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ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY: THE CASE OF JUDITH VON HALLE

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ABSTRACT

Charisma is an unstable basis upon which to build authority. Charismatic leaders need their followers to perceive them as being endowed with extraordinary, even supernatural, gifts. Detractors can in turn question whether the leader actually possesses these unique qualities. Using Judith von Halle and her conflicts with the Anthroposophical Society as a case study, we address the question of how charismatic authority can be constructed and deconstructed in polemical texts. At various points throughout her career, Von Halle has made extraordinary claims. She presents herself as being clairvoyant and as having received stigmata. Anthroposophists who believe these claims cite them as their reasons for regarding her doctrinal statements as being trustworthy. Skeptical Anthroposophists, on the other hand, question her experiences and motives. Using a theoretical framework inspired by Foucault and Bourdieu, we discuss how both camps discuss von Halle's charismatic status in terms that are opaque to outsiders unfamiliar with Anthroposophical discourse.

KEYWORDS

Charismatic authority – Anthroposophy – Judith von Halle – polemics – religious experience

INTRODUCTION

Every organization—whether it be a company that manufactures breakfast cereals, a circle of friends who take turns hosting board-game playing nights, or a group of individuals united by shared beliefs about the nature of reality—will face a challenge at some point in its lifespan. Catalysts vary, but the fallout can make continuing operations in customary ways impossible, although collective efforts may be made to behave as though nothing has changed. In the world of cereal production, for instance, managerial restructuring or a hasty corporate decision to start focusing on selling energy bars instead may prove disastrous for stakeholders at every level, and organizations that formulate cosmological doctrines and perform rituals imbued with spiritual significance are in essence no different. They will also face challenges, sometimes ones requiring mobilization against perceived external or internal threats.

Religious movements that form around charismatic leaders are inherently vulnerable to a particularly thorny set of such threats. Max Weber (Weber 1948: 296) famously portrayed charisma as a fleeting quality. Charismatic leadership breaks down unless leaders continually succeed in making their followers perceive them as being endowed with 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.

Charisma thus needs to be built up and maintained by the charismatic authority figure and her or his adherents, and detractors can conversely make attempts to dismantle the leader’s charisma. Ensuing struggles can erupt over the “proofs” alluded to by Weber, and disputes may arise between followers and foes regarding questions such as whether or not the leader truly performs miracles or actually possesses the unique and direct means of accessing revelations from a transcendent dimension that she or he claims to have. Such conflicts can be carried out in various arenas, from the organizational politics of the organization (e.g., as attempts by one party involved in the conflict to ostracize or exclude the other) to the discourse used, i.e., in apologetic and polemical texts that support or undermine charismatic authority. It is the latter that is the object of our study.

Polemical language in the domain of religion in general remains undertheorized and we therefore suggest two potentially useful approaches. The first is enabled by the terms *doxa* and *episteme* as they are used within the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, respectively. *Doxa* as part of Bourdieu’s terminology denotes what is taken for

granted within a society and can naturally be extended to signify what is seen as evident or beyond questioning in a particular polemical setting. *Episteme*, in the Foucauldian sense, defines the limits of what is counted as a knowledge for a particular group of people. For Foucault (1970: 168), “...in any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge.” The second is based upon the concept of interpretive communities, introduced by Stanley Fish (1980). Texts get their meaning when the words that comprise them meet the interpretive efforts of specific readers. These readers are equipped with a certain store of background knowledge that opens up the possibility of interpreting these words while simultaneously constraining them so that their reading is not wholly idiosyncratic. An interpretive community, in this sense, is a social formation whose members share such modalities of reading. We will return to these concepts below.

In this article, we will explore the polemical negotiation of charisma by presenting a specific case study, i.e., a series of challenges that the Anthroposophical Society¹ has faced in recent years. The Anthroposophical Society was founded at the end of 1912 by the Austrian esoteric entrepreneur Rudolf Steiner (1864–1925). For over a century, it has struggled with numerous difficulties, including the death of its leader and, more recently, an aging membership base, perpetual financial concerns, and processes of glocalization that create spaces, and thus opportunities, for new readings of Steiner’s overwhelmingly Eurocentric teachings. The particular problem that concerns us here is a situation that the Anthroposophical Society has found itself in multiple times, namely attempts to build up and dismantle charisma in an organization that, paradoxically, both seems to encourage and reject the development of charismatic powers among its members.

