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Source: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Jun., 1999), pp. 287-308

Published by: Wiley on behalf of Society for the Scientific Study of Religion

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387795>

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# A Theory of Revelations

RODNEY STARK<sup>†</sup>

In this essay I present a model which attempts to explain how sane and sober people can receive revelations. It synthesizes a number of my previous essays with extensive new work, especially on the role of Holy Families in sustaining prophets.

## INTRODUCTION

As conceived by the major Western faiths, God speaks. Thus, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Mormon scriptures are believed to derive from revelations, from the actual thoughts of God conveyed to selected recipients. If we would truly understand these faiths, it is necessary to ask *How do revelations occur?* To the extent that we cannot answer this question, we remain ignorant of the origins of our basic subject matter: religious culture.

Despite being *the* question, it seldom has been raised, and the on-going empirical research on revelations and various other aspects of “the sociology of mysticism takes place within a theoretical vacuum” (Hood 1985: 287). The reason for this theoretical neglect has been that the “causes” of revelations have seemed obvious to most social scientists: those who claim to have received revelations — to have communicated with the supernatural — are either crazy or crooked, and sometimes both. Indeed, even many social scientists who will assume the rationality of more mundane religious phenomena, find it quite impossible to accept that *normal* people can *sincerely believe* they have communicated with the divine. No reviewer flinched when in the third sentence of his book *Mystical Experience*, Ben-Ami Scharfstein (1973: 1) revealed that “mysticism is . . . a name for the paranoid darkness in which unbalanced people stumble so confidently.”

Although scholars often are more circumspect than Scharfstein, it long has been the orthodox position that the world’s major religious figures, including Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, as well as thousands of more recent revelators such as Joseph Smith, Jr., Bernadette Soubirous, and Sun M. Moon, were psychotics, frauds, or both. When Bainbridge and I (1979) surveyed the literature on revelation 20 years ago we found that although the topic had been little-covered, the psychopathological interpretation was the overwhelming favorite, with conscious fraud treated as the only plausible alternative.

In that essay, Bainbridge and I reworked this slim literature and analyzed our own field observations to propose three models of revelation. The first gives systematic statement to the *psychopathology* model. Here revelations are traced not simply to mental illness, but also to abnormal mental states induced by drugs or fasting. The second model substitutes chicanery for psychopathology and characterizes some religious founders as *entrepreneurs*. Finally, we proposed a *subcultural-evolution* model of revelation wherein a small group, interacting intensely over a period of time, assembles a revelation bit by bit, without anyone being aware of the social processes taking place. Here, at least, we made room for revelations involving neither craziness nor corruption.

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After the publication of that article, it became increasingly clear to me that these three models fail to account for many cases of revelations — including the most significant ones. There have been precious few examples for which there is any persuasive evidence that the founder of a new religious movement had any symptoms of mental problems.<sup>1</sup> Of course, lack of visible signs is no impediment for Freudians and others who are entirely willing to infer psychopathology from religious behavior per se (Capps and Carroll 1988; Carroll 1987; Freud 1927; LaBarre 1969; Schneiderman 1967). But, for those lacking conviction in Freud's revelations, the apparent normality of scores of well-documented cases ought to stimulate new approaches. Moreover, it seemed equally clear that few of the apparently sane recipients of revelations were frauds. Too many made personal sacrifices utterly incompatible with such an assessment. Finally, the subcultural-evolution model will not take up the slack, for the majority of cases seem not to fit it either. Hence, the need for a new approach was patent. Consequently, I devoted several papers to exploring how normal people could talk with God (Stark 1991, 1992, 1997). In this essay I greatly revise and extend that work into a general model of revelations.

The inspiration for pursuing such a model came from reading an account of how Spencer W. Kimball, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, received the revelation that blacks should be admitted to the Mormon priesthood (Mauss 1981). Kimball reported no voices from beyond, no burning bushes, and no apparitions. He spoke only of the many hours he spent in the "upper room of the temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance." The actual process by which he received his revelation would seem to involve nothing more (or less) than achieving a state of complete certainty about what God wanted him to do.

Or, consider an account by Sun M. Moon, founder of the Unification Church, of the method by which *The Divine Principle*, the scriptural basis of his movement, was revealed to him. "God will not tell you outright. Therefore you have to search, to find out by yourself" (in Barker 1984: 71). So Moon studied and reflected in search of new religious truths and then used prayer to test each answer. If you are wrong, Moon explained, God lets you sense that fact. "You immediately know that is not right. It is something else."

If these episodes can be considered revelations, then it is entirely clear that normal people can, through entirely normal means, believe they communicate with the divine. Moreover, as I pursued the matter in greater depth, I saw that this assumption can be extended even to cases involving voices and visions — as I plan to demonstrate.

Although the model is, of necessity, limited to the human side of revelations, it is inappropriate to rule out the possibility that revelations actually occur. Unfortunately, as Ralph Hood (1985) has pointed out, even the most unbiased social scientists typically have been unwilling to go further than to grant that the recipients of revelations have made honest *mistakes*, that they have *misinterpreted* an experience as having involved contact with the divine. This is taken as self-evident on the grounds that any real scientist "knows" that real revelations are quite impossible. I fully agree with Hood (1985, 1997) that while methodological agnosticism represents good science, both methodological atheism and theism are unscientific. We do not know that revelations are impossible; it is entirely beyond the capacity of science to demonstrate that the divine does not communicate directly with certain individuals. Therefore, provision is made for this possibility in Proposition 4, although this is not, and ought not be, a *necessary* assumption of the model.

Keep in mind, too, that many religions are not based on revelations. A distinction is made between "revealed" and "natural" religions in all general discussions of comparative religions. Thus, The New Columbia Encyclopedia (1975: 2299) notes that religions may be distinguished on the basis of "the origins of [their] body of knowledge . . . some religions are revealed as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" while others are "nonrevealed, or natural" being the result "of human inquiry alone." Here the NCE includes Buddhism, Hinduism,

Taoism, and “Chinese metaphysical doctrines.” In similar fashion, the new Oxford Dictionary of World Religions (Bowker 1997: 814) explains that natural religions are based on truths “discerned within the natural order” whereas revealed religion “comes from a source other than that of the human recipient, usually God.” Geoffrey Parrinder (1976) uses the terms “monism” and “theism” to draw the same distinction between forms of mysticism, the former involving insights achieved by the mystic, while the latter attributes insights to communication with divinity. Consequently, insights gained through meditation, such as when Zen Buddhists gain enlightenment, are *not* revelations because a revelation is not an insight or an inspiration. A revelation is a *communication* — neither Kimball nor Moon thought they had found truth within themselves, but that *God had placed it there*. Consequently, a revelation presupposes a divine *being* capable of wishes and intentions, thereby eliminating the Tao as well as the god of most Unitarians.

**REVELATIONS are communications believed to come from a divine being.**

With this definition to guide us, let us turn to the model. In presenting the propositions I will illustrate each by drawing on the four most important cases of revelations in Western history. I make considerable use of the case of Joseph Smith, Jr., not only because his revelations launched the most impressive new religious movement in centuries, but also because of the extraordinary amount of reliable detail that is available. The second primary case is that of Muhammad, whose life and activities also are very well documented. Jesus is the third case I will draw upon, and I was very relieved to discover that the mists of unrecorded history are far less dense than I had feared. The fourth case is Moses, and here I will be limited to passing references since the mists are thick indeed.

*The Context of Revelations*

If not all conceptions of the divine can be the source of revelations, not all socio-cultural contexts can sustain revelatory activity (Stark 1965b). Hence, the first proposition includes two elements which specify the context necessary for revelations to occur.

