

Introduction

In *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, I argued that we should not focus on “religious experience” as if it were comprised of a fixed and stable set of experiences but on how people decide on the meaning and significance of their experiences. This book tests the method outlined in that book on a particular type of experience that has played a central role in the formation of many spiritual paths—experiences of presence that some consider “revelatory.” In using the word “revelatory,” I am deliberately adopting a term loaded with theological meaning and recasting it in a way that I believe will allow us to investigate processes that inform many spiritual paths as they emerge, whether they are explicitly viewed as “revealed religions” or not. I refer to such experiences as “events,” that is, as “happenings,” because “events” provide a promising link between the psychological, which focuses on “event cognition,” and the sociocultural, which focuses on narratives of events. Experiences are events—meaningful wholes—that we pick out from the stream of experience. My focus here, as a historian with interests in cognitive science, is on events that people experienced firsthand and the processes whereby they came to believe that something had been revealed by or via a suprahuman source.

REVELATION AS EVENT

In referring to revelatory events, I am focusing on one of the three different ways the concept of revelation is used in the modern context. In addition to particular *events* or *occurrences* (whether mythic or historical) that some construe (explicitly or implicitly) as revelatory, the term is also used to refer to the specific *content* that people claim has been conveyed through a revelatory event or to a general *type of knowledge*. Within a religious tradition based on a revelatory event, people may refer to the content of what was revealed simply as “revelation.” Thus, when people refer to God’s revelation to Moses on Sinai, they may be referring to the content—the oral and written Torah—rather than to the event in which Moses went up the mountain and spoke with God. When people refer to Christian revelation, they may

2 | INTRODUCTION

be referring to the (content) claim that Christ is the incarnate Word (logos) of God rather than to the event of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem. Similarly, when Muslims refer to revelation, they may be referring to the content of the Qur'an rather than to the event in which the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad and commanded him to speak. Although the content of revelation differs from one revealed religion to another, these traditions all presuppose that revelation is a valid source of knowledge. Whether this is in fact true has been debated since the Enlightenment and has thus given rise to treatises defending the very possibility of revelation as a legitimate type of knowledge and way of knowing. Although theologians and philosophers of religion continue to devote attention to revelation in the second and third sense, this book looks at revelation in the first sense, that is, as an event or occurrence that some claim is revelatory.

To aid us in thinking about revelation as an event, we can begin with *The Oxford English Dictionary* definition of revelation as "the disclosure or communication of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency." Reframed in the active voice as "knowledge that an individual or group *claims* was disclosed or communicated to them by a divine or supernatural agency," it captures the range of contested phenomena that interest me and the sort of phenomena that will be considered in this book. This definition, which goes back to the fourteenth century, has four distinct components: (1) an act of disclosure or communication that presumably involves some sort of means through which this communication takes place; (2) the knowledge that is disclosed, which presumably involves some sort of content, however enigmatic or mysterious; (3) the human or humans to whom this knowledge is disclosed; and (4) the divine, supernatural, or suprahuman agency that discloses or communicates the knowledge. Revelatory events thus involve two knowledge claims. The first is the commonplace and empirically verifiable claim that knowledge has been communicated or disclosed. The second is the controversial claim that the knowledge came from a divine, supernatural, or suprahuman source.

It is the second claim that makes the knowledge non-ordinary and sets it apart from other kinds of knowledge. The attribution of the communication to a suprahuman source constitutes the knowledge as revelation and the event as a whole as revelatory. Such claims are generally based on the interpretation of unusual or ambiguous events. Those who make such claims are typically aware of a range of alternatives and seek to rule out competing claims. Thus, for example, claims having to do with divine or supernatural agency may be in competition with alternatives that postulate a human source for the knowledge, whether conscious or unconscious, normal or pathological, or an alternative divine or supernatural agent. Both claimants and their critics typically rely on various sociocultural resources to defend their claims, including the arts of persuasion; the systems of diagnosis and

discernment advanced by different cultures, traditions, or disciplines; and/or institutionalized structures of power and authority. As historians, we can compare and contrast the resources at hand and analyze the way that people mobilize them—and to what effect—in particular situations. Points of uncertainty and contestation, and the various resources that are mobilized in response to them, allow us to see both the interpretive options and the social possibilities available in any given context.

