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Religion and Celebrity

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RELIGION AND CELEBRITY

Abstract

This paper examines the thesis that there is considerable overlap between religion and celebrity. It compares and contrasts the categoric division of institutional organization between the two and the use of the key concepts of 'Charisma' and 'collective effervescence' in the settings of religion and celebrity. The paper argues that if one examines certain idioms of experience and meaning, notably messianism, piety, necessity and magic there is considerable overlap. The rise of celebrity is a form of 'secular magic' i.e. a sublimation of key characteristics of religion.

Key words: Charisma, Collective Effervescence, rationalization, secular magic, Sublimation

An *anthropomorphic god* ? This is the definition of cinematic celebrity formulated by Edgar Morin (2005, orig. 2005a: 85). Today, the overwhelming

majority of sociologist's would very likely dismiss it as a *non sequitur*. It is certainly not orthodox to regard celebrity status as the reflection of divine grace. Conversely, a large and growing literature maintains that there are significant parallels of experience and practice between religion and popular culture (including celebrity) (Doss 1999; Possami 2005; Porter 2009; Lofton 2011a). In broad terms this material navigates a three-way street: the place of religion in popular culture; the place of popular culture in religion; and the fusion of religion and culture into a new form of faith-based belief and practice. The first half of this paper examines the reasons why the dominant opinion in sociology regards religion and celebrity to be categorically distinct. After weighing the case for the categoric divide, a counter-case is recounted. It draws upon elements from a variety of sources, notably phenomenological sociology, to consider idioms and motifs in religious and celebrity experience and practice that overlap. The paper ends by proposing that the proper way to explore the subject is to analyze some significant aspects of celebrity culture as the *sublimation* of organized religion.

To come first to the case for the great divide, it is useful to contrast the meaning of two key shared concepts in the settings of religion and celebrity: *Charisma* and *Collective Effervescence*. As regards charisma, Weber recognizes that the origins of the concept are in the ecclesiastical tradition (1). Here it

refers to momentous divine gifts supposedly possessed by a given high-profile individual (Weber 1978: 241). The secondary literature credits Weber with introducing the concept to the secular realm (Joose 2014: 271). However, he never fully abandons the standpoint that even in this setting the application and impact of religious antecedents and overtones operate. Thus, even when it comes to politics and military relations he describes charismatic authority as 'god-sent master(y)' and 'divine mission' (Weber 1968:1114, 1112). He offers a relational approach to the matter i.e. a perspective that locates the wellspring of charisma, not in divine right or personal traits of a given, profiled individual, but in the social relations between such a person, adherents and the public. Weber's procedure is to treat charisma as bearing an allusive ring of religious associations that influence willed action. This is one reason why he abhors the indiscriminate use of the concept of charisma in social life. For him, the worship of 'idols' of 'personality' in society is frightfully misguided (Weber 1946: 146). He suggests that this appetite for idols and personalities is a reaction to 'the disenchantment of the world' (Weber 1946).

The point in this paper has now been reached where it is necessary to consider the place of charisma in celebrity culture. *Contra* Weber's admonitions, the indiscriminate use of charisma to describe high-profile celebrities is commonplace. In the media the formulation of the 'charismatic performer' is

affixed to ‘magnetic’ actors, divas, dancers, rappers and sports stars who are portrayed to have an emphatic existence. To some extent, the practice is paralleled in some academic schools of thought. For example, according to Marshall, a leading advocate of *Persona Studies,* ‘the charismatic prophet can be likened to the celebrity’ (Marshall 1997: 55). Likewise, Alexander who works in a different tradition of social theory assigns ‘the celebrity icon’ ‘charismatic power that transcends time and place’ (2010: 329). Against this, the balance of sociological opinion remains steadfast. It is inadmissible to trace a line between religion, charisma and celebrity (Hendriks 2017). Two reasons are usually advanced to solidify the point. To begin with, Weber’s concept of charisma is an ideal type (Turner 2003: 15-16). As such, it takes the form of an abstract, logically consistent construct i.e. a purely cognitive formation. Weber’s methodology is comparative-historical analysis. The ideal type is an instrument of analysis designed to assist in the interpretation of complex, comparative and historical data, not to sum-up reality. Therefore, the very act of labelling some forms of celebrity as charismatic mistakes a purely conceptual construct with visible, empirical data.