The main reason for this incongruity is Steiner’s tendency to shuffle between two positions, i.e., one that stresses the importance of personal freedom and the capacity for developing spiritual insight, and one that presents constraints by either asserting his own authority or, more covertly, by constructing his audience as individuals ultimately subject to karmic forces that follow their own, for human beings, often inscrutable laws of operation. To take but one example, in *How to Attain Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, Steiner writes that “There slumber in every human being, faculties by means of which he can acquire for himself knowledge of higher worlds” (Steiner, n.d.: 1). However, the

1. The organizational history of the Anthroposophical Society is complex. It consists of various divisions that have been restructured and renamed through the years. We have, for the sake of simplicity, chosen to refer to it as the Anthroposophical Society in this article as these organizational and terminological details are of no consequence for our present purposes. It can furthermore be noted that we here label and treat Anthroposophy as a religion, since it has all the characteristics of what scholars of religion tend to study: suprahuman agents, rituals, canonized scriptures, a charismatic founder figure, and so forth. Anthroposophists themselves will by contrast typically reject the label “religion.” This discrepancy between insider and outsider perspective is not uncommon in the case of contemporary movements, which can prefer a self-presentation as a form of spirituality, a philosophy, or as a scientific endeavor.

path he proceeds to outline in this and other books is arduous and requires the cooperation of forces over which one has little immediate control. This discursive move, whereby a way that is potentially open to anyone who chooses to pursue it is subsequently closed to all but a select few and perhaps is only fully accessible to Steiner himself, carves out a space for conflict and contestation. This article surveys this contestation by examining the rise to fame and prominence of one particular Anthroposophist, the visionary Judith von Halle (b. 1972). After providing the necessary context by briefly presenting the Anthroposophical Society and its founder, we go on to examine von Halle's attempts to build up her own charisma by means of making a series of extraordinary claims. Thereafter we investigate the strategies deployed by some of her main detractors to debunk and discredit those assertions.

RUDOLF STEINER AND HIS UNIQUE STATUS

One commonly made claim in the history of religions is that higher knowledge is attained as the result of extraordinary experiences. Examples here range in time from the philosopher of late antiquity Plotinus (205–270 CE), via individuals from the early modern age as diverse as Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) and Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) to occultists such as and Charles W. Leadbeater (1854–1934) and Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). Rudolf Steiner similarly claimed to base his own teachings upon entering a particular state of consciousness. In Anthroposophical parlance, this is known as “reading the akashic records.”² Steiner reports in his autobiography, *Mein Lebensgang*, published in 1925, having had some kind of mystical experience in 1899, the details of which are not made clear to the reader.³ This spiritual awakening, whatever its nature might have been, marked the beginning of his long and far-reaching career as the primary architect of a complex set of teachings. Stories that originate and circulate among insiders present Steiner as a man who had succeeded in reaching an exalted level of clairvoyant perception and who after having utilized the Theosophical Society as a stable institutional basis from which to launch his own career went on to create his own movement towards the end of the year 1912.⁴ Seen from the outside, one might regard Steiner as the successful leader of a schismatic new religious movement whose charismatic authority is due to his ability to brand himself as uniquely gifted.

2. The term “akashic records” began to be used in Theosophical writings in the 1880s and 1890s as a designation for a kind of universal memory bank, where traces of every event that had ever happened could be clairvoyantly seen by those who had developed extraordinary powers of spiritual perception; see Hanegraaff 2017 for the history of the concept.

3. Steiner rather obscurely refers to this purported watershed moment as having “stood spiritually before the mystery of Golgotha”; see Steiner 1925: 366.

4. For the details of this schism, see Zander 2007: 151–170.

An additional claim Steiner made was to have discovered a pathway of spiritual development that others also could endeavor to follow based upon his instructions. Steps he described include studying his works and a daily practice of carrying out various exercises, e.g., concentrating on certain mental images and reciting prescribed mantra-like phrases.⁵ After sufficient training, the disciple will, according to Steiner's pronouncements, be able to "enter into a conscious relationship with certain supersensible beings and forces" (Steiner, n.d.: 182). When outlined broadly, these steps can seem well-defined and appear to involve distinct phases. Meticulous research by Helmut Zander (2007: 580–615), however, has demonstrated that the specifics of this path changed as new editions of the texts in which it was described were printed. Given the many alterations it underwent over the years, the supposed path towards clairvoyant perception could be regarded as just as much a discursive construction as it is an actual set of recommended practices.

Not unlike the situation one encounters with Scientology, where the pathway indicated is one that nobody can follow to the end, which means that it is impossible to match the achievements of founder L. Ron Hubbard, a key element of Anthroposophical discourse is the claim that nobody has succeeded in acquiring the same capacity for clairvoyance that Rudolf Steiner managed to develop in his lifetime. For this reason, he is treated by Anthroposophists as a unique individual, and challenges to that status, i.e., the claims of various individuals to have reached similar levels of clairvoyance, have therefore caused intense controversy throughout the history of the Anthroposophical movement. This is certainly the case with Judith von Halle.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JUDITH VON HALLE

