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RE-CHARISMATISATION – WHEN CHARISMA REVIVES: THE CASE OF THEOSOPHY IN DENMARK

Abstract

Through the formative years of the Theosophical Society (1875–1930) the group experienced several severe splits due to disputes about leadership. In order to minimise the occurrence of splits, the Theosophical Society gradually toned down charismatic abilities as a mean of leadership requirement, which induced decades of organisational ‘calmness’. However, reintroducing charismatic authority as a management tool during the 1970s this institutionalized organisational structure was once again challenged by the Danish section of the Society, causing new splits to occur. Using the theosophical history in Denmark as a launch pad, this article aims to analyse why such charismatic claims were reintroduced despite the experience of outcome from previous incidents. With charismatic authority as a fulcrum, this article will take as its theoretical point of departure scholarly traditions following Max Weber in his theory on charismatic leadership, which will be discussed in relation to resource mobilization theory. Based on both in-depth interviews and analysis of theosophical journals, it will be concluded that re-charismatisation can be seen as a way of survival for an otherwise ailing religion.

Key words: Theosophical Society, Max Weber, charisma, re-charismatisation, resource mobilization theory

Introduction: A theosophical dilemma

On 17 November 1875, a group of esoterically interested people met in an apartment in Manhattan, New York. They wanted to found a forum for studies of early religious sources, such as the books of Hermes and the Indian Vedas, which they considered to be the primary sources of all religions. The prime movers of this meeting were the American attorney, colonel and reporter Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and the Russian-born and semi-noble Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91). Both had attracted favourable notice in various esoteric circles at the beginning of the 1870s in and around New York, and this was partly the reason why they were elected, respectively, President and Recording Secretary of the Theosophical Society (TS), which was
formed at this meeting. Despite the high spirits at the beginning and wide agreement among TS members on the importance of the studies, the expansion of TS made rather slow progress during its first years. The public interest in TS and its various initiatives quickly decreased. However, having left New York at the end of 1878 to move its headquarters to India, TS became successful. From the new centre of the Society, Huddlestones Garden, situated at Adyar near Bombay, which TS acquired in 1882, it expanded its activities over the following decades to cover close to 50 countries worldwide, including the Scandinavian countries, counting in its prime in the 1920s more than 40,000 members internationally.1

At first glance, one would not expect Blavatsky to be a spiritual teacher or leader who eventually turned out to be one of the most dominant sources of inspirations for new religions and spiritual activities in modern times. Being a very colourful personage, a heavy smoker, and using phrases not typical for ‘a lady’ at the time, the teaching that she developed until her death in 1891 has, despite of that, since then been adopted and adapted by a vast number of groups. Apart from her teaching, her claims to possess unique contacts with members of a spiritual hierarchy (also called the Masters, the white brotherhood etc.) – and the fact that she was therefore expected to possess certain insights about cosmology and anthropology – attracted a growing number of people to TS and were thus also an essential factor in the expansion within TS during the first decades of its existence.

After Blavatsky’s death, such special abilities like grace of God or charismatic authority, in Max Weber’s use of the term (see below), became abilities that the more prominent international leaders of TS were expected to possess. This, for example, was the case with Annie Besant (1847–1933), who took over the leadership after Blavatsky and later on, between 1907 and 1932, became the president of TS. This was also the case with Charles Leadbeater (1854–1934), Besant’s close companion and primary ideologist, and with Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), a young Indian boy whom Besant and Leadbeater had prophesised would be the vehicle through whom the next Spiritual Master or ‘Messiah’ would manifest himself. Prominent theosophists, other than the ones mentioned, also claimed such abilities.

On several occasions, as we shall see, the insights passed on by these theosophists collided, which caused disagreements and consequently resulted in splits. To cope with this dilemma, the organisational structure of TS changed over the years, particularly during the presidency of Annie Besant, gradually toning down the influence of guidance from Masters in organisational matters. Although the following president of TS, George Arundale (1878–1945), also claimed to be guided or inspired by Masters (Arundale 1936), this claimed contact barely influenced his leadership – as hitherto had been the case. So, by placing less emphasis on a leader’s possession of divine insight or assistance, the dilemma seemed to have been solved. However, after more than 40 years without fatal controversies, due to this new leadership structure, the dilemma within TS revived again from the 1970s and onwards. Once again people started claiming to have powers to communicate in different ways with Spiritual Masters, again resulting in new splits – this time in the Danish national section of TS.
In this article I will address the question of why such claims reappear. This question is interesting, not only to the study of theosophy but also viewed in a broader perspective. Several scholars in the study of religion have focused on factors involved in the establishment of new religions and the institutionalisation process that often follows. This is particularly the case within the study of charismatic authority initiated by German scholar Max Weber (1864–1920), who focused on the mechanisms at play when authority is transferred from a founder of a religion to a different authority of leadership – expressed in his theories of charisma and routinisation of charisma. Like Weber, whose theory of charisma was restricted to the process of routinisation, to use Weber’s own term for this institutionalisation process, a vast number of scholars within the sociology of religion have focused on the initiation and institutionalisation of new religious groups (Barker 1984; Lindholm 1990; Oakes 1997). In latter decades, however, the resource mobilization theory, a theory initially initiated within the social sciences in the 1960s, has been adopted by several sociologists of religion, broadening the perspective on religious movements, hence new religions or new religious groups. Focusing on the resources that a social or religious movement organisation mobilize to change as well internal and external conditions, this theory has among others paved the way to look beyond the process of routinisation/institutionalisation, bringing into focus challenges and dilemmas that social and religious movement organisations confront and the consequences of their conduct in different matters. Scholars within the sociology of religion who have implemented the resource mobilization theory into their work are e.g. David G. Bromley and Anson D. Shupe (Bromley and Shupe 1979) and in a Scandinavian context Inger Furseth (1996; 2002). Due to this apparent convergence between the recent historical development within TS in Denmark and the before mentioned theories this article will not only display charismatic authority within TS but also discuss the Weberian theory on charisma in relation to resource mobilization theory. Before doing so, I will shortly refer to cases where this dilemma has occurred, starting out with some of the early cases where less emphasis was placed on a leader’s charismatic authority. This will be followed by examples of how charisma once again has unfolded in recent years in Denmark.

