



## THE POWER OF A SPIRITUAL ELDER'S WORDS: THE COMMUNICATION OF CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY

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**Abstract:** The article considers Weber's theory of charismatic power as an interpretive model for the examination of religious beliefs. Traditionally, academic thought has interpreted the source of the power as either a leader's personal characteristics or constructive actions performed by his / her group. Instead of searching for the causes of charismatic authority, I am interested in ways of performing charismatic authority and techniques for its realisation. My fieldwork was conducted in a remote Russian village with an Orthodox community, devoted to a spiritual elder (*starets*). Through careful ethnography, I will describe the post-Soviet conditions that have transformed a collective farm into a religious group, the group's organisational characteristics, and the process by which the leader's charisma is routinised. The main goal of the article is to analyse the communicative practices of the community. I suggest that many of the presuppositions on which our everyday face-to-face communication is based would not hold in a case in which an interlocutor, according to believers, had superhuman abilities (e.g., the ability to predict the future). Thus, the micro level of interactions can change the whole structure of a community. My primary perspective for the reconsideration of charismatic authority is a perspective drawn from linguistic anthropology.

**Keywords:** charismatic authority, spiritual eldership, Max Weber, religious communication, anthropology of religion.

**To cite:** Dubovka D., 'The Power of a Spiritual Elder's Words: The Communication of Charismatic Authority', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 2017, no. 13, pp. 163–185.

**URL:** <http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng013/dubovka.pdf>

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## The Power of a Spiritual Elder's Words: The Communication of Charismatic Authority

The article considers Weber's theory of charismatic power as an interpretive model for the examination of religious beliefs. Traditionally, academic thought has interpreted the source of the power as either a leader's personal characteristics or constructive actions performed by his / her group. Instead of searching for the causes of charismatic authority, I am interested in ways of performing charismatic authority and techniques for its realisation. My fieldwork was conducted in a remote Russian village with an Orthodox community, devoted to a spiritual elder (*starets*). Through careful ethnography, I will describe the post-Soviet conditions that have transformed a collective farm into a religious group, the group's organisational characteristics, and the process by which the leader's charisma is routinised. The main goal of the article is to analyse the communicative practices of the community. I suggest that many of the presuppositions on which our everyday face-to-face communication is based would not hold in a case in which an interlocutor, according to believers, had superhuman abilities (e.g., the ability to predict the future). Thus, the micro level of interactions can change the whole structure of a community. My primary perspective for the reconsideration of charismatic authority is a perspective drawn from linguistic anthropology.

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### Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority and its further development

It is hard to overestimate the influence of Max Weber's theoretical positions on the development of sociological thought. Some of his works, such as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and *Science as a Vocation*, are long-established classics and inevitably to be found on reading-lists issued by faculties of history, sociology and philosophy. However, some of Max Weber's heritage is still the subject of debate in professional circles. One of his most contentious ideas is the concept of charismatic legitimacy. As he develops his theory of authority (primarily political authority), Weber invites us to examine the reasons why people obey their leader, and names different variants of the affirmation of power. He identifies three types of legitimacy: traditional, founded on belief in the legitimacy of authority and the sacredness of tradition; rational, maintained by a conviction of the legality and lawfulness of the established order; and the charismatic, which proceeds from the exceptional qualities of the leader's personality [Weber 1978: 215].

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If the description of the first two types of legitimacy is more or less understandable, there is still no single treatment of the concept of charismatic authority. Though intuitively what Weber had in mind may seem understandable (from the point of view of ordinary observers, the power of the Old Testament prophets, Napoleon or Martin Luther King does not appear either traditional or rational<sup>1</sup>), problems are encountered in attempting to operationalise the term 'charisma'. I shall mention just a few tendencies that reflect on Weber's use of the term 'charisma'. There are studies which concentrate on the revolutionary potential of charismatic authority. Their authors stress that the traditional and rational types of power only reproduce existing structures, whereas the charismatic type changes society by creating new internal connections [Dow 1978]. The most recent works on charisma, however, show how it fits into traditional community structures and demonstrate, for example, the role of the patronage system in the careers of charismatic leaders [McCulloch 2014]. Representatives of yet another tendency, trying to determine what the new connections are that arise when there is charismatic authority, place the stress on the emotional interaction between group and leader [Wasielewski 1985].

However, the greatest number of theoretical works that analyse Weber's concept of charisma treat it in one of two ways: either as a personal gift, a specific peculiarity of the leader, or as the ascription to the leader by his audience of those features which they would like to see in their representative [Riesebrodt 1999; Joosse 2014]. The starting-point for these interpretations is usually a fragment of a chapter in *Economy and Society* that deals with charismatic power: 'The term "charisma" will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities' [Weber 1978: 241]. The fact that this basic definition combines both personal qualities and the specifics of how a person is perceived by his / her community has led to the aforementioned variants in the treatment of the term.

The majority of the academic community agree that Weber's own texts contain contradictions in the description of charismatic authority and are evidently a sort of amalgam of various early twentieth-century ideas, from a reinterpretation of the Christian concept of a charisma as a gift of the Holy Spirit, combined with the social context in which this definition existed, to the works of British

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<sup>1</sup> And indeed, to a certain extent this is true from a scholarly point of view too. Works which describe phenomena usually treated as charismatic as the rational type of legitimacy continue to provoke a sharp reaction. See, for example, a study of the Nazis' rise to power in Germany as a rational choice of the average German worker: [Brustein 1996].

anthropologists who constructed an evolutionary ladder from magical to religious and thence to scientific consciousness [Riesebrodt 1999].

