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Many new religious or spiritual movements are formed as a result of “revelatory events,” where someone is believed to have received messages from a superhuman being. In Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths, Ann Taves closely examines the historical experiences of three groups that emerged in this fashion—Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous, and A Course in Miracles. As Taves describes it, “this book reconstructs the historical process whereby small groups coalesced around the sense of a guiding presence and accounts for this process in naturalistic rather than supernatural terms” (xi). Based on her reconstruction of these groups’ foundings, Taves advocates for a processual understanding of religious group formation—that an understanding of supernatural communication develops through social interactions between a key individual and the group surrounding that person, and that how this understanding is institutionalized depends on the nature and decisions of the group.

The initial sections of the book consist of Taves’s case studies, where she uses archival sources to understand what happened as each group was emerging, including the key individual, the group around that individual and their interactions, and how each group understood and acted upon the supernatural revelation. In her first case study, involving Mormons, Taves examines Joseph Smith’s recovery and translation of ancient golden plates, addressing how this came to be understood as revelation and how Smith’s family and initial followers understood the physical objects involved in this process. She goes on to examine accounts of Smith’s initial vision, noting that accounts of the vision evolved to address issues that might necessitate the formation of a new church and included different titles for Smith depending on the context and claims of authority being made at that particular time.

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In her second case study, Taves examines the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). She notes that in this case, the key individual, Bill Wilson, and early members of the group minimize Wilson’s extraordinary experience and do not understand it as revelation. This enables AA to be established not as a new religion, but as a spiritual way of life, compatible with anyone’s religious beliefs. She reviews Wilson’s experiences of a “presence” (97) at various times and how Bill’s narrative and AA’s “Big Book” evolved over time. In this case, Taves notes that factions within early group members, as well as the desire to gain the support of religious leaders and organized medicine, may have contributed to the group’s ultimate narrative and form.

The third case study, A Course in Miracles (ACIM), refers to a self-guided course, two foundations and a number of unofficial centers associated with the course, as well as the course’s students and some independent teachers. In this case, Taves reconstructs the events surrounding Helen Schucman and William Thetford, psychologists working together, and Schucman’s communications with a “Voice” from whom she “scribed” the course (151). Taves notes that the “Voice” seems to have emerged in the context of interactions between Schucman and Thetford and that the addition of new members changed this group over time.

In the latter part of the book, Taves uses her three case studies to develop a theoretical model to explain the development of new religious or spiritual paths. She describes the steps that occur involving the key individual, the group surrounding that person, and their collective understanding of the events. Importantly, Taves notes that decisions the group makes in establishing the identity of an extraordinary presence, communicating with that presence, and determining the authenticity of communications lead to the generation of the group’s authority structure. Taves uses this to explain the varying authority and organizational structures of Mormons, AA, and ACIM. Importantly, this model suggests that a group’s trajectory cannot be understood through examination of a revelation or supernatural communication alone, because its path is dependent on interactions between the receiving individual and the group.

Taves goes on to compare the similar experiences of Joseph Smith’s “translation” and Helen Schucman’s “scribing,” and to compare both of these with the experiences and abilities of “highly hypnotizable individuals,” explaining them through cognitive science. While Taves makes strong use of archival sources and employs them whenever possible, this
section of the book seems somewhat speculative, with Taves observing that she is “hypothesizing” (264).

Overall, the most important contribution of *Revelatory Events* to the study of new religions is likely to be Taves’s call for a processual understanding of religious group formation—that to understand how and why a group developed in the way it did, scholars must examine the process through which the group was formed, using accounts from that time rather than retrospective retellings. In addition, the historical accounts of the three case studies are fascinating and will be of interests to scholars of new religions in general, in addition to those studying these particular cases.