Charisma—a special gift from God that enables some believers to perform prodigious feats such as prophecy, preaching, pardon, and miracles, for the good of the community—was originally conceptualized by St. Paul in the first century. The term charisma is a linguistic variation of charis, which was used in ancient Greek literature to refer to a gift, and was always closely related to the experience of beauty. The concept of charisma was later assumed by thirteenth-century scholastic theologians, who preserved Paul’s meaning but connected it to the related notion of grace. In the early twentieth century, Max Weber redefined charisma, and its use in historical, social, political, and economic analysis, as captivating attractiveness or charm that enables one to engage in political, economic, and religious leadership. Appropriated and secularized by Weberian and post-Weberian sociology, charisma has since entered the core of the contemporary social sciences, generating an intense and long-lasting debate that lasts to this day—but at the cost of misrepresented its original meaning.

This Special Issue of *Religions* analyzes the concept of charisma in the Middle Ages based on Paul’s original use of the term in the first century, freeing it from its anachronistic post-Weberian definitions. Though governed by medievalists, this collection comprises a solid interdisciplinary group of historians, art historians, classicists, literary critics, and political philosophers. It examines the concept, theory, practice, and representations of charisma in the Middle Ages, including its institutional developments, its religious and political implications, its forms of ritualization, its doctrinal presumptions, its iconographic representations, its projection to the objects, and its paradoxical relationship with authority and law. It also provides a space for interdisciplinary dialogue between history, theology, canon law, art history, political philosophy, and symbolic anthropology, prioritizing examination of the transferences between the spiritual and the temporal; the sacred and the profane; the political and the religious.

**Theories**

The term “charisma” has a long history. In Biblical Hebrew, it is spelled עננ (H-N-N) and signifies a “generous benefit of God” or “his forgiveness”. It also conveys the more general meaning of “favor” or “charm”. In 77 occurrences, often related to the vocabulary of joy, the Septuagint translates it as χάρις and the Vulgate translates it as gratia. Paul (Rom 12, 1 Cor 12) defines it as “a gift of God”, but more specifically as an extraordinary talent conferred by the Holy Spirit, mainly of speech, but also for governing, healing, or operating miracles, serving as a foundation of the Church. In I Peter 4:10, one receives charisma “for the service of the others”. In the New Testament, χάρις μα δειμια appears as a gift from God to some Christians, and helps them serve the community.

The sense of the word charisma has changed radically in the modern world. In the nineteenth century, sociology assigned the term a more personal, individual signification:
the capacity for using seduction, influence, and fascination to govern and also to manipulate others. In 1912, in Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen (The Social Teachings of Christian Churches and Groups), the sociologist Ernst Troeltsch (1912) described “charismatic authority” over a sect: a small, deviant religious group. This overtly negative connotation of the word focuses on the profit that a person can obtain from others. Ten years later, Troeltsch’s book, paired with discussion within the Church between Catholic and Protestant positions which crystallized in Rudolph Sohm’s idea of the charismatic church, inspired Max Weber’s use of the concept of charisma in his study of the three types of legitimate rule, published in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Economy and Society). His prestigious thought on charisma has become the doxa in human sciences. It considers an exceptional character whose extraordinary qualities provide him/her with strong leadership and influence over a group. These talents could be related to supernatural powers bestowed by God. They provide infallibility to their holder, who becomes the object of a cult of personality by his adepts or followers. This destructive situation would nonetheless take the form of routinized bureaucratic charisma after the death of the founder. It coexists with the existent legal, rational, and coercive authority. Interesting as it may be, without the proper nuance, this Weberian definition of charisma should be considered anachronistic to the study of medieval political theology.