Despite the said lack of theoretical congruence, the term 'charismatic authority' continues to be used, particularly in anthropological works, usually in the context of a leader's invention of his / her own attributes of authority and / or his / her means of justifying it.<sup>1</sup> While I agree with this sort of constructivist reinterpretation of Weber's works, I should like nevertheless to examine charismatic authority in a different light. What if, instead of seeking the source of charisma in a leader's personal qualities or in the ascriptive activity of the crowd, we were to look at the actual mechanism whereby charismatic authority is realised? This is not so easy to do, because Weber thought up his description as a description of ideal types, i.e. theoretical models for the study of various means of authority. And while it is still possible to find real prototypes for the traditional and rational means of legitimacy, charismatic authority apparently never exists in its pure form, and may be identified only at the moment in which it becomes routine — the gradual accretion of an administrative apparatus and a shift to a different type of legitimacy [Weber 1978: 1121–3].

We must here take account of the fact that in his constructs Weber was building upon historical works, which do not usually describe the micro-mechanics of authority or everyday communication with a charismatic leader, whereas in participant observation the differences between the technique of authority of a charismatic leader and his / her management structures are quite evident. And although, maybe, a purely charismatic type of authority really is impossible to identify, we can still study the specifics of the interaction of a community with its charismatic leader, and thus approach an understanding of the phenomenon that stands behind the word 'charisma'.

### **The charismatic authority of eldership**

In contemporary Orthodox circles the closest example of charismatic authority may be seen in the relations between a spiritual father and his flock. Eldership — if not in actual practice, at least as the proclaimed ideal, according to which it would be good to pursue salvation with an elder, except that there is no one filled with the Spirit nowadays — is extremely popular. This ideal is connected to the notion that certain people, by virtue of their pious life and God's special providence, receive certain gifts from above, which make

<sup>1</sup> On the Russian material see, for example: [Lindquist 2006].

them holy even in this life. These gifts usually include the ability to see spirits from the other world — devils and angels, knowledge of other people's hidden sins and an ability to predict the future. The official teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church categorises these gifts as special forms of God's grace 'which are given to a particular person to be used for the common good, that is, in the service of the Church' [Davydenkov 1997: 194]. This teaching is based primarily on St Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, in which he lists such gifts of the Holy Spirit as wisdom, healing, prophecy, miracles, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues, etc. [Ibid.: 194–5]. Even though the image of the elder (male or female) in popular hagiographical literature may be substantially different from the Church's theological interpretation of Scripture,<sup>1</sup> the concept of the spiritual authority of elders does proceed from the same biblical texts as Weber's model of charismatic authority. This fact has led to the confusion of Weber's analytical category and its source in works on eldership. The authors of most of these works follow the same tendency in the interpretation of Weber's work: charisma as a person's personal quality, the sources of which may be seen as his / her personal ascetic labours, or as the grace of God.

It is obvious that ecclesiastical literature will stand at one extreme of this interpretation: the history of the Church in general, and of monasticism in particular, frequently turns into an anthology of the lives of elders, male and female, not all of whom have even been canonised [*Russkoe pravoslavnoe zhenskoe monashestvo...* 1992; Shafazhinskaya 2009]. Representatives of academic institutions are also frequently overcome by the attraction of eldership and discover in this sort of ascetic labour an organic manifestation of the Church which from time to time extends to the whole people [Kirichenko 2010].

Classical historical writings, based as they are on extensive archival materials, have studied the relations between the official Church authorities and elders in detail, but whether by virtue of the nature of their sources or the mystical aura that Eastern Christianity has in Western eyes, they hold to a 'psychological' interpretation of charisma as the exceptional moral power of those who possess it [Kenworthy 2010; Paert 2010].

Continuing Weber's distinction between traditional and charismatic authority, Sibireva has examined a crisis of trust in the structures of the Church on the part of believers in the Soviet period, and their alternative reverence for elders [Sibireva 2010].

At the other extreme is Jeanne Kormina's article on the construction of the image of elder Nikolay Guryanov [Kormina 2013]. Although

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<sup>1</sup> On the creation of the images of popular saints and female elders, see: [Kormina, Shtyrkov 2014].

Kormina herself sees her approach as in opposition to Weber's understanding of charisma, there is an intellectual tradition of interpreting his term in a constructivist light. Still, strictly speaking, the article on Guryanov is focused on the 'memory wars', the struggle between various groups over his symbolic heritage and the way the deceased elder should be represented. In Weber's world these processes might be called attempts at the institutionalisation of charisma, that is, its transformation into a different type of authority.

The methodology furthest from Weber's is that used by Nikolay Mitrokhin in his article giving an account of one of the most influential elders on the religious map of modern Russia, Archimandrite Naum of the Holy Trinity-St Sergius Lavra. The author analyses the mechanism whereby Archimandrite Naum acquires new spiritual children and describes the social network of this famous spiritual director [Mitrokhin 2006]. It is, however, remarkable that Mitrokhin is surprised by his informants' desire to seek the elder's advice. There are glimpses in his article of references to the psychological condition of people who might have need of authoritative direction of this sort, so that, although Mitrokhin does not explicitly raise the question of the nature of charismatic authority, he is actually trying to answer it. His answer turns the traditional view of charisma as the particular qualities of the leader inside out, stressing the 'particular' qualities of the group that might need such a leader.

Even this brief review of the historiography of eldership identifies a few general points which are of interest to everyone who studies the nature of charismatic authority. Under what conditions may someone become a charismatic leader? What are the connections between external circumstances and inner qualities in the course of such a career / ascent? What is the role of the group in the creation of a charismatic leader? How is the authority of such a leader specifically brought to bear?

For several weeks during the summer of 2011 and the winter of 2012 I lived in an Orthodox community which revered a particular elder. I shall examine the questions that have been raised on the basis of material gained from participant observation and interviews.