1. *Revelations will tend to occur when (a) there exists a supportive cultural tradition of communications with the divine and (b) the recipient of the revelation(s) has direct contact with a role model, with someone who has had such communications.*

As will be seen, people routinely experience many things they *might* define as communication with God (Hood 1985), but to actually define something as a revelation they must assume that such communication is possible. This assumption can be supported by the religious culture in general, but revelations are far more likely for those who know and respect someone who already has had such encounters. This holds in all four major cases:

*Joseph Smith, Jr.* At the age of 18, when he had his first encounter with the Angel Moroni, Joseph Smith, Jr. lived in Palmyra, New York, a small town in the heart of a region that came to be known as the “Burned-over District” because of its responsiveness to revivals and for giving rise to so many religious movements. Hence, in addition to the general Christian tradition of revelation, Smith lived in a local environment in which people were accustomed to reports of revelations (Ahlstrom 1972; Brodie 1945; Cross 1950) and Joseph Smith’s family took revelations for granted as did most of their neighbors. Local people frequently reported having vivid religious experiences, including Smith’s father, Joseph Smith, Sr., who often had dreams that he defined as “visions” (Arrington and Bitton 1979; Brodie 1945; Bushman 1984). Seven of these visions were regarded as so significant that they are recounted in detail in his wife’s memoirs, published years later (Smith [1853] 1996). These visions, which always involved healing and salvation, were well known to all family members. Consequently, the son was prepared for visions of his own and when that

happened, the first thing he did was tell his father who “expressed no skepticism. Having learned himself to trust in visions, he accepted his son’s story and counseled him to do exactly as the angel said” (Bushman 1984: 63). LaMar C. Berrett (1988: 37) noted that the senior Smith was “the first person to have faith in Joseph’s experience with Moroni” and “showed respect and trust to his son concerning an experience that would cause most fathers to question, criticize, or disregard.”

*Muhammad.* Revelations were taken for granted in Arabic culture in Muhammad’s time. In part, this was a result of the constant and close contact with Christians and Jews — communities of both faiths existed all over the Arabian peninsula in these days, some of them very close to Muhammad’s Mecca. In fact, at the start of his prophetic career, Muhammad assumed that Christians and Jews would embrace his revelations, since he believed himself to be the last in a line of prophets beginning with Abraham and including Jesus. There also was an indigenous Arabic tradition of revelation. This was especially well-developed among a group known as the *hanif*, who seem to have been a monotheistic sect in Arabia including elements of both Christianity and Judaism — possibly being a refuge for heretics from both (Bowker 1997). Scholars now generally accept that the *hanif* reflected the existence of “a national Arabian monotheism which was the preparatory stage for Islam” (Fück [1936] 1981: 91).

Muhammad was directly influenced by two of the four founders of the *hanif* movement. One of these was his cousin Ubaydallah ibn Jahsh, who also was among Muhammad’s early converts, and the other was his wife’s cousin Waraqa ibn Naufal, a famous ascetic, who Muhammad may have known since early childhood (Peters 1994: 104). Waraqa had visions of his own and had long been predicting the coming of an Arabian prophet. Consequently, he authenticated Muhammad’s earliest visions and spurred him on in pursuit of more revelations. (Armstrong 1993; Farah 1994; Payne 1959; Peters 1994; Rodinson 1980; Salahi 1995; Waines 1995; Watt 1961).

*Jesus.* There is much uncertainty about the actual revelations on which Christianity is based. Jesus did not leave a “book” and his fundamental message, let alone what he actually said, always has been in dispute — there is no Islamic or Mormon apocrypha. That aside, the story is much the same.

Has there ever been a time and place where revelation and prophesy were more taken for granted than Palestine in this period? Indeed it is the combined legacy of Judaism and early Christianity that provided the cultural basis for the revelatory activities of Muhammad and Joseph Smith. As for a role model, according to Luke (1: 36), John the Baptist and Jesus were cousins. Moreover, the Baptist’s father Zacharias was a high priest whose revelation from the Angel Gabriel concerning his son’s conception was known far and wide (Luke 1: 5–22). Besides being cousins, John the Baptist and Jesus are thought to have been friends from childhood (Metford 1983: 92, 144) and the most famous among John’s revelations is the one in which he is told that Jesus is the promised messiah and son of God. In addition, a case might be made that Mary also served as a role model. Although the New Testament says surprisingly little about the mother of Jesus, the account in Luke 1: 26–56 tells of her revelation concerning her conception of the “Son of God” and also reports her discussions with Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, concerning the divine source of that miraculous pregnancy as well. Granted that many Bible scholars deny that there is any historical reality behind this passage. But, of course, they make the same claim about most of the New Testament — despite a century of archaeology that strongly demonstrates otherwise (Dodd 1963; Finegan 1992; Robinson 1985). Moreover, it never seems to occur to these scholars that even if they are correct that revelations don’t actually occur, that doesn’t falsify *reports* about people who believe they communicated with the divine. When scholars claim that because they “know” that there was no virgin birth, Mary could not have perceived an encounter with the Holy Spirit, they express a *non sequitur*, despite all of the

academic apparatus within which it usually is wrapped. We do not know whether Mary was or was not “a teenage prophetess who sang hymns of joy when she became pregnant with Jesus” (Allen 1998: 36). *All* we know is that Luke says she was, and that when her son grew up, he believed that he spoke to God.

*Moses.* Admittedly, an attempt to draw upon the case of Moses to illustrate the model is entirely dependent on scripture and tradition (cf. Ginzberg [1911] 1939; Klugel 1997). I make no claim that any portion of these traditions is true. Indeed, I cannot refute revisionists who claim Moses never lived. Were the whole story mythical, however, it would seem curious that the account in the Pentateuch is so entirely consistent with the other three cases — the “mythmakers” had no model to guide them in these respects. All that said, let’s see what the tradition tells us.

However it was that the Israelites got to Egypt and whatever their actual status under the pharaohs, it appears that they took the idea of revelation for granted, as the story of Abraham attests. Scripture reports no skepticism when Moses and Aaron confided the Lord’s message to the assembled “elders of all the Israelites” (Exodus 4: 29–31). Closer to home, Moses’ wife is presented as having been entirely supportive, not only agreeing to accompany him back to Egypt, but she also is reported to have circumcised her eldest son along the way in order to protect him from God (Exodus 5: 20–26). As the daughter of Jethro, who is identified as the “priest of Midian” (Exodus 2: 16; 3: 1), she may have been accustomed to such episodes. We do not know whether Jethro had visions or otherwise served as a role model, but it is a worthy supposition and entirely consistent with his enthusiastic support of his son-in-law’s claims and plans (Exodus 18). In addition, Moses’ brother Aaron also had a revelation at this time, directing him to join Moses. Finally, in Exodus 15, Moses’ sister Miriam is identified as “the prophet.” Since she was older than Moses, depending upon when she began to prophesy, she too could have served as a role model. As Yehezkel Kaufmann (1960: 227) put it, Moses “seems to have grown up among a family of . . . seers.” In any event, Moses did not have to invent the idea of revelation.

Let us now focus more closely on the phenomenon of revelation as such.

### THE “MYSTICAL” MAJORITY

Revelations are merely the most intense and intimate form of religious or mystical experiences — those episodes involving perceptions and sensations which are interpreted as communication or contact, however slight, with the divine (Glock 1959). As I have noted, such episodes differ greatly according to the intensity and intimacy of the contact (Stark 1965a). But even the least intense form of religious experience contains the potential for more intense encounters. Indeed, the ordinary, frequent, and very widespread act of prayer has often been the springboard for revelations — this is how it all began for Muhammad. With this in mind, consider remarks by an American Catholic interviewed as part of Margaret Poloma and George Gallup, Jr’s (1991:28) national survey on prayer:

There are times when I need to make contact with God, but he seems very far away. During those times I’ll force myself to recite the rosary — and somehow he’ll just become present. After I finish the decades I can go on to talk with him in my own words. I don’t understand how it works, I just know that it does.