As David A. Bell has recently argued, while social scientists have generated a massive amount of literature on charisma, the concept has seldom been considered by historians, with a few notable exceptions such as Brigitte Bedos-Rezak. This volume attempts to palliate this lack of historiographical interest, proceeding chronologically through different disciplines. The concept is broadened by C. Stephen Jaeger, who refers to the work of two other authors: Goethe and Clifford Geertz. In his view, both the poet and the symbolic anthropologist offer a superpersonal perspective on the subject—Goethe’s idea of “the Demonic”, formulated in his autobiography, Dichtung und Wahrheit, and Clifford Geertz’s study of charisma as a determinant in societies and governing orders. Like truth and beauty or good and evil, charisma lends itself to analysis as an abstract concept. While these concepts manifest in people, things, works of art, and human actions, they are also understandable as ideas separate from any personal or social context. This allows the concept of charisma to be extended to the entire aesthetic dimension. The terms “charisma”, “aura”, and “enchantment” can be profitably rehabilitated as critical concepts for the analysis of art, literature, and films; their aesthetics; their impact on the audience; and the psychology of both stars and fans. In this Special Issue, this field is developed not only by Jaeger but also by Anna-Maria Moubayed and Alfons Puigarnau.

However, perhaps the most important feature of this volume is that it does not simply derive the notion of charisma from the Weberian genealogy; it also revisits the frequently overlooked Pauline’s concept by rescuing medieval case studies, since Pauline’s concept was only present in the medieval world when speaking of extraordinary elements associated with power, other than magic or the demonic.

**Practices and Representations**

These theoretical perspectives on charisma, based on an interdisciplinary viewpoint, allow the contributing authors to apply the concept to different aspects of medieval society.

The first topic of discussion is the discourse. Charisma explores the dialectical relation between legacy and merit. C. Stephen Jaeger emphasizes the transformation from sacred to profane charisma during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which represents an end to the life-cycle of charismatic culture, and the transition to intellectual and textual culture. This consists of a very deep mutation, in which charisma surrenders its theological implications in order to infiltrate art and culture.

Antonio Bento relates the modern definition of charisma to its Jewish root of Puritan criticism against idolatry and its suspicion regarding the “hysterical adoration of the great men”. This “idol” or “strange” worship was denounced by Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) as an error of substitution or an anthropomorphic conception of God. In pre-Christian society, a supernatural strength emanated from the chief, who shared his power with the
gods thanks to the συνθρονος institution developed by Ernst Kantorowicz and rediscovered by Alfonso Puygarnau. Similarly, the bond of Constance I, the army, and the supreme divinity, presented by Alex Corona, coincided with the Roman Empire’s transition from an ancient to a new conception of the ruler’s charisma. The transfer of the pagan supernatural force of the chief to the medieval kings should be studied from an anthropological perspective, considering the determinant Christian influence. This was the nuanced method that Marc Bloch practiced in works such as Les Rois Thaumaturges (The Thaumaturge Kings, 1924), while using the numerous data gathered by James Frazer in The Golden Bough (1890) from the so-called primitive societies.

The second major subject that governs this volume is that of religious practices in the Middle Ages. The Judaeo-Christian contempt for superstition allows a distinction to be made between sacrality, related to paganism, and sanctity. Amicie Pelissie du Rausas attributes the term “charismatic” to Saint Louis, identifying two sources of charisma: sacred kingship and personal holiness. She questions the nature of the charismatic relationship that linked Louis IX to his contemporaries, concluding that “if the sacrality of Louis IX pre-existed him, his sanctity is a post-death construction”. Her work also addresses the question of what attributes of a living character would indicate a charismatic personality. The religious aura of the king, which best echoes the Paulinian version of charisma, was sometimes at odds with the political expectations levied on a medieval ruler, which a Weberian definition of charisma helps to define. Pelissie du Rausas concludes that the crusades provided a unique setting in which the king’s Christ-like qualities and his political leadership could be reconciled, as demonstrated by the symptoms of Louis IX’s living charisma in the reactions of his contemporaries.

The same model must be adapted to the post mortem devotion to Carlos de Viana studied by Maria Narbona. There is a magic power inherited by every king or member of a holy dynasty, which acts during his life while, for instance, curing scrofula. However, in Christianity, after-death miracles are indicative of a life during which virtues have been exercised in a heroic degree; these extraordinary events, such as inexplicable healing, are required for canonization.

Because of their extreme ascetical and penitential practices, some medieval individuals, such as the eremitic loricati, who wore sturdy hauberks and heavy iron chains (Edina Bozóky), were venerated as saints even during their lifetime. In presenting the posthumous semi-historical and fictional narratives on Godfrey of Bouillon, Sini Kangas demonstrates how he became the personification of chivalric values, and even one of the Nine Worthies. In reality, the Advocate of the Holy Sepulchre was a flat character that avoided provoking his peers, who chose him precisely because of this lack of charisma. By contrast, the discursive strategies of crusade chronicles present negative depictions of most women, even charismatic ones, such as Alice of Antioch, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Sibylla of Jerusalem, and even the fictional Calabra, who practiced Muslim black arts.

