

Ethics of Leadership

The Value of Charisma

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Reading

- Max Weber, “Legitimate Authority and Charisma”, pp. 189–192.
- Robert Solomon, “The Myth of Charisma”, pp. 202–212.
- Charles Lindholm, “‘The Only God You’ll Ever See’: Jim Jones and the People’s Temple”, pp. 192–202.

Background

One virtue is commonly advocated for leaders: charisma. The attribution of charisma to a leader suggests the possession of a quality that inspires intense loyalty, devotion, and personal emotional attachment in their followers. The reading from Max Weber lays out a classic account of charismatic leadership in quasi-religious and mystical terms. Meanwhile, Robert Solomon is much more critical of the meaning and value of charisma for leadership. Finally, Charles Lindholm presents a classic case study involving a charismatic leader, Jim Jones, who comes to view himself (only cynically at first, though later this may have become truthfully) as “God incarnate”, leading his followers to ultimately commit mass suicide in the jungles of Guyana.

Questions

1. Max Weber repeatedly distinguishes charismatic authority (with its calling to “disciples” and “followers”) from bureaucratic authority (with its appointment of “officials”). What is the difference between these two types of authority, especially when it comes to the role of reason and emotion?
2. Robert Solomon is not impressed with discussion of charisma in the context of leadership, where he concludes that charisma is “without ethical value and . . . without much explanatory value either” (p. 202). What is Solomon’s argument for this position? What is Solomon’s understanding of the proper role of emotion and trust in leadership, and why does he believe “trust would be a much better emotional vehicle for the discussion of leadership than charisma” (p. 212)?
3. Initially, at least, Jim Jones seems motivated by genuinely altruistic concerns about helping the most vulnerable members of American society (African Americans, women, the elderly, and the poor). Why did this inspire so much devotion from his followers? Do you think this devotion was more about charisma or trust? Were any (or all?) of Jones’ actions justified by his altruistic goals and the devotion he had from his followers? In the end, 909 of Jones’ followers committed suicide. This included people who knowingly fabricated lies to maintain the mythology surrounding Jones. Why would such people still, nevertheless, be ready and willing to take their own lives at his command?