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Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



The Place of Identity Dissonance and Emotional Motivations in Bio-Cultural Models of Religious Experience: A Report from the 19th Century

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Durham University's 'Hearing the Voice' project involves a multi-disciplinary exploration of hallucinatory-type phenomena in an attempt to reevaluate and reframe discussions of these experiences. As part of this project, contemporaneous religious experiences (supernatural voices and visions) in the United States from the first half of the nineteenth century have been analysed, shedding light on the value and applicability of contemporary bio-cultural models of religious experience for such historical cases. In particular, this essay outlines four historical cases, seeking to utilise and to refine four theoretical models, including anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann's 'absorption hypothesis', by returning to something like William James' concern with 'discordant personalities'. Ultimately, the paper argues that emphasis on the role of identity dissonance must not be omitted from the analytical tools applied to these nineteenth-century examples, and perhaps should be retained for any study of religious experience generally.

Keywords: bio-cultural model; identity; nineteenth century; voices and visions; emotional motivations

1. Introduction

Recent historical analysis of religious experience in the nineteenth century, carried out under the auspices of the 'Hearing the Voice' project and seeking to illuminate the multi-modal and bio-cultural nature of those experiences, indicates that existing theoretical models for the study of religious experience may lack a crucial component. Bio-cultural theories, due to their inherent balance of culture versus cognition, are the best-equipped models for any exploration of the causes and contexts of religious experience. Nevertheless, the present study draws from four nineteenth-century cases studies to shed light on the relative shortcoming of some of these frameworks, ultimately arguing that they have unnecessarily abandoned or de-emphasised the role of personal emotional and psychological conflict for individuals eliciting or recurrently experiencing supernatural voices and visions.

Of course, establishing the phenomenology of such historical cases is necessary and presents a number of significant challenges. This sort of social-scientific analysis of the past suffers from the impossibility of ethnographic field work in the traditional

sense; the subjects cannot be interviewed, and the analyst cannot engage in participant observation. Likewise, it is impossible to use psychological/neurological tools to clarify distinctions between self-report (or indeed collective memory) on the one hand and measurable traits (e.g., levels of psychosis or areas of brain activity) on the other hand. Indeed, there is a unique sample bias at work in which the most robust and accessible case studies are those attached to historical figures whose experiences and biographical events were preserved because of their role in establishing various social movements – whether political, religious, or otherwise.

Whilst those limitations temper the following essay, research into the various socio-cultural and potential neuro-cognitive aspects of the nineteenth-century experiences outlined below does seem to be uncovering a number of significant patterns, cutting across demographic dimensions such as race and gender. Specifically, a number of key cases of religious visionaries from America's Second Great Awakening (roughly 1800 – 1850) describe the experiences in such a way that, whatever else may be happening culturally and cognitively to facilitate them, issues of personal psychological wellbeing and continuity emerge as likely motivators driving the individual toward his or her religious experiences. In fact, there seems to be something here related to the ego, the sense of self in relation to both greater society and the supernatural. William James was perhaps the first to highlight this, famously outlining his notion of the 'divided self' as a 'certain discordancy or heterogeneity in the native temperament of the subject' (2004: 152). For James, this discord was often resolved by religious experience, and he provided many examples such as that of Stephen H. Bradley's 1829 theophanic experience in which the young man sees Jesus and subsequently asks for happiness which the deity gave to him 'as quick as thought' (ibid.: 171-174).

More recently, Ann Taves, whose 'building block' approach to religious experience combines various theoretical approaches including a sort of Durkheimian sociology as well as elements of event cognition to attempt historical reconstructions (2009; 2017), seems to recognise the part played by one's sense of self when she brings the notion of supernatural agents into her discussion of social identity and the 'revelatory events' of various historical actors (2016: 237-239, 290-295). As is mentioned below, other theorists appear to make less of this. However, our research indicates that in a number of nineteenth-century cases, the individuals who report encountering divine visions, voices, dreams, et cetera not only exhibit an apparently acute drive to reconcile their own personal backgrounds with socio-religious options but also go on to have recurring experiences as they establish, join, leave, and re-join more than one of those options. The available primary sources, particularly personal journals and autobiographical accounts, suggests that the repetition of their experiences seemed to coincide with a personal yearning for stable identity – a search for harmony and consonance between their private and public expectations as well as between their psychological, social, and economic needs.

2. Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience

The following accounts, then, serve as examples of this preliminary finding in which a struggle for continuity acts as part of the impetus behind religious experiences. This

is not simply a longing for stability *qua* stability,¹ but for the sort of stability that results from harmony between socio-religious needs/expectations and religious options/experiences. In each of the four cases below, an initial internal tension exists and builds until the individual experiences one or more supernatural events which reportedly resolve that tension. Whilst demographic variables – race and gender – are controlled by the selection of these four figures, I cannot at this point exclude the possibility that similarities in their experiences as recorded and disseminated in the nineteenth century are due to factors such as the salience of particular culturally-transmitted symbols and linguistic forms as well as commonly rehearsed religious tropes rather than a felt sense of existential strain. Even so, whether as a cultural artefact indicative of those sorts of broader social trends and forces or as insight into a recurring pattern of individual psychological consequence for the religious visionaries of the period, the narratives of Isabella Baumfree (Sojourner Truth), Nat Turner, Joseph Smith, and Ellen White underscore the integrative function of religious experience during the first half of the nineteenth century in America.

