

# Soft charisma as an impediment to fundamentalist discourse

The case of the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden

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The Anthroposophical Society in Sweden is, in the view of many of its members, going through tough times. Times of crisis and the search for a collective identity often inspire the formation of ideological rifts within a larger religious community. One way of responding to challenges is by turning to doctrines and texts stemming from a purportedly pristine past for guidance – in other words, by developing a fundamentalist discourse. A striking fact about the Anthroposophical Society, in Sweden as well as internationally, is that such returns to a set of canonical texts by the founder of the movement appear to be self-defeating. There are deeply rooted structural features within the Anthroposophical Society as an institution that impede any one voice from gaining significant traction and imposing a collective identity upon the movement. This article uses the example of the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden and the conundrum it repeatedly faces when addressing a perceived crisis in order to formulate a model of charismatic leadership that more generally accounts for the lack of success of fundamentalist discourses in religious movements with certain types of organisational culture.

## Introduction

The Anthroposophical Society in Sweden is, in the view of many of its members, going through tough times. Interviews reveal that there are widespread concerns about issues such as financial problems, the unwillingness of young people to join (or their lack of interest) and doubts about

the role that the movement may play in the future. Many of these problems are viewed as being the result of a lack of a distinct identity for the Anthroposophical movement (Swartz 2022).

Times of crisis and the search for a collective identity often inspire the formation of ideological rifts within a larger religious community. One way of responding to challenges is by turning to doctrines and texts stemming from a purportedly pristine past for guidance – in other words, by developing a fundamentalist discourse.<sup>1</sup> A striking fact about the Anthroposophical Society, in Sweden as well as internationally, is that such returns to a set of canonical texts by the founder of the movement appear to be self-defeating. The Anthroposophical Society is a large and, to use the terminology of David G. Bromley (2012), settled new religious movement that was founded by a charismatic leader who presented a broad set of cosmological doctrines in a

1 Prototypical examples include the development of Islamism as a response to the expansion of European colonial powers in the Middle East and North Africa, and the formulation of fundamentalist Christianity as a reaction to perceived threats such as biblical criticism.

vast corpus of texts.<sup>2</sup> In theory, building blocks are in place that could potentially be used as the basis of a fundamentalist discourse that entreats members to go back to what could be seen as an indisputable doctrinal bedrock when pressing situations arise. While such calls do exist, as will be discussed below, there are, we contend, deeply rooted structural features within the Anthroposophical Society as an institution – both within the Swedish national branch upon which we focus and its mother organisation and within Anthroposophy itself – that impede any one voice from gaining significant traction. In what at first appears to be a paradoxical situation, such quests for building a solid foundation on the words of the founder result in an insistence that every person who is interested in Anthroposophy must find their own individual path. This article uses the example of the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden and the conundrum it repeatedly faces when addressing a perceived crisis in order to formulate a model that more generally accounts for the lack of success of

2 It can be noted that insiders routinely deny that Anthroposophy is a religion and prefer to characterise it as, for example, a philosophical perspective or a form of science. From a scholarly perspective, however, Anthroposophy has all the elements that one typically associates with a religion, for example, a charismatic founder whose status is based on claims of having direct insight into a normally invisible spiritual dimension of existence, a plethora of culturally postulated suprahuman beings that are said to influence our lives, concepts of an afterlife, canonical texts and rituals. Religions whose members deny that the movement they belong to has anything to do with religion are not uncommon in the modern age, but the reason for this is a matter that goes beyond the confines of this article.

fundamentalist discourses in certain types of religious organisations.

In particular, we suggest that the discursive construction of the founder Rudolf Steiner as a particular kind of charismatic leader that differs in crucial ways from the ideal type envisaged by Max Weber effectively hampers any factions that may arise from gaining the interpretive upper hand. In order to argue this point, we use our case study as a way to present and apply a model of charisma, developed in Swartz (2022), that extends and refines Weber's classic discussion of charismatic leadership.

We begin by briefly surveying the scholarly usage of the term fundamentalism and thereafter propose a definition suitable for use in the study of settled new religions such as Anthroposophy. Next, some necessary historical context will be provided when we present a very brief overview of the emergence and development of the Anthroposophical Society against the backdrop of *fin-de-siècle* culture and as a schismatic movement that broke away from its mother organisation, the Theosophical Society. A comparison between the doctrinal contents of Theosophy and Anthroposophy shows that there are numerous similarities. There are, however, significant differences between the ways in which each movement came to relate to its textual heritage. Whereas there have been recurrent calls within the Theosophical movement for a return to the doctrines of its ideological founder, Helena Blavatsky, against what many perceived as the nefarious innovations of later Theosophists,<sup>3</sup> Anthroposophical sources simultaneously build upon the legacy of

3 See Poller 2017 on these innovations and on the way in which they were polemically denigrated as neo-Theosophy.

Steiner and discursively marginalise his importance. The model of charismatic leadership that informs our study will then be presented, and we conclude by answering the question of why Steiner's form of charisma impedes any voice calling for doctrinal purity from gaining a firm footing and produces the seemingly paradoxical stance that Anthroposophical sources exemplify.

### **Fundamentalism - a contested term**

As is well known, the term 'fundamentalism' has roots as an insiders' label for a range of conservative doctrinal positions that emerged in early twentieth-century Protestant milieux.<sup>4</sup> As a pre-theoretical, non-academic term, fundamentalism has increasingly been deployed as a label in polemics against forms of religion disapproved of by the person using the term. In academic scholarship, numerous attempts have been made to make it operational as an appellation for a particular type of religion. The point of departure is generally understood to be the Fundamentalism Project. Sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and directed by the historian R. Scott Appleby and the scholar of religion Martin E. Marty, this vast collaborative effort resulted in the publication of five edited volumes (Marty and Appleby 1991-5).

