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Title

From 'Fetish' to 'Aura': The Charisma of Objects?

Abstract

In the history of religions, material artifacts have often played an important role as mediations of the 'sacred.' They were and are worshipped, venerated, and sometimes destroyed for their assumed supernatural powers. The article reviews theoretical concepts that engage with the charismatic capacities of objects ('fetish,' 'cultic image,' and 'aura') and discusses literature about 'charismatic objects.' It deals with the question what kind of charisma objects may have and suggests that the term 'charisma,' when defined in a specific way, is a useful concept to describe and compare specific material objects from different religious traditions. These conceptual and methodological considerations are illustrated by a brief discussion of Christian relic veneration.

1. Introduction[1]

On April 15, 2019, the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris catches fire and burns for hours. Around the world, people express their worries and empathy; within days, they donate more than 900 million Euros to the reconstruction of the church. While many observers are upset about the severe damage of unique architectural heritage, clergy and Christian believers are also worried about the relics kept in the cathedral treasury. While the church burns, the

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[1] I would like to thank the editors of this special issue and two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

chaplain of the fire department, fellow firemen, policemen, and other helpers retrieve the relics, most prominently the crown of thorns, the tunic of Saint Louis, parts of Jesus' cross, and one of the nails allegedly used in his crucifixion.[2] According to legend, some of these relics were found by or on behalf of Saint Helena, mother of the first Christian emperor of the Roman empire, Constantine, and transferred to France in the thirteenth century where famous Sainte-Chapelle was built, basically as a vault for relics.[3]

In short: People risk their lives to save the bones and other supposed remains of persons who have been dead for centuries. Why do they do this? The intuitive answer, and one that will probably suffice to most observers, particularly if they adhere to the Christian faith and teaching: Because these objects are believed to be sacred. They are considered as special and irreplaceable, and, therefore, may not be harmed. Church authorities, therefore, will ask that they be saved by all means. In other words: These objects become socially effective. They have an agency which becomes visible in the actions undertaken to save them but also in centuries of preservation and veneration.

Of course, this case is not singular: Throughout the centuries, Christian believers have searched, gathered, and protected relics. I will return to the example of relics and how they could analytically be understood as 'charismatic objects' later in this article.

Usually, charisma is a quality ascribed to persons, be they of religious, political, or other relevance. This special issue seeks to discuss how the sociological concept of 'charisma' can be applied to texts, ideas, and material objects too. In this article, I consider the question if and how artifacts can be described as charismatic and what kind of surplus this might bring to the study of religion when it seeks to understand the role of material objects in religious

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[2] Several press reports mentioned this, e.g. https://www.welt.de/vermischtes/article192027995/Notre-Dame-Wie-der-Kaplan-der-Feuerwehr-Jesu-Dornenkrone-rettete.html.
[3] Arnold Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien: Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart* (München: C. H. Beck, 1994), 160.

traditions.[4] Therefore, this article is intended, first, as a contribution to the scholarly reception and development of the concept of charisma, and, second, as a contribution to the conceptualization of the agency of material things[5] in religious contexts.

Only a few authors have considered the notion of 'charismatic objects' so far,[6] and I will discuss their approaches in section 2. I think it is time to take stock and, based on these accounts, develop an analytical approach to charismatic objects that is empirically grounded and conceptually sound. In order to anchor this discussion in the study of religion as a comparative discipline, I also consider similar concepts such as 'fetish,' 'cultic image' and 'aura.' They address, to some extent, social effects and particular qualities of objects, and thus prepare the ground for a conceptual elaboration of the notion 'charismatic object.'

Although this article contains historical examples to illustrate the argument, it is primarily a conceptual suggestion, supplemented by methodological notes. The main point is to develop an analytical understanding of 'charismatic objects' that allows us to identify and describe charismatic objects in the religious field. This analytical rendering of the term will and cannot be equivalent with religious ideas about 'charisma,' but it starts from the observation that – in many religious traditions throughout the world – some objects are more valued and 'sacred' than others; and some are venerated and protected; they spark myths and narrations.

The challenge is to remain close to the historical and empirical data, but not simply adopt the term 'charismatic' as a black box for an intuitive, pre-linguistic feeling of presence and awe that one might experience in the encounter with certain persons or objects. This happens even

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[4] Dick Houtman, Birgit Meyer (ed.), *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (New York, NY: Fordham, 2012); Sally M. Promey (ed.), *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).
[5] "Material things," in this article, are defined as material items and their arrangements, ranging from single objects such as images or statues to furniture and architectural settings.
[6] E.g. Christopher Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha: Encounters with a Charismatic Object," in: Sandra H. Dudley (ed.), *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations* (London: Routledge, 2010), 53–70; Ann Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers: Charisma, Special Affordances and the Study of Religion," in: Dimitris Xygalatas & William McCorkle (eds.), *Mental Culture, Classical Social Theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 80–97; Marianne Vedeler, Ingunn Marit Røstad, Elna Siv Kristoffersen & Zanette Tsigaridas Glørstad (eds.), *Charismatic Objects: From Roman Times to the Middle Ages* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2018).

in scholarly literature, e.g. when authors speak of an "auratic charge" of things[7] – an expression that might fit subjective experiences but does not explain what this "charge" is and how it emerges.

In section 3, I suggest that we can understand charismatic objects, in analytical perspective, as those objects which are over longer periods of time explicitly addressed as special or extraordinary in religious discourse and practice, which have an attractiveness, and thus become socially effective. In other words: They make people do something because they are valued as 'sacred' or 'auratic.' The article will then (section 4) turn to illustrating this point by addressing some aspects of relics and their veneration in Western Christian traditions. I conclude with a few notes on how the conceptual approach outlined so far could be realized methodologically.

