Speaker 1: Thank you for calling one 1-800-REL-HELP. Your question is very important to us. A scholar will be with you shortly. Every question is an important one. And the scholars on call at 1-800-REL-HELP are eager to provide information on your requested topic. Thank you for choosing 1-800-REL-HELP for answers to your most burning questions about religion. Our scholars are more than well equipped to answer any questions you-

Cody Musselman: Hello. You've reached 1-800-REL-HELP. This is Cody. What can I help you with today?

Speaker 3: Hey, so I'd like you to settle a debate. Me and my friend were talking recently about people like Steve Jobs and Elon Musk. You know, those superstar Silicon valley types. Well, she said that they're like religious leaders, that they were charismatic, and I did not know what she meant. What's charisma? And what's a charismatic leader? And is Elon Musk a charismatic leader?

Cody Musselman: Great question. So most people think of charisma as something pretty self-explanatory. You know it when you see it. Today, we talk about charisma as a quality of attraction, as the magnetic personality of someone that inextricably draws you in and has some kind of power over you. Like you mentioned, we talk about celebrities and business CEOs as possessing charisma. But the word charisma gained its meanings, these associations with leadership in stardom, relatively recently. In fact, charisma is a word and a concept with over 2000 years of history. And as you dig deeper into this history, you start to learn more about its religious connotations.

Speaker 3: Whoa. That's crazy. So what did it mean 2000 years ago?

Cody Musselman: Well, charisma derived from the Greek root charis, which broadly interpreted means grace. And this appeared in the Hellenistic world and indicated a reciprocal relationship between mortals and gods. Usually it meant beauty, charm, attraction, benevolence, gifts. It had positive connotations. But it gained new significance in Paul's New Testament, Epistles. Paul, who you may or may not be familiar with, was an early Christian convert and Jesus devotee. And he traveled throughout the Roman empire evangelizing and establishing Christian communities. And this is when he first started to write about the idea of charisma.

Speaker 3: So what does he say about charisma?

Cody Musselman: So in these letters, we see Paul talk about charisma with his own theological twist. And he talks about it in the plural form of charismata, meaning God's gifts. So this could be anything from healing, knowledge, showing mercy, prophecy, speaking in tongues. And according to Paul, each individual had a unique gift given to him or her from God. You might have heard people say something like there are many gifts, but the same spirit. This idea is from Paul's letter to Corinthians, where he's addressing a spiritual hierarchy that was beginning to emerge. He tried to quell this hierarchy and to affirm that everybody had gifts, that we should promote a harmonious union among believers.

Speaker 3: Huh. So charisma is biblical.

Cody Musselman: In a sense, yes, but the history and evolution of the concept doesn't stop there. For a long time, the idea of charisma remained on the fringes of Christian theology. Charisma is a theological concept, laid dormant for several hundred years until it began to gain more prominence among German theologians in the 19th century. It was then in the late 19th century that Max Weber, a German sociologist, political economist and scholar religion, again innovated upon the term in his classic work, Economy and Society. In this sweeping text, Weber attempts to theorize the actions and institutions that form the basis of economic and social life. He offers a definition of sociology, dissects market conditions, examines their formation of corporate and political groups, and least of all, conceives of three types of authority operative in communal life.

Speaker 3: Wait, what does the economy have to do with charisma?

Cody Musselman: Well, Weber was interested in understanding how in our institutional and organizational lives, authority figures and structures, gain legitimacy. What, in other words, motivates voluntary obedience and larger groups of people. Weber's analysis of authority is situated after an extended discussion of economic relations, including labor management, budgeting, and finance. And in this section, he is clearly interested in understanding the dynamics of power at work and the relationship between the employer and employee. Dynamics of authority, Weber discerned, were everywhere determining social interaction. Weber establishes three types of authority, one of which is charismatic authority. Charisma, he writes, is quote, "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and is treated as endowed with supernatural superhuman, at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities." Charismatic authority, Weber theorized, gains legitimacy by quote, "virtue of personal trust", in the miraculous powers, revelations, or heroic acts exhibited by extraordinary individuals. That's where he roots charisma.

Speaker 3: So people will work harder because they work for a charismatic leader?

Cody Musselman: In a sense, yes. Charisma is the authority that can compel people to obey a boss or even to obey a religious leader, according to Weber. You can see how this is quite different from how the ancient Greeks talked about charisma, or even how Paul described charisma. Weber added his own twist to charisma. And because of Weber, charisma is not merely a gift from God now, it's a quality of one's personality, directly tied to authority into leadership. This is at the root of why we now see leadership books and courses that focus on cultivating your own personal charisma. Weber's charisma is also why people began to associate the charm and inexplicable, almost mythical magnetism of celebrities with charisma. So I hope I've answered your question. Is there anything else I can help you with today?

Speaker 3: No, I guess not. I've learned a lot, though. Thanks. And thanks for settling the score.

Cody Musselman: No problem. And remember to call 1-800-REL-HELP with any of your other religion related questions.

Speaker 1: 1-800-REL-HELP is an American examples production in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama, and is funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. This episode was produced by Cody Musselman, Jack Bernardi, and Erica Bennett. A video version of this podcast is available on YouTube. Just search American examples. Find out more about American examples at our website, americanexamples.ua.edu. Also follow the Department of Religious Studies on Twitter and Instagram at the handle studyreligion, or on the Facebook at facebook.com/RELatUA. If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to our podcast on Spotify or Apple podcasts, and give us a rating and review. Music credits to www.bensound.com.

Speaker 4: Luce. Luce.