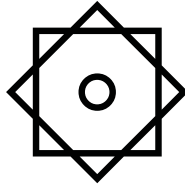


Introduction



Defining *Spiritual Master*

Victoria Kennick

The Procrustean Bed

A Greek myth tells of Procrustes,¹ who invited strangers to spend the night on his marvelous bed. They were enticed by the promise of a bed that exactly fit the size of every guest. The unknown terror of the bed was that Procrustes stretched short guests, and severed the feet of tall ones to make each guest fit the bed. Needless to say, all guests died on Procrustes's bed. A definition is like a procrustean bed when the subject is stretched or cut to "fit" its dimensions. Yet definitions by nature require acts of stretching through abstraction, and cutting through specification. The conceptual challenge in fabricating an intelligent definition is to perform these acts of generalization and abbreviation with the least feasible amount of distortion that stems from bias and ignorance. This introductory chapter fabricates a definition of *spiritual master* that should accommodate, but not constrain, the exemplars discussed in this book. We say *fabricate* to connote artifice,

as well as falsehood, because definitions are conceptual “constructs” that necessarily “lie.”

The Task

To avoid creating a procrustean bed for the spiritual masters presented in this book, its contributors worked from a set of questions designed to allow each tradition to speak for itself, in both descriptive and critical ways. They examined such matters as the qualities, qualifications, role, and contributions of specific spiritual masters, with attention to critiques provided by the tradition for determining the authenticity of a spiritual master. The inquiry was set up as *one way to begin* probing issues relative to spiritual masters across religious traditions. Contributors were not asked to survey the history of spiritual masters in their tradition—nor were they discouraged from doing so. They were to wrestle with the topic of *spiritual master* from the ground of their own expertise, as the topic made most sense to them, using classic and modern exemplars.

Contributors introduced readers to terms specific to the tradition at hand,² using those most pertinent to the context of their inquiry, along with the trope *spiritual master* when suitable. They understood that their work was meant—at once—to broaden our knowledge about a particular religion, and to deepen our thinking about a certain type of figure in the history of religions. Those involved in the project expected that parameters of the subject matter would be shrunken and stretched from one chapter to the next. But this was to be like shrinking and stretching a bed to fit the guest—not the guest to fit a bed. Because contributors made efforts to evince the specific outlook on spiritual masters of the tradition for which they were responsible, we wound up with a variety of orientations. Indeed, paying attention to these orientations is instructive. The approach of each contributor gives a sense of the cultural values attached to spiritual masters in that particular tradition.

The first chapter opens with perplexity where Harold Kasimow begins: “When I recently told a rabbi that I was writing an essay on Jewish saints, he was somewhat puzzled. I am not surprised.” By contrast, the term *spiritual master* was a natural for James A. Wiseman writing on Christianity, as his discussion gravitated to the Roman Catholic tradition where the very roots of the words *spiritual* and *master* are sunk in Latin, the language of its classic liturgy. Osman Bakar stressed the Šūfī fight for survival—an issue that beset Muslim mystics from its early days, and thus heavily impacted the role of spiritual masters across the centuries. Arvind Sharma surveyed the

evolving role of Hindu spiritual masters, as Hindus often make sense of their massive set of traditions by identifying layers of thought. Our Sikh chapter centered on narrative portraits of spiritual masters, as Mary Pat Fisher saw "*Gurū*" as the key symbol to elucidate. Victoria Kennick geographically delineated the Buddhist world to account for the cultural impact on representative spiritual masters. For Simon Man Ho Wong, a corrective to the mistaken notion of "no spiritual masters among Confucians" was of key import, as his focus on exemplary Chinese sages showed otherwise. Eva Wong categorized spiritual masters, telling stories to subtly convey the spontaneity and hidden wisdom that characterize Daoist literature.

The Definition

In the Christian chapter, Wiseman reduces the trope *spiritual master* to its Latin roots. *Spiritual* comes from *spirare*, which means "to breathe." *Spirare* is associated with staying alive, thus the adjective *spiritualis* could mean simply "belonging to breathing" or "belonging to air." *Master* is based on *magister*, meaning "master" or "authority." The root of *magister* is *mag*, whose adjectival form *magnus* means great or large; thus *master* in English connotes leadership, authority, and mastery. Naturally, the term *spiritual master*, stemming from the language still used by the Roman Catholic Church for official liturgical texts, is well suited to Roman Catholicism. Despite this specific linguistic connection, the basic sense of the words can be adapted to cross cultures. Using these connotations, spiritual master should be understood as a subset of the more generic category of religious leader.

