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From Weird Experiences to Revelatory Events

Ann Taves

As the first invitee to this portrait section trained as a scholar of religion and situated in a department of religious studies, I was interested to see how previous scholars trained in anthropology and sociology positioned themselves in relation to ‘religion’ as an object of study. It seems we all do so gingerly. Although my graduate work was in the history of Christianity with a focus on American religious history, since the early 1990s I have self-consciously positioned my historical research in an interdisciplinary space between psychiatry, anthropology, and religious studies in order to explore the contestations surrounding unusual experiences. During the last decade, I have been identifying myself less as a historian and more as an interdisciplinary scholar attempting to bring both humanistic and cognitive social scientific methods to the study of historical experiences and events. From this vantage point, I would argue, as Maurice Bloch (2010) did in the first volume of this journal, that ‘religion’ is not a natural kind but a complex cultural concept and that a theory of religion per se is impossible. In keeping with the way Bloch positions himself as studying ritual as a “form of communication” (ibid.: 11), I would position myself as studying how people appraise experiences and, more recently, events. Like another portrait subject, Bruce Kapferer (2013), I am interested in the light that religion can shed on more general processes, specifically the appraisal of events at various levels of analysis and the role of unusual experiences in the emergence of new social formations.

Background

I came to these views and questions over time. Having had a non-religious upbringing in a culturally Protestant American family, I was alternately fascinated and puzzled by intense forms of religiosity. In college, a course on theories of religion impressed me with the seriousness of both religious thought and thought about religion. As a result, it led me—in typical baby-boomer fashion—to try out a number of religious options during the next several decades. Had I thought of myself as an ethnographer, I could have construed this process as fieldwork, although anthropologists would rightly have accused me of ‘going native’ way too many times. But through these explorations, my indigenous secularism never entirely left me. That, coupled with a year in medical school before I decided to focus on religion, most likely laid the groundwork for entering empathetically into diverse religious and spiritual perspectives and—at the same time—attempting to explain them from a naturalistic point of view.

As a graduate student in the history of Christianity and American religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School, I took the sorts of theory courses that had drawn me to the study of religion in the first place, while at the same time focusing my research on practices that were foreign to me, such as Catholic devotion to consecrated wafers and Jesus’s bodily wounds. The theory courses repeatedly returned to Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, but also to Anthony Giddens on social theory and Turner, Spiro, Geertz, and Ricoeur on symbols. My dissertation on changes in nineteenth-century Catholic devotional practices integrated a bit of anthropological theory (Turner and Spiro on the bivalence of symbols). But mindful of the advice of my dissertation committee—Jerald Brauer and Martin Marty—and the general ethos of religious studies in those days, I shied away from trying to explain experience in naturalistic terms. When I was hired to teach American religious history—not theory—at a Methodist

theological school, I delved into Methodist history and discovered that its rapid expansion was fueled by unusual experiences. In class I skimmed over that material quickly, not knowing how to make sense of it.

Having no explanation for such experiences, and having been encouraged in any event to avoid ‘reductionism’, I set aside issues of experience and explanation, focusing instead on the role of piety and practice in the lives of ordinary people—immigrant Catholics and Protestant women. Then, at the height of the multiple personality disorder (MPD) ‘epidemic’ in the late 1980s, a friend shared her experiences of lost time and alternate selves, and her sincerity opened a new world of interpretive possibilities. Comparisons soon came to mind between the phenomena associated with MPD in psychiatry, spirit possession and shamanism in anthropology, and the experiences of early Methodists and others in the history of Christianity. This insight galvanized my career, reshaped my research agenda, and provided me with a cross-disciplinary framework within which I could combine my love of theory and my fascination with unusual experiences. In retrospect, the idea of ‘multiple personality’ also offered a guiding metaphor for thinking about selves in more fluid terms, for bringing multiple points of view into a common conversation, and, most recently, for offering naturalistic explanations of experiences in my own voice without obscuring the perspectives of those I am studying.

