

**Charisma and History:  
The Case of Münster, Westphalia  
1534-1535**

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**INTRODUCTION**

THE VIOLENT attempt by the Melchiorite Anabaptists in 1534/35 to establish the "New Jerusalem" in the city of Münster represents one of the most bizarre events of the Reformation. The whole crisis is often construed as an extreme outworking of some latent tendencies within Reformation thought. Luther's widespread influence had greatly diminished the role of the priest as a mediator between the layman and God, thereby increasing the importance of the Bible and personal conscience in directing the layman's spiritual journey. The outcome of this change was that many laymen gave birth to radical interpretations of scripture—interpretations which often carried dangerous social and political implications.<sup>1</sup> The prophetic claims of the two principal prophets at Münster, Jan Matthys and Jan Bockelszoon van Leiden, support this view. Both men drew an enormous amount of prophetic authority from scripture and wielded it with disastrous social and political consequences.

I intend to investigate the means by which Matthys and Bockelszoon established their prophetic authority among the citizens of Münster. I will focus specific attention on their leadership roles during the turbulent period of 1534 and 1535. However, the narrative given here is also an attempt to redress some of the shortcomings of previous interpretations of these two prophets. There has been a tendency among scholars to employ Max Weber's categories of "charisma" and the "routinization of charisma" in order to understand the leadership styles of Matthys and Bockelszoon. The initial leadership of Matthys—so goes the argument—reflected a dominant charismatic style, while Bockelszoon only represented the routinization or bureaucratization of this charisma, which culminated in the oppressive legalism of his messianic reign.<sup>2</sup> A closer examination of the actual events at Münster, however, reveals that such Weberian distinctions are largely unjustifiable. The classic Weberian devolution from charisma to bureaucracy does not clearly appear in the succession from Matthys to Bockelszoon. Rather, each prophet manifested extreme bureaucratic, even authoritarian, tendencies—they only perhaps worsened under Bockelszoon.<sup>3</sup>

Attempts to overlook this and retain a strict Weberian terminological framework overvalue the conceptual utility of charisma and clouds historical perception. By presenting Matthys and Bockelszoon without Weberian conceptual support, I aim to highlight the shortcomings of charisma as a conceptual category, and thus call attention to the disadvantages which such theoretical devices, when not judiciously employed, often bring to the discipline of history.

#### BACKGROUND

AS RECENT scholarship points out, identifying the origins of Anabaptism is a notoriously complicated matter. Previous disputes have centered around whether Anabaptism began in Zürich with the initiation of believers' baptism in January of 1525, or in 1521 and 1522 with Luther's confrontation of the Wittenburg radicals, whom he labeled *Schwärmer* (enthusiasts). Recently, the disputed nature of Anabaptism's origins has led scholars, instead of trying to establish a single moment of origin, simply to accept a plurality of possible origins and to engage the complexity of Anabaptism.<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, I only mention the spread of Anabaptism throughout Southern Germany and into the Netherlands, a process largely traceable to the fiery apocalyptic sermons of Melchior Hoffman, who independently initiated adult baptism in Strasbourg in 1530 and later, after much traveling and preaching, won a following in the Low Countries.<sup>5</sup> It was his strand of Anabaptist faith, characterized by eschatological fervor (once encountered by Jan Matthys and later transmitted to Jan Bockelszoon van Leiden) that laid the intellectual foundations for the events at Münster.

IN 1533, Hoffman's eschatological prophecies were perceived as a social threat by the authorities at Strasbourg (the city he originally had prophesied as the future "New Jerusalem") and he was imprisoned despite his refusal to employ violence to achieve his ends. After his imprisonment, his ideas began to assume an aggressive life of their own in the Netherlands. Soon after hearing of Hoffman's fate, the Haarlem baker Jan Matthys, in the presence of the Low Country Melchiorites, professed to be driven by the Spirit, and he told how God had revealed to him that he was Enoch, the second witness of the apocalypse (Hoffman had claimed to be the first witness, Elijah). This caused considerable confusion among the Melchiorite Anabaptists in the Low Countries who did not know how to respond to Matthys's sudden claim of prophetic authority. When Matthys learned of this confusion, according to the *Confession of Obbe Philips*, he resorted to threats and terror; Philips writes, "he carried on with much emotion and terrifying alarm, and with great and desperate curses cast all into hell and to

the devils to eternity . . . who would not recognize and accept him as the true Enoch."<sup>6</sup> Gradually, however, he won a small following of disciples, one of whom was Jan Bockelszoon van Leiden, the future king of Münster's theocracy. Matthys immediately began sending his disciples out in pairs as emissaries for Christ. Bockelszoon and a man named Gerard Boekbinder were sent to Münster.<sup>7</sup> They returned and reported to Matthys that they had found Bernard Rothmann, the leading preacher in Münster, openly teaching Anabaptist doctrines similar to their own. The conditions in Münster, Matthys reasoned, seemed to coincide with Hoffman's eschatological hopes for Strasbourg. A major revision in Melchiorite apocalyptic thought took place. The New Jerusalem, Matthys reasoned, would now be Münster. The political and social climate there seemed to confirm this.<sup>8</sup> On January 5, 1534, other emissaries from Matthys's camp entered Münster and began to initiate adult re-baptism. As they had expected, the citizens were receptive to their message.<sup>9</sup>

The initial steps toward Münster's tragic fate had been taken.

#### CHARISMA AND THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMATION

WITH THIS scant historico-intellectual backdrop bearing upon Matthys and Bockelszoon, we must now turn from our narrative in order to examine the nature of the sociological interpretations which these two prophets have received.