In English, the word *spiritual* picked up the sense of otherworldliness. Yet for cross-cultural application its basic meaning of "breath of life" or "staying alive" is more versatile, because not every religious tradition concerns itself with a transcendent otherworld. And though *master* can reference the more powerful figure in a hierarchical relationship, for our purpose its basic meaning of "authority" and "master of oneself" is best retained. In no way should *master* be restricted to connote only the masculine gender. Excising the trope *spiritual master* from superfluous associations with things otherworldly, hierarchical, and gender specific, it becomes suited to a wide spectrum of religious traditions. Thus, even in nontheist traditions, the word *spiritual* is applicable. Indeed, Simon Man Ho Wong devotes his entire chapter to the *immanent* character of Confucian spirituality.

Here follows our definition of *spiritual master*, based on the Latin etymology: A SPIRITUAL MASTER IS A CHARISMATIC MEDIATOR WHO AUTHORITATIVELY TEACHES TRADITIONS, PERSONALLY SUPPORTING RELIGIOUS VITALITY. The

term *charismatic mediator* indicates one who transmits a “gift of grace.”³ It carries the sense of *spirare*, to breathe—as a charismatic mediator is enthused by the sacred (inspiration) and conveys it into the profane (expiration). The phrase *authoritatively teaches traditions* affirms the fact of mastery, as the charismatic mediator is a *magister*, master or authority. The word *personally* indicates that one who authoritatively teaches traditions does so through intimate contact. The term *religious vitality* relates to the experience of what is *spiritualis*—a term from the Greek *zōtikos*, associated with *vitalis*, meaning “vital.”⁴ The word *supporting* indicates that the spiritual master, in some manner or other, contributes to the flourishing of religion.

Religionist and Reductionist Approaches to the Data of Religions

We just noted that the words *spiritual* and *master* picked up the aggravating connotations of otherworldly and hierarchical. What is more, in the course of history some religious leaders capitalized on such connotations to abuse their authority, politically elevating themselves above and beyond the reach of reasoned critique. To account for both the healing and the harming power exercised by religious leaders, scholars of the history of religions developed two basic approaches to their subject: religionist and reductionist. The view of a spiritual master changes radically depending on which of these is taken, and one view acts as a corrective to the other.

The religionist approach takes religion as *sui generis* (in a class by itself), positing that *experience of the sacred* makes religion unique. It calls for the study of religion *as religion*—not as a subset of another academic discipline. The key religionist question is: What do the data of religions mean? By contrast, the reductionist approach posits that religion is a thoroughly human creation. Claiming that nothing is inherently *religious*, reductionists tend to enlist questions from the social sciences, particularly sociology, to bolster their analyses. The key reductionist question is: How do the data of religions serve human interests? Below we will see how religionist and reductionist approaches are complementary.

The Religionist Approach

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), a founding scholar of the history of religions, articulated a classic religionist approach in saying,

The work of deciphering the deep meaning of religious phenomena rightfully falls to the historian of religions. Certainly, the psychologist, the sociologist, the ethnologist, and even the philosopher or the theologian will have their comment to make, each from the viewpoint and in the perspective that are properly his. But it is the historian of religions who will make the greatest number of valid statements on a religious phenomenon *as a religious phenomenon*—and not as a psychological, social, ethnic, philosophical, or even theological phenomenon.⁵

Eliade balanced this focus on religious phenomena, *sui generis*, insisting that they be seen in historical context. He studied the morphology (structure) of religious phenomena, as part of a two-pronged method, and cautioned against the use of typologies in the absence of historical context.

The historian of religions will not confine himself merely to a typology or morphology of religious data; he knows that “history” does not exhaust the content of a religious phenomenon, but neither does he forget that it is always in History—in the broadest sense of the term—that a religious datum develops all its aspects and reveals all its meanings. In other words, the historian of religions makes use of all the *historical* manifestations of a religious phenomenon in order to discover what such a phenomenon “has to say”; on the one hand, he holds to the historically concrete, but on the other, he attempts to decipher whatever transhistorical content a religious datum reveals through history.⁶

A prime example of the religionist approach to *spirituality* is seen in Ewert Cousins’s comment on problems faced by the editors of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*:

In the planning of the project, no attempt was made to arrive at a common definition of spirituality that would be accepted by all in precisely the same way. The term “spirituality,” or an equivalent, is not found in a number of the traditions. Yet from the outset, there was a consensus among the editors about what was in general intended by the term. It was left to each tradition to clarify its own understanding of this meaning. . . . As a working

hypothesis, the following description was used to launch the project:

The series focuses on that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions “the spirit.” This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality. The series explores the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development, and its journey to the ultimate goal. It deals with prayer, spiritual direction, the various maps of the spiritual journey, and the methods of advancement in the spiritual ascent.⁷

Despite their historical awareness, the religionist editors leaned into the domain of theological inquiry through presumptions about the reality of a spiritual core, transcendent dimension, and ultimate reality. Whether or not these exist as such, a historian of religions, taking either a religionist or a reductionist approach, does not engage in truth claims about the data of religions.

