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Metakinesis: How God Becomes Intimate in Contemporary U.S. Christianity

ABSTRACT Contemporary U.S. religion is shaped by a new emphasis on bodily and trance experience. This article describes the learning process through which evangelical congregants come to use language and bodily experiences in particular ways, which I call here "metakinesis." Through this process, congregants build remarkably intimate relationships with God. [Keywords: religion, trance, metakinesis]

IN THE LAST 30 OR 40 YEARS, MIDDLE-CLASS U.S. citizens have begun to worship their God(s) in a markedly different manner than before. Mainstream churches have seen their congregations dwindle; evangelical, New Age, and other more demanding faiths have seen their memberships explode. And what U.S. citizens seem to want from these new religiosities—and from evangelical Christianity in particular—is intense spiritual experience. We in the academy have focused on evangelical Christianity's claim that the Bible is literally true. That claim is undeniably important (Crapanzano 2001). But it is at least as important that the new U.S. religious practices put intense spiritual experience—above all, trance—at the heart of the relationship with God. The most interesting anthropological phenomenon in U.S. evangelical Christianity is precisely that it is *not* words *alone* that convert: Instead, congregants—even in ordinary middle-class suburbs—learn to have out-of-the-ordinary experiences and to use them to develop a remarkably intimate, personal God. This God is not without majesty. But He has become a pal.

How does God become real to people? A recent, widely read book—Susan Harding's (2000) *The Book of Jerry Falwell*—argues that in evangelical Christianity, what makes God come alive to people is the mastery of His word. This book is an attempt to understand the compelling power and appeal of Jerry Falwell's brand of evangelical fundamentalism. The book is specifically cast as an account of conversion and from the beginning presumes an identity between the culture and practice of Christianity on the one hand, and its language on the other. Harding describes her book as an attempt "to show how Bible-based language persuades and produces effects" (2000:xii). She dismisses the "considerable literature, both popular and academic, on how various ritual

practices and psychological techniques trigger experiences that result in conversion" (2000:35). Those experiences may "pave the way for radical shifts in belief and commitment" (2000:35) but, she says, they are not necessary. The appropriate question, she says, is this: "How does the supernatural order become real, known, experienced, and absolutely irrefutable?" (2000:36). And her answer is that it can do so through language alone:

Among conservative Protestants, and especially among fundamentalists, it is the Word, the gospel of Jesus Christ, written, spoken, heard, and read, that converts the unbeliever. The stresses, transitions, influences, conditioning, and techniques scrutinized by many social scientists do not in themselves "explain," do not "cause," conversion to Christ. All they do is increase the likelihood that a person might listen to the Gospel; they may open or "prepare a person's heart." [2000:36]

Harding agrees. The first chapter's title and its concluding sentence (2000:60) state the basic argument: "Speaking is believing." "Generative belief, belief that indisputably transfigures you and your reality, belief that becomes you, comes only through speech" (2000:60).

Yet the patterns of new U.S. religious practice suggest that ritual practices and psychological techniques are not ancillary but central to contemporary spirituality. At least, congregants seem to want to experience the Gospel in intensely bodily ways that seem to make the message of the Gospel come alive for them in a way it has not previously. The demographic shift in U.S. religious practice since the late 1960s is remarkable. Two-thirds of the generation referred to as the "baby boomers" who were raised in religious traditions—and nearly all were—dropped out of those traditions as adults; just under half of those now seem to

be returning to religious practice, but not in the style in which they were raised (Ostling 1993; Roof 1993). Across the board they have joined groups that demand more in religious practice and encourage more in religious experience. Evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity has exploded as a cultural phenomenon, as has the New Age movement, in all its many forms (such as modern witchcraft and modern Santería): In 1996, 39 percent of U.S. citizens described themselves as “born again” or “evangelical” (Gallup and Lindsay 1999:68). Even Judaism, whose traditional and reform rabbis look askance at intense spirituality because it distracts the faithful from the obligations of their practice, has seen an enormous increase in the interest in an immediate spiritual experience of divinity, from new centers (such as the Kabbalah Centre in Los Angeles) that teach kabbalah as a practice accessible to all (a heretical idea in the past) to Chabad and Hasidic shuls that teach an experience-centered religiosity to ever-expanding crowds (e.g., Kamenetz 1997). There are many explanations for this shift and many anxieties about its political and social implications (e.g., Fogel 2000; Roof 1993). But its behavioral implications are clear: These religions greatly value intense religious experience. As a group, they encourage participants to experience the divine vividly, immediately, and through unusual moments of altered consciousness (Wuthnow 1988, 1998).