This respondent did not report revelational experiences and most people don’t. But for those who pray often and talk with God in their own words, the possibility is always there. Given that well over 80% of Americans pray quite regularly and nearly all do so in their own words, the wonder is that revelations aren’t rife. And perhaps they are. As will be discussed, most revelations do not involve anything new and thus do not require recipients to report

them — most revelations simply provide recipients with personal confirmation of the reality of God (Howell 1997; Neitz and Spickard 1990; Stark 1965a, 1965b).

Although religious experiences do occur among the mentally ill and sometimes are caused by fasting or drugs, overwhelmingly they occur among normal, sane, sober people (Stark and Bainbridge 1997: 129–55). Indeed, there is an immense body of evidence suggesting that quite ordinary mental phenomena can be experienced as some sort of mystical or religious episode involving contact with the supernatural being (Hood 1985) and that many (perhaps even most) people in most societies have such experiences (Gallup International 1984; Greeley 1975; Yamane and Polzer 1994). Hence:

*2. Many common, ordinary, even mundane mental phenomena can be experienced as contact with the divine.*

Most of the time these contacts do not produce revelations, but provide an experiential validation of faith or what I have called a “confirming experience” (Stark 1965a). Thus, for example, Catholics often report seeing the Madonna, but seldom is she reported to speak. Moreover, even when the contact does involve a communication, this usually will be interpreted in support of the prevailing religious culture. Such revelations are the kind Ernst Troeltsch (1931) defined as dogmatic mysticism, in that they support the current orthodoxy. Troeltsch contrasted these with revelations of the non-dogmatic variety, which do challenge orthodoxy and can lead to protest movements. Evelyn Underhill (1911: 95, 105) made the same point, noting that mysticism “is most usually founded upon the formal creed which the individual mystic accepts . . . he is generally an acceptor not a rejector of such creeds. . . . The greatest mystics have not been heretics but Catholic saints.”

The far greater prevalence of the confirming or dogmatic variety of religious experience is the result of two factors. First, religious organizations typically come to recognize the risks involved in uncontrolled mystical activity among their adherents. As James S. Coleman (1956: 50) noted:

... one consequence of the “communication with God” is that every[one] who so indulges . . . can create a new creed. This possibility poses a constant threat of cleavage within a religious group.

Consequently, religious organizations take pains to filter, interpret and otherwise direct such activities so that the communications enhance and even revive conventional faith. Indeed, orthodoxy has been the standard against which Christianity has tested revelations. In John 1: 4: 1–3, Paul states clearly the test of all revelations:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now is in the world already.

In addition to institutional control, the second reason that most people who communicate with the supernatural bring forth orthodox revelations is that most such people are deeply committed to the prevailing orthodoxy and few are possessed of the creativity needed to generate new culture. This leads to the third proposition:

*3. Most episodes involving contact with the divine will merely confirm the conventional religious culture, even when the contact includes a specific communication, or revelation.*

### *Enter Genius*

Most revelations are utterly boring and clearly uninspired, as is easily discovered at the nearest occult bookstore. In contrast, some revelations seem genuine in the sense that the material is so culturally impressive as to be worthy of divine sources. For example,

entirely apart from its status as a sacred text, Islamicists never cease to praise the Qur'ān for its extraordinary literary merit, particularly the rhyming, rhythmic stanzas of the earliest *sūrahs*. As Robert Payne (1959: 3) put it, in the Qur'ān the Arabic "language reaches its greatest heights. Muhammad, who detested poetry, was the greatest poet to come out of Arabia." How could this happen?

Suppose that someone with the literary gifts of William Shakespeare underwent a series of mental events he or she interpreted as contact with the supernatural. Would it not be likely that the revelations produced in this way would be messages of depth, beauty and originality? The question is, of course, how can geniuses mistake the source of their revelation? That is, how could they not know that they, not the divine, composed it?

The psychopathological model explains their mistake as delusional. The entrepreneurial model claims there is no mistake, but merely conscious fraud. Nevertheless, it seems likely that such a mistake could easily be made by an entirely rational and honest individual.

Most composers *compose*. That is, they write music slowly, a few notes at a time. But this is not the way all composers work. For Mozart and Gershwin, melodies simply came to them in completed form — they did not compose tunes, they simply played what they heard and later wrote down what they had heard (although they often polished what they had originally heard). And both of them seemed to regard the sources of their music as somehow "out there," as external. In a letter to Isaac Goldberg, Gershwin described the genesis of his *Rhapsody in Blue*:

It was on that train, with its steely rhythms, its rattlety-bang that is so often stimulating to a composer — I frequently hear music in the heart of noise — I suddenly heard — and even saw on paper — the complete construction of the rhapsody from beginning to end. . . . All at once I heard myself playing a theme that must have been haunting me inside, seeking outlet. No sooner had it oozed out of my fingers than I knew I had it (in Peyser 1993: 80–81).

Compare this with the report by the great first century Jewish mystic, Philo of Alexandria:

Sometimes when I have come to my work empty, I have suddenly become full; ideas being in an invisible manner showered upon me, and implanted in me from on high; so that through the influence of divine inspiration, I have become greatly excited, and have known neither the place in which I was, nor those who were present, nor myself, nor what I was saying, nor what I was writing; for then I have been conscious of a richness of interpretation, an enjoyment of light, a most penetrating insight, a most manifest energy in all that was to be done; having such an effect on me as the clearest ocular demonstration would have on the eyes (in James [1902] 1958: 364).

The similarity between artistic and religious creation has long been remarked. As Evelyn Underhill (1911: 63) put it:

In all creative acts, the larger share of the work is done subconsciously: its emergence is in a sense automatic. This is equally true of mystics, artists, philosophers, discoverers, and rulers of men. The great religion, invention, work of art, always owes its inception to some sudden uprush of intuitions or ideas for which the superficial self cannot account; its execution to powers so far beyond the control of that self, that they seem, as their owner sometimes says, to "come from beyond."

Of course, most of what "comes from beyond" to most people is banal or a confused muddle. But not when the recipient is Mozart, Gershwin, or Philo. Suppose that splendidly expressed and profound new scriptures suddenly flooded into one's consciousness? How easily one might be convinced by the quality and content of these revelations, as well as their sudden arrival, that they only could have come from the divine.

It seems instructive here to examine briefly how Muhammad received the Qur'ān. The founder of Islam told his followers that an angel spoke the text to him and he, in turn,



repeated it so scribes could take it down. Much of this dictation took place in front of audiences. Obviously, then, Muhammad could not have appeared to his listeners to be composing the Qur'ān as he went along. If he actually was repeating the words spoken to him by an angel, there would have been no false starts, no second attempts, no backing up and starting over as would be the case with normal approaches to prose composition. This does not mean that he didn't edit — Muhammad often rearranged material after it has been revealed and he sometimes received an emending revelation at a later time (Watt 1961). But it does mean that when he was receiving a revelation, Muhammad's performance would have been more like someone reading than like someone composing scripture. Of course, Muhammad could neither read nor write, and that too would have made him prone to mistake his own creations for external products.

Indeed, in his distinguished study of Muhammad, W. Montgomery Watt (1961: 18) reported that in his first two revelational experiences, Muhammad had seen "the glorious Being," but that "this was not the normal manner in which he received revelations." Watt then noted:

In many cases it is probable that he simply found the words in his heart (that is, his mind) in some mysterious way, without his imagining that he heard anything. This seems to be what originally was meant by "revelation" (*wahy*) [in the Qur'ān].