Experience

Fits, Trances, and Visions (Taves 1999) was the first major fruit of this shift in focus. It traced the historical interplay between experiential forms of religion (mostly Protestant and post-Protestant in the Anglo-American context) and scientific theories (medical, physiological, mesmeric, psychological) generated by insiders and outsiders in order to explain (and for the most part discredit) such experiences over the course of two centuries. It began with eighteenth-

century debates over the unusual experiences of Methodists and ended with early-twentieth-century debates over and comparisons between hypnotically induced dissociation in women (often very devout) diagnosed with hysteria and the unusual experiences of spiritualist mediums, mystics, and Pentecostals. The historical work led to three key insights. First, experiences of this sort are unstable and can morph experientially and hermeneutically through suggestion and encounters with others who variously explain, condemn, or encourage them. Second, the categories used to characterize these experiences (e.g., hysteria, mysticism, spiritual, religious, occult) are ideologically laden, theoretically unstable, and difficult to study apart from a history of discourse. Third, it is important to figure out how to constitute historical or ethnographic objects of study in such a way that our academic categories do not interfere with tracing this morphing of experience at the level of discourse (categories and theories) and practice.

In recognizing that there were similarities between experiences that scholars variously characterized as dissociative, shamanistic, and religious, I became aware of the problems created by assuming that ‘religious experience’ refers to something clearly defined and stable, rather than something that emerges as the result of a complex interpretive process. That insight shifted my focus from the historical study of religious experience to the study of experiences that people or groups explain in very different ways; for example, an experience that Methodists might explain as ‘falling under the power of the Holy Spirit’, mesmerists might explain as the effect of a ‘mesmeric trance’ induced by a powerful preacher, and a physician might explain as ‘catalepsy’, a bodily disorder. This shift in my object of study allowed me to analyze not only how individuals’ interpretations of their own experiences changed over time, but also how their contemporaries both inside and outside their own immediate social group interpreted their experiences.

While working on *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, I struggled to constitute my object of study and had difficulty explaining to others what the book was about in any positive sense. Having already rejected terms such as ‘religious’, ‘mystical’, ‘visionary’, or ‘ecstatic’ as modifiers of the experiences in question, I considered alternatives such as ‘trance’ and ‘dissociation’. However, because those I was studying also used these terms, adopting any of them aligned me either with the explanatory commitments of a present-day discipline or with my historical subjects. To avoid such alignments, I constituted my object of study with a more generic description of the sort of experiences that interested me. By focusing on “subjects whose usual sense of themselves as embodied agents is altered or discontinuous” (Taves 1999: 9), I could then consider how and why people characterize, respond to, and in some cases seek to induce these alterations in their sense of self.

As a result of the book, I was invited to write the entry on religious experience for the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Taves 2005). The essay traces the various roles that the concept of religious experience has played in modern discourses on religion and the controversies that emerged around it beginning in the 1970s. These controversies led scholars of religion influenced by the linguistic turn within the humanities to critique *sui generis* notions of religious experience, which—they claimed—set religious experience apart from other sorts of experiences studied by scholars in the humanities. These critiques, which led scholars of religion to reject the study of experience as passé or to study it only as a discursive construct, placed me in an odd position. Although I shared their critique of *sui generis* claims, their attempt to explain experience simply in terms of discourse struck me as inherently implausible. While my own work so far had focused on the history of discourse about experience, I sympathized with past attempts to explain experiences of other-worldly presences in naturalistic terms. Moreover, in

contrast to most of the critiques of religious experience, my work focused on explanations of particular kinds of experiences, not experience (religious or otherwise) in general. Many of the features of these experiences (e.g., the loss of a sense of self or the sense of another entity displacing oneself) recurred in different periods and cultural contexts, where they were sometimes considered religious and sometimes not. In my own mind, it seemed clear that such experiences could not be explained solely in terms of one factor, whether biological, personal, or cultural; rather, they provided intriguing contexts for investigating the interplay between them.

In 2004, prompted by a colleague interested in the newly emerging cognitive approaches to the study of religion, I plunged into the scientific literature on dissociation and hypnosis in order to reinterpret a turn-of-the-century medium in light of more current scientific research. The paper (later published as Taves 2006) sparked lively discussion at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, as well as teasing comments about going over to the scientific ‘dark side’. Owing to my focus on experience, the paper led to invitations to give lectures at conferences on cognitive science and religion and eventually the decision to tackle the touchy issues surrounding the study of religious experience directly in *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Taves 2009). There I argued that we should disaggregate the concept of “religious experience” and study the wide range of experiences to which people have attached religious significance. Focusing on the underlying form of particular experiences would allow us to compare experiences that shared that feature under different conditions and analyze the processes through which particular experiences are perceived, assessed, and valued at various levels from the intrapersonal to the intergroup.