Many scholars of religion have been content to analyze the events people consider revelatory without attempting to explain them. Indeed, purely as historians, we have little basis on which to do so. If historians or other scholars want to go beyond analyzing the revelatory process and account for the source of the revelation in question, we enter into the explanatory fray, along with claimants and critics. In the first part of the book, I write as a historian; in the second part, I enter into the fray, drawing on methods and findings from the natural and social sciences to explain the emergence of these new spiritual paths in naturalistic terms.¹

Although some critics and scholars offer naturalistic explanations in order to debunk revelatory claims, oftentimes characterizing claimants as deluded or out of touch with reality, that is not my goal. Instead, I will be approaching new revelations as new insights that seem to come from beyond the individual or the group and analyzing them in light of recent research on creativity. Doing so allows us to move beyond the polarized perspectives of believers and critics; challenges us to acknowledge presuppositions about reality embedded in our understanding of delusion, self-deception, and psychopathology; and raises theoretical questions regarding the emergence and assessment of novelty that haven't been fully addressed.

CASE STUDIES AND SOURCES

This book analyzes the role of revelatory claims in three groups that emerged in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), and the network of students associated with *A Course in Miracles* (ACIM). These three case studies are not only richly documented but also present intriguing comparative possibilities. Each had a key figure whose unusual experiences and/or abilities led to the emergence

¹ Philosophers defend a range of versions of naturalism. In its weakest form, naturalism simply rejects supernatural claims. In its strongest form, naturalism assumes that all explanations can ultimately be cast in terms of physics (Papineau 2015; Baker 2013). Here I am assuming a relatively weak version, informed by the “new mechanism” in the philosophy of science (Craver and Tabery 2016), that presupposes: (1) that subjective experience is an emergent property of underlying brain mechanisms that evolved over the course of evolutionary history; (2) that the behavior of biological systems can be explained in terms of mechanisms, layered in part-whole relations, that span multiple levels of organization; and (3) that properties that emerge (organizationally) at higher levels may have causal effects on lower levels.

4 | INTRODUCTION

of a new spiritual path and to the production of scripture-like texts that were not attributed directly to them. Joseph Smith (1805–44), a farmer and treasure seeker in Upstate New York, had a vision in 1823 in which a personage told him of ancient golden plates buried in a hillside, which Mormons claim he recovered, translated, and published as the Book of Mormon (1830) and which led to the founding of a restored church (1830). Bill Wilson (1895–1971), a (failed) stockbroker, had an ecstatic experience of a blinding white light while hospitalized for alcoholism in 1934, which he associated with the feeling of a “presence” and which gave rise to a vision of a “chain reaction of alcoholics, one carrying this message and these principles to the next.” The vision, once he rightly understood it, led to the anonymously authored “Big Book” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1st ed., 1939) and the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (1953; hereafter *12&12*) of Alcoholics Anonymous. Psychologist Helen Schucman (1909–81) “scribed” the words of an inner voice, which she and her collaborators attributed to Jesus, to produce the best-selling self-study course *A Course in Miracles* (1976).

Each of the founders was embedded in an intense primary group that collaborated on the production of the books on which the spiritual paths were based. Smith’s immediate family and a few key supporters were involved in the discovery, recovery, and translation of the golden plates. Wilson, with the support of his wife, his doctor, and a small group of alcoholics, refereed a collaborative process that produced the Big Book. Schucman, with the help and encouragement of her colleague and fellow psychologist, William Thetford, scribed *A Course in Miracles*, the “Workbook for Students,” and the “Manual for Teachers.” Kenneth Wapnick and Judith Skutch, who joined with Schucman and Thetford after the Course was scribed, worked with them to make it public.