As mentioned before, scholars have liberally applied the Weberian categories of "charisma" and the "routinization of charisma" to both men in order to illuminate the means by which they established their leadership positions and transmitted their religious ideas to their followers.<sup>10</sup> The concept of charisma is of central importance in both Weber's philosophy of history and his sociology of dominion (*Herrschaftssoziologie*). In his monumental fragment *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, charisma appears in his tripartite division of pure types of legitimate authority: the traditional, the rational-legal, and the charismatic. Weber defined traditional authority as order resting on "an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them." Rational or legal authority, on the other hand, he defined as "a belief in the 'legality' of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands."<sup>11</sup> Unlike charismatic authority, traditional and rational forms of authority (also described as patriarchal and bureaucratic) share a significant characteristic: permanence. In this respect they are both institutions of the daily routine, providing for the recurrent and normal needs of daily life. As Weber himself put it, "The patriarch is the 'natural leader' of the daily routine. And in this respect, the bureaucratic

structure is only the counter-image of patriarchy transposed into rationality."<sup>12</sup>

Charisma, on the other hand, represents a radically different form of authority that appears in periods of social distress. Unlike traditional and rational authority, where ultimate power resides in impersonal entities (i.e. institutions, constitutions, hereditary lines), charismatic authority appears in the leadership characteristics of specific individuals, or perhaps more accurately, in the dialectical interplay between leaders and their followers. Weber writes,

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 rule over men . . . to which the governed submit because of the belief in the extraordinary quality of the specific person. . . . Charismatic rule is not managed according to general norms, either traditional or rational, and in this sense it is "irrational."<sup>13</sup>

This passage touches on several noteworthy aspects of charisma. First, the leader-follower relationship is characterized by a complete personal devotion. Second, the devotion of the followers often leads to the formation of a charismatic community (*Gemeinde*) in which the followers exist in an emotionally-charged environment in which each is committed to the leader. Third, and most importantly, there is the hint in this passage that authentic charisma acts as a revolutionary force, disrupting social norms. Elsewhere Weber writes,

charisma, in its most potent form, disrupts rational rule as well as traditional altogether and overturns all notions of sanctity . . . [it] is indeed the specifically creative revolutionary force in history. . . . The bearer of charisma enjoys loyalty and authority by virtue of a mission believed to be embodied in him: his mission has not necessarily and not always been revolutionary, but in its most charismatic forms, it has inverted all value hierarchies and overthrown custom, law, and tradition.<sup>14</sup>

The essence of genuine charisma is thus its revolutionary nature. Weber documented various historical manifestations of genuine charisma in such figures as Christ, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Napoleon, and many others whose personal appeal somehow revolutionized their respective social orders.

The concept of charisma especially invites application to religious figures. In fact, Weber derived the term from the church historian Rudolf Sohm, who in turn borrowed the idea from St. Paul's epistles to the Corinthians, where it had originally meant "gift of grace." In his *Kirchenrecht*, Sohm used the term to

explain how the early church legitimated itself as a durable institution in antiquity.<sup>15</sup> While Sohm speaks of charisma principally from a religious point of view, Weber expanded the term to apply to a multiplicity of social contexts, both religious and secular. He wanted his concept be value-neutral: to be a charismatic leader is not necessarily to be an admirable individual. Thus, one could, with good conscience, apply the term to a religious figure like Francis of Assisi as well as to a secular military leader like Napoleon without deviating from the general spirit of the conceptual framework.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Weber recognized that his three types of legitimate authority were "ideal types," that is to say, that nowhere in history did he expect to find a political or religious order established purely on one means of authority alone. In perhaps all cases, legitimate order is a conglomerate of the three types of authority complexly related to one another.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the frequent employment of charisma throughout his *oeuvre*, Weber devotes more space to its routinization than to charisma itself. Routinization refers to the means by which a charismatic movement becomes infused with everyday social institutions. It is also a process of the de-personalization and de-revolutionization of genuine charisma. Since charisma depends on a period of social distress in order to flourish, its life is necessarily short-lived, because its revolutionary drive becomes mitigated by the more resilient forces of tradition and rationality.<sup>18</sup> As Weber himself put it,

As domination congeals into a permanent structure, charisma recedes as a creative force. . . . However, charisma remains a very important element of the social structure, even though it is much transformed . . . after its routinization its very quality as an extraordinary, supernatural, and divine force makes it a suitable source of legitimate authority for the successors of the charismatic hero.<sup>19</sup>

Though charisma is superseded by stabilizing forces, it still remains within the fabric of the ascending structures of tradition and/or rationality. It serves these structures by acting as a point of reference from which they derive legitimation.

UNTIL NOW, I have been discussing charisma and its routinization in a broad and theoretical manner. Though Weber largely speaks in similar terms, he also pinpoints specific historical personalities and social situations in order to demonstrate the value of his theory, including the example of a religious prophet.<sup>20</sup> Weber believed that charismatic prophet inspires from the resources of his own personality—resources which his followers believe are somehow "in touch" with a spiritual or extra-mundane realm which confers "a unified view of

the world derived from a consciously integrated meaningful attitude toward life"<sup>21</sup> upon the person who accepts the leadership of the prophet. Such a prophet leads simply because of the compelling characteristics of his nature; he is able to "win over" his followers with the apparent realism of his world view, and compel them to act accordingly.