The Ordinary and the Non-ordinary

Of this book's four chapters (on religion, experience, explanation, and comparison), the first proved to be the most controversial. The controversy arose not in response to the chapter's central claim—that we should recast “religious experience” as “experiences deemed religious” (Taves 2009: xiii)—but in response to my attempt to get out of the definitional problems surrounding religion-related terms. While I was clear from the outset that efforts to theorize ‘religion’ as an abstract concept were problematic, I initially planned to stipulate a second-order definition of the adjective ‘religious’ in the usual religious studies fashion. As I drafted the manuscript, however, I could find no way to avoid the confusion engendered by the use of diverse and often overlapping second-order definitions of terms such as ‘religious’, ‘magical’, and ‘sacred’ (ibid.: 148–149, 161–162). Not only do stipulative definitions make it hard to distinguish between first- and second-order use of terms, they also make it appear that we are studying the same thing when we often are not and thus obscure common objects of study that we label differently.

Rather than endlessly working to sort out our different technical uses of these complex cultural concepts, I concluded—much as I did in *Fits, Trances, and Visions*—that my interdisciplinary aims were better served by specifying the experiences of interest in broader, more generic terms that would allow me to analyze how people characterize and work with the experiences in practice. In light of recurrent references to ‘special’ objects, actions, and beliefs in scholars’ attempts to define religion, magic, and the sacred, I suggested that studying experiences people mark as ‘special’ or ‘non-ordinary’ would provide a more inclusive way to capture experiences of interest without presupposing how people interpret them.

When I made this suggestion, I had not yet read the work of Ellen Dissanayake (1990: 92–101), who proposed much the same from the vantage point of art history, nor was I aware of Bloch’s (2008) article proclaiming that ‘religion is nothing special’, which came out about the time *Religious Experience Reconsidered* went to press. As I later clarified (Taves 2010b: 176–177), I agree with Bloch that “religion is nothing special because, viewed from an evolutionary perspective, it is ‘an indissoluble ... aspect of human social organization.’” My claim, however, was that “while religion *may be* nothing special relative to other cultural activities from which it has belatedly been distinguished, *specialness* is special in so far as making things special [in Dissanayake’s sense] is at the heart of human cultural activity” (ibid.: 177). It is important, however, to distinguish between *making* things special and *perceiving* things as special or non-ordinary. The former is a more distinctly—although undoubtedly not exclusively—human activity and the latter a more general biological capacity possessed by many if not most organisms, upon which making things special is premised, although as I concluded based on two subsequent articles the relationship between consciously making and perceiving things as non-ordinary is complex.

In these two articles (Taves 2013a, 2015), I demonstrated how we could tease apart classical definitions of religion to break down “the sacred” and “religion” into more basic processes that are involved in making and/or perceiving things as non-ordinary by distinguishing between the generic schema that structure a definition and the specific features that mark it as “religious.” Taking cues from Durkheim’s definition of sacred things as “things set apart and forbidden” and Tillich’s definition of religion as ultimate concern, I recast setting apart as a means of making things *salient* and taboos and claims of ultimacy as means of signaling *significance*. From the early twentieth-century debates between animists, pre-animists, and their

heirs, I contrasted theorists, such as van der Leeuw and Weber, who explored the range of ways that people attach non-ordinary powers (e.g., mana and charisma) to all kinds of things including deities, with the Durkheimian tradition, which explored the way that people generate and enter into non-ordinary worlds. I recast the non-ordinary powers of the “mana” tradition and non-ordinary worlds of the Durkheimians in relation to two different aspects of imagination: inventiveness, the capacity to generate novelty in response to different environmental circumstances, and pretense, the ability to enter mentally in a “pretend” world.

In a recent exchange, Nathaniel Barrett (2014) critiqued my use of ‘specialness’, arguing that “meaning seems to drop out of her analysis of specialness at the most basic level, leaving behind a highly abstract quality whose unconscious ascription is allegedly responsible for the ‘singularization’ of something as a bearer of special value.” In my response to his target article (Taves 2014), I conceded that I had been using the term less frequently because—like his preferred term ‘meaning’—it allows us to gloss over important distinctions. Just as we can distinguish between semantic meaning, which is descriptive, and foundational meaning, which involves value, so too can we use ‘special’ to signify both something that is set apart from other things in its class (and, thus, salient) and something that has particular value (and, thus, significance). Both ‘meaning’ and ‘special’ are useful terms to watch for ‘on the ground’, so to speak, where they highlight features of interest. But both can obscure the distinction between salience and significance if we do not carefully analyze the manner in which they (‘meaning’ and ‘special’) are used.