Harding is certainly accurate when she reports that evangelical Christians often say that they are converted by the Word alone. But conversion is a complex process and above all else a learning process. Converts do not make the transition from nonbeliever to believer simply by speaking—by acquiring new concepts and words. They must come to believe emotionally that those new concepts and words are true. And this, as Saba Mahmood points out in an Islamic context, is a matter of “skills and aptitudes acquired through training, practice and apprenticeship” (2001:844). As many anthropologists have pointed out, those skills often involve the body and the training is often emotional (Boddy 1989; Csordas 1994; Desjarlais 1992; Lambek 1981; Mitchell 1997; Whitehead 1987; see also the rich discussion in Rambo 1993). What is striking about U.S. religion since the 1960s is that it not only emphasizes bodily phenomena but also uses those experiences to create remarkably intimate relationships with God.

When we take an ethnographic look at what these converts actually learn in the process of becoming evangelical Christians, we see that their new cognitive/linguistic knowledge is embedded within other kinds of learning that not only make that new knowledge real but also make this God as gritty as earth and as soothing as a summer breeze. New believers do indeed acquire what Harding calls a “shared elementary language” (2000:19) of faith (see also Keane 1997). That linguistic/cognitive knowledge can be described more precisely, perhaps, than Harding has done: There are words or phrases to describe their new life in Christ (their “lexicon”); themes that structure the logic of their new understanding (their “syntax”); and a common plotline that de-

scribes the way they decided to join this way of life (their “conversion narrative”). This new knowledge is important; it is necessary to the convert’s conversion.

But it is not sufficient. For these converts, in these new and intensely experiential U.S. evangelisms, God becomes an intimate relationship—a buddy, a confidante, the ideal boyfriend. It is not mere words that make Him so but learnt techniques of identifying the presence of God through the body’s responses—particularly in the absorbed state we call “trance”—and learned techniques that frame that responsiveness into the experience of close relationship. This is not to say that every convert has these intense experiences of absorption. But the religion models the practices that produce these experiences as central to the experience of God.

We can describe this process as *metakinesis*, a term used in dance criticism to depict the way emotional experience is carried within the body so that the dancer conveys the emotion to the observer and, yet, does it by making the expressive gesture uniquely his or her own (Martin 1983:23–25). New believers learn to identify bodily and emotional states as signs of God’s presence in their life, identifications that imply quite different learning processes than those entailed by linguistic and cognitive knowledge. Then, their new linguistic/cognitive knowledge and bodily experiences are put to use through new relational practices. Through prayer and Bible reading, worshippers report that they learn to experience themselves in an intimate interpersonal relationship with their God; they do so not only by acquiring new knowledge but also by using that knowledge to relate to what might be psychoanalytically termed an inner “object” (cf. Lester in press). These are relational processes that are yet again another kind of learning process.

These three different kinds of learning—cognitive/linguistic, metakinetic, and relational—are psychologically distinct. Linguistic/cognitive knowledge tends to be the domain of cognitive science and linguistics; emotional and altered states tend to be studied by developmentalists and those interested in psychopathology; relationship practices tend to be studied by attachment theorists, often with a psychoanalytic bent. Together, they enable new believers to do something quite remarkable—to construct, out of everyday psychological experience, the profound sense that they have a really real relationship with a being that cannot be seen, heard, or touched. The learning process used by these U.S. evangelical Christians teaches us that new religious practices are giving us a God more private, more personal, and in some fundamental sense more tangibly real than the God of our fathers. We have yet to come to terms with this enormous social fact.