An attempt to summarise what had been achieved and to formulate a typological construct and a definition of fundamentalism can be found in a later work (Gabriel A. Almond *et al.* 2003), produced by centrally placed figures of the Fundamentalism Project. Among the key features of fundamentalism as described therein are its function as a militant reaction to the

perceived marginal role of religion and to secularisation, its reliance on a selective use of particular religious resources in order to formulate this reaction, its espousal of a form of moral dualism where outsiders are seen as tainted, its affirmation of the absolute validity of the 'fundamentals' of the religious tradition in question, and an accompanying element of millennialism. The political dimension of fundamentalism holds a prominent place in this line of research: if the current political and socio-economic order is regarded as going against the sacred values a group holds as uniquely and absolutely valid, the present system needs to be replaced by one that is infused with them.

Several of these characteristics arguably seem to fit Christian and Islamic prototypes better than they do those of other religions. In particular, few numerically small religions embedded in a much larger host culture, including new religious movements in the contemporary West, embrace militancy or have a political ambition to replace a secular political system with a sacred order. To make the term fundamentalism applicable for religious currents that nevertheless display a family resemblance to those investigated in such seminal studies as the Fundamentalism Project, we suggest a somewhat modified definitional criterion. A fundamentalist response to a perceived crisis is here seen as emphasising that answers can be found in a corpus of texts, the words of a founding figure or a historical legacy that is treated as sacrosanct. This perceived loyalty to texts and traditions from the past is foundational for other features that are identified in much of the literature on fundamentalism. It is, we contend, this allegiance to perceived absolute truths that allows fundamentalist discourses to construct images of the morally tainted Other and of the sacred

4 For a detailed historical account, see Marsden 2006.

socio-political order that needs to prevail. It allows those who are partial to the fundamentalist logic to answer specific questions through a careful perusal of the foundational texts.

Before returning to the question of the extent to which fundamentalist discourse as understood here has a place within the movement that forms our case study, some historical background is in order.

### **Theosophy and Anthroposophy: a historical sketch**

From various versions of spiritualism to transmissions from disembodied Himalayan ‘masters’ to esoteric teachings safeguarded by elaborately tiered organisations, the decades before and after the beginning of the twentieth century had much to offer in terms of alternative spiritualities that could compete with the message of the mainstream churches. In this milieu, discarnate souls offering solace to the living rubbed elbows with returned Christs and other colourful characters, some of whom we will meet below, all against a backdrop of patchwork constructions comprised of bits and pieces of traditions culled from different regions and different epochs.

In *The Place of Enchantment* (2004), the historian Alex Owen uses the term ‘mystical revival’ to refer to the widespread interest in such currents that characterised the period in question. Informed by orientalisising tendencies typical of the times, it was shaped by several then prominent intellectual trends. Among them can be counted an enthusiasm for science and for budding fields of scholarship in areas like philology, anthropology and comparative religion.

The production and distribution of periodicals such as *Borderland* (1893–7) and *The Occult Review* (1905–51) helped fuel popular interest by offering articles

on a variety of topics such as alchemy, Buddhism and hypnotism. Many women and men from the educated middle classes turned for guidance and orientation to these and other publications as well as to an increasing number of organisations and more loosely structural spiritual milieux. While the fact that social class indeed ‘regulated access to the mysteries’ has been pointed out by the historian Joy Dixon (2001: 8), an additional unifying factor was a cessation of being able to identify with ‘formal Christian observance’ (Owen 2004: 4). The largest and most influential institution established in this context, and the one to which the Anthroposophical Society ultimately owes its existence, is the Theosophical Society.

The historical chain of events leading to the emergence of Theosophy and Anthroposophy has been widely documented by scholars. For our purposes, only a short summary including the bare essentials is necessary. The Theosophical Society was founded, largely through the efforts of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91), in New York City in 1875.<sup>5</sup> In the years that followed, a substantial corpus of texts took shape that presented a vast cosmological panorama based on communications Blavatsky claimed to have had with spiritually advanced beings variously referred to as the ‘Masters’ or ‘Mahatmas’ in Theosophical literature. By offering what was for many people at the time an appealing alternative to what they regarded as, on the one hand, an outdated Christian religion and, on the other, soulless materialism, Theosophy

5 See Campbell 1980, Godwin 2013 and Wessinger 2013 for general surveys of the history of Theosophy. For an introduction to Blavatsky’s predecessors, see Godwin 1994.



Rudolf Steiner, founder of Anthroposophy, c. 1900. Goetheanum archivum.

attracted a large number of adherents.<sup>6</sup> After Blavatsky's death, troubles increasingly plagued the Theosophical Society, and it splintered. The social reformer Annie Besant (1847–1933) took over as president of one of the organisations that emerged as a result of these conflicts. The Austrian polymath Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) was but one of many individuals to become active within the Theosophical Society under her leadership.<sup>7</sup>

By the time his engagement within Theosophical contexts began in 1902, Steiner had already pursued a variety of interests and careers, from editing Goethe's

6 At its peak in 1928, the Theosophical Society had over 45,000 members; see Tillet 1986: 942–7.

7 Zander 2007 and 2011 are the indispensable works documenting the development of Anthroposophy and the biography of Steiner.

works on the natural sciences to writing a doctoral dissertation in philosophy. After only a short time within the Theosophical Society's ranks, he managed to make a name for himself and was appointed by Besant as leader of the so-called esoteric section of the organisation's German branch in 1904. In the years that followed, however, he would increasingly distance himself from the Theosophical Society, and by the end of 1912 he had officially broken ties with it and founded his own organisation, the Anthroposophical Society. During the remaining years of his life, Steiner would travel extensively and incessantly throughout Central and Northern Europe, holding thousands of lectures. It was also during these years that, together with many collaborators, he formulated a number of practical applications of Anthroposophy, ranging from a pedagogical system (Waldorf education) to a method of agriculture (biodynamic farming).