Scrolling through scholarly literature on theosophy, we find that most scholars are/ have been focusing on the formative years of TS – that is from the founding of TS in 1875 till Besant left office in 1933. The primary reason seems to be that most scholars consider the formative period to have been the golden age of theosophy, not being aware of the possibility that another one might be occurring in the present time (see Dybdal 2007). Contemporary studies on (institutionalised) theosophy are therefore limited. Looking at other ‘observers’ on theosophy, it seems that the situation is roughly the same. To give an example, TS has only rarely been in the spotlight of the media, and therefore few newspaper articles etc. are to be found on TS – at least when it comes to TS in Denmark. Compared to other contemporary religions, the Danish section of TS has been exceptional in providing sources of insight into their history, their activities, institutional development etc. Since the founding of the Danish section, it has almost in an unbroken line contributed to or published their own theosophical journals, providing new information to members on organisational matters etc. every
one or two month. These journals are a treasure trove of information and have therefore been the primary source of information in my work on the development of contemporary theosophy. Nonetheless, different editorial lines have over time prevented continuity in covering certain matters. As an example, some editors have had great focus on membership, member characteristics etc. Others have not. This situation has caused some limitations/challenges concerning the question addressed here – some of which will be further elaborated below. In addition to the theosophical journals I furthermore have conducted a series of interviews with prominent theosophists, who during the last decades have held central positions within the organisation. Although several of the recent leaders are deceased or have been unable to be interviewed due to advanced age, I have succeeded in conducting in-depth interviews with representatives of the most dominant positions or fractions within the Danish section of TS since the 1950s. These interviews have particularly been vital in providing insights into the everyday-life of TS as well as details about organisational matters that the journals have not unveiled.

The golden age of TS – early dilemmas

The Judge Case

Following Blavatsky’s death in 1891, disagreements arose about who was the right heir to the position of Blavatsky as the primary doctrinaire articulator. Several claimed to have been selected by Blavatsky when she was alive, including Olcott, who as the President of TS had so far primarily been the administrative leader. There was therefore not one appointed successor, and the controversy over the heir to the Society lasted several years. Ultimately, two prominent theosophists were in the running. One was William Q. Judge (1851–96), co-founder of TS and, at that time, the Vice-President in office and the General Secretary of the American section. The other candidate was a relatively newly arrived theosophist, namely the Irish-born feminist etc., Annie Besant, who, after a short time as a member, was given central duties of responsibility and positions of authority in TS (Sellon and Weber 1992: 316). In support of Judge’s claims to be the heir, letters with an M stamped on them – thus presumably written by one of the Masters communicating with Blavatsky, Master Morya – appeared on several occasions, which claimed that Judge was the one to take over Blavatsky’s position. Annie Besant at first withdrew her candidacy expecting there was no reason to doubt the authenticity of the letters. The fact that Judge later claimed to have contact with Masters himself and thus to be a channel between them and this world, made Olcott react. Recalling that Judge a few years earlier had given as a present to Blavatsky a stamp marked with an M, and that this stamp had disappeared after her death, Olcott now questioned the authenticity of the letters, feeling able to document that the stamp was not used by a Master but by Judge himself. Judge then was accused of forgery for having produced Master letters in order to further his own conditions and interests. The case resulted in a number of mutual accusations in public, internal examinations were made and, finally, still refusing Olcott’s accusations, Judge resigned from TS and instead founded the Theosophical Society in America (the later Theosophical Society
Point Loma and Theosophical Society Pasadena), which the majority of the American TS members joined (Campbell 1980: 111).

