

HOLY MISCHIEF WITHIN INSTITUTIONS: CHARISM AND CONSCIENCE

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Introduction

We often tend to understand the word charism to mean a particular spiritual gift given by God to a person for the good of a religious institution like a church, a synagogue, a temple, or a mosque. The initiator of the gift is God, Thou who is the ground of being, and the recipients are members of a religious institution. Working through religious institutions, a charism can benefit the entire human community.¹ However, in our day, I think we need to recognize that charisms are given to people who do not belong to a specific religion and are operative in the wider secular world. Indeed, given the secular age² in which we live, it appears that charisms operate both inside and outside conventional religious institutions. Indeed, today there are many who abide beyond confessional walls who possess charisms for the good of all. Religious thinkers today need to keep this contemporary development in mind, as I shall do in these reflections. The charism of holy mischief is a combination of experiencing the holy and working with critical thought and action for justice, peace, and sustainability. This charism, often associated with the prophetic tradition, has deep roots within human history. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, I wish here to offer a few observations on the charism of holy mischief, how it operates within institutions and organizations today, and how discernment and conscience are important elements of living this charism. Central to my thinking is a growing awareness that the charism of holy mischief circulates today not only

among those who share a religious horizon of meaning but also among many who abide outside the confines of religious structures.

The charism of holy mischief

Let us begin by considering what we mean by the word “holy.” Usually, we equate goodness with the word holy. But, as Rudolf Otto has argued, this is inaccurate. It is true that being good is contained within the term “holy.” But, the “holy” is much more than being good. Otto argues that the “more,” the surplus of meaning, attributed to the term “holy” is beyond goodness.³ In Catholic theology, we would call this surplus, this “more,” the “experience of God.” For Otto, the holy points to the experience of feeling dependent upon another, upon a Creator. It is accompanied by a feeling of something beyond the self, something objective. It leads to a sense of “creature-feeling” as well as a sense of fearful mystery.

The experience can be uncanny, eerie, and even weird. It is often inexpressible, causes awe, is inspiring, gives energy, and holds a sense of urgency. Deep within the experience is an awareness of the majestic.⁴ Now there are many biblical examples of people who encountered the holy. Of course, we know that Abraham stood in awe of the holy when he looked up into the heavens and saw the stars in the night sky. It was this experience of the holy, the “more,” that ushered in the covenant between God and Abraham. His experience was enough to found an entire people. But, for our purpose here, which is to explore “holy mischief,” let us turn to the life of Moses who is the quintessential model of holy mischief in the Jewish tradition.

Moses was no saint. He killed an Egyptian man and fled into the desert. There he lived in a new land and led a quiet, solitary life as a goat herder and a shepherd. But, one day he had an experience of the holy that totally transformed his life. He saw a bush on fire, but the bush was not consumed. Drawn to this, he sensed that something unusual was taking place. Moved by fright, he took off his shoes, because of the divine power he sensed, and knelt down before this awesome event. It was an experience that was not only powerful, but also communicative in that it spoke to him. The holy revealed itself, as “I am who I am.”

The experience of the burning bush, and all that was revealed in that experience, led Moses to embrace his mission, which was to lead God’s chosen people out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. We well know

what God was able to accomplish through Moses. God freed the chosen people from slavery. The holy which Moses experienced and which led him to work with the Creator in the freeing of the chosen people marked the beginning of the tradition of holy mischief, the prophetic tradition. All authentic prophecy is grounded in the experience of God, the experience the holy. All work for liberation, all work for justice, peace and environmental sustainability, if grounded in the experience of the holy, will yield results. This is the way God works. This is the way of holy mischief.

Turning to the Christian story, we have many descriptions of when people experienced Jesus as a bearer of the holy. It's not hard to imagine that people found him mysterious. He may even have struck some people as a little weird. Certainly the transfiguration would have been an experience of the ineffable. Being with Jesus would have been inspiring for his teachings turned the cultural narrative on its head, and he had a sense of urgency in his preaching. His ministry was accompanied by a sense of the majestic, of inapproachability, and humility: recall those who could only touch his garment; the Centurion who asked Jesus to heal but not to come to his house; and after the Resurrection, the disciples who would have been awestruck by him being alive and in their midst.