The Theosophical milieu in Sweden was also affected by the events described above. Very shortly after Rudolf Steiner left the Theosophical mother organisation, a group of Swedish Theosophists followed his lead and founded the Swedish division of the Anthroposophical Society (Lejon 1997: 137). Much of the initial focus within the Swedish Anthroposophical milieu was on the doctrinal contents of the breakaway movement, but in the 1930s and 1940s the practical applications with their basis in interpretations of Steiner's suggestions became increasingly dominant. Several factors, including the arrival of Anthroposophists from Germany, where the leaders of the Third Reich had banned the movement, Sweden's post-war economic boom, and the rise of the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s, led to a period of significant growth. A large centre for Anthroposophical activities was

built in Järna, a small town located roughly 45 km south-west of Stockholm. Fieldwork and interviews conducted by one of the authors of this article attest to the existence of a commonly shared view among many present-day members that this period of expansion was a Golden Age now irretrievably lost (Swartz 2022).

Since its earliest days, the development of the Anthroposophical movement has been informed by narratives of crisis. On the one hand, historical events and cultural developments in society at large have typically been interpreted as constituting a crisis in which Anthroposophy serves a soteriological function. This is also the case in the Swedish context, and an example of such discourse can be seen in a pamphlet advertising a youth meeting in Järna in 1975 at the height of the purported Golden Age. Formulated in almost Manichaean terms, it is explained that the world, at the time at which the event was scheduled to take place, was in a precarious position:

Humanity has in the 1970s entered a phase of increasingly intense struggle for the entire range of human values. In all areas there are strong tendencies to push people into situations determined by a struggle between polar opposites: private capitalism/state socialism, dogmatic materialism/fanciful spiritualism, East/West, a dissolution of all forms/ossified bureaucracy, dry intellectualism/religiosity without knowledge, etc. (Anonymous 1975)<sup>8</sup>

8 All translations into English have been carried out by us.

On the other hand, as was stated in the introduction, the movement itself can be understood as experiencing a state of crisis. In particular, the present conditions of Anthroposophy in Sweden are described by numerous stakeholders in the movement as constituting just such a situation (Swartz 2022). Regardless of whether or not the stories they tell correspond to an objective reality, their narratives consistently focus on issues such as an ageing membership base, financial troubles and a deep sense of uncertainty about the future, much of which is attributed to the lack of a clear identity for the Anthroposophical movement and its constituent parts, including the Anthroposophical Society itself.

As we suggested at the beginning of this article, a sense of crisis and a desire to formulate a clear self-identity is in many religious communities couched in a fundamentalist vocabulary: if only the present generation would return to the pure faith of the founding generation and follow the precepts clearly set out in the foundational writings, all, according to this line of reasoning, would be well. This way of thinking is also found in Anthroposophical texts, albeit (as will soon become apparent) in a way that leads to paradoxical results. We will return to this issue after presenting very briefly some of the main claims of the foundational literature of Theosophy and of the breakaway Anthroposophical movement.

### **Some basic doctrines of Theosophy and Anthroposophy**

As presented above, Anthroposophy was born within the Theosophical milieu and gradually separated itself from its mother organisation. Theosophy thus served as the point of departure for the formulation of Anthroposophical cosmology, and a summary of some of its basic tenets

can serve as a useful background. In her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888, Blavatsky developed a complex Theosophical cosmology permeated by evolutionism. The planet we live on is said to be merely one stage – currently the fourth – in a succession of stages – seven in total – and in a very distant past was preceded by less dense and more spiritual globes. Humanity is also on its own evolutionary journey involving seven successive ‘root races’: the Polar, Hyperborean, Lemurian, Atlantean and Aryan root races as well as two more, currently lacking names. Each is further subdivided into seven races which Theosophical writers (in a rather Eurocentric fashion) link to cultures they saw as having been instrumental in the development of nineteenth-century European intellectual culture. Our present time is associated with the fifth subrace of the Aryan root race.

Because of the twin mechanisms of karma and reincarnation, this journey of spiritual evolution involves everyone. The speed of each individual’s ascent differs, however, and some have already attained a much higher level of understanding than others. Through the ages, a universal spiritual tradition has been passed on by a succession of such bearers of the torch of wisdom. According to this perspective, all major religious traditions, when interpreted through the correct hermeneutical lens, can be regarded as reflexes of the same inner core of truth, and it is this core that Theosophical spokespersons such as Blavatsky claimed to present. The outer shells of various religions differ to varying degrees from this postulated inner core of timeless wisdom, and Blavatsky singled out the interpretations of Christianity as a particularly deplorable distortion of it. Far closer, she insisted, were ‘Oriental’ religions.

