

# The Shouting Ellen White

*Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James.* By Ann Taves. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Reviewed by A. Gregory Schneider

Ann Taves's *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, winner of a 2000 Outstanding Professional and Scholarly Publication award from the Association of American Publishers, tells a story of three ways in which people have made sense of Protestant religious experience in Anglo-American history. There was a naturalistic and secularizing tradition that ran from seventeenth-century theological polemics against "enthusiasm" to twentieth-century academic psychologies that disparaged religion. There was, in opposition, a supernaturalist and religious tradition that ran from John Wesley and the transatlantic revivals of the early eighteenth century to Holiness and Pentecostal churches of the early twentieth century. Taves's distinctive contribution is to argue for the existence and integrity of a third, "mediating" tradition that was naturalistic but not secularizing. Its origins were in German philosophical Romanticism, but it first emerged in American culture with the mid-nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement and flowered with the idea of the subconscious in the early twentieth century. Taves casts William James as its chief exemplar.

The religious experience at issue in Taves's narrative, which covers two centuries, includes a range of involuntary phenomena:

uncontrolled bodily movements (fits, bodily exercises, falling as dead, catalepsy, convulsions); spontaneous vocalizations (crying out, shouting, speaking in tongues); unusual sensory experiences (trances, visions, voices, clairvoyance, out-of-body experiences); and alterations of consciousness and/or memory (dreams, somnium, somnambulism, mesmeric trance, mediumistic trance, hypnotism, possession, alternating personality.)<sup>1</sup>

Taves structures her story in three parts. Part One, 1740-1820, covers the Enlightenment attack on the "enthusiastic" religion that, said critics, had moved some to kill their king (Charles I) in the Puritan Revolution, and had driven others mad. This section also details the construction of a renewed evangelical theology and practice of religious experience led by John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards but completed by their followers,

especially Wesley's Methodist followers in America. Part Two, 1820-1890, traces the rise of popular psychologies like Mesmerism and the complex struggle that ensued as some skeptics used it to explain religious trance states. Some religious figures demonized it, and others appropriated it as a naturalistic means to contact spiritual realities. Part Three, 1886-1910, deals with the rise of the idea of the subconscious as a way both to explain and to respect the religious claims implied in fits, trances, and visions. It also chronicles the fall of the idea, as academic and professional psychology opted for the prestige of scientific materialism and both liberal and many conservative Protestants sought rational self-control and social respectability more than religious experience.

Ellen White becomes a major player in Part Two of Taves's story. Taves makes the Adventist prophet a member of a pair of former Methodists who took directly contrasting attitudes and courses of action regarding their common roots in what Taves calls the "shout tradition." The other member of the pair is La Roy Sunderland, Methodist preacher turned free-lance healer and philosopher/psychologist.

Sunderland claimed that the experiences he had witnessed and induced in his revivalist preaching and had attributed to the Holy Spirit he could readily reproduce through the naturalistic psychology of mesmerism and therapeutic interventions of phrenology. He made good on his claims, furthermore, by inducing feelings of religious joy and visions of heavenly places in several mesmerized subjects. He also healed a case of religious melancholy by a combination of mesmeric trance and the manipulation of phrenological "organs" of the brain.<sup>2</sup>

Demonstrations like his resembled the interactions of James and Ellen White enough to cause James to withhold publication of Ellen's visions, for a time, and to publish instead explicit denials that he knew anything about mesmerism or its practice, all in a bid to reassure the fledgling Seventh-day Adventist community that was forming around his wife's prophetic authority.<sup>3</sup>

The shout tradition that White and Sunderland had in common was overtly Methodist and in self-conscious continuity with the Anglo-American revivals led by John Wesley and his disciples. Taves reveals Baptist and African-American layers in this tradition that made it something different from just an English import. The African strand of the shout tradition included the call-and-response pattern of preaching, testifying, and singing. Most important was the



Ellen G. White's bedroom, 1915.

Africans' expectation that they would come to know and experience God in and through their interpersonal connections in group worship.