2.1 *Isabella Baumfree (Sojourner Truth)*

Born around 1797, Isabella Baumfree was a slave in New York until just before the abrogation of slavery in that state in 1827. Much of what we know of Baumfree – who later changed her name to Sojourner Truth – comes from an 1850 publication, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, dictated by Truth but recorded by Olive Gilbert. This account offers, among other things, a description of the early adulthood of Baumfree as she comes to serve a kind master/household, gains her freedom, and has a number of formative religious experiences. Indeed, much of the narrative is interspersed with allusions and interjections of an overtly religious sort. By 1850, of course, Sojourner Truth was emerging as an outspoken proponent of women's rights and had spent a number of years as an itinerant religious figure as well as briefly associating with numerous religious movements of the period.

Here, our concern is simply with recounting the portions of this narrative dealing with her state of mind before and during her initial religious experience. Baumfree was exposed to religious (loosely Protestant Christian) ideas during childhood; the narrative states that 'her mother...talked to her of God [and] from these conversations, her incipient mind drew the conclusion, that God was a "great man"; greatly superior to other men in power; and being located "high in the sky", could see all that transpired on the earth.' Baumfree seems to have carried this basic theological notion with her into early adulthood, and it influenced her form of prayer as well as her spiritual expectations: 'She at first commenced promising God, that if he would help her out of all her difficulties, she would pay him by being very good...and this she soon found much more easily promised than performed.' Indeed, after repeatedly feeling that she had not kept her promises to God, 'the mortifying reflection weighed on her mind, and blunted her enjoyment.' However, she eventually came to serve a different slaveholding family, this one being very kind and providing Baumfree with 'a place where she had literally nothing to complain of, and where, for a time, she was more happy than she could well express.'

¹ Thus, not quite like the general notion of identity offered by sociologist Hans Mol as 'a stable niche in a predictable environment' (1976: 55).

Yet, this happiness appears to have been short-lived, for Baumfree not only realised that she had ceased to pray or engage in other religious practices since becoming much more content, but she also began to experience internal conflict related to her separation from the friends and family who were still the slaves of her previous master. Baumfree does not explicitly refer to this in terms of guilt, a natural assumption given that her new circumstances were much more pleasant than those of the fellow slaves she had left behind, but instead her editor describes a moment when Baumfree 'saw in prospect' an upcoming holiday in which she could imagine 'her former companions enjoying their freedom for at least a little space, as well as their wonted convivialities, and in her heart she longed to be with them.' In fact, 'with this picture before her mind's eye, she contrasted the quiet, peaceful life she was living with the excellent people of [her previous home], and it seemed so dull and void of incident, that the very contrast served but to heighten her desire to return...' That same day, her old master visited, and Baumfree told him of her eagerness to accompany him back to his home.

At this point, Baumfree's narrative shifts to a focus on religious experience and its relationship to her internal dilemmas. Her old master refused her request to return with him, but Baumfree prepared herself and her child for the journey anyway. However, as she approached the carriage to leave, 'God revealed himself to her, with all the suddenness of a flash of lightning, showing her, "in the twinkling of an eye, that he was all over...and that there was no place where God was not."' This sudden epiphanic event caused Baumfree to be 'instantly conscious of her great sin in forgetting her almighty Friend.' Her 'unfulfilled promises arose before her...and her soul, which seemed but one mass of lies, shrunk back aghast from the "awful look" of him whom she had formerly talked to...a dire dread of annihilation now seized her, and she waited to see if, by "another look", she was to be stricken from existence.' The editor does not indicate what Baumfree means by 'looks' from God, whether this was a visual hallucinatory-like experience or not, but the narrative reveals that a second 'look' did not come and that Baumfree attempted to resume her work in the house after realising that the carriage had already left during her experience.

Even so, this initial experience did not resolve her conflictual thoughts regarding her own inner character and moral worth, even if it does seem to have quelled her yearning to return to her previous master. In the end, Baumfree's plans of the latter were thwarted by divine intervention, but she remained troubled and found it a challenge to focus on her duties. That state of mind then initiated or facilitated a more immersive religious experience:

But the workings of the inward [wo]man were too absorbing to admit of much attention to her avocations. She desired to talk to God, but her vileness utterly forbade it...She could not; and now she began to wish for someone to speak to God for her. Then a space seemed opening between her and God, and she felt that if someone, *who was worthy in the sight of heaven*, would but plead for her in their own name, and not let God know it came from her, *who was so unworthy*, God might grant it. At length a friend appeared to stand between herself and an insulted Deity; and she felt as sensibly refreshed as when, on a hot day, an umbrella had been interposed between her scorching head and a burning sun. But who was this friend? became the next inquiry. Was it Deencia [an old friend of Baumfree], who had so often befriended her? She looked at her, with her new power of sight—and, lo! she, too, seemed all 'bruises and putrifying sores,' like herself. No, it was someone very different from Deencia.