Of course, the charisma of the prophet is subject to routinization. This takes place, according to Weber, after the death of the prophet when he is succeeded by a "legislator"—one who continues the leadership role of the prophet but does so by institutionalizing or bureaucratizing the charismatic drive of the former leader. Incapable of generating the "crowd-response" like his charismatic forebear, the legislator appeals to rational and/or traditional means of authority to sustain the momentum among the followers which the prophet had inspired. The devolution in early Christianity from Christ to Paul is an oft-cited example of this process, though Weber notes many other examples. The procedure can take many forms, ranging from a simple codification of the accepted moral behavior set down by the prophet to the imposition of cruelty and force. Both forms may be seen as efforts to maintain a sense of control in the absence of the charismatic leader. Weber does not view this change in leadership styles as a radical dichotomy, but often as a fluid and inevitable transition. The death of the prophet leads to the rise of the legislator. The structure which the latter imposes represents a compensation for the loss of charisma in the former.<sup>22</sup>

SINCE WEBER, the concept of charisma has witnessed a bewildering variety of applications, often of a contradictory nature. Because of the perceived abuse (or perhaps, overuse) of the concept, one must wonder whether the concept remains serviceable for sociological investigation. Weber himself is at least partly to blame for this problem, for he frequently left the term vague, in spite of many attempts to clarify himself. His original opacity is compounded by the fact that such sweeping concepts as charisma do not fit harmoniously into the multiparadigmatic character of modern sociology. Scholars who attempt to appropriate Weber's vocabulary often end up obfuscating his intent while producing a revised conceptual framework of questionable value. In the final analysis, the opacity of Weber's original formulation coupled with the diverse character of contemporary sociology has produced a conceptual quagmire in which, as has been repeatedly argued, terms such as charisma have become "sponge words" easily employed for multiple and often contradictory purposes. The question no longer is, What does charisma mean? but, What does it mean for whom and when applied to which circumstances? This state of conceptual anarchy has led some scholars to argue for the elimination of its use in

sociology.<sup>23</sup>

But this is an extreme position. Weber's canonical status in modern sociology has led many scholars to endeavor to rescue charisma from the entropy which its applications have generated. A principal strategy has been to subdivide the concept into categories and then to resolve the residual ambiguities with copious qualifications. Since the literature which this enterprise has generated is too massive to take account of here, I will only touch on a few developments which charisma has undergone as it specifically relates to prophecy.

Robert Tucker's study of Lenin's leadership style (1968) argues that "prophetic charisma" should be understood as the centerpiece of Weber's entire work on charisma. Tucker makes a sharp distinction between prophetic charisma and routinized charisma, and argues that the latter should be given another name, since forces of routinization are completely contradictory to charisma as he defines it. In a 1977 study, Margrit Eichler calls for a limited understanding of charisma in which she concludes that the idea of charisma is not useful for the study of social movements, but rather should be confined only to understanding the legitimacy of leadership. Guenther Roth (1975), on the other hand, argues for an expansion of the conceptual boundaries of charisma to encompass the genesis and development of a wide range of social movements. He generally speaks of groups rather than individuals as charismatic, and he calls the members of these "inspired" groups "ideological virtuosi" who espouse single minded convictions about certain absolute values.<sup>24</sup>

Even from this brief glance at attempts to clarify or improve upon Weber's idea of charisma, we can see that the concept is a bit too pliable to be practical: attempts at clarification only result in further obfuscation. I contend that charisma from a macrosociological standpoint has entered a state of severe questionability. The promise of conceptual clarity which the idea seems to offer has been lost in the manifold attempts to effect this clarity.

This is true in both a macrosociological and microsociological context: the problematic nature of charisma seen in a purely theoretical context also appears when it is applied to specific historical settings. The Weberian treatments of leadership during the Münsterite kingdom is an apt example. The social turbulence at Münster coupled with the presence of self-proclaimed prophets makes for an appropriate setting to use Weberian concepts. However, as mentioned above, the Weberian reading applies only by excessively tampering with historical detail.

An example of such an endeavor is Otthein Rammstedt's 1966 *Sekte und soziale Bewegung: Soziologische Analyse der Täufer in Münster (1534/1535)*. Rammstedt depicts Jan Matthys as a radical charismatic leader (*charismatischen*

*Herrscher*). The reasons for this, according to Rammstedt, are based on the fact that Matthys claimed to be directly led by God in his actions. He possessed the gift of exorcism and categorized people simply as saintly or ungodly. His actions were sanctioned by his *pneuma* and could not be controlled, criticized, or subjected to set regulations or traditions (*Ordnungen oder Traditionen*), but were dependent solely on his spontaneous revelations. Finally, the nature of his chiliastic expectations made it possible for his followers to identify with him.<sup>25</sup>

The death of Matthys only months after the "New Jerusalem" had gotten under way led to the leadership of Jan Bockelszoon van Leiden who, according to the Weberian scheme, fits the role of a "legislator." Rammstedt claims that Bockelszoon lacked charismatic authority and could only establish his legitimacy by authoritarian control. Unlike Matthys, whose authority radiated from charismatic appeal, Bockelszoon was forced to depend on two of Münster's leading officials, Rothmann and Knipperdolling, to help him bolster his position of leadership. Though he did prophesy, his prophecies were unsatisfactory to the Münster congregations because they lacked the spontaneous and irrational elements characteristic of Matthys's visions. Moreover, the spontaneity of Matthys's leadership style was replaced by organization, as seen in Bockelszoon's decision to end Matthys's former spontaneous group meetings and to institute a system of organized meetings.<sup>26</sup>

Rammstedt's chief argument for the institutionalization hypothesis is based on the cruelty and terror of Bockelszoon's reign. Violence increased when he came to power; in one case he summarily executed someone, without definite cause, simply to inspire dread in the people. In sum, to quote Rammstedt,

Formerly spontaneous, extraordinary events became ordinary phenomena, became ritualized, and all that remained was fear for one's own life. To preserve their power positions and to prevent the disintegration of the congregation, the ruling minority regulated the life of the Anabaptists completely.<sup>27</sup>

Rammstedt's argument has been criticized by Margrit Eichler, who argues that the succession of the Münsterite prophets may be apprehended in a Weberian framework only if that framework is modified. She argues that in certain contexts, a charismatic leader may be succeeded by another charismatic leader, as in the case of Matthys and Bockelszoon. She divides charismatic leaders into two types: prophets and saviors, and argues that saviors (Bockelszoon) often follow prophets (Matthys). The archetypal example she gives of this process is found in the succession from John the Baptist to Christ, where the charisma originating in the former culminates in the latter. In her scheme, the classical