In light of this distinction, I would say that things that are salient stand out from things in their class and are therefore perceived as special (insofar as we want to use that term) in the sense of being non-ordinary. Stimuli may be salient—that is, grab our attention—for many

different reasons, all of which involve potential value, including potential survival value (evolved salience), potential cultural value (learned salience), or potential value that is unknown (novel salience). But salient stimuli have to be appraised in relation to the environment (context), past experience, and the goals of the organism in order for the organism to determine their significance.

Broken down in this way, I was able to relate the distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary to the distinction between intuitive and minimally counterintuitive widely employed in the cognitive science of religion (Taves 2015), which to date has been primarily interested in identifying and explaining pan-cultural cognitive constraints on religious thought and action. Thus, in conceptualizing deities and other culturally postulated superhuman agents as minimally counterintuitive (MCI), CSR researchers situated them within a larger class of representations that involve violations of pan-cultural ontological categories. In CSR terms, we could say that MCI concepts stand out as non-ordinary because they add something unexpected to the way we have evolved to predict how things will behave. This makes the concepts more salient than things we would expect. If they are rich with possible inferences, we would assess them as potentially significant and, most likely, explore and develop the inferences using our imagination. Such concepts would, thus, be perceived as non-ordinary across cultures.

In focusing on universals, however, CSR researchers do not always explicitly stress that they are setting aside research on concepts—sometimes referred to as counterschematic—that violate cultural or idiosyncratic expectations and, thus, are crucial in accounting for cultural and individual differences. Within cultures or between individuals, violations of counterschematic concepts would also stand out as non-ordinary. Analysis of the interplay between concepts at

these levels promises to provide us with a better understanding of how cultural and individual differences emerge.

When I initially proposed that we think about ‘specialness’ on a continuum from the ordinary to the singular, some scholars of religion assumed that I was simply substituting ‘special’ for ‘sacred’ or ‘religious’ and objected that there are many things people consider special, such as their children, that they do not consider sacred. My goal, as I reiterated in subsequent publications (Taves 2010a, 2010b), was to cast a wide net that would capture the range of things that people consider non-ordinary in order to focus on (a) how and why people perceive some experiences as non-ordinary, and (b) how and why they understand and respond to such experiences (Taves 2013a, 2013b). In doing so, I was continuing my efforts to position the study of experience within an interdisciplinary space and, at the same time, elaborate and extend the ‘building-block approach’ I advocated in *Religious Experience Reconsidered*.

A Building-Block Approach to Complex Cultural Concepts

In sketching what I mean by a building-block approach (BBA) and how I gradually extended it to include ‘complex cultural concepts’ (CCCs) more generally, I am using ‘we’ language to acknowledge my collaboration with Egil Asprem, a scholar of Western esotericism who came to the University of California, Santa Barbara, as a postdoctoral researcher in order to extend this method to the concept of ‘esotericism’ and work with me to further develop it. As we are conceiving them, CCCs are abstract nouns with unstable, overlapping, culturally determined meanings that vary within and across cultures and adjectival forms—such as ‘religious’, ‘spiritual’, ‘sacred’, ‘magical’, ‘superstitious’, ‘esoteric’, ‘occult’, and ‘paranormal’—that can be used to characterize experiences, practices, objects, and so forth. We are using ‘formations’ to refer to any social entity, for instance, schools of thought, traditions of practice, social movements, social

networks, and academic disciplines. CCCs are often built into formations, in which case they take on specialized meanings within and for those formations. The key terms of our various disciplines, traditions, and schools of thought all have specialized meanings inside these formations. A BBA to CCCs is a method for learning more about how formations—and the CCCs that constitute them—emerge and function. It works by (1) taking apart the CCCs, that is, by disassembling, fractionating, or reverse engineering them into more basic components,¹ and then (2) tracing how people, individually or in groups, have assembled them into various formations. We can break this process down into four phases: CCC identification and disassembly followed by BBA identification and reassembly.²