On top of his innate holiness, we know that Jesus was known for causing trouble. He challenged the religious and political leaders of his time; called attention to those who were poor, sick, and imprisoned; chased the moneychangers out of the temple; and focused on the Kingdom of God rather than the Empire of Caesar. Because he challenged the powers and principalities of his time, he was put to death.

The crucifixion marks the moment in which Jesus, the holy mischief-maker from Galilee, becomes the Christ, the holy redeemer of the world. The crucifixion serves as the turning point, the point of transformation, and thereafter death and resurrection are gathered into one unbreakable event. The cross becomes the tree of life and Jesus is revealed as the Christ, the Holy One. Christians, then, who follow Jesus, follow the Crucified Christ who continues to be fully present as the Holy One of God. In uniting both holiness and mischief-making, Jesus became the full incarnation of holy mischief. What Moses was to the Jewish people, Jesus now became for the world.

Just as the fire did not consume the burning bush, the cross did not destroy Jesus. Just as God was revealed through the burning bush, God

has been revealed through the death and resurrection of Christ. Just as the burning bush inaugurated Moses' mission of holy mischief, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has unleashed the charism of holy mischief into the world. This holy mischief is the work of prophecy, liberation, healing, and repair of the world.

What can we glean from these two sources, Moses and Jesus Christ? First we can conclude that the way of prophetic action in the world is something that God desires and is a path that is integral to the life of Judeo-Christian faith. Second, we can know that Christ, as the full presence of the holy in our world, requires us to be in communion with him, to abide in him, and in so doing to see the path he travelled as the holy path. To be a follower of Christ is to be led, at some point in our lives, to our own crucifixion. To follow Jesus is to follow a dangerous person. Christ, the holy one, is our "dangerous memory."⁵ The more we follow him, the more we are led to the cross in which both suffering and resurrection are one. The deeper we go with this experience of abiding with Christ, with sharing in his life, death, and resurrection, the more we live "in persona Christi."

The way of holy mischief, of prophecy, is a path that seeks to live in touch with the fire of the burning bush and the power of the dangerous cross. It is a charism that leads to freedom and liberation, to embrace critical and alternative lifestyles that challenge contemporary cultures and even the norms of religious institutions. It leads to critique of all political, economic, religious, and social systems. It leads a person to denounce sinful structures and announce the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. We could call this way of being in the world the charism of holy mischief.

There has always been a tension between the charism of holy mischief and institutional life. Institutions tend to appropriate the energy of the holy and to carry it forth so that others may benefit from the power of the holy. In this way, the relationship between institutions and holy mischief can be positive. But, there can be negative consequences when institutions appropriate the holy. Sometimes there is a tendency to censor the critical component of the charism so that it is less challenging. Moreover, rules and laws, seemingly necessary in systems, often threaten to squelch the fire of holy mischief.

We are living through a time of tremendous change in our world and in our religious institutions. As the limitations of hierarchal systems become more apparent and new forms of organization emerge; as the influence of religions in secular society wanes; and as postmodernism and globalization continue to impact upon all areas of life, it seems to me nonetheless that the charisma of holy mischief continues to burn and to be active within our world today. Indeed, we are experiencing in our time the re-emergence of the mystical, prophetic life in various areas of religious and spiritual life.

Moreover, even beyond the perimeters of explicitly acknowledged religions, we see holy mischief at work today. We witness it with the literary, visual, and acoustic arts and in the use of communication technologies fueling activism. Sometimes we even witness its operation within the academic world itself. We are witnessing a growing integration of mysticism and justice outside religious institutions with the growth of a global citizenry mobilized around justice and human rights. Granted, there are differing views of what constitutes human rights and differing notions of justice,⁶ yet the growing worldwide impetus toward social justice work and ecological sustainability points to a widening operation of holy mischief in our time. Today this charisma is alive within religious circles, but it is also found in the circles of some secular humanists, environmentalists, and peace and justice activists.