Despite these intriguing similarities, the three groups do not make the same claims for their scripture-like texts, and their respective collaborations generated very different social formations. Mormons explicitly describe the Book of Mormon as new revelation, the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous does not mention revelation, and ACIM teaches a new understanding of revelation. Joseph Smith’s new revelation led to the founding of a new church, which some now characterize as a world religion; Bill Wilson’s sudden experience, which he told critics was simply a conversion experience and not a new revelation, led to the emergence of a worldwide fellowship, which is usually characterized as therapeutic; and *A Course in Miracles*, which characterizes itself as “but one version of a universal curriculum,” resulted in a network of foundations, workshops, and study groups.

There is extensive primary documentation that can be used to reconstruct the process through which both the scripture-like texts and the groups themselves emerged. Virtually all the documents related to early Mormonism are available either through the *Early Mormon Documents* (Vogel 1996–

2003; hereafter *EMD*) or the *Joseph Smith Papers* (ed. Jessee, Esplin, and Bushman, 2008–12; hereafter *JSP*). In addition to published materials, such as the original working manuscript of AA's Big Book (Anonymous 2010), Bill Wilson's correspondence and other unpublished materials are available at the Stepping Stones Foundation Archives (SSFA) in Katonah, New York, and the AA General Service Office Archives (GSOA) in New York City. Much of the available material related to Helen Schucman and ACIM has been published or is available on the Internet; unpublished materials are available at the Foundation for Inner Peace (FIP; Tiburon, California) and Foundation for *A Course in Miracles* (FACIM; Temecula, California). There is also an extensive secondary literature surrounding the emergence of all three movements. Even when written by outsiders, however, the secondary literature generally reflects the groups' own sense of their beginnings, viewed retrospectively *in light of what emerged* rather than from the point of view of participants *as the group was emerging*.

METHODS

Methodologically, this project is built on a stipulated analogy that generates a series of comparisons. In Part 1, the point of analogy is more narrowly focused on the three groups, each of which had a founding figure who had unusual experiences of a presence that they felt was other than themselves. In Part 2, the point of analogy expands to include comparisons with others who had experiences in which *it seemed like* they were not the agent or author of their experience, even if they knew that they actually were.

Part 1 reconstructs the interactive process through which a small group of collaborators found meaning in their experiences. It draws on process-tracing methods used in microhistory, historical anthropology (Handelman 2005), microsociology (Collins 2004), and case study research in the social sciences (George and Bennett 2005) to work backward from official accounts of origins to reconstruct the process of emergence using the full range of available primary sources. Within a general process-tracing framework, I analyze narratives of key experiences (aka events or situations), distinguishing between the experiencer's perceptions (what happened) and appraisals (their implicit or explicit explanations of why it happened). Depending on the nature of the sources, I compare multiple accounts of a single event to see how a subject reinterpreted it over time and multiple versions of a more comprehensive narrative (an event series) to analyze the way the narrator positions a particular event within a larger narrative framework. As one reconstruction is added to the next, we can begin to see similarities and differences in how the small groups formed, the way key figures' unusual experiences were understood, the way the scripture-like texts were produced, and the way authority was structured within each of the groups.

6 | INTRODUCTION

The discussion of each group opens with a consideration of how the story of the path's emergence is usually told by followers of the path, briefly introduces the key collaborators, and then indicates, based on the available sources, how we can reconstruct the process *as it unfolded* from the point of view of the interacting subjects. It's important to recognize that while the reconstructed process will break with the more or less "official" story of the path's emergence, it still tells the story from the point of view of the interacting subjects. The difference lies in the timing and the vantage point of the telling. Insiders tell the "official" stories in light of what emerged. Their retrospective accounts make the outcome look much more inevitable than it did as the process was unfolding. Part 1 thus remains faithful to the point(s) of view of those involved in the process of emergence, but does so recognizing that (1) they did not know what was emerging, (2) developments took place amid uncertainty and at times disagreement, and (3) dissenters and skeptics were part of the process. Although my aim is to reconstruct the process from the point of view of the interacting subjects, I occasionally insert comments in my own voice when I think that doing so will make my argument clearer.