Skeptical Enlightenment critics had stigmatized such emotional interaction as a disorderly social contagion of "animal spirits." What were mere animal spirits to elite skeptics, however, was Holy Spirit to the plain folk of the shout tradition. The Baptist layer of the shout tradition added an "iconic" reading of Scripture that inclined believers to create or legitimate their experiences and practices as copies of Biblical images, "antitypes" of Biblical types. All baptisms, for instance, were antitypes of Jesus' baptism, and all bodies of water were antitypes of the river Jordan.

These two elements combined with the distinctively American Methodist practice of the camp meeting to help create the central characteristics of the shout tradition. First, the preaching, praying, and singing together of believers in the camp generated intense collective emotion accompanied by weeping, shouting, falling as if dead, traveling in trance to see heavenly places, and similar bodily exercises. Far from seeing such extraordinary emotions and bodily exertions as signs of disorder, believers in the shout tradition counted them as signs of the presence of God.

Second, both the bodily exercises of the believers and the space of the camp became antitypes of biblical types. The great collective emotion of the camp was an antitype of Pentecost, when the early Christians were together in one place and the Spirit fell upon them as holy fire. Falling as if cut down by the sword of the Lord was an antitype of the prophecy of Ezekiel 21:7 (KJV): "and every heart shall melt, and all

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A. Hilliard house, Otsego, Mich., 1938.  
Location of Ellen White's health reform vision.

hands shall be feeble, and every spirit faint, and all knees shall be weak as water." The shouts of praise and glory to God by the converted were antitypes of the actions of the Jews at the rebuilding of the Temple under Ezra: "And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid" (Ezra 3:11 KJV). These shouts, finally, were understood to be uttered in "the camp of Israel," the wilderness encampment around the ark of the covenant and its tabernacle. The camp ground itself, then, became sacred space for believers of the shout tradition.

By the dawn of the nineteenth century, the shout tradition had become a dominant theme in evangelical Protestantism, especially Methodism, soon to become America's largest denomination. The epithet, "enthusiasm," lost its sting as its political connotations of regicide lost their relevance. A new term, "fanaticism," arose as the term used by respectable and learned authorities to discredit what they regarded as false religion. Whereas the charge of enthusiasm had implied social contagion among weak-minded, ignorant persons using faulty readings of Scripture, the accusation of fanaticism added the understanding that the experiences claimed as supernatural by believers could now be replicated and thus explained away by mesmerism. Ellen White becomes important for Taves's story because White was an exemplar of the shout tradition who was accused of fanaticism and whose trances and visions were challenged by mesmerist explanations.

As informed Seventh-day Adventists have known at least since *Spectrum* published its articles on the trial of Israel Dammon, Ellen White was one among several radical Adventist visionaries who arose in the months after the Great Disappointment.<sup>4</sup> The region around her home in Maine was reputed to be a hotbed of fanaticism, and the Israel Dammon transcript reveals her to be much more intimately involved with fanatical activity than her own later accounts suggest. The mainstream of post-disappointment Adventists explicitly repudiated as fanatical any "new messages, visions, dreams, tongues, miracles, extraordinary revelations, discerning of spirits."<sup>5</sup> One of White's

tasks, says Taves, was to emerge out of fanaticism's ferment as a sober opponent of fanaticism while casting competing visionaries as the fanatics. At the same time, she also had to overcome mesmerism's naturalistic explanations of her visionary experiences.

Ellen White accomplished this task, says Taves, through a strategy of demonization. Early in her visionary career she claimed to have been shown in vision that mesmerism was from the devil and that those who used it were destined for the bottomless pit.<sup>6</sup> About a decade later she elaborated this view in a testimony, "Philosophy and Vain Deceit," that has shaped Seventh-day Adventist attitudes toward psychology ever since. "The sciences of phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism," she said, "are the channel through which he [Satan] comes more directly to this generation and works with that power which is to characterize his efforts near the close of probation."<sup>7</sup> As Taves observes, demonization was "not a particularly sophisticated attack" on White's opposition, but it did serve to neutralize the threat of mesmerism for those who accepted White's prophetic authority.<sup>8</sup> Ellen White also demonized competing visionaries among the radical Advent bands as she toured to give testimony to her own visions, speaking of "fanatical persons . . . who were exalted by the spirit of Satan" and delivering rebuking messages to them as she was shown in vision by God.<sup>9</sup>