The second issue is that a strong position in the study of celebrity today is that celebrity residency is regarded primarily as the product of data bulk and data flow (Driessens 2014). The attachment of charisma to celebrity status occurs

via media intervention. It is not a direct, spontaneous relationship between a high-profile individual, adherents and the public. On the contrary, it is a highly mediated relationship (Couldry and Hepp 2016: Hepp 2019). The purpose is to build attention capital (Franck 2019). The power to command a theatrical stage, a sports arena, a tv series, a Reality TV show, a movie or a social media site, is hardly equivalent to the apocalyptic power that Weber saw springing from the fingertips of the genuinely charismatic individual. In an attempt to capture this, Bryan Wilson introduces the concept of 'deferred charisma'. It refers to the appeal of high-profile celebrities today (Wilson 19755: 116-117). As he elaborates:

> (Celebrities) are idols … their qualities *fantastic* and *fabulous* (now that old charismatic epithets – *angelic, heavenly, divine, enchanting, bewitching* have been worn out) … such figures enjoy neither political significance nor enduring social regard. They make no specific claims for themselves: they are simply the recipients of extraordinary social acclaim, and the stimulators of extraordinary psychological responses … the responses (are) stimulated by a battery of diverse techniques of publicity, and suggestion (Wilson 1975: 124-125).

Weber unequivocally, treats charisma as a type of authority that *exceeds* traditional and legal rational accountability (Weber 1968). It is sociologically momentous because it does not comply with established rules governing acclaim, esteem and posterity. Contrarily, for Wilson, the use of charisma in relation to celebrity falters precisely because celebrity status *derives* from traditional and/or legal-rational rules. It cannot be apocalyptic because it is rule-bound. In contrast to genuinely charismatic individuals, rule infraction produces media scandal and legal consequences. Celebrities are 'names that need no further identification' (Wright Mills 1956: 71-2). However, they are not immune from conventional social and legal restraints. This was acknowledged some time ago by Alberoni who argued that celebrities should be properly seen as 'a powerless elite' (Alberoni 1972). This again aligns celebrity residency to media generated data bulk and data flow rather than crowning forms of power.

To come back to Weber's rationalization thesis for a moment, in the secondary literature his argument was widely understood to twin the rise of Science and Bureaucracy with 'the disenchantment of the world' (Weber 1946, 1949). Not to put too fine a point on it, from the first, Weber's thesis on rationalization and the disenchantment of the world *never* maintained that religion, mysticism

and magic are fated to disappear under the challenge of science and legal-rational rule (Weber 1946). On the contrary, he regarded the adaptation of these spiritual, faith-based forms of consciousness and social organization to be inevitable. This is because they are irretrievably embroiled with the ultimate questions of life. By definition, what is ultimately meaningful, but not rationally accountable, is the preserve of religion, mysticism and magic. Since Science and Reason are unable to solve these questions, the avid search for ultimate foundations is an immoveable component of human culture (Kolakowski 1988). Tacitly, the German theologian and neo-Kantian, Rudolf Otto, confirms this principle. He argues that the celebration of faith is embodied in the rituals and forms of worship curated and expressed in folk tales, myth, saga and legend (Otto 1950: 64).

Celebrity should be added to the list. Various attempts to explain it in terms of the rule of capital, the Media and *techne* have made important contributions (Williamson 2016; Couldry and Hepp 2016; Marshal, Moore and Barbour 2020). Consecutively, they provide only a half-developed picture. Celebrity attraction and impact go well beyond materialism and quantifiable empirically accessible data. As Morin insists it is also an 'ideas force' (Morin 2005a, 2005b). Weber died in 1920. Had he lived into the era of mature, global celebrity culture he would no doubt have explored the relationship between

the revival of religiosity and the expansion of celebrity in the age of Science and legal-rational rule. One obvious possibility here is to examine celebrity as a social form that is a reaction to the disenchantment of the world. To some degree, the glamour, magnetism and para-social reach of celebrities in the present day, speak to moves to re-enchant the world i.e. the belief that awe, wonder, mystery and transcendent meaning cannot be reduced to the logic of scientific rationality, secularism and consumer capitalism. Of course, science and market capitalism produce celebrities of their own that reinforce legal, rational and market hegemony (Williamson 2019). However, disenchantment also creates space for the expansion of what has been called 'secular magic' (Landy and Saler 2009). That is, a type of social consciousness that supports the elevation and presence of notable figures which represent the cultural revolt not only against organized religion but also against quantification, routinization and predictability. The topic of secular magic will be discussed in more detail later.

