

*Revelatory Events* by Ann Taves is a study of three social phenomena that began with and are based on cases where somebody supposedly experienced a religious revelation of some kind. These social phenomena are: Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), and the movement, for lack of a less tendentious term, associated with Helen Shucman's book "A Course of Miracles" (ACIM). In the case of Mormonism, person who allegedly had the religious revelation was Joseph Smith; in the case of AA, it was Bill Wilson; and in the case of SACIM, it was Helen Shucman.

First a word on ACIM, since many readers are unlikely to have even heard of it. Helen Shucman was a psychologist who, so she claims, had a series of religious revelations, which she described in ACIM. ACIM came to have a following of sorts, but this following did not turn into an organization of any kind, let alone a religion. This following—what we're referring to as SACIM ---just consists of various people who believe ACIM to have at least a certain validity. SACIM is not an organization, and it has no objectives. Being a part of SACIM does not involve observing a code of conduct; and although being a part of SACIM requires one to believe ACIM to be valid in some way or other, there are no specific beliefs one must have as to the nature of this validity or as to the exact influence ACIM should have on one's life.

When referring to Mormonism, AA, and SACIM, we must use a generic term such as "social phenomenon." This is because have as little in common as they could have, given how similar their respective origins are. There is no way to evaluate *Revelatory Events* (RE), or even say what it's about, except in terms of this fact; and we will therefore begin by discussing it.

We cannot refer to all three as "religions", since only one of them, Mormonism, is a religion. Mormonism is a religion. AA is *like* a religion in that AA-members are required to turn themselves over to a higher power; but it is *unlike* a religion in that they can choose what that higher power is. As for SACIM, it simply isn't a religion; for it isn't an organization of any kind. It is simply a group of people who

all give credence to ACIM but are not organized and do not, except by chance, even associate with one another other.

We cannot refer to all three as “institutions”, let alone “religious institutions”, since SACIM is unambiguously not an institution; and, of the other two, only Mormonism, unambiguously is an institution.

We cannot refer to all three as “movements”, since a movement must have an objective and SACIM does not have an objective. We cannot even refer to Mormonism as “movement.” Mormonism is an established institution, and established institutions after they *stop* being movements and become organizations. Even AA, though having a well-defined objective, is too mature and set in its ways—too institutionalized---to be described as a “movement.”

We cannot describe all three as “organizations”, let alone as “religions organizations”, since SACIM is not an organization. In fact, even AA is not exactly an organization. It is more in the nature of a protocol for establishing organizations. Right now, I could form an AA group with my next-door neighbor; we would not need approval from any authority organization. The only requirement would be that we our organization it comply with AA-protocol, meaning that it followed certain precepts (the 12 Steps) in furtherance of a certain objective (to help people stop drinking). AA is an organized protocol for establishing and running organizations; it is not itself an organization.

We cannot describe all three as “cults.” It’s obviously possible some or even all of them are or have been cult-like in some respects. But none of them is at all organizationally similar to a paradigm-case of a cult. And although it’s obviously possible that cult-like psychodynamics may be operative to varying degrees in all three, it isn’t obvious that they’re operative and, if they are operative, it isn’t obvious how. We therefore could not refer to them as “cults” without prejudging substantive questions as to their respective natures.

Each of these social phenomena has some basis in a tendency that people to believe in a higher power. But that fact is operative in completely different ways in all three cases. In the case of Mormonism, it led to a garden-variety religion. In the case of AA, it led to a self-help movement that encourages its followers to find their own personal gods and therefore discourages them from casting their lot with any organized religion (or, therefore, with any religion at all, “religious organization” being a pleonasm). By encouraging such “religious individualism”, as we might call it, AA reroutes people’s need to believe in a higher power *away* from religion, and AA is therefore positively *anti*-religious. Indeed, AA tends not to benefit people who are already religious until they suspend or altogether relinquish their religious views. As for SACIM, while it is based on a need or tendency that people have to believe in a higher power, it doesn’t *do* anything with fact, simply allowing it to dissipate into a vague spiritualism that imposes no definite requirements on the thought or conduct its adherents.

Within the limits set by the fact that each of these three social phenomena is founded a case of somebody’s supposedly having a spiritual revelation of some kind, they are, we must conclude, about as different as they could be. There is no therefore no explanatorily cohesive category of which they are all members---no “natural kind”, as philosophers of science would say, of which they are all instances---it being irrelevant that events that *initiated* them may well represent a natural kind.

