

Charisma

This is the fifth in a series. Please see Parts [One](#), [Two](#), [Three](#), and [Four](#)

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (January 2024)



Blue Rhapsody II– Hans Hofmann, 1963

This is another in my series on the therapeutic worldview, the most recent previous essay being [Religion and the Therapeutic Worldview](#). In this essay we pause to re-calibrate, by paying special attention to language.

The word “worldview” is bandied about a good bit in conversations about where the culture is taking us. Let’s consider what it means and doesn’t mean. “Worldview” is normally intended to correspond to the German *Weltanschauung*, which is sometimes employed in philosophy to mean not merely

an interpretive lens, but rather a person's comprehensive understanding of reality. We might use instead "comprehensive worldview," or "paradigm," or we might continue to use just "worldview," so long as we take it to mean a set of concepts or thought patterns that govern how we comprehend reality; one's operating assumptions about how things work.

Worldviews by this definition are mutually exclusive. If you adhere to an orthodox Christian worldview, for example, you take the physical world of matter in motion to be only part of reality; there is an unseen spiritual "world," too, which we might conceive as another dimension overlapping those of physical space-time. This element of reality has no place in an atheist worldview. To grasp another's worldview, you must imagine holding a set of foundational truths different from your own, and then rationally extrapolating to acquire the other's vision of reality.

I undertake this clarification to underscore that the therapeutic worldview is mutually exclusive with the religious worldview, as discussed in *Religion and the Therapeutic Worldview*. It's very important to remember, in this context, that the religious worldview is fundamental to Western civilization, it's not exclusive to religious believers. One who appreciates the civilization arising from religion's creeds and interdicts has the religious worldview, whether he is indifferent to God and religion, or not.

It's also important to understand that there is a great divide between the worldviews. It takes imagination to cross over and understand the other. To understand the therapeutic worldview from a Christian perspective, for example, one has to suppose that what is true and right is formed in the inner being as the result of warring psychological impulses; there are no Platonic conceptions of aspirational virtue.

Some of the words we use to comprehend the differences in worldview may seem awkward at first, like "remission,"

“release,” “renunciatory impulse,” and “interdicts.” Such usages may seem a bit arcane, but are necessary to get subtleties in meaning not available from more accessible but facile synonyms. The language comes in large part from Philip Reiff, in his 1966 [The Triumph of the Therapeutic](#), which is now recognized as seminal in marking the shift from the faith worldview to the therapeutic worldview. In what follows I mostly cite his posthumously published [Charisma](#) (2006).

“Charisma” as used here doesn’t mean personal magnetism. It means an otherwise difficult-to-define sense of deep mystery that attends openness to the divine. The closest I can come to it in a single word is “numinous,” prominent in [Rudolf Otto’s](#) writing at the turn of the last century. You might use “religious impulse” instead, so long as you attribute the phrase to something ominous and real, more real than that which is tangible; a reference to the ground of all being, roughly described by phrases like Tao, Brahmin, and almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth.

A couple of key quotes, from *Charisma*:

The therapeutic is that terrible beast who has been slouching toward Bethlehem.

[T]he therapeutic is the ideal anti-type and real successor of the charismatic.

In the first quote, Reiff is of course referring to Yeats’ poem *Second Coming*. The “terrible beast” phrasing gets interpreted and re-interpreted all the time. A good but kind of vague interpretation, I would say, is anti-Christ. As the therapeutic impulse infects our culture, it replaces the faith impulse. It manifests anti-Christ, the destructive, rotting worm of our society.

Reiff says the therapeutic way of thinking about self and about reality is in conflict with the charismatic. The charismatic must be creedal, and as such introduces new “interdicts” in our lives. Instead of “interdicts,” I might have said something like forms, boundaries, restrictions, scaffolding, constraints, and like terms; in fact I used all those words in my book [*The Mountain and the River*](#), subtitled *Genesis, Postmodernism, and the Machine* (New English Review Press 2023). The therapeutic, Reiff says, is “a releaser of the interdicts, a transgressive figure.” It doesn’t construct, it deconstructs.

If you’re following this so far, you understand that perception of charisma also means perception of guilt, our consciousness of sin. And that leads to what Reiff called a need for “renunciation.” So we have a renunciatory instinct against the evil we produce. That results in creeds. Creeds are systems of interdicts; moral rules necessitated by consciousness of sin and the renunciatory instinct. You can think of the Apostles’ Creed or the Ten Commandments as examples. Creeds constitute the structure, or scaffolding, or system of constraint on which a society is built.