Many of Steiner’s pronouncements are

strikingly similar. He also claimed that the present-day Earth was preceded by earlier, less dense incarnations; these he referred to with names like ‘old Saturn’, ‘old Sun’ and ‘old Moon’. According to Steiner, it will continue to incarnate, and, at some point in the distant future, stages he called the future Jupiter, Venus and Vulcan would follow (Steiner 1986: 142 (GA 11)).<sup>9</sup> The present Earth stage is further divided into seven epochs according to a scheme with distinct echoes of Theosophy. In agreement with Theosophical conceptions of history, these are known as the Polar, Hyperborean, Lemurian, Atlantean and Aryan epochs, with two future ones still lacking names. Each is further divided into seven periods conceived of as cultural stages rather than as ‘subraces’ (Steiner 1986: 32–3 (GA 11)). We are, according to this model, presently in the fifth post-Atlantean stage of the Aryan epoch.<sup>10</sup>

One of Steiner’s innovations in regard to the Theosophical historiographic schemata is the addition of various spiritual beings who govern specific divisions of time, such as Michael, whose influence is said to be particularly important in our present age. More generally, from an Anthroposophical point of view, events in the empirical, material world are often regarded as the reflexes of spiritual forces. The concepts of Ahriman and Lucifer are particularly prominent in Steiner’s descriptions of the mechanics of this correspondence between the spiritual and mundane realms. Lucifer is the epitome of the mystical, but also of the illusory and superstitious, and, in contrast, Ahrimanic forces are associated with rationality, but

9 Steiner’s original text appeared in instalments in the journal *Luzifer* from 1904 to 1908.

10 See Zander 2007: 624 ff. for a summary of this system of periodisation.

also in the (for Steiner) excessively rigid forms it may take.<sup>11</sup> Balancing these forces and succumbing to neither is a challenge for human development.

History, from Steiner's perspective, is a story of gradual evolution, and, as in the Theosophical view, we, as participants in this project, incarnate over many lifetimes. Throughout his career as a lecturer, he provided numerous accounts of Byzantine complexity, providing details not only about how reincarnation works but of who particular individuals were in their past lives. He identifies karma as the most fundamental mechanism informing a process with a defined goal, that is, reaching a stage where the human being is able to fully gain knowledge of the spiritual world.

As can be seen from this necessarily brief summary, Anthroposophy is founded upon a corpus of extremely detailed pronouncements concerning numerous very broad topics. While times of crisis witness calls by stakeholders to return to these doctrinal foundations of the organisation, such voices do not gain traction because of particular mechanisms embedded deep within its structure. It is to this topic, primarily by referring to material from the Swedish context but also turning to a few examples from the wider milieu, that we will now turn.

### **The quest for identity and the call for renewal**

Over the years, much space in Anthroposophical sources, ones produced for Swedish Anthroposophists and ones produced for a wider circle of readers, has been devoted to two interrelated questions:

11 It should perhaps be pointed out that this is a minimal summary of his many detailed discussions of these two entities, one that does not take into account how his ideas changed over time.

what is Anthroposophy and how can it be made relevant to people today? In order to answer the first question, an outside observer might be tempted to describe a set of doctrines and practices, perhaps along the lines sketched in the preceding section. Much of this material can be traced back to Steiner and his collaborators, and a historically informed approach to explaining what Anthroposophy is would document the connections between Steiner's *œuvre* and Anthroposophical praxis. This is the method employed in key academic treatments of Anthroposophy such as the work of Helmut Zander (e.g. 2007, 2019). There is a striking difference between this approach and what one finds in many source texts. A characteristic recent example of an insider's understanding in a Swedish context is an article appearing in issue 2/2021 of *Forum Antroposofi*, the newsletter of the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden (Held 2021). The author of this piece notes that non-Anthroposophists often identify Anthroposophy with the corpus of statements by Steiner and remarks that this is 'obviously not correct'. Anthroposophy, Held argues, is a method that we can all apply in a spirit of freedom and therefore every person who is interested in Anthroposophy will have, and perhaps even must have, their own understanding of what it is. Steiner's role, in Held's perspective, was to be the one who 'incarnated' Anthroposophy and who made it available to others, who in turn pass it on to an even wider circle of others.

A perhaps surprising result of this insistence that Anthroposophy is not enshrined in Steiner's words is that introductions to Anthroposophy composed by individuals having great significance within the Swedish Anthroposophical milieu can give cursory summaries of the founder's life and contributions, in effect

marginalising his importance in the movement today. For instance, Frans Carlgren, a pioneer in the history of the Swedish Anthroposophical movement, devotes over one hundred pages to the practical applications of Anthroposophy in one of his books before treating Steiner in a single chapter (Carlgren 1985). In another volume (Carlgren 1980), he describes Anthroposophy as a method of spiritual research available to everybody, thereby granting Steiner a very minor role in something apparently much, much larger.

As for the second question raised above, the perceived need to make Anthroposophy relevant is often couched in terms of setting into motion a process of renewal, but this term, we contend, can be regarded as an empty signifier. There is a notable tendency in the sources to see renewal in practical or organisational terms, or as an adaptation to prevailing cultural trends. Ulrike von Schoultz (2014), for instance, focuses on several such factors, including the requirement to find both financial support and content for new Anthroposophical initiatives and the need to connect with the increasing individualism of contemporary culture. By contrast, renewal is rarely, if ever, framed as a return to a perceived doctrinal purity as documented in Steiner's texts.

Despite the voices that deny or at the very least marginalise Steiner's central role as creator (rather than transmitter) of Anthroposophy, references to his foundational writings are common in the materials surveyed here. Typically, however, they focus on one single item, namely a collection of lectures he held in connection with the Christmas Conference of 1923, a meeting at which the worldwide Anthroposophical Society was refounded and its statutes were presented, and in particular on a section called the Foundation Stone Meditation, a

poetic piece replete with compound nouns coined by Steiner and characteristic of his sometimes quite obscure style. It is too long to be quoted *in extenso* here, but the opening lines, first in the original German and then in an English translation, will give an impression of its contents:<sup>12</sup>

Menschenseele!  
Du lebest in den Gliedern,  
Die dich durch die Raumeswelt

In das Geistesmeereswesen tragen:

Übe *Geist-Erinnern*  
In Seelentiefen,  
Wo in waltendem  
Weltenschöpfer-Sein  
Das eigne Ich  
Im Gottes-Ich  
Erweset;  
Und du wirst wahrhaft *leben*  
Im Menschen-Welten-Wesen.