This means that *Revelatory Events* (RE) is fundamentally incoherent. RE is not three separate studies: it is a single study that concerns three social phenomena; and the underlying assumption is that they must be meaningfully similar given that they are based on similar originating events. But that assumption is false, and the data that she cites (summarized above) makes that clear. But she never questions that assumption when trying to model that data, with the result that her model completely non-explanatory.

According to that model, social phenomena of this kind---i.e., social phenomena that are based on somebody’s supposedly having a religious revelation--follow a certain pattern: First, the alleged

revelation happens; then a small group of people give credence to that revelation; then a large group of people do so.

Analysis: If a large group of people give credence to some supposed spiritual revelation on somebody's part, then there was a time when fewer people gave credence to it: propagation doesn't happen instantaneously. Conclusion: Taves' so-called model is not a model.

Taves also says that during there is more doctrinal disagreement during the second phase than during the third. (This assertion is a part of her model; it is not an aside.)

Analysis: Once a belief system is formed, people who reject *ipso facto* don't belong to the corresponding social phenomenon. While that belief-system is being formed, there is *ipso facto* no belief-system people must accept to belong to that phenomenon. Conclusion: This point is trivial; it is a non-point.

According to Taves, the psychological episode—the alleged “religious revelation”—that originates the movement in question is usually preceded by other, similar psychological episodes or at least by content-similar ideation of some kind or other.

Analysis: This point, unlike the others, is non-trivial. But it concerns the originating event of the social phenomenon in question, not the phenomenon itself. So it doesn't show that social phenomena that have originating events this kind are otherwise similar or, therefore, that they constitute an explanatorily cohesive class. Conclusion: Though non-trivial in and of itself, this point does nothing to detrivialize Taves' model, since what makes that model trivial is its false assumption that having such originating events are *otherwise* meaningfully similar.

To sum up: Taves' study is a failure, since it falsely assumes that social phenomena that are based on a certain kind of originating event are otherwise similar. In fact, it is less than a failure; it is a mere tissue of trivialities that don't add up to any sort of explanation, even a failed one.

But there are several, even deeper incoherencies in RE. In that work, Taves is, though she doesn't say it or otherwise show awareness of it, conducting two separate studies. On the one hand, she is trying to understand social phenomena *generated* by alleged religious revelations. On the other hand, she is trying to understand those episodes themselves. As we've seen, the first of these two studies assumes that social phenomena based on such originating events *ipso facto* constitute a natural kind and, by implication, that there is a consistent and organic relationship between those originating events and the corresponding social movements. This assumption is false, as we've seen. But *if* it were true, then Taves' study of those originating events would simply be a component of her study of the resulting social phenomena, in much the way that the study of fetuses during the first trimester of pregnancy is subordinate to the study of their development during all three trimesters. Indeed, if that assumption were true, then we could use information about such social phenomena to understand such originating events, in much the way that we can use information about infants to understand the internal structures of week-old fetuses.

But since that assumption is unambiguously false, we cannot read facts about those social phenomena into those psychological episodes, and those episodes must be understood on their own terms. But Taves, locked as she is into that assumption, does not try to understand them on their own terms. The result is a failure to understand events that are easily understood, especially relative to the data that Taves herself provides.

Taves set out to "prove" that the psychological episodes in question were not in fact religious revelations. Point of order: Taves doesn't need to prove this if she's writing for a secular audience, since it's an immediate corollary of a secular world view. At the same time, she cannot possibly be writing for a religious audience, since, as she herself states, the book assumes the validity of a "naturalistic" approach to religion and therefore assumes the validity of a secular world view.

In any case, Taves sets out to prove this. To this end, she seizes on facts about Smith, Wilson, and Shucman and then rummages through various diagnostic categories, hoping to find ones that fit. Taves considers a number of possibilities in connection with each one. Shucman suffered from “dissociative personality disorder”; Shucman suffered from “multiple personality disorder”; Smith had a “schizotypal personality”; Smith suffered from “schizoid personality disorder”; Wilson suffered from “avoidant personality disorder”; Wilson was in a protracted “state of hypnosis”; Wilson had “dependency issues.” Maybe some of these diagnoses are accurate; maybe not. Either way, they explain little.