### **The economic context of the formation of St Nicholas' Monastery**

St Nicholas' Monastery is situated in the village of Nikolaevskoe, Shabalino region, Kirov Oblast. Because of the lack of rivers, arable land and mineral resources, these lands did not begin to be actively settled until the second half of the nineteenth century [Karina, Kozlov (eds.) 2007]. The railway from St Petersburg to Vyatka, built in 1902, encouraged the region's economic growth. At various times the Soviet authorities saw Shabalino region as a centre

for the production of flax, the production of butter, or animal husbandry. However, the difficult natural and climatic conditions meant that agriculture was unproductive in comparison with forestry. At present agriculture is continuing to die out, and the region's budget is based on income from logging and timber working.

The village of Nikolaevskoe, one of the oldest in the region, lies 53 km from the urban settlement of Leninskoe, the regional centre. According to the village librarian, its population in January 2011 was 102 people. It is not served by any public transport. The village has a library, a shop, and a dispensary, and the houses have running water and electricity. The building of a church dedicated to St Nicholas was begun at the end of the nineteenth century, but not completed until 1913. It was briefly turned into a grain store in the 1940s, then opened again. In the late Soviet period it was the only working church in the area. Not far from Nikolaevskoe, before the revolution, was the Convent of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God, founded in 1907 by Fevroniya of Shabalino [*Zhizneopisanie igumenii Fevronii... s. d.*]. It was closed in 1923 and all the monastery buildings were demolished.

In the Soviet period the economic and social life of the village revolved around the state farm. Ten or so of the surrounding villages were involved in the economic activities of the state farm, with Nikolaevskoe as the administrative centre. The state farm was engaged in sheep farming and the production of fodder. In the harvest season no fewer than a hundred persons would be brought in from Kirov and other provinces to work on the farm. Even so, the farm used to make a loss even then. The natural conditions of the Shabalino area were badly suited to industrialised animal husbandry: the long, cold winters made it necessary to buy in large amounts of fodder, which was an unjustified expense. At the beginning of the 1990s the Nikolaevskiy state farm was in a very disadvantageous position, one which was quite typical for the non-Black Earth Belt regions of the Russian North: the difficult natural and climatic conditions, combined with a lack of fertile land, the distance from the markets and the absence of any active transport arteries made it unprofitable [Kalugina, Fadeeva 2009: 188]. After changing its legal status and management more than once, the former state farm finally collapsed in 2006. The school closed a year later; the kindergarten had closed even before that. There were still a number of jobs in the public sector (now transferred to the local administration) and in forestry. The lack of any prospects whatsoever forced the young people to leave, and pensioners, who received at least some guaranteed income, were the best-off people in the village.

From the moment when the state farm began to collapse, the village was on a sure road to disappearance, and would have shared the fate

of many abandoned villages in the neighbourhood (see: [Shanin, Nikulin, Danilov (eds.) 2002; Nefedova, Pallot 2006]). However, some of the former property and land of the former state farm came to be concentrated in the hands of Fr Savva, then the parish priest of St Nicholas' Church. The forced deprivation of the village turned out to be a favourable socio-economic condition for the realisation of the priest's vision of an Orthodox settlement: 'When they couldn't do anything without the priest, not get married or christened' (Fr Savva). In 1994 Fr Savva obtained permission to build a monastery, and around this there grew up an Orthodox community convinced that there would soon be no way of surviving except through personal work on the land and the elder's prayers.

### **The charismatic leader and his circle**

Usually Fr Savva himself tells visiting pilgrims about his life, and he also illustrates his sermons with personal stories. The biography of him that I give here is reconstructed on the basis of my conversations with Fr Savva and stories of members of the community.<sup>1</sup> The future Archimandrite Savva was born in 1925 in Western Ukraine, not far from the Pochayiv Lavra. During the Second World War the place where he lived was occupied, and after their victory the Soviet authorities sent him to a camp in Kazakhstan. He worked in the mines for several years 'fed on some kind of slops once a day.' The conditions were so hard that Fr Savva, in his own words, vowed to serve the Lord if he could but eat his fill of bread and drink his fill of water. He was released in 1947 and went to Pochayiv. 'What should I be — a tractor driver? I'll be a monk.' Given the religious policies of the time, there was very little chance that a young man of twenty-two would be accepted at a monastery. Fr Savva's first rejection was explained by the fact that 'his time was not yet come.' He got married and began work as a tractor driver on a collective farm. In 1977, by agreement with his wife, he came again to Pochayiv, where he was accepted and given three duties: to look after the electricity in all the churches, to roll out the carpets for visiting bishops, and to remove demoniacs during the services.

Fr Savva believes that he has been given the gift of healing from his childhood, so that people came to him for help even before he entered the monastery.<sup>2</sup> He did not remove the demoniacs from the church, but prayed over them. In 1978 Metropolitan Khrisanf (Chepil) was consecrated Bishop of Vyatka, assembled his own clergy and brought Fr Savva to Kirov. According to one of the parishioners of the Church of the New Martyrs in Kirov, who often

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, unless indicated otherwise, the short quotations are from Fr Savva's stories.

<sup>2</sup> It is not entirely clear, however, what that help was.

made the pilgrimage to Nikolaevskoe, Bishop Khrisanf and Fr Savva came from the same village, Berezivka, Korets region, Rivne Oblast in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

At Kirov Fr Savva found himself in conflict with the rector of his church. According to Fr Savva, the other priests had a negligent attitude towards the rules of the Church, for example looking at the penitent rather than the Bible during confession. Fr Savva himself followed the liturgical prescriptions of the Pochayiv Lavra strictly, and regarded any deviation from them as something akin to heresy. As a result of this conflict Fr Savva asked the bishop to give him the most 'remote parish'. Metropolitan Khrisanf offered him the church at Nikolaevskoe. Fr Savva arrived there with a few 'reliable grannies, who helped him with their pensions'<sup>2</sup> (resident in the Orthodox settlement, about 60). For a long time this small group supported and renovated the church, and when the Soviet Union collapsed and the situation in the country changed, they began to bring their idea of a monastic parish to life.