Collective effervescence

Another concept that has a long pedigree in both the sociology of religion and the study of celebrity, is collective effervescence. Durkheim introduced the

term. He used it to refer to the launching of emotions in sanctioned religious settings to reach out for a state of transcendence (Durkheim 1917). It closely relates to his binary dichotomy between 'the sacred and profane' (Durkheim 1917). That is, the division between sensed exalted supra-normative and normative experience. This involves overcoming the imposed, constraining characteristics of mundane order. In their place, a shared cognitive and emotional condition of oneness centred upon the indivisible and ineffable mystery of God obtains (Durkheim 1917).

Without much fuss, the concept has since been widely used in the sociology of sport, fandom and other cognate types of secular collective assembly (Benzecry and Collins 2011; Cottingham 2012; Rime and Paez 2023; Crossman *et al* 2026). The operative principle is that the primary import of these secular settings of collective assembly is that here celebrity is a component in eliciting finite breaks with normative order. A sense of oneness is certainly part of this. For example, a home football crowd feel as one in supporting the team against opponents. Of equivalent importance in explaining the attraction of these events is the feeling of boundlessness that is commandered and released. Once again, within the sociology of religion, and to a lesser degree in the study of celebrity, it is insisted that categoric divisions in the meaning of collective effervescence hold firm. Thus, the decisive way of separating collective

effervescence in religion from its counterpart in celebrity is to address the ends of willed participation. The religious setting is concerned with *transcendence.* Collective effervescence is organized and presented as an entry point to 'the wholly other' (Otto 1950; Vandenberghe 2010: 7). The reward for lifelong obedience to divine authority is personal salvation. The attention assigned to the ends of participation with celebrity culture is categorically different. It is a type of *escapism*. To be sure, feelings of oneness and boundlessness are part of this. However, the higher reality in question is not connected to the principle of divine transcendence, nor does it promise eternal salvation. Rather it is theorized as a reaction to stimulants from commercial interests and the media (Williamson 2016). 'What kind of identity', asks Kolakowski, 'can be attained through the worship of a football player?' (Kolakowski 2012: 208). The answer is a type of social consciousness that connects with an elevated, mediated individual who is commercially sanctioned to merit acclaim, esteem and posterity. Divine right has no place in this. Once again, it is the commercial imposition of wants and desires in consumers that is presented as the catalyst and main channel of social integration.

Institutional Organization

Crucial differences in the meaning of charisma and collective effervescence go some way to clarifying what categorically divides religion from celebrity. Another angle to throw light on the point is to briefly consider institutional organization. Celebrity culture has no equivalent to the *institutional* base of organized religion. The latter is a *Sponsorship* type of power in which a hierarchy of acclaim, esteem and posterity derives from a central power source and is universal. For its part, celebrity culture is governed by a *Contest* form of power that acknowledges pluralism and competition. It does not seriously make the case for the ascendancy of universal hierarchies of acclaim, esteem and posterity. A more egalitarian version of celebrity culture is envisaged.
In order to substantiate the point, consider briefly the institutional characteristics of Abrahamic organized religion. They are five in number:

1) *Creed*: a divine canonical doctrine, usually expressed in Scripture, that constitutes the basis of faith.
2)
3) *Clergy*: a faith based, hierarchical system of preachers, teachers and administrators, who curate and articulate creed and ensure that believers observe canonical doctrine.

4) *Universalism*: the truths of canonical doctrine are believed to be sacred and universal.

5) *Liturgy*: sanctioned rites and rituals designed to affirm and reaffirm canonical doctrine and reinforce faith.

6) *Salvationism*: the belief that strict observance of Creed and Liturgy will result in entry to the abode of everlasting paradise ('Heaven' in Christian faith; 'Olam Ha-Ba' in Judaism; and 'Janna' in Islamic Scripture).