THE ETHNOGRAPHY

Horizon Christian Fellowship in southern California has the no-frills, ordinary-folks approach characteristic of the “new paradigm” Christian churches (Miller 1997). Like other such churches, Horizon has a rock band on Sunday morning, not

a choir; the pastors have an informal, anti-intellectual style; many congregants meet in small-home Bible fellowships during the week; they hold their large worship meetings in a gym; and they call themselves "Bible based," by which they mean that the written Bible is literally true and the only decisive authority. They are also entrepreneurial, well organized, and extremely effective. Horizon is an offshoot of perhaps the prototypical new paradigm church, Calvary Chapel, which began to grow in the mid-1960s by reaching out to the countercultural Jesus movement on southern California beaches, but now has over 25,000 members and nearly a thousand "seeded" churches around the country. These days Horizon serves about 5,000 mostly white congregants at its main church campus. It has seven associated churches in San Diego and claims 80 offshoots around the world. Horizon runs a preschool, an elementary school, a junior high, a high school, a school of evangelism with a master's program in divinity and pastoral studies, outreach evangelism in this country and abroad, youth programs, summer camps, and constant concerts, "getaways," and social events. The specific and much-reiterated goal of this busy institution is to lead each worshipper to have a vividly personal relationship with Jesus (see also Ammerman 1987).

How does God become so real for people? The great majority of U.S. citizens (96 percent) say that they believe in God—or at least, in a power "higher than themselves"—when asked in a Gallup survey. The number has remained more or less constant for 50 years (Gallup and Lindsay 1999:24–25). At the same time, those who have come to Horizon have usually developed a faith quite different from that in which they were raised (Miller 1997). Most congregants say that they believed "intellectually" in Christ in their childhood, or not at all, and that as adults they discovered a "new" life in Christ. How does a new congregant learn to turn an amorphous, often intellectual belief in God into the rich personal experience modeled in these religious sites?

Seen from another angle, this ethnographic puzzle is the central practical issue for a church like Horizon. Congregants at Horizon are acutely aware of their newcomers; after all, the point of an evangelizing institution is to convert them. And, yet, learning to be a true Christian is understood as a lifelong goal. As so many tracts say, faith is a journey in which the believer aims always to grow in the knowledge and love of God. While sermons talk of accepting Jesus as a one-time commitment (come, today, to the altar to be saved), they speak in the same breath of a long-term process of "dying to self" so that gradually and with difficulty you learn to put God's desires above your own. Being "saved" is both a singular event that people celebrate like a birthday and an ongoing process.

As a result, there is no sharp distinction between newcomers and longtimers in actual practice. At Horizon, newcomers learn about the faith in two institutional settings. The first is the service. There are as many as five services throughout the weekend, each often packing the gym. They are usually led by different pastors and are sometimes struc-

tured differently, but they all focus on an hour-long sermon structured around a particular Biblical text. The services have the anonymity of all large groups. During the week, however, congregants often attend a more intimate fellowship, gathering in someone's home where they participate in the small group worship Robert Wuthnow (1994) finds to be so characteristic of contemporary U.S. religion. Despite variation, each home fellowship meeting will involve personal testimony about Jesus and biblical teaching.

Books are also an important vehicle for learning about the faith. The well-appointed church bookstore sells an impressive array of Christian goods. Many of their items are obviously intended as learning tools: There are perhaps a hundred guides to prayer and Bible Study, with prominent displays for what are seen as basic manuals. Each sermon, or message, is taped and sold for a nominal fee so that congregants can listen to them again in their cars. There is a wide selection of Christian novels, videos, and music. The music section has a chart that helps you to identify what mainstream music you already like and, thus, what Christian music you will like. The music ranges from folk to disco, its difference from the mainstream only in its lyrics. The wider commercial success of these products is stunning.

For three years, from 1997–2000, I carried out fieldwork with a colleague, Richard Madsen, to try to understand how adults create a personal relationship that feels to them authentic, intimate, and mutually reciprocal with an intentional being who does not exhibit any of the normal signs of existence. We studied four of the growth points of U.S. religion: (1) Horizon as an example of evangelical Christianity; (2) a charismatic Catholic church; (3) a New Age Santeria house; and (4) a *baal tshuva* (newly orthodox) shul. In each group, we attended services for months, in most cases nearly a year, bought the books and tools described as helpful to new converts, and, to the extent that was feasible, tried to understand and to do what new converts did when they entered these groups. For each group, we formally interviewed the leader of the group and ten of its congregants. Using the formal interviews and casual conversations as my guide and drawing only from fieldwork at Horizon, I now describe (in brief) at least three kinds of learning that took place: (1) cognitive/linguistic, (2) metakinetic, and (3) relational. The cognitive/linguistic learning actually contains its own analytic triad—the lexical, the syntactic, and the specific conversion narrative—which reflects the more clearly differentiated kinds of learning that take place under the rubric of the cognitive and linguistic.