The most basic biographical sketch of the life of Judith von Halle could be outlined as follows.⁶ She was born in what is now Berlin, Germany in 1972, the only child of non-observant Jewish parents. After having attended upper secondary school at a Christian *Gymnasium* she studied architecture at the Berlin University of the Arts from which she graduated in 1998. Her first encounter with Anthroposophy occurred the year before, and her career as a religious figure and innovator, which at the time of writing has spanned a period of roughly twenty years, has taken place within what can broadly be conceptualized as an Anthroposophical milieu. She has, however, collaborated most closely with Peter Tradowsky (1934–2019), who has ever since the 1970s been seen as a controversial figure in the Anthroposophical movement and who was one of the

5. A collection of such phrases can be found in Steiner 2014.

6. The vast majority of the literature on Judith von Halle is apologetic or critical, and very little has been published by scholars. A short academic discussion can be found in Zander 2019: 98–101. The biographical data given here summarizes information in Zander 2019 and Kröner et al. 2008.

founders of a schismatic branch that emerged in 2006 within that movement in Berlin (Zander 2019: 99).

During Easter week 2004, stigmata purportedly appeared on her hands and feet. Ever since this stigmatization took place, von Halle has, according to her own reports, eaten nothing and has had very little to drink. She was at first reticent to speak of her stigmatization but decided to go public roughly six months after it occurred (Tradowsky 2009: 4). The purported stigmatization caused an uproar in Anthroposophical circles, and a commission was appointed that in the years between 2006 and 2008 held talks with the concerned parties and subsequently delivered a report on the so-called von Halle case (Kröner et al. 2008). After conversations between Judith von Halle and members of the *Vorstand* (or executive council) of the Anthroposophical Society took place in 2012, the relationship between the two parties is said to have improved (Zander 2019: 100). However, polemical attacks written after that abound on the Internet and in printed form.

Judith von Halle has shared glimpses of her life story in interviews and books, not least in a lengthy recent (2016) work, *Schwanenflügel*, that, to coin a new term for the study of religion, can be characterized as part of an autohagiographic narrative.⁷ *Schwanenflügel* is framed as the first volume of what will ultimately be a more extensive presentation of her life.⁸ It paints the picture of a person who had a truly extraordinary childhood. Among our reasons for characterizing the book as an autohagiography are her reports of having contemplated complex philosophical questions regarding the nature of consciousness at the age of two and having in the years directly afterwards developed supersensible cognition that allowed her to perceive otherwise invisible life forces. She explains to her readers that these abilities had been acquired in previous incarnations (von Halle 2016: 9–40).

It might seem puzzling that a person who had already become an extraordinary spiritual figure by the time she was a toddler would choose a path crafted by somebody else, i.e., Rudolf Steiner. In an interview conducted in 2014 that appeared in the Dutch Anthroposophical journal *Motief*, von Halle insisted that she did so because she recognized that he had written about things that she had already independently experienced.⁹

7. The word autohagiography exists as an emic, i.e., insider's term. Aleister Crowley used it in the subtitle of his memoir (Crowley 1969). As an addition to the vocabulary of the study of religions, the concept of an autohagiography draws attention to the fact that numerous figures have branded themselves as extraordinary individuals by crafting hagiographical narratives about themselves. Just as the autobiographical genre has received sustained attention in the area of literary criticism and has generated a wealth of studies, we contend that autohagiographies constitute a fertile field for research.

8. At the time of writing (July 2020), no second volume had yet appeared.

9. See <https://www.motief.online/wp-content/uploads/holland-motief-19.10.14-michel-gastkemper.pdf>. All websites referred to here were accessed 15 June, 2020. The published text is a shortened version of an interview conducted by Michael Gastkemper.

Steiner's status is thus rhetorically converted from that of a teacher to that of a fellow traveler on the same path.

Her autohagiographical narrative divides her life up into two distinct phases, i.e., one before and one after receiving stigmata, each of which is characterized by a distinct mode of supranormal cognition. In connection with her stigmatization, she began to have spiritual experiences in which she, according to her claims, has clairvoyant access to historical periods. The main focus of her glimpses into the past is the life of Jesus and the lives of a number of people in his immediate surroundings.¹⁰ She refers to some of these visions as *Zeitreisen*, time journeys, and by doing so employs a factual language that implies the actual existence of an ability to study past epochs at first hand. Her exploration of the life of Christ is aided, she tells us, by the fact that her clairvoyant perception involves all five senses, so that she, e.g., hears the Aramaic language as it was spoken at the beginning of the Common Era and feels the ground felt beneath the feet of the protagonists as well as the temperature of the air.¹¹

These visionary journeys in time only complement what she, using a typically Steinerian expression, calls “spiritual scientific” investigations. They serve as commentaries upon what she explains as being the actual import of what has been witnessed, a mode of insight that she insists preceded her stigmatization. Specifically, she claims to be able to, as Steiner was before her, access the akashic records. According to von Halle, her ability to “do” spiritual science ultimately goes back to her childhood experiences but has been further cultivated by following a path of inner development, a way purportedly like the one prescribed by Rudolf Steiner which she describes rather vaguely in her *Motief* interview.