Taves observes that the emergence of a single authoritative prophet from among the several competing visionaries was not the only way the early Seventh-day Adventist story might have come out. A set of visions, from several different visionaries, might have become the authoritative canon for the new movement, an outcome rather like that of the early Christian church and the New Testament. Taves explains Ellen White's emergence over her competi-

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tors with two speculations that invite further historical research. First, Taves thinks the timing and content of White’s visions spoke more consistently than those of others to the needs of the movement. Second, and perhaps more important, she credits what Jonathan Butler calls the “symbiotic relationship” between Ellen and James White. No other post-disappointment Adventist visionary had so faithful and forceful a promoter as Ellen had in James.<sup>10</sup>

Taves’s analysis of the shout tradition and Ellen White raises more implications for informed Seventh-day Adventists than can be covered here. The issues that occur to this reviewer include, first, the question of what habits of mind and heart were bequeathed to succeeding generations of Seventh-day Adventists by the Whites’ struggle to define themselves over against fanaticism and mesmerism. Second, we may ask about the validity and use to Seventh-day Adventists of the mediating tradition that Taves delineates and defends.

One of Taves’s more provocative observations is that in constructing a prophet by demonizing mesmerism, Seventh-day Adventists both “neutralized mesmerism and inscribed it at the heart of the Seventh-day Adventist cosmos.”<sup>11</sup> Taves recognizes that spiritualism, because of resemblances between mediumship and Ellen White’s visionary activity, also became part of this cosmic inscription, but she observes that spiritualism was chronologically too late to be a formative influence in White’s religious experience.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the images of mesmerism and spiritualism in the Seventh-day Adventist mind have combined to send a persistent and powerful message: “Don’t lose control! At peril of demonic possession of your soul, DO NOT LOSE CONTROL!”

Demonization, while used by the Whites to fend off mesmerism’s naturalistic explanations of White’s visions, implied and ingrained a fear that one’s mind might be possessed and dominated by another. With such anxiety continually at the back of our minds, we Adventists of subsequent generations could not help but lose touch with ourselves.

We have lost touch, it seems, with what Taves, in her concluding theoretical meditations, calls “the

tendency of the mind to act upon or influence itself or others.” Various called “suggestibility,” “hypnotizability,” or “sympathy,” this tendency is best understood as a set of abilities that can be cultivated or suppressed depending on cultural contexts. In so arguing, Taves contests the Western Enlightenment critics of enthusiastic religion, who built their criticism on a series of dichotomies—strong/weak, self-possessed/possessed by another, rational/emotional, objective/subjective, dispassionate/sympathetic—and favored always the first term in each pair.

Women, slaves, and colonized peoples seemed to practice the involuntary acts of enthusiastic and fanatical religion more frequently than others. Because such categories of people, under Anglo-Saxon law, were legally the possessions of others, Taves finds it unsurprising that leading Enlightenment thinkers associated women, blacks, and the colonized with weakness and impulsiveness.<sup>13</sup> Western thinkers’ contempt for weakness implied also a preoccupation with control, as in the ability of the hypnotist to control a subject or the ability of “group contagion” to infect and undermine an individual’s judgment. When the spirituality of interpersonal influence is viewed with such hostility, people’s sympathetic abilities tend to be discouraged. Taves points to the very different African cultural contexts, however, in which such abilities are cultivated in order bring about the “dynamic rhythmic interconnection of individuals-within-a-group” whereby “the Spirit is known.”<sup>14</sup>

Leaving aside the ways in which North American Adventism may have been shaped by the racism and imperialism of Enlightenment thought, it is ironic that the Adventist penchant for demonization has helped align us with the Enlightenment’s concern for control and its hostility toward the dynamic group spiritualities of Africa and the shout tradition. Surrendering the self in trance or other dissociative states of consciousness came to mean for Adventists not only a violation of rationality, objectivity, and self-control,

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Ellen G. White (center) at Reno, Nevada, camp meeting, circa 1888.

but also, more ominously, an invitation to invasion by an alien evil power.