Is it not more plausible to cast Muhammad in the role of literary and religious genius who produced the Qur'ān without realizing he was doing so, than to argue that he was psychopathological or a fraud? It is hard to imagine a man with either defect behaving as he did. Here too Watt (1961: 17) puts the case most forcefully:

[Muhammad] must have been perfectly sincere in his belief. He must have been convinced that he was able to distinguish between his own thoughts and the messages that came to him from "outside himself." To carry on in the face of persecution and hostility would have been impossible for him unless he was fully persuaded that God had sent him . . . Had he known that these revelations were his own ideas, the whole basis would have been cut away from his religious movement.

The case of Joseph Smith, Jr., is remarkably similar. He did not simply one day produce a copy of the Book of Mormon. Instead, he began dictating it page by page to his assembled family. Soon, Oliver Cowdery, a young school master rooming with Joseph Smith's parents, took over the job of scribe, writing down the scripture as Smith spoke it. As in the case of Muhammad, the prose came smoothly (Bushman 1984: 98) and impressed many as being far too sophisticated to be the creation of someone with so little education. When Sidney Rigdon, one of the most colorful characters in nineteenth-century American religious history, and quite learned, discovered that Joseph Smith hardly had a common school education, he remarked, "If that was all the education he had, he never wrote the book" (Van Wagoner 1994: 60).

In any event, there seems sufficient evidence that an absolutely rational person could utter spontaneous prose, just as Muhammad and Joseph Smith, Jr. seemed to do, and quite easily externalize the source.

However, as mentioned before, there is another possibility that cannot be dismissed: that Muhammad and Joseph Smith could spontaneously produce remarkable scripture because they were merely repeating what they read or heard. Since science cannot disprove that possibility, provision must be made. The question arises, if revelations really come from divine sources, why doesn't everybody experience them? Or, why did these specific people receive them rather than some other people? Having access only to the human side of the phenomenon, one must speculate. There are several possibilities. Perhaps only some people have the capacity to receive revelations or the willingness to do so. Evelyn Underhill (1911: 76) suggested that just as "artists . . . [have a talent for] receiving rhythms and discovering

truths and beauties which are hidden from other men, so th[e] true mystic . . . lives at different levels of experience from other people." In addition, perhaps many more people receive revelations than report them, perhaps because they are quickly silenced — a matter taken up in Propositions 8 through 11. And perhaps the divine moves in mysterious ways.

In any event, a fourth proposition may be stated:

4. *Certain individuals will have the capacity to perceive revelations, whether this be an openness or sensitivity to real communications or consists of unusual creativity enabling them to create profound revelations and then to externalize the source of this new culture.*

Most such episodes will produce orthodox religious culture, in keeping with Proposition 3. The primary interest, of course, lies in novel revelations, the sort that get identified as heresies. Several factors limit the kinds of people apt to produce a novel revelation and define the times and places in which they are likely to do so. Just as people without interest in music probably don't have melodies come to them, people without abiding interests in religion probably do not receive revelations. And people are very unlikely to receive heretical revelations unless they are concerned about shortcomings in the prevailing religion. This can be stated:

5. *Novel (heretical) revelations will most likely come to persons of deep religious concerns who perceive shortcomings in the conventional faith(s).*

Of course, people will be more apt to find fault with conventional religions under certain social conditions than under others. This may be stated:

6. *The probability that individuals will perceive shortcomings in the conventional faith(s) increases during periods of social crisis.*

### *Crisis and Heresy*

Frequently in human history, crises produced by natural or social disasters have been translated into crises of faith. Typically this occurs because the crisis places demands on the prevailing religion that it appears unable to meet. This inability can occur at two levels. First, the religion may fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of why the disaster occurred. Second, the religion may seem to be unavailing against the disaster, which becomes truly critical if or when all secular responses also prove inadequate, for then the supernatural remains the only plausible source of help. In response to such failures of their traditional faiths, societies frequently have burst forth with new ones — often based on the revelations of one individual. A classic instance is the series of messianic movements that periodically swept through the Indians of North America in response to their failures to withstand encroachments by European settlers (Mooney 1896). An immense number of similar movements in Asia and Africa have been reported by Bryan Wilson (1975).

In a famous essay, Anthony F. C. Wallace (1956) argued that all successful religious movements arise in response to crises. That seems a needlessly extreme view, but there is abundant evidence that faith seldom is "blind," in the sense that religions frequently are discarded and new ones accepted in troubled times. Keep in mind that such new faiths often are efficacious, which is why Wallace called them revitalization movements. This name indicates the positive contributions such movements often make by revitalizing the capacity of the culture to deal with a crisis. How do they revitalize? Primarily by effectively mobilizing people to attempt collective actions. Thus the Ghost Shirt movement initially revitalized Indian societies by greatly reducing drunkenness and despair and then by providing the means to join fragmented bands into a cohesive political unit capable of concerted action.

Of course, a crisis need not afflict a whole society in order to provoke religious innovations. Indeed, that may be why the incidence of messianic movements is so high among oppressed minorities — from the Jews of the Diaspora (Sharot 1982) to blacks in the New

World (Bastide 1978; Simpson 1978). The extreme overrepresentation of women in such movements probably is pertinent here as well (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

Another proposition now can be stated:

7. *During periods of social crisis, the number of persons who receive novel revelations and the number willing to accept such revelations is maximized.*

This principle certainly applies to all four major cases: *Joseph Smith, Jr.*, grew up in a time and place of immense upheaval and disorder. His home was only a short walk from the Erie Canal — described by contemporaries as Satan's sewer. Construction of the canal was completed two years following Smith's first encounter with Moroni. This area of western New York was the most rapidly growing, transient, booming, crime-ridden, drunken, and socially disorganized area in the United States at that time, and so productive of revelations and new religions that it has prompted an immense literature (Barkun 1986; Cross 1950; Thomas 1989). *Muhammad* came to maturity in an environment overshadowed by the climax of the long and immense struggle between the Byzantine and the Persian empires and agitated locally by bitter clan and ethnic conflicts among Arabs as well as chronic grievances involving nearby Jews and Christians. During Muhammad's boyhood, the public consciousness had become pregnant with impending religious expectations that soon the Arabs too would have a prophet (Hodgson 1974; Payne 1957; Peters 1994; Watt 1961). In the time of *Jesus*, Palestine seethed under Roman misrule, corrupt vassal kings, and all manner of religious controversy, while angry prophets and millenarian expectations abounded (Horsley 1989; Mathews 1921; Neusner 1975, 1984). And *Moses*, of course, was born to a people held in bondage in a land of the unchosen.

Keep in mind that I do not suppose that revelations (or religious movements for that matter) require social crises. Proposition 7 merely states that revelations will be more frequent during times of stress and the probability that a revelation will be heretical also rises at such times.

### *Social Support*

People typically are somewhat reluctant to divulge a revelation, especially one that is heretical — which is further evidence of their sanity. As will be seen, at first Muhammad was "assailed by fears and doubts," and apparently wondered whether he was mad (Watt 1961: 21). It took a lot of initial encouragement from his wife and her cousin for him to fully believe in his mission. In similar fashion, Jesus did not begin his ministry with messianic claims, but only revealed them slowly and in confidence.

The reason for such reluctance and worry is obvious. Human beings, at least those not afflicted with mental illness, are immensely influenced by the reactions of those around them. The more extraordinary one's claims, the greater the perceived likelihood of rejection and ridicule. And, as Watt (1961: 21) put it: "For a man in remote seventh-century Mecca thus to believe that he was called by God to be a prophet was something stupendous." Had his wife rejected his claims, Muhammad may well have remained unknown to history.