Sponsorship here comes from clerical rule. It seeks to build a congregation and separate believers from non-believers. There is simply no equivalent in celebrity relations. Institutional organization is therefore deployed as another principle that separates religion from celebrity. The categoric distinction translates into different modes of analysis regarding power and influence. Under the Sponsorship system, organized religion is taken to have ultimate power over political and institutional norms, the constitution of identity and the shape and meaning of social practice. In contrast, under the Contest system, space is given to individualism, dissent and pluralism (Kurzman *et al* 2007; Gunter 2014; Williamson 2016). Here celebrity status is formally based in

Civil Rights and competition in pursuit of acclaim, esteem and posterity. Celebrity status does not answer to formal, centralized, institutional power (Meyer and Gamson 1995: 183). Nor does it stand upon a level playing field in which free competition takes place. Under the Contest system celebrity status still has backers and gatekeepers. A condition of *multi-polar patronage* obtains. That is, celebrity residency is a function of commercial interests, *techne* and media-generated data bulk and data flow (Driessens 2014).

Further, the people that function to position religion and celebrity for attention in society are in different camps. Under the Sponsorship system Creed and Liturgy provide governing power to a retinue of clerical personnel that channel approved types of neo-religious acclaim, esteem and posterity for public consumption. These reflect and reinforce the messages of salvation and divine transcendence. There is a parallel with the construction and maintenance of celebrity persona via the labour publicists, agents, marketing staff, platform anchors etc (Smith Maguire and Matthews 2014). Organizationally speaking, these 'cultural intermediaries' clearly perform a gatekeeping role. However, their authority resides in technical, rather than spiritual authority. All of this tends to support the thesis that religion and culture are separate. Rhetorically speaking, never the twain shall meet.

Leakage and Secular Magic

The case against the claim that a significant crossover between religion and celebrity exists is formidable. Nonetheless, it is very far from supporting the conclusion: *case closed*. If one presses into the matter a little more, several loopholes are revealed in the orbit of enquiry. In the first place, the presupposition of categoric divisions in social life have an exclusive, hard and fast status upon meaning and willed action is dubious. From a phenomenological standpoint, meanings are multi-dimensional and perspectives may be incommensurable (Schutz 1967; Schutz and Luckmann 1974). It is the procedures and objectives of members that uplift the canopy of paramount reality. In Husserl's work this is referred to as 'the natural attitude' (Husserl 1971). Just because the majority of members subconsciously process this attitude in an unreflective way as 'given' does not mean that it is irrevocable or immutable. In even the strongest versions of paramount reality there is always leakage and an undertow of dissenting opinion and practice. Take the topic of the balance between oneness and boundlessness in relations of religion and celebrity. Creed and Liturgy treat oneness as organized around divine reality. Yet both contain the seed of doubt that oneness is a position without opposition. Voltaire's entry on 'idols' and 'idolatry' in his *Philosophical*

Dictionary, makes no bones about recognizing that from the beginning, the contradiction between 'oneness' and dissent have been intrinsic to Abrahamic faith (Voltaire 1971: 238-252).

Equally, to turn to celebrity relations, the categoric feature of boundlessness implies escapism from the magnetic pull of oneness (universalism). However, celebrity is actually, a type of distinction. Indeed, as an aside, from the standpoint of Bourdieu's sociology it might be said that celebrity is the most fully realized type of distinction (Bourdieu 1986, 1996). Beholders go to some lengths to reflect social integration to exhibit *difference* from other groups. In the course of this a variety of procedures and symbolic forms to represent distinction developed. When all is said and done, emotionally speaking, charisma, collective effervescence and institutional organization do not automatically, or inevitably, lead to oneness. Multidimensionality of experience and social differentiation of interpretation are unavoidable (Schutz 1967). In fine, to proceed on the basis that transcendence is quarantined from escapism or, contrarily, that escapism is immune from the pull of transcendence, is untenable.