In short, she stresses that while the spiritual path is unique to each individual who chooses to pursue such a route, it involves exercises of concentration and meditation by means of which one learns to abstract completely from one's own self. Such a regimen can lead to flashes of intuition whereby one experiences a whole chain of events becoming visible in one single point, as if viewed through an eyepiece. Particularly noteworthy is what the passage does not say: there is no mention of any specifics, and aspiring clairvoyants receive therefore no assistance in their own attempts to embark upon a similar path.

10. While it is arguable that the most familiar aspects of Anthroposophy (for many) are its practical applications, the foundation of Rudolf Steiner's teachings comprises innovative interpretations of Christianity. See Zander 2007: 781–858.

11. A statement to his effect appears in all her books on the Christ event, see e.g., von Halle 2008a: 11.

AN OVERVIEW OF VON HALLE'S WRITINGS

Both modes of cognition, i.e., the historical time journeys and the akashic investigations, are presented by von Halle as objective and factual and serve as the basis of the more than twenty books that she has published to date. Parts of Judith von Halle's work are written in an opaque style that excludes readers not having a fundamental grasp on Anthroposophical vocabulary and the worldview that informs it. It is not the aim of this article to provide a comprehensive overview of the contents of her writings other than the information that is necessary for a discussion of her as a charismatic figure whose authority is principally manifested via texts, i.e., books and lectures. Much of what she has produced consists of mythological accounts of events in the lives of Jesus and his closest associates. As is the case with Steiner's Biblical exegesis, the Gospel narratives are in her works also assumed to be factually true (i.e., they are not demythologized in any way), but they are presented as being in need of a competent interpreter who can eke out the spiritual truth beneath the letter of the text. Some sections read like detailed exegeses of Steiner's work while others are framed as explanations of reportedly strange or mysterious things that she has seen in her visionary explorations of the past. For instance, von Halle reports that when Christ arose, he bore the marks of the lance wound but not those of the other injuries he had suffered and she then in *Von den Geheimnissen des Kreuzweges und Gralsblutes* (von Halle 2008c) proceeds to explore why this is so.

These distinctions between visionary cognition of the past, access to a "spiritual scientific" perspective thanks to her ability to read the akashic records, and elucidations of material attributed to Steiner are useful as abstractions, but actual passages in her books can draw on and freely combine various forms of suprasensible cognition, implicit or explicit references to Steiner's works, and arguments that – due to the paucity of supporting endnotes – are often difficult to trace. An exegetical passage discussing references to diseases in the Gospel narratives, for instance, states that modern people do not read these texts in the ways that ancient people did because the human faculty of thinking was different in those days, a Steinerian concept supported by references to his works (von Halle 2008b: 20–23). It is her position that, if one reads them in the right state of mind, it is possible to learn that Jesus had introduced a kind of medicine that took spiritual truths into account and that did not (in contrast to what is regarded from this perspective as an utterly useless biomedicine) restrict itself to the material dimension. Since von Halle purportedly has a suprasensible ability to understand the Gospel text, she claims to understand Jesus' sayings about healing and medicine even better than his own disciples did (von Halle 2008b: 25–26).

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY

As we have seen, Judith von Halle's career for roughly the last 15 years has been based upon a number of what could be described as extraordinary and exotic experiences, e.g.,

the supranormal experiences of her earliest childhood and visionary time travels to Palestine. One might follow the lead of Loren Fetterman who, in a recent (2018) issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*, takes Steiner's claims at face value and attempts to eke out the consequences that his "path to spiritual science" has for our understanding of the psychology of mystical states and approach Judith von Halle's claims in a similar way. Our suggestion, however, is vastly different. For one who does not belong to Judith von Halle's circle of admirers, it would presumably require a massive suspension of disbelief to accept that such experiences as miraculously gaining the ability to understand ancient Aramaic exist outside the world of von Halle's autohagiography. We can, however, in one analytic step retain a version of the methodological agnosticism that tends to characterize the study of religion and examine von Halle's narratives of her multiple experiences as data for a study of religion and not just of psychology.

In order to investigate such experiences as those reported by von Halle as religious phenomena and not only as psychological ones, we first need to agree upon some fundamental matters regarding precisely what the term 'religion' can usefully stand for. The attempts that have been made to define religion are of course numerous. It is our contention here that the phenomena we elect to characterize as religious must comprise a minimal social component.¹² Firstly, before we proceed, a common-sensical argument could be made for this position, i.e., pointing out the seeming absurdity of suggesting that an idea or practice that either 1) is now, has always been, and always will be unknown to everyone other than its originator, or, alternatively, 2) no one classifies as 'religious', is religious. In the case of an individual who declares that the voices inside her or his head come from God and where the social consequence of doing so is that she or he is placed in the care of a psychiatric hospital, the use of the term religion seems out of place.