Doubtlessly, the material turn in the study of religion has produced quite a number of publications that deal with the social effectiveness of material things.[8] The idea of 'charismatic objects' is but one suggestion about how a classical sociological concept could fruitfully enrich the discussion about the agency of objects in religious traditions.

2. State of the art: Concepts and studies regarding 'charismatic objects'

2.1 Fetish

The concept "fetish" belongs to the central concepts in the early study of religion and has since been discussed by a number of scholars.[9] Originally spelled *feitiço* or *fétiche*, the term

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[7] "auratische Aufladung," Stefan Laube, *Von der Reliquie zum Ding: Heiliger Ort – Wunderkammer – Museum* (Berlin: Akademie, 2011), XIII.

[8] E.g., Birgit Meyer, "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding," in: Birgit Meyer (ed.), *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1–28; Sonia Hazard, "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 4/1 (2013), 58–78; Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

[9] For an overview, see Udo Tworuschka, *Einführung in die Geschichte der Religionswissenschaft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2015), 62–68; for more recent discussions, see, e.g., Peter Pels, "The Spirit

was used in seventeenth century travel reports by Catholic Portuguese and French merchants who referred to objects they encountered in West African coastal communities.[10] *Feitiço* is derived from the word *feito*, the past participle of the Portuguese word *fazer* which means 'to do, to make' and thus literally means 'made.' The Europeans learned that objects such as wooden figures, stones, even waste, could be – to the eyes of the indigenous – inhabited by spiritual powers, but to denounce these powers, they identified these objects as artificial and made-up.[11]

The term 'fetishism' was introduced in the 1760 book *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches* by Charles de Brosses (1709–1777).[12] He coined the term to designate a 'primitive' and original kind of religion. Although he did not, from the start, mean to use the term pejoratively, his way of describing fetishism as irrational, infantile, and absurd became a challenge for future generations of scholars who sought to be more neutral in their discussions of indigenous religions.[13]

Fetishes are objects with a social effectiveness because they are worshipped despite being, to the mind of the Europeans, meaningless.[14] However, to the Portuguese merchants, the similarity of the 'meaningless' fetishes and Catholic ritual objects was undeniable. They rationalized, with the help of Catholic missionaries, that while the Catholic crucifixes were 'real,' the 'heathen fetishes' were either meaningless made-up objects, or worse: possessed by

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of Matter: On Fetish, Rarity, Fact, and Fancy," in: Patricia Spyer (ed.), *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 91–120; Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion* (Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2012), 15–16.
[10] Dieter Sefrin, "Fetisch/Fetischismus," in: Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow, Karl-Heinz Kohl & Matthias Laubscher (eds.), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990), 425; Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 34–35.
[11] Sefrin, "Fetisch," 425.
[12] See also Bruno Latour, "Fetish-factish," in: S. Brent Plate (eds.), *Key Terms in Material Religion* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 89.
[13] Sefrin, "Fetisch," 425.
[14] Latour, "Fetish-factish," 88.

demonic powers. Consequently, they sought to substitute fetishes with Christian statues and images of saints.[15]

Emerging from these contexts, the term 'fetish' was taken up in theories of religion. Authors like David Hume and Edward Burnett Tylor used the concept of the "human-made thing-that-lived as the foundation of their general theories of 'primitive religion' and of 'religion' itself."[16] The term, however, never got rid of its colonial ballast and was consequently discarded by many scholars of comparative religion. Nonetheless, it is a concept pointing towards the idea of 'charismatic objects' and, as such, of relevance in this paper.

2.2 Cultic Image

'Cultic image' is a term used in the study of religion to refer to images or statues which are believed to be material representations of transcendent beings. They are venerated either because they are assumed to be manifestations of a transcendent power, or because they are valued as their earthly representations. Often, cultic images are set in special places and surrounded by ritual and, sometimes, institutionalized religious practice.[17] Some of these images are not even believed to be made by humans.[18]

This term also includes an aspect of socially effective material objects because these objects are actors in social interaction: People greet and talk to cultic images; they touch and kiss them. In some cases, cultic images 'eat,' they need to be looked after regularly, require fresh clothing or make-up; even entertainment may be appropriate. This is because they are treated as if they were alive; indicators of this may be found in reports about cultic images that speak,

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[15] Orsi, *History*, 34–35.
[16] Orsi, *History*, 36.
[17] Burkhard Gladigow, "Kultbild," in: Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow, Karl-Heinz Kohl & Matthias Laubscher (eds.), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998), 9.
[18] E.g. Angenendt, *Heilige*, 186–187. These objects are called "acheiropoiete" (e.g., Bruno Latour, "What is Iconoclash?, or Is there a World Beyond the Image Wars?", in: Bruno Latour & Peter Weibel (eds.), *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image-Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002), 18).

laugh, cry, sweat, or bleed.[19] As such, cultic images answer believers' prayers and do miracles. As Peter Bräunlein observes: They are charged charismatically and have an 'agency.'[20] Even though, in Christian traditions, the church tried to regulate the veneration of images by arguing that the images do not have any higher power *per se*, they were still treated as such.[21]

What makes these objects 'charismatic' in the sense suggested in this paper is that they afford devotional practice, and their attractiveness is explicitly addressed, and thus constituted, in religious discourse. Because they are believed to be sacred, people do things for them, such as offering gifts and vows.[22] It is because of these ascribed powers that cultic images and objects are sometimes victims of iconoclasm, i.e. of attempts to disempower them. Paradoxically, some cultic objects (and fetishes) have been dethroned and destroyed although Christian missionaries claimed that they were in fact powerless and meaningless.

2.3 Aura

The concept of 'aura' is inseparably connected to Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."[23] Benjamin used 'aura' to describe the feeling of respect, awe, and reverence that surrounds pieces of art as long as they are *original pieces*.[24] His oft-quoted definition of aura says:

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[19] Gladigow, "Kultbild," 9–10; Angenendt, *Heilige*, 186–189.