Another issue that strains the principle of categoric division between religion and celebrity relates to sociobiology. Before going into this in more detail it should be noted that on this question, sociology and social theory have a long-

standing history of scepticism about the concept of Human Nature (Pinker 2002; Horowtiz, Yaworsky and Kickham 2014). Conventionally, social environment and history are seen as the first and sufficient ports to anchor investigations into willed action. The core of sociobiology is that Human Nature cannot be excluded from the analysis of human motivations. The inference is that Needs and Wants are pre-religious (and therefore pre-celebrity). On this account, despite their categoric status, oneness and boundlessness are not the creations of either Religion or Celebrity. To be sure, they are culturally coded by them. Consecutively, from the standpoint of sociobiology, when all is said and done, they are species-characteristics (2). It follows that if this is allowed, despite how these are culturally packaged, the probability is that they will be finally expressed in comparable ways in social action.

A final issue relating to leakage relates to the question of technology. Both religion and celebrity rely on technical systems of communication for messaging and packaging. Communication technologies are interwoven with principles and protocols of social exchange. Religion and celebrity have not extended the principle of categoric division to apply to the exchange of *techne* (3). Reliance upon the same technologies of communication produces a crossover of social effects. Consider, the rise of televangelism after the 1950's produced an influx of tele-host programming styles, talk and game show

formats (Beckering 2018). Types of secular therapeutic, inspirational and self-transformational scripts developed in the television programming setting were absorbed and repurposed to pursue missionary goals. In addition, quantitative and qualitative methodologies for measuring audience reception, such as questionnaires, sampling, in-depth interviews, self-completion diaries, pilot testing and focus groups, entered the repertoire of religious ministry. Televangelism and digital outreach extend mechanisms and processes pioneered in the fields of amusement and entertainment to develop brand appeal and brand loyalty (Campbell and Tsuria 2021; Wilkins-Laflamme 2022). They constitute 'the electric church', often turbocharged with powerful 'financial offertory' and 'prosperity gospel' ingredients (Frankl 1987). For its part, celebrity and popular culture have borrowed and adapted religious associations and templates. Faith, purification, sacrifice and redemption are foundational in religion, but a form of each is also constitutive of celebrity culture (Lofton 2017: 86). For example, the idea of celebrity inspired 'personal makeovers' pulls on religious threads of confession, reformation and conversion. Similarly, consumerism draws upon guilt-free religious associations of preaching and pastoralism around commodified goods and services. Hence, certain brands, such as *Apple*, *Leica*, *Lamborghini, Hermes* and *Prada* have a devotional, congregational consumer base.

The various crossovers between religion and celebrity have encouraged commentators to venture that it is valid to propose that types of secular celebrity as sprinkled with elements of religiosity. Lofton has coined the term 'spiritual capitalism' to denote how celebrities, like Oprah Winfrey, mix and blend elements of religion with commerce to turn material commodities into objects of redemption and salvation (Lofton 2011a). Yet pairing spirituality with capitalism goes only so far in encompassing the new religiosity. Against the view that emphatic existence is only or even mainly, given to celebrities favoured by science and market capitalism, the idea of 'secular magic' to describe the reaction to the disenchantment of the world has been born (Landy and Saler 2009). This employs aspects of proposed wants and needs in Human Nature to explain elevation and presence. A checklist of the key identifying characteristics of secular magic consists of five features:

1) A sense of *mystery*, *wonder* and *purpose*.

2) Faith in the *significance* of some types of meaning that are not rationally accountable.

3) Conviction that quantifiable, empirically accessible data comprise *finite* forms of knowledge.

4) Belief in *exceptional*, *miraculous* events.

5) The experience of *secular epiphany* whereby consciousness briefly coalesces with 'something larger than oneself' (Landy and Saler 2009: 2).

Secular magic is an expression of wants and needs that cannot be satisfied by rationally accountable practice. They are confirmed instead by the 'evidence of the senses', and the power of imagination (ideas force) (Morin 2005a, 2005b; Alexander 2008: 782; Braudy 1997). This type of immanent knowledge is inextricable from celebrity culture.

Idioms and Motifs

Having set out some elements of the counter-case against the thesis that a categoric divide separates religion from celebrity, it is time to put flesh on the bones about the overlap between the two. The measure taken here is to address shared idioms and motifs of behaviour and meaning. Given the vantage point of phenomenological sociology, procedures, interpretations and member objectives frame meaning. Yet crucial to the secular magic standpoint

is the proposition that the human sensory apparatus encompasses stimuli that are beyond the reach of quantifiable, testable empirical data. Four points of comparison repay attention: Messianism, Piety, Necessity and Miracles.