Thus, Adventists have suspected the twentieth-century heirs of the shout tradition, Pentecostals and charismatics, to be only a step removed, if that, from Satan's ground. Speaking in tongues and other trance-like practices of Pentecostal and charismatic religion represent claims to a redemptive and healing loss of control, a surrender of self to the Holy Spirit. Ellen and James White's foundational battle with fanaticism, however, has ingrained in us a fear that the opposite spirit is in control. It is ironic that Ellen White, whose trances and visions became the basis of Seventh-day Adventist teaching and the central means her husband used to evangelize his audiences, should spawn a movement so hostile to trance.

The point of this editorial excursus is emphatically not to advocate wholesale, uncritical surrender of self-control in any practice, religious or secular. The point rather is that the Whites' unsophisticated strategy of demonization has ingrained in the Adventist subculture a pattern of phobic reactions to life and a preoccupation with control that preclude intellectually careful, ethically sensitive, and spiritually discerning interactions with God's world. A demonizing, controlling state of mind distorts the human spirit, and hence the human capacity to know the Spirit of God.

Today's complex world offers, often demands, many practices with correlated alterations of consciousness that make them spiritually formative. They include things like reading or watching engrossing stories in books or film, the introspections of counseling and psychotherapy, the emotional swings in live music concerts, and the deep quiet or high ecstasy of various religious practices, including those of the contemporary shout tradition. One may "lose oneself" in any or all of these activities and in others.

But will losing oneself result in a self restored, deepened, and refreshed or in a self dissipated, one step further toward destruction? The false absolutes and desperate boundary posturing that result from a demonizing state of mind are of little help in answering this momentous question. Faced with so

many opportunities and dangers, we need instead to build a tradition of careful, compassionate spiritual discernment by which our Adventist priesthood of all believers can mutually aid one another in knowing God and ourselves.

The current tempest in Adventist schools over the Harry Potter children's books brought to my attention recently an example of the failure of intellectual, ethical, and spiritual acumen that is attributable to a demonizing, controlling habit of mind. During a board meeting of the elementary school where he enrolled his children, an African-American acquaintance was speaking against a proposed ban on the Harry Potter books. Book banning in general is a bad idea, he argued, and added that even though there were books on library shelves that contained depictions overly sympathetic to slavery in America, he would still oppose removing them or prohibiting children from reading them.

Of course, slavery was unfortunate, replied a board member, but in the Harry Potter books, with their depictions of wizardry, there is the presence of *real* evil. That a children's fantasy of having magical powers, loyal friends, and an adventure where right triumphs over wrong could seem really evil, whereas the actual historical horrors of slavery could seem merely unfortunate is evidence of a breathtaking distortion of the spirit, it seems to me.

But of what use might Ann Taves's "mediating tradition" be to Seventh-day Adventists today as they seek a right formation of the spirit? We must recognize, of course, that aiding in Adventist spiritual formation is not Taves's purpose. She has written a work with three interlocking agendas: historical narrative of religious experiences and their interpretations; reflection on popular and professional psychologies of religion; and methodological reflection on the study of religion. In concluding her study, however, Taves makes some

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moves that Adventists might well follow if they wish to find a way past the either-or, meat-cleaver mentality of demonization. In particular, Taves may provide some help past the echo of this mentality in our polarization between a doubting dismissal of Ellen White, on one hand, and a demonization of the doubters, on the other.

William James's theory of religion, says Taves, is the best expression of the mediating tradition. He fashioned it in order to mediate between the supernaturalist believers who claimed their experiences to be both supernatural and "true," and the scientific skeptics who debunked them as natural and thus "false." What he gave us is a sophisticated way to see religion and religious experiences as both "natural" and "true," at least potentially true. Religion originated in the subconscious realm, James asserted, but identifying its origin does not imply that religion is nothing but a chemical or physiological or psychological process. Both this scientific reduction and the opposing supernaturalist claim of an experience of the divine were "overbeliefs," metaphysical concepts whose merits must be defended on philosophical grounds, not scientific ones.