The suggestion that religion is essentially a social phenomenon resonates with well-known understandings of the kind of entity to which the term "religion" might usefully apply. Ninian Smart, for instance, famously asserted that religions are characterized by several different dimensions, one of which is social and institutional.¹³ More recently, Bruce Lincoln (2003: ix) introduced the idea that religions have four components, i.e., discourse, practice, community, and institution.

If we accept that religions necessarily have a social component, this leads us to an important conclusion. Experiences, which are preeminently private, cannot in and of themselves have social effects and thus be constituent elements in the formation of religious currents. If von Halle had had experiences of accessing the akashic records and had experienced stigmatization and visions of Christ but had opted to remain silent about

12. The argument here is developed more fully in Hammer 2020.

13. Smart sees religions as multidimensional entities, the social and institutional being one of either one of six (1969: 15–25) or seven (Smart 1989: 12–21) dimensions.

them, her biography would hardly qualify as source material that might be of interest to scholars of religion. If she had confided in a friend or two who remained utterly unconvinced of the truthfulness of her claims, the choice to call her career a religious one would be terminologically questionable. It is only after she first presents herself in narrative form to others who accept her story as valid that the private details of her (constructed) biography become publicly accessible and can form the substratum of what we can call religious phenomenon.

Because these biographical details have been accepted as true by others, a social formation has arisen around them. Claims of superior knowledge are attributed to von Halle, hagiographic narratives surround her, and a group of adherents has been formed, i.e., people who study and disseminate the doctrines that they find in her books and lectures. The social formation surrounding Judith von Halle is still in its infancy, and many elements that are otherwise common in the case of charismatic leadership, i.e., pilgrimage sites, rituals, iconography and other dimensions of material culture, are lacking or are at least still in their earliest developmental phases.

Reframing religious experience as a social label rather than viewing it as a psychological phenomenon leads us to study a case such as Judith von Halle's based upon a stance grounded on methodological agnosticism. Since the central social phenomenon in the events surrounding von Halle's emergence in the Anthroposophical milieu is charismatic authority, the matter of what she actually experienced becomes of marginal importance. Whether or not outsiders find it utterly implausible that a two-year-old could ponder philosophical matters or that a 44-year-old could remember such inner monologues from her infancy is, for our purposes, immaterial. What is important here is that the claims she makes are public and are employed for the purposes of bolstering her charismatic authority. It makes therefore no difference if her accounts faithfully reflect her experiences or are textual constructions that she has either partially or entirely fabricated.

Von Halle's narrative, when seen from this perceptive, differs in no way from the kinds of accounts we encounter in other religious traditions that purportedly relate various experiences and the cognitive results that are the fruits of these experiences. For purposes of elucidation, we will make a comparison with Buddhism. Several Buddhist branches have key manuals that describe stages on the Buddhist path. For Theravada there is Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* ("Path of Purity"), and for Tiantai there is Zhìyǐ, *Móhē Zhǐguān* ("The Great Calming and Contemplation"). Western books on Buddhism that analyze such texts typically stress extraordinary states experienced in meditation as the sine qua non for advancing on what is viewed as being a Buddhist path of sorts. In his 1995 paper "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," Robert Sharf suggests that such a perspective fundamentally misrepresents the Buddhist texts. Closer inspection of the sources, he argues, shows that the "mystical path" includes stages involving feats that are physically impossible to carry out, e.g., walking

through walls, flying through the air, becoming invisible, and ceasing to have any mental or bodily function while still remaining alive. Sharf notes that these works cannot be faithful records of actual meditative practices and ensuing experiences but are instead doctrinal works that present “scholastic constructs.”

Von Halle’s doctrinal statements are legitimized by her claims of having had extraordinary experiences since infancy. The link between purported experience and doctrinal statement is, however, far from straightforward. One innovative claim in her writings is that Rudolf Steiner was an incarnation of Serapis, understood here as one of twelve spiritual beings belonging to the so-called White Lodge (von Halle 2011: 137). One way to view this assertion is as an innovative extension of a piece of Steinerian cosmology. In a body of work that exceeds 350 published volumes, Steiner presented his opinions with varying degrees of detail and clarity on an astronomical number of diverse themes. Occult speculations about the membership of the White Lodge can be found by Anthroposophists willing to search for passages on this topic.