1) Messianism: In Judaism, Christianity and Islam belief and practice accepts the power of prophecy as given. Hence, Moses, Abraham, Jesus and Mohammed are worshipped as figures who have the power to reveal the truth, predict the future, and save. In the *New Testament* Jesus is revered as the Messiah foretold in the *Old Testament*. Judaism credits Jesus with prophetic powers. Simultaneously, it rejects his status as the Messiah on the grounds that he does not fulfil the concrete prophecies outline in the Hebrew Bible (the *Tanakh*). The *Qu'ran* complies with the classification of Jesus as the Messiah. It recognizes his thoughts, words and deeds as affirming the Almighty, but does not recognize him as the son of God. Mohammed's connection with divinity is mainly a matter of his status as the Final Prophet sent to complete the Abrahamic legacy. Mohammed, like Jesus, is revered as blessed with second sight. For believers he is a role model without parallel. Throughout, he is consistently understood to be an exemplary human being not a divine presence. The contents of the *New Testament* and the

Qu'ran are commended as benchmarks of posterity. Both unveil approved society-wide articulations of enhanced, enlarged material and spiritual ways of being. Jesus is presented as the embodiment of transcendental form and Abraham, Moses and Mohammed are blessed with powers of divination. Rudolf Otto refers to 'Overplus Experience' as the response to religious messianism (Otto 1950: 5, 146). It offers consciousness of 'pure recognition' that 'defies exposition' and 'springs directly from an irreducible feeling of the truth' (Otto 1950: 170). The 'co-witnessing spirit of faith' may be directed to transcendence, but it delivers three bases of gravity in everyday life (Otto 1950: 162). *Absolutism*, the sense or feeling of being in touch with an active, ultimate creative force. *Necessity*, the conviction that the stance of believers to the divine is an *a priori,* inevitable position. *Completeness*, faith in the proposition that belief and obedience deliver personal fulfilment (salvation) (Otto 1950: 114). Messianism provides believers with iconic certainties about belonging, community and purpose. Turning to celebrity, the first point to make is that a continuum of beholder responses exists, from moderate belief/trust to intense belief/trust. For the purposes of word length and clear exposition, the comparisons drawn here and below refer to the upper end of intense

belief/trust. Celebrity Messianism is not a straight match with Religious Messianism. Celebrities are secular figures and powers of conversion and deliverance are rarely attributed to them. Nonetheless, the beholder relationship to celebrity often encompasses the consumer belief in higher form. The widespread use of charisma in relation to elevation and presence in celebrity relations confirms this. Even deferred charisma draws on senses, feelings and convictions that are beyond rational accounting practice. Some Celebrities are presented as prophets who are martyred for their revelations e.g. Martin Luther King, John Lennon, Steve Biko. The possessions linked to them are often invested with the status of 'holy relics' and other worldly power (Howells 2011: 125-128). In Business Studies, Advertising and Marketing, celebrity endorsement is commonly interpreted as reflecting prophetic power in being perceived as conferring interaction advantage to consumers (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016; Rodrigues et al 2025). The recognition displayed by fans parallels the sentiments of belonging, faith and unity that underpin the division between religious congregations and non-believers. Absolute certainty in the higher, divining powers of celebrity carries over into unshakeable loyalty. Levels of faith, truth and certainty invested in given celebrities are often concentrated, intense and self transformational (Myers 2009;

Riddell 2021). Celebrity messianism is not just a compartmentalized object of belief. It provides fullness of meaning and purpose to life that resembles the belief system of organized religion, but cannot be subdued by it.

2) Piety: Membership of a religious congregation carries with it duties and rituals of piety, symbolized in protocols of liturgy, speech, comportment and dress. For example, pectoral crosses and crucifixes representing the martyred Christ, small woven palms portraying the cross or the crown, rosaries and respectful religious tattoos are acceptable parts of the Catholic repertoire of faith adornment. Observance of these symbols are marks of respect, identity and belonging. They also provide a basis for judging pious and impious forms of behaviour. Believers will be brought closer to God by observing behavioural rules of bodily adornment, decoration and self-presentation. Pilgrimage to sacred sites is seen as a duty of devotion. In Islam the journey to Mecca is respected as a responsibility for all Muslims that can afford it. Judaism venerates the Western Wall in Jerusalem as a sacred space for prayer. Christianity sanctifies Nazareth, Bethlehem and the Holy Land and Marian shrines such as Lourdes and Camino de Santiago as sacred spaces.