James's science of religion, while discussing origins, distinguished them from the functions of religion. The basic religious function was to assuage the sense that there is something wrong with us as we stand by putting us in touch with a higher power that is beyond the everyday self we hold in consciousness. The science of religion describes, compares, and even assesses the various ways in which religions perform this function. It remains resolutely humble and agnostic, however, about the ultimate nature of the "higher power" that wells up into consciousness from the subconscious realm.<sup>15</sup>

Taves points out that when James distinguishes between origin and function, his move allows him fruitfully to investigate some extreme characters and their experiences. Quaker founder George Fox, for instance, was by James's reckoning an unbalanced personality, subject to obsessive impulses and ideas. The pattern of religious experience he originated,

however, proved to have ongoing and profound value for human life. In making this kind of argument, James was extending a Darwinian outlook to consciousness and ideas. As new biological traits spontaneously arise and prove to be adaptive or not for a species, so new ideas or patterns of thought arise in the minds of human geniuses and survive as they demonstrate their ability to serve the needs of human communities in their environments.<sup>16</sup>

An analogous application to Ellen White and her visionary ideas begs to be made. White's innovations in theology and spirituality may have their origins in a personality unbalanced by brain lesions, though I hasten to add that the evidence by no means compels such a conclusion. They may have their origins in a character who was not altogether candid about her affiliations and influences, a conclusion to which I think the evidence does compel us. Nevertheless, her ideas served the needs of the early Advent community and founded what would become a worldwide community. That certain patterns of thought we have inherited from her may now seem less useful, even inimical, to our spiritual common life, as I have argued above, does not diminish her lasting significance to our community.

Now, however, well-informed Seventh-day Adventist must appreciate and assess that significance in the comparative perspective that our religiously and culturally pluralistic world forces upon us. There are other keepers of flames in other lamps. All of us hold our treasures in earthen vessels, and even our lights flicker and smoke in distracting, confusing ways. Concepts like James's subconscious and studies like Taves's *Fits, Trances, and Visions* will help us understand and evaluate the many lights around us. Nevertheless, the Light is our life, not the science of the lights.

"What really *exists*," wrote James, "is not things made but things in the making. Once made, they are dead, and an infinite number of alternative conceptual decompositions can be used in defining them."<sup>17</sup> The study of religion, whether theological, historical, or

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psychological, is a body of concepts, a collection of things made, well preserved, no doubt, but dead. Living religion is a body of things in the making, a truly living being. Adventism is a thing in the making, a living religious community and culture that nevertheless carries and shapes itself by its body of concepts.

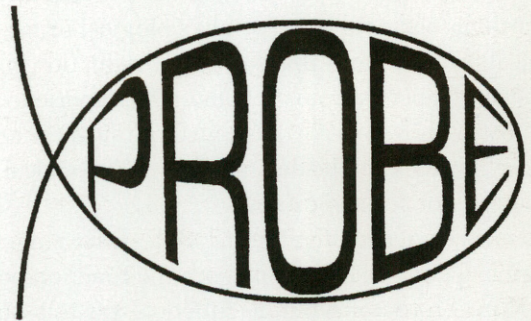
Adventists informed by critical historical study of their community are as much a part of the making of Adventism as those who would demonize such study. They may use their broader, deeper knowledge of the Adventist story to help form a spirit in self and community that is in turn broader, deeper, and, we may hope, less defensive. Less defensive because our critical knowledge, if acquired and used in faith, lets us understand that our Adventist community is but one of those "earthen vessels" into which our Savior is pouring grace and favor for the world's salvation. We may, indeed, profit much from comparative study of those other vessels. Nevertheless, this vessel, our little Seventh-day Adventist jar of clay, is not a club from which we may casually withdraw or a corporation by which we ambitiously promote our spiritual careers. It is the living tabernacle that has given us birth and nurture. For our souls' sake we will remain faithful to it.

## Notes and References

1. Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 3
2. *Ibid.*, 141-48.
3. *Ibid.*, 163-64.
4. "Special Section: Early Adventures in Maine," *Spectrum* 17.5 (Aug. 1987):15-50.
5. Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 157.
6. *Early Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1882), 21.
7. *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:290.
8. Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 164.
9. *Spiritual Gifts* (Battle Creek, Mich.: James White, 1860), 2:39-40, 49-51.
10. Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 163.
11. *Ibid.*, 158.
12. *Ibid.*, 398.
13. *Ibid.*, 356.
14. *Ibid.*, 357.
15. *Ibid.*, 280-86.
16. *Ibid.*, 277-78.
17. *William James, A Pluralistic Universe*, in *ibid.*, 360.

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