Many of those outside of religious circles have experiences of the holy that either lead them toward or sustain them in their engagement in making the world a better place. Many have experiences of the holy in which they see something “more” going on, something “more” that has the power to draw them and lead them. The following description of such an encounter by the political mystic Dag Hammarskjöld, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, is perhaps emblematic of this experience:

Summoned

To carry it,

Alone

To assay it,

Chosen

To suffer it,

And free
 To deny it,
 I saw
 For one moment
 The sail
 In the sun-storm,
 Far off
 On a wave-crest,
 Alone,
 Bearing from land.⁷

The challenge of many religious leaders is to assist people in understanding and communicating such primal spiritual experiences. Sadly, many do little to help and people are often left to process their experiences on their own. Yet such experiences often fuel a person to be engaged in the meaningful work of serving others by trying to pursue justice, peace, and sustainability in the midst of global complexities.

Such engagement should not be surprising for one of the major characteristics of the contemporary renaissance in spirituality is the renewed emphasis placed upon action as constitutive of a holy life. No longer is the contemplative life seen as the higher way; now the active life is preferred as the road to meaning and spiritual fulfillment. It is this turn toward action and a renewed appreciation of holiness that led Dag Hammarskjöld to also say, “The road to holiness passes through the world of action.”⁸

It is this active, engaged spirituality that is the tenor of our age. It is the people who understand the importance of an active spirituality and the ones who speak passionately from the context of their engagement with others that speak with moral authority. This is why Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King Jr., and so many others speak to us. Moral authority in our age is directly connected to the life of action, particularly action devoted to justice, peace, and sustainability.

We can say then that the charism of holy mischief is one that has a long history within Judeo-Christian tradition and now is found beyond religious traditions. It is a way that integrates both the mystical experience of the presence of the holy with the call of the holy that we act in

the world. People who live a life of holy mischief do not do it for themselves. No, they do so because they feel that, in being faithful to their experience, they have no choice. The charism of holy mischief, with deep roots within our Judeo-Christian heritage, continues to manifest itself in our world today and is one of the promising signs of our time.

When people living from the charism of holy mischief are called to critique institutions from the outside, we see them engaging in the work of prophecy. They denounce the sins of the institutions, warn of the verdict of God, and advise those within the institutions, particularly the leaders, to change and align themselves with the will of God. The examples are legion: Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah, Micah, and all the prophets down to our own time including Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chevas, Dorothy Day, the Berrigan Brothers, and John Dear to name just a few.

Many find themselves called to this work of prophecy. The active, public ministry of prophecy today includes denouncing the trafficking of women, war, material poverty, environmental devastation, etc. But the ministry of holy mischief, if it is to be truly prophetic, must also announce an alternative vision. It must offer hope. And so, on top of denouncing, there must also be the work of announcing an alternative vision⁹: living out a preferential option for those who are poor; creating a world where women and children are safe; building the culture of peace; sharing one's wealth and fostering economic solidarity; and living sustainably on this good earth.

However, there are individuals animated by the charism of holy mischief and who are called to live this out as reformers within institutions or organizations. Often these individuals are called to denounce the sinful, immoral, or illegal practices embedded within the institution, appeal to a higher standard or the institution's core values, and invite people to change. This work of holy mischief is just as important as prophecy in the public world. It is sometimes no less dangerous and problematic than public prophecy and certainly no better understood. Indeed, given our world's tendency to transfer individual agency to institutional agency, an organizational flaw exacerbated by our technocratic and bureaucratic mindset, individuals who ask troubling questions and who pursue reform often risk disproportionate punitive consequences, sometimes legal, often economic.

Within religious institutions, there is a semblance of understanding of how the charisma of holy mischief, when applied internally to the institution, can help to keep an organization living in fidelity to its mission. In more secular institutions, particularly economic ones, there can be some appreciation for employees or leaders who seek to call the institution to live in congruency with its core values. However, both in and outside religious institutions, there are many times in which the charisma of holy mischief is met with resistance and sometimes repression.