Steiner and the Krishnamurti Case

The first decade of the 20th century saw a similar case when TS began looking for an heir to succeed Olcott as the international President of TS and thus entered into an epoch with the Society’s second generation of leaders (Blavatsky and Olcott as founders and first-generation leaders – see, e.g. Kraft 1999). Despite the fact that there was already a controversy as to whether Besant or the then Vice-President in office, A. P. Sinnet, should succeed Olcott, and that the result of the election also in this case was affected by claimed Master contacts, it was in particular the struggle for power that developed between Besant and the German-born Rudolf Steiner that came to influence the post-Olcott development of TS. Annie Besant, who since the Judge Case had travelled around the world to spread her theosophical visions and teaching and thus had become a highly respected personality in the various national sections, was considered by a majority of members worldwide to be the natural candidate. Running against her was Steiner, who beyond comparison had had a meteoric leadership career in TS. Already after one week’s membership, he became the leader of the German Theosophical Society in January 1902, and six months later General Secretary of the newly founded German section of TS. In reply to the question as to whether Besant was the natural future leader of the Society, however, Steiner did not agree with the majority of the members. He was of the opinion that Besant only had a limited degree of contact with the spiritual world and that he himself was a better «channel» and thus more suitable for the position (Bjørnsen 1998: 66).

The controversy between Besant and Steiner about leadership and being the right heir to the leadership position went on for several years and culminated in 1913 when Steiner broke with TS and shortly after founded the Anthroposophical Society. This resulted in the majority of the German TS members leaving TS to join Steiner. Even though the public interpretation of the controversy focused on theological issues, with Besant being more theologically oriented towards an Eastern esotericism, and Steiner towards a Western, it was one of Besant’s protegés, a young Indian boy named Jiddu Krishnamurti, who became the main source of disagreement and brought about the final controversy and split between the two. Shortly after Olcott’s death, Besant and her longtime close friend and theological «sparring partner», Charles Leadbeater, thus proclaimed the coming of a new World Teacher, who would pave the way for the future development of mankind and who, in due time, would use the young Krishnamurti as a vehicle – an insight given to them through their communication with spiritual Masters. Steiner did not agree. He did not think that the coming World Teacher would be manifested in the physical universe, but rather on a spiritual level, where it would only be attainable for certain initiates. As recorded by Bjørnsen, Steiner considered himself to be the channel of this World Teacher and the possessor of the «keys» for the initiation of others (Bjørnsen 1998: 71). Steiner’s self-realisation thus culminated with Besant and Leadbeater’s claims of Krishnamurti being the World Teacher. Two doc-
trines or expectations of the World Teacher were at play which decreased the possibility that Steiner would one day be able to possess the prime leadership in TS, a position to which he considered himself to be the natural heir.

**Alice Bailey and the Tibetan**

About a decade later (at the end of the 1910s and the beginning of the 1920s), claims by the leaders of TS to be in contact with Masters were again being questioned. This time the case centred on the American-born Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949) and her claimed contact with the Master Djwhal Kuhl, also called the Tibetan.

Bailey became acquainted with theosophy and TS in 1915 and shortly after joined the American section of TS. Showing a genuine interest in theosophy and dedication to the Society, she soon became involved and was assigned special administrative duties. Consequently, she moved to Krotona in Hollywood a few years later in order to continue her work for TS through the American headquarters. In spite of her «meteoric career» in the Society, Bailey soon had to develop her ideas and practice elsewhere. According to Bailey herself, one reason was that she and her new spouse, Foster Bailey (?-1977), at that time the General Secretary of TS in the US, were dissatisfied with the centralistic organisation of the national section allowing only limited influence by local lodges on both TS as such and on their own activities. Another reason was that leading figures in TS seemed to have thrown doubt on whether Bailey was really a channel for Master Djwhal Kuhl, whose message she had claimed to communicate through a great number of books published since 1919. In her own opinion, however, this doubt was primarily a result of «theosophical jealousy» (Campbell 1980: 151). In 1920 both Alice and Foster Bailey were suspended from their administrative positions in the Society. A few years later they moved to New York in order to found a number of theosophical groups and activities there, including Arcane School, Lucis Trust, World Wisdom Trust and Triangles. As was the case with Steiner, it was also disputed whether Bailey was to be considered a true channel.

After the Bailey ‘exit’, the dilemma between theology and hierarchy had once again been challenged causing severe controversies within TS. The line of splits due to claimed Master contacts had at that point increasingly proved to be an inadequate leadership strategy, receiving its most severe stroke only a few years later, in 1929, when Krishnamurti abdicated, claiming not to be the world teacher as Besant and Leadbeater had otherwise predicted. In the following decades, no severe controversies about leadership occurred on an international level. That is until the 1970s when new initiatives were taken within the Danish section.