[20] Peter J. Bräunlein, "Ikonische Repräsentation von Religion," in: Hans Gerhard Kippenberg, Jörg Rüpke & Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Europäische Religionsgeschichte: Ein mehrfacher Pluralismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 782–783.

[21] Angenendt, *Heilige*, 188.

[22] Gerhard Baudy, "Kultobjekte," in: Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow, Karl-Heinz Kohl & Matthias Laubscher (eds.), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998), 17.

[23] The French original of this essay was first published in 1936 in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. I am quoting here from the critical edition: Burkhardt Lindner (ed.), *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013). It contains the German version which Benjamin wrote for the journal *Das Wort* but was never published: Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit [Fünfte Fassung]," in: Burkhardt Lindner (ed.), *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013), 207–250.

[24] Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk," 213.

"We define the aura […] as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch."[25]

This concept has been received widely to describe a feeling of presence of art, persons, or objects.[26] However, Benjamin's idea is also a critique of reproductions and his concept thus a normative one: Authentic pieces of art have an aura, reproductions do not. While the concept addresses an emotional and social effectiveness of material objects, architecture, and space, and as such ranges in the conceptual realm of 'charismatic objects,' an analytic approach in the study of religion should not include such normative perspectives. The term 'charismatic,' in everyday parlance, also carries a normative dimension, for instance when objects in museums are described as charismatic, which often means that they are deemed special or particularly good. The approach suggested in this paper, on the contrary, tries to offer a less normative variant of the term 'charismatic.'

The important question, though, is what differentiates a 'simple object' from an 'auratic object.' It is not enough to state that there is something about the object or piece of art which people may (or may not) experience when they encounter this object. There need to be empirical indicators that can be analyzed with transparent methods. The same pertains to the question when an object is charismatic and when it is 'just' an object. The next section, therefore, discusses a few approaches to the notion of 'charismatic objects.'

2.4 Charismatic objects

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[25] Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk," 215; translated by Harry Zohn.
[26] For an overview, see, e.g., Marleen Stoessel & Manfred K. H. Eggert, "Aura," in: Stefanie Samida, Manfred K. H. Eggert & Hans Peter Hahn (eds.), *Handbuch materielle Kultur: Bedeutungen, Konzepte, Disziplinen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2014), 174–180.

Having discussed briefly three concepts which prepare the scholarly debate about the agency of objects in religious contexts, I turn to authors who have introduced the idea of 'charismatic objects' proper.

ANN TAVES, for instance, discusses "magical objects" and "sacred places" as those things "to which persons attribute non-ordinary powers."[27] Working with Max Weber's idea of charisma, she argues that the key to understanding charismatic objects is the "perception that the object […] possesses non-ordinary powers *that matter to us* and that *we believe* will enable us to do something we otherwise would not be able to do or that would enable something to happen that otherwise would not happen."[28] Through these attributions, she argues, bonds between people and things emerge. These bonds make people use the objects in the context of "goal-directed action."[29] In the discussion about the agency of objects, Taves makes clear that objects neither act intentionally nor in the sense of, e.g., an animal, but have the "*capacity to produce an effect*."[30] This is close to what Bruno Latour writes about agency[31] and what Sonia Hazard summarizes as the "capacity to make effects in the world."[32] Following Taves, the "extra-ordinary powers discussed by Weber combine a notion of specialness (that which is non-ordinary or extra-ordinary) with at least a minimal conception [of] agency (the capacity to produce an effect)."[33]

Taves remarks that when scholars talk about the powers of relics or fetishes, these powers are often explained as originating from "something else that is special or charismatic, whether event or person."[34] This, however, is not the only source of their capacity to produce an effect.

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[27] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 83.
[28] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 83.
[29] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 83.
[30] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 84.
[31] E.g. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 68.
[32] Hazard, "The Material Turn," 65.
[33] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 84.
[34] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 89.

What these objects afford by themselves is just as important. They are perceived as outstanding because they offer potential that would not exist without them.[35]

Taves' definition of "charismatic objects," thus, is as follows: "Charismatic things are those that afford something (or are believed to afford something) only *by means of* the thing (person or object) in question."[36] She elaborates: "We can […] conceptualize charismatic things as a specialized type of affordance that enables a goal-directed action that *the* [human] *animal believes* would not have been possible otherwise."[37] This definition, though paying due attention to the material affordances, remains a bit vague as it could apply to a broad array of objects, including non-religious things and objects of everyday use.

CHRISTOPHER WINGFIELD also writes about 'charismatic objects' explicitly. Using the example of the Sultanganj Buddha exhibited in the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, UK, he points out that the history of some objects may show that they have the "peculiar capacity to become the focus for human activity, in the process gathering other people and objects around" them.[38] Based on Max Weber's notion of charisma as extraordinary powers,[39] he observes that this particular statue of the Buddha has extraordinary powers because it is able to elicit a high degree of human response: a "reverence bordering on awe."[40]

Wingfield then sets out to understand the origin of this kind of charisma: Quoting David MacDougall,[41] he suggests that it is important to "take seriously this 'microsecond of delivery' as the moment of contact in which the attitude to be adopted towards an object may be established."[42] This phenomenological idea of an undifferentiated, pre-linguistic, and unconscious feeling of presence people have when first encountering an object is similar to

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[35] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 91.
[36] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 93.
[37] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 93.
[38] Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha," 53.
[39] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978 [1922]), 399–634.
[40] Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha," 54.
[41] David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton, NJ: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[42] Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha," 56.

the notion of aura according to Benjamin (see above), or to that of the "punctum," suggested

by Roland Barthes, the first emotional impact of a photograph on a viewer.[43]