Celebrity audiences display comparable, quasi-liturgical idioms and motifs of speech, comportment, ornamentation and dress. This is articulated in forms of grooming and adornment. As with religious piety these types of practice are partly designed to demarcate boundaries. Symbolically, the dress and comportment of believers and fans symbolizes disassociation with every point of mundanity. Celebrity Influencers (especially Social Media Influencers) and Fan Clubs (Registered and Unregistered) participate in organizing Conventions and Message/Discussion Boards which strengthen boundaries. Obligations of piety are observed. Fan conventions have been compared to religious pilgrimages (Porter 2004). The devotional aspect is all encompassing. Writing of *Star Trek* fans she observes:

> *Star Trek* defines for fans …
> something about the way things
> are, and the way things should
> (and can) be. It maps out a means
> for attaining the ideal, and it
> acknowledges the pitfalls that
> confront humanity on its journey

> to greatness. It is, ultimately, the vehicle for expressing the implicit religion of fans (Porter 2009: 278).

Connoisseurship of celebrity output operates as a grading device. It separates novices from devotees. It is a mark of distinction (Bourdieu 1987). Fans gate-keep and create hierarchies around celebrity contents and beholder responses (Yodovich 2021: 874). However, at every point what underpins social differentiation and judgement is a faith-based relationship with celebrity. Celebrity output in music, film, lierature or art, resembles a Creed. It also has the effects of giving stability and purpose to life that Liturgy provides in the religious context. Consuming celebrity has been described as 'the secular equivalent' of religious salvation (Benzecry and Collins 2014: 321). Fan agency, identity and careers are forged from the cultural and symbolic capital of transactions and sacrifices that fans make in obeisance to the celebrity ideal (Bourdieu 1987; Benzecry 2011). As a mode of social differentiation it operates via pious 'bodily copresence, mutually aware focus of attention,

shared emotional quality, and exclusion of outside distractions' (Benzecry and Collins 2014: 310).

3) Necessity: Judaism, Christianity and Islam hold to a belief Transcendent Necessity. There are anterior (*a priori*) divine categories that condition human practice in the phenomenal world. Overplus Experience is presented as a matter of heavenly compulsion. Faith-based consciousness accepts that these categories elude rational accounting practice, yet are axial in human practice. They constitute the immutable, but ultimately ineffable backdrop to the apparatus of human perception. They are God-given. Human access is possible via devotion and intuition. In Christianity, *Rapture* and in Islam, *Tawhid*, are sensory states that accompany celebration of indivisible, necessary communion with God. The needs for absolute certainty and transcendence appear to be a permanent part of the human condition. In religion, Necessity follows from the Absolute Priority of God. Observance of this sacred truth equips believers with a sense of devout consummation in life (Otto 1950).

   Fans often toast their relationship with celebrity as an inevitable, unavoidable connection. Their favoured celebrity is what they had

always been looking for. A sense of foretold communion is confirmed. The upper end of fan attachment plays with the idea of mystical union with the celebrity object. It is not necessarily sanctified by religion. But it is experienced and justified as 'given'. Elvis fandom has been aligned with religious feelings of unity, continuity and fulfilment (Doss 1999: 74). Fans are drawn to celebrities as accessible 'Others' that are perceived to possess qualities that out-run normative boundaries and everyday experience (Riddell 2022: 114). Everyday life may be subject to flux and contingency. In contrast, dedicated fandom is based in permanence and solidity. The rock of celebrity is revered as a necessary fortress against doubt and uncertainty.