Two additional propositions are appropriate here:

8. *An individual's confidence in the validity of his or her revelations is reinforced to the extent that others accept these revelations.*

9. *A recipient's ability to convince others is proportionate to the extent to which he or she is a respected member of an intense primary group.*

Imagine yourself living a life of solitary contemplation. Then one day new truths are revealed to you by a divine being — a revelation that does not simply ratify current religious conceptions, but which adds to or departs from these conceptions to a significant degree. Having imparted a heterodox revelation, the divine being directs you to communicate it to the world, which means you must found a heretical religious movement. Having no close

friends to reassure you or to help spread the word, somehow you now must find someone who will believe you, and then another, and another. It is a daunting prospect.

But what if, instead of living a solitary life, you are a respected member of an intense primary group? It would seem far less difficult to share your revelation with people who love and trust you, than to convince strangers. Moreover, if members of your immediate social network can be converted, they constitute a ready-made religious movement.

Revelations cannot be sustained and transformed into successful new religions by lonely prophets, but are invariably rooted in preexisting networks having a high level of social solidarity. Indeed, new religious movements based on revelations typically are *family* affairs — profound achievements of what rational choice economists would call household production (Becker 1964; Iannaccone 1990). Whether or not a religious founder's primary group is based on kinship, what is important is that it is a durable, face-to-face, network with very high levels of trust and affection.

Proposition 9 concerning the role of primary groups in sustaining a religious founder would appear to contradict the New Testament, which attributes these words to Jesus upon his return to Nazareth:

A prophet is not without honor, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house (Mark 6: 4).

The same statement also appears in Matthew (13: 57) and John (4: 44). Nevertheless, I am prepared to argue that both history and theory testify that a prophet without honor among his own kin and in his own house is probably a prophet silenced. I suggest that if Jesus actually said these words, they were not directed toward his immediate family at all, but perhaps at the neighbors and at more distant relatives — which is another matter entirely. As will be seen, Jesus was honored by his family, at least some of whom seem to have been his earliest and most ardent followers. Centuries of Christian art to the contrary, the "Holy Family" did not consist of three, but of at least nine members (and probably many more). Indeed, all four of the great revealed faiths were solidly rooted in Holy Families.

### *The Mormon Holy Family*

In 1823, in a farm home just outside Palmyra, New York, lived Joseph Smith, Sr., his wife Lucy Mack Smith, their six sons, Alvin (25), Hyrum (23), Joseph, Jr. (18), Samuel (15), William (12), and Don Carlos (7), and their three daughters, Sophronia (20), Catharine (11) and Lucy (2). They were, by all accounts, a close and loving family, greatly given to religious discussion and experimentation, having switched denominations repeatedly (Backman 1988; Berrett 1988; Bushman 1988; Smith [1853] 1996). The Smiths provide the quintessential example of household religious production.

In September of that year, Joseph Smith, Jr. had a vision during which the angel Moroni revealed to him the existence of a set of golden plates on which was written a "record" of events concerning Christ's visit to the New World, known today as *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*. Following the episode, almost the first thing Joseph did was tell his father, who encouraged him to do as the angel instructed. According to Joseph Smith, the next day he found the plates in the place identified by Moroni. But, having done so, he then disobeyed Moroni's injunction not to look directly upon the plates and suffered a severe physical shock. At this point, the angel reappeared, rebuked him for touching the plates, and told him he was forbidden from "bringing them forth" until he had demonstrated his willingness "to keep the commandments of God." What did he do then? His mother (Smith, [1853] 1996: 110) tells us:

When Joseph came in that evening, he told the whole family all that he had made known to his father in the field and also of finding the record, as well as what passed between him and the angel while he was at the place where the plates were deposited.

How did his family respond? According to his mother (111–12):

We sat up very late and listened attentively to all that he had to say to us . . . and every evening we gathered our children together and gave our time up to the discussion of those things which he instructed to us. I think that we presented the most peculiar aspect of any family that ever lived upon the earth, all seated in a circle, father, mother, sons, and daughters, listening in breathless anxiety to the religious teachings of a boy eighteen years of age who had never read the Bible through by course in his life. For Joseph was less inclined to the study of books than any child we had, but much more given to reflection and deep study.

We were convinced that God was about to bring to light something that we might stay our minds upon, something that would give us a more perfect knowledge of the plan of salvation and redemption of the human family than anything which had been taught us heretofore, and we rejoiced. . . . The sweetest union and happiness pervaded our house.

Several months later, Alvin, the eldest Smith son, died. As the family gathered at his bedside, Alvin used much of his ebbing strength to encourage to Joseph, Jr. to obtain the plates. Four years later he did, bringing them home inside a locked trunk which could not be opened because, as he reminded everyone, to look directly upon the plates could be fatal. He also claimed to be able to read the plates through the trunk and to translate them by looking through two transparent stones, known as the Urim and Thummim. So, Smith began to translate *The Book of Mormon*, usually doing so orally in front of the family, which now included his wife, Emma. The family responded enthusiastically and everyone was eager to hear each new installment. Soon after the translating began, Joseph and Emma established their own household and others outside the family began to learn about his activities. Among them were Martin Harris, Joseph's long-time friend, neighbor, and sometime employer, and Oliver Cowdery, a young schoolteacher who was rooming in the home of the senior Smiths. Twenty years earlier, in Vermont, Cowdery's father, William, had participated with Joseph Smith, Sr. in a religious group that used divining rods as a medium of revelation (Quinn 1994). Cowdery learned about the on-going translation process from long conversations with the prophet's mother Lucy who subsequently introduced him to her son, whereupon Cowdery volunteered to serve as his scribe to write down the translation as Smith dictated it.

Soon after meeting Joseph Smith, Jr., Cowdery formed a close friendship with David Whitmer. As work on the translation progressed, Cowdery sent Whitmer "a few lines of what they had translated" (Porter 1988: 75). David Whitmer shared these with his entire family who responded with very great interest. Subsequently, Smith and Cowdery, and Smith's wife, Emma, moved into the Whitmer home where the manuscript was completed late in 1829. During this stay, Cowdery got to know Elizabeth Ann Whitmer whom he later married. Consequently, at the start of 1830 the first 23 Mormons (counting in-laws) consisted of 11 Smiths, 10 Whitmers, Martin Harris, and Oliver Cowdery.

### *The Muslim Holy Family*

Muhammad was about 40 when he first began to have visions. They occurred in the month of Ramadan,<sup>2</sup> during which he had for several years begun to seclude himself in a cave on Mt. Hira'a. Here "Muhammad spent his days and nights in contemplation and worship. He addressed his worship to the Creator of the universe" (Salahi 1995: 62). This practice may have been prompted by "the old visionary Waraqa" (Payne 1959: 15), who had converted to Christianity, is thought to have known Hebrew, and who, as mentioned, had

long been predicting the coming of an Arabian prophet (Armstrong 1993; Farah 1994; Peters 1994; Rodinson 1980; Salahi 1995; Watt 1961). Eventually Muhammad began to have vivid dreams involving angels and to experience mysterious phenomena such as lights and sounds having no source (Salahi 1995: 62). These upset him and he feared he was losing his sanity or that he had been possessed by an evil spirit. So, he confided in his wife, Kahdījah. She gave him immediate reassurance. She also hurried to consult Waraqa who accepted these as signs that greater revelations would be forthcoming (Payne 1957: 16). Subsequently, when Kahdījah brought Muhammad to consult him, Waraqa cried out, "If you have spoken the truth to me, O Kahdījah, there has come to him the greatest *namus* who came to Moses aforetime, and lo, he is the prophet of his people" (Salahi 1995: 85). Later, when he encountered Muhammad in the marketplace, Waraqa kissed him on the forehead as a mark of his mission as the "new prophet of the one God" (Salahi 1995: 85). Indeed, Waraqa "serves as a kind of John the Baptist in the accounts of Muhammad's early revelations" (Peters 1994: 123).