Weberian notion of the routinization of charisma does not appear and Matthys and Bockelszoon are *both* depicted as charismatic.<sup>28</sup> Rammstedt and Eichler's approaches present several problems. Granted, Rammstedt's "charisma-legislator" devolution in some respects is genuinely observable, and a certain conceptual insight may be gleaned from Eichler's modified approach. However, the paradigmatic nature of both arguments yields insights at the expense of significant historical detail. To remedy this problem, in the narrative of Matthys and Bockelszoon presented below, I have consciously abandoned Weberian constructs in order to suggest that both prophets operated simply by employing manipulation and brute force to accomplish their goals. This process originated with Matthys, who captured and maintained the devotion of his followers not by charismatic personal authority, but by the fear and dread which he inspired. Bockelszoon's rule by intimidation and his Old Testament monarchy therefore represents only the natural outworking of authoritarian tendencies already embodied in Matthys. Again, it is my contention that, though the Weberian approach *does* offer a hermeneutic for understanding this historical situation, it is not without its limitations. The paradox and price of insight is often an accompanying blindness.

#### MÜNSTER UNDER MATTHYS AND BOCKELSZOON

DURING February 1534, the power of the Anabaptists in Münster increased dramatically. On February 8, Jan Bockelszoon van Leiden and the guild leader Bernard Knipperdolling, whom Bockelszoon had befriended, ran wildly through the streets, screaming that everyone must repent of their sins.<sup>29</sup> This ignited much emotional turbulence, especially among the women Anabaptists, who, as former nuns, had recently left the convents and fallen under the influence of Rothmann's preaching. Some began to see apocalyptic visions in the streets of such intensity that they would foam at the mouth and throw themselves upon the ground. In such a charged atmosphere, the Anabaptists made their first armed rising and took the Town Hall and market place. The Lutheran majority in the town offered little resistance, and soon the town council recognized the Anabaptists as legal citizens of Münster. Thereafter, many Lutherans fled the city and the Anabaptists grew in number and power. Messengers and manifestos were sent out urging Anabaptists in other towns to come with their families to Münster. The rest of the earth, it was announced, was to be destroyed, but Münster would be spared to become the New Jerusalem.<sup>30</sup>

Into this volatile situation Jan Matthys entered: a tall, gaunt figure with a long black beard.<sup>31</sup> His imposing, physical presence allowed him to gain power

quickly, but the attempt to realize the New Jerusalem was not without authoritarian measures. Unlike Hoffman, he *did not* hesitate to employ violence to accomplish his purposes. On February 25, 1534, he preached a sermon at the house of an Anabaptist near a fish market. Afterwards, he proclaimed to the crowd that God's grace had allowed the city to have a favorable beginning, but in order to build the republic of Christ on earth, it was necessary to purify the city of all uncleanness (*Unsauberkeit*), whether the impure be papists, Lutherans, or others who dissented from the prevailing Anabaptist teachings. To achieve this goal, Matthys advocated the execution of all remaining Lutherans and Roman Catholics.<sup>32</sup> However, Knipperdolling, one of the town leaders, disagreed with Matthys, saying that the bloodshed would cause the outside world to be enraged against Münster. A compromise was reached and they decided to expel all the "godless" (*Gottlosen*) from the city and make those who chose to stay behind receive compulsory baptism.

This task of expulsion and compulsion took place several days later. On the morning of February 27, armed men, urged on by Matthys, ran through the streets yelling: "Get out you godless ones, and never come back you enemies of the Father." In bitter cold, in the midst of snow, rain and wind, droves of the "godless" (including the old and invalids, small children, and pregnant women) were chased from the town by Anabaptists who beat and laughed at them. They were forced to leave their belongings behind, their food was confiscated, and they had no choice but to beg in the countryside for food and lodging. As for those who decided to remain in town, they received compulsory re-baptism in the marketplace. The entire process lasted three days.<sup>33</sup>

By eliminating the Lutherans and Catholics from the city, Matthys and his cohorts not only heightened the sense of chiliastic expectation but they also came to realize that the outside world was growing intolerant of the developments within Münster, and that they were soon to be besieged. The Catholic Bishop of the city, Franz van Waldeck, had been at work some time in recruiting mercenaries to confront the Anabaptist threat. The expulsion of the Lutherans and Catholics prompted him to accelerate his efforts.<sup>34</sup> Soon thereafter, earthworks were erected around the town and the siege began. Many Anabaptists were surprised and confused to find themselves at war, but under the leadership of Knipperdolling they soon recovered confidence and began responding to the threat. Men, women, and children were assigned various duties. Small skirmishes took place outside the walls.<sup>35</sup>

The war atmosphere led to a veritable social revolution. Matthys seized the opportunity to consolidate his power over the property and money of the townspeople. He preached that it was the Father's will that all the goods of the

recent exiles be confiscated. Moreover, all the account books and contracts found in their homes were burned. Their clothing, beds, furniture, tables, weapons, and food were placed in a central area<sup>36</sup> and, after praying for three days, Matthys announced that God had given him a sign to appoint seven deacons to distribute the goods to the people.<sup>37</sup>

This trend toward common ownership culminated in an institutionalized communism. Under the leadership of Matthys, the town preachers and council members decided that *all* goods should be shared in common. Matthys employed Rothmann to promulgate this new vision of society in his sermons. "Dear brothers and sisters," Rothmann proclaimed, "afterwards we shall be one people. Brothers and sisters, indeed it is completely God's will that we bring our money, silver, and gold together. One person should have just as much as another."<sup>38</sup> At first this order was met with considerable opposition. The people who had recently received compulsory baptism were assembled and told that unless they relinquished their money they would perish. They were then locked inside a church in a state of mortal fear for several hours. At length Matthys entered the church with a group of armed men. His victims implored him to intercede to God for them, which he did, saying that if they complied, God would allow them back in the community. Ultimately, they complied.<sup>39</sup>