4) Miracles: Scripture recounts that Jesus had powers of healing and transubstantiation. He is credited with giving the blind man sight at Bethsaida, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, curing lepers, turning water into wine, walking on water and feeding the multitude. Mohammed is also credited with curing the sick and injured, causing rain to fall to reverse drought and multiplying food for the faithful by prayer. Historians have referred to a cult of devotion in the Catholic world organized around 'sacred celebrity' (Kaufman 2018: 517). For example, 12th and 13th century holy men such as the preacher Fulk of Neuilly,

Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi, possessed considerable acclaim in their own lifetimes. They were believed to have supernatural powers including the miracle of healing (Kleinberg 2011: 393-394). In the last quarter of the 19th century the Lourdes shrine became a celebrity setting of considerable publicity and pilgrimage. It was the grotto where a 14 year old French peasant girl, Marie-Bernarde Soubirous, attested to experiencing serial visions of the Virgin Mary (Kaufman 2018: 520). The grotto water itself was credited with medical miracles.

It is true that today miracles are very seldom attributed to celebrities. However, the market in celebrity relics, such as possessions owned by celebrities or celebrity autographs, is strong and lucrative (Self 2024). Relics are objects that symbolize taste and identity. Possession is valorized as a touchstone to glamour and interaction advantage. Physically touching celebrities is also associated with the gift of grace. These forms of celebrity contact may be said to be quasi-miraculous. They are consciously aligned with constitutive asset power. Specifically, they are embellished with the prospect of delivering interaction advantage to the beholder.

Conclusion: Sublimation

If the question of etymological roots is entertained, the proposition that there is an overlap between religious experience, practice and celebrity relations is further strengthened. As regards, religion, *Relegere,* means to encompass or harvest together; *Religare,* means to bind or integrate together (Beveniste 1973). The meaning of celebrity derives from two sources. From the French word *celebre* comes the meaning of 'well known' or 'popular', and from the Latin *celere* comes the meaning 'swift'. Reduced to essentials, religion is a social gathering organized around eternal, divinely ordained truths. Likewise, celebrity status evokes a gathering. The truths that it imparts are not eternal or divinely ordained. In any testable, quantifiable sense they may not be truths at all. Celebrity is the dramatization of truth. It provides a cohesive sense of necessity, the absolute and consummation that is demanded because the Theocratic Sponsorship system of distributing acclaim, esteem and posterity was curtailed by disestablishment (4). The separation of the state from religion opened up new spaces of acclaim, prestige and posterity that were not dependent upon the auspices of religion. This was concomitant with various processes of urbanization, rationalization, industrialization and political enfranchisement that strengthened the expansion of the Contest form of celebrity (Douglas and McDonnell 2019). The subtext of the discussion of

shared idioms and motifs recounted above, is that key features of celebrity experience and practice are sublimated forms of organized religion. Students of celebrity have under estimated the point. Marcus contends that celebrity culture 'has become synonymous with an empty renown that has no basis in merit or achievement' (emphasis in original, Marcus 2019: 192). What this misses is the deep, transformational, quasi-religious meaning that a good deal of celebrity culture has for fans and beholders (Porter 2004, 2009). If connection with a platform anchor, a chat room host or another type of micro-celebrity gives an overwhelming sense of value, worth and purpose to fans, who is to discount the parallels with religion? The great divide is a rhetorical distinction that relies upon a certain kind of pedantry to force home the point. Ardent fandom equips members with social distinction, cohesion, transcendence and a moral framework for conduct. As such, it is a mistake to bundle it with mere escapism. Ardent fandom takes the form of a home-coming rather than an escape (Porter 2009; Benzecry and Collins 2011). It is a form of elemental recognition. In the further investigation of the links between religion and celebrity the main challenge is to focus upon experience and meaning, rather than the issues of institutional organization and the perimeters of categoric division.

Notes

1. Another innovation is that Weber maintains that charisma is relevant to any religion, not just Christianity.

2. Support for the Human Nature thesis is supplied from an unlikely source. Karl Marx is celebrated as the exponent of historical materialism. Yet as Geras (1983) notes, the 6th thesis on Feurbach unequivocally invokes the notion of 'human essence': 'Feurbach resolves the religious essence into the *human essence*. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single
individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations' (Marx 1968: 29).

3. *Techne* refers to the accumulated technologies of communication and the technical labour expended in the image economic, public relations and marketing.

4. De-establishment refers to separation of Church and State was the product of the European Protestant Reform movement that beganin the 16th century. The eventual termination of the international monopoly

power of the Catholic Church greatly expanded state power and the riser of Civil Society based in pluralism.

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