'Who are you?' she exclaimed, as the vision brightened into a form distinct, beaming with the beauty of holiness, and radiant with love. She then said, ...'I know you, and I don't know you.' Meaning, 'You seem perfectly familiar; I feel that you not only love me, but that you always have loved me—yet I know you not—I cannot call you by name.' When she said, 'I know you,' the subject of the vision remained distinct and quiet. When she said, 'I don't know you,' it moved restlessly about, like agitated waters. So while she repeated... 'I know you, I know you,' that the vision might remain—'Who are you?' was the cry of her heart, and her whole soul was in one deep prayer that this heavenly personage might be revealed to her, and remain with her. At length, *after bending both soul and body with the intensity of this desire*, till breath and strength seemed failing, and she could maintain her position no longer, an answer came to her, saying distinctly, 'It is Jesus.' 'Yes,' she responded, 'it is Jesus.' (emphasis added)

After this experience, Baumfree's narrative recounts again that her foregoing concept of God was as 'an eminent man, like a Washington' but that 'now he appeared to her delighted mental vision as so mild, so good, and so every way lovely' that she concluded that God 'had always loved her, and she had never known it.' From this episode onward, Baumfree's life is related as being more directly pervaded by religion. She eventually joins the religious movement of Robert Matthews, himself a quintessential religious figure of the time, and later associated with the Adventist movement. Those later religious forays, however, seem to have been fuelled by the events just provided, and whilst the narrative certainly discusses Baumfree's gradually complexifying views of the divine, the internal questions of her moral adequacy and the discomfort with her having escaped the hardships of her previous slavery-related circumstances are not mentioned again.

2.2 Nat Turner

Unfortunately, not all of Baumfree's fellow slaves were so lucky. Nat Turner, born into slavery around 1800 in Virginia, never received his freedom in the way that Baumfree did. However, at the age of approximately 31, Turner led a slave rebellion in which both slaves and white slaveholders, as well as their families, were killed. When Turner was subsequently captured and awaiting punishment in jail, he dictated an autobiographical narrative to Thomas Gray, the latter recording the account and publishing it in the first-person voice of Turner as *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831). Just as Truth found an audience for her life story due to her eventual esteem as a political activist, so Turner's narrative was sought, preserved, and disseminated because of the extraordinary nature of his decision to organise a revolt. The following material comes from these confessions and has been chosen to highlight the particular contours of Turner's progressive alignment of expectations, needs, and religious experiences.

In fact, Turner's account is written as a linear, chronological narrative and, thus, affords an easier reconstruction of the events prior to the onset of his religious experiences. Like Baumfree, Turner's encounter with a basic, but diverse, range of theological ideas began in childhood. From the outset, he was frequently told of the unique events of his earliest years, events taken to be of a religious nature by his family and friends: '...when three or four years old, I was telling [other children] something, which my mother overhearing, said it happened before I was born – I stuck to my story, however.' This confident knowledge of things from before his birth caused those present to predict that Turner would be a 'prophet' because he had been shown this information by 'the Lord'.

It is particularly interesting to note that Turner then speaks of the way in which this special religious significance was legitimated and perpetuated by his family and others, often connected to the high level of intelligence that others perceived in him and influencing not only his expectations of greatness but his religious practice:

And my father and mother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose...My grandmother, who was very religious, and to whom I was much attached – my master, who belonged to the church, and other religious persons who visited the house...remarked I had too much sense to be raised, and if I was, I would never be of any service to anyone as a slave – to a mind like mine..it is easy to suppose that religion was the subject to which it would be directed.

Growing up among them, with this confidence in my superior judgment, and when this, in their opinions, was perfected by Divine inspiration...and which belief was ever afterwards zealously inculcated by the austerity of my life and manners...Having soon discovered to be great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and prayer...

It is not clear whether Turner chose to ‘wrap himself in mystery’ as a way of fulfilling what he understood to be the hopeful desires others had for his life or whether he also believed himself bound for a future of divinely-chosen significance. Either way, his prayer intensified after encountering the biblical verse, ‘Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you’ (Matthew 6:33). This led him to ‘reflect much on this passage, and pray daily for light on this subject.’ During one of these prayers, Turner recalls that ‘the spirit’ spoke to him, repeating the same verse from the book of Matthew. The voice of ‘the spirit’ excited Turner and resulted in two years during which he ‘prayed continually’ whenever he found time. Again, this entity spoke to him with the words of the same verse. This time, Turner felt ‘confirmed’ that he was ‘ordained for some great purpose’. He recalls, ‘Several years rolled round, in which many events occurred to strengthen me in this belief.’