COGNITIVE/LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE: THE LEXICON

At Horizon, not all of the knowledge presented in the written material is taken equally seriously by congregants, at least to judge by the content of their conversation. Few congregants spoke in their interviews about "the Rapture" and "the end of time," concepts that are central to an enormously best-selling fantasy series called *Left Behind* (e.g., LeHaye and Jenkins 1995), which was planted front

and center in the bookstore and which many congregants seemed to have read. But certain phrases did reverberate through the manuals, the church services, other books, and the transcripts of our interviews. As newcomers became members of the community, these phrases became part of their speech patterns.

The most important phrase was “to walk with God.” Sometimes a noun—“my walk”—and sometimes a verb—“learning to walk”—this phrase describes the daily experience of living your life as this kind of Christian. As the manuals use the term, “to walk with God” refers both to learning to develop a relationship with God and to managing the everyday challenges to your faith: temptation, frustration, and disappointment. This, for example, is the way one congregant uses the term when she describes her goal for a women’s Bible Study group she started with students in Horizon’s School of Evangelism, where she works. “It’s really just interacting with them so that they can get to a different level of their walk with God.”¹ To “walk with God” describes the way you incorporate God into your life, and people accept that there are different degrees of that incorporation, more being better. To “walk with God” also captures something about the sense of the intimacy of God’s presence in your daily life. As another congregant said, “To me, well, now that I am walking with the Lord I know that, like, I feel that God talks to me all day long. . . . I just think God’s with me all the time.”

Another common phrase in the lexicon—but there were many others—is the “Word of God.” The phrase refers overtly to the written Bible, but it connotes the loving, personal, and unique relationship congregants believe God has with each individual Christian. One man said, “I went [to church] for several weeks in a row and I heard the Bible and it was addressing me and speaking to me personally. . . . I was realizing that it is a love story, and it’s written to me.” This is a remarkable claim, the more remarkable in that it was made by a sober man in his forties: that the written Bible, a text which is the same for all who read it (issues of translation aside), was at the same time written uniquely and with love for each of us individually. “The Bible says,” he continued, “that the Word of God is actually written on the tablets of your heart.”

COGNITIVE/LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE: SYNTAX

By *syntax*, I mean an underlying logic that knits together different phrases; syntax organizes the narratives around meaningful phrases like “my walk with God.” While by *lexicon*, I mean to denote the new words and phrases that participants begin to use, by *syntax*, I mean to denote the themes of this kind of religious commitment, what one could metaphorically describe as “the grammar” of this religious life. The sermons at Horizon, along with the books and videos sold by the church, model the kind of people Christians are, what they struggle with, and to what end. New congregants are not so much learning a specific, concrete story as they are learning ways to tell a range of stories.

Albert Lord (1960) famously distinguished “formula” and “theme” as building blocks for the great stories told by singers of tales, the Homeric bards among them. Such singers, he argued (with Milman Parry), did not memorize and precisely reproduce the thousands of lines of text found in the great epics. Instead, they composed anew each time in what Parry and Lord called the “oral-formulaic” tradition. They became familiar with large and small plots that could be elided or elaborated as the occasion demanded, and they learned to use common phrases associated with the tale. “Rosy-fingered dawn” is a formula, a phrase often evoked to describe the Iliadic morning; the tragedy of Achilles and the deception of the Trojan horse are themes. The new congregant to Horizon becomes familiar with formulaic phrases like “walking with God” and part of what it means to be a Christian is to use those phrases in describing your daily life. Another part of being a good Christian is to become familiar with the themes—the syntactic knowledge—that organize the way that life is understood and experienced.

Horizon’s syntactic themes are well represented in its sermons, or “messages.” Here is one such sermon, not recorded and transcribed but captured in my notes from the service one morning in May.

Someone, somewhere, has to start a revolution, the pastor said. The people of this government, they’ve been to Harvard and Yale, they just passed a law saying that pornography can be shown on television at any time, because it’s protected by the freedom of speech. But that’s not what free speech is about, he said; we all know that free speech is about having the freedom to criticize the government, not to allow rubbish on television. . . .