Failing to perceive charisma, or outright rejection of it, means rejection of guilt and the creeds and interdicts it produces. What takes its place is a therapeutic mindset. Sin is not the problem; guilt is. Guilt and its management in the inner psyche is the therapeutic project, not management of the sin through renunciation and consequent creeds. It is rejection of an ontology of mankind with endemic sin: reality imagined without the Fall.

The mindset is “therapeutic” because it means psychological self-care, which is required to protect the true self from the corrupting sense of sin. It’s not sin that corrupts, but *consciousness* of sin. Consciousness of sin is not understood to construct character. It is understood only to induce guilt and shame. Psychological man, with the therapeutic worldview,

assumes consciousness of sin to be formed from creedal interdicts, rather than the other way around: creedal interdicts from consciousness of sin.

One's Identity, the true inner being unsullied by consciousness of sin, must be allowed to emerge from the formless void of the subconscious, the Freudian roil of competing inner impulses. This requires both transgression of interdicts, and ongoing nurture of the emerging innocent inner being. No wonder, then, that the therapeutic worldview entails "an acute suspicion of all normative institutions." Religion is a threat, but so also all tradition formed on a presumption of transcendence, or logos, or Platonic ideal, or universality of moral values.

It is common in discussions on this subject to personify "the transgressive" and "the therapeutic," using those words to refer to people who adopt that way of thinking. This would be a person who is given over to the transgressive therapeutic disposition rather than the charismatic religious disposition. You can think of these as corresponding to political left and right, respectively, but that's a little too simplistic, without more explanation. It has more to do with inner psychological disposition than political principles about the scope of liberalism, or of public vs. private interest in material resources.

The charisma requires creed, remember, and creed constitutes "interdicts." The therapeutic disposition is transgressive, which means it's not a competing creed, but rather transgression of creeds formed in charisma. You might think of the transgressive as creedal because after all it involves articulable tenets of belief, but those tenets are negations, not affirmative beliefs *sui generis*. It is more accurately an anti-creed.

The creedal disposition builds through interdicts, while the therapeutic deconstructs through transgression. The

therapeutic disposition presupposes that deconstruction is necessary because the interdicts produce authoritarian repression of the innocent inner-formed self which the therapeutic disposition creates and then nurtures and protects.

I want to emphasize the dichotomy of creed vs. transgression of creed, over against creed vs. creed. Transgression without something to transgress makes no sense. One cannot transgress the established order if there is no established order. There can be no charisma without creed, but neither can there be transgression without creed. The transgressive impulse in this way doubles back on the religious impulse. Both religion (or charisma) and irreligion (or transgression) depend on creed. One constructs it; the other deconstructs it. This is why hard left activism, which is a reaction to norms founded on the religious impulse, nonetheless has a religious feel.

Transgression is, as the word suggests, contravention of an ordered system of thought rather than its own system of thought, which means that one transgresses interdicts without imposing interdicts, which explains why progressives never disclose the endpoint of their progress. There isn't one. We'll find out when we get there.

For those with a lingering attachment to interdicts formed in charisma, this just looks like an unspooling of all values; a dismantling of the system of interdicts rooted in revelations of God. It means the collapse of civilization, when we extrapolate these ideas to their logical conclusion. But for transgressives, God and the moral hierarchy descending from Him are a fiction, so it's ok to hate God and the system of the world constructed by belief in Him. And there is no perception of irony in decrying hate in the abstract while hating those who perceive charisma and actual sin and accept interdicts against it.

This idea of interdict and transgression is right, I think,

because it explains how people are on this left and right political spectrum we think we understand. They aren't so much expressions of certain political opinions as they are expressions of how one evaluates the system of the world he finds himself in. If you think it's authoritarian and oppressive and bounded by repression and hate, you'll want it loosened to the ebb and flow (always presumptive flow) of positive social movement toward individual liberty. But you will be of a rightist disposition if you think the culture is so lacking in necessary interdicts of sinful man that we're unwinding to a chaos that tends to totalitarianism: political absorption of the individual, rather than his liberation.

More Reiff. In ancient Israel the creedal forms contained within themselves an openness to possibility, rather than the rigid left/right way we approach things now. "God is dangerous to man." "God and God alone, can be the terrorist of man." Not mankind's structuring of interdicts, but God. The terror of God is the terror of possibility. This terror of God results in the construction of man-made systems of constraint and control to supplant religious interdicts: "Released from the constraints of [the interdictions that accompany] charismatic authority, Western culture can engage freely in its own destruction ... All hope dies of a democracy that is not a dictatorship of the empty by the phony."

Why? Because in a society imbued with the charisma, "[t]he highest authority is subjective knowledge of God." But "[t]he highest knowledge under the authority of the therapeutic is the objective knowledge that there is no God."

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book is [*The Mountain and the River: Genesis, Postmodernism, and the Machine*](#) (New English Review Press 2023).

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