Yet not everyone acceded to Matthys's authority: some defied him unto death. A blacksmith, for instance, unconvinced by Matthys's prophecies, accused him of being possessed by the devil. Matthys had him arrested and thrown in the tower.<sup>40</sup> Later he was brought to the market place where many of the citizens were also summoned. Matthys gave a speech in which he declared that God was outraged at this man's evil actions because he had defiled an otherwise pure town. He was sentenced to death, but before execution, was stabbed repeatedly with a halberd and thrown back into the tower. Later he was placed against the town wall and Matthys himself shot him in the stomach, causing his eventual death.<sup>41</sup> The gathered crowd was told to profit from the example of the blacksmith and they dutifully sang a hymn before dispersing.<sup>42</sup>

A final instance of the authoritarian control exercised by Matthys may be seen in his decision to regulate information. On March 15, 1534, Matthys proclaimed that all books except the Old and New Testaments (which were deemed solely sufficient for conducting a holy life) were to be brought to the cathedral-square where they were burned to ashes.<sup>43</sup> This anti-intellectualist act represents a complete break with the past, and it allowed Matthys to gain a complete monopoly in the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>44</sup>

On Easter Sunday of 1534, Matthys received what he believed to be a divine command to make a sortie against the besiegers of the city with only a few men

to help him. The result was a miserable failure. He was pierced with a pike, beheaded, and his body hacked to pieces. His head was later raised on a pole outside the city.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the authoritarian reign of Jan Matthys came to an end. Summing up the character of this prophet years later, Obbe Philips wrote:

He was so fierce and bloodthirsty that he brought various people to their deaths; yea he was so violent that even his enemies for their part were terrified of him, and finally in a tumult they became too powerful for him, they were so incensed that they did not just kill him . . . but hacked and chopped him into little pieces.<sup>46</sup>

The death of Matthys allowed for his disciple Jan Bockelszoon van Leiden to assume leadership. Under Bockelszoon, the previously-established authoritarian measures of Matthys continued, reaching a crescendo in his decision to anoint himself king. The kingdom which he set up is legendary in German history, so here I will touch upon only its most salient features.

Bockelszoon began his messianic reign by running naked through the streets of Münster in a wild religious frenzy; he then fell into a silent ecstasy for three days. When his power of speech returned, he announced that God had told him to restructure the town government immediately, which he did by appointing twelve men whom he called the Elders or the Judges of the Tribes of Israel (*Ältesten der Stämme Israels*) who were placed in charge of all the public, private, spiritual, and worldly affairs of the citizens of Münster—the “Israelites.”<sup>47</sup> The twelve published a new code of moral law<sup>48</sup> which provided for strict military organization and a tighter communism of goods. Some workers, for instance, previously employed for money, were forced to continue in their trades without pay, simply as servants of the community.<sup>49</sup> The code also had a very rigid stance on sins committed after (re-)baptism, and all citizens were subjected to demanding laws:

If we are God's sons and have been baptized in Christ then all evil must disappear from among us. . . . Every one is under the authorities, who have power over all. Because there is no authority outside of God. . . . If you do evil, fear the authorities. They wield the sword not in vain; they are God's servants, the avengers to punish the evildoer.<sup>50</sup>

Sins punishable by death included blasphemy, seditious language, scolding one's parents, adultery, lewd conduct, backbiting, spreading scandal, and even complaining!<sup>51</sup>

Bockleszoon's most controversial innovation was polygamy. It was introduced at least partly to emulate the Old Testament patriarchs<sup>52</sup> and also (perhaps) to compensate for the rapid attrition of male citizens due to their military efforts.<sup>53</sup> Bockleszoon established polygamy on his own authority by announcing that all who resisted it would be considered reprobates and therefore in danger of execution. Persons of marriageable age were ordered to marry; unmarried women had to accept the first man to ask them. This often led to disorder in the competition to see who could acquire the most wives, and thus this latter regulation was ultimately rescinded.<sup>54</sup> Bockleszoon himself, beside remarrying Matthys's widow Divara, ultimately accumulated 15 wives.<sup>55</sup> Bernard Rothmann received second place with nine.<sup>56</sup>

It was not as an ordinary king that Bockleszoon established himself, but as the Messiah of the Last Days. One day a goldsmith declared that the Heavenly Father had revealed to him that Bockleszoon was to be king of the whole world, holding dominion over all kings, princes, and great ones of the earth. He was to inherit the scepter and throne of his forefather David and was to keep them until God should reclaim the kingdom from him. Bockleszoon accepted this man's prophecy and soon enlisted the town preachers to deliver one sermon after another, explaining that the Messiah foretold by the prophets in the Old Testament was indeed none other than Jan van Leiden Bockleszoon.<sup>57</sup> Bockleszoon himself called a town meeting in which he gave a speech to proclaim his new identity, "Now God has chosen me to be king over the entire world. What I do, I must do, because God has ordained me. Dear brothers and sisters, let us now give thanks to God."<sup>58</sup> After the sermon, Bockleszoon led the crowd in singing a psalm, and then everyone returned to their homes.<sup>59</sup>

Bockleszoon did everything possible to represent tangibly the importance of his new position. While the siege continued outside the city, the streets and the gates within were given new names. Sundays and feast days were abolished and the days of the week were renamed on an alphabetical system. Even the names of infants were decided upon by the king according to a special system. Gold and silver coins were minted with inscriptions that emphasized Bockleszoon's unique role: "One King Over All."<sup>60</sup> A special emblem was devised to symbolize Bockleszoon's absolute claim to spiritual and temporal dominion: a globe, representing the world, pierced by two swords and surmounted by a cross inscribed with the words: "One king of righteousness over all." The king himself wore this emblem modeled in gold as a necklace, his attendants wore it as a badge on their sleeves, and it was accepted in Münster as the official emblem of the state.<sup>61</sup>