Remember, he said, that we are the children of God. You ladies [and here the room got very silent], you are the daughters of God. . . . Lift your head out of the gutter. You are noble. . . . [When] you realize this, and you say to God, I’m here in a place full of body odor and bodies, a fleshly material place, and can You please help me, He will help you. Even when you want to pray so badly and you can’t really get it out, it’s okay because there’s a spirit inside of you helping it to come out. And if you are praying and being with Jesus, the devil won’t distract you. He’ll say, she’s got the helmet of righteousness on. She can’t be reached. And he’ll move on. Because his time is short. Short. And your time is infinite. So don’t numb your feeling, don’t dull yourself with alcohol and drugs. Feel good. Reach out. Start living. Smell every flower. Live like that, live with God. Be alive. He loves you. [field notes, May 28, 2000]

In a sermon like this, the pastor is teaching a way of thinking about how to live in the world as a Christian: what it is to be a person (you need to be responsible; you are noble, a child of a mighty Lord); what the world is like (full of rubbish, full of people who have been to Harvard and Yale but can’t see what’s morally obvious, a place of bodies and odors); who God is (He’s responsible, He’s pure, He loves you); and why a Christian person needs God (to keep you pure, to give you armor for protection from the devil, to help you be fully alive). Interwoven with these more general spiritual themes are some remarkably concrete politics. It is

also worth noting that a good Christian might “want to pray so badly and you can’t really get it out.” These Christians expect that prayer does not come easily and naturally. It is a skill that must be learned, as a relationship to God must also be learned. That is part of the logic of the faith.

COGNITIVE/LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE: CONVERSION NARRATIVE

While congregants learn specific phrases to depict their new religiosity and thematic plots to describe God’s human world, they also learn a specific personal narrative to depict their own entry into committed evangelical Christianity. This narrative form stands out from these other kinds of narratives, like the sermon above. It is both more personal and more stereotyped. This combination of the very personal and the stereotyped is hardly unique to evangelical Christians. The anthropologist Christopher Crocker (1985) describes the recruitment of Bororo shamans as exhibiting a similar combination of cultural expectations (everyone knows that the shaman-to-be must see a stump or anthill or stone move suddenly in the forest; catch a small wild game animal like a wild turkey; dream of attempted seduction; and so forth) and intensely personal experience. “Their details and sequences are standardized almost to the point of collective representations, known by most adult nonshamans. Yet the shamans I knew best spoke of them with vivid sincerity, adding variations and personal reactions at once idiosyncratic and consistent with the general pattern” (1985:206; see also Crapanzano 2000:102ff.).

In these accounts, congregants said that they knew God, or knew about God, in an abstract way or as children growing up in religious households; then they had a wild ride through drugs, sex, alcohol, and depravity; they hit bottom; they realized that their life was empty, unsatisfying, and unfulfilled. They accepted Christ (often as a result of coming to a Bible-believing church on a whim) and were filled with love, acceptance, and forgiveness. A male congregant, who worked in construction for Horizon, told us that he grew up in a house without religion, although he knew the commandments and that “there was someone I was accountable to, and that was God.” By the time he was 13, he had already experimented around and realized that “it all amounted to emptiness.” He continued to lark around. The sense of emptiness, he said, “really hit when I was 38.” He tried drugs, what he called “Buddhism,” existentialism, and one romance after another, but, apparently, he had never tried a Christian church. “I had tried everything and, because of drugs, lost everything. I lost my business, lost my place, lost my hope. Absolutely rock bottom.” Homeless, he moved in with friends, and someone invited him to Horizon. When he went, he said, “I just knew it. Without a doubt.” Eight of the ten people we interviewed formally gave us some version of this story of self-destruction, despair, and redemption.

Should we trust these stories? If accurate, they are an alarming glimpse into the U.S. (or at least, Californian)

experience. It is possible that some congregants at Horizon learn, like Augustine, to stretch their little sins until they become an abyss of wickedness. It is also possible that a church like Horizon offers the structure to enable an addict to abandon his addiction, just as the fast-growing Pentecostal church offers women a tool with which to detach their men from drink (e.g., Brusco 1995). In any event, the message of the narrative is clear: I was lost, so deeply lost, so lost that no one could love me—and then God did, and I was found.