In Part 2, I break with the point of view of the three groups to offer a naturalistic explanation of the emergence of these new spiritual paths. The explanation is based on two methodological steps. The first step is a deepened comparison of the process whereby the path emerged in each of the three groups in order to specify the features that need to be explained more precisely. The second step expands the range of comparisons related to the specific features to be explained. This expanded range of comparisons will include experiences in which people felt *as if* they were not the agent or author of their experience and will rely in part on scientific research on hypnosis, delusion, and unconscious motivation. Although critics have often alluded to these lines of research to debunk revelatory claims, I hope to demonstrate how we can make judicious, critically informed use of scientific resources to offer naturalistic explanations of such experiences without being dismissive of them (for a more in-depth discussion of methods, see the appendix).

MAIN POINTS

Building on Rodney Stark's (1999) insight that small, intimate, face-to-face groups play a crucial role in the interpretation and elaboration of unusual experiences, I argue that both the interactions of the group and the outcomes of their interaction depend to a significant extent on the form, the content, and the elaboration of the unusual experience—that is, *on what interacting subjects viewed as emerging and how they decided to act on it*. Although the content, significance, and interpretation of the unusual experi-

ences differed and led to the emergence of very different social formations (a restored church, an anonymous fellowship, and an educational network), the meaning-making process in each case allowed multiple factors to coalesce to create self-reinforcing concepts and practices—circular logics—that simultaneously constituted and validated (and thus “bootstrapped”) something new into existence. In each case, the group developed procedures that gave voice to the alleged suprahuman source of the emergent path and allowed it to guide the process as it unfolded. This guidance ultimately provided and legitimated the narrative thread that constituted the “official” accounts of the groups’ emergence. While there is no one path or product, the emergence of the new paths in each case involved the collective reconfiguration of the self-understanding of the key figure as the conduit of a suprahuman presence. This reconfiguration enabled the emerging group to view this presence as the source of the key text, as guiding the emergence of the group, and calling each of them to reorient their lives in a profound and compelling way.

Stated most concisely, I make two arguments. Part 1: These three spiritual innovations were produced by small groups that believed they were guided by suprahuman presences and were able to generalize their experience so as to attract and incorporate others. Part 2: We can generate a naturalistic explanation of the emergence and role of these suprahuman presences by expanding a social identity approach to the creative process in light of research on nonconscious mental processes grounded in evolutionary and cognitive social psychology.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

As indicated in the preface, this project is intended as a theoretical contribution to interdisciplinary research on the emergence of new social formations and on the creative process. At the same time, it illustrates a method that historians and ethnographers can use to set up comparisons between cases in order to analyze and explain similarities and differences in the way the processes unfold.

Theoretically, this project builds on earlier research (Taves 1999, 2009) in which I argue that we will learn more about how people interpret their experiences and those of others if we do not focus on “religious experience” per se but on the uncertainties and disputes surrounding particular kinds of experiences or events, for example, those involving a seeming “presence.” Thus, while James Lewis (2003) made a forceful case for studying the role of religious experience in the context of new religious movements, this study offers a broad theoretical framework for analyzing the role of “presences” in the emergence of new social formations. It places the process whereby people determine how such experiences should be interpreted or categorized at

8 | INTRODUCTION

the center and thus situates the project in an interdisciplinary space that does not presuppose how the experiences, or the formations that result from them, will be categorized. This broader, more generic terminology allows us to apply the methods used here to new social formations regardless of how they characterize themselves.

The project also reflects the “material turn,” widespread in the humanities and the social sciences (Houtman and Meyer 2012), in which scholars have sought to undercut the presumed oppositions between spiritual/material and belief/practice, moving beyond studying beliefs about non-ordinary powers, entities, and worlds to examine the processes—cognitive, experiential, and interactive—whereby people materialize what they view as non-ordinary in the ordinary world. In focusing on revelatory *events*, I am focusing on events in which people claim to perceive non-ordinary presences in the ordinary world. The situations in which this occurs are varied but include interactive visual appearances to an individual or several people, internal textual dictation, the collective conscience of small groups, and revealing and transporting material objects. Claims regarding presence may thus arise in response to various kinds of stimuli: internal thoughts and sensations that subjects claim to experience as not their own, sensations that they claim arise externally but are not reflected in the external environment in an ordinary way, and the objects that people claim such presences have produced or transformed.