With retrospection concerning the events of his childhood and a faith freshly bolstered by the repeated encounters with ‘the spirit’, Turner then focused on the reason for his chosenness: ‘I began to direct my attention to this great object, to fulfil the purpose for which, by this time, I felt assured I was intended.’ Yet, Turner was then appointed to work under a different, and apparently less agreeable, ‘overseer’. To avoid this, Turner ran away for approximately one month. He returned, however, after experiencing a vision of ‘the spirit’ who chastised Turner for being focused on worldly issues rather than on ‘the kingdom of Heaven’. Furthermore, the spiritual entity warned of punishment for those who do not serve their earthly masters. Although, Turner offers no comments on the relationship of this tense and potentially conflictual message, it is perhaps significant that the special spiritual self-understanding of Turner was at odds with his inclination to flee from threatening, physical circumstances. As will be seen, the case of Joseph Smith presents a similar tension between more mundane exigencies and the perceived spiritual chosenness of the individual – with another example of a theophanic vision reprimanding the visionary for moral inadequacy and misaligned priorities.

For Turner, this experience, with its stern prompting to focus on the spiritual rather than the material, certainly seems to have refocused his energy and behaviour. He

experienced another vision in which 'white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened'. This inspired Turner to withdraw as much as possible from his duties and to commit himself as completely as possible to 'serving the spirit'. Indeed, as years passed Turner was visited by this spirit, saw secret symbols displayed on leaves and grass, and witnessed the healing of a skin lesion. He became increasingly convinced of an ultimate and imminent 'day of judgment' that would be brought on by god. Then, in 1828, many past elements were integrated into a single whole as a vision informed Turner that 'the Serpent was loosened, and Christ has laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that [Turner] should take it on and fight against the Serpent'. Turner understood this fight against 'the Serpent' as the special purpose predicted in his youth and, when an 1831 solar eclipse triggered a memory of his earlier vision of white and black spirits battling under a darkened sun, he organised a rebellion to kill local white slaveholders and their families.

In the light of our emphasis on identity and emotional motivations, Turner's story is interesting in that he represents a strong sense of personal identity tied to both the expectation of religiously-significant future actions and the expectation of continued guidance and communication from the spiritual entities of his visionary experiences. Although it may be too strong to suggest that his visions directly resolved specific psychological tensions, it is important to note the strong influence that others had on Turner's own self-understanding, including the early assumption that he may possess a prophetic gift.

2.3 Joseph Smith

Of course, Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, is one of the most notable of nineteenth-century America's visionary prophets. Born in 1805 in Vermont, thus a direct contemporary of both Baumfree and Turner, Smith eventually produced a sacred text (*The Book of Mormon*) and a church. Both those scriptures and that religious organisation were rooted in the religious experiences reported by Smith. Numerous accounts of Smith's earliest religious experiences exist from the 1830s and 40s, with many of the details appearing inconsistent. Even so, the basic timeline as well as the details of most relevance for this essay remain quite constant. Thus, a November, 1835 entry from Smith's journal – actually recorded by one of his associates, Warren Parrish – has been chosen to recount the events leading up to Smith's first and second visionary experiences, the encounters with supernatural agents that gave birth to Mormonism. The journal entry, written from Smith's point of view, describes a conversation between Smith and a visitor who was curious about the foundational events of Mormonism. The following quotes, therefore, are those in which Smith is describing his earliest religious experiences to his guest.

Space does not allow for a thorough explication of Smith's backstory, one which has been mined repeatedly for precisely the sort of motivations or psychological unrest with which we are concerned. For example, a number of scholars have pointed to a traumatic childhood leg operation as a possible influence on Smith's drive to overcome suffering/death/opposition in his religious experiences and pronouncements (Davies 2000: vi; 2010: 110; Morain 1998: 7), whilst others are convinced that the tension between his involvement in treasure-seeking/magic (an activity shared with his father) on the one hand and the Protestant Christian revivalism of the area (of which his Mother was a part) on the other hand played a primary role in determining the shape

and function of his religious experiences and objectives (Bushman 2005: 26-27, 46; Taves 2016: 283). As will be seen, the latter claim appears quite harmonious with Smith's own reflections, even if we are required to extrapolate a general division in his family from his own personal anxiety over truth and righteousness among the various religious options of his day and to speculate a bit as to the degree of distress caused by it all.

In his own words, at the age of about fourteen, Smith was 'wrought up in [his] mind, respecting the subject of religion and looking at the different systems taught the children of men'. He was 'perplexed in mind' at this time because he 'knew not who was right or who was wrong'. In this anxious state, teenage Smith went to a 'silent grove' to pray and ask for wisdom for, as he says, 'Information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called upon the Lord.' However, Smith's resolve was lacking, and his effort to pray was 'fruitless' because his 'tongue seemed to be swollen in [his] mouth'. Then, as he struggled to speak his desire for knowledge, Smith felt a troubling presence:

I heard a noise behind me like some person walking towards me, I strove again to pray, but could not, the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprung up on my feet, and looked around, but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking, I kneeled again my mouth was opened and my tongue liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer...