The first impression Wingfield talks about is shaped by perceptual faculties of the human

body and by socio-cultural factors. He suggests, however, that some objects have charismatic

powers before and beyond any cultural context.[44] This argument is in contrast to Taves'

emphasis of the *ascription* of specialness. Wingfield, instead, emphasizes the "embodied

encounter with a material object" and is not convinced that human responses to objects are

entirely socially and culturally conditioned.[45]

Looking into the history of the Sultanganj Buddha, Wingfield observes that "people have

reacted in a number of similar ways to its charisma and attempted to harness this force."[46] In

sum, he suggests that there are general human faculties that always respond in the same way

to the material qualities of an object. These anthropological qualities are to be found,

following Wingfield, in human psychology. For instance, the Buddha's facial expression and

its "tranquility" afford an almost universal response.[47] Human and non-human charismatic

things, Wingfield continues, are "able to combine a great many factors that in combination

make [them] unusual and remarkable" – this 'natural charisma,' so to speak, may then be

enhanced by "artificially produced charisma, such as its framing and presentation within the

museum."[48] Thus, Wingfield locates charisma first of all in general anthropological perceptual

faculties which respond to the material qualities of an object, and, secondly, in discourse and

practice around this object. As I will elaborate below, I think it is possible – and necessary –

to go beyond this way of conceptualizing the charisma of objects.

Another contribution to the discussion about 'charismatic objects' is the edited volume

Charismatic Objects by MARIANNE VEDELER, INGUNN M. RØSTAD, ELNA S. KRISTOFFERSEN

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[43] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27.
[44] Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha," 56.
[45] Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha," 57.
[46] Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha," 64.
[47] Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha," 66.
[48] Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha," 67.

and ZANETTE T. GLØRSTAD (2018). They undertake the important endeavor to reflect the notion of charismatic objects in the context of archaeology, relying largely on Weber's concept of charisma.[49] What makes charisma, as Vedeler points out in the introduction to the volume, are both the physical features and the myths told around them. These objects are "believed to possess special powers."[50] As for many other scholars, for Vedeler and her colleagues the "very essence of the phenomenon charisma lies in the *extraordinary*, in the ability or power to arouse awe" and "the belief in such a power is the engine or foundation of charisma. In cases where the force is believed to be within a thing or object, this object becomes both powerful and dangerous."[51] As such, charisma is a social attribution to objects. These objects may become "acting forces" in history.[52] An additional feature of charismatic objects, according to Vedeler (referencing Weber and Spencer[53]), is that their "power is transferable," i.e. whoever controls a charismatic object is in control of its power. Therefore, charismatic objects are "tools of power and control."[54] Other objects (Vedeler et al. mention the cross of Røldal), though, may possess charisma as their unique feature that cannot be transferred onto a person.[55] Regarding the physical qualities of charismatic objects these do, first of all, provoke "admiration and awe." They may be extraordinary pieces of art or artisanry, or their production might be unclear, "almost magical."[56]

In sum, the definition suggested by Vedeler is that charismatic objects are those that "have the ability to arouse awe within a given cosmological frame," more precisely, "within a cosmology where objects are considered to have properties animated by a holy or magical

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[49] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 399–634.
[50] Marianne Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power of Objects," in: Marianne Vedeler, Ingunn Marit Røstad, Elna Siv Kristoffersen & Zanette Tsigaridas Glørstad (eds.), *Charismatic Objects*: *From Roman Times to the Middle Ages* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2018), 10.
[51] Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power," 10.
[52] Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power," 13.
[53] Martin E. Spencer, "What is Charisma?" *The British Journal of Sociology* 3 (1973), 341–354.
[54] Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power," 21.
[55] Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power," 24.
[56] Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power," 25.

power."[57] She argues that there are two sources of the charismatic quality of an object: first, "a power transferred from the classical charismatic leader to objects," and, second, "a power believed to arise from within the objects themselves."[58] She then outlines several types of charismatic objects, all of which belong to the first category (charisma transferred from a charismatic leader onto an object): (a) objects which have long been in the possession of a mighty family (lineage charisma); (b) objects which belong to the traditional equipment of a leader's role (charisma of role); (c) objects which are taken from the body of an important person (relics).[59] Relics are, indeed, important examples when it comes to discussing charismatic objects (see section 4).

3. Conceptual suggestions on 'charisma' and 'charismatic objects'

The history of the concept 'charisma' and its career in the sociology of religion, starting with Max Weber, do not need a lengthy repetition here.[60] For the purpose of this paper, it is sufficient to repeat that the term is derived from the Greek words *chaírein* (χαίρειν) = 'to rejoice' and *cháris* (χάρις) = 'grace.' In the Christian tradition, it was introduced in the letters of Paul in the New Testament. According to Paul, every Christian person has charisma, i.e. s/he is called to minister in the community. Until the nineteenth century, the concept was hardly used outside this scripture and its interpretation, and it did not play a significant role in church history and theology.

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[57] Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power," 28.
[58] Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power," 28.
[59] Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power," 13–21.
[60] See the introduction of this special issue, and various publications such as Winfried Gebhardt, Arnold Zingerle & Michael Ebertz (eds.), *Charisma, Theorie – Religion – Politik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993); Martin Riesebrodt, "Charisma in Max Weber's Sociology of Religion," *Religion* 29 (1999), 1–14; Thomas Kroll, "Max Webers Idealtypus der charismatischen Herrschaft und die zeitgenössische Charisma-Debatte," in: Edith Hanke & Wolfgang J. Mommsen (eds.), *Max Webers Herrschaftssoziologie: Studien zu Entstehung und Wirkung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

Only in the second half of the nineteenth century, Rudolph Sohm (1841–1917) re-introduced the concept in his discussion of the church's constitution. This is where Max Weber read (most probably) about charisma. Charismatic power, for Weber, is the third type of power (next to rational and traditional power).[61] Weber used the term not in the Paulinian sense, but it unmistakably has a Christian tradition and connotation. From there, in turn, the concept was re-imported to theological, popular culture, and, eventually, religious studies discourse.[62] Apart from the use of the term in sociology and the study of religion, there is also the use by Christian groups and movements that refer to themselves as "charismatic" in the biblical sense, i.e. as relating to special gifts such as prophecy, healing, or 'speaking in tongues'; and, finally, in every day speech and popular culture, there is a general and normative idea of charisma to refer to successful and popular leaders.