Interdisciplinary Study of Anomalous or Unusual Experiences

We can recast the study of anomalous, unusual, or non-ordinary experiences in terms of the BBA. Hence, there is a range of disciplinary contexts (formations) in which scholars study unusual or anomalous experiences under various headings (CCCs), including shamanism, spirit possession, and altered states of consciousness in anthropology; paranormal experiences in parapsychology; anomalous experiences in psychology; mystical and religious experiences in religious studies; and dissociative disorders and psychoses in psychiatry. These disciplinary formations, each with their own key terms (CCCs), have frustrated the interdisciplinary study of anomalous or unusual experiences. Although anthropologists have been attempting to overcome this balkanization of research for some time, many within psychiatry and religious studies have resisted interdisciplinary comparisons on the grounds that some experiences are inherently pathological or religious.

Some psychiatric syndromes, as groups of signs and symptoms, can also be construed as CCCs that present difficulties parallel to those of religious experience: both tend to conflate

cultural categories, which carry an assessment or point of view, with the phenomenological analysis of form and thus stabilize clusters of types of experiences or symptoms by definitions rather than common underlying mechanisms. The National Institute of Mental Health recently critiqued the categories in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* on these grounds and has launched a Research Domain Criteria Project to "transform diagnosis by incorporating genetics, imaging, cognitive science, and other levels of information to lay the foundation for a new classification system" (Insel 2013).

Labeling 'symptom clusters' by definition rather than by underlying mechanisms has resulted in the overassociation of a wide range of seemingly involuntary experiences that are common in the general population with psychopathology. Phenomenologically similar types of experiences that people do not feel that they willed, intended, or caused thus appear in lists of anomalous, parapsychological, and religious experiences, as well as psychotic and dissociative disorders. The many scales devoted to experiences of various sorts suffer from the same difficulty. As a result, there are scales that focus on mystical, spiritual, transliminal, kundalini, near-death, and paranormal experiences, as well as scales devoted to anomalous experiences, creative experiences, dissociative experiences, and schizotypy (unusual experiences). Even though each scale seems to assume that it is measuring something different, the scales share many questions in common.

The Appraisals of Anomalous Experiences Interview (AANEX) (see Brett et al. 2007), developed by Emmanuelle Peters and her team of psychosis researchers at King's College, London, is markedly different. Aware that there are people in the general population who have unusual experiences who do not experience distress, never seek clinical help, and may indeed value and cultivate unusual experiences, these researchers developed an interview protocol that

allowed them to compare those who do seek help with those who do not. Studies using the AANEX interview are finding significant differences in the way that clinical and non-clinical populations appraise their unusual experiences (Brett et al. 2009). This suggests that appraisal processes interact with other variables, such as schizotypal tendencies, and play a crucial role in determining not only how unusual experiences are categorized but also how people respond to them and, thus, whether they disturb, enhance, or have no particular effect on people's lives.

A BBA to unusual experiences therefore allows us to distinguish between sensations and perceptions and the way they are appraised and, as a result, to set up comparisons based on these components rather than on the experience as a whole. The chief difficulty with categorical views of psychotic experiences and *sui generis* views of religious experience(s) is that they insist on treating experiences as wholes and rule out—a priori—the comparisons that would allow us to (a) identify component processes and underlying mechanisms and (b) investigate how the interactions between them effect outcomes clinically, ethnographically, and historically.

Events

In *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, the chapter on experience, which situated experiences people consider religious in the context of experience more generally, was a significant step forward, but it left me unsure how to characterize the relationship between 'experience' and 'experiences' in cognitive terms. The chapter on explanation, which relied heavily on recent developments in attributional theory (Malle 2004), argued for the importance of integrating unconscious appraisal processes into a multi-level explanation of how people attribute meaning to their experiences, but it left much underdeveloped, both theoretically and practically.

In more recent work, Asprem and I argue that situating experience and experiences in relation to research on ‘event cognition’ allows us to conceptualize the relationship between the two in more precise cognitive, information-processing terms (see Taves and Asprem, forthcoming). Event cognition is premised on the observation that we continually segment the flow of information into chunks, creating ‘event boundaries’ and, within those boundaries, ‘events’ (Radvansky and Zacks 2011; 2014: 29–31). Thus, in cognitive, information-processing terms, ‘experience’ (in the abstract) refers to the flow of information insofar as we are aware of it, whereas ‘experiences’ (in the plural) refers to events that are segmented out of the flow of experience such that each experience is perceived to have a beginning and an end. What we refer to colloquially as ‘experiences’ are simply personally experienced events that are particularly salient.