**Dilemma revived - the Danish case**

The first TS institutionalised activities in Denmark were initiated by engineer and Councilor of State G. Howitz (1821–1900) and Johanne Meyer (1838–1915) when founding the Copenhagen lodge on November 17. 1893. Due to the TS regulations
requiring at least seven lodges to form a national section, TS in Denmark was during the first decades formally organised as part of the Scandinavian section of TS. In 1920, however, the number of lodges matched the required number, which led to the forming of the first Danish national section. Both prior to that time and in the following decades, the theosophical milieu in Denmark was characterised by a distinct loyalty towards the leadership of TS. Whenever controversies between prominent positions had previously occurred in TS on an international level, resulting in the emergence of new theosophical traditions, the Danish section generally only experienced minor disturbances. Consequently, neither TS Pasadena nor United Lodge of Theosophists, two other major theosophical traditions emanating from TS, has ever existed in Denmark – which is contrary to what was the case in several other neighbouring countries. During the late 1960s and 1970s, however, this situation started to change. The experience that both theology and, particularly, the practice of TS did not sufficiently accommodate the requirements of potential ‘customers’ paved the way for several prominent figures within the national section of TS in Denmark to start experimenting with new ways to practice theosophy5 – among those were Preben Sørensen, Hardy Bennis and Niels Brønsted (the first two being general secretaries in those years). These experiments later on led to severe controversies between the national section and the international headquarters of TS in Adyar (Teosofia, October 1988). After several years of growing tension, as TS Adyar and the Danish national section considered each other to be respectively too rigid and too progressive, a final split occurred in 1989. The split induced TS Denmark to reorganise in a new autonomic association – Teosofisk Forening (Theosophical Association) (Dybdal Pedersen 2005).

Being a period characterised by an urge to transform and to find new ways of expressing and practicing theosophy, many new initiatives were taken – also some that were not necessarily supported by the leadership of the national section. One example is Jeanne Morashti (also known under the name of Ananda Tara Shan, 1946–2002), who had joined TS in Denmark in 1975. She soon became known for her claim to have daily contact with a number of spiritual Masters. When she later proclaimed to be an incarnation of Madame Blavatsky and expected to get the position and respect that go with such a relationship, disagreements arose in TS circles. This caused, in 1979, Morashti and a number of TS members to withdraw their membership from the Society. In the following years, she initiated the foundation of several theosophical groups, like Shan The Rising Light (which today is known under the name of The Theosophical Fellowship) and Heart Flow Worldwide. The case of Morashti, however, was not unique. Only one decade later, the theosophical dilemma again burst into flames. This time the heart of the dilemma was one of the national section’s most prominent theosophists, Birgit Lomborg, who, since the beginning of the 1980s, had been a conspicuous lecturer and teacher both within and outside TS. The problem arose when, at the beginning of the 1990s, she claimed that two books published under her name had been communicated to her by the Master Djwhal Kuhl, with whom Alice Bailey also had earlier claimed to be in contact. Also in the case of Lomborg, her asserted contacts with Masters were questioned, which resulted in her leaving TS in 1993 to found another theosophical group, namely Spirituelt Center (Spiritual Centre).
The claims made by Morashti and Lomborg to have charismatic insight and thus also charismatic authority were not the only examples of charismatic qualities evolving in that period. During the late 1970s, group meditations increasingly became part of TS’s meetings schedule, which also involved contacting higher spiritual levels. Even if the local theosophical lodges already during Besant’s leadership were requested to practice such group meditations, the lodge meetings up to the 1970s were primarily held in the form of lectures, reading groups or discussion events. The communication or teaching of the theosophical corpus of ideas was still an important element of the meetings in the following period. What was new, however, was the practice of meditation, during which the participants, often sitting in a circle around a table with flowers, candles or a glass of water, jointly contacted or rather intended to make contact with higher, spiritual levels in order (as ‘channels’) to communicate divine insight and energy for healing around the world. Even though there was/is typically one person who functions as a guide of the act, all the participants in the circle act as channels – all participants can therefore during the actual meditation claim to possess some kind of grace of God or charismatic ability. Since the mid 1970s, this practice has expanded rapidly, currently being practiced in the majority of theosophical as well as theosophical inspired groups nationwide.

After this presentation of both prior and present cases where claims of contacts to Spiritual Masters have played a vital role in the development of TS, it is now time to turn to the works of significant scholars dealing with contemporary society in order to analyse why this revitalisation of grace of God or charismatic authority has occurred during the last decades in Denmark.

**Weber on charisma**

The term charisma is today used to describe people who, one way or the other, are «exceptional» – typically people who have exceptional gifts of speaking, or who are skilled «performers». Compared to this somehow «superficial» usage, Weber’s use of the concept is remarkably different. According to him, a charismatic person is also «specifically exceptional» even though, in Weber’s definition, these exceptional qualities are not «accessible to the ordinary person». What Weber considers exceptional is exactly the possession of a divine insight or contact, or rather the claim to possess such qualities. Even though, according to Weber (see, e.g. 1968: 48–54), such exceptional qualities or powers are fundamental for using the concept of charisma about anybody, this, however, does not suffice. A person can only be called charismatic or said to possess charismatic authority if somebody considers him or her to be equipped with such claimed qualities. Somebody must believe that s/he is endowed with something «superhuman» and that this person is worth following because of her or his asserted qualities and visions: «His [the holder of charisma] charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him, he is their Master – so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through ‘proving’ himself» (Weber 1968: 20). It is thus also fundamental for applying
the term charisma in Weber’s interpretation of the concept that a dialectic leader-follower relationship is present.