METAKINESIS

I use the term *metakinesis* to refer to mind–body states that are both identified within the group as the way of recognizing God’s personal presence in your life and are subjectively and idiosyncratically experienced. These states, or phenomena, are lexically identified and indeed the process of learning to have these experiences cannot be neatly disentangled from the process of learning the words to describe them. A congregant must use language to describe and, thus, to recognize, the moment of experiencing the state. Yet congregants do not use the phrases the way they use phrases like “my walk with God,” which is used to denote a general orientation toward life. In identifying metakinetic states, congregants identify—and, thus, psychologically organize—bodily phenomena that seem new and distinctive to them, which they come to interpret in ways that are congruent with the group’s understanding of evidence of God’s real reality in their lives. They seem to be engaging a variety of bodily processes that are integrated in new ways and synthesized into a new understanding of their bodies and the world. Some of these processes could be called “dissociative,” in which attentional focus is narrowed and manipulated to produce noticeable shifts in conscious awareness, so that individuals feel that they are floating or not in control of their bodies. Others involve sensory hallucinations, in which people see or hear things that observers do not. There are specific and dramatic mood elevations, in which individuals are self-consciously and noticeably happier for extended periods of time. As a result of these phenomena, congregants literally perceive the world differently and they attribute that difference to the presence of God.

Horizon and the Calvary Chapel movement more generally do not place doctrinal nor ritual emphasis on what Christians often call the “gifts of the Holy Spirit” (see Robbins 2004). No one speaks in tongues in public ritual and spiritual authority is understood to rest in the Bible, not in private experience. Yet the singular point of the services, sermons, Bible Study groups, and prayer manuals, repeated with such maddening insistence that it becomes the texture of the religious life, is that one should build a personal relationship to God through prayer. *Prayer* is a commonplace word, tinged with the mystery of the sacred but ordinary in a way that words like *meditation*, *visualization*, and *trance* are not. And still the act of prayer demands that we focus our attention inward and resist distractions. Most of us remember

the prayer of childhood service. I would bow my head and my mind would wander to my dress's scratchy collar and what I would do that afternoon. In mainstream Christian and Jewish services, that is what prayer often is: a dutiful, closed-eyed silence while the leader intones, followed by a period of quiet in which it is all too easy to remember items you need to add to the shopping list. Horizon sets out to change those habits by modeling a relationship to God as the point of life—and, incidentally, of going to church—and modeling prayer as the practice on which that relationship is built. And with this emphasis, prayer becomes the conduit of anomalous psychological experience it was for the 19th century reformers, the medieval ecstasies, and the early pastoralists who sought to be still and hear the voice of God.

The taught structure of this prayer is deceptively dull: Prayer is about talking with God. But the taught practice asks the congregant to turn inwardly with great emotional attention. In the service, in the early period of worship before the pastor speaks, people start singing songs to God—songs to God, not about God. People shut their eyes, hold out their hands, and sway back and forth, singing of how much they love Him and yearn for Him. Some will have tears on their cheeks. Then the music will fade, and congregants will remain standing, eyes shut, deeply absorbed in their thoughts. Sometimes the bandleader will pray out loud here, softly describing “how much we seek to glorify You in our hearts.” Prayer, says a popular manual, is a yearning for God (Burnham 2002). That private, absorbed yearning is visible on the faces of those who pray here.

There are perhaps a hundred prayer manuals and books about prayer at the Horizon bookstore. These books, the sermons, and home fellowships insistently and repeatedly assert that none of us pray as seriously as we can or should; all urge you to pray more intensely. And despite Horizon's literal interpretation of the Bible and its overt hostility to charismatic phenomena, in fact the practical theology invites the congregant to assume that truth is found inwardly and not from external experts. God is to be found in personal experience, as He speaks to you directly in your prayers and through His text. Pastors hasten to say that anything He says to you in private must be confirmed through His Word, but in fact the Bible is learned not as a text to be memorized but as a personal document, written uniquely for each.

This emphasis on prayer has, I believe, two effects. First, it encourages people to attend to the stream of their own consciousness like eager fishermen, scanning for the bubbles and whorls that suggest a lurking catch. And, perhaps, because memory is adaptive and perception obliging, they begin to note the discontinuities that are natural to our state and actually to interpret them as discontinuous, rather than smoothing them over with the presumption of a simple integrated self. Second, it demands that people engage in practices that help them to go into trance. *Trance* is an ominous-sounding word, but I mean something relatively straightforward by it: that one can become intensely absorbed in inner sensory stimuli and lose some peripheral awareness (Spiegel