Charisma, to take up a suggestion from the introduction to this special issue, is an attribute that is ascribed to persons and objects in social communication. It is a relational phenomenon that needs both the social ascription and confirmation of something or someone as charismatic and the person or thing in question affording and being receptive to this ascription. While there may be kinds of non-religious charisma (e.g., in political, economic, or popular culture discourse), I am dealing here with *religious* charisma, a fact that immediately asks for a definition of 'religious.'

The discussion about a definition of 'religion' is older than the discipline of the study of religion.[63] In brief, I follow systems theoretical approaches which propose that religious communication is defined as that communication which deals with the distinction of immanence and transcendence while trying to ultimately cope with contingency.[64] Charisma, based on this assumption, is *religious* charisma, when it is embedded in communication that

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[61] Günter Kehrer, "Charisma," in: Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow, Karl-Heinz Kohl & Matthias Laubscher (eds.), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990), 197.
[62] Kehrer, "Charisma," 195–196.
[63] For an overview, see, e.g., Tworuschka, *Einführung in die Geschichte der Religionswissenschaft*.
[64] Volkhard Krech, "Communication," in: Michael Stausberg & Steven Engler (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 265.

deals with the immanence-transcendence-distinction while tackling contingency. This does not mean that every single communicative act has to meet this criterion but that the complete case (a longer chain of communications) can analytically and retrospectively be qualified as religious. In the case of charismatic objects, this means that they are part of this general task of religious communication.

I suggest here, with specific consideration of charismatic *objects*, that we should understand *charisma* as the agency of a person/object when this agency is explicitly addressed in religious communication.[65] Together with an explicit addressing of their social effectiveness, aspects such as attractiveness and specialness are also apparent in such communication about certain objects.[66] Of course, following Bruno Latour, things and persons, i.e. actors in social networks, also have an agency when it is not explicitly addressed.[67] But, to my mind, the concept of charisma is particularly suited for those instances when the agency, specialness, and attractiveness of an artifact are explicitly and continuously addressed in religious discourse. This could be the case, for instance, when there are narrations or ritual practice surrounding an object which address this object as being 'sacred' (specialness), doing miracles (agency), and causing people to desire them (attractiveness).

Ann Taves makes a similar argument referring to the notion of affordance, first suggested in James Gibson's environmental psychology. The affordance is "a specific combination of the properties of [an object's] substance and its surfaces taken with reference to an animal."[68] Affordances are relational, i.e. they depend both on the object and the abilities of the human

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[65] Approaches that conceptualize charisma foremost as a trait of personality, consequently, do not succeed in framing the analysis of material objects (e.g., Paul Binski, "Charisma and Material Culture," in: Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak & Martha Dana Rust (eds.), *Faces of Charisma*: *Image, Text, Object in Byzantium and the Medieval West* (Boston: Brill, 2018).

[66] *Non*-charismatic but religious objects, consequently, are those embedded in religious communication but not explicitly attributed with agency, specialness, and attractiveness.

[67] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 72.

[68] James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," in: Robert Shaw & John Bransford (eds.), *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977), 67.

being.[69] In other words, the "environment affords actions relative to actors."[70] Methodically, this means that we have to *study material artifacts and social communication in their mutual empirical entanglements.*

A brick, e.g. in a pile of bricks on a construction site, has an agency, to take up an example from Bruno Latour,[71] but it is not automatically a *charismatic* object. Other stones, such as the seer stone used by Joseph Smith to find the golden plates that would eventually be known as the Book of Mormon,[72] or the stone referenced in the biblical myth (in Genesis 28:18–22) about Jacob and the foundation of the city of Beth-El,[73] however, qualify as charismatic religious objects when following the definition suggested here. They have an agency which is explicitly and over a longer period of time addressed within religious communication, they attract social action, and they are described as special in different ways.

The example of the stone as a charismatic religious object also shows that it is not sufficient to consider either the physical features of an object or the perceptual faculties of humans as the source of charisma.[74] This means that *every* thing can become a charismatic religious object as long as it affords the attribution of specialness and is socially effective. In the following, I shall test these theoretical considerations in the case of relics from medieval European Christianity.

4. Testing the concept: Relics as 'charismatic objects'?

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[69] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 91.
[70] Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 93.
[71] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 74.
[72] To take up the example used by Taves, "Non-Ordinary Powers," 84.
[73] Quoted in Karl-Heinz Kohl, *Die Macht der Dinge: Geschichte und Theorie sakraler Objekte* (München: C. H. Beck, 2003), 160.
[74] As, e.g., Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha," 66–67, suggests.

Relics are frequently referenced in the discussion about religious charismatic objects.[75] There is a large body of scholarly literature on relics in diverse historical and cultural contexts.[76] The following paragraphs have no intention whatsoever to provide a complete picture or analysis of relics. Instead, I refer to some studies and historical cases taken from the history of Western Christianity selectively, and use them to discuss whether the concept of 'charismatic objects' as outlined above could be a fruitful approach to the understanding of relics.