The features generally characterising the charismatic leader and her or his relation to the followers are discussed by Weber in various contexts (Weber 1968). With a view to the aim of this article, however, it is in particular Weber’s theories on routinisation of charisma that are worth noticing. The central point of this theory is that the structure of a group ruled by a charismatic leader cannot remain stable in the long run. The authority, which, according to Weber, at the beginning of a group’s existence rests solely with the founder, will at a certain time have to be transferred to others, either because the followers demand a hierarchical stratification or because the founder leaves her or his position (e.g. in case of death). In the former case, this means that people only stay committed if, one way or the other, they are «rewarded» for their efforts. Cf. e.g. Weber: «...the routinization of charisma also takes the form of the appropriation of powers of control and of economic advantages by the followers or disciples» (Weber 1968: 58). The followers will therefore urge for a hierarchical structure within the group, in which they can be placed according to their experience and effort. In the latter case, the authority can technically be transferred in several ways: It can be inherited; it can be transferred to someone considered worthy by the founder; or a successor can be elected by the followers, etc. In some cases, charismatic authority like that of the founder will be attributed to the heir whereas, in other cases, the charismatic authority will be transferred to other persons within the group – e.g. by means of special forms of leadership or rituals or sacred texts (O’Dea 1961; Refslund Christensen 1997; Sørensen 2005).

In most cases, the special insight and thus also the special status of the founder will typically be uncontested whoever the successor is. Viewed in comparison with the followers’ wish to create a form of hierarchical structure, in which their own positions within the group are being estimated, this means in practice that the authority resting with the leader, after her or his departure, will be transferred to more people or instances within the group. From being solely ruled by the charismatic founder, the group will experience an increasing degree of institutionalisation or bureaucratisation – positions of responsibility will be defined and distributed, procedures can be formalised etc. In other words, it could be said that the institution changes from a ‘chaotic’ leadership style to one based on routines. In this process controversies over power is a latent matter, which often result in disagreement about who should be the right heir, and such disagreement will often result in splits (Weber 1968: 61). Splits in the early period of the history of a given religion are therefore not exceptional to TS.

Routinisation of the Theosophical Society

By looking at the above-mentioned examples with point of departure in Weber’s theory, we see that the splits in the early history of TS in many ways can be taken as a typical example of Weber’s theory of routinisation. First, we have a (co-)founder of TS, Helena P. Blavatsky, whose authority is based on people’s expectation that she, as claimed, is able to make contact with divine guides and thus endowed with exceptional
understanding of the structure of the universe and man’s «role» in it. Despite the fact that, at one occasion, her Master contact was doubted, nobody actually challenged her leadership. As long as she lived, Blavatsky was, in TS, the source of knowledge about the world to come. The real problems only arose when an heir to Blavatsky’s position had to be found. The disagreement about succession resulted in splits in TS, which, according to Weber, is to be expected in connection with transfer of charismatic authority. Although Besant’s position never really was at risk due to a widespread support for her among members worldwide, several others than Besant claimed to possess charismatic authority and thus to be the rightful leader of TS; such as the above mentioned William Q. Judge, Rudolf Steiner and Alice Bailey.

However, Weber’s theory on routinisation can be applied to explain other features of TS’s development during the first decades than the procedures for selecting an heir. Also TS’s administrative and organisational development during that period indicates that the Society has been subject to routinisation in the shape of institutionalisation of leadership (e.g. Weber 1968: 54). After Blavatsky, and in particular after Olcott, the top leadership positions were increasingly put up for election – the presidential position, for example, was put up for election every seven years after Olcott died. To secure uniformity across the Society as it grew in size, guidelines were developed for deciding when TS in a given country could achieve status of a national section and for communication between local sections, national sections and the international department in Adyar.7 At the same time, other activities were initiated within the organisation of TS which were not «classic» TS lodge activities. In 1910, for example, the Ordre de Service de la T.S. was established, the purpose of which was to reduce suffering in the world (Teosofisk Tidsskrift 1910: 70), just as the esoteric section, originally founded by Blavatsky in 1888, was enlarged under Besant’s leadership. In 1899, Besant changed this section, which was a forum for particularly dedicated theosophists, to The Eastern School of Theosophy and immediately after began an internal recruitment to involve more theosophists. This resulted in a widespread ranking within TS between «ordinary» members and those who made special efforts for the promotion of emanation (Teosofisk Tidsskrift 1899: 90). From a perspective of sociology of religion, it is thus possible to explain the splits as well as the organisational development within TS that occurred during the first decades of the Society’s existence as consequences of a charismatic group’s routinisation process.