At that moment, 'a pillar of fire' appeared and 'rested' on Smith's head, offering comfort and restoration by filling him 'with joy unspeakable'. Two 'personages' then appeared to Smith, the second communicating that Smith's sins were forgiven and proclaiming that 'Jesus Christ is the son of God.' Although the text reproduced here does not, it is important to recognise that other versions of this narrative describe the felt presence as an oppressive darkness and recount the 'personage' explicitly telling Smith that all Christian denominations are flawed and that he should resist joining any of them. In this 1835 account, Smith recalls the supernatural entity simply absolving his sins and testifying to the divine status of Jesus as was just seen, but this version also includes a brief description of Smith's second religious experience.

This second experience is of central importance, not because it is the vision in which Smith is told by an angel that there are golden plates buried in the earth and that Smith will be granted the power to translate them (thus producing the *Book of Mormon*) but because of the way in which it illuminates the state of Smith's mind between the first and second visions as well as just following the second. Having told his guest of the first experience, Smith continues:

When I was 17 years old I saw another vision of angels, in the night season after I had retired to bed I had not been asleep, *but was meditating upon my past life and experience, I was very conscious that I had not kept the commandments, and I repented heartily for all my sins and transgression, and humbled myself before Him; (whose eyes are over all things)*, all at once the room was illuminated above the brightness of the sun an angel appeared before me... (emphasis added)

This echoes Baumfree's seeming disquiet concerning her inability to maintain an acceptable degree of faithfulness or commitment to what she took to be her half of a moral contract with the divine. Similarly, Smith is uncertain of the truthfulness of his religious options, is visited by a 'personage' who assures him of his virtue, but then in

a moment of reflection concludes that he is in fact once again sinful and in need of forgiveness. This time, an angel appears and exhorts Smith to 'be faithful and keep [God's] commandments in all things' before revealing that an ancient text is hidden nearby and that Smith will soon be able to translate it. That same night, the angel returns two more times, reiterating the same message during each visit.

The next day, as Smith recalls, he was working in the fields of the family farm when his father asked him if he was sick (the account does not explain what caused his father to ask this). Smith responded that he 'had but little strength' to which his father responded by insisting that Smith return home. On his way back to the house, Smith lost his strength completely and fell to the ground. Whilst apparently unconscious, or semi-conscious, and on the ground, the angel reappeared to Smith. It explained that Smith should return to his father and report the previous night's visions. He followed these instructions, and his father responded by weeping and confirming that the visions were 'from God'.

In the following months and years, Smith experienced recurring visions, including many of the same angel who often dealt with Smith regarding the hidden scriptures and how to recover them from their location buried in a nearby hill. We note these recurrent visions to direct attention to the relationship that they had with Smith's own unresolved religious and psychological angst. For four years after his visions at 17 years old, Smith attempted to locate the buried golden plates and reported frequently that the angel told him that he was not yet permitted to see them because of his concern with worldly possessions rather than spiritual matters. This is an echo of Turner's chastisement from 'the spirit' for not focusing on the 'kingdom of Heaven' and also suggests that Smith continued to struggle with his faith and – again, like Turner – with his new awareness of the special role (translator of the hidden text) that he was to play in a divine plan. Likewise, turning to secondary sources for a moment, Taves argues quite compellingly that Smith emerged from the night of his angelic visitations at 17 years old with a degree of scepticism concerning whether or not they were a dream or a truly unique supernatural event (2016: 55). If true, Smith's earliest religious experiences seem to have coincided with the presence of a number of conflicting forces. He was interested in the irreconcilable truth-claims of religious competitors in his context, and it seems likely that a secure sense of virtue or pardoned sin also eluded him. Furthermore, his blossoming sense of self during his teenage years was likely a factor, as the gradually evolving notion of his own special religious significance coalesced with supernatural reassurances of his worthiness from the angel and (perhaps) validation from his father.

2.4 *Ellen White*

Indeed, if religious experiences are in any sense linked to a discordant identity, it may be unsurprising to find them intertwined with the formative teen years. For another of Smith's fellow religious visionaries, this was certainly the case. Ellen Harmon (later, White) is one of the central figures in the history and nascent stages of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a Protestant denomination/sect officially formed in the 1860s. However, many years before, in 1840, at the age of thirteen, White first encountered the Adventist teachings of William Miller. Her own recollection of those teachings and the subsequent supernatural events that she experienced were first published in 1851 as *A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White*; although later

editions were printed with the slightly revised title, *Christian Experience and teachings of Ellen G. White* (1922). This first-person account affords a close look at White's state of mind just prior to the onset of her religious dreams and visions, thus the following material is taken from that source alone.

