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Charisma and Myth.

Raphael Falco.

London: Continuum International Publishing Group. 2010. 206 p. + index.

Raphael Falco begins his introduction with a story about an American army general participating in a game-show. Choosing the category of Greek myths, the general proceeded to give a flawless performance. When asked why he picked that particular subject matter, he responded, "Because they [the myths] don't change" (1). This is one of many common assumptions that Falco challenges in his book, *Charisma and Myth*. Drawing from various theorists on mythology from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century and combining them with the ongoing development within charisma theory, Falco operates on the basis that myths are the function of a group, and that every myth system is part of a relationship with the charisma of a particular group. For Falco, the charismatic component is crucial to the survival of the myth, and the myth is crucial to the survival of the group. Concentrating on the so-called 'group component' of myths, he unpacks the effects of myths on the continuing evolution and revolution of the charisma, and attempts to draw out the symbiotic relationship between the production of a myth and the endurance of the associated charismatic movement. Falco looks at the relationship of myths to charismatic movements, questioning how long-sustaining myths and charismatic groups – such as politically charged ideologies, street gangs, and religious organisations – are able to survive. Each charismatic group, regardless of size, generates its own set of myths which supports the authority of the group. Myth becomes a vehicle not only for leaders to establish their authority within a particular group but also for the self-definition of group members.

Divided into six parts, including an introduction and afterword, *Charisma and Myth* presents examples of transformations with a myth system vis-à-vis charisma and analyzes the more popular approaches and theories to myth within the framework of charismatic authority. Falco brings together various types of myths to illustrate his points, including heroic, epic, and cosmogonic. In his "Introduction", the author presents his thesis while attempting to reconcile working definitions of myth and of charisma through the use of several existing theories and their respective functions within society. In Chapter One, "From *Barbaros* to *Mythos*", the author discusses the progress from disbelief to belief and charts the changes and transformations with both myth and the charismatic movement brought on by deviations. Chapter Two, "Myth and Routinization" explores the use of symbols and their manipulation by the leaders. Myth, as

Falco explains, becomes a symbol for the group, a point around which they gather. In “Authority and Archetypes”, the following chapter, the author asks whether archetypes (specifically, Jungian and Eliadian) should be included in discussing charismatic phenomena. Finally, in Chapter Four, simply called “Charisma and Ritual”, Falco looks at ritual reflecting mythic narrative.

Charisma and Myth is a bold project in a hotly contested field. To begin with, a working definition of ‘myth’ has yet to be established and accepted. Using charismatic movements as the factor that determines the social force of a myth is particularly difficult. Laying nineteenth century Weber, for example, next to late twentieth - early twenty-first century Bruce Lincoln causes certain methodological challenges. In spite, or perhaps because, of his approach, Falco unpacks many intricacies that bring a new dimension to our understanding of myths.

Falco successfully illustrates a dynamic relationship between charismatic movements and myth systems: they are interdependent and constantly changing. Contrary to the American army general’s claims, myths are living entities - at least for the members of the groups who keep them relevant. As a social vehicle, myths must be shared in a group.

The strength of *Charisma and Myth* lies in Falco’s ability to express innovative arguments through simple, relevant examples. For each new theory or concept introduced, he incorporates several examples. Some are familiar to the Western reader, some are lesser known ancient myths, while others, particularly myths from political groups, are very modern. These comparisons, which span cultural and temporal boundaries, beautifully illustrate Falco’s arguments while adding the fine details to his portrait of myth, charisma, and group identity.

If there is any fault with this manuscript, it is Falco’s style. His presentation is sometimes too dense for a general audience. Also, some of the concepts are quite difficult to grasp, especially for someone with no prior knowledge of myth theory and scholarship in charisma. However, Falco counteracts this by providing plenty of examples and interjects some light-hearted humour which encourages the struggling reader.

Despite this setback, Raphael Falco’s *Charisma and Myth* is extremely relevant to those with an academic interest in myth and its theories. It is an undeniably critical contribution to the fields of religion, anthropology, and sociology.

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