Formed in 1995, the monastery now has about fifteen residents:<sup>3</sup> three nuns, five to seven novices and a similar number of postulants. The Sister Superior, Vasilisa, who is about fifty-five years old<sup>4</sup> and the superior of the community, came to Nikolaevskoe in the early years of this century. She is Fr Savva's daughter and spent her youth in Western Ukraine, then married a priest who was sent to serve in Kazakhstan. When their marriage ended she came with her children to help Fr Savva with the housekeeping. Soon Bishop Khrisanf gave his blessing for her to become a nun. At present she, as Sister Superior, gives most of the directions for the running of the community, though she often consults Fr Savva. All the other nuns and novices are over seventy-five. Most of them spend all their time in their cells and only appear for the Liturgy. Even though this is a female monastery, there are two male postulants there, and at one time there were several monks.<sup>5</sup>

The Orthodox community around the monastery consists of forty to fifty persons. Its composition is very diverse by social, generational and economic criteria. Most of the people are from Kirov, but some

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail on the functioning of social networks among the contemporary and Soviet episcopate of the Russian Orthodox Church, see: [Mitrokhin 2007].

<sup>2</sup> It may be, given the high taxes imposed on clerical incomes at that time, that assistance from the most involved parishioners was a usual practice.

<sup>3</sup> I was never told the exact number of nuns and postulants. I was unable to count them for myself, because some nuns never left their cells by reason of sickness, and the postulants did not wear a distinctive habit. Thus I base my figures on the liturgical commemorations (special prayers for the health of individuals at which they are mentioned by name with their position in the Church).

<sup>4</sup> Informants' ages are given as they were in 2011–2, the time of my expeditions to Nikolaevskoe.

<sup>5</sup> It is said that they left the monastery because there were no daily services.

are from St Petersburg, Yaroslavl, Murmansk, Archangel and many of the neighbouring villages in Kirov and Kostroma Oblast. Some people were brought to Nikolaevskoe by Fr Savva's reputation as a healer; their decision to stay there was connected either with the hope of being cured, or with the desire to live near to the priest who had 'put them back on their feet' (postulant, 70). Most of them, however, have remained in Nikolaevskoe not because of any illness, but out of a desire for salvation as the end of the world approaches.

Many members of the Orthodox community heard about Fr Savva while they were on pilgrimage or from fellow-parishioners who had been on pilgrimage. There are several pilgrimages that take place within the diocese of Vyatka, some official (the Velikoretskoe Pilgrimage) and some which the leadership of the Church views with mistrust (the 'Ardent Infants' and the 'Way of the Tsars'); the latter are particularly popular amongst the so-called 'church people' [Tarabukina 2000]. Such pilgrimages undertaken on foot provide a good opportunity for the circulation of eschatological and conspiracy-theory narratives about the wicked plots being hatched by the Yids and Masons, Roman Catholics and American secret services against the Russian people, who are the guardians of Orthodoxy, and about how the appearance of many technological innovations is evidence of the approach of the Apocalypse [Ibid.; Akhmetova 2010; Panchenko 2016]. The best means of salvation in such circumstances is to find an elder who will take responsibility for the life (in this world and the next) of his / her flock. The Orthodox community regards Fr Savva as such an elder, a living saint.

Over time another group has appeared in the Orthodox settlement, reflecting Fr Savva's ideas of the monastery's social mission: 'A priest must receive everybody, be he a robber, whoever he be' (Fr Savva). This group consists of members of the marginalised groups of today's society: ex-prisoners, the disabled and those with alcohol dependency. Most of them come from the surrounding villages. These people make up the basic workforce of the monastery's economy. They live at the monastery as long as they feel they need to, practically for bed and board.

Fr Savva's main aim is not only to form an Orthodox community around the monastery, but also to make the whole village practising members of the Church. In this the Archimandrite<sup>1</sup> sees the embodiment of his two fundamental principles of life: the service of God, who has placed him in this spot, and the service of humanity, by giving what help he can. For this, Fr Savva requires not only spiritual authority, but also a firm economic base.

<sup>1</sup> Bishop Khrisanf gave Fr Savva the rank of archimandrite, and also permission to perform exorcisms.

In practice, Fr Savva's plan is already to a certain extent realised. After the collapse of the state farm he was able to obtain part of the farm equipment and buildings and several head of cattle at a knock-down price. Now the monastery and parish are to a certain extent supplied with food from their activities in agriculture and animal husbandry (cattle breeding). Other sources of income are pilgrimages and the exorcisms performed by Fr Savva.

Half the village — twenty-five houses — is already occupied by the Orthodox parish. The houses in which Fr Savva settles new arrivals legally belong to the state farm,<sup>1</sup> they cannot be privatised, but it is possible to register people as resident there. The priest is extremely flexible in his management, and accepts various ways of including people and their families in the monastery's economic activities. Complete inclusion presupposes that a person will possess no property apart from his / her personal effects, and will receive bed and board for his / her labour (apart from the 'rehabilitation' group, there are a number of individuals among those 'completely included' who share the Orthodox community's values and see no point in having their own property, feeling that 'the only things that are my own here are my sins' (postulant, 50). It is possible for someone to be independently economically active and have additional paid work at the monastery. There are also families that are economically independent from the monastery but support the general convictions of the Orthodox settlement and identify themselves with that group (and other people also accept them as belonging to it).