William Miller, an itinerant preacher who predicted the return of Christ to the earth as an event to happen in 1844, visited White's town in Maine when she was just thirteen years old. She notes that Miller's gatherings were pervaded by 'a deep solemnity' but that his prophecies caused 'terror and conviction to spread through the entire city' with no one completely escaping the 'influence that proceeded from the teaching of the near coming of Christ.' In this context, White sought salvation and pushed through a crowd to receive prayer at the front of the venue when she attended one of Miller's 'lectures'. However, White recalls feeling that she would never be worthy of being called a 'child of God' and states that 'a terrible sadness rested on my heart'. In the midst of her despondency she could not think of anything that she had done to cause such an emotional state, but she reports 'a lack of confidence in [herself], and a conviction that it would be impossible to make anyone understand [her] feelings.'

A year later, White attended a Methodist revival, and her account emphasises that she still felt herself an outsider to Christianity (despite seeking salvation at the Millerite meeting one year earlier) and longed for Christian 'hope and peace'. Here, White listened to a sermon which was comforting and filled her with a sense that 'the darkness began to pass away.' Once again, however, White recalls an internal struggle following the sermon: 'But my mind was often in great distress, because I did not experience the spiritual ecstasy that I considered would be the evidence of my acceptance with God, and I dared not believe myself converted without it.' White then engaged in intense prayer at the meeting, an effort that was rewarded when she felt her 'burden lift'. Yet, this too was overcome by her sense that she 'had no right to feel joyous and happy'. Indeed, she asked herself, "Can this be religion? Am I not mistaken?" It seemed too much for me to claim, too exalted a privilege.'

In the days following the Methodist meeting, White reports that she began to feel that 'the rays of the Sun of Righteousness [had] penetrated the clouds and darkness of my mind, and dispelled its gloom.' This state of mind remained for a year or two; White was baptised and entered a women's seminary. During her courses at the seminary, however, her 'health rapidly failed' which caused 'great sadness...feelings of discouragement...[and] great anxiety of mind.' White left the seminary and, in 1842, attended another of Miller's public events. This renewed her desire to experience some supernatural assurance of her faith, some feeling that she 'was entirely accepted of God.' Instead, White's anxiety over praying in public, an act that she seems to have associated with confident Christian faith, caused her to fall deeper into depression. In her words, 'Despair overwhelmed me, and for three long weeks no ray of light pierced the gloom that encompassed me.' Her 'sufferings of mind were intense', with a mental image of 'eternally burning in hell' always present. Doubt and dejection combined, apparently exacerbating one another until she was in a state of 'inexpressible anguish'. At this point, White's narrative recounts her first religiously-themed dream:

While in this state of despondency, I had a dream that made a deep impression upon my mind. I dreamed of seeing a temple, to which many persons were flocking. Only those who took refuge in that temple would be saved when time should close...The multitudes without who were going about their various ways, derided and ridiculed

those who were entering the temple, and told them that this plan of safety was a cunning deception, that in fact there was no danger whatever to avoid...Fearful of being ridiculed, I thought best to wait until the multitude dispersed, or until I could enter unobserved by them. But the numbers increased instead of diminishing, and fearful of being too late, I hastily left my home and pressed through the crowd. In my anxiety to reach the temple I did not notice or care for the throng that surrounded me.

On entering the building, I saw that the vast temple was supported by one immense pillar, and to this was tied a lamb all mangled and bleeding...All who entered the temple must come before it and confess their sins. Just before the lamb were elevated seats, upon which sat a company looking very happy...These were they who had come before the lamb, confessed their sins, received pardon, and were now waiting in glad expectation of some joyful event.

Even after I had entered the building, a fear came over me, and a sense of shame that I must humble myself before these people; but I seemed compelled to move forward, and was slowly making my way around the pillar in order to face the lamb, when a trumpet sounded, the temple shook, shouts of triumph arose from the assembled saints, an awful brightness illuminated the building, then all was intense darkness. The happy people had all disappeared with the brightness, and I was left alone in the silent horror of night.

I awoke in agony of mind, and could hardly convince myself that I had been dreaming. It seemed to me that my doom was fixed...

Again, White's story suggests an enduring anxiety related to her own religious fears, particularly a sort of guilt over her reluctant faith. Even so, this initial dream was followed by another. This time, White dreamed that she was 'sitting in abject despair, with [her] face in [her] hands' when a 'person of beautiful form' opened a door and asked White if she would like to see Jesus. This being led White up a stairway, encouraging her to leave her possessions behind and to focus upward, as many present were breaking their upward gaze and falling from the stairs. Soon, White was standing in front of Jesus, and the latter spoke only two words: 'Fear not'. In the dream, the sound of those words 'thrilled [her] heart with a happiness it had never before experienced'. The guiding led her back down the stairs, and she 'descended...praising the Lord, and telling all whom [she] met where they could find Jesus.'