Bockleszoon set up a throne in the marketplace. Draped with cloth and gold,

it towered above the surrounding benches which were allotted to other dignitaries and preachers. Often the king would come there to sit in judgment or to oversee the proclamation of new regulations. Heralded by fanfare, he would arrive on horseback wearing a crown and carrying a scepter. In front of him marched officers of the court, behind him came Knipperdolling, who was now chief minister; Rothmann, who was now the royal orator; and a long line of lesser servants. On either side of his throne stood a page, one holding a copy of the Old Testament, the other a sword.<sup>62</sup> Both symbolized the absolute control which Bockelszoon exercised over the citizens.

Though the king indulged in a life of excess, he subjected his citizens to austerity. Harsh regulations of dress went into effect; for God, Bockelszoon had said, abhorred all superfluity in clothing. Every house was searched and anything that was considered surplus was confiscated. To justify the disparity between his lifestyle and that of the people, he explained that luxury was permitted him because he was completely dead to the world and the flesh.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, though Bockelszoon maintained his grip on power through prophetic outbursts and appeals to Scripture, his primary means of controlling the populace was terror and brute force. Two instances suffice to demonstrate this. The first one came in the wake of Bockelszoon's decree of polygamy when a group of citizens, led by Henry Mollenhecke, attempted to stage a coup and depose him. Their efforts failed, however, and Mollenhecke, with forty-eight of his followers, was brutally tortured and ultimately beheaded in a macabre process that took four days. Afterwards, two mass graves were dug in the marketplace where all the dead bodies were placed—a solemn reminder of Bockelszoon's authority.<sup>64</sup> Another example of Bockelszoon's tactics of intimidation was his decision to execute several women for their sins. One was beheaded simply for denying her husband his marital rights, another for bigamy (the practice of polygamy was solely a male prerogative), and a third for insulting one of Bockelszoon's preachers.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the king would tolerate no transgressions. It was thus announced that all sinners in the future would be immediately brought before the king and sentenced to death. They would be extirpated from the Chosen People, their very memory would be blotted out, and they would find no mercy beyond the grave.<sup>66</sup>

WHILE Bockelszoon was busy with his power and prestige within the city, outside the city walls, the siege of Münster, spearheaded by Bishop Franz von Waldeck, continued. By careful diplomatic action, the Bishop had managed to involve both Catholic and Protestant rulers, as well as imperial representatives, in support of his cause. Even Philip of Hesse, one of the staunchest supporters

of Protestantism, was a faithful supporter. Almost constantly out of funds, the Bishop wrote letters pleading for help to a host of potential patrons: King Ferdinand, elector of Mainz, Trier, Saxony, and Brandenburg; the dukes of Braunschweig, Lüneburg, and Saxony; and the bishop of Liège. Although most declined, the bishop raised enough support to maintain the mercenary force which he had gathered and to continue the siege and the occasional skirmishes against the city. Despite political and financial support, the actual military enterprise proved largely unsuccessful throughout 1534 and for the first few months of 1535. Endeavors to blockade the city, to drain the moats, and even to take direct military action ultimately failed.

However, by April of 1535, signs of success began to appear. The elderly, women, and children began trickling out of the city due to food shortages. In order to prevent escape, four of the escapees were beheaded on April 26 by the besieging forces and their heads placed at the gate as an example of what would happen to others who tried to leave. Overall, between April 22 and June 15 at least fifteen hundred citizens attempted to escape the misery of the city. All but a few were immediately killed by the Bishop's forces.

On May 25, Heinrich Gresbeck abandoned his post at one of the gates of Münster and surrendered. His life was spared because he volunteered information which led to the final defeat of the Anabaptists. On June 24, he and Hans Eck, who had escaped with him, led the bishop's army into the city. The final showdown had begun. In accordance with the bishop's policies of war, there was to be no mercy for the conquered except for pregnant women and priests. The gaunt, surviving Anabaptist army suddenly faced three thousand soldiers who had been waiting sixteen months for this occasion. The killing lasted for two days. According to one report 450 of the armed Anabaptists were killed during the fighting and an additional 200 afterwards when the cellars and attics were searched. On June 27 Count Wirich von Dhaun, commander in chief of the Bishop's forces, gave orders to stop the killing. At that time, the surviving men and women were gathered at the cathedral square where they were tried, condemned, and executed. The bodies of those killed and starved to death were buried in the cathedral square by peasants recruited from the surrounding countryside. The stench was unbearable.<sup>67</sup>

Bishop Franz came personally to the city to assess the situation and to receive his share of the booty. He claimed half of the total goods, which included all the property of the Anabaptists, while the mercenaries received the movable goods as payment for their services. The bishop also took charge of the leaders of the Anabaptists (their lives had been spared for interrogation purposes). The preacher Bernhard Rothmann probably perished somewhere in the city, but no

definite information about his fate is known. Bockelszoon and Knipperdolling, on the other hand, as well as a prominent figure named Krechting, were kept alive. These three men were subject to intensive interrogation carried out in several different locations in an effort to understand the origins and nature of their theological positions. Philip of Hesse was especially interested in these interviews in the hope of better understanding the international threat of the Anabaptist faith. Ultimately, after much interrogation, Jan Bockelszoon van Leiden recanted, stating that the kingdom of Münster was a vain and dead structure and that he had become king only because of a prophecy he had heard by a man named Dusentschuer. Furthermore, he admitted that every one must obey the government for all governments are ordained by God.