Thus reassured, Muhammad now accepted his mission and expected to receive major new revelations — and soon did so. Through all that was to come, Kahdījah's support remained constant. M. A. Salahi (1995: 73) commented:

It was indeed a blessing that [she] should readily accept the new faith. She was to give the Prophet unwavering support, and comfort him in the years to come when opposition to his message was to increase in ferocity and wickedness.

Indeed, as a reward for her steadfastness, the angel Gabriel came to Muhammad telling him to convey Allah's greetings to Kahdījah and to "give her the happy news that she had a special home in heaven where she would enjoy total bliss and happiness" (Salahi 1995: 73).

But, Kahdījah was not alone in her faith in Muhammad. Let me briefly enumerate the members of the Muslim Holy Family. After Kahdījah, first among them was, of course, Waraqa who was Kahdījah's cousin and who also may have known Muhammad since childhood (Peters 1994: 104). Muhammad was an orphan who seems to have had little contact with his siblings, otherwise those family members probably would have been part of the founding core of Islam, just as Joseph Smith's parents and siblings were prominent early Mormons. But, despite this, Islam began as a family affair. Kahdījah bore Muhammad two sons, both of whom died in early childhood. Perhaps partly as a result, Muhammad and Kahdījah adopted two sons. The first was Muhammad's cousin Ali and the second was Zayd ibn-Hārithah, whom they originally had purchased as a slave. These adopted sons became Muhammad's third and fourth converts (after Kahdījah and Waraqa). Kahdījah also bore four daughters, Fātimah, Zaynab, Ruqayya, and Umm Kulthūm, each of whom also converted. In addition, three of Muhammad's cousins accepted his message (including the famous *hanif* Ubaydallah) as did Asmar, wife of his cousin Ja'far. Muhammad's aunt also was an early convert as was his freed slave, Umm Ayman, a woman who had cared for him in infancy.

The second convert from outside Muhammad's immediate family, and the fifth to accept the new faith, was Abū-Bakr, Muhammad's oldest and closest friend. And, occupying a bridge position<sup>3</sup> in the network as did Oliver Cowdery in the early Mormon network, Abū-Bakr, in turn, brought the new faith to "a group of five men who became the mainstay of the young [movement]" (Watt 1961: 35). These five young men were close friends and business associates. One of them was Abū-Bakr's cousin and another was the cousin of Muhammad's wife, Kahdījah. Like Muhammad, Abū-Bakr had great sympathy for slaves and throughout his life spent much of his income to purchase and free people from bondage. Two of the earliest converts to Islam were slaves freed by Abū-Bakr, including Bilāl, who gained lasting

fame as the first muezzin (or crier) to call the faithful to prayer. So there they are, the first 23 Muslims.

### *The Christian Holy Family*

The New Testament is so remarkably silent on the subject of the family of Jesus that it seems quite likely that the early texts were expurgated. Even Mary is seldom mentioned and her portrait is further obscured by confusing references to several "other" Marys, who sometimes might not be "others" at all (Bauckham 1990). As for the siblings and other close relatives of Jesus, they barely made it into the scriptural canon. In Mark (6: 3) we learn that Jesus had four brothers — "James, Joses, Judas, and Simon" — and unnamed "sisters." In Matthew (13: 55–56) Joses is called Joseph, and reference is made to "all his sisters." Mark (15: 40) identifies one of Christ's sisters as Salome and again mentions his brothers James and Joses, the latter being named again in Mark 15: 47. And in I Corinthians (9: 5), Paul refers to "the brothers of the Lord" and claims that they were accompanied by their wives as they travelled with "the Lord." In the expert opinion of Wolfgang A. Bienert (1991: 471), because Paul claims personal acquaintance with "bodily brothers," who still lived at the time in which he is writing to others who would have known of them, the existence of these siblings "must be treated as historically reliable."

In addition to biblical references, Epiphanius of Salamis (*Panarion*, 78.8; *Anacoratus* 60) mentions Salome as well as another sister of Jesus, named Maria or Mary. The *Gospel of Philip* (CG II, 3), a Coptic text from the Nag Hammadi collection, also identifies a sister of Jesus as Mary. The apocryphal *History of Joseph the Carpenter* (2) names Jesus' half-brothers as "Judas, Justus, James, and Simon" and his two half sisters as "Assia and Lydia."

Of the siblings, James is by far the best-documented. Paul acknowledges him as an apostle and as head of the church, having been so designated by his brother Jesus (Galatians 1: 20; 2: 9). In Acts (12: 17) James also is confirmed as the brother of Jesus and, at least by implication, as head of the church. James also appears in respectable, noncanonical sources. Josephus (*The Antiquities of the Jews* XX, 9: 1) reported the execution of "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James." In the fragment of *Gospel of the Hebrews* quoted by Jerome (*De viris illustribus* 2), which may date from the middle of the first century, James is placed at the Last Supper and Jesus is quoted as calling him "my brother." In the *Gospel of Thomas*, which also may date from the first century, we read:

The disciples said to Jesus, "We know that you will depart from us. Who is to be our leader?"

Jesus said to them, "Wherever you are, you are to go to James the righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being" (12).

This is also what Clement of Alexandria reported (in the fragment quoted by Eusebius, 2: 1): "Peter, James and John, after the Ascension of the Saviour, did not claim pre-eminence . . . but chose James the Righteous as Bishop of Jerusalem." Of course, Eusebius himself several times identified James as "the Lord's brother" (2: 23). Finally, in another work that survives via Eusebius (2: 20), Hegesippus identified James as "the brother of the Lord." He also reported that the grandsons of Judas, "who was said to be His brother, humanly speaking," were brought before Domitian who freed them once they had convinced him that the "Kingdom" promised by Christianity was not of this world.

Elsewhere, however, Hegesippus identified James, Judas, Simon and Joseph as *cousins* of Jesus, a view later supported by Jerome (Eisenman 1997: xxviii). Others redefined the "brothers and sisters" of Jesus as half-brothers and half-sisters, being children of Joseph by a prior marriage. Still others have resorted to the confusion over the various Marys to claim this brood belonged to another Mary, wife of Alphaeus (Metford 1983: 54).

These contradictory kinship identifications bring into view the reason it is necessary to ransack the sources in pursuit of the family of Jesus: the doctrine concerning the *perpetual* virginity of Mary. Since this doctrine ruled out the possibility that Jesus could have actual siblings, what is remarkable is not that these people became obscure, but that verses identifying them as actual siblings survived in the official canon at all. Perhaps they did so only because the doctrine of perpetual virginity is of theological origins and therefore developed slowly. Thus, even at the end of the second century Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 4: 19) vigorously defended the position that the “Lord’s brothers” were his blood brothers, born of Mary and sons of Joseph, against those, including Marcion, who proposed that Jesus had not actually undergone physical birth or was otherwise beyond biology. A generation later, however, Origen (*Commentary on Matthew* 10: 17) noted that “some say . . . that the brethren of Jesus were sons of Joseph by a former wife, whom he married before Mary. Now those who say so wish to preserve the honour of Mary in virginity to the end.” By the fourth century, Eusebius seems to have found the whole matter confusing, but did take pains to note that Jesus was not the son of Joseph (2.1). Eventually, this became another matter of dispute between Protestants and Catholics, the former accepting the interpretation that Jesus had biological brothers and sisters. Recently, many Catholic scholars have come to this view as well (Bienert 1991: 470).

For my purposes, of course, it doesn’t matter whether these were the actual brothers and sisters of Jesus, half-brothers and half-sisters, or cousins. What matters is whether they constituted an intense primary group that served as a committed group of initial followers, which is, of course, specifically denied by scriptural passages quoted earlier. But here too, revisionist hands left sufficient evidence to the contrary.