Nevertheless, almost half the village (about fifty persons) is still not engaged with the Church. The local people occasionally go to church on holidays and are generally well disposed towards Fr Savva, both as a man and as an 'entrepreneur', since without the Orthodox settlement and the flow of pilgrims the village of Nikolaevskoe might already have ceased to exist. The only shop in the village would have closed as unprofitable, as would the dispensary and the primary school, for lack of people to use them. In addition, the locals do seasonal agricultural work on Fr Savva's farm, and / or sell berries and mushrooms to the pilgrims who come to visit him. The local people explain their detachment from the Church as a result of the policies of the Soviet authorities (most of the remaining inhabitants of Nikolaevskoe are pensioners). For their part, Fr Savva and the Sister Superior are upset with the locals for their lack of religious zeal, but have not given up hope of converting them.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the state farm no longer exists, in practice it has no legal successor.

### Soteriology and authority at Nikolaevskoe

While the local people expect definite economic benefits from Fr Savva's projects, the Archimandrite's disciples look for nothing less than the salvation of their souls. The figure of the elder occupies a central place in the soteriological ideas of the Orthodox community. One may only obtain salvation thanks to the prayers of the elder and his intercession before God. Personal efforts to attain the Kingdom of Heaven play hardly any part, since, as it is thought, they lead mostly to pride. Moreover, according to these ideas, a person is not left one to one with his / her sins or virtues: invisible evil forces constantly impinge upon him, be they devils, inherited sin or the so-called 'system'. Despite all the diversity between the ideas of the system (the total state), the devils (anthropomorphic evil beings) and inherited sin (the common guilt of the Soviet people for the sin of apostasy and regicide) the effect of the action of these forces on a person is similar. They all practically deprive people of the possibility of independent action, either gradually enslaving them or (as in the case of inherited sin) corrupting their nature from the very beginning. The residents of Nikolaevskoe live in constant fear of being under the influence of these forces and look for signs of their presence everywhere.

I shall give only two examples which illustrate the anxious mood of the Orthodox community. Once the postulant Maria<sup>1</sup> gave me a bottle of oil for the icon lamp. Suddenly the label caught her attention. Bemoaning her lack of caution, she abruptly tore off the label with the bar-code,<sup>2</sup> after which she told me to make the sign of the cross over it and said a prayer. On another occasion the postulant Ekaterina woke up the pilgrim Ksenia in the middle of the night in a panic that a demon was watching them. In a fright, Ksenia followed Ekaterina outside. The postulant pointed out some stars in the sky that made a pattern resembling horns.

The visiting pilgrims usually share this sense of anxiety and feel that they are in a more dangerous position than the residents inside the monastery, because nowadays there are many devils that can easily be 'caught'<sup>3</sup> anywhere outside the monastery walls. Nevertheless they may be healed by undergoing an exorcism. Even people relatively unfamiliar with the Orthodox sociolect understand exorcism as an activity which restores integrity: 'Father patches up the energetic holes with his lance' (female pilgrim, 50). However, this procedure

<sup>1</sup> All the names of the people living in the monastery and the Orthodox settlement have been changed.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s goods with bar-codes became a source of anxiety for a certain part of the Orthodox population, who believed that the three sixes that form the number of the Beast in the Apocalypse were encoded in them.

<sup>3</sup> As one might catch an infection [Trans.].

requires regular application, since life in the world is full of undesirable evil beings (or influences of the system) that affect people's bodies and souls. The following quotation from my dialogue with the pilgrim reveals the syncretism of these ideas, which include elements of New Age discourse:

*P.: He [Fr Savva] drives out the demons, you know, I hadn't been for three months, and then I came just before New Year, you can feel it, you know it hurts.<sup>1</sup>*

*Me: Yes, and when you do it regularly, do you stop feeling it?*

*P.: Yes, as if the demon is driven out of the organism, all the points come to life, but when you don't come for a long time, you feel some kind of heaviness in yourself (female pilgrim, about 50).*

Such views, held by the inhabitants of Nikolaevskoe and their closest social milieu, change their sense of the boundaries between the visible and invisible worlds and the causal connections between them. These boundaries become porous not only on ritual occasions, which is the perception of traditional societies [Baiburin 1993], but all the time. Only in special places and through the efforts of special religious specialists can these boundaries be put back in their place.

In practice the soteriology described above becomes an impulse to transfer all the responsibility for what happens onto Fr Savva. This includes not only spiritual but also practical questions, which in the present case are hard to tell apart. Fr Savva regularly goes out into the fields at planting and harvest time, and goes down into the cellars to check on the condition of the stored vegetables. The Sister Superior looks after the issue of equipment for work and its return, oversees the distribution of food, sees how much light is used and issues rebukes for what she regards as excessive use of it. Not only that, she moderates communication within the Orthodox group, often forbidding social contact between members of the opposite sex.

The Orthodox community and especially the marginal group is sometimes irritated by such excessive control of not only their work activities, but also their personal relationships and everyday life. However, as resistance to the leadership they choose the strategy of avoidance. Instead of discussing the conditions of their labour, and of their living at the monastery in general, many of them prefer to do some of their work, and then spend the rest of the day hiding from the Sister Superior. This 'game of hide-and-seek' corresponds to the Sister Superior's expectations of the behaviour of the inhabitants of Nikolaevskoe and only confirms her conviction of the need for strict control. On the one side this tendency towards total

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<sup>1</sup> Meaning the blows of the small lance with which Fr Savva strikes the pilgrims while he reads the appropriate prayers.

control is explained by the shortage of resources at the monastery, and on the other, one may see in the specific management described the practical result of the group's wish to avoid responsibility and place all authority in the hands of a single person.

However, their assurance of the elder's special nature, which allows him to govern other people, needs constant reinforcement. This strengthening of their faith in Fr Savva's special gifts and in the correctness of the Orthodox group's perception of the world comes about in the course of everyday communication.