A central element in the Theosophical worldview is the existence of a group of spiritually highly advanced beings, the Masters, who transmitted their wisdom to the founder of the Theosophical Society, Helena Blavatsky, and her successors. Steiner, in lectures held during his years as a leading figure within that organization, appropriated several of these Masters and gave them roles within his own cosmology, typically as cosmic beings that heralded the transition from one cultural stage to another within his grand view of human evolution. His argument for this set of claims is a familiar one from his oeuvre more generally, i.e., he knows this to be true because he is able to access the information from the akashic records. Von Halle does the equivalent by appropriating Steiner’s cosmology but adds the twist of placing Steiner himself within this august circle of spiritual personages and tacks on the additional claim that she knows this for similarly clairvoyant reasons. In one sense, as was touched upon above, it does not matter whether or not there is any such thing as a reading of the akashic records, nor does it matter whether or not Judith von Halle successfully did so. What is significant for our purposes is that it remains an observable fact of the empirical world that her identification of Steiner as Serapis rests upon the social capital that she has accrued by claiming to have had precisely that akashic experience. This social capital, to extend the same metaphor, is amassed in the form of a currency that is only valid within certain social circles and whose value is continually negotiated.

NEGOTIATING CHARISMA IN A POST-STEINER ANTHROPOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Our choice to refer to exotic experiences as examples of a negotiated social capital may seem reductionist. However, religious insiders often behave as if experiences are precisely that, i.e., socially negotiated commodities. Robert Sharf, again, in a later article, illustrates this point in a cultural context vastly different than the one discussed here: Zen Buddhism (Sharf 1998: 279–280). Prized, purportedly mystical states that one can

attain during the course of a long and arduous religious career, e.g., *satori* and *kensho*, are typically only accepted as valid within one's own sub-branch of Zen and are rejected by others. No identifiable underlying experience is universally recognized, and a supposed *kensho* experience only provides added value to a monk's social capital within his own particular lineage. What is the case among Japanese Zen monks is also applicable to Anthroposophists: Charismatic authority based upon claims of having attained extraordinary states of consciousness is an unstable and contested commodity because it is often challenged.

In history of the Anthroposophical Society, discord has on occasion arisen regarding the status of individuals claiming to have become clairvoyant. A small number managed to become leaders of their own post-Anthroposophical movements. For instance, the Estonian-Russian writer Valentin Tomberg (1900–1973), who joined the Anthroposophical Society in 1925, was regarded as a controversial figure because he claimed to have original insights and was in 1940 asked to leave the Society.¹⁴ The case of Judith von Halle, although it ended with at least a partial reconciliation, has similar characteristics. As stated above, she has figured as an innovator within the Anthroposophical milieu for the past two decades, and her claims provoked strong reactions within it. This is in part because they can be interpreted as attempts to undermine Steiner's authority as well as the hegemonic rights of interpretation that are both assumed by and bestowed upon the members of the executive council of the Anthroposophical Society.

Various arguments either rejecting or affirming the validity of her visionary insights have been put forth in response to her promotion of her own brand of Anthroposophically informed teachings. An examination of texts in which these views are articulated reveals a number of discernable themes that are periodically recycled. Despite their differences in position and tone, what these texts share is that they treat stigmata, inedia, and having visionary insights in general as phenomena that are possible for a human being to experience. What is being hotly debated by the authors of these pieces is the matter of the specific claims Judith von Halle makes about them.

One of the most critical voices in the discussion is found in the writings of the prominent Russian Anthroposophist Sergei O. Prokofieff (1954–2014). During his years of service within the Anthroposophical Society and its governing body, he produced a voluminous body of works, many of which present his own innovative Christological teachings and some of which address von Halle's claims. It is arguable that the very existence of Judith von Halle would have gone unnoticed altogether by many outside of the German-speaking, Goetheanum-adjacent Anthroposophical world were it not for the widely translated verbal attacks he launched against her.

14. For information on Tomberg, see Faivre 2005. On the schism with Anthroposophy, see Zander 2007: 727.

His critical onslaughts inspired the formation of two camps divided by opposing views on the subject, and each side has in turn produced its own battery of arguments. Some engaged in the debate, including Prokofieff himself, reject the validity of her visionary experiences. In this case, her stigmatization is regarded as proof that she has failed to follow the Anthroposophical path of spiritual development. Prokofieff, for example, discusses in his book *The Mystery of the Resurrection in the Light of Anthroposophy* the case of a Richard Pollak whom he claims consulted Steiner about his own mysterious wounds and was prescribed a specific meditation to help rid himself of them (Prokofieff 2010: 177–178). Author Ron MacFarlane also takes this stance on his website The Sacred Heart of Shambala:

Since...anthroposophical spiritual science...promotes the Rosicrucian-Christian path of...development, not the path of Mystic-Christianity,...Judith von Halle is an obvious anomaly within the anthroposophical movement. If...her claims of mystical stigmata, inedia and visionary experience are genuine, then obviously she has been following a Mystic-Christian path of development, rather than the Rosicrucian-Christian path... Since Mystic-Christian development is...not a “path of the head”—of intellectual development—(as is practiced in Rosicrucian-Christian development), von Halle’s connection with anthroposophy is clearly an attempt to cognitively understand and explain her own mystical experiences.¹⁵

