

Review Essay

Experiencing New Religions

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Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths. By Ann Taves. Princeton University Press, 2016. xviii + 357 pages. \$75.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper; ebook available.

R*evelatory Events* is a book that anyone studying new religious movements is going to have to deal with for the foreseeable future. In *Revelatory Events*, Ann Taves has followed her award-winning *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (Princeton University Press, 2011) with a direct application of her theoretical framework to the question of how the revelations that are foundational to three different religious movements took shape in the minds of the founding visionaries and their closest followers. She combines detailed historical research in the book's first part with a comparative theoretical analysis based in cognitive science in the second section. Her comparative work and sophisticated analysis gives us a model for how good scholarship should be done. She also includes a helpful methodological appendix that future scholars can use. *Revelatory Events* is original interdisciplinary scholarship that will certainly inspire conversation among the scholars of these different movements and within the community of theoretical thinkers in the study of religion.

Taves' goal is to explain how people come to think that a superhuman presence is responsible for providing a new message to humanity by

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speaking through a specific individual. These revelations lead to that entity providing a new set of complex religious texts, and Taves examines how people identify the presences and what motivates followers to accept the being's legitimacy (223). She defines these revelations as events, which is a useful conceptualization because labeling something an event speaks to its historical relevance as a discrete unit of analysis (1). Methodologically, studying origin narratives as events enables Taves to look at how the people who received revelations and their immediate followers made the events collectively meaningful through prolonged interactions. Instead of treating the narratives as precise, factual accounts, she sees them as negotiations that occur between the person who receives the revelation and their significant others as they jointly determine the revelation's meaning. Particularly important to her study is the way that small groups of people eventually recognize the authority of superhuman entities whose existence cannot otherwise be identified. The end result is a comparison that enables us to see how the individual identity of each person who receives a revelation and their social context (especially power struggles over the direction that the group should take with the new revelation) have institutional implications.

Taves studies three origin narratives: those of Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–1844) and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), Bill Wilson (known as Bill W., 1895–1971) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), and Helen Schucman (1909–1981) and *A Course in Miracles* (ACIM). She directs her attention to how these persons received revelations (e.g., through seeing an angel or by listening to a voice), and how they understood what those revelations meant by interacting with a small group of close supporters and rivals.

In the first part of *Revelatory Events*, Taves engages in a detailed historical study of the three movements' origin stories. Historical specialists in each tradition will find a lot on which to chew in Taves' careful reconstructions of how the official narratives of the revelatory events came to be. For example, drawing upon numerous accounts and carefully piecing together the data, Taves shows us that the final versions of the story of how Joseph Smith received The Book of Mormon were achieved through complex interactions among believers. Eventually the narrative solidified, but Smith emphasized different roles and statuses in different contexts and for different audiences. While LDS historians and theologians will likely engage Taves in robust debate about the specifics of her arguments, in the broader field of new religions studies Taves has given us an excellent example of how to piece together the ways the narratives that are taken as central to each group's authenticity and validity change as time passes.

Paying careful attention to how origin stories are retold shows us that accounts of religious experiences, as the public comes to know them, are modified as their narrators receive audience feedback. Such careful

analysis allows us to note how the revelations that give each leader a certain type of authority mutate over the course of group interactions. How that authority is negotiated comes to shape both the leader's religious identity and the group's structure. Joseph Smith's authority, for example, was consolidated in himself as the receiver of revelation, and this recognition by followers and competition with adversaries led to the development of his status as prophet at the top of the LDS Church hierarchy. Meanwhile, in Alcoholics Anonymous, the insistence that *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (1939) be the voices of many alcoholics kept Bill Wilson's personal revelation from becoming a central defining feature of the movement, and meant that he would not hold a similar organizational stature as Smith. In Helen Schucman's case we have somebody who received a series of revelations, but who could not accept her status as receiving these messages and would not use them in her personal life.

Taves' historical work in part one, even when she makes a hypothesis that will upset some believers, is absolutely essential for her arguments showing how the cognitive apparatuses that guide and shape revelatory events are powerful forces in developing the final meaning for the persons who receive the revelations and their initial followers. That said, Taves' examples move further away from organizations that are built around the revelations of a specific individual, and more towards loosely tied movements or readerships as she moves forward in history. In the case of *A Course in Miracles* (1976), the only thing being provided to ACIM students today is the revelation, as compared to the organizational structure of the LDS Church or the Twelve Steps and traditions in AA. In the latter two cases organizational ties are weaker, but the impact that this has on how revelatory events shape the lives of people who come to believe them, beyond the innermost circles, is not covered in the book.