Although Max Weber ([1956] 1978), Anthony Wallace ([1956] 2003), and Rodney Stark (1999) all contributed to our understanding of these processes, none devotes sufficient attention to the process of interpretation and decision making as it unfolds from the point of view of the people associated with the emergent group, whether as supporters or critics. To better understand this multilevel process, this study integrates research on appraisal processes drawn from cognitive psychology, attribution theory in social psychology, and framing processes in sociology in order to tease apart subjects’ perceptions of what happened and why it happened as they frame and re-frame key events over time.² This more integrated approach, which is described in detail in the discussion of methods in the appendix, allows us to ground social movement theory in cognitive and social psychological processes.

When this more integrated approach to appraisal processes is combined with research on the abilities of highly hypnotizable individuals, delusions, and unconscious motivation, we can better understand the interplay of variables that lead some people who have unusual experiences (i.e., score high

² On event cognition, see Radvansky and Zacks (2014), as discussed in Taves and Asprem (2016); on attribution theory in social psychology, see Malle (2004), as discussed in Taves (2009), 88–119; on framing processes in sociology, see Goffman (1974); Snow et al. (1986, 464); Snow (2007); Johnson and Noakes (2005, 3).

on measures of “benign schizotypy”) to seek clinical treatment, while others join new religious or spiritual movements and still others create new ones.³ Among these variables, appraisal processes within small groups, whether conceptualized as “reality monitoring” or “spiritual discernment,” clearly play a crucial role, leading not only to the materialization of spiritual entities, texts, and objects but to the emergence of widely accepted spiritual paths.

I interpret this process of materialization as a creative act, while recognizing that the insiders view themselves not as creators but as followers of suprahuman entities that they allow to act through them. To account for their experience, I draw on a social identity approach to creativity, which explores the way that shifts in self-identity and self-categorization affect the creative process when it takes place in and for groups (Haslam et al. 2013; Postmes 2010). This line of research links psychological and social processes and thus provides the basis for an explanation that is both cognitive and social scientific (Thagard 2012, 35–41; 2014). To explain the emergence of suprahuman entities, however, I had to expand shifts in self-identity to include postulated suprahuman “selves.” In doing so, I realized—much to my surprise—how this line of research could lead to a rereading of Durkheim’s understanding of the “totem” and, by extension, its role in the emergence of groups (small societies) within the context of complex, large-scale societies.

Methodologically, many still assume that we must choose between engaging in deep, descriptive analysis or explaining phenomena in terms alien to those we are studying. I hope that this book models a way of playing fair with people’s deeply held beliefs, whether religious or not, without having to bracket one’s own. Certain presuppositions and values inform this effort:

1. *Humanistic Presuppositions:* It’s important to take account of how things feel to people on the inside (subjectively). People can undergo radical life transformations and shifts in worldview. We need to recognize novelty as such and seek to understand its emergence.
2. *Scientific Presuppositions:* Scientific explanations presuppose a naturalistic point of view and adopt the most economical explanations. How things feel on the inside (subjectively) isn’t necessarily the best way to explain them scientifically. We will understand ourselves better if we can achieve greater consilience between the humanities and the sciences.

³ On the role of appraisal processes in “the path to psychosis,” see Peters et al. (1999); Brett et al. (2007); Brett et al. (2009); Heriot-Maitland, Knight, and Peters (2012); Ward et al. (2014). On the incidence of “benign schizotypy” among those drawn to new religious movements, see Day and Peters (1999); Farias, Claridge, and Lalljee (2005); Smith, Riley, and Peters (2009); Farias, Underwood, and Claridge (2013).

10 | INTRODUCTION

Explaining things scientifically neither explains them away nor destroys their value.