Human Soul!  
You live within the limbs,  
Which bear you through the world of  
space  
Into the Spirit-Ocean-Being:  
Live remembering Spirit  
In soul-depths,  
Where in majestic sway  
Of World-Creator-Being  
Your own I  
In God's I  
Is begotten:  
And you will *live truly*  
In the Being of the Human World.

The significance of the text is exemplified by its ubiquity in the Swedish milieu, for example, as a piece typically recited

12 Quoted from Rudolf Steiner Archive (2021a).

at various meetings.<sup>13</sup> That this parallels a wider trend in the worldwide Anthroposophical movement can be seen from the fact that an entire conference held in 2018 at the Anthroposophical headquarters in Dornach had this passage as its theme (Anonymous 2018). Such intense focus on a single Steinerian source could perhaps be construed as a kind of minimalist fundamentalism, especially since there are references to it as constituting ‘the foundation for all further work’ (Haglund 2014: 17). However, there are counteracting forces that have impeded any further development of a trend in this direction. Firstly, the way in which the Foundation Stone Meditation is interpreted by Anthroposophists in leadership positions undermines any attempt to reassert Steiner’s pronouncements as a textual bedrock for the Anthroposophical movement. A common understanding is that Steiner placed the words of the Foundation Stone Meditation in the hearts of the people present as a way of enabling them to pursue their own path of spiritual insight. For instance, Mats-Ola Ohlsson and Dick Tibbling (2012; 2013: 3), two long-time former members of the Swedish branch of the organisation’s governing board, explain that the significance of the Christmas Conference was that it founded a renewed Anthroposophy guided by the ideal of accepting divergent opinions in a spirit of tolerance. This divergence is an inevitable and positive outcome of the power of the words of the meditation to aid each individual in developing their own spiritual path. Secondly, the Christmas Conference

13 See, for example, the summary of the 2014 board meeting (Hallström 2014), where a lengthy list of ‘mundane’ questions such as a review of the society’s finances and a round of voting on various motions ends with a recitation of the passage in question.

speeches and lectures that form the larger textual context for the Foundation Stone Meditation deny Steiner the role as an exceptional, charismatic leader. To make a solid case for this latter claim, we first need to make a detour via a theory of charisma that extends Weber’s classic understanding of the concept.

### A model of charismatic leadership

The founders of new religious movements are prototypical examples of charismatic leaders in the Weberian sense. Reflecting on how Steiner is presented in Anthroposophical sources provides an instructive perspective on Weber’s concept. Weber offered several, differing definitions where charisma is sometimes seen as a mysterious gift and at other times regarded as a socially attributed label. Both readings are explicitly and simultaneously present in one of his central texts discussing the concept of charisma:<sup>14</sup>

The term ‘charisma’ shall be understood to refer to an *extraordinary* quality of a person, regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged or presumed. ‘Charismatic authority’, hence, shall refer to a rule over men ... to which the governed submit because of their belief in the extraordinary quality of the specific *person*. (Weber 1991: 295–6, first published in 1948, emphasis in the original)

Using such diverse examples as sorcerers, shamans and the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith (Weber 1991: 296), Weber,

14 In the interests of brevity, we limit our discussion to Weber’s view of charisma in this particular chapter. A fuller range of his texts on charismatic leadership is conveniently collected in Weber 1968.

in his writings on the topic, singled out religious leaders as holders of this trait. Charismatic leadership as a source of authority is for Weber an unstable commodity that can easily falter unless followers are convinced that their leader possesses supernatural gifts:

The legitimacy of charismatic rule thus rests upon the belief in magical powers, revelations and hero worship. The source of these beliefs is the 'proving' of the charismatic quality through miracles, through victories and other successes, that is, through the welfare of those governed. Such beliefs and the claimed authority resting on them therefore disappear, or threaten to disappear, as soon as proof is lacking and as soon as the charismatically qualified person appears to be devoid of his magical power or forsaken by his god. (Weber 1991: 296)

By means of a process Weber called the routinisation of charisma, the authority vested in the person of the leader is transferred to the system built around him or her. The charisma of the founding figure remains nonetheless instantiated in the legitimising structure of the movement, where, through various forms of narrative, rituals and iconography, it is maintained by remembering their exceptional qualities. While the process can be found in both historically well-established religions and new religious movements, we argue in what follows that not all forms of charisma are built upon the same legitimising foundations. A brief comparison with three other movements in which the maintenance of charisma plays a central role provides insight into the distinct form of charisma that is narratively attributed to Steiner in many sources.

The construction of a hagiographic portrayal of L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, has been studied by the scholars of the study of religions Dorte Refslund Christensen (2005) and Mikael Rothstein (2014). What their work documents is that the Church of Scientology goes out of its way to promote Hubbard's purported uniqueness and extraordinary accomplishments, in part through the production of biographical narratives presenting him as an unparalleled genius and the creator of a ground-breaking religious 'technology', who in countless ways revolutionised human civilisation. His death was presented as an event that allowed him to leave his body in order to carry out further research on a non-physical plane. Such a degree of authority is granted his writings that practices deviating from what is documented therein are rejected. Through innumerable portraits, his very signature and the many recreations that exist of his workspace, he has a continued presence in the Scientology milieu.