Theosophy re-charismaticised?

In the wake of Weber

As mentioned previously, Weber’s theory on charisma practically ends with the routinisation process. To him, pure charisma cannot be revitalised. So, how does this fit with the development of TS in Denmark over the last decades? In retrospect, it would seem plausible to explain both the Jeanne Morashti and Birgit Lomborg cases using Weber’s theory as a launching pad; as two sectarian group formations where individuals with special charismatic abilities leave a group to form others, experiencing that the exis-
tential road hitherto travelled is no longer in tune with the genuine ‘masterplan’ or
dogma. In other words, we are dealing with the establishment of two new groups/reli-
gions where the leaders, Morashti and Lomborg, claim to posses certain spiritual
insights and contacts, being surrounded by a group of followers who accept these
claims and therefore grant these leaders the authority that they claim to posses. As
mentioned previously, such innovations are not unique to Theosophy. However, what
seems to be missing in Weber’s theory concerning this case is to answer the questions
of 1) why these initiatives occur at that particular point in time after decades of organ-
izational stability and 2) why the idea of whom can posses such gift of grace changes,
so that these abilities are no longer limited to the core group of leaders.8

Looking through the work of other scholars within the tradition of sociology of reli-
gion dealing with charismatic authority, most scholars tend to have focused on the
establishment and initial development of a given group rather than on what occurs
when the routinisation process has taken place. As mentioned above, Weber’s theory
on charisma has worked as fulcrum for the majority of scholars dealing with the sub-
ject. Although his theory has been criticised from time to time, the critique has most
often been of a supplementary rather than falsifying nature. Many scholars have
expressed the opinion that, for one thing, his arguments are built upon too «old»
sources (in the sense that they are not founded on empirical studies) and, for another,
he has not focused sufficiently on the followers. Although some have further expressed
critique for not including certain aspects, such as e.g. Stephen Turner (2003), who crit-
icizes Weber’s approach for being too wide, turning charisma into «a residual category
that provides an explanation where other explanations do not suffice» (Turner 2003:
9), the majority, however, seem to support the basic theory of Weber. For some schol-
ars, the intention of their work has been to elaborate on Weber’s theories on what con-
stitutes a charismatic leader’s authority (Spencer 1973; Wallis and Bruce 1986). Others
have instead focused on the dialectic relation between leader and followers (Barker
1984, 1993; Lofland and Stark 1996; Fiscella 2007), and others again on the routinisa-
tion process (O’Dea 1961). In comparison to the above mentioned focus relatively few
sociologists of religion have been building upon Weber’s model of charismatisation
and routinisation; hence looked into potential scenarios or challenges awaiting charis-
matic groups after being routinised. One who has, nonetheless, is the American soci-
ologist of religion Margaret M. Poloma. Particularly her article «Toronto Blessing:
Charisma, Institutionalization, and revival» (Poloma 1997) at first glance seems to be
of interest concerning the evolvement of TS in Denmark in recent decades. Studying
the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, who during the 1990s experienced a massive
membership expansion, Poloma attempts to see if it is possible to preserve charisma
(in the understanding of grace of God) once a group has been routinised/institutiona-
lised. When she published her article, the group was still in the midst of an institution-
alisation process. Several interesting reflections were presented, but the group’s state
at the time prevented her from concluding on her fundamental question. So, in order to
answer the questions of why the claim of charismatic authority and the evolvement of
personal grace of God increasingly arise from the 1970s and onwards in theosophical
milieus in Denmark, we need to look into other scholarly traditions.
Charismatic authority and hierarchical positioning

Leaving Weber out of account, we find several other theories that seem capable to provide important insights. In his research on new religions established during the 1960s and 1970s, professor in anthropology Charles Lindholm, for example, partially explains the claims and initiatives by Morashti in the 1970s. According to Lindholm, «degredation of tradition and the high evaluation of the potential and ability of the educated young enhanced their willingness to try experimental life styles, and to dare charismatic groups that offered transcendent values at the apparently low cost of disavowing all ties to a useless past» (Lindholm 1990: 119). Although Lindholm enhances that this particularly concerns young Americans in the 1960s and 1970s, it indicates, nonetheless, that the formation of Morashti’s groups occurred during a period of time when the ground was particularly beneficial for the establishment of new charismatic groups – even in a European country as Denmark. To some extent, the tendencies of time can be seen as one factor for the claims of charismatic authority within TS in the 1970s. This factor, however, seems less essential when we look at the Lomborg case. In the early 1990s, when she claimed to be in contact with Spiritual Masters, the ‘charismatic boom’ initiated during the late 1960s and the 1970s seems to have decelerated (see e.g. Dybdal Pedersen 2005). As a highly appreciated lecturer within theosophical milieus since the early 1980s, spokesman for several local lodges (among others Aalborg logen and Aros logen), and vice-general secretary for several years, Lomborg was indeed a prominent person within TS and, later on, TF in Denmark. However, since 1976 and until the dissolution of TF as a common national association (Dybdal Pedersen forthcoming), Hardy and Marion Bennis were uncontested as national leaders of both TS and TF in Denmark. In comparison with the case of Rudolf Steiner, the prospect for further advancement seemed to be out of reach. One vague hypothesis is that, by claiming special charismatic abilities, Lomborg might have had means of promoting a personal position. Although the above-mentioned theories all seem to provide some explanations in the individual cases, they still, however, do not seem to provide an adequate or sufficient explanation of why this ‘claim of charisma’ reappears at this point in time.