Another argument against her claims is informed by the view that they must be false because they contradict Steiner’s reports. For instance, the author of a review of *Time-Journeys: A Counter-Image to Anthroposophical Spiritual Research*, Sergei O. Prokofieff’s most pointed attack on von Halle, writes that the “‘revelations’ of Judith von Halle contain, without question, certain errors and thereby lose, altogether, their credibility. Only naïve or dazzled and deluded people can take her writings seriously.”¹⁶ A more subdued formulation of this view was put forth by former member of the executive council of the Anthroposophical Society, Virginia Sease, when she wrote that von Halle’s “images often make a strange impression on people familiar with Rudolf Steiner’s Christology.”¹⁷

Another category of critical views hints at the existence of conspiratorial thinking among members of the organization Steiner founded. For instance, MacFarlane tells his readers that: “Some overly-suspicious anthroposophists regard von Halle as a Catholic

15. <https://www.heartofshambhala.com/?cat=2>

16. https://lochmann-verlag.com/von_halle%27s_time_travel_no.94.pdf. The review is posted anonymously and does not reveal the identity of the author.

17. https://www.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/AWW/aw_e/AWE2014_01-02.pdf

'Trojan Horse';...a covert means of introducing Catholic practices...into the anthroposophical movement."¹⁸ An additional line of conspiratorial reasoning positions her as being financially backed by wealthy Anthroposophical institutions (Gyr 2012: 10).

Voices that question the legitimacy of von Halle's claims are in turn met by counterattacks launched from various Anthroposophical outposts. As previously mentioned, stigmata and inedia are in the texts we have examined regarded as being entirely possible, but her defenders reject the way in which these phenomena are used by her critics as evidence of her not being a "proper" Anthroposophist. Instead, they point out that Steiner himself had much to say on the subject of stigmata and therefore the appearance of these wounds cannot be wholly dismissed as an abomination. Attacks resting on the premise that von Halle's reports contradict Steiner's teachings are met by references to instances of Steiner having contradicted himself. For example, we can find a general way of addressing this matter in text written by Alan Mullen published in the *Portland Anthroposophical Branch Newsletter*: "...Steiner also often seemed to contradict himself in perplexing ways. He often refers to these paradoxes as resulting from differing points of view used to describe a spiritual fact, and from the complexity of the spiritual worlds."¹⁹

An examination of these occasionally incensed and polemical responses reveals that the matter of precisely *what* has been said about von Halle is less of a concern than *how* it was said and *by whom*. For instance, one contentious issue has to do with actions believed to have been taken against her by people in positions of authority within the Anthroposophical Society. Here Prokofieff can also serve as an example. After he passed away in 2014, a number of eulogies appeared in which he was lauded by former colleagues for his efforts to protect Anthroposophy. His behavior, however, has not universally been seen as befitting an elected representative of the General Anthroposophical Society. In an open letter written by a number of prominent German Anthroposophists, we find one expression of this point of view: "If your statements...are not true and if they are not based on Spiritual Science and on the Gospels, but rather on irrational speculation, as it appears to us, then your accusations amount to spiritual defamation. We believe that this is true. Therefore...we urge you to perform some critical self-reflection."²⁰ A more direct formulation can be found on Larry Clark's blog *Wellspring* (2017): "For many years — until his death — Prokofieff was the Anthroposophical Society's Grand Inquisitor. How shameful that this was ever allowed!...The attacks on Judith von Halle

18. <https://www.heartofshambhala.com/?cat=2>

19. <http://www.portlandbranch.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/May2011PortlandBranchNewsletter.pdf>

20. Translations of this letter (in English from the original German) can be found on any number of websites, e.g. <https://sites.google.com/site/waldorfwatch/jvh>. The letter and reactions to it are discussed in *Anthroposophy Worldwide* 5 (May 2013), p. 19, available online at <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/15062968/awe2013-05>

stem from Prokofieff’s psychological problems.” We can turn again to Mullen to see another way in which this form of discontent has been expressed: “It is appalling how Judith von Halle has been attacked by some anthroposophists, without seeming to give her a fair, unbiased treatment, even to the extent...of refusing to talk with her, despite her request, before publishing the book containing the attack.”²¹

ANTICHARISMATIC POLEMICS

What can we do with all of these points of view now that we have identified and presented them? As we have noted, they all come from Anthroposophical sources. They are formulated in a polemical style containing references to Anthroposophical concepts and are thus opaque to most outside readers. For instance, a non-Anthroposophist might find references to von Halle executing “her quasi-sensory perceptions of past events with the help of the so-called phantom-body” puzzling as would also likely be the case with arguments suggesting that this proves that her views are erroneous because the risen Christ did not in fact appear in the phantom-body to his disciples but instead in his etheric body.²²

It is here that the concepts of *doxa* and *episteme*, introduced at the beginning of this article, prove useful. Authors from both camps agree that the human body consists of more than just a fleshy shell. The existence of etheric and phantom bodies, for example, is not contested; what is questioned is whether one or the other is involved in the reappearance of Christ and, it follows, whether Judith von Halle’s specific claims regarding the phantom body are plausible. Someone on the outside looking in would not necessarily share in the boundaries of this particular *doxa* and would, one might assume, question the evidence and perhaps even the very rationality of the concept of multiple bodies.