The Reductionist Approach

The reductionist focus on religion as a human creation serves to check and balance the religionist treatment of religion as *sui generis*, which easily slips into theological truth claims. For instance, when religionists begin to speak theologically of “the spirit” as a unique and irreducible aspect of reality by which the person opens to the transcendent dimension, reductionists look with healthy suspicion on words explicitly relating to the divine, such as *spiritual*, *sacred*, and *transcendent*.

Sometimes, reductionists even use the word *religion* with reluctance. Consider this view of the defining characteristic of religion, articulated by the contemporary historian of religions, Bruce Lincoln:

Of particular interest, I think, is the way religion connects to the other domains of culture [i.e., ethics and aesthetics]: specifically, the capacity of religious discourse to articulate ethical and aesthetic positions in a uniquely stabilizing fashion. What religion does—and this, I submit, is its defining characteristic—is to invest specific human preferences with transcendent status by misrepresenting them as revealed

truths, primordial traditions, divine commandments and so forth. In this way, it insulates them against most forms of debate and critique, assisting their transmission from one generation to another as part of a sacred canon.⁸

From Lincoln's definition of *religion*, we infer the key role of spiritual masters to be "investing specific human preferences with transcendent status by misrepresenting them as revealed truths, primordial traditions, divine commandments and so forth." Thus, what a religionist may think of as a "spiritual core [that] is the deepest center of the person," a reductionist may regard as a fiction created by "investing specific human preferences with transcendent status" through propagandistic means. However, a religionist approach need not become so idealistic with regard to spiritual masters; nor a reductionist, so suspicious.

Our definition of *spiritual master* accounts for both religionist and reductionist perspectives. It does not preclude the possibility of spiritual masters receiving authentic revelations, according to their own definitions; nor does it assert the reality of those revelations. It keeps the door open to discover the meaning of religious claims from the insider viewpoint of adherents, recognizing that religious authorities might either *represent* or *misrepresent* their putative wisdom as revealed truths, primordial traditions, and divine commandments. Yet, an inquiry based on the definition of a spiritual master as a *charismatic mediator who authoritatively teaches traditions, personally supporting religious vitality* invites scrutiny as to whether a religious leader creatively promotes religious teachings to foster human intelligence or insulates them "against most forms of debate and critique," as Lincoln cautioned. It should be obvious by now that not every religious leader should be counted as a spiritual master. Those who stifle religious vitality do not qualify.

The foregoing discussion of religionist and reductionist approaches is of key importance to our understanding of spiritual masters, because personal surrender to religious leaders historically has allowed uncritical acceptance of truth claims and abuses of power. We now turn to the work of Max Weber (1864–1920), who spoke of such surrender as the "obligation of obedience." Weber, the "father of sociology," examines the role of charismatic individuals in terms of the legitimation of their authority in society. His reductionist work contributes significantly to an understanding of the social function of spiritual masters. Subsequently, we examine the work of Daniel Gold, a contemporary historian of religions who built on Weber's

sociology to develop important categories that accommodate a religionist perspective.

Max Weber and the Problem of Charismatic Authority

In Germany, Max Weber was most prolific in his writing from 1903 to 1920—a time spanning World War I and events leading up to it. He studied the means by which political authority became accepted as legitimate in societies, and classified *Herrschaft* (German for “rule” or “domination”) into three types: legal, traditional, and charismatic. Knowing full well that typological analysis has its limits,⁹ Weber further classified charismatic authority into three types: magician, priest, and prophet. Provisionally, we suggest that, spiritual master could be counted as a fourth type of charismatic authority

Charismatic Authority and the “Obligation of Obedience”

Weber posited three grounds upon which *Herrschaft* as social rule or domination rests: (1) rational grounds that rest on a belief in the legality of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands, (2) traditional grounds that rest on established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them, and (3) charismatic grounds that rest on devotion to a sanctified, heroic, or otherwise exceptional or exemplary person, and of the normative order revealed or ordained by that person.¹⁰ Domination or rule is accepted as legitimate when an “obligation of obedience” springs from such belief or devotion.