The term 'relic' is commonly used to refer to highly valued remains of deceased church fathers, saints, or other important figures of the Christian traditions.[77] Since antiquity, Christians have collected and preserved these parts or things that were in some way associated with places or events in the biography of Christ, the apostles, or martyrs.[78] While the remains of martyrs and saints originally had to remain intact and whole, beginning in the tenth century, they were divided and their fragments distributed to separate places. This is why the relic is also described as a *pars pro toto*:[79] In every part of the body, the entire person is believed to be present.[80]

Usually, relics are kept in reliquaries. Cynthia Hahn points out that these constitute an important aspect of the cognitive and social functions of relics, specifically when the relic proper is completely hidden inside the reliquary. Where the relic is not visible, the reliquary needs to convey the impression of authenticity and holiness.[81] This means that, in our

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[75] Vedeler et al., *Charismatic Objects*.
[76] E.g., Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, NY: Zone, 1991); Angenendt, *Heilige*, 149–166, on Christian relics. E.g., Kevin Trainor, *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravada Tradition* (Cambridge: New York University Press, 1997) on Buddhist relics. Peter Flügel, "The Jaina Cult of Relic Stūpas," *Numen* 57/3 (2010), 389–504 on Jain relics.
[77] E.g., Kevin Trainor, "*Pars Pro Toto*: On Comparing Relic Practices," *Numen* 57/4 (2010), 267–283.
[78] Holger A. Klein, "Sacred Things and Holy Bodies: Collecting Relics from Late Antiquity to Early Renaissance," in: Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann & James Robinson (eds.), *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 55–56.
[79] Angenendt, *Heilige*, 154; see also Trainor, "*Pars Pro Toto*," 271.
[80] Relics also exists in non-Christian traditions although the term might not originally be used. For instance, Buddhist stupas are believed to contain a part of the ashes of the Buddha or other important figures of the Buddhist traditions (e.g. Lal Mani Joshi, "Buddhistische Kunst und Architektur," in: Heinz Bechert & Richard Gombrich (eds.), *Der Buddhismus: Geschichte und Gegenwart* (München: Beck, 1989), 101).
[81] Cynthia Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?" *Numen* 57/3 (2010), 284–316.

discussion of the social effectiveness of relics, due attention should be paid to the reliquaries as well: They "'represent' the relic as powerful, holy and sacred."[82] Only in the fourteenth century, relics were partially and temporarily made visible.[83]

What is important about relics is that they are believed to be authentic, i.e. the real human remains or fragments of cloths from a certain person. Sometimes, this is made explicit by a tag or inscription, or documents hidden in the reliquary together with the relic.[84] In other cases, relics need to prove their authenticity through ordeal by fire or miracle. Relics should be resistant to fire, and cause miracles,[85] such as signs, visions, healings; they would miraculously emit a scent when opening the tomb, spread inexplicable light, or be completely undecayed, even years after the respective person's death.[86] This quest for authenticity connects well to the notion of aura and authenticity as emphasized by Benjamin (see above). Peter Flügel, based on his studies of Jain relics, makes a few observations about the social effectiveness of relics which relate to this article. He argues that the "cross-cultural recognition of the power of valued relics can only be comprehensively understood in terms of their function as media of communication and interaction within social systems."[87] This is where the argument suggested in this paper takes its cue: The understanding of charismatic religious objects (e.g. relics) is only possible when studying how these artifacts are embedded in continuous explicit discourse about their specialness and social effectiveness. Such an approach, according to Flügel, highlights the "importance of narratives and the role of experts in political 'tournaments' that endow relics with socio-cultural value and work against their

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[82] Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do," 289–290.
[83] Angenendt, *Heilige*, 160.
[84] Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?", 290.
[85] Angenendt, *Heilige*, 162.
[86] Angenendt, *Heilige*, 181.
[87] Flügel, "The Jaina Cult," 472.

commodification."[88] Although Flügel provides a thorough analysis of relics, he mentions charisma only in passing[89] and more in relation to persons than to objects.

Seeking to explain why relics have such a power, he writes: Relics "function as repositories and transmitters of power […]. Relics of renowned ascetics have the power to attract rather than to command. Though relics are usually hidden away and do not physically circulate much, their invisibility and relative immobility does not affect their efficacy as symbolic media of social communication and interaction."[90] Touching questions of the agency of objects, Flügel emphasizes that relics can "function as a catalyst and repository of power."[91]

How relics can be perceived as powerful in a very tangible way is recounted in hundreds of legends such as one conveyed by Gregory of Tours:[92] One citizen of Bourges (France) had tried to bring to trial some fellow citizens who had allegedly betrayed him. He made them swear on Saint Stephen's relics (his blood) which were kept inside the altar of Bourges Cathedral. But when he himself advanced the altar, he was thrown headlong into the air, smashed to the ground, and lay still for some two hours, apparently dying. Upon awaking, he confessed that he had accused his fellow citizens without reason. They took this as a sign of the power of the relics.

It does not matter if this is a factual account or not; what matters is that these relics are embedded in communication which attests special powers and effectiveness to them. One could argue with Flügel that relics should not so much be understood as objectified personal charisma but as agentic elements of networks of social relationships.[93]

Based on this approach, I suggest here to closely study objects, in this case relics, in their communicative embeddedness: When and how are they ascribed as special? What do they afford? Cynthia Hahn, stressing a similar point, notes that relics are defined "through the

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[88] Flügel, "The Jaina Cult," 472.
[89] E.g. Flügel, "The Jaina Cult," 468, 469, 474.
[90] Flügel, "The Jaina Cult," 473.
[91] Flügel, "The Jaina Cult," 475.
[92] Quoted from Angenendt, *Heilige*, 201.
[93] Flügel, "The Jaina Cult," 480.

recognition by some audience of the presence of power that leads to a certain desirability […] without some form of recognition, a relic is merely bone, dust, or scraps of cloth."[94] What Hahn mentions as recognition becomes observable in communication and ritual surrounding a relic.