### **Interpretative communication with the charismatic leader**

According to the theory of pragmatics, our everyday communication is based on a series of universal principles. People usually assume that their interlocutor is talking about something that is relevant to the context of the conversation and is trying to avoid superfluous or inadequate information. It is also expected of the interlocutor that he will speak the truth and remain within the bounds of politeness [Grice 1989]. And although we can all cite many examples of these postulates' being contravened, it is taken for granted that they are more or less fulfilled in a successful everyday communication.

However, unlike an everyday conversation, in the case of a ritual event all communicative expectations will be broken. The purpose of the ritual hardly includes the clear, coherent and unambiguous conveyance of information. And although, in the past, anthropologists explained ritual speech as the conveyance of sacred knowledge to the neophytes, this informational theory of ritual had obvious flaws. Ritual communication is often deliberately ambiguous, and so-called sacred knowledge is of no use in ordinary life. Moreover, it is sometimes conveyed in language which is not comprehensible or deliberately distorted [Tambiah 1968].

Such characteristics of ritual speech have made people engaged in social research look for other explanations of its purposes and structure. Pascal Boyer has pointed out that non-human actors are always present in ritual communication, and that the purpose of the ritual is not to convey knowledge to neophytes but to make them open to that knowledge the transmission of which depends on supernatural beings, or, to put it another way, to introduce the neophytes to these non-human actors [Boyer 1990: 90]. Once they have appeared, the supernatural actors (as the people conceive of them) are able to make a real difference to human communication. After all, how can it be a matter of fulfilling Grice's postulates when the interlocutor is invisible and even immaterial?

In his article on language and religion, Webb Keane points out how a person's linguistic behaviour changes when his / her interlocutor

is invisible and the laws of tête-à-tête communication cannot be applied. When talking to God, to angels, to demons, to the spirits of the ancestors — in all these cases it is appropriate to ask by what means and in what way people can talk with invisible beings, how they receive answers, how they can recognise the source of the answer and evaluate its sincerity, completeness and appropriateness [Keane 1997: 48]. Different cultures have found different answers to these questions. It has depended on how people have understood the nature of this invisible world, the nature of humanity and the means of making contact between the two. Usually cultures have special mediators (shamans, seers, etc.) who have privileged access to the invisible essences. Such a division leads to certain socio-political consequences for that group, and also raises a series of curious questions about the intentionality of the speaking mediator, and about the authorship of what is said — is someone consciously conveying what has been revealed, or acting in a state of possession, with the spirit speaking through him or her. These questions in turn require clarification of the responsibility of the mediator for what is said. Shamanism, *klikushestvo*,<sup>1</sup> demonic possession, speaking in tongues and so forth are all very different phenomena, which may be profitably examined through the lens of linguistic anthropology and that branch of it which is the pragmatics of religious speech.

In this context eldership is curious, in that the elder does not speak in the name of any other being, nor does he come into contact with the invisible world during special rituals. Although to all appearances he is an ordinary man, he has extraordinary gifts, which above all change the temporal structure around him. He is a man to whom God has revealed the past (other people's sins) and the future. Whereas our everyday communication is built on the relevant context of 'here and now', communication with the elder requires quite another basis, such as 'here and hereafter', or only 'in the hereafter', or 'in the hearer's past'.

Changes in the temporal pattern of perception of the elder's speech are particularly significant insofar as, strictly speaking, the ritual context of contact with the elder is not separated from the everyday. Accordingly, any conversation may potentially be interpreted in a sacred mode.<sup>2</sup> According to J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts, our every utterance consists of locutionary, illocutionary and

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<sup>1</sup> A condition known in Russia since the Middle Ages, in which those afflicted are typically subject to fits during which they emit animal-like cries; they are supposed to be either bewitched or possessed by spirits [Trans.].

<sup>2</sup> The constant ambiguity of elders' speech has been examined by Alice Forbess in the context of the production of knowledge in Orthodoxy and the sometimes necessary vagueness of theological postulates [Forbess 2015]. Forbess's primary informants were well-educated Serbian elders who made deliberate use of the rhetorical device of paradox. In my case the ambiguity or secondary meanings were more often created by Fr Savva's disciples than by Fr Savva himself.

perlocutionary acts: that is, the actual speaking, the illocutionary act which manifests the speaker's intention and sets (or defines) the convention under which the utterance is to be interpreted, and the perlocution which is the extra-conventional effect on the hearers [Austin 1962: 95–131]. Austin developed his theory of speech acts with reference to the speaker. However, I shall rather analyse the reaction of the hearers, since it is essential for more or less successful communication for the listeners correctly to recognise the speaker's intention and purposes, that is, to understand the illocutionary force of the utterance. It is not so much that the community at Nikolaevskoe does not recognise the illocutionary force of Fr Savva's utterances as that it substantially transforms it, placing the elder's words in a ritual context even when it is a matter of everyday things. The perlocutionary effect of the conversation will be tireless interpretation of his words. I shall examine concrete examples of this below.

Fr Savva's communicative repertoire is not homogeneous. He mainly converses with the community in the following genres: sermon, confession (either within the setting of the liturgy, or as an informal conversation, usually with new arrivals) and everyday business communication. The initiator of the interaction is almost always Fr Savva. He is already a very aged man, and therefore the community has the idea that it is not good often to disturb him with their troubles: he prays for them all in any case, and, since he has the spiritual gift of perception, he can see a person's problems and will probably give him an answer in one of his sermons or everyday conversation: it is only necessary to read what he says correctly. Of all the genres available to the community, it is the sermon that is easiest to divorce from its original context and which, through the efforts of the flock, acquires supplementary interpretations.