In the case of legal authority, obedience is owed to the legally established impersonal order. It extends to the persons exercising the authority of office under it only by virtue of the formal legality of their commands and only within the scope of authority of the office. In the case of traditional authority, obedience is owed to the *person* of the chief who occupies the traditionally sanctioned position of authority and who is (within its sphere) bound by tradition. But here the obligation of obedience is not based on the impersonal order, but is a matter of personal loyalty within the area of accustomed obligations. In the case of charismatic authority, it is the charismatically qualified leader

as such who is obeyed by virtue of personal trust in him and his revelation, his heroism or his exemplary qualities so far as they fall within the scope of the individual's belief in his charisma.¹¹

Here we see the three substantive ways in which religious authority is exercised in society, namely through: (1) a charismatic individual who is unique, and is, in that sense, a revolutionary hero, (2) a person who stands in a traditional lineage of some sort, often exercising authority through an office established after a charismatic leader passes away, and (3) a set of normative rules, administered by an officeholder who does not personally command the authority owed to the legal entity.

Initially it is useful to think of a spiritual master as a charismatic individual who mediates a "dual relationship between men and the supernatural."¹² Many exemplars discussed in this book have charisma in the sense Weber that attaches to it here:

The term "charisma" will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader. In primitive circumstances this peculiar kind of deference is paid to prophets, to people with a reputation for therapeutic or legal wisdom, to leaders in the hunt, and heroes in war. It is very often thought of as resting on magical powers. How the quality in question would be ultimately judged from any ethical, aesthetic, or other such point of view is naturally entirely indifferent for purposes of definition.¹³

The designation *spiritual master* as a charismatic individual might suit some of Weber's exemplars better than his categories of magician, priest, or prophet—the obvious example being Jesus. Weber classifies Jesus as a prophet; and though Jesus is recognized as a prophet by Muslims, *spiritual master* is a more religiously neutral term that circumvents the critical point of contention about Jesus that divides Christians and Muslims. Whether Jesus is identified as prophet or spiritual master, his qualities well illustrate a key aspect

of the charismatic individual, namely, a self-reflective sense of possessing charisma. Weber reminds us:

It must not be forgotten for an instant that the entire basis of Jesus' own legitimation, as well as his claim that he and only he knew the Father and that the way to God led through faith in him alone, was the magical charisma he felt within himself. It was doubtless this consciousness of power, more than anything else, that enabled him to traverse the road of the prophets. . . . There was always required of such prophets a proof of their possession of particular gifts of the spirit, or special magical or ecstatic abilities.¹⁴

Given the foregoing discussion of Weber's *Herrschaft*, charisma, and obligation of obedience, we suggest that spiritual masters are mediators of the sacred, obeyed by people who have developed personal trust in them based on their exceptional sanctity, heroism, or special qualities. This renders them charismatic and authoritative, according to Weber's understanding. People become devoted to spiritual masters after being impressed by their charisma, exhibited through putative gifts of the spirit, or special magical or ecstatic abilities. Moreover, the charisma has been felt by the spiritual masters themselves, giving them a sense of their own legitimacy. This produces in spiritual masters a sense of duty and confidence to exercise charismatic authority in promoting a normative social order—even with new and revolutionary patterns. Indeed, "within the sphere of its claims, charismatic authority repudiates the past, and is in this sense a specifically revolutionary force."¹⁵

The Routinization of Charismatic Authority

Weber questioned the extent to which the force of charisma—hence, the corresponding obligation of obedience—might diminish in the transfer of authority from a charismatic individual to a traditional authority established in a subsequent lineage, and further into an impersonal set of legal rules, whose caretaking officeholder defers to the legal framework. Weber posits that the exercise of authority by a traditional officeholder involves less charisma than the exercise of authority of a charismatic personality, per se. By definition, the charismatic personality is a unique, heroic, and revolutionary individual who embodies charisma. In contrast, a traditional officeholder's

authority is limited within the sphere of tradition, and thus mediates through charisma that is more circumscribed. Further, according to the definition, legal authority is devoid of charisma, as there is no place for a *personal* set of rules to mediate charisma, and there is no allegiance due to the noncharismatic officeholder who administers the rules. Within this framework, Weber develops his theory of the “routinization” of charisma, which involves the diminution of charisma through three sociological stages in the exercise of authority.