and Spiegel 1978). Trance is the consequence of shifting the streetlamp of our focal awareness from the external to the inward. We do this naturally when we daydream, play, or read, and we seem to vary somewhat in our spontaneous ability to ignore the distracting world. But for many, probably most of us, that ability is also a learnable skill. Prayer, as it is taught at Horizon, encourages trance because it focuses the worshipper's attention inward, away from external stimuli, and it can be learned because mental concentration responds to practice (Luhmann 1989). There are no known bodily markers of a trance state, but as the absorption grows deeper, people become more difficult to distract, and their sense of time and agency begin to shift. They live within their imagination more, whether that be simple mindfulness or elaborate fantasy, and they feel that the experience happens to them, that they are bystanders to their own awareness, more themselves than ever before, or, perhaps, absent—but invariably different. In addition, trance practice appears to encourage the wide variety of anomalous phenomena (hallucinations, altered states, mystical awareness, and so forth) often called “spiritual” (Luhmann 1989; Roche and McConkey 1990; Tellegen 1981; Tellegen and Atkinson 1974).

Whether because they pay new attention to their awareness, or whether because these new practices alter their conscious experience, all congregants spontaneously associated the process of “getting to know Jesus”—which one does through prayer and reading the Bible—with occasional experiences that involved heightened emotions and unusual sensory and perceptual experiences and that they identified, labeled, and discussed.

One of the less dramatic of these metakinetic states was “falling in love with Jesus.” People said that you could tell when someone was a newly committed Christian because they got “this goopy look” on their face when you asked them if they loved Jesus. They repeatedly spoke of Christ as their lover or their greatest love and described this love in physical terms. Even the men did so, although for them He was more buddy than boyfriend. When I asked John (the construction worker) whether the phrase “falling in love with Jesus” made sense to him, he said, “Absolutely . . . the closer you get the more of his love you feel and it is undeniable. You become flooded. You become absolutely radiant.” When asked whether that was different from falling in love with a woman, John said, “He will never disappoint me. He will never let me down. He'll tell me the absolute truth and He will never push me. He will never force me to do anything. He will always encourage. Granted, He's perfect.”

“Falling in love with Jesus” is an emotional state, not a general way of being in the world, as “walking with the Lord” denotes. People spoke about this experience as if it were indeed the intense love of early adolescence, with the confidence that the beloved truly is perfect and that His perfection is a kind of miraculous confirmation of one's self. You were not necessarily in prayer when you felt it, but it emerged through the process of establishing a relationship

through prayer. One woman compared her relationship with God "to a relationship with the man of my dreams." Another spoke for an hour about her love of God and ended our interview by talking about people who might tell her that God was selfish to want her exclusive love: "And you know what? They're right. They are right. He wants to be loved." Falling in love with the Lord was a giggly, euphoric experience—a breathless, wonderful high. Because of this, it could also be seen as merely the first step on the road to true Christianity. A pastor spoke scoffingly to us about people who had fallen in love with Christ but did not realize that there were rules and responsibilities to being Christian. He went on to compare the experience of being a true Christian to being married: Sure, you fell giddy in love and there was all the romance but you had to get past that and do the dishes and pay for the car.

Then there was "peace"—the "peace of God that passeth understanding." Like "falling in love with Jesus," *peace* had a bodily quality and was treated as an emotional state or a mood. People often spoke of this peace as something God gave to them. They felt sad for those who did not feel it, and often used the word in the context of turning responsibility for some decision they needed to make over to God, with a kind of relief that He would make the decision. These emotional states were clearly understood as the result of creating a relationship with God through prayer. "Falling in love" was the first phase of that relationship; what one evangelical writer describes as the "first love" years (Curtis and Eldredge 1997:30). A person "new in Christ" may experience "peace" immediately but it is also associated with mature Christian faith. Peace is the result of the engagement of the yearning, sometimes anguished spirit; the true prayer may begin in pain but it ends in peace. Peace is the sense of being spiritually heard and emotionally met, of being calmed through the act of relating to God. While the concept and its evocation are shared by all Christian traditions, at Horizon the word was likely to be used to evoke the shape of a feeling, rather than a political goal. One man said, "I almost stopped [on his way down to the altar during an altar call] but I felt peace, so I went forward."