TS as a social movement organisation

Although relatively few sociologists of religion dealing with charismatic authority are linking or referring to the tradition of organisational and institutional analysis, several scholars within the sociology of religion have over the years added to this related tradition. As mentioned previously this has particularly been the case within the resource mobilization theory focusing on changes occurring and conducted within social (and religious) movement organizations (SMO). In comparison to formal organisations, SMOs differ by being less structured and by being based on voluntary membership. In an SMO people are not engaged to receive a pay cheque or an educational degree but to advance a specific cause. The degree of commitment to SMOs is therefore typically more fragile than to other types of organisation – «anyone who wants to can quit an-
time» (Oberschall 1995: 26). The resemblance to particularly new religions seems clear, and many scholars have often included different religious organisations as examples of SMOs. Some scholars who have done so are, e.g., Anthony Oberschall (1995), Mayer N. Zald and Roberta Ash Gardner (Zald and Ash 1966), and John D. McCarthy (Zald and McCarthy 1987).

In the case of theosophy in Denmark, the joint article «Social Movement Organizations: Growth, Decay and Change» by Zald and Ash (1966) seems particularly relevant. In contrast to the Weberian tradition on charismatic authority, they do take a step further by following the line of development after a routinisation process. More precisely, their intention is to enhance specific factors which influence how or in which direction an SMO can be transformed after being routinised. They conclude that it is possible to implement new initiatives in an otherwise routinised group (a bureaucratised SMO) with the object of «stirring up» an otherwise conservative form of organisation. They suggest: «If a leadership cadre are committed to radical goals to a greater extent than membership-at-large, member apathy and oligarchical tendencies lead to greater rather than less radicalism» (Zald and Ash 1966: 339). Viewed in the light of a decrease in TS membership since the beginning of the 1930s (see Dybdal Pedersen 2007) and the fact that, several times during the period from then to the 1970s, a sense of decline and frustration spread due to lack of support, it seems relevant to adopt the suggestion made by Zald and Ash. TS membership was significantly low and new initiatives had to be taken to ensure its survival. Zald and Ash further suggest that, in the case of an inter-organizational competition — i.e. if several familiar organisations are competing for the attention of the same group of people, as Lindholm has stated was the case in the 1960s and 1970s, new initiatives and shifts in goals are enhanced (Zald and Ash 1966: 332).

To sum up, a yearlong decrease in lack of engagement and motivation among both leading figures and members as such in the theosophical milieu, as well as a new competitive situation emerging during the 1960s and 1970s, called for new initiatives to be taken, new goals to be made and new organisational structures to be established. Although, as mentioned above, several theories can provide additional answers to why and how certain events or incidents occurred the way they did, the resource mobilisation theory offers a persuasive argument explaining why the initiation of a new structure, focus and initiatives taken escalated from the early 1970s within TS in Denmark. Having as a theosophical dogma, so to say, that insight in and contact with higher spiritual levels will increase continuously over the years with the progress of the expected universal emanation process, eventually providing everyone with these abilities, it ought not be a surprise that new initiatives are centred around such abilities as claiming charismatic authority or possessing grace of God. These abilities or trades are theoretically expected and therefore those ‘found’ and elaborated.
Conclusion

There are two aspects of particular interest when looking at the revival of charisma within TS in Denmark. First of all, it is interesting to note that every time someone promotes him or herself as possessing certain contacts, certain insights into the/a higher spiritual world, controversies are most likely to occur, often resulting in splits among different theosophical fractions. As we have seen, this has been the case during the first golden age of theosophy and again during the second one – the period of expansion occurring in Denmark in the late 1970s and the following decades. This despite the fact that, according to theosophical cosmology, all mankind will consequently attain such abilities due to an emanation process which theosophists expect the entire universe to evolve through. We might therefore expect leaders of TS to appreciate if and when other people than the core leaders would step forward claiming such abilities, proving that evolution proceeds as predicted. Paradoxically, as the examples have shown, this has not been the typical response. What is the fundamental discrepancy between theology and hierarchy inherent in TS? This is interesting and needs to be examined further! In relation to the Danish case, it will be of particular interest to see if the meditation practices, providing a channel for non-specialists to establish a contact with more advanced spiritual levels, will solve this dilemma. Another interesting aspect is the reappearance of claims of charismatic authority after decades of ‘silence’. The main focus of this article is on this last aspect, to present various arguments for the ‘re-charismatisation’ that has occurred within TS in Denmark since the late 1970s and onwards.