Weber predicts a natural expiration date for every case of charismatic authority. Personal charisma is extraordinary; but when disciples lose confidence in its special character, the authority of the magician, priest, or prophet dissolves. Weber explains:

Charismatic authority is thus specifically outside the realm of everyday routine and the profane sphere. . . . The only basis of legitimacy for it is personal charisma, so long as it is proved; that is, as long as it receives recognition and is able to satisfy the followers of disciples. But this lasts only so long as the belief in its charismatic inspiration remains.¹⁶

Once charismatic individuals fail to excite an obligation of obedience, their authority fails. Even when a magician, priest, or prophet maintains an obligation of obedience, the charismatic authority cannot continue in their absence. According to Weber, the charisma becomes “routinized,” whereby the intensity of the charisma of a founding charismatic individual necessarily becomes depleted.

In its pure form charismatic authority has a character specifically foreign to everyday routine structures. The social relationships directly involved are strictly personal, based on the validity and practice of charismatic personal qualities. If this is not to remain a purely transitory phenomenon, but to take on the character of a permanent relationship forming a stable community of disciples or a band of followers or a party organization or any sort of political or hierocratic organization, it is necessary for the character of charismatic authority to become radically changed. Indeed, in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exist only in the process of originating. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both.¹⁷

Weber provides the case of the dalai lamas as an instance of the routinization of charismatic authority, whereby a new charismatic leader is sought to replace a dalai lama that has passed away.¹⁸ The routinization of charismatic authority of a dalai lama can occur

on the basis of criteria of the qualities which will fit him for the position of authority; . . . by revelation manifest in oracles, lots, divine judgments, or other techniques of selection; . . . by the designation on the part of the original charismatic leader of his own successor and his recognition on the part of the followers; . . . [and by] designation of a successor by the charismatically qualified administrative staff and his recognition by the community.¹⁹

One can apply Weber's insights on routinization of charismatic authority to the lineage of Sikh *gurūs*, insofar as the ten historical charismatic leaders were maintained "by the designation on the part of the original charismatic leader of his own successor and his recognition on the part of the followers."²⁰ Every Sikh *gurū* is recognized as having charisma, technically known as *jot*, or divine light, of which each is a vessel. Certainly, Sikh *gurūs*, as well as Tibetan Buddhist dalai lamas, Roman Catholic popes, and other spiritual masters who belong to what we might call lineage offices have charisma that to some degree survives the process of routinization. With such examples in mind, we are reassured in the notion that spiritual master is a category commensurate with magician, priest, and prophet—insofar as it includes persons garnering an obligation of obedience, hence legitimacy, even into the routinized contexts of traditional and legal forms of authority. But there is a catch.

The Limits of the Person in Weber

If Weber's reductionist inquiry were sufficient for studies in the history of religions, his typology of *Herrschaft* would accommodate all cases of spiritual masters. However, for example, the case of the final Sikh *gurū*—a scripture called "Gurū Granth Sāhib"—drives Weber's typology to the breaking point. This scripture forces us to shift gears. Gurū Granth Sāhib fits into Weber's typology neither as a charismatic authority, nor as a traditional authority, because Weber defines both as personal. As a sociologist, he never asks how an object such as a holy scripture might function as a *person*. Moreover, Gurū Granth

Sāhib does not fit as a legal authority, because Weber defines legal authority as impersonal. So, where is the place for Gurū Granth Sāhib in Weber's typology of *Herrschaft*? The same question can be asked in connection with numerous other sacred texts in the history of the world's religions.

Gurū Granth Sāhib is a collection of hymns that provide an ethical foundation in Sikh tradition. As such, according to Weber's model, one would identify the document as a legal authority that is impersonal and devoid of charisma. However, Gurū Granth Sāhib is viewed not only as a collection of hymns, but also as a unique charismatic mediator. Gurū Granth Sāhib—having the outward appearance of a book—exhibits charismatic qualities and is treated by Sikhs as a person. The *gurū* is even retired at night in its home, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India. Fisher says:

Gurū Granth Sāhib [is] enshrined in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the most revered Sikh holy place. At night, the scripture is closed, wrapped in fabrics, and carried on someone's head, with water sprinkled ahead of it to symbolically purify the way. It is then lovingly placed to rest for the night, as it were, on pillows in a specially constructed "bed." In the winter, it may be covered with a fine quilt so that the Gurū does not become cold. (151–52)

Indeed, there is a religious reason that Sikhs call their scripture *Gurū*: it embodies the divine light (*jot*), as did the preceding Ten Gurūs, who were human vessels of *jot*. There are many cases in the history of the world's religions where one finds special treatment given to sacred objects. They, too, can be seen in light of their personal impact on religious people.