On the 20th of January 1536, Bockelszoon, Knipperdolling, and Krechting were transferred to Münster and interrogated for the final time. Once again, the examiners were particularly interested in finding out about underground international Anabaptist connections, but the answers they received yielded little valuable information. Predictably, each one tried to minimize his responsibility. The day before the executions, Bockelszoon, in the spirit of his previous recantation, was said to have admitted that he deserved to die ten times.

The next day they were brought to an elevated stage for the execution. Hot glowing coals and pincers were present for purposes of torture. The death penalty was verbally proclaimed against all three since they had sinned against "God and the government." Bockelszoon fell to his knees and prayed. The victims were strapped against wooden posts and iron rings were placed around their necks. Bockelszoon was the first to be tortured. When Knipperdolling witnessed how the hot pincers were used to burn Bockelszoon's body, he attempted to end his life by hanging his head over the iron ring around his neck. The executioner tied his head against the post with a rope through the mouth in order to prevent his attempts. After the final act of torture, which consisted of pulling their tongues with the pincers, they were put to death by piercing their hearts with a glowing hot dagger. Their bodies were then put into large iron cages and hung on the tower of a nearby church, and the pincers were attached to a column of the city hall. This was done so that "all insurrectionists who refuse to obey proper authorities would see in this an example and warning."<sup>68</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

UNDERSTANDABLY, the nature of this paper—its sharp division into theoretical and historical sections—presents problems as one approaches a conclusion. My intent could be seen as an effort to set up the theoretical only to have it "knocked

down" by the historical, i.e. to show the triumph of narrative historical knowledge over conceptual handiwork. Yet this is only partially true, for I grant the heuristic value of concepts in making history apprehensible. My principal aim, rather, has been to redress an imbalance, by arguing that conceptual schemata, when not carefully monitored, often end up displacing history instead of informing it. Weber construed sociology as the handmaiden to history. Unfortunately, the reverse has often become the case. This is especially true with the concept of charisma.

Scholars in the past have often dealt with the events at Münster as if the entire crisis was simply one hermetic laboratory for sociological experimentation. If one avoids this error, however, and is willing to think of the chain of ideas leading up to Münster, i.e. the thought of Melchior Hoffman, the Weberian mold is perhaps illuminating. For it is Hoffman, and not Matthys, who is the prophet that most clearly manifests Weberian charismatic characteristics. The masses attracted to Hoffman's prophecies in the Low Countries and his refusal to use violence to effect his message attest to the fact that he established his authority simply by personal appeal and the content of his message. Matthys, on the other hand, represents a devolution into authoritarian measures. His use of violence, his tactics of information control, and the opposition which he received from the citizens in Münster testify to his inability to maintain a sense of authority on the basis of charisma alone. He simply drew from the charisma generated by Hoffman and sanctioned it in himself by force. Finally, if one indulges my revision, Bockelszoon represents only the extreme propulsion of authoritarian tendencies already originating with Matthys.

Yet my revisionist reading should seem self-evidently problematic, for it is the very flexibility of charisma which has made it such a troublesome concept. My revised appropriation of charisma, like similar enterprises, represents only a recasting of historical detail to endorse a shaky conceptual framework. Thus my quick dismissal of this account is an admission of the impracticality of charisma altogether. Lumping figures like Christ, Napoleon, Hoffman, Matthys, and Bockelszoon under the same terminological umbrella indeed presents many problems. As much of this paper demonstrates, the employment of such terms easily sinks into mere semantic wrangling. Historical detail becomes a pawn in an increasingly complex theoretical language game that distances itself from historical knowledge as it increases the sophistication of the conceptual tools which are supposed to promote this knowledge. In the final analysis, instead of cajoling history to serve theory, we should perhaps tame our theory in order that it may better serve history.

## ENDNOTES

1. Of course all previous structures of authority did not disappear with the reception of Luther's message. There were, for example, teachers, pastors, and parents which helped oversee the individual's spiritual development. Nevertheless, the fact that the individual received greater autonomy in conducting his own spiritual affairs is inescapable. See R. W. Scribner, "Anticlericalism and the Reformation in Germany" in *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987), 243-256.
2. The specific problem I aim to address has been raised clearly in Margrit Eichler's article "Charismatic Prophets and Charismatic Saviors" in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 55 (1981) 45-61. Eichler here summarizes in detail a work done by Otthein Rammstedt entitled *Sekte und Soziale Bewegung: Soziologische Analyse der Täufer in Münster* (1966). Eichler attempts to overturn Rammstedt's "orthodox" Weberian reading of the prophets at Münster by claiming that both Matthys and Bockleszoon are classifiable as "charismatic" prophets, and that no devolution from "charisma" to "bureaucracy" ever took place in the succession from one prophet to another. A perhaps more accurate reading, however, is to see them both as "bureaucratic" prophets, understanding this term to apply to someone who through laws and force—instead of through charismatic personal appeal—controls and manipulates those under him. Eichler is illuminating in that she has detected major flaws within the Weberian approach to the Münsterite prophets; however, by persisting to apply the term "charisma" to both prophets she has failed to deal with other aspects of their leadership styles.
3. Arguably, a charismatic dimension is evident in their behavior. But by stressing their "bureaucratic" elements, I attempt to show how such terminology can be easily adjusted to support a completely contradictory thesis, thus pointing out the fragility of Weberian interpretations in light of the complexity of historical reality.
4. James M. Stayer, Wertner O. Packull, Klaus Depperman, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (1975) 111. Also, for well-established and detailed treatments of Anabaptism, see Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism, a Social History, 1525-1618: Switzerland, Austria, Moravia, South and Central Germany* (Ithaca, 1972); James Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, Kans., 1972); George Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1962).
5. *Ibid.*, 85.
6. Philips, *Confession*, 214.
7. *Ibid.*, 215.
8. George Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 368.
9. Krahn., 124.
10. Kojiro Miyahara, "Charisma: From Weber to Contemporary Sociology," *Sociology Inquiry*, 53 (1983) 68.
11. Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, edited by S.N. Eisenstadt

(Chicago, 1968), 48.

12. Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1946), 245.

13. *Ibid.*, 295-296.

14. From Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, translated by G. Roth and C. Wittich (Berkeley, Calif., 1968), quoted in Miyahara, "Charisma," 371.

15. Weber, *Charisma and Institution Building*, 47.

16. Robert C. Tucker, "The Theory of Charismatic Leadership" in Dankwart Rustow, *Philosophers and Kings: Studies in Leadership* (New York, 1970), 73.

17. Ronald M. Glassman and William H. Swatos Jr., eds. *Charisma, History, and Social Structure* (New York, 1986), 3.

18. Miyahara, "Charisma," 371-372.

19. *Ibid.*, 372.

20. Weber, *Charisma and Institution Building*, 253-354.

21. *Ibid.*, 266.

22. *Ibid.*, 256.

23. Miyahara, "Charisma," 373.

24. See Robert C. Tucker, "The Theory of Charismatic Leadership" in Dankwart Rustow, *Philosophers and Kings: Studies in Leadership* (New York, 1970), 69-94; Margrit Eichler, "Leadership in Social Movements" in *Sociological Inquiry* 47 (1977) 99-107; Guenther Roth, "Socio-historical Model and Developmental Theory: Charismatic Community, Charisma of Reason and the Counterculture" in *American Sociological Review* 40 (1975) 148-157. For succinct summaries of these arguments, see Miyahara, "Charisma," 374-376.

25. Otthein Rammstedt, *Sekte und soziale Bewegung: Soziologische Analyse der Täufer in Münster (1534/1535)* (Köln und Opladen, 1966), 62-63.

26. *Ibid.*, 74-83.

27. *Ibid.*, 78. *Ehemals spontane, außeralltägliche, Ereignisse wurden zu Alltagserscheinungen, wurden zeremonialisiert, und was blieb, war die Angst um die eigene Existenz. Um die Machtpositionen zu wahren und einen Zerfall der Gemeinde zu verhindern, reglementierte die führende Minorität das Leben der Täufer vollkommen.*

28. See Margrit Eichler, "Charismatic Prophets and Charismatic Saviors" in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 55 (1968).

29. Richard van Dülmen, ed., *Das Täuferreich zu Münster 1534-1535—Dokumente* (München, 1974), 52. Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* and George Williams *The Radical Reformation* have proved to be the most helpful resources in guiding me through the Dülmen's source book on Münster. Though both of these works are perhaps a bit dated, they nevertheless are replete with organized information necessary for an understanding of Matthys and Bockelszoon.

30. Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 283-284.
31. Dülmen, *Das Täuferreich zu Münster*, 109.
32. Ibid., 71.
33. Ibid., 71-72.
34. Ibid., 90.
35. Ibid., 92-93.
36. Ibid., 96.
37. Ibid., 98.
38. Ibid., 97. *Liebe Brüder und Schwestern, nachdem wir wie einerlei Leute sind, Brüder und Schwestern, so ist es ganz Gottes Wille, daß wir unser Geld, Silber, und Gold zusammen bringen. Der ein soll soviel wie der andere haben.*
39. Ibid., 98.
40. Ibid., 94.
41. Ibid., 95.
42. Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 287.
43. Dülmen, *Das Täuferreich zu Münster*, 100.
44. Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 290.
45. Dülmen, *Das Täuferreich zu Münster*, 108-109.
46. Philips, 221-222.
47. Dülmen, *Das Täuferreich zu Münster*, 112-114.
48. Ibid., 116.
49. Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 371.
50. Dülmen, *Das Täuferreich zu Münster*, 115. *Wenn wir aber Söhne Gottes geworden und auf Christus getauft sind, muß aller Überrest des Bösen aus unserer Mitte ausgerottet werden . . . Jederman sei untertan der Obrigkeit, die Gewalt über ihn hat. Denn es ist keine Obrigkeit außer Gott . . . Tust du aber Böses, so fürchte dich! Denn sie führt das Schwert nicht umsonst; denn sie Gottes Dienerin, eine Rächerin zur Strafe über den, der Böses tut.*
51. Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 371.
52. Dülmen, *Das Täuferreich zu Münster*, 140.
53. Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 372. Over two-thirds of the population of Münster throughout the siege were women. For a better understanding of the polygamy issue and the role of women in general, see R. Po-chia Hsia, "Münster and the Anabaptists" in *The German People and the Reformation*, ed. R. Po-chia Hsia (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51-69. Hsia's understanding of the plight of women seems consonant with my thesis of authoritarianism. In summing up his position, he writes, "the Reformation

in Münster represents an attempt to subjugate women by restricting their social and religious roles, by transforming them, ultimately, into obedient (and protected) wives and daughters of a polygamous, patriarchal, and sacred tribe.”

54. Ibid., 372-373.

55. Dülmen, *Das Täuferreich zu Münster*, 141.

56. Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 373.

57. Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 296.

58. Dülmen, *Das Täuferreich zu Münster*, 147. *Nun hat Gott mich zum König sein soll gewählt über die ganze Welt . . . Was ich tue, das muß ich tue, wenn mich Gott dazu auserkoren hat. Liebe Brüder und Schwestern, des laßt uns Gott danken.*

59. Ibid., 142.

60. Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 296.

61. Ibid., 297.

62. Ibid., 297-298.

63. Ibid., 298.

64. Dülmen, *Das Täuferreich zu Münster*, 143.

65. Ibid., 162.

66. Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 300-301.

67. Krahn, 158-159.

68. Ibid., 161-164.