Using Max Weber’s theory on charisma as a launching pad, I have argued that the splits appearing during the first decades of the existence of TS may be due to the routinisation process that TS underwent in that period. Despite being an explanatory tool for these early examples of controversies, the tradition of sociology of religion, working with and elaborating on Weber’s theory, still does not seem to explain why a revitalisation of charisma (grace of God) is evolving within TS in Denmark. An answer to this question may be found from looking at what, through the eyes of other research traditions within sociology of religion, seems to be a particularly Danish development. In the case of Jeanne Morashti, her claims of charismatic authority can thus be seen as just one among several claims occurring in the wake of the youth revolt in the late 1960s. The Birgit Lomborg case, however, does not seem to fall within the same category of explanation but might instead be encountered as an initiative to enhance personal hierarchical status. The tendency within theosophical milieus in Denmark since the 1970s to accept or rather expect an increasing number of people to possess ‘grace of God’, being able to work as channels for energy and wisdom mediated from the Spiritual Masters to mankind, could be explained within another, different, scholarly tradition, i.e. as an example of the increasing individualisation process that several scholars have highlighted as an essential characteristic for the present era. Since none of the presented traditions, however, are able to provide an adequate answer to why this re-charismatisation occurs altogether from the 1970s and onwards in TS in Denmark, it has turned out to be fruitful to look to the scholarly tradition dealing with organisational
and institutional analysis. Zald and Ash’s resource mobilization theory, examining the factors influencing the transformation of SMOs, may provide a key for understanding this issue. Based on their theory, this article makes it plausible that re-charismatisation can be characterised as a survival act, in an attempt to rescue an otherwise «ailing» religion. So, a re-charismatisation can occur although a group, with Weber’s theory in mind, has undergone a routinisation process. However, the theory that re-charismatisation ensures survival does not apply to all groups previously led by a founder with claimed charismatic authority. Re-charismatisation has to be seen as just one means of revitalisation. Others are also possible. Whether to enhance one or the other must depend on the particular context in which the revitalisation occurs, the theology of the particular group in question, prior history etc. In the case of theosophy in Denmark, re-charismatisation has been the one given particular attention since, seen from an emic perspective, this is what theosophists were expecting.

Notes

1 According to TS Adyar’s website, the society counted 41,779 members in 1925 (www.ts-adyar.org/history.html).

2 An expression of this massive support of Besant was the fact that, at the presidential election in 1907 following Olcott’s death a few months earlier, all the Scandinavian members entitled to vote elected Besant as President instead of Sinnet (Arvid Knös 1907: 79).

3 It is, however, Bailey’s great number of works which, especially during the latest decades, have had profound influence on many people’s lives – and views of the world. This, for example, applies to her books about the new era also called new age, in which she predicts the coming of a new era where people will turn away from materialism and begin their spiritual search. Also her description of Christ as the coming World Teacher, who, together with his disciples, will launch this new era, has played an important role for many people, also in Denmark.

4 The concept of theology is here used in the sense of a systematic account of a given religion’s notions of faith, and views of life and humanity, etc. – as a synonym of teaching, according to some, and thus not in the sense of a scholarly discipline aiming to disclose the history and religious belief of Christianity.

5 E.g. group meditation, public courses in theosophy etc. For further reading see Dybdal Pedersen 2005 and 2007.

6 Leadbeater gives a comprehensive account of this in an article titled «Logemødernes skjulte side» (the Hidden points of lodge meetings), published in the Danish journal Teosofisk Tidsskrift (Theosophical Journal) in December 1910 (Leadbeater 1910). It appears from the article that the lodge meetings provide more than «just» information about, teaching of and introduction to theosophical ideas and theories. They also include interaction with higher spiritual levels, which can and will affect one’s surroundings by activating and heighten the general spiritual level. Particularly concerning the question to what degree meditation or yoga was practiced in the early years, the theosophical journals are lacking to provide information. From interviews with people who have been members since the mid-1940s, I know that short group meditations were occasionally conducted. According to my informants, thought, this was rare, and the praxis has changed immensely over years. How rare and how they differ from the meditations today is an issue barely touched upon by the early journals.
The Central Organisation of TS was thus established in 1912 as an internal organisation consisting of prominent theosophists whose duties included keeping TS Adyar informed about activities and decisions made at the local and national levels, and vice versa.

Concerning this second question, it is important to notice that one may argue that the abilities that people participating in the meditation practices are expected to possess are not charismatic in a Weberian understanding of the word, due to the apparent absence of a dialectic relationship between a leader and a group of followers. Nonetheless, it could instead be argued (as I will do) that a dialectic relationship is at hand since there is a mutual agreement among the participants that such contacts are not only possible but required to enable the ritual/meditation practise to work as intended – an idea that I find support in in the works of the British scholar Paul Heelas, who has focused on how religiosity/spirituality has changed in recent decades. See e.g. Paul Heelas 1996.

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