The people around Fr Savva are constantly occupied in interpreting his words. One may encounter fragments of his sermons in the most diverse contexts. For example, the subject of the famine that will occur in the last times, and the need to be abstemious with food in connection with the sin of gluttony, is very popular. In Fr Savva's sermons this is all that is said about it, but in the community active consumers of literature about elders of both sexes supplement what he says, asserting that the elect will indeed need little food (compare [Akhmetova 2010: 120–34]). Other people, in the context of Christian humility, stress that they cannot do without food at all, since they are a long way from the ascetics of old who lived almost without it. Finally, creative development of the subject is possible: the postulant Lidia had cats which she fed once a day, and the cats were always hungry. I asked if I might be allowed to buy them something, to which Lidia replied: 'But what for? It's normal to feed the cats once a day, the saints used to eat once a day.'

The visiting pilgrims also apply Fr Savva's words to themselves, and interpret them with respect to their own health or wellbeing and / or the fate of the whole world. During my conversation with the pilgrim Tatyana, she remarked that Fr Savva's Sunday sermon had been a very good one. I asked her to tell me precisely what she had liked about it. The sermon had contained calls to faith in the Lord and His Mother and a reminder of the coming of the Antichrist in the near future. She answered: 'Briefly, but Father said everything, we can go to church until the Eighth Council.'<sup>1</sup> There had not been a word about the Eighth Council in the sermon, but for Tatyana the eschatological motifs that had been expressed had evoked others that she already knew and that were in the same semantic field.

Most of the residents of Nikolaevskoe confine their commentaries on Fr Savva's speeches to extracts from his sermons. In his communications about everyday business Fr Savva speaks not as an elder but as an ordinary man. However, there are people who are extremely consistent in their understanding of the elder's extraordinary nature and are ready to interpret his every word as providential.

There is in the community a 'professional interpreter', the worker Glafira, and most of what she says is commentary on the priest's words. Most of the community does not take her seriously. For example, at haymaking time all the able-bodied residents of the monastery were sent out to rake the hay into windrows, and suddenly Fr Savva shouted out 'Don't make stooks!' I muttered that nobody was going to, anyway. Glafira immediately reacted to my words, the words of one of the uninitiated that also supposed some doubt about the priest's wisdom, 'But Father is foresighted, he knows what we would have started to do.' In this context the illocutionary force of Fr Savva's utterance could be formulated as 'I'm warning you: you mustn't make stooks.' For me it was a superfluous sentence, since nobody was making them in any case. For Glafira there was total certainty that what he was warning about would have happened in the future, so that it was not superfluous, but necessary, making a timely change to our actions.

It is not even always necessary for the elder to say anything for Glafira to interpret what happens from that temporal perspective in which Fr Savva, knowing the future, somehow averts it in the present. On one occasion a tractor broke down in the fields, but after a while another one drove up. Glafira exclaimed joyfully 'A miracle, a miracle, what a miracle!' At this everyone else replied 'What sort of a miracle is that? Ivan went to Nikolaevskoe on his motorbike and told them to send another tractor.' But in Glafira's interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> There have been seven Ecumenical Councils in the history of the Church, but the Eighth Council, as the people around the churches are convinced, will be the Council of Antichrist.

it had been Fr Savva who had given the order to the other tractor driver to go out to the field, foreseeing the breakdown even before the tractor had gone to the fields.

Glafira's interpretations of this sort rarely receive a warm welcome among the other members of the community. Not only are they not prepared to perceive everyday communications in a different temporal mode, but accepting Glafira's interpretation would mean that she had been the first to see the mystic connection between events, which would mean that she was more spiritually experienced. Preserving the relative equality of status within the group, they do not allow her to distinguish herself and do not support most of her interpretations. Interpretation is almost the only resource within the Orthodox community that creates a hierarchy within the group. Interpretation, in this context, equals correct information or the ability to recognise it. Other resources for affirming their status are either inaccessible to the members of the community, or do not appear significant, and may even seem unedifying or sinful (for example, being financially well off or educated). Interpretations are also used to legitimise one's rights or attempts to compel someone else to do something. Since the right to interpretation is freely available (after all, Fr Savva's sermons are heard by everyone), in one way or another the community has recourse to this resource. But there is a difficulty in its use: it is essential for one person's interpretation to be shared by the rest of the members of the community, or at least some of them.

The process of changing temporal settings may be applied not only to Fr Savva's words, but also to other significant happenings in the community. Fevroniya of Shabalino and a number of other blessed persons who lived in the locality in Soviet times, and who though not canonised are venerated as saints, have almost as high a status as the elder in the community. Stepan told me in the course of our interview that when he was a child the Blessed Gavrila often visited their house and his mother would feed him:

*Stepan: When Mother had baked bread or pies and took them out of the oven and put them on the table, he would grab hold of them and break them. Mother <...> would say to her daughters, 'Stand in a ring round them, don't let Garya<sup>1</sup> in to grab hold of the bread.' But he would still somehow manage to get hold of it and throw it about.*

*Aleksandr: Was it before this that you were expropriated as kulaks or afterwards?*

*S.: Afterwards.*

*A.: There you are, he was simply telling you that you would... (Stepan, about 80, Aleksandr, about 50, members of the Orthodox settlement).*

<sup>1</sup> The diminutive of Gavrila [Eds.].

Aleksandr is clearly using the same interpretational scheme as is offered in the life of Fevroniya of Shabalino. ‘After praying, Mother Fevroniya sent the sisters to pick flowers and bring them to her. They were all glad: flowers meant something good. But the abbess was silent. She took the flowers and <...> scattered them in all directions. She said only “So we shall all be scattered”’ [*Zhizneopisanie igumenii Fevronii...* s. d.: 12]. However, Stepan, as the owner of the reminiscences felt that he had the right to give a different interpretation, based on the literal meaning of the prophecy: ‘It is bread, he was foretelling, there was a time when they used to throw bread about, not so long ago, there was lots of bread, sometimes the children would play with a loaf like a football.’ Then Stepan, encouraged that his interlocutors had accepted his version, continued his story, developing his scheme of interpretation of the prophecies: ‘And then again [the Blessed Gavriila] would keep saying “Mother, some milk, mother, some milk, mother, some milk,” so he was also foretelling, everybody started joining the collective farms, and those collective farms wanted milk, milk.’<sup>1</sup> Although this saying of the blessed man can easily be understood literally, as a request for milk, the situation of a story about a local saint does not presuppose such a profane explanation, therefore any action of the blessed man is willingly interpreted as a prophecy.