In another case study, which explored how charisma influences medieval religion, Peter Scott Brown argues that the invention of Christ’s blood and prepuce in 1082 in Charroux offers an insight into some charismatic strategies of religious reform in France in the era of Pope Gregory VII. Gregory’s use of standing legates with regional mandates, such as Amatus, was a novelty in papal administration, meaning that their authority was based on legal legitimacy: when they could not induce or coerce cooperation, they frequently confronted the impotence of their legal–canonical mandates. The miracle at Charroux presented an alternative charismatic strategy, harnessing liturgical art and spectacle to magnify the legate’s stature as an authority in the context of the Eucharistic controversy and religious reform.

In her work, Montserrat Herrero applies the concept of charisma to a specific object. She echoes recent trends which have projected charisma onto objects, as Stephen Jaeger and Brigitte Bedos-Rezak have argued. Agency—the capacity to act and transform the world and society—is also applicable to relics because of their ability to perform miracles. Their devotion was widely spread in medieval religion. From a Christian perspective,
it seemed more related to the sanctity of the deceased than to the sacrality of the object. However, they could obtain a re-signification because of their semiotic power, as shown by Montserrat Herrero. “All power comes from God” (Rom, 13, 1), and, for this reason, it is embodied in relics whose use is often political and collective.

The projection of charisma to objects is also explored by Anna-Maria Mouyabed from the art-history perspective. Charisma also gives life to pictorial fruits, transformed into “(accidental) actors”, especially in paradise. Mouyayed addresses object agency and approaches the possible propriety of certain fruits in visual and textual narratives to emanate and/or appropriate charisma. She presents a discussion of the linguistic and conceptual mutability and malleability of the term “charis” and its conceptualization into charisma, as well as its possible manifestations or translations in fruits. This leads her to provide an exploratory reflection on the ambiguity and metamorphic aspect of “charismatic” fruits in the context of myths and the Genesis narrative represented in the visual arts, and their translation into fairytale narratives and modern advertising campaigns.

This Special Issue also explores the application of charisma to other aspects of medieval society as economics and medicine. In Mediterranean ports, the Franciscan spirituality supported a new moral and ethics about work, which considered the commercial, maritime, and financial activities of urban merchants. New ideas about money and poverty were developed in opposition with the rural and lordship economic concepts, as recalled by Jaume Aurell, who applied this phenomenon—which Max Weber believed to be specific to early modern Calvinism or Puritanism—to the Middle Ages context.

Corinne Lamour, for her part, shows that the concept of medical charisma also changed around the year 1300 in relation to laicization of the doctor’s charisma. This resulted in an evolution from a “personal charisma” to a “functional charisma”, from an “ethic of conviction”, based on Christian faith and action of divine grace, to an “ethic of responsibility”, in which the surgeon had complete free will to make decisions.

All these case studies raise some fundamental questions about the notion and practice of charisma in the Middle Ages. Is it possible to reconcile the definitions of both St Paul and Max Weber? As these authors and the contributors of this volume have demonstrated, charisma is a rich and shifting concept with numerous meanings. These papers preserve the Paulinian, medieval theology of signification (divine gift to serve the community) and the Weberian, modern sociological definition of charisma, which describes leadership, personal power, and seduction. Historians, and more often philosophers, use words with both archaic and more modern connotations. There is nothing anachronistic about this, as long as we are aware of the semantic shift we have imposed. The evolution of charisma covers several periods of the concept: the myth of an ancient hero, a semi-god; Christian grace, given by the sole gratuity of God; and a talent, inherent to an individual, that offers him fulfillment, but can also be used to serve others or, on the contrary, to take advantage of them; modern charisma focuses on one’s own success. Religious or profane, medieval or modern, the richness of the concept is immense.

**Funding:** This research was funded by Gobierno de España. Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (ref. PID2020–116128GB–100). Proyect: “The Charisma in Medieval Spain”.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.