In part two Taves takes a comparative approach to developing a theory of how revelatory events occur and how they shape each group's dynamics. This section includes chapters on groups and their roles in identifying the superhuman presences, individual states and how these open the visionary to the message, and the stimuli that people have in pursuing new paths and how those drives can spur them to acknowledge the reality of a superhuman entity. Moving from the most complex level (groups) to the most basic (individual motivations), this section guides us through the intricate social and cognitive mechanisms that steer individuals to locate the superhuman presences either within themselves or in other people. New religions scholars should pay careful attention to this section because so much of our work addresses public concerns of "how could somebody believe that?" Taves has provided answers to this question, and now the question becomes how the subfield of new religions studies will respond to her arguments.

The methodological appendix (297–310) summarizes Taves' theoretical thinking and, as such, deserves some unpacking to show the potential and controversy that this book will inspire. For Taves, every one of these revelations and the types of actions they inspire—translating scriptures from golden plates that may not have existed; suddenly stopping the drinking of alcohol; and articulating a course that Jesus is providing—is a product of cognitive mechanisms. These mechanisms are able to work with each other, producing increasingly complex cognitive systems. These systems are analyzable by breaking down the components into smaller pieces and seeing how they fit together. If Taves is right, then religious actions are the product of multiple levels of components acting as systems to produce results. Revelations are not an individual's behaviors since they are too complicated; but Taves uses her theoretical grounding to argue that each revelation comes as a result of the individual's cognitive apparatus interacting with input from the world around them. To do this, she breaks things down into the simplest terms she can identify and then tries to build up to the revelatory event (hence the importance of seeing revelations as events that are not momentary occurrences—allowing more feedback and interaction among participants). The exciting possibility in this model is that if we can come to identify the different mechanisms and then piece them together, then all of religious life might be explainable by the ways that individual brains work. In light of questions as to whether the study of religion is engaged in studying comparable phenomena or if the data of religion is just a scholarly construct, Taves' research is a bold commitment to comparison as something that is achievable by a thoroughly centered religious anthropology which focuses on our brains as the tools that make the supernatural something real to be dealt with.

That underlying assumption about our brains is also the red flag that will draw the most criticism and sustained argument. Without being able to get inside the heads (literally and figuratively) of Joseph Smith, Bill Wilson, and Helen Schucman, this evaluation of revelatory events is still a product of Taves' analysis. She decided on her topic. She decided which paths were relevant. She decided which other cases in the cognitive science literature were worth bringing in for use with her case studies to provide an additional explanatory framework. Some will find her arguments to be an attempt at retroactive psychological analysis of key figures in religious history without being able to gather data directly from them in ways that contemporary psychologists would find valid. There is also the question of how much of her research is reproducible since the cases are built on hypotheses that are not directly testable.

Additionally, there is the question of how much of this process of receiving revelation is best explained through cognitive mechanisms, or if the phenomena in question are better explained by existing sociological or historical paradigms. Especially important in this discussion are

the individual and group dynamics that enable people to identify the superhuman presences as real. While Taves does not definitively state that these presences are objectively real, she gives us a model for explaining how things can be socially and mentally real without being materially existent. Yet, that model relies heavily on people confirming claims made by the person giving the revelations. Taves argues that individual motivations are key to driving our decisions to affiliate with a group or not. Revealed messages and the groups that coalesce around them *work* for people, which is why they join—at least among first followers. This leads to members legitimating the revealed events, and gives those who reveal them time to interpret what the revelations mean along with the people around them. But this argument is not particularly new.

