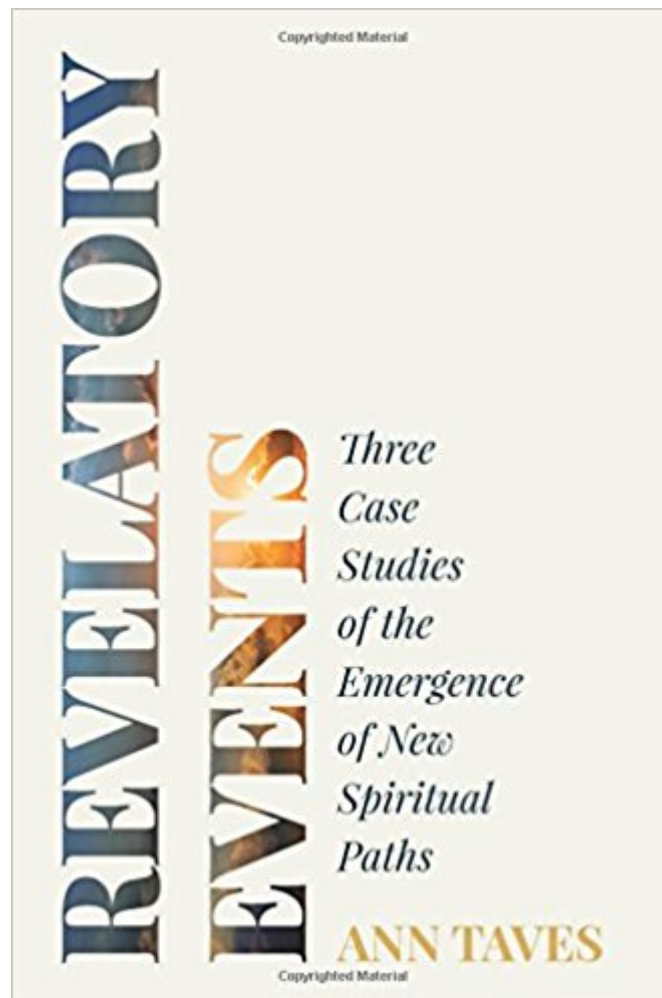




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Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies Of The Emergence Of New Spiritual Paths



Synopsis

Unseen presences. Apparitions. Hearing voices. Although some people would find such experiences to be distressing and seek clinical help, others perceive them as transformative. Occasionally, these unusual phenomena give rise to new spiritual paths or religious movements. Revelatory Events provides fresh insights into what is perhaps the bedrock of all religious belief—the claim that otherworldly powers are active in human affairs. Ann Taves looks at Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous, and A Course in Miracles—three cases in which insiders claimed that a spiritual presence guided the emergence of a new spiritual path. In the 1820s, Joseph Smith, Jr., reportedly translated the Book of Mormon from ancient gold plates unearthed with the help of an angel. Bill Wilson cofounded AA after having an ecstatic experience while hospitalized for alcoholism in 1934. Helen Schucman scribed the words of an inner voice that she attributed to Jesus, which formed the basis of her 1976 best-selling self-study course. In each case, Taves argues, the sense of a guiding presence emerged through a complex, creative interaction between a founding figure with unusual mental abilities and an initial set of collaborators who were drawn into the process by diverse motives of their own. A major work of scholarship, this compelling and accessible book traces the very human processes behind such events.

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Customer Reviews

"Ann Taves uses her skills as a historian to demonstrate that it is not spiritual experience itself that makes revelatory events, and her skills in cognitive science to unpack how events become revelatory. A deeply fascinating book, Revelatory Events helps us rethink spirituality itself."--T. M.

Luhmann, author of *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*"Students of religion have routinely emphasized the importance of exceptional events or experiences--visions or revelations--in the emergence of religious movements. In *Revelatory Events*, Ann Taves combines history and cognitive psychology in an entirely new way to investigate how small networks of believers can turn an individual's revelation into a social movement, and possibly into a religion. This outstanding book will set the agenda for the psychological and historical study of religious innovation."--Pascal Boyer, author of *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*"Revelatory Events is Taves at her best. She weaves together careful historical description and insightful psychological analysis to examine the biographical, experiential, and social substrates of new religious systems. This is the kind of brilliant scholarship we have come to expect of Taves."--Robert C. Fuller, author of *The Body of Faith: A Biological History of Religion in America*"Revelatory Events offers significant promise for advancing our understanding of the emergence of new religious traditions, and will draw serious interest from scholars in several disciplines."--David G. Bromley, director of the World Religions and Spirituality Project, Virginia Commonwealth University

Ann Taves is professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her books include *Religious Experience Reconsidered* and *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (both Princeton).

While I came to this book for its take on Alcoholics Anonymous, I found it much more fascinating, thought-provoking and informative in its focus on Mormonism and A Course in Miracles. All of these spiritual movements grew out of what some might describe as hallucinatory experiences

Although Joseph Smith's method of translating the Book of Mormon and Helen Schucman having A Course in Miracles dictated to her by "The Voice" both strike me as several steps removed from Bill Wilson's "white light" experience in Towns Hospital (which led to his continuous sobriety). I found Taves' approach to these three events impressive and even-handed. It is tremendous testimony to her scrupulous method and her thoroughness that my typical knee-jerk skeptical reactions were gradually alleviated as I moved deeper into each of these stories and was forced to ponder the real-time acceptance of these phenomenon by the people who were directly influenced by them. In each of these three cases, Taves starts with contemporary historical records which she clearly

describes and sources. Using these, she then builds the story behind each of these events as seen and understood by the people involved with a special emphasis placed on what they thought was happening and why. Having done all of this with consummate skill, she then returns to each series of event in turn and looks at possible explanations for the underlying beliefs that these three movements were being actively guided by a suprahuman presence. Having been so deeply immersed (and, eventually, enjoying) the story of how these new spiritual paths originally emerged, I was pleased to return to the world of Reality and to a more judicious, clear-eyed and naturalistic approach to these phenomena. The book is based on solid scholarship both historic and scientific and is relatively jargon-free. I found Taves' talent for blending the old (historical) with the new (scientific) convincing in the extreme and her insights provided much food for further thought about Man and his understanding of his relationship with the Divine. "Revelatory Events" was, for me, consistently fascinating, never condescending, and a useful tool in letting at least some of the "scales fall from my eyes" in relation to these three movements which are so clearly believed to be based on some sort of "suprahuman" involvement.

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