If, as the research on event cognition suggests, humans rely on what cognitive psychologists refer to as ‘event models’ when verbalizing event narratives, events offer a platform for integrating theoretical work on framing processes (Goffman 1974), which sociologists have elaborated in relation to social movements (Johnston and Noakes 2005), as well as attributional processes (Spilka et al. 1985), which social psychologists have elaborated in relation to dyadic interactions (Malle 2004), with the unconscious appraisal processes that cognitive psychologists elaborate within a predictive coding framework.

This more integrated approach has significant implications for historians and ethnographers. First, it allows us to better understand the relationship between ‘original’ experiences and later narratives by recognizing that post hoc narratives rely not on the original event model (also known as the ‘working model’) but on an event model (the remembered event) generated at the time of narration. This means that historical or ethnographic reconstructions of experience events must proceed in two steps, moving first from a public event narrative to the

hypothetical mental representation of the event at the time of narration, and then from this mental event to a hypothetical earlier working model of the initial event, whether internally or externally generated. The insertion of a hypothetical mental model at both points in the process does not make the historian's or ethnographer's reconstructive task easier or more certain, but it reminds us that the narration of experiences, however immediate, is always post hoc and thus always constitutes *a new event* in which memory and context interact afresh, resulting in a new data point in the reconstruction of historical processes.

Second, this integrated approach allows us to understand how various features, including background knowledge (i.e., memory and 'culture') and appraisals (i.e., intentions and causes), can be incorporated into experiences unconsciously and unreflectively (i.e., in the context of the experience event itself) rather than simply attributed post hoc. Once these features are apprehended, they determine what else we perceive as relevant in an event. This means that even at the level of the event model, events are represented partially and from the subject's point of view and thus do not provide an objective view from nowhere.

Third, because the causal frameworks embedded in event models are generated through appraisals of cues that the subjects sense and perceive in their environment and within themselves, the cues themselves are often represented in event narratives along with tacit and explicit appraisals. Drawing inspiration from Bertram Malle's (2004) analyses of how people explain events (see Taves 2009: 100–111), we can use this distinction between cues and appraisals to divide a detailed narrative event into sub-events by asking 'what happened' and 'why it happened' from the point of view of the narrator as the event narrative unfolds. In many cases, this allows us to tease apart the cues that the subjects sense or perceive ('what happened') from the causes or reasons they implicitly or explicitly give for an event ('why it happened').

Although unraveling these processes in historical and ethnographic narratives is conjectural and highly dependent on the nature of our sources, these distinctions allow us to take a more rigorous approach. If we have only one account and it is narrated long after the event, it may be impossible to distinguish appraisals that were built into the initial event from later reflections on the event. If we have multiple accounts of the same event recounted at different points in time, we can compare the versions by dividing the event into sub-events and interweaving the accounts so that we can compare the sub-events. Depicting the analysis in charts allows us to see what sub-events were added or deleted as the narrative was retold and analyze to what extent the narrator altered the way that the sub-events were described over time. When the description of ‘what happened’ remains stable across accounts, this allows us to identify a plausible early representation of the sensory cues that comprised the original event model. If some portions of the reasons a subject offers to explain the cues remain stable over time, this suggests that those reasons may have been closely connected to the initial unconscious appraisal of the event. Reasons that change over time likely represent the subject’s more conscious reflections on the experience and hence can be analyzed in relation to the context in which the narrative was retold.³

Revelatory Events

These lines of research come together in my most recent work *Revelatory Events: Experiences and Appraisals in the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Taves, forthcoming), in which I analyze the role that unusual experiences played in the emergence of three spiritual paths (Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous, and A Course in Miracles) that generated very different social forms (a church, a self-help movement, and a network of students). Part I devotes three chapters each to the descriptive analysis of the role of experience in the process of emergence reconstructed from the point of view of participants (whether as followers or critics) as events

unfolded based on the best real-time historical sources. Part II compares the three movements in order to explain their emergence as a creative process involving unusual abilities, small group interactions, and underlying motivations. In separating the descriptive reconstructions in Part I from the naturalistic explanations in Part II, I am differentiating between the reconstructive task of the historian who seeks to portray events from the point of view of historical actors and the social scientist who seeks to explain events from a naturalistic point of view. Taken together, the two parts offer a historically grounded study of the way people cultivate experiences and adjudicate their meanings over time and a comparative study that juxtaposes multiple explanatory points of view, including my own. At a personal level, it returns to the issues that drew me into the study of religion in the first place and to issues of voice and the interplay of voices that have preoccupied me since the eighties.