Are relics, then, 'charismatic religious objects,' i.e. artifacts that are over a longer period of time explicitly addressed as extraordinary and effective in religious communication? How do they become socially effective and how is this social effectiveness represented in discourse and action related to relics?

In religious discourse, relics are not just pieces to remember someone by but they are believed to contain 'holy powers,' and the belief in these holy powers afforded the construction of churches, altars, and shrines.[95] Through the miracles attributed to them, relics become socially effective. In the Christian traditions, the term for the effectiveness of relics is *virtus*. Believers recognize a divine spirit present in the physical remains in which they believe because of the miracles done through the relics.[96] The *virtus* of relics also became real to believers by other effects in the material world: Angenendt quotes from another story about Gregory of Tours who observed that cloths which had been on top of the tomb of Saint Peter in Rome over night were heavier in the morning since they had absorbed the *virtus* of the relics.[97]

Often, the miracles are also taken as signs that prove their authenticity[98] and thus make these bones and other human remains special: They are not just any remains, but attributed to particularly important figures (martyrs, saints, or Jesus).

Relics were taken from the original burial sites and placed in newly constructed churches, often within the altar as the central piece of furniture in the church. Since the ninth and tenth century, they were also shown (at specific times) and displayed on processions – which

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[94] Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?", 291.
[95] This is what Joseph Cardinal Höffner writes in the preface to Jörg-Holger Baumgarten, *Kölner Reliquienschreine* (Köln: Wienand, 1985), 7.
[96] Angenendt, *Heilige*, 155–156.
[97] Angenendt, *Heilige*, 156.
[98] Angenendt, *Heilige*, 172.

points, again, to the need for authenticity through visibility.[99] In other words, these human remains are embedded in longer chains of narratives and practices which all attest to their extraordinariness, social effectiveness, and attractiveness within a specific religious tradition. Take, for instance, the relics of Saint Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine the Great.[100] Born c. 246/248, she became the Empress of the Roman Empire after her son had become the Roman Emperor in 306. Like her son, she adopted the Christian faith and is believed to have endowed many churches, particularly in Palestine. According to legend, she also discovered the cross on which Jesus had died and other important relics of Christianity, such as the crown of thorns, mentioned at the beginning of this article. When she died c. 330 she was buried, presumably, in Rome. After her death, she was kept in good memory by the Christian community, adored, and became the object of new legends. More than 500 years later, around 849, some of her relics were brought from Rome to the diocese of Reims in France. When miracles were reported at their new abode, Reims became the center of the cult of Saint Helena in Central Europe and, consequently, her relics were distributed in France and Germany. In the late ninth century, she was first called a "Saint." In 952, relics came to Trier in Germany, where they still keep her skull. This is where the first German hagiography was compiled and from where the veneration of Saint Helena spread through Germany, also in the region of Cologne. The Church of Saint Gereon of Cologne is reported to have possessed relics (parts of her bones, soft tissue, and shroud) since the early twelfth century. From there, the veneration of Saint Helena spread in the rural estates of the Church of St. Gereon along the Lower Rhine region where a few places and churches are called after Saint Helena.

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[99] Baumgarten, *Kölner Reliquienschreine*, 15–16.
[100] The following is based on the accounts by Karl Mackes, *Aus der Vor-, Früh- und Siedlungsgeschichte der Stadt Viersen* (Viersen: Verlag der Stadt Viersen, 1956), 182–202, and Ferdinand Dohr, *Geschichte der Pfarre St. Helena Viersen-Helenabrunn* (Viersen: Verlag der Stadt Viersen, 1971), 13–18.

Already in the sixth century, it had become common practice that churches possessed relics hidden inside their altars.[101] Therefore, one should assume that every church dedicated to Saint Helena also keeps fragments of her relics.

For the analysis, it is not relevant if the legends and stories about Saint Helena and the spread of her relics and cult are historically accurate, and whether the relics are in fact of the mother of Constantine. What is relevant, however, is that we can study a long chain of traditions, narrations, religious practices, and legends which are connected to these human remains and embed them in religious discourse while at the same time explicitly addressing them as special, effective, and unique. They are socially effective in the miracles attributed to them, the cultic veneration they receive, and the effort undertaken to obtain them.[102]

To summarize: In the case of relics, relatively non-special human remains or artifacts are embedded in religious communication as extraordinary (because of their alleged origin) and socially effective (because of the miracles attributed to them). Once this communication develops into legends and narratives, the relic – in its entanglement with the stories connected to it – affords veneration and other practices, to the point of building churches and cathedrals for them, and structuring the outline of medieval villages and towns.

One could argue that the 'power of relics' lies in these powerful narratives only, or that they become objects of political power relations, e.g. when legends are made up to legitimate territorial claims. But these narratives would be rather worthless (and unthinkable from the start) without the material relic. Just like the communications around an object are powerless without the object, the object is powerless without these narrations. Both mutually enhance their respective socio-cultural agency. When this agency is explicitly and continually

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[101] Angenendt, *Heilige*, 168.
[102] Another example that I can mention only briefly here is that of Saint Matthias' relics. In 1127, i.e. more than 1,000 years after his death in c. 63, during a reconstruction of the abbey in Trier (Germany), bones were found which were identified as his. According to legend, his relics had been discovered by empress Helena in Palestine more than 250 years after his death and brought to Trier. Although the identification was subject to skepticism, the abbey succeeded in establishing a popular center of pilgrimage (Petrus Becker, *Die Benediktinerabtei St. Eucharius: St. Matthias vor Trier* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 397.

addressed in religious discourse, I think it is helpful to apply the concept of 'charismatic object' to relics in order to get a clearer view on why and how they function.

