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## Review of Judith A. Merkle, *Beyond Our Lights and Shadows: Charism and Institution in the Church*

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*Beyond Our Lights and Shadows: Charism and Institution in the Church.* By Judith A. Merkle. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016. xiv + 237 pages. \$106.04.

The Spirit is free but everywhere is in ecclesiastical chains. This may be something of an overstatement, but it gets to the heart of the issue Judith Merkle sets out to address in her study of revitalization and adaptation in Roman Catholicism. Since at least the time of Max Weber, charism and institution have had something of a dialectical relation, the latter seen as the inevitable decline and capture of the former in what Robert Michels famously dubbed the “iron law of oligarchy.” Notoriously obscure and ambiguous on the one hand and, yet, greatly over-defined by Weber’s typology on the other, charism and its role within the church remain an underdeveloped aspect of the field of ecclesiology. This is complicated more for Catholics due to the association of charism with the institutions of religious orders. Merkle’s work thus is a welcome contribution for its willingness to take on an often neglected and complex topic. Its central question focuses on how charism offers a resource for faithful ecclesial renewal in a twenty-first-century context of globalism, secularism, pluralism, and advanced technology.

Written for those who want “more,” the study seeks to offer construction materials, culled from sociology and theology, for those seeking to move down the paths of renewal, following on the trajectory of Vatican II. The initial three chapters of the book provide a theological, sociological, and ecclesial foundation for charism, exploring the notion and its use. She provides a biblical and theological conception of charism as the Spirit-given power-to-human-flourishing, both in individuals and in institutions. This conception is then situated within the conditions of modern life, through an engagement with sociology. The section concludes with a look at the role of community in

contemporary life, indicating the role of the church in mediating, in and through charism, the more of human life.

Part 2 engages the reality of charism within a changing ecclesial context, offering a more detailed look at charism within the church, particularly focused on its presence in the laity. Merkle explores possibilities of renewal within newly emerging groups and communities where more meaningful and mutual connections are being established. She also shows how these new initiatives move beyond ideological entrenchments, tapping into deep desires and ushering in transformative movements that are beginning to reconfigure structures of participation. In the third part, Merkle offers an *aggiornamento* for charism within a contemporary framework, examining its place in a society of globalization, secularism, and technology. Parts 2 and 3 are the real purchase of the book, providing what I found to be a perceptive account of how an updating of charism might proceed within the church as well as how it might impact wider society. Indeed, her stress on the need for new organizations and structures within the church that identify and incorporate the current expressions of charism, allowing them to reshape our communities, is prophetic and prescient. Additionally, her suggestion that the church need look to its charisms as a means of faithfully responding to forces of globalization and pluralism lays the groundwork for much fruitful reflection.

Yet, for all its insights, as a reader I remain confounded by the study's failure to offer a richer ecclesiology. While the author is clear and adamant about the role of the institution and its tradition as well as emphasizing the gift of charism to each of the baptized, it is not always clear what real participation of the laity means for the church *as church*. Additionally, in her attempt to sketch an alternative to hierarchical and

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institutional conceptions of the church, Merkle tends to veer into a view that trades ecclesiology for cosmology wherein charism seems allied to a wider evolutionary movement toward sacralization and purposiveness. I found this tension unresolved in the study, perhaps leaving the laity at times in the awkward position of being present and unnecessary as an ecclesiological member in a more universal search for meaning. The final few pages do turn toward the issue of church governance as well as the role of women in the church, but I think more space and detail need have been provided here. Whatever shortfalls I detect with her ecclesiology, however, I have no doubt that the volume will be of much help to institutions like my own, which seek to train the next leaders of the church for what will certainly be a disruptive century.

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