Recall that Paul mentioned that “the brothers of the Lord” travelled about with him. Is it reasonable to suppose that siblings who rejected Jesus would have accompanied him on his ministry or, indeed, that they would have been permitted to do so? In the same line of thought, R. E. Brown (1966: 112) commented (vis-à-vis John 7: 5) that “it is curious to find the ‘brothers’ of Jesus following him along with his mother and disciples who believed in him.” Moreover, in the same verse it is reported that “the brothers” urged Jesus to show his miracles to the world.

Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 4: 19) believed the famous denial of his family by Jesus reported in Mark 3: 33 was a misinterpretation. When, told that “Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you.” Jesus is quoted as responding “Who are my mother and brothers?” Then, gesturing to those who sat listening to him, Jesus added, “Here are my mother and brothers. Whosoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.” Tertullian explained that Jesus used this as a device to stress the kinship of faith, not to deny his family feelings. The more significant aspect here is that such an important early church father was committed to traditions of family support for Jesus.

In addition, Origen dismissed as figurative the claim that “a prophet is not without honor, but in his own country, and among his own kin.” He noted (*Commentary on Matthew* 10: 18) that if taken literally and generally “it is not historically true.” As proof he listed many prophets of the Old Testament who were honored in their local communities. He continued: “But, figuratively interpreted, it is absolutely true for we must think of Judea as their country, and . . . Israel as their kindred.” Origen then reasoned that because the people needed repeatedly to be censured, that they sometimes persecuted prophets, and that all remained sinful was proof of the figurative truth, for had “their country” and “their kin” truly honored Moses, Elijah, Samuel, or Jeremiah, things would be entirely different.

Surely there is nothing in the Marian traditions that would suggest that she was less than ardent in her support of Jesus. Likewise, it seems undeniable that Jesus did designate his bother James to lead the church and that he was among the most important of his brother’s followers — perhaps the most important (Ward 1992; Eisenman 1997). It is less



certain, but likely that Simon also played an important role in his brother's movement and that, like James, he was put to death as a result (Eisenman 1997). Finally, there is no plausible reason to suppose that only three family members accepted Jesus while the others scoffed. What seems more plausible is that the stoning of James and some of his associates and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem following the failed uprising against Rome, obliterated Jerusalem Christianity and with it went most remaining relatives of Jesus and the memory of their significant roles in the movement. This is entirely consistent with Helmut Koester's evaluation of the *Epistle of Jude*. The author of this book of the New Testament identifies himself as "Jude, brother of James." Koester (1982: 246–47) noted:

... meaning without any doubt not an "apostle," but a brother of Jesus ... The use of this pseudonym would have made sense only at an early date, as long as there was still some memory of the significance of such members of Jesus' family.

It was not until I circulated a draft of this essay among historians of the early church that I learned of Richard Bauckham's (1990) extensive monograph on the part played by the relatives of Jesus in the early church.<sup>4</sup> Had I known of it sooner, I would have been spared a great deal of scrutiny of unfamiliar primary sources, since most of what I report above is laid out carefully and clearly in Bauckham's first two chapters. Bauckham also argues persuasively that Jesus' brothers and sisters were active and well-known in the early church. He suggests that there may have been a brief period when several of the brothers were not part of Jesus' entourage, but concludes that they did travel with him during much of his ministry, noting that "Paul includes the brothers of the Lord within the general category of apostles" (Bauckham 1990: 59).

### *The Jewish Holy Family*

Like Muhammad, Moses did not have a revelation until he was in his mature years, having fled Egypt and after having achieved fame as a military leader and a favorite of the pharaoh. Indeed, Moses had settled in Midian, married Zipporah and fathered several sons before God spoke to him from a burning bush. This first revelation was extremely elaborate as were others yet to come.

It seems clear that his family played a major role in Moses' religious career. His father-in-law and his wife were active, loyal supporters. Aaron was his comrade and confidante, and invites comparisons with James, while Miriam also seems to have been very prominent. Although two of Aaron's sons (Nadab and Abihu) were killed by God for an improper sacrifice (Leviticus 10: 1–2), his other two sons (Eleazar and Ithmar) became priests and major figures during the second generation of the movement (Numbers 3). Moses' son Gershom also gained considerable prominence (Exodus 2: 22, Numbers 3), and Moses' other sons, whose names are unknown, may have done so too.

### *Heresy Amplified*

Holy families do more than accept revelations; they encourage a recipient to have (or report) additional revelations. One of the first things Waraqa is said to have told Muhammad is to expect further revelations and subsequently as his audience responded to each new additional portion of the Qur'ān he was encouraged to seek more. The same is true in the case of Joseph Smith, Jr. Hence:

*10. The greater the reinforcement received, the more likely a person is to have further revelations.*

This is, of course, nothing more than elementary exchange theory. Behavior that is rewarded tends to be repeated, while that not rewarded tends to disappear. However, I now wish to develop a rather more subtle and less obvious implication of how reinforcement influences revelations.

Close examination of the available reports on successful religious founders reveals a most interesting pattern: revelations tend to become more novel (heretical) over time. That is, the earliest revelations reported by a "prophet" tend to be substantially more conventional than do their later ones.

Let us consider Joseph Smith, Jr. His early revelations represented at most a very modest shift from conventional Christianity. In fact, the Book of Mormon contains none of the religious doctrines that now separate Mormons and conventional Christians. Most of these were received by Smith in Nauvoo, Illinois — nearly two decades after his initial revelation. The same principle applies to Muhammad. His earliest teachings tended to be quite general and highly compatible with Arab paganism. As Maxime Rodinson (1971: 96) summed up:

There was nothing at all revolutionary or shocking in [Muhammad's initial] message — or not, at least, at first sight. It did not appear to involve any major religious innovations . . . Strangely enough, in fact, Muhammad's Lord did not, in his first revelations, attempt to deny either the existence or the power of the other divinities. He was content merely to ignore them. There are no denunciations as there are in later messages of 'those who would assign companions to Allah', no insistence on the uniqueness of the supreme deity . . . Criticism of the 'complacency' of the rich and of their conviction that their wealth entitled them to 'be independent' of all authority was perfectly acceptable in moderation. Insistence on the necessity of almsgiving was nothing out of the ordinary . . . There was nothing in all of this unacceptable to the Meccans.

The distinctive Islamic faith Muhammad eventually taught was revealed to him progressively. In similar fashion, Jesus only slowly revealed the full scope of his mission. We do not know, of course, whether this reflected a progression in his awareness of his mission or in his willingness to break the news — a caveat which also applies to Muhammad, Joseph Smith, and other revelators. Finally, Moses' first revelation was entirely devoted to instructing him to return to Egypt and lead his people to freedom — no doctrine was involved at all. That came after the exodus.

What is to be made of this pattern? I suggest that the interaction between a successful founder and his or her followers tends to *amplify heresy*. Given that successful founders typically will be confronting a social crisis and the need for a new religion, there will be sufficient motive to move in new doctrinal directions. However, the initial revelations will tend not to be too heretical because there is a selection process by which the initial credibility of founders is established. Had Joseph Smith, Jr. begun his career with revelations favoring polygamy and teaching that humans become gods, it seems very likely that he would have been rejected. But, once a credible relationship exists between a founder and a set of followers, the stage is set for more daring innovations. Stated as a proposition:

11. *The greater the amount of reinforcement received and the more revelations a person produces, the more novel (heretical) subsequent revelations will become.*

At this point, of course, the model of normal revelations has become linked to the subcultural-evolution model. For now, the pattern of social interactions between founder and followers may play a major role in shaping revelations, bit by bit, in ways that go absolutely unnoticed. This will be facilitated when the process of revelation is public, as in the case of Muhammad and Joseph Smith, Jr.

