Wild and woolly

by Robert Fuller in the May 24, 2000 issue

Fits, Trances & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James, by Ann Taves

American religion tends toward the wild and woolly. Pentecostals proclaim the wonders of being "fire baptized." Evangelicals testify to their personal experiences of being "born again," experiences that may have prompted them to fall powerless to the floor, cry out for mercy or shout hysterically. And adherents of alternative spiritualities attest to the life-altering wonders of shamanic ritual, Eastern meditation or 12-step recovery programs. "Experiencing religion" seems to come in almost every size and shape, and none of us can quite escape the dilemma of how best to explain the various "fits, trances and visions" that we encounter in the course of our lives.

Ann Taves is acutely aware of the gulf that divides "experiencing religion" from the "explanation of religious experience." Those who have undergone religious experiences make claims that we must either accept or reject, with great existential consequences. Such claims prompt us to wonder, for example, why only a relatively few individuals experience such intense episodes of religious awareness. Alternatively, we might ask why some individuals are visited by fits and visions, while others become channels for messages from the spirit world. And, most urgently, how do we explain which experiences are authentic and which are delusions?

Taves offers a brilliant introduction to the intricate art of explaining religious experience. While her examples are drawn from the pages of religious history, her analysis and commentary highlight contemporary issues. A professor of American religion at the Claremont School of Theology, Taves begins her narrative with an account of the role that "enthusiasm" played in American evangelicalism between 1740 and 1820. The fits, trances and visions that attended revivalistic religion in this era were seen by many as evidence of the workings of the Holy Spirit.

Such religious enthusiasm, however, soon gave rise to a three-way skirmish, as the proselytizing piety of revivalist groups clashed with both the interests of the more established churches and the rationalist perspective of Enlightenment thought. Taves leads us through the arguments that many New England preachers made against fits and visions in their effort to counter the religious challenges that enthusiasm presented. Enthusiasm, they maintained, was actually an aberrant psychological condition caused by the overheating of the imagination, bad temperaments, weak minds or melancholic dispositions.

Defenders of the established churches, then, used psychological arguments to demonstrate the apparent falseness of enthusiastic phenomena. Meanwhile, early adherents of Enlightenment rationality were beginning to explain the whole of religious experience in secular, scientific categories. Thus, even in the colonial era, some Americans viewed religious states as wholly natural experiences.

Taves follows these lines of argumentation over the course of the 19th century, finishing with a lucid analysis of the rise of professional psychology between 1890 and 1910. Intense ideological battles were fought over the various psychological domains associated with fits, trances and visions. Particularly insightful is Taves's discussion of how the growth of psychological science was linked to its ability to wrestle the intellectual interpretation of trances away from its theological rivals. Psychology's new conceptions of the subconscious mind, hypnosis and dissociation enabled it to advance a "modern" understanding of religious experience and to demonstrate the discipline's ostensible superiority to theological modes of explanation.

Taves's narrative of the complex interplay between experiencing religion and explaining experience is only partly historical. Her purpose, however, is to create a dialogue between the three principal American strategies. The first of these sees religious experience as supernatural. That is, most of those who seek to proselytize on the basis of experiential religion believe that their experiences are caused by a supernatural agency and are, therefore, true. Such strategies are "particular, exclusivist and revealed" in that they identify very specific kinds of "trance conditions" that alone can be counted as the work of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, however, even those who use a supernatural explanation to account for their own religious experiences will often employ secularist categories when interpreting the "false" experiences of their theological rivals.

This brings us, of course, to the second major strategy. Throughout history those who seek to debunk religion have used secular categories to demonstrate that alleged religious experiences have natural causes. Early Enlightenment *philosophes* were as eager as the first generation of social scientists to establish the superiority of their own intellectual systems by using them to reclassify religion as either irrational or delusional.

Of particular interest to Taves is a third strategy, one that maintains that religious experiences are simultaneously natural and true. Although some 19th-century mesmerists used the category of "magnetic trance" to reinterpret conversion experiences as purely natural trance phenomena, others argued that the magnetic trance was simultaneously a path to universal mystical awareness. Mesmerists, spiritualists and psychical researchers alike maintained that there is a specific state of mystical trance that initiates persons into the experiential source of all true religious awareness. They used their respective understandings of trance-bound experiences to argue for a universal source of religious truth, while yet conceding that the particular religious doctrines that get attached to these trance-bound experiences are invariably affected by cultural conditioning.

Nowhere can this mediating position be seen more clearly than in the writings of William James and a few other early psychologists of religion. James drew upon the work of the psychical researcher F. W. H. Myers to develop a psychological theory of the subliminal self that could mediate between scientific and religious understandings of the world. James postulated that although all religious experience comes to us through the subconscious, this does not necessarily rule out the possible causal role of supernatural agencies. Though this mediating position was repudiated by most of his fellow psychologists, who insisted upon explaining religious experience in the secular terms of psychopathology, group dynamics or simple delusion, it defined a strategy for defending the viability of religion in a scientific age.