idealists ready to 'go to the poor' in the practice of voluntary poverty and the works of mercy. Maurin urged them to think about constructive Christian alternatives to capitalism and socialism. He advocated a 'green revolution' centered on self-sufficient farming communes where modern segmentation could be overcome by blending 'cult, culture and cultivation', creating a 'new [Christian] society within the shell of the old'. This agrarian option never caught on but Maurin's deep engagement with Catholic tradition suggested themes of community, mutuality, work as a gift for the common good rather than a commodity, and self-sufficiency as capitalist or socialist.
In the late 1930s Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement resisted efforts to enlist Christians in war, first during the Spanish Civil War, then in World War II when Day's commitment to pacifism conflicted with the sincere patriotic responsibilities of many movement participants. These decisions set the movement at odds with both ecclesiastical and civil authorities. The movement shrank in size

but revived in the 1960s when Day herself helped the entire Church find its way to allow for Christian nonviolence and conscientious objection just as resistance was growing to the Vietnam war. Day's inspiring leadership, and the movement she founded, played an important role in evolving American Catholic theory and practice of peace making. In the years since her death in 1980 the small but vital Catholic Worker movement, with settlement houses, independent newspapers, and farming communities, has continued to offer witness to Christian love in direct service to the poor and vulnerable, and campaigns for social justice and international peace.

Dorothy Day's courage and compassion expressed deep faith and an ever changing spiritual life shared in columns and books. In her democratic spirit, wide ranging imagination, and complete commitment to the Catholic community of faith, Dorothy Day stood at the center and not on the margins of the American Catholic Church. Her love for the poor, her invitations to the non-poor, and her continuing search for constructive and creative initiatives to meet human needs without violence and exploitation all witnessed to the best aspirations of her country and her Church. At the same time she was a deeply devoted Catholic who combined respect for conscience with reverence for pastoral leadership and ecclesiastical authority. In her case charismatic leadership was associated not with inter-group conflict or mass mobilization but with personal conversion, creative discipleship and the practice of hospitality. At times she made bishops and clergy uneasy and there was talk of bringing her movement under closer supervision but, to their credit, Church leaders for the most part trusted her, and many Catholics thought of her as a witness to the way one ought to live.

Dorothy Day was very Catholic, and one explanation of her influence was that her ideas and actions were always so closely linked to scripture, prayer and the liturgy. One explanation of why the Catholic Worker movement has persisted since the founder's death is that its members continue to hold fast to the Church, drawing on its spiritual, liturgical and cultural resources and also on the relationships it makes available through its networks of parishes, dioceses, schools, religious orders, and social service agencies. Another explanation is the discipline required by the daily offering of food, clothing and shelter to the poor. Practicing the works of mercy (along with what members call the works of justice and the works of peace) provides daily occasions to practice what one preaches, and to recall the central place of people, shared basic needs, and community. Studying the life and work of Dorothy Day leads to reflection on the charismatic consequences of daily efforts to follow the little way, such as that of St Thérèse, to whom Day was devoted.

Debs and King, through circumstance more than choice, were drawn into mass movements for liberation. Day backed many mass movements against war and weapons and in support of economic and racial justice and for economic justice. But for Day her small movement was an experiment in love, an experiment shaped by Day's remarkable faith and equally remarkable intelligence. Her love for the poor was never naïve or sentimental. Nor was it love as obligation, as if Christians should go to the poor to relieve their woes, nor was it a form of evangelism, to demonstrate Christian goodness. No, Catholic Worker commitment to voluntary poverty and hospitality was for the sake of Christians themselves, so they might live with integrity. It was what the great Jane Adams once called the subjective necessity of settlements: if you believe noble things and never do noble deeds, those

noble thoughts fade and die. For the young who stopped in at the Worker for a time and then went on to other things, their Worker period was a bright light, not because they worked, which they did, not because they eliminated poverty, which they didn't, but because for a brief time they lived with a kind of integrity never to be recaptured. They had given of themselves and practiced the works of mercy not to gain merit in heaven but to be brothers and sisters to all. This companionship and acceptance was a mark of Day's character that caught the attention of innumerable visitors to her House of Hospitality.
The Christian commitment to people is a commitment to real people, as they are, not as we would like them to be. Pope John Paul said men and women must be loved for their own sake. Dorothy Day could be angry and she could be tough but in the end she trusted in people and knew that it was wrong to judge others. Robert Coles argued that the Catholic Worker was meant to address plain, ordinary working men and women. She never wanted to lose contact with those people, never wanted to lead them or tell them that they were being tricked or duped.

Dorothy Day's charisma was within and never apart from the Church. For herself, she knew the dramatic moments of conversion were rare and grace-filled. At least as important were the daily experiences of life. None defined the responsibilities of Christian commitment in more dreadful and demanding ways, none bore those demands with greater wit, modesty and courage. Dorothy had no wish to challenge the institutionalized Church or make life uncomfortable for anybody in it, even Bishops. 'I did never see myself as posing a challenge to Church authority,' she told Coles. 'I was a Catholic then and I am now and I pray to die one. I've not wanted to challenge the Church not on any one of its doctrinal positions. I try to be loyal to the Church, to its teachings and its ideals. I love the Church with all my heart and soul. I never go inside the church without thanking God Almighty for giving me a home. The church is my home and I don't want to be homeless. I may work with the homeless but I have no desire to join their ranks.'

