

## Jesus Christ and Max Weber: Two Problems of Charisma\*

Andrew McCulloch

### Abstract

The significance of the concept of charisma for Weber, both theoretically and personally, is discussed. For Weber, Christ was the paradigmatic charismatic leader. What little we know about Christ is examined and his charismatic status disputed. The claim is made, therefore, that sociologists need to consider further the circumstances under which charismatic leadership appears. This is especially the case as charisma as a form of leadership does not appear to be on the wane.

Keywords: Max Weber, Jesus Christ, heroism, Christianity, apocalyptic vision, sapiential kingdom, legitimacy, freedom.

### *Introduction*

This article is part of a longer investigation into the history and sociology of charisma. In what immediately follows, I am concerned principally with two inter-related problems: What was Weber's relationship to his famous concept? Secondly, Does Jesus Christ merit the place at the head of this particular tradition of power and authority? The two questions are directly linked because Weber unequivocally endorses Christ's pre-eminence in the charismatic tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Few Weberian scholars writing in English (with the exception perhaps of Reinhard Bendix) have rivalled the intellectual quality of Lawrence Scaff's *Fleeing the Iron Cage – Culture, Politics and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber* (1989). Scaff's judgment of Weber is that

The spirit of our contemporary life is captured in the concepts and questions he left behind: bureaucracy, domination, rationality, charisma, the 'ethic' of work, disenchantment. He saw the predicament of our 'fate' in

\* I have benefited from the comments of Professor Harry Collins, Dr John Donnelly, and Pamela Davies. Cecelia McCulloch has corrected my English for over thirty years.

1. My theoretical allegiance is to the Marxist tradition. However, although Marx is the key analyst of capitalism, Weber is without doubt the greatest cultural critic of bourgeois society.