White recalls that this second dream provided a strong sense of hope. Thus bolstered, she sought the advice of an Adventist minister, Elder Stockman. As she reports it, 'Upon hearing my story...[Stockman] said with tears in his eyes, "...Jesus must be preparing you for some special work."' Indeed, as White disclosed her struggles with depression and doubt to Stockman, he responded by asserting that God had 'never been withdrawn' and that White would begin to see 'the wisdom of the providence which had seemed so cruel and mysterious' now that 'the mist that then darkened my mind had vanished'. Shortly after, White maintains that she was part of a prayer meeting in her uncle's home. There, as she prayed, 'the burden and agony of soul that [White] had so long endured, left [her], and the blessing of the Lord descended upon [her] like the gentle dew.' Finally, after years of unresolved religious, perhaps psychological, doubts, White was irreversibly affected. Her future would be one filled with many more 'visions', often coming to her in moments of trance-like states amidst gatherings of fellow Christians. Whilst the religious experiences would recur many times, her faith would not exhibit the same anxiety and indecision.

In fact, White's case is striking in that she reports mental despair of a physically-debilitating magnitude, accompanying her religious uncertainties and causing her to drop out of seminary. Yet, for White, the process of resolving these crises began when the dream figure of Jesus said, 'fear not'. Whilst, in that sense, it seems White may have possessed a particularly despair-inducing preoccupation with Christian notions of the certainty of salvation (thus, her worthiness to belong), the interlacing of anxiety, religious conviction, and personal identity was shared by her contemporaries. Furthermore, just as a teenage Smith had two major visionary experiences prior to receiving validation and encouragement from his father, so White had two remarkable dreams before receiving social validation and support from minister Stockman. Likewise, the latter's assurance that White was set apart for 'special work' calls to mind Turner's determined fate as a 'prophet' in the first few years of his life. For each of these cases, including that of Baumfree, the commencement of extraordinary religious experiences was preceded by marked psychological tensions as well as a set of religio-spiritual expectations rooted in the socially-acquired, but rather inchoate, religious ideas of their contexts.

3. Assessing Existing Models: Emotional Motivations and Identity Dissonance

Those needs and expectations, of course, may simply be described as emotional or personal motivations. In fact, two noteworthy theoretical models useful for analysing religious experience include motivations among their key components. We have already mentioned the work of Taves above. In her recent book, *Revelatory Events*, she investigates the various processes at work whereby unusual religious experiences ultimately engender 'new spiritual paths'. In doing so, she dedicates an entire chapter to discussing the role of motivation for three nascent spiritual movements in America's history (Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous, and *A Course in Miracles*)² – paying close attention to apparent individual and collective needs that may have propelled the emergence of so-called supernatural entities seen or heard by the founders of these movements (Taves 2016: 270-289). Indeed, it is arguably the aforementioned cross-disciplinary character of Taves' work that permits her to include social-psychological aspects in her analysis.

Accordingly, much of the progress in this area of religious studies since James' ground-breaking *The Varieties of Religious Experience* has come in the form of increasingly broad (in disciplinary terms) frameworks for investigating such phenomena. As Armin Geertz notes, these 'bio-cultural' models blend 'neurobiology, social psychology, anthropology, cognitive science, archaeology, and comparative religion' because 'nothing else can do the job' (2010: 313). It is Geertz's own model, then, that joins with Taves' in suggesting a central role for what he calls 'emotional motivations' as a component of the cognitive-psychological dimension of religion. It must be said, of course, that whereas Taves is primarily focused on a way forward for the study of religious experience particularly, Geertz is interested in offering a general framework for religion as a whole (although presumably with experience/practice as primary lines of inquiry). For both, however, affective and psychological issues must be integrated into the theoretical account.

² It should be noted, therefore, that Taves observes a similar role for personal and collective motivations in both the nineteenth-century case (Mormonism) and the twentieth-century cases (AA and *ACIM*).

Yet, it is less clear how such motivations operate in, or on, religious experiences such as those recounted in America's Second Great Awakening, and both Taves and Geertz – to varying degrees – leave James behind by setting aside his observations concerning the resolution of the 'discordant personality'. Indeed, although Taves and Geertz (via Jeppe Sinding Jensen) include 'motivations' in their theoretical models and approaches to religious experience and to religion, respectively, there is little to no mention of affinities at work between individuals (as 'embodied' and 'embrained', in Geertz's terms) and religious systems, one of sociologist Max Weber's lasting contributions to the study of religion.³ Here, it is useful to turn to the anthropologically-grounded frameworks of Douglas Davies and Tanya Luhrmann.

Again, both Davies and Luhrmann offer bio-cultural approaches, aware of the interplay between cognition, embodied actions, and cultural constructions. Whilst Luhrmann's well-known work focuses attention on contemporary religious experiences, such as hearing a supernatural voice, Davies invokes 'bio-cultural' to describe his exploration of the somatics of religious emotion – often in the context of a particular religious experience – as a window onto the connection between an individual and his or her social world (2011: 29). This approach notably leads Davies to a discussion of identity as that affective intersection of person and place. What is more, he describes 'identity depletion' as those 'negative emotional experience[s] within social contexts when people sense a relative loss of meaning and hope in life' with 'salvation' referring to 'the human drive to survive and flourish amid these constraints' (2011: 67, 72). For our purposes, this helpfully links emotions with identity as well as with an individual's drive for meaning in the face of 'identity-depleting' influences, and sheds considerable light on, for example, the apparent affinity that figures like Turner and White had with notions of purpose, salvation, and hope which propelled them through a series of extraordinary religious experiences. This elision of emotion, identity, and experience is something of a return to both James and Weber, and it is abetted by Luhrmann's influential 'absorption hypothesis'.