Holy mischief within institutions

To fully understand the impact of holy mischief within institutions and why this charisma is often resisted, it can help to first sketch the context. What are the general characteristics of institutional systems? Well, a few things are obvious: (1) most are hierarchical structures; (2) most are centrally controlled, with a degree of local management; (3) most provide efficient ways to organize complex situations; (4) most value speed rather than process; (5) most value top-down communication strategies rather than dialogue; (6) most value loyalty, hard work, and efficiency; (7) most are patriarchal; (8) most use the language of sports; and (9) for most, any talk of consultation, process, and feedback is peripheral to the deliberations of policymakers. These hierarchal characteristics can generally be found in both public, secular organizations and religious organizations.

There are many positive values to hierarchal institutions. They provide a container for the continuance of corporate memory or the passing on of a grande narrative that animates the organization. They are generally efficient and productive. They provide a sense of belonging and a sense of mission. They provide established roles and identities. They provide financial power, create jobs, and lobby outside organizations.

Organizations, particularly large ones, are often able to be gratuitous and to contribute to the common good, especially during times of emergencies or tragedies. So, while there are limits to large organizations and systems, there are many positive attributes to such systems.

But the holy is not limited to systems and cannot be contained by any system. The holy exists beyond individuals and organizations. The holy occupies a realm that makes all things transparent and reveals what is real and essential by burning away falsehood. So, when the experience of the holy inspires people to speak, to ask a different set of questions

than those of the institution, to evaluate and perhaps denounce the actions of individuals and even the system itself, and to begin to act differently, these individuals can be placed in a very delicate position within an institution.

Sometimes, holy mischief-makers find sympathy within institutions, and they find that their concerns or actions are heard or at least tolerated. But, generally, the power of the institution and its office bearers seek to suppress and minimize the power of holy mischief so as to protect the reputation or status quo of the organization. People animated by holy mischief are sometimes labeled as troublemakers, mavericks, or psychologically unbalanced. They are often met with silence or have their concerns unaddressed. They may not be invited to meetings or to sit on certain committees. They may be accused of dissent, disloyalty, or insubordination. They may be encouraged to go to another organization or threatened with dismissal. Indeed, a person animated by the charisma of holy mischief will often encounter resistance to their challenges from within their institutions. The pressure to conform can be quite intense, and speaking from a holy place can lead to a life of suffering and pain. In the midst of the opportunities, challenges, highs and lows of following the charisma of holy mischief a person animated by holy mischief must learn and pay attention to discernment and to conscience.

Discernment and conscience

Discernment is a time-honored practice, one in which some people are particularly gifted. Discernment begins with listening. But, listening to what or rather, more importantly, to whom? Well, listening to the movement of the spirit, listening to the call of God, listening to the signs of the times, and listening to the holy as it is made real in daily life. For non-religious people listening would mean listening to experience, listening to the still voice within, and listening to the summons to act justly in our day.

Discernment also involves considering the pros and cons of actions. Often this weighing process becomes acute when facing a clear choice, like when one is at a crossroads. Sometimes, the considering process is more difficult because there are several apparent divergent avenues to choose, or there are a myriad of complicating factors with each option.

It is important during this listening and considering time that one also attends to one's inner freedoms. I ask myself, am I attached to one path or another? Deeper still I ask, is there some "inordinate" attachment getting in the way of my being free to follow the movement of the holy? The insights of St. Ignatius on how discernment requires a taking stock of one's self, one's inner disposition, are particularly pertinent in this regard.¹⁰

Finally, at some point in discernment, one must make a choice for an option. Usually, if the option is between a good and a bad, or a greater evil and a lesser evil, one chooses the good or the lesser evil. But, when both options appear to be equal in terms of goodness, or evil, then the choice is all the more difficult. Add to this any anticipated punitive measures that might come as a result of your choice or negative consequence for oneself and one's loved ones, then discernment can be complex. Then, one needs to pay particular attention to one's conscience.