Let’s consider Wilson’s case and let us try to understand it on its own terms, instead of looking at it through the lens of some diagnostic category that may or may not apply. Wilson needed to stop drinking but he couldn’t stop drinking; then “God”—some part of his own mind, in other words---told him to stop drinking, and he stopped drinking. Basically, he needed to stop drinking and he did, albeit with the help of some psychotic episodes and possibly some permanent form of psychosis. We don’t explain Wilson’s behavior in terms of his psychosis; we explain his psychosis in terms of his behavior. He didn’t stop drinking because he was psychotic; he was psychotic because he had to be to stop drinking. (And if Wilson was already psychotic—if he had a psychotic condition that predated his need to stop drinking—it was mobilized in the way that it was because he had to stop drinking.) Assuming that Wilson *did* suffer from some form of psychosis, that fact does not by itself explain why he stopped drinking; in fact, it does not by itself explain why he did anything that he did. What it might explain, at least partially, is why he did what he did in the way that he did it. If we learn that Wilson was “schizotypal”, does that explain the fact that Wilson stopped drinking or that he went on to found AA? No. At most, it may explain why he did those things in the exact way that he did them.

Let us look at Joseph Smith’s case. Smith belonged to a religion that he didn’t care for and whose precepts he rightly regarded as incoherent. (According to those precepts, God never changes but

he responds to our prayers; Jesus is the son of God and is human but God is not human or otherwise a biological entity; God is all-knowing but is sometime shocked by our conduct.) Smith had a series of visions to the effect that God, though superior to us, is still biologically human and can therefore relate to us accordingly. Assuming that Smith did in fact have visions and he wasn't simply lying, he obviously was psychotic in some way or other; and that would indeed explain why he had "visions" (delusions experienced as perceptions) *of some kind or other*. But the contents of Smith's visions cogently addressed highly reasonable theological concerns of Smith's, and the fact, if it is a fact, that Smith was psychotic does nothing to explain that.

As for Shucman, I personally know very little about her; but judging by the facts presented in RE, her situation parallels the other two. Shucman had always had religious tendencies but had never affiliated herself with any specific religion. A practicing psychologist, Shucman suppressed her religious tendencies, believing them to be incompatible with her profession. Then she began hearing voices; these voices basically told her to unrepress her own spirituality, and that's what she did. Shucman's spirituality was an integral part of her personality, and it was not psychotic of her to unrepress it, granting that psychosis was involved in triggering and possibly mediating this process.

In general, psychological diagnoses explain failures but they do not explain successes. God tells Brown to pour ketchup on his boss's head (i.e., Brown has auditory hallucinations to this effect); so he does. In this context, "Brown is schizophrenic" may well do much to explain Brown's behavior. Now consider a different scenario. God tells Brown to compose a piano concerto; so he does. In this context, "Brown is schizophrenic" doesn't explain Brown's behavior. Brown composed a piano concerto because he is a composer and he wanted to compose a piano concerto. Because Brown is schizophrenic, the events that mediated the inception of this process, and possibly even the process itself, were different from what they would otherwise have been. "Brown is schizophrenic" may therefore be an explanation of the exact character of some aspects of this event-series, but it is not an explanation of that event-

series itself. In general, psychological diagnoses can sometimes do much to explain lapses, but they have a decidedly ancillary explanatory role when it comes to explaining successes.

In quitting drinking and founding AA, Wilson was succeeding. In founding Mormonism, Smith was succeeding. In unrepressing her own spirituality, Shucman was succeeding. Each clearly suffered from some form of psychosis; but that doesn't explain why they thought what they thought; it only explains why they thought what they way thought *in the exact way that they thought it*. When the object of explanation is failure, there can be an element of truth in this position. But there is no truth in it when the object of explanation is adaptive behavior. Because Taves assumes otherwise, he attempts to understand Smith, Wilson, and Shucman lack substance.

In conclusion, Taves' book is a double failure. It falsely assumes that social phenomena that are based on alleged religious revelations must for that alone belong to the same explanatory category. And it falsely assumes that, when psychosis is involved in an undertaking, explaining that undertaking is the same as identifying the exact type of psychosis involved. Because of the first assumption, Taves doesn't look at religious phenomena on their own terms and therefore fails to understand them, and because of the second, she doesn't look at psychological phenomena on their own terms and therefore fails to understand them.