In Luhrmann's numerous studies, both experimental and ethnographic, religious experiences seem to follow certain patterns (2010; 2012; 2013). With her colleagues Howard Nusbaum and Ronald Thisted, Luhrmann offers a theory of 'absorption' which suggests that modern-day conservative evangelical Christians not only learn *to expect* but also actually learn *to have* religious experiences like hearing God's voice (2010: 74), with the outcome of such learning (frequency and nature of religious experiences) modulated by a sort of predilection for 'absorption', a 'willingness to be caught up in [one's] imaginative experience, and in nature and music' which is measured by the Tellegen Absorption Scale (2012: 195). This 'willingness' to enter an imaginative state of mind could be a measurable variable directly related to that which manifests as a sort of affinity. In other words, when culture supplies the symbols and expectations, cognitive predispositions may help determine which individuals have the most vivid and frequent religious experiences (Luhrman, et al. 2010: 73). If, then, identity exists

³ Weber highlighted 'elective affinities' (a term borrowed from Goethe, who in turn borrowed from the Swedish chemist Bergman) between, for example, Puritans and a certain work ethic (1905: 54). These 'elective affinities' were natural attractions between people, classes, meaning systems, economic structures, etc. For more on Weber's use of this term, see Richard Howe, 'Max Weber's Elective Affinities: Sociology within the Bounds of Pure Reason,' *American Journal of Sociology* 84/2 (1978): 366-385.

at the nexus of emotions and context – and if emotional motivations are integral to religious experience and practice – then ‘absorption’ may complete the model, predicting that some individuals with a greater imaginative ability/inclination will be able to harmonise their emotional needs, religious expectations, and cultural options through their religious experiences.

This could be expressed in terms of identity conferral/resolution (the outcome) or identity dissonance (the ‘motivation’). The latter seems potentially apropos, for it calls to mind psychologist Leon Festinger’s well-known concept of ‘cognitive dissonance’ as the considerable mental unrest resulting from holding two contradictory beliefs or ideas (1956: 25) and, in doing so, highlights the anguish and instability of the nineteenth-century subjects included above as they sought resolution for their inner conflicts. Furthermore, it is worth recognising that recent neuroscientific research not only corroborates the concept of cognitive dissonance by showing increased activity in the amygdalae (largely responsible for regulating fear and anxiety) of religious believers who are confronted with claims contrary to their previously-held religious beliefs (and no such response for counterevidence of non-religious beliefs) but also rightly notes a likely connection, therefore, between challenges to identity and increased fear/anxiety responses (Harris 2009: 6).⁴ With such a connection between religion and identity in mind – noting the interplay between brain activity, emotions, and culturally-transmitted beliefs – it is interesting to observe that the nineteenth-century cases discussed earlier tended to have (in psychological terms) egosyntonic religious experiences. That is, their visions, dreams, and other revelatory supernatural experiences did not so much contradict or disrupt their sense of self, but rather settled or affirmed their sense of self.

4. Conclusion

Interdisciplinary bio-cultural models of religious experience, if they are to be valid beyond the historical context of their own inception, ought not to leave out this element of identity dissonance. For example, Geertz – perhaps with something like Luhmann’s ‘absorbed’ religionists in mind – rightly locates ‘emotional motivations’ in the category of religion’s ‘functions’ but then asserts that ‘it is evident that there is a great deal of brain-body manipulation at play [within religious systems] which ultimately is meant to emotionally motivate individuals cognitively and psychologically’ (2010: 316) without noting the reverse. In our investigations into nineteenth century accounts of religious experiences, the emotional motivations often seem prior to, or interwoven with, the ‘brain-body’ manipulations involved in visions and other spiritual experiences. At the same time, the nineteenth-century visionary prophet can be viewed as, itself, a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, having much in common with that age-old anthropological favourite: the shaman. To be associated with supernatural religious experiences is to be marked for prophecy/shamanism; to be a prophet/shaman is to be associated with supernatural religious experiences. As analysts of such experiences, we must ask about this association – about the role of personal and collective affinities rooted in particular cultural contexts and serving to prime an individual with specific religious

⁴ Similar findings have also been found with regards to political beliefs (Kanai, et al. 2011; Kaplan, et al. 2016) and may be taken as a small part of a larger discussion of the ‘neuroscience of identity’ which uses neuroimaging and other experimental findings to hypothesise about the mental structure and origin of individual identity (Greenfield 2011).

expectations and an unresolved sense of self. At least for historical cases such as those listed above, any model that ignores these elements or presupposes their causal direction seems unnecessarily limited.

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