We have known for a long time that people affiliate with new religious movements for a variety of reasons that work for them, and that some highly committed individuals will dedicate a lot of their personal energy into confirming the choices they have made. Does this require a whole new theoretical approach to explain? Sociologically, I find that Taves underplayed the importance of positive social feedback to the person articulating the revelation, a phenomenon that was most obvious in Schucman's case when her close friend Bill Thetford (1923–1988) started encouraging her to write down the course. Schucman needed Thetford's continuous encouragement to get to the point where she could publish the course, otherwise she may have completely ignored the Voice they both came to believe was talking to and through her. Similarly, Bill Wilson's revelatory event was important in helping him to stop drinking, but the members of AA pressured him to move to more general language about a "higher power" to appeal to alcoholics from different religious backgrounds. As such, Wilson's revelatory event plays a more marginal role in the organization that he helped found. Sociologically, the members minimized Wilson's experience to fit other group needs, which had a profound effect on the organization moving forward. The question for us as scholars becomes which analytic tools do we favor, and when? The extent to which cognitive science will help us to explain religious revelations and insights will be determined through further debate, but Taves argues that much religious experience can be explained through the cognitive systems working in our brains or, more to the point, the brains of a few individuals with exceptional cognitive abilities.

Chapter eleven offers the opportunity to consider whether we should consider revelatory events as the products of exceptional cognitive abilities. This chapter, titled "Selves," which Taves uses to refer to the specific characteristics and qualities that shaped the founders of each movement as special people who could receive revelations, draws upon literature about highly hypnotizable individuals to argue for special skills that particularly Joseph Smith and Helen Schucman may have possessed (254–69, especially 254–61). Unlike the arguments in chapters ten (on

the role of groups) and twelve (on the motivations people have when determining if a presence is real), this section lacks the concrete historical data that Taves uses when constructing her other arguments. We do not know what Smith, Wilson, and Schucman were thinking, we do not have accounts of their actions that are reported in such a way as to draw scientific conclusions, and the reports we do have are from biased observers (both pro and con) and, as such, are subject to the critical evaluation of the reporters' motives. To be fair, gathering data about the mental states of the three visionaries is highly unlikely (if not impossible), so some speculation is going to have to be required. It remains to be argued, however, if utilizing the example of highly hypnotizable individuals is the best point of comparison.

There are other issues with *Revelatory Events* that are worth engaging. One long-term question that this book raises is if a strictly materialist interpretation of cognitive systems and mechanisms is sufficient for explaining the persistence of belief, especially in cases such as "materialization," which Taves explains in chapter two. She argues that Smith did not find golden plates, but that he was not delusional in claiming to possess them. She theorizes instead that he might have created, "what was in effect a representation of the plates, perhaps using sand and later tin or lead, as detractors claimed, in the knowledge that they would become the sacred reality the Smith family believed them to be only insofar as the angel made them so" (59). She compares this process to the view of Catholic and Orthodox Christians that the Eucharistic wafer is the actual body of Jesus. Yet, materialization remains a problem for people and their beliefs in the modern era; it is worth noting that neither Wilson nor Schucman made any materialization claims as did Smith.

Furthermore, Taves' argument here is based on supposed similarities that are not supported by evidence. We cannot really know what Smith was doing or thinking, and begs the question of whether this is an acceptable scholarly way of dealing with the long-standing question of the authenticity of the golden plates. Furthermore, there are plenty of Catholic and Orthodox Christians who see transubstantiation as a mystery, precisely because their taste buds tell them that it is unlikely they are eating flesh at the moment they consume the host. Empirical evidence and belief clash in that moment which needs a resolution. The question is, how do they resolve these problems? More applied work on how practicing and believing Catholics and Orthodox Christians treat transubstantiation within the methodology Taves details is needed before she can say that the model actually explains materialization. What Taves presents is something that looks like an opportunity for making connections, but more work needs to be done to understand the phenomena to which we have access before trying to attribute the same skills to someone who lived close to two hundred years ago.

Yet, it is important to pursue such avenues of explanation because in the wider discourse about new religions the question of the leader's sincerity and mental health is pervasive and sometimes the issue of fraud is used as a justification to criticize the entire belief structure of an institution. That is, the argument goes, if Smith was a fraud, the entire LDS Church is fraudulent. Taves seems to be saying that Smith might have been factually fraudulent without actually lying. I am not convinced that the argument from materialization will resolve any issues for those whose criticisms of Smith and the LDS Church lie in claims that Smith was a charlatan. Thus, when it comes to explaining why the LDS Church is a successful religious institution, I am not convinced that the cognitive science framework laid out in *Revelatory Events* is the most useful explanatory framework. That said, Taves' willingness to confront controversies, such as Smith's golden plates, with her theoretical insights derived from cognitive science make this a book with which we should wrestle. At the very least, this is a first attempt that will make people ask if cognitive science's insights will be useful for explaining what appear to be recurring historical phenomena.