Bearing in mind how Gurū Granth Sāhib is existentially experienced from a Sikh religious standpoint, *in a limited sense*, the scripture might be classified not only as a legal authority, but also as a charismatic authority and a traditional authority, both of which are personal. Gurū Granth Sāhib is treated as a charismatic living *gurū*; in this sense, the scripture is a charismatic authority. Gurū Granth Sāhib is part of the lineage of Sikh *gurūs* and makes available the sanctity of immemorial traditions; in this sense, it is a traditional authority. Gurū Granth Sāhib is also a revered document; in this sense, it is a legal authority—but, not the impersonal legal authority of Weber's typology. Moreover, following Weber, the First Gurū should have

held charismatic authority, the Second Gurū through the Tenth Gurū should have held traditional authority, and Gurū Granth Sāhib should have held legal authority. But this does not explain everything.

From the Sikh point of view, an obligation of obedience is owed to Gurū Granth Sāhib, which is a vessel of the same the same *jot* as was Gurū Nānak and each of the intervening human Sikh *gurūs*. From the First Gurū to the Tenth Gurū, all have been called “Nānak,” though they are each known by another name as well. Moreover, in reading Gurū Granth Sāhib, one comes into contact with Gurū Nānak through the *jot* of the hymns. Thus, the charisma of Nānak proceeds through all three types of *Herrschaft*, and nothing is lost to a process of routinization. Hence, we begin to see two limits of Weber’s typology of *Herrschaft* for the context of the history of religions: (1) the process of routinization, or loss of charismatic authority over time, does not always apply, and (2) an authority can function in more than one category, as they function in a nonhierarchical relationship.

The Sikh case suggests that the charismatic authority of spiritual masters is not necessarily diminished according to the social process of routinization described by Weber in connection with magicians, priests, and prophets. Rather, spiritual masters might maintain a high level of personal charisma regardless of the context of authority through which they gain social legitimation: legal, traditional, or charismatic. Moreover, since all Sikh *gurūs* command an equal obligation of obedience based on identical charisma, they should all be counted as charismatic individuals that function sometimes in a heroic capacity, sometimes in the context of a traditional lineage, and sometimes as a legal authority. Thus the three types of *Herrschaft* cannot in this case be viewed as a hierarchy of discrete classes of authority. Weber’s analysis of *Herrschaft* remains useful for a sociological study of spiritual masters. But one must realize with such a reductionist analysis, the religious meaning of numerous spiritual masters in the history of the world’s religions is left unattended; and thus the complexity of the cultural dynamics surrounding them is overridden.

We could end here, and remain content with one theoretical context in which to understand spiritual masters. To limit ourselves to Weber’s reductionist model, we would be obliged to omit troublesome examples of spiritual masters, such as the Sikh holy scripture and nine other Nānaks. But of what use is a definition that cannot account for all cases that call for admission and fit nowhere else? Accepting the challenge of fabricating a definition that can cogently accommodate outliers brings the boon of deeper understanding of all members of the class, here, specifically, *spiritual masters*. To fabricate

such a definition requires the shift from a reductionist to a religionist approach to our data. There the import of the term *charisma* may come closer to the early meaning that Weber elaborated to serve his sociological agenda.²¹ At this point, our provisional identification of spiritual master as a fourth type of charismatic individual in Weber's typology has reached its limit.

To open our minds to the full range of spiritual masters that our definition must serve, let us consider a conversation between Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) and a disciple named Dilip. This passage, presented by Sharma in the Hindu chapter, challenges us to seriously consider the case of inanimate spiritual masters:

Dilip: Sri Aurobindo often refers to you as having had no Guru.

B.: That depends on what you call Guru. They need not necessarily be in human form. Dattatreya had twenty-four Gurus—the elements, etc. That means that any form in the world was his Guru. Guru is absolutely necessary. The Upanishads say that none but a Guru can take a man out of the jungle of mental and sense perceptions, so there must be a Guru.

Dilip: I mean a human Guru. The Maharshi didn't have one.

B.: I might have had at some time or other. And didn't I sing hymns to Arunachala? What is a Guru? Guru is God or the Self. (120–21)

How can we admit Dattatreya's twenty-four *gurūs* into our definition of *spiritual master*? Beyond Dattatreya's elements, etc., and Gurū Granth Sāhib, what should be done with other exemplars that would be problematic to Weber's model—including many sacred texts, members of spiritual lineages, and other existentially meaningful objects? To find a way to account for such spiritual masters in the history of the world's religions, we now move from the reductionist model.

Daniel Gold and the Categories of Religious Perception

As a sociologist, Weber focused on social institutions. As a reductionist, he did not provide as full a characterization of spiritual masters as

that needed by historians of religions. Weber presented a typology of social authority exercised by religious leaders, but did not focus on the *existential meaning* leading to the obligation of obedience that grants that legitimacy. Building on Weber's insights, Daniel Gold developed a "grammar of religious perception" for the history of religions that did focus on such meaning. We will find largely that whatever can be said of Gold's *gurū*, can be said of *spiritual master*.