3. *Methodological Transparency*: When analyzing the beliefs and practices of others, it's important to be open and clear about the methods and presuppositions we are bringing to our analysis, so that those we are studying can see where they agree or disagree with us.
4. *Methodological Fairness*: Research becomes polemical when we apply methods and theories to others that we are unwilling to apply to our own beliefs and practices. It is good to test our methods and theories on ourselves to see what it is like to be studied in this way.
5. *Methodological Agility*: It is possible (and helpful) to shift back and forth between humanistic and scientific presuppositions, so that we can (a) explore what experiences, beliefs, and practices are like for those who hold them; (b) compare their experiences with those of others, including ourselves; and (c) offer explanations that make sense to us that may differ from those we are studying.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The book is divided into two unequal parts, each with its own brief introduction. Part 1—“Making Meaning”—reconstructs the emergence of each of the three groups. Each reconstruction is presented in a set of three chapters accompanied by an introduction. The introduction indicates how the story of the group's emergence is usually told and the sources available for reconstructing the process as it unfolded. The chapters are then organized based on the availability of real-time sources rather than chronologically.

Because the Book of Mormon and the revelations that Joseph Smith received in the context of translating it provide the earliest real-time sources, the reconstruction of early Mormonism begins in chapter 1 (“Translation”) in the midst of the “translation” of the golden plates. Chapter 2 (“Materialization”) moves back in time through a reading of extant retrospective (post hoc) sources to reconstruct how Smith and his family might have materialized ancient golden plates if we presuppose that (a) there were no actual ancient golden plates and (b) the ancient plates were real for Smith in some nondelusional sense. Chapter 3 (“Beginnings”) turns to a close reading and comparison of the origin narratives that Smith and others recounted in the 1830s in the wake of the publication of the Book of Mormon and the founding of the new church.

Again, due to the nature of the evidence, the chapters devoted to Alcoholics Anonymous begin not with the meeting between Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith in 1935 that marks AA's official beginning, but with the real-time sources that survive from the drafting of AA's Big Book in 1938. Chapter 4 (“Stories”) traces the emergence of a gap between Wilson's personal version

of his story and his public account of AA's beginnings. Chapter 5 ("Fellowship") analyzes the development of AA's spiritual path (the Twelve Steps) in the late thirties and its social organization (the Twelve Traditions) in the forties, focusing on the role of experience in the former and anonymity in the latter to account for the gap that emerged between the public "Mr. AA" and the private Bill Wilson. Chapter 6 ("Seeking") highlights spiritual interests and abilities that Wilson shared with Joseph Smith and Helen Schucman but that he suppressed for the sake of the movement.

Correspondence between Helen Schucman and William Thetford during the summer that the Voice emerged allows us to begin the first of the three chapters on ACIM, where ACIM begins its own story—with Schucman and Thetford's decision to try to find a way to overcome their interpersonal difficulties. Chapter 7 ("Emergence") uses these sources to analyze the emergence of the Voice. Chapter 8 ("Teaching[s]") draws on unpublished versions of the Course to analyze the interactions between Schucman, Thetford, and the Voice in the early stages of scribing it. Chapter 9 ("Roles") analyzes how roles shifted, as first Kenneth Wapnick and then Judith Skutch were integrated into the Course's inner circle.

Part 2 is comprised of three chapters that compare and explain the process whereby the three paths emerged. Chapter 10 ("Groups") compares the process of group formation and the emergence of suprahuman entities and guidance processes, and extends the social identity approach to creativity to encompass suprahuman entities. Chapter 11 ("Selves") compares Smith as translator of the golden plates with Schucman as scribe of the Course and, through a series of additional comparisons, attempts to account for the production of complex texts that followers believe neither Smith nor Schucman could have produced on their own. Chapter 12 ("Motives") uses research on motivation—the factors that activate, direct, and sustain goal-directed behavior—to consider why some and not others were motivated to participate in the process of group formation and how competing motives directed toward different goals were given voice as alternate "selves." The conclusion highlights the distinctive feature of the three cases—their claim that a suprahuman presence was involved in the emergence process—and discusses its implications for understanding emergent groups, the creative process, and key aspects of Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.