5. How to study charismatic objects: Notes on method and methodology

To repeat, I suggest that religious charismatic objects are those that are, over a longer period of time, explicitly addressed as extraordinary and socially effective in religious communication, i.e. communication concerned with ultimately coping with contingency on the basis of the immanence-transcendence-distinction. How to operationalize this conceptual approach?

Here, I make a few suggestions towards the empirical study of charismatic objects from the perspective of the comparative study of religion. Given that the key to understanding charismatic objects lies neither within the material object alone nor within the individual psychological perception of these objects, it is crucial to study in which kind of communication and practice the objects under concern are embedded.

Previous studies on charismatic objects have often recurred to phenomenology of the body approaches (*Leibphänomenologie*) or the psychology of perception. The phenomenology of the body argues that people in their encounter with objects experience a pre-linguistic, unconscious, and culturally unspecific feeling of presence, of awe, or of admiration.[103] While this might be true, it remains beyond the reach of social scientific methods: We can only study an unconscious feeling of awe when someone communicates about it – and in that moment, it is not unconscious or pre-linguistic any more but part of social communication.

Following approaches in the psychology of perception, authors argue that the sensory and cognitive apparatus of human beings responds in certain ways to certain material objects. In

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[103] E.g. Wingfield, "Touching the Buddha."

short: It is in the individual brain and cognitive processing of sensory stimuli where an impression of charismatic objects arises.

For instance, Saunderson et al. observe that authenticity is an important criterion for people to judge whether they find an object inspiring or not. Following Walter Benjamin, they assume that original pieces and reproductions are perceived differently. They test this hypothesis in an experiment that measures eye movements when looking at originals and replicas. Their results, however, "indicate that there was no significant difference in basic eye movements between paintings and the photographic and monitor reproductions."[104] The authors seem a bit surprised that this runs against "the evidence of human behavior and cross disciplinary literature"[105] because they do not take into consideration that the question of authenticity is a communicative matter: It is crucial to study how people talk and write about objects and their status (as 'authentic piece' or 'reproduction'); the charismatic quality of an object does not lie in the eye (or brain, for that matter) of the observer alone.

It is certainly true that people perceive material objects only by virtue of their sensory and cognitive faculties – but these are not social phenomena, as famously (but not exclusively) argued by Emile Durkheim: "In a word, there is between psychology and sociology the same break in continuity as there is between biology and the physical and chemical sciences. Consequently every time a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may rest assured that the explanation is false."[106]

I do not argue that these approaches (phenomenology of the body and psychology of perception) are entirely flawed but suggest that we can get a fuller and empirically traceable understanding of charismatic objects by studying the historical and empirical communications

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[104] Helen Saunderson, Alice Cruickshank & Eugene McSorley, "The Eyes Have It: Eye Movements and the Debatable Differences between Original Objects and Reproductions," in: Sandra H. Dudley (ed.), *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations* (London: Routledge, 2010), 95.
[105] Saunderson, Cruickshank & McSorley, "The Eyes Have It," 97.
[106] Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1982), 129.

around charismatic objects *in their entanglements* with the material affordances of these objects.

Virtually every material artifact (even a stone, as mentioned above) bears the potential to afford communication that, when analyzed from an analytical perspective as suggested in this paper, will allow us to describe this object as charismatic. Nonetheless, the disposition to afford that kind of communication will more often occur when the material characteristics of the artifacts make them stand out in contrast to other, similar objects. For instance, they might be made of rare materials, carefully crafted, particularly expensive, or used by an unusually influential person.

Therefore, I suggest studying historical or empirical cases which center around certain objects. Questions asked in the course of the analysis should be: How do the material affordances (the agency) of the object trigger certain kinds of communication and practice? How does communication and practice embed the object and address it as special, effective, and attractive? Are there rituals which involve the object? Is it taken care of in a particular manner? Does the object 'demand' something from those who use or venerate it? Is its specialness continuously and explicitly addressed in religious discourse? In brief: How does written, verbal, and non-verbal communication speak about the social effectiveness of the object?

By studying such cases in a comparative manner, we might arrive at a typology of charismatic objects. This typology will differ from religious typologies[107] and it will also differ from typologies that focus on how the charisma was transferred from a person onto an object.[108] Instead, such a typology could be based on the question how specialness and social effectiveness are semantically filled in historical and empirical cases.

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[107] E.g. relics of first, second, and third order, a Christian typology also used in scholarly works, e.g. Hahn, "What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?", 290.

[108] E.g. Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power of Objects," 13–21.

6. Conclusions

The idea of this article was to consider if and how artifacts can be analyzed as 'charismatic objects' and how this enriches the study of material culture as part of a religious studies approach. As such, this paper offers a contribution to the scholarly history of the concept 'charisma' as initiated by Sohm and Weber. Moreover, it is also meant as a contribution to the conceptualization of the agency of material artifacts in religious contexts. The material turn in the study of religion has offered a number of concepts and approaches that tackle the question of how and why things become 'agentic' and how they take part in religious communication and practice.[109] The approach to conceptualize 'charismatic objects,' therefore, can only be an additional and complementary one.

Doubtlessly, material objects are relevant to one of the central tasks of religious communication and practice, i.e. to mediate between the transcendent and the immanent. Starting from ideas about the affordances and agency of material things, the proposal in this article is to take seriously the explicit religious debate about objects, e.g. relics, and understand those objects as 'charismatic' which are explicitly addressed in religious discourse as special, effective, and attractive. It is crucial not to focus either on the materiality of the object alone or the narratives surrounding an object, but to study the entanglements and mutual constitution of religious communication and material affordances.

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[109] E.g., Meyer, "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations"; Hazard, "The Material Turn"; Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind*.

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, NY: Hill and
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