Why is the existence of etheric, astral, and phantom bodies taken for granted in the polemical texts? This is because they are all undergirded by a similar *episteme*. Despite their differences, Anthroposophists share the conviction that there is a spiritual reality and that there are ways to access it. There is also a general consensus that committing to a program of spiritual exercises that leads one through various stages on the path towards higher knowledge can take at least some people to a stage of suprasensible insight. The caveat “at least some people” here is crucial. Was Steiner unique in his accomplishments or has Judith von Halle also succeeded in gaining access to such knowledge? No one ever suggests that the stages Steiner outlined do not actually correspond to any clearly

21. <http://www.portlandbranch.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/May2011PortlandBranchNewsletter.pdf>

22. The reference here is to the same open letter translated in English referred to in note 20.

identifiable state of consciousness or that they may even be a fiction. This is because such a position falls completely outside of the *episteme*.

These taken-for-granted concepts and the conditions of knowledge are, as we have noted, presented in texts that have to some degree built-in barriers that may cause problems for outsiders. The same goes for von Halle's writings resulting from her supposed visionary states. Her discussions of such matters as the wounds Jesus bore or the nature of the Last Supper can make waves in a certain milieu because it is there, and perhaps nowhere else, that they are comprehensible to readers. Like any other text, the articles and open letters that discuss the specifics of the "Judith von Halle case" get their meaning because Anthroposophists form an interpretive community. A careful analysis of how readers within this community understand concepts such as stigmatization, visions, and a spiritual world would be needed to see how such terms are understood by readers fluent in Anthroposophy and its special vocabulary, an "Anthroposophese" of sorts, and can become bones of contention.

How does one become part of this interpretive community? In order to address this question, we must move from text-internal analysis to the anthropology of lived experience. Precisely how Anthroposophists sympathetic or antagonistic to Judith von Halle's claims come to assume these positions lies outside the scope of this exploratory article and would require in-depth interviews to determine. As a working hypothesis, Tanya Luhrmann's concept of interpretive drift could be usefully applied to this process (Luhrmann 1991: 307–323). Luhrmann did fieldwork among pagan groups and observed how newcomers, through interacting with other members, gradually came to adopt a vocabulary, i.e., a way of understanding and talking about their experiences, and through repetition began to feel more and more comfortable using it. For example, what had previously been just "a bad day" could eventually be reinterpreted in astrological terms as a symptom of a Mercury retrograde. An analogous process would account for the gradual adoption of what might be an initially baffling terminology that includes such concepts as the existence of various subtle bodies and lead to an increasing ability to discuss with other Anthroposophists the finer points of why it "makes sense" to assume that either the phantom or the etheric body was involved in certain arcane processes.

CONCLUSION

We have in this article addressed the question of how Judith von Halle attempts to construct herself as a charismatic authority and how critics have challenged her. The arguments of both camps hinge on narratives that are only meaningful within the worldview of the Anthroposophical milieu. Belonging to this particular interpretive community, a social formation whose members accept a particular *doxa*, is thus crucial both in the construction of charisma and in the sometimes bitterly polemical struggle by others to dismantle her charismatic authority. In texts written by insiders to this battle, extraordinary experiences are the main currency upon which social capital is built. The funda-

mental argument of this article, however, has been that “experience” is, for the purposes of a study of religion, better understood as a series of claims built upon premises and couched in a language that makes sense within that social formation rather than as a psychological phenomenon.

The Anthroposophical milieu, which includes the Anthroposophical Society itself, may in texts crafted by von Halle, her supporters, and her detractors come across as quite an exotic interpretive community, but when one strips away all the references to phantom bodies and grand cosmic processes that which remains ought to be familiar to anyone who has ever been involved in any kind of organization: we find questions involving institutional authority, order, and even the socially negotiated construct called “basic human decency,” which itself belongs to the realm of a group’s specific culture, and these are of course part and parcel of the everyday workings of any kind of organization, whether it be a group held together by a collection of shared beliefs, or a circle of board-game loving friends who meet on a regular basis, or a company that manufactures breakfast cereal.²³

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23. This theme is developed further in Swartz (forthcoming) and Swartz and Hammer (forthcoming).

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