Toward a Grammar of Religious Perception

Gold developed his grammar first to comprehend the Hindu *gurū*, and then to offer a comparative framework. Consistent with Eliade's two-pronged method that includes phenomenology and history, Gold understood that

our problem as historians of religion[s] is to understand problems of human beings struggling to comprehend their existence in the world. Our religio-historical constructs must then be able to make sense of the worlds that they conceive.²²

Gold's grammar throws us into a religionist discussion of *religious meaning* that grew from Weber's reductionist discussion of *social processes*. He focused on "perhaps most intriguing [of problems that history of religions treats, namely] the complex relationships between outer tradition and inner life."²³

Gold made three methodological moves that help unpack our definition of *spiritual master*: (1) he developed a nonhierarchical morphological frame, instead of a typology, to better accommodate the fluid and dynamic categories relative to the *gurū*, (2) he took an epistemological turn to see aspects of the *gurū*—four immanent foci of the divine, namely, holy man, singular personality, eternal heritage, and unifying truth—as categories of religious perception, rather than as external objects, and (3) he recognized a continuum between inner spiritual life and outer traditions, which he designated as esoteric and exoteric, or hidden and public (revealed).

Four Immanent Foci of the Divine

Earlier, we provisionally identified spiritual master as an additional type of charismatic individual, alongside Weber's magician, priest, and prophet. Gold's holy man could be considered in similar terms, as a type of charismatic individual—with all the benefits and limitations

attending Weber's sociological context. In this limited, reductionist sense, spiritual master and holy man are equivalent to each other, but only insofar as they are defined as charismatic human individuals, the legitimation of whose authority derives from an obligation of obedience.

Now, we must break open the trope *spiritual master* in light of the full spectrum of the four immanent foci of the divine, to see that *spiritual master* is none other than the *gurū*. Gold's *gurū*—like our spiritual master—occupies a nonhierarchical morphological frame that encompasses all four charismatic mediators identified in the grammar, of which holy man is just one. As such, a spiritual master, like a *gurū*, can function not only as a holy man (e.g., a human), but also as a singular personality (e.g., a deity), an eternal heritage (e.g., a scripture or temple), and a unifying truth (e.g., an interreligious teaching). The *gurū* is all of these; and each is a source "through which divine grace, knowledge, and power are mediated to humankind."²⁴

Gold emphasized the function of mediation, more than the substance of divine grace or charisma itself. Here we see how the first three foci function to mediate the divine:

Mediation through the eternal heritage is perceived as the assimilation of the ageless wisdom underlying the accumulated tradition of a people. Mediation through the singular personality comes through participation in a universal fount of grace established on earth by a divine being, which is often accessible through a teaching and a sacrament he has left. Mediation through the holy man is experienced as a direct communication from a living person qualified to transmit the divine. Conceived according to different understandings of the way in which spiritual power finds a center on earth, each of these sources represents a particular perception of the *immanent focus* of the divine.²⁵

Gold developed the concept of unifying truth less than he does the other three immanent foci of the divine, because "it does not support any large-scale religious tradition."²⁶ Accordingly, it does not appear in the above passage. However, for our understanding of *spiritual master*, all four foci are of equal import; and we occasionally reference them later in this chapter.

In Weber's model of routinization, charismatic authority stands in hierarchical relationship to traditional authority and legal authority—all within an exoteric, public context that Gold calls outer tradi-

tion. This hierarchical structure, and the lack of the esoteric dimension of inner life limits Weber to his sociological context, around which he developed an understanding of the generation and distribution of charismatic, traditional, and legal authority in society. Echoing Weber's view of self-recognized charisma and the garnering of authority in society through an obligation of obedience, Gold sees the potential for loss of charismatic authority of a holy man:

The distinctive dynamic of the holy man, then, whether within established traditions or without, is to continually make hidden truths immediate, and mundane community divine. To do this effectively, the holy man must remain at once true to his own possibly changing realizations and sensitive to his devotees' probably changing needs. And should he begin to lose touch with his hidden sources of inspiration or fail to keep communicating convincing revelations to his disciples, his perceived position as holy man [read: Weber's charismatic magician, priest, or prophet] is likely first to become shaky and then to break down.²⁷

Here, Gold's claim reflects Weber's sociological perspective. However, despite this affirmation of Weber's model, Gold goes further to permit charismatic authority to remain undiminished, free from the impact of what Weber called routinization. Methodologically, he got there by taking an epistemological turn.