Interpretation as a popular communicative genre is not only characteristic of communities that have formed around elders. If one is to describe the situation in Russia, various New Age groups are characterised by active interpretation (see: [Panchenko 2006; Andreeva 2012]) and so are local intellectual elites [Shtyrkov 2016]. What distinguishes communication with elders is its particular temporal orientation and the circumstance that the place where a supernatural entity usually stands is occupied by a human being. This peculiarity — that certain subjects are endowed with the properties of a human interlocutor and a non-human entity at the same time — lies, I would suggest, at the root of charismatic authority. At the lowest level this power is the result of a similar shift in communication from everyday interaction ‘here and now’ towards interaction with an entity which is defined by different parameters in different cultures.<sup>2</sup> Charismatic leadership, moreover, is only one of the possible consequences of such interaction, for we know that in some cultures there exist ideas that intercourse with non-human entities is to be avoided. In this case charismatic leadership is the result of a particular model in that culture, according to which the

<sup>1</sup> Referring to the milk quotas imposed on collective farmers by the state [Eds.].

<sup>2</sup> In Old Believer culture, for example, where there are no elders (understood as bearers of the gifts of the Holy Spirit), this sort of shift has led to a general heightened semiotisation of culture [Naumescu 2011].

words and deeds of a particular human being (or not entirely human being, according to the group's ideas) are imbued with special power.

Strictly speaking, it is by no means necessary for the elder to be answered with verbal acts. It may be by the flock's action or inaction. Hence from the analysis of communicative acts we pass to the analysis of interaction within culture in a wider sense. In the case of Nikolaevskoe the elder's charismatic authority is defined by his flock's certainty that Fr Savva knows the future. Consequently he is ready to take responsibility for that future, at least on behalf of those who follow him of their own free will. The flock thus responds by passivity, by the willingness to accept control over the smallest details of their lives. Therefore what researchers find so surprising at Nikolaevskoe — the people's unpreparedness to take responsibility for their actions — is the result of living with the elder. In the academic milieu, which is based on the general Western norms of the view of human nature, the refusal of responsibility appears to be the result of inadequacy of external compulsion, since it amounts to a lack of free will.<sup>1</sup> It is curious, though, that such a refusal of free will should be the natural and logical consequence of communication with a subject who possesses superhuman knowledge of the future.

### Conclusion

The examination of charismatic authority as a particular type of communication between human and non-human beings involves both definite methodological advantages and difficulties. Since, when charisma is so defined, face-to-face communication is exceptionally important, I can see that this model is applicable to the traditional anthropological objects of study — small communities. At the same time it is hardly practical at the level of the state.

When I speak of the advantages of perceiving charisma as specific communication, I would like to stress two elements. Firstly, we may suppose that in certain communities charismatic authority is practically impossible for lack of any space for it in the group's communicative field. Take for example Luhrmann's widely known work on the Evangelical Protestants of Chicago, *When God Talks Back* [Luhrmann 2012]. In their striving to fill their lives with the presence of God, these people try to address God as often as possible and on the most mundane occasions — what clothes to put on in the morning, what route to take to work — and to be attentive to the answers that come into their heads. They organise evenings of

<sup>1</sup> For example, many investigators of Soviet everyday life in the 1930s have either depicted communist ideology as crushing the individual, or ignored it altogether, thereby consciously or unconsciously rehabilitating Soviet citizens of that period in the eyes of the academic community. For a critical analysis of these approaches see: [Hellbeck 2010].

meeting with God, during which they can tell everything that troubles them and simply remain in silence with the One in whose unconditional love members of this religious group believe. Such methods of interaction make the presence of God real in the lives of these Protestant Evangelicals, and at the same time such a personal, ordinary communication with God, woven into the rhythm of their everyday lives, makes any qualitative distinction between the leaders and other members of the group problematic. Even if some members of the group hear the answers to their requests and questions more easily and more swiftly, nevertheless established contact with God is the personal affair of every one of them.<sup>1</sup>

The second consequence arises from the idea of the very possibility of a person's communication with an imagined subject. In the place of the latter there may be not only angels and demons, but also, say, the true secret ego of the subject himself. If we look at the work of Wasielewski cited at the beginning of this article in this light, in which the author sees in charismatic authority the strong emotional ties between the leader and the group, this model is correct only for a particular period in the history of North America, when certain communicative techniques intended to bring a person's real emotions to the surface and open them up, such as the popular variant of psychoanalysis, were particularly widely practised [Illouz 2008]. It was believed that to identify and acknowledge them would bring a person to happiness. And the speeches of Martin Luther King analysed in the article do indeed fulfil the function of expressing hidden emotions and sublimated desires and modelling new 'correct' emotions.

Thus the communicative model of charismatic authority may provide a new set of research tools allowing a view of the agency, intentionality and authorship of utterances, and means (direct or indirect) of conveying the missives of a non-human entity through the charismatic leader and his / her responsibility for the information conveyed.

*Translated by Ralph Cleminson*

#### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Sergei Shtyrkov and Vlad Naumescu for their valuable advice.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the absence of any mediators in the conversation with God is considered a distinctive feature of all Protestant denominations, it is obvious that the actual structure of their communities and their ideas about the means of communication with God may be very different. See, however, how visions of Hell help Russian charismatics to climb the social ladder: [Shtyrkov 2013].

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