There is also the problem of how these movements increase in scale and survive, and what role revelatory events play in this process. While Taves makes a case in chapter ten that the revelatory events were essential for the ability of Joseph Smith, Bill Wilson, and Helen Schucman to convince others that they were receiving revelations (rather than just being crazy), there are still the questions of how these revelatory events function in establishing groups and keeping them running, and how they are used in later stages of outreach and why. It is difficult for Taves to address these concerns, because the book is narrowly focused on the examples of selected founders and a few key early followers. Furthermore, they prompt one to wonder what Taves might see as the limitations to the cognitive science methods she champions. While there is a lot of academic interest in cognitive science today, we need to ask what are the strengths and weaknesses of this specialization we are being asked to consider. More work on what makes the people who do not receive revelations more likely to accept that the person next to them is a visionary—rather than somebody who is mentally unstable—is an important, but missing, component of *Revelatory Events*.

In light of these questions, AA provides the most interesting case in the book, as Bill W.'s spiritual experience was not used as a prototype for other AA participants. Taves makes this fact explicit in chapter five. While Wilson's experience might have been an important motivator for himself and Dr. Bob Smith (known as Dr. Bob, 1879–1950), the fight to establish the language of the Twelve Steps shows that other AA participants wanted none of the God-speak that inspired Wilson included in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Indeed, Wilson's spiritual pursuits were kept at arm's length from AA in order to create a more open and accepting

organizational structure that could encompass everyone, from the most devout Catholic to the most strident atheist. Therefore, Wilson's revelation remains questionable as an event that is foundational to the AA movement. His authority is neither Smith's nor Schucman's, the former being a prophet who founded a new church and the latter being recognized as the person who received the dictation of a course. There is also the question of the ACIM movement even being considered an organization. Aside from Schucman and the four closest insiders who helped make the course public, Taves does not give any suggestion that there is a movement around the course.

All of this raises questions about the usefulness of the cognitive science approach, which tries to explain where revelations come from, for explaining the rise of new religious movements based on revelations. Revelations might be important for establishing an early group of participants, but what is it about revelations that make them necessary or valuable for people as the organization expands? Especially important here is the issue of how revelatory events are important for those who never knew the person who received the original revelations. This is an entirely separate set of sociological and cognitive issues that Taves could have noted, but does not. The problem of subsequent generations of those who belong to groups or participate in creating traditions of interpretation around revelations is left to other scholars.

Fundamentally, *Revelatory Events* and this review ought to prompt debate over theoretical relevance. Scholars study groups they find appropriate for research purposes. Can the cognitive science methods Taves advances in her latest book help us get to the heart of how groups grow to the point at which they become germane to the scholar's investigations such that we can justify spending our limited time, energy, and funding studying these groups and not others? I am not certain that *Revelatory Events* answers this question satisfactorily since it is so focused on the micro-interactions of a handful of early adherents and not on the groups as they grew to be more widespread organizations or movements. I will be interested in seeing if people can make the argument that cognitive mechanisms are viable as explanatory systems at higher levels of group complexity, and that they are better explanations than our existing theoretical frameworks. If we can get to how revelatory events become key in inspiring further adherence and creativity among people, then the importance of Taves' framework with her examples becomes even more apparent.

Revelatory Events is a major contribution to the debate about whether insights from cognitive science that are developed in contemporary research settings are applicable to historical phenomena. Its reception will go a long way to determine if the book becomes an interdisciplinary classic that launches further research, or if it is ultimately viewed as an ambitious book that did not meet its mark. Like *Religious Experience*

Reconsidered, it is a major scholarly achievement from one of our foremost scholars of religion.

This is an important theoretical work in the study of religion that draws on data from the study of new religions. The challenge going forward will be to determine the extent to which individual scholars absorb, combine, and emphasize the theoretical tools Taves takes from cognitive science over other theoretical approaches in their own research and analysis. I will not be surprised if at least a small school of scholars gathers around Taves' model and takes it in new and original directions.