The Epistemological Turn

Gold's epistemological turn transforms the four immanent foci of the divine into categories of religious perception. He releases *gurū* from the constraints of a substantive typology into a functional morphological frame to show how holy man, singular personality, eternal heritage, and unifying truth *existentially appear* along an interpenetrating continuum. In this fluid and dynamic model, Gold imposes no substantive restrictions relative to what might play the role of *gurū* within the four categories of religious perception. There is room in the morphological frame for Gurū Granth Sāhib, Dattatreya's twenty-four *gurūs*, and more.

Gold moved beyond reductionism when he realized that "to understand the dynamics of relationship among the foci we must look to some uncharted depths of religious perception."²⁸ This was outside of Weber's mandate as a sociologist. In his grammar, Gold

found an alternative to Weber's routinization. Weber posited that whenever magicians, priests, or prophets die or are discredited, their charismatic authority inevitably fades or disappears. Gold created a seismic shift by recalibrating types of authority as *categories of religious perception*. His understanding of charismatic mediation and the exercise of authority, in the morphological frame of the *gurū*, complements Weber's sociological perspective, but is not limited by it.

The same collectively recognized spiritual image can appear as a different type of immanent focus to different religious individuals. A figure taken respectively by one individual as a guru, a holy man, may be glorified by another as an avatar—who is at least a very special personage, more likely a singular personality. A deity to whom one individual can relate as a magnificent, complex personality is seen by another as merely belonging to a class of rather manipulable godlings in a heritage. *The immanent foci, then, do not refer directly to external objects.* Certainly, people in the same tradition have similar experiences of their common objects of faith, which may then attain constant local values. *The immanent foci, however, are here offered explicitly as categories of religious perception.* And as categories of religious perception, the immanent foci reveal the divine in distinctive conceptual dimensions. (emphasis supplied)²⁹

Nothing by way of charisma or charismatic authority need be lost in the transition from one sociological center of spiritual power to the next—provided that there is a vitality of inner life associated with the obligation of obedience.

Weber's view of routinization does not account for the existential meaning of inner life. That is to say, the reductionist model recognizes no esoteric category of religious perception in which outer tradition gains enhanced personal meaning. It does not theoretically account for the degree to which charisma is or is not lost in the routinized social transfer from a magician, priest, or prophet to a traditional authority (e.g. a lineage holder) or a legal authority (e.g. a set of laws). Although the sociological model can say whether or not the obligation of obedience has collapsed, it does not account for the interplay of inner tradition and outer tradition. When one detects from a sociological perspective that charismatic authority has been diminished, there is a possibility of understanding the loss in connection with the degree of vitality of existential meaning of the inner life. Thus, with Gold's

model we can utilize Weber's model, and go still deeper into cultural dynamics.

We can understand Gold's move away from sociology into the history of religions in terms of two axes: an esoteric-exoteric vertical axis, and a horizontal axis of the four immanent foci of the divine. In Gold's model of the *gurū*, no charisma need be lost in a disciple's religious perceptions of any of the four foci. This is because they function along an interpenetrating continuum of the four foci along what we call a horizontal axis. The image of horizontal here is meant to indicate nonhierarchical structural relationship. This horizontal axis of the four foci intersects with the vertical axis of esoteric and exoteric categories of religious perception. The image of vertical here is meant to indicate two complementary poles that become sources for a disciple's existential meaning. In other words, each focus of the divine generates existential meaning for disciples through both their inner life and their outer tradition. The *gurū* is thus religiously perceived according to specific intersections of the horizontal and vertical epistemological axes.

Esoteric and Exoteric Categories of Religious Perception

Weber's notion that charismatic authority weakens through routinization as it becomes traditional or legal, holds within a methodological model that is focused on society, recognizing only what Gold labels as an outer tradition that is exoteric or public. Gold's observations are consistent with Weber's observations, as long as one assumes that the hidden, esoteric dimension of religious perception has weakened:

What seems to distinguish a successful transformation from a breakdown of tradition is the continuing balance it keeps between the hidden and revealed aspects of the divine that it makes manifest. In a *progression*, our term for a successful transformation, the forms of religious expression available through a tradition change along with the tradition's dominant focus: as new hidden meaning is seen in a focus, the tradition develops revealed forms that reflect it adequately. In *breakdowns*, on the other hand, a serious gap occurs between the revealed forms of a tradition and the hidden ideals that these forms are supposed to represent. Neither the theoretical nor the practical forms of religious expression offered by the tradition lead any longer to a potent appreciation of the immanent divine. For a large