However, the process by which follower reactions amplify the heretical tendencies of the founder does not go on indefinitely. Indeed, as movements grow and develop more ramified organizational structures, pressures build up against further revelations, for *organizations* are served best by a *completed* faith. Often the anti-revelational forces do not make

substantial headway until the founder is gone. In any event, a movement cannot long sustain constant doctrinal revision, nor can it permit unrestricted revelation.

12. *As they become successful, religious movements founded on revelations will attempt to curtail revelations or to at least prevent novel (heretical) revelations.*

Max Weber's (1947, 1993) work on the routinization of charisma obviously applies here. Weber regarded charismatic authority as suited only for "the process of originating" religious movements and as too unstable to sustain an organized social enterprise. Moreover, upon the death or disappearance of the prophet, a new basis for authority is required in any event. Several options exist. The movement can take the position that the age of revelations is ended, for all necessary truths have been told. This has been the usual Protestant stance. Or the capacity to reveal new truths may be associated with the leadership role — the charisma of the prophet is replaced by charisma of office, in Weber's terms. This has been the Roman Catholic and the Mormon choice. In either case, however, doctrine is stabilized sufficiently to sustain a changeover from prophetic to administrative leadership.

### ON CHARISMA

Since I already have mentioned it above, it seems appropriate to include a brief discussion of charisma, especially since my views are quite heretical. Max Weber borrowed this Greek term meaning "divine gift" to identify a form of authority that is seen as legitimate because it is attributed to divine sanction. Quite obviously, then, the founders of religions based on revelations have, or at last claim, such authority and it might be useful to have a name to identify this phenomenon. Trouble arises when we forget that charisma is merely a *name*, just as "Pope" is merely a name. *Names explain nothing*. Thus, it is as circular and silly to say his early followers believed Muhammad's authority came from God because Muhammad had charisma, as it is to say that John Paul II is the leader of the Roman Catholic Church because he is the Pope.

Unfortunately, most scholars who use the term charisma forget that it is only a name describing a form of authority, and they use it as a trait of individuals that *explains why* others believe that their authority is God-given. That is, charisma becomes a mysterious power that enables people to impose their authority on others. But, even this application is no more than a name and thus to say Jesus had charisma is merely to substitute one mystery for another. Why did the disciples believe in Jesus? Because he had charisma. What's charisma? A kind of power that makes people believe in you.

Weber was as guilty of this circularity as anyone. Having discussed the "extraordinary powers" often attributed to religious adepts, Weber ([1922] 1993: 2) wrote that "We shall henceforth employ the term 'charisma' for such extraordinary powers." In subsequent discussions, when, for example, Weber wrote (46) that "We shall understand 'prophet' to mean a purely individual bearer of charisma," he said nothing more than that charismatics have charisma. And when he went on to claim (47) that prophets hold authority on the basis of "charismatic authentication," Weber again answered this most fundamental question with a tautology. We still are presented with no *explanation* of what this power is or how anyone gets it. Unfortunately, Weber's authority (charisma?) has been such that generations of scholars (not well-trained in the philosophy of science) have been content to attribute the accomplishments of various individuals to their charisma.

I am entirely comfortable with the observation that successful religious founders have *something*. They do seem able to form and maintain very intense emotional bonds with other people (Stark and Roberts 1982). There is nothing wrong with identifying that something as charisma, or "magnetism," or even as "it," so long as we never mistake the name for an explanation.

Frankly, I don't find even the concept of personal charisma to be nearly as interesting as I do the group process by which charisma is *attributed* to leaders. Holy families not only reinforce the founder's confidence, more importantly, their testimony generates faith among potential and new converts. Followers effectively attribute charisma to their leader, and this can, to a considerable extent, be independent of the actual traits or behaviors of the leader. That is, charisma may exist primarily in the eyes of the inner circle and in the accounts they provide to those who are less well-situated. Followers love to relate incidents of their leader's amazing capacities, especially to those who can have no similar tales to tell. Thus early Mormon missionaries who knew Joseph Smith did not limit themselves to discussing passages in The Book of Mormon, but also gave substantial testimony concerning their prophet's amazing gifts.

### CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to explain how it is that normal people can talk to God, while retaining a firm grip on rational thought. This is not to suggest that only sane (or sober) people receive revelations. Nor is it to suggest that "revelations" are never rooted in conscious fraud. In religion, as in any other sphere of life, delusion and deception exist. But, it does not seem the more reasonable choice to attribute truly profound religious culture to such disreputable sources. I close by acknowledging that in his classic monograph on Muhammad, W. Montgomery Watt (1961: 238) anticipated several central propositions of my model:

I would begin by asserting that there is found, at least in some [persons], what may be called 'creative imagination.' . . . Prophets and prophetic religious leaders, I should maintain, share in this creative imagination. They proclaim ideas connected with what is deepest and most central in human experience, with special references to the particular needs of their day and generation. The mark of the great prophet is the profound attraction of his [or her] ideas for those to whom they are addressed.

Where do such ideas come from? Some would say 'from the unconscious'. Religious people say 'from God' . . . Perhaps it could be maintained that these ideas of the creative imagination come from that life in a man [or woman] which is greater than himself [or herself] and is largely below the threshold of consciousness.

### NOTES

A portion of this essay was presented as the Annual Plenary Address, North American Patristics Society, 1997. I thank Andrew M. Greeley for inspiration. I also wish to express my debts to Marie Cornwall, Ronald K. Esplin, L. W. Hurtado, Laurence R. Iannaccone, Armand Mauss, Monsoor Moaddel, Carrie Miles, William Silverman, and Michael Williams for their invaluable help with the sources.

<sup>1</sup> Mental patients who claim to talk to God or to be Muhammad are of no interest. At issue is the mental health of people who succeed in convincing others to accept the authenticity of their revelations, not the incidence of religious imagery in the delusions of the mentally ill.

<sup>2</sup> This holy period and the custom of making a pilgrimage to Mecca preceded Islam, having been well-established in Arab paganism.

<sup>3</sup> A person in a bridge position is one who "bridges" or links two or more networks.

<sup>4</sup> I thank L.W. Hurtado for bringing this study to my attention.

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**FIGURE 1****A MODEL OF REVELATIONS**


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**Revelations are communications believed to come from a divine being.**

**1. Revelations will tend to occur when (a) there exists a supportive cultural tradition of communications with the divine and (b) the recipient of the revelation(s) has direct contact with a role model, with someone who has had such communications.**

**2. Many common, ordinary, even mundane mental phenomena can be experienced as contact with the divine.**

**3. Most episodes involving contact with the divine will merely confirm the conventional religious culture, even when the contact includes a specific communication, or revelation.**

**4. Certain individuals will have the capacity to perceive revelations, whether this be an openness or sensitivity to real communications or consists of unusual creativity enabling them to create profound revelations and then to externalize the source of this new culture.**

**5. Novel (heretical) revelations will most likely come to persons of deep religious concerns who perceive shortcomings in the conventional faith(s).**

**6. The probability that individuals will perceive shortcomings in the conventional faith(s) increases during periods of social crisis.**

**7. During periods of social crisis the number of persons who receive novel revelations and the number willing to accept such revelations is maximized.**

**8. An individual's confidence in the validity of his or her revelations is reinforced to the extent that others accept these revelations.**

**9. A recipient's ability to convince others is proportionate to the extent to which he or she is a respected member of an intense primary group.**

**10. The greater the reinforcement received, the more likely a person is to have further revelations.**

**11. The greater the amount of reinforcement received and the more revelations a person produces, the more novel (heretical, deviant) subsequent revelations will become.**

**12. As they become successful, religious movements founded on revelations will attempt to curtail revelations or to at least prevent novel (heretical) revelations.**

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