Day had her own well thought out version of the former Speaker of the dictum that all politics is local. Responsibility like justice and charity begins at home and requires not only the Worker's gentle personalism but decentralization of power and continuing experiments in participation. As she saw it, without such communitarian strategies political and economic ideas of human dignity and democratic self-government become meaningless language covering the continuous atrocities of the twentieth century. 'A good citizen uses the Bill of Rights, says what he believes to be true and shares his thoughts with others,' Dorothy said. 'A good citizen takes part in democracy and doesn't leave it to others, some big shot, to speak for him and act for him.' This is the language of American radicals. She and Maurin were serious people who meant to launch no cute little ministry but a movement to explore better ways of human living and working, ways which could and should attract and convince serious people. She was also democratic to her bones. On his first visit to the New York House as a troubled medical student, Robert Coles found Dorothy Day engaged in a long one-sided conversation, silently nodding to another woman's alcoholic 'ranting'. Finally Day politely excused herself, came over to Coles and asked, 'Are you waiting to talk with one of us?' With those

words, Coles recalls, she cut through layers of self-importance and scrapped the hard bone of pride. Later she told him 'as a youngster, there was something in me that made me stop and look at the people, how they lived and wonder if I could ever do it and live the way they did.' She felt a joy and pride in the courage of unemployed men who marched on Washington in 1932. She 'wanted to go and be with the people I heard all those learned folks talking about.' Thus the charisma of Dorothy Day drew from the Catholic tradition, was nurtured by prayer, liturgy and persistent inquiry, was persistently democratic, and found expression is simple acts of compassion, truthfulness, and peacemaking. Gandhi suggests each person must 'be the change'. Debs would have understood that, King certainly did, and Dorothy Day expressed that idea in a lifetime of generous and intelligent service to church and society.

Summary

There are many points about the work of these American democratic leaders which could be helpful to ecclesial movements. I will mention three.

Personal responsibility

Critics of American culture often decry its extreme individualism, but these leaders welcomed America's emphasis on personal responsibility. Debs was almost unique among socialist leaders in his insistence on the agency of individual workers. He rejected self-interested business unionism increasingly controlled by union bureaucrats and the Leninist elitism of most Marxist factions. Instead he told workers that they would have to be the agents of their own liberation. Similarly King's activist career was launched by the actions of just such agents, first in Montgomery, then in communities across the south and the nation. He offered advice, linked local efforts to wider coalitions, and insisted to all audiences that the witness of self-sacrificing idealism, even love, evident in the protests should awaken the conscience of all Christians and all citizens. In Dorothy Day's case voluntary poverty and the works of mercy, later the works of justice and peace, arose from personal conversion amid a supportive community. Debs went to jail in 1918 because he insisted to challenging the military draft. Rarely has the case for civil disobedience been more clearly stated than by King in his Letter from Birmingham Jail. And Dorothy Day brought that democratic principle - 'vote with your whole self' - into American Catholic life through word and witness to what she and Peter Maurin called personalism, most evident voluntary poverty and in conscientious objection to war and nuclear weapons.

Movements and organization

Social movements associated with charismatic leaders have been a major feature of American history. Debs hoped to mobilize working class Americans in to a broad based labor party which would change the structures of the country's political economy. He was at his best holding forth that democratic vision without specifying public ownership, guaranteed social supports or worker participation.

King was more successful in leading mass mobilizations that brought about important changes. He found common ground across multiple organizations, built coalitions and drew allies attracted by his vision. But in both cases of democratic socialism and Christian nonviolence no organized institutional support developed to sustain those visions. Solidarity and the common good, so central to each, is still the missing ingredient in US political culture. In Day's case a movement does carry on her ideals, and the larger Church has responded at least partially to her insistence on peacemaking and finding Jesus among the poor. Catholicism does bring some important and unique resources to democratic society, and some are found in unexpected places.

Vision

Christianity's dynamism arises in part from the tension between present experience and the promises of God. Neither world nor church is yet the Kingdom of God. American democratic idealism often is built upon a similar tension between the promise of American life and its always sordid reality. Each of these charismatic leaders held forth a vision of the future based on Christian and American promises of equality, rights and community. On this basis they critiqued the existing order and summoned people to action. In each case the vision expanded with experience, for Debs transnational working class solidarity, for King American responsibilities in an emerging 'world-house', for Day the worldwide search of the poor for a dignified place in history. For each solidarity was a central and expanding virtue, the value without which the fight for justice can become not only divisive but self-defeating. The most important American question, perhaps, is whether or not a free, open and diverse democratic society can experience genuine solidarity and construct institutions capable of building the common life of the human family.

So a concluding Focolare comment: Debs, King and Day shared a faith in personal commitment, shared social responsibility, and solidarity grounded in visions of the promised single human family. Perhaps this suggests that there may be unappreciated dimensions of American culture potentially hospitable to a new ecclesial movement grounded in Chiara's charism of unity and the daily practice of Christian love. American Christian communities all struggle with a sense of loss associated with changing regional, ethnic and religious subcultures. In the past religious energies have been renewed by ideas about the future, and about personal and communal commitments to bringing the beloved community to life. May US Catholics, with the help of Focolare and unexpected new charisms, make such commitments the basis of spiritual and community renewal.

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