The many hagiographic narratives concerning the life of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, can serve as a second example. This substantial body of literature has been studied extensively by Kimmo Ketola, who notes the interplay between the views on Prabhupada expressed within them and how members speak about him. Stories of encounters with Prabhupada in the movement's early years or of how he carried out the most mundane of tasks, such as drinking a cup of water (Ketola 2008: 135), contain copious references to his distinctiveness. So far beyond the realm of ordinary humanity, the only way the guru can be understood is through the path of complete devotion (p. 144).

Our final example, Joseph Smith, the

founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a somewhat older new religious movement, differs from Hubbard or Prabhupada because numerous other figures (mythical and historical) share the role of prophet. It is not only biblical prophets that are considered prophets by the LDS church: prophetic authority has been invoked throughout the history of the church and allows new generations of leaders to introduce doctrinal innovations. Furthermore, statements made by stakeholders within the church milieu make it evident that Smith's status as prophet does not imbue his every saying and action with significance.<sup>15</sup> Rather, specific stories about his religious mission are singled out and have a special place within the organisation. Events such as his first vision, his encounter with the angel Moroni, and the extraordinary processes by which he reputedly rendered a text in Reformed Egyptian engraved on gold plates into English are frequently encountered in printed and online documents.<sup>16</sup>

15 In the article 'Prophet' in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, one can read: 'speaking of Brigham Young, Elder Wilford Woodruff said, "He is a prophet, I am a prophet, you are, and anybody is a prophet who has the testimony of Jesus Christ, for that is the spirit of prophecy" ... It follows that this spirit does not operate in every utterance of its possessor. The Prophet Joseph Smith explained that "a prophet [is] a prophet only when he [is] acting as such"' (available online, see *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 2011a).

16 These stories can be found in any account of the LDS Church's history. See, for instance, the hagiographic account of the First Vision in the article 'First Vision' in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (available online, see *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 2011b). For a discussion of the various and sometimes conflicting accounts Joseph Smith gave of the events, see Taves and Harper 2016.

Compared to the intensely hagiographic, yet each uniquely so, portrayals of Hubbard, Prabhupada and Joseph Smith, Steiner appears to be a decidedly different type of charismatic leader. Swartz (2022: 194–9) offers a model that distinguishes four types of charisma, definable in terms of two intersecting parameters, *distance* and *type of attribute* (to be explained below). The model will be briefly presented here, but it may be noted that for the purposes of understanding how the narrative construction of Steiner's charisma affects the potential for the dominance of a particular fundamentalist discourse, it is the distance parameter that is most relevant.

The typology has, as its point of departure, the defining traits mentioned by Weber, such as those touched upon in the above quotation. In his foundational texts, Weber firstly lists as defining traits, but without distinguishing between them, the specific *attributes* (e.g. revelations, magical powers and miracles) attributed to the charismatic leader by followers, and the *distance* (hero worship, the submission of followers) that is constructed between the leader and ordinary people. Secondly, he refers to 'belief' in the magical powers and other attributes, which can be understood as an inner state that may be impossible (barring advances in areas like cognitive science) for researchers to investigate. If charisma is viewed as something followers attribute to a particular person, it follows that references to belief can be abandoned; instead, one could use terms such as the construction of charisma. Thirdly, since charisma can be constructed in different narratives in different ways, it should be emphasised that charisma, in the perspective adopted here, is not a property of the charismatic leader, nor is it a monolithic set of attributes consistently projected on the them. It is thus possible for the same leader

to be placed in different locations along the two intersecting scales in different sources.

Leaving the attribute parameter aside, it may be noted that different narratives will portray the purported distance between the leader and the rest of humanity in distinct ways. Both Prabhupada and Hubbard are narratively framed as truly extraordinary people. For instance, Hubbard's genius, as described by Scientology's spokespersons, was so highly developed that no other human being can even come close. Prabhupada is similarly presented in many of the narratives analysed by Ketola as a person whose every action set him apart from others. We propose to call this property *strong charisma*. Joseph Smith, by contrast, is a more human character and as such possesses a property that we will call *soft charisma*.

### Steiner's soft charisma

There is a tension in many of Steiner's texts that at times makes him appear as a fellow traveller on a path of spiritual inquiry and as a nearly infallible guru figure at others. This tension is clearly discernable in the following quotation, where the recipient of Steiner's message is encouraged to investigate all his claims independently, but is simultaneously assured that such an investigation will simply prove that Steiner's claims are true:

When with an unprejudiced sense for truth you begin to reflect, when you say, 'We have been told so and so; let us search the records accessible to us, the religious and mythological documents, let us ascertain what natural science can tell us,' that then you will perceive the correctness of what has been said. Make use of all the means you can bring to your assistance, the more the better. I am not afraid.

That which comes from the sources of Rosicrucianism may be tested in every way. Test by the most materialistic criticism of the Gospels what I have said about Christ Jesus, test by means of all the sources at your disposal what I have said about history, test it as minutely as possible by all the means at your disposal on the physical plane; I am convinced that the more minutely you test it, the more you will find, that what has been said out of the sources of the Rosicrucian Mystery will be found to correspond to the truth.<sup>17</sup> ('The Mission of Folk-Souls,' GA121, lecture 11, available online, see Rudolf Steiner Archive 2021b)

Although strong and soft charisma seem to coexist in an uneasy equilibrium in passages such as this, the emphasis in Anthroposophical sources on Steiner as a spiritual investigator who has progressed further than others on a path we can all follow makes him a characteristic representative of soft charisma. There are innumerable references in his writings to a carefully delineated path towards higher knowledge and to a science of the spiritual world described as having the same degree of certainty as more conventional forms of science. The lectures he held as part of the proceedings of the Christmas Conference can serve as an example showing how he presents himself as such a fellow investigator of a spiritual dimension.