Conscience is a complicated matter in our time. It is often the battle cry of those on the left who seek to create change and uphold the supremacy of individual conscience. But, just as often it is the chant of those on the right who resist change by advocating for informed conscience rooted in tradition.

The Roman Catholic Church, my home of spiritual meaning, has a complicated relationship with conscience. It has always taught that one must follow one's informed conscience and that being informed required knowing the teaching of the Church. Our Church has recognized that there are situations in which a person's conscience might lead one to different perspectives than that of the official church. To accommodate the possibilities of such differences, our Church recognizes the differences between the "internal forum" (that which is private and kept private) and the "external forum" (that which is public and made public).¹¹ The pastoral concern would appear to be to limit the negative repercussions for people, to avoid scandal, and to hold out the possibility of reconciliation between different persons involved in a conflict. Most importantly the Church teaches that it is imperative for a person to follow their conscience no matter what. It places such a high value on personal conscience that if one follows one's conscience, one is following the Aboriginal Vicar of Christ, who resides in the heart of the individual.¹²

How interesting it is for us to live at a time when Pope Benedict Emeritus, himself the earthly Vicar of Christ, has followed his conscience,

his inner Vicar of Christ, and that this has led a traditionally minded Pontiff to resign his office in order to follow Christ. Beyond providing an example of the power of personal conscience within a system, this pope's resignation is an example of the charism of holy mischief, which has long been a part of Judeo-Christian spirituality and which is necessary for the ongoing life of any organization. The implications of Pope Benedict's resignation, as an act of conscience, will take years to fully digest in light of its impact and as an example of holy mischief within an institution.

Those who live the charism of holy mischief while working within institutions are reformers who denounce situations and who call for change or correction. They are people who, after serious discernment, have decided to follow their conscience. When they follow their conscience and put into action their decisions to challenge the institutions in which they live and work, they find that there are consequences. Sometimes the consequences are positive, but more often they are negative for the person called to holy mischief.

There is a general understanding within religious circles of the vocation of holy mischief. Sometimes religious leaders can temper their judgments and exercise prudential wisdom so that the voice of a holy mischief-maker is not squelched but rather is allowed to inform and correct an institutional problem. Blessed is the church, synagogue, temple, or mosque where such leaders are found.

Outside religious circles there can be some understanding of the corrective power of workers or agents who challenge a system to correct improper, immoral, or illegal practices. Sometimes within secular, humanist, or social democratic systems, there is an appreciation of the depth of motivation that leads a person who has experienced the holy to speak and to act and wise leaders will know how to respond to this charism for the good of all. Blessed is the institution or organization where such leaders are found.

Conclusion

The charism of holy mischief is operative today in our world through many different people, some religious and some non-religious. It is a spiritual fire that fuels the pursuit of justice, the strengthening of institutions, and the preservation of our common home, the earth. Given this

reality, religious leaders need to make available to all, those outside as well as those inside their religious institutions, their wealth of knowledge and wisdom for discernment and conscience formation. Accompanying and supporting people who have the charism of holy mischief can be a tremendous contribution to forming agents capable of engaging the critical issues of our time with hope as a counterbalance to the despair and anarchy that often permeates many of the movements for change in our world today. Such ministry is a work for which those who find their home of meaning within the Judeo-Christian worldview are well equipped. It is a work toward making the holy more incarnate and a way of participating in the repair of the world.

Notes

1. "Charism" in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), pp. 180–183.
2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
3. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, Trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).
4. *Ibid.*, 8–49.
5. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), pp. 88–99.
6. Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 1–27.
7. Dag Hammarskjold, *Markings*, Trans. Leif Sjoberg & W.H. Auden. Foreword. W.H. Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 175.
8. *Ibid.*, 23.
9. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978).
10. David L. Fleming, SJ., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), pp. 202–219.
11. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism Volume Two* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1980), pp. 796–797.
12. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a6.htm