Theoretically, this project builds on my previous research, placing the process whereby people determine how experiences should be interpreted or categorized at the center and thus situating it in an interdisciplinary space that does not presuppose how the experiences or the formations that result from them will be categorized. In keeping with the theoretical work just discussed, it takes experience-related events in which it seemed to people as if an ‘other’ were present as its stipulated point of analogy. While James Lewis (2003) makes a forceful case for studying the role of religious experience in the context of new religious movements, *Revelatory Events* offers a wide theoretical framework for analyzing the role of ‘presence’ experiences in the emergence of new social formations. This broader, more generic terminology allows us to apply the methods used here to these new formations regardless of how they characterize themselves.

In keeping with this open-ended framework, I do not assume that the key subjects who founded the movements—Joseph Smith, Bill Wilson, and Helen Schucman—were psychotic, delusional, or consciously deceptive, although critics have often characterized Smith in particular in that way. Instead, recognizing that we cannot rule out these possibilities entirely, I take up the more interesting challenge of explaining how these individuals and their immediate followers might have sincerely believed, for example, in the existence of ancient golden plates or in the curative effects of a Higher Power or that an internal voice was that of Jesus. Thus, in Part II, the chapter on ‘abilities’ seeks to explain how Smith and Schucman were able to dictate complex texts in a manner that convinced their followers that they were not the authors. The chapter first compares what it was like for Smith to ‘translate’ the golden plates, while looking at a seer stone placed in a hat to block out the light, and for Schucman to ‘hear’ the words of the internal voice, which she ‘scribed’ in shorthand and then dictated to a colleague. It then compares their abilities with those of highly hypnotizable subjects and novelists to ask how we generate alternative first-person selves that we sometimes view as real. The chapter on ‘interactions’ focuses on the way in which the key subjects and their close collaborators frame their experiences in terms of other-worldly entities and powers, finding that in each case the groups developed agreed upon procedures that allowed them to be guided by the other-worldly entities along a path that the individuals within the group did not consciously envision. The final chapter on ‘motivations’ takes a cognitive approach to goal-directed action that allows us to conceive of these other-worldly entities as split-off (non-conscious) aspects of individuals that were not only recognized by but motivated to think for the emergent small group as a whole.

Revelatory Events can be read in several different ways: as an account of the role that ‘presence’ experiences played in the emergence of the three social formations; as an illustration

of methods that can be used to reconstruct the role of experiences in the emergence of new social formations; and as an explanation of the emergence of spiritual paths whose origins were attributed to guidance by other-worldly sources. Read in the first way, the book is intended as a contribution to the study of emergent social formations that does not presuppose the final form that they took, but focuses instead on how key participants perceived the process as it unfolded. Read in the second way, it is intended to demonstrate how comparisons grounded in basic concepts—in this case ‘events’ and ‘paths’—can revitalize comparative work and generate a more nuanced basis for explaining the processes involved. Read in the third way, it is intended as a contribution to creativity studies that draws from evolutionary psychology and the cognitive social sciences to better understand instances in which creative authority is attributed to other-worldly sources.

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NOTES

¹ Some anthropologists have used the term ‘fractionating’ to identify “cognitively and behaviorally universal patterns” that are associated with a “folk category” such as “ritual” or “religion” (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014: 675; see also Boyer and Bergstrom 2008: 119), that is, what we prefer to call CCCs. Although we have no objection to the term ‘fractionating’, we are not just searching for universals. We prefer the term ‘reverse engineering’ because it is widely used for the process of taking apart something complicated in order to see how it was put together and thus envisions the reassembly side of the BBA.

² For the most recent iteration, see Asprem (forthcoming).

³ For an elaboration on this method in relation to case studies, see Taves (forthcoming) and Taves and Harper (forthcoming).

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