Steiner's proximity to his audience is rhetorically marked by the introductory

17 The term Rosicrucianism should not be taken in its historical sense; it was Steiner's label for what he considered to be a Western counterpart to the 'Oriental' path taken by Theosophy, accessible via clairvoyant perception.

greeting, 'My dear friends!' Furthermore, he does not position himself as the unique revealer of Anthroposophical truths but instead as merely the conduit for something emanating from the spiritual realm itself and requiring a response from a collective 'we' ('we are to achieve,' 'we must turn,' etc.):

The proper impulse for what must now go forth from Dornach must, as I have emphasized from various angles over the last few days, be an impulse arising not on the earth but in the spiritual world. Here we want to develop the strength to follow the impulses coming from the spiritual world. ... If we are to achieve something fruitful for the earthly world, we must turn to the spiritual world for the appropriate impulses.<sup>18</sup>

The use of the first person plural rhetorically signals that the audience is collaborating with Steiner on a joint project and thus does not constitute a circle of disciples subordinated to a leader. The project in which they are engaged will, in the future, become even more democratic and encompass humanity at large, since the people gathered at the conference are portrayed as the vanguard of a coming form of humanity where the ability to achieve spiritual insight will be commonplace. In Anthroposophical parlance, the Guardian of the Threshold will no longer prevent souls from entering the spiritual world:

18 Quotations from the proceedings of the Christmas Conference are taken from 'The Christmas Conference' (GA 260); see Rudolf Steiner Archive 2021–2.

This Christmas Conference will send a strong impulse into our souls which can carry them away to do strong work of the kind needed by mankind today, so that in their next incarnation human beings will be able to encounter the Guardian of the Threshold properly, or rather so that civilization as a whole will measure up to the Guardian of the Threshold.

The trope of a collective 'we' carrying out the requisite work is repeated at various points in the text. In the following passage, for instance, Steiner again counts himself not as a leader stationed above his subordinates but as part of a collective:

They [i.e. 'spiritual flames'] shall arise out of our hard work and out of our devotion. The more we go from here with the courage to carry on the affairs of Anthroposophy, the better have we heard the breath of the spirit wafting filled with hope through our gathering.

In short, Steiner may, according to Anthroposophical cosmology, have developed abilities of occult perception exceeding those possessed by anyone else at present, but the emphasis in this key text is on the notion that all of us can embark on the same journey of spiritual exploration that he did and not on the fact that he is alone in his achievement.

The two central themes that we have identified in this text – that Steiner is not an elevated guru figure, and that Anthroposophy is a path that anyone (who is interested in doing so) can embark upon – are reiterated in numerous later sources produced in the nearly one hundred years that have passed since his death. A few illustrative examples will provide an idea of how

he is framed narratively as an approachable person whose main role was to facilitate the spiritual quest of others.

The soft charisma attributed to a very human Steiner comes across, for instance, in one of the older Swedish-language descriptions of him, penned by Anna Wager Gunnarsson, a pioneer of the Anthroposophical movement in Sweden. In her autobiography, first published in 1936, she recalls how friendly Steiner was and how he liked to crack jokes, but also how he selflessly made himself available to all who met him (Gunnarsson 1992: 69–70). That this impression is one that transcends a particularly Swedish context can be seen in a much more recent volume compiled by Peter Selg (2010), which provides innumerable hagiographic details culled from people's recollections of Steiner that extoll him for his altruistic desire to help others. Picking out a specific passage for the purposes of illustration in a volume that is composed of little else than effusive praise of this kind makes for a difficult task, but his nature as an anti-guru of sorts who assists others in their individual quests in a spirit of complete freedom comes across with particular clarity in a passage (on p. 51) that praises his efforts to ensure that nobody was dependent upon him and to honour the individual freedom and integrity of everyone he encountered.

Descriptions of Anthroposophy as a spiritual practice and a method for developing greater insight into a supra-sensible dimension can frame Steiner as a person who, however notable his achievements may be perceived to be, merely happened to speak from a place of experience that others also can reach if they are willing to do the work involved. That this is a widespread trend within Anthroposophical milieux can be seen in the work of Arthur Zajonc, a former general secretary of the

Anthroposophical Society in America. A book he wrote on the topic of meditation is replete with footnotes referring to Steiner, but in the body of the text, concrete descriptions of his achievements present him as 'a trained contemplative who is writing out of his meditative experience. I place myself within this contemplative lineage' (Zajonc 2009: 42). Clearly, Steiner, as described here by one who served the organisation in an official capacity, is a figure who points out a path rather than delivers a fixed body of doctrines.

Although Steiner, historically speaking, is the creator of the Anthroposophical edifice, his role, as we saw in the above discussion of Carlgren's books, can be curiously subdued. A further example can be seen in an advertisement in *Forum för antroposofi* providing basic information about the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden, the benefits of becoming a member and the details of how membership dues can be paid. Steiner's name is entirely absent from the text until it is mentioned at the end that his books, as well as publications written by many other authors, can be ordered from a company in Järna (Anonymous 2009: 47).

These tendencies – humanising Steiner and presenting him as a trail-blazer on a path available to all while simultaneously, and even paradoxically, minimising his importance – are combined on the websites of the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden and of its mother organisation. On the latter, his work is not described as a corpus of clairvoyantly perceived truths but as an inspiration and an individual path:

[Steiner's ideas] live in today's cultural life as an impulse and an inspiration. The philosopher, scientist and Goethe scholar Rudolf Steiner developed anthroposophy as a "science of the spirit." An individual path of spir-

itual development, Christcentered at its esoteric core, its fruits are visible in art, social forms and practical initiatives. (Goetheanum n.d.b)

The former gives him an even more subdued role. There is a biography of Steiner, but it is hidden at the bottom of a scroll-down menu accessed under Antroposofiska Sällskapet (the Anthroposophical Society) (see Antroposofiska Sällskapet n.d.). The very concise description frames Steiner as a man who developed a scientific method for investigating spiritual realities, worked with the arts, and lived during turbulent times when many people sought his advice. As charismatic leaders go, Steiner comes across as very low-key.<sup>19</sup>

### **Charisma and fundamentalist discourse**

The forms and prevalence of fundamentalist discourses within various religious traditions, we argue, align with the kind of charismatic leadership that is commonly constructed within that tradition. The strong Weberian charismatic leader who is distant from other human beings fits structurally with the proposition that the leader has the insights necessary for presenting absolute truth in his or her writings and pronouncements. Distant leaders such as Hubbard are prototypical examples of this. He was the founder of a movement that has developed a rigidly centralised structure

19 It may be added that interviews with stakeholders within the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden can give Steiner an even more subdued role than these 'official' voices do. One even finds suggestions that Steiner was a man who attempted to accomplish many things but ultimately failed (Swartz 2022: 177). Such views, we contend, would be anathema in an organisation founded by a person to whom strong charisma is attributed.

and where doctrinal purity is maintained by referring extensively to his writings as the only source of correct doctrines and practices.<sup>20</sup> Organisations whose founders are constructed as bearers of soft charisma will have a more pluricentric locus of authority and have a less exclusive focus on using narratives of the founder as a legitimising strategy. The LDS church accepts that Joseph Smith, besides being a prophet, was a fallible human being and also attributes prophetic gifts to others. New prophetic messages have contradicted Smith's pronouncements and practices, with the 1890 ban on polygamy as the best-known example. Important messages from the leadership do not necessarily invoke the founder's name,<sup>21</sup> and a key assumption is that any individual can receive confirmation of the truth of the Book of Mormon from the Holy Ghost.<sup>22</sup> Even less distant

20 For an interesting perspective on this matter, see Rothstein 2007. The argument presented suggests that the bulk of writings that Scientology claims Hubbard authored is so voluminous that he would have had to produce roughly 50 to 70 publication-ready pages of text each day throughout his entire career as leader. Even for a prolific writer like Hubbard this figure is so large that it is almost certain that some of these texts were written by others. His charisma is so powerful that any innovations that might have been introduced are hidden behind the claim that everything can be traced back to Hubbard's own texts.

21 For instance, an important proclamation issued in 1995 that affirmed conservative gender roles and family patterns was introduced with the words 'We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, solemnly proclaim', and no other authority was invoked anywhere else in the text. See Church of Jesus Christ 1995.

22 A suggestion along these lines is part of the Introduction to the Book of Mormon:

on this scale and thus 'softer' is Rudolf Steiner, who is presented as an approachable human being, who in many ways simply lived at the right time and happened to have gone further on a path towards clairvoyant insight than the rest of us. Anthroposophy is so infused with a pluricentric ideal that individual members are expected to relate to the movement in an individualised way, characterised by complete freedom. The foundational document that is invoked again and again, in the Swedish context and in the broader milieu, as a bedrock of Anthroposophy affirms precisely this ideal. This, we contend, is the basic building block that undermines an appeal to the minutiae of Steiner's books or innumerable lectures as constituting a corpus recording absolute truths. Even though Steiner is very much present in the movement, for example, in the form of ubiquitous portraits adorning the walls of Anthroposophical institutions, the central and oft-repeated idea that Steiner is first among peers rather than the unparalleled source of all truth makes it all but impossible for any particular voice within the movement to dominate a discussion of what Anthroposophy is or how the movement should respond to crises. Even the bylaws governing the organisation allude to future developments and Anthroposophical discoveries. The fifth of fifteen items presently constituting the document states that:

'We invite all men [sic] everywhere to read the Book of Mormon, to ponder in their hearts the message it contains, and then to ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ if the book is true. Those who pursue this course and ask in faith will gain a testimony of its truth and divinity by the power of the Holy Ghost.'

The Anthroposophical Society sees the School of Spiritual Science in Dornach as a centre for its activity. The School will be composed of three classes. Members of the Society will be admitted to the School on their own application after a period of membership to be determined by the leadership at the Goetheanum. They enter in this way the First Class of the School of Spiritual Science. Admission to the Second or Third Classes (2) takes place when the person requesting this is deemed eligible by the leadership at the Goetheanum. (Goetheanum n.d.a)

Steiner died fifteen months after the Christmas Conference of 1923/4 when the bylaws were first presented, and only the first of the three classes was ever established. What is striking here is the brief note (2) that appears in connection with the last sentence of the quote. The editors of the website note that the final two classes 'have not yet been established'. Even without Steiner, it would seem that new advances in 'spiritual science' can be made.

To summarise, we have argued that charisma comes in several versions. Attributing soft charisma to founders of a religious movement, that is, emphasising their humanity and discursively framing them as people who in many ways are similar to their followers, fits an organisational culture where individual interpretations of doctrines and practices are common, and where it is difficult for any current leader or leadership faction to impose in fundamentalist fashion a particular vision of the movement's identity or current role. Our case study is an apt example of this phenomenon: repeated quests for a collective identity for the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden during a time of crisis, as well as within the broader Anthroposophical

movement, clash with a view of Steiner as a person who had merely come further on a spiritual path that we can all embark upon. This fundamental claim about Steiner's role undermines every effort to address these issues on behalf of the entire community of Anthroposophists. ■

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