In addition to these emotional phenomena, nearly half of the congregants reported a variety of what a psychologist would call sensory hallucinations—phenomena of thought, not mood. These are not everyday events for these Christians. They are not, however, as rare as one might think even in the wider population. Many people (in the United States, perhaps one in ten; see Bentall 2000) literally hear an apparently hallucinated external voice at least once and, for most of them, this is not a symptom of illness. The congregants do seem to experience hallucinations: Individuals were very clear about the difference between hearing God's voice "inside" and "outside" their heads. One congregant, making that distinction, remarked, "There are rare times when I hear a definite voice, but . . . it's hard to explain. Like just a small tiny push or something, like a thought in your mind." It is possible that the trancelike practice of prayer may evoke such hallucinations: that would be in accord with what

we know scientifically about the relationship of concentration practices and anomalous experience (e.g., Cardena et al. 2000; Luhrmann 1989). Whether their prayer induces such phenomena or not, individuals do seem to learn to pay attention to the fragmentary chaos of conscious awareness in a new way. To some extent, we impose coherence on our conscious experience retrospectively (Gergen 1991; Kunzendorf and Wallace 2000). These congregants learn to identify and highlight these moments of discontinuity and they come to understand those moments as signs of God's presence in their lives.

Sometimes the term *Holy Spirit* is used to indicate such moments, although that term is also used more broadly than to describe hallucinations. But even moments too trivial to be glorified as the Holy Spirit are reported and associated with God nonetheless. A man who served as one of the many associate pastors called them "these quirky things that happen that there is no scriptural support for. Every person I talk to," he continued, "has some oddball supernatural experience that sounds crazy, unless you're a Christian." The story that prompted his comment was this:

I'm pretty much a new believer at this point and I'm driving and I hear the evangelist say on the tape, "Dennis, slow down. You are going too fast." It certainly wasn't something on the tape; it was something I heard. So, I slowed down and immediately a cop passed me and pulled over another guy who was also speeding, in front of me. I thought, God is really doing something here.

Congregants also reported tactile sensations, as this woman did when I asked her how she sensed God:

One time I was praying for this woman who had dated this guy who was into this Satan worship and she felt like there were demons in her. We were praying for her and stuff and I felt like there was a hand on my head. . . . And sometimes I just feel when I'm driving along, sometimes I can feel it on my body and sometimes it's just more inside. He is just such a comfort to me, and it's just so great.

Again, what a psychologist would call "sensory hallucinations" are not everyday events for these Christians, but they are clearly significant, meaningful enough for nearly half of our interviewees to bring up in a comparatively short formal interview and common in many evangelical accounts of prayer and divine relationship (e.g., Burnham 2002; Curtis and Eldredge 1997).

Other moments are more complexly constructed. Answering the altar call is described by many congregants as an emotionally overpowering experience accompanied by a conscious loss of bodily control. Congregants remember that God took over their body (this can be described as submission to God's will) and carried or pushed them up to the altar. One congregant said, "It was like someone had lifted me up out of my seat and I pretty much ran down there. I was walking real fast down there. It was like it wasn't me; it was kind of like He was pushing me up there. It was kind of cool. And I was just crying . . . I was weeping. I was crying so much. I was so happy." These memories recall moments

that are profoundly emotional, that stand out sharply from everyday experience, that are identifiable by bodily sensations, and that for those who experience them mark God's spiritual reality in their lives.

RELATIONAL PRACTICE

At Horizon, the goal of worship is to develop a relationship with God. Developing that relationship is explicitly presented as the process of getting to know a person who is distinct, external, and opaque, and whom you need to get to know in the ordinary way. "Acquaint thyself with God," says a classic evangelical guide; "God is a Person and He can be known in increasing degrees of intimate acquaintance" (Tozzer 1961:116). This is a remarkable characterization, the more so at Horizon because the intimacy is modeled so concretely. God is not only first principle, an awesome, distant judge, a mighty force, although congregants quickly say God is these as well. Nor is He only *spouse*, a formal term. He is *boyfriend* (for women), *buddy* (for men), *close friend* and *pal* (for both). Several congregants explained the process of developing a relationship with God by asking me whether I had a boyfriend. Congregants describe God and Jesus as people you need to meet personally, as if you were out for coffee and had to figure out what the person across the table from you really meant. As one congregant said, "It's just like any relationship. If I had a best friend and we never hung out, where would our friendship be?" Another remarked: "The closer you get to a human being, the better you can get to know them. It's the same with Jesus, the more time I spend reading the Bible, the more time I spend praying, the closer I get to Him and the better I get to know Him."

As that congregant suggests, the two practices thought to create that relationship are Bible reading and prayer. They are taught as two sides of a personal conversation: The worshipper speaks to God through prayer and receives His answer through His Word. But the printed text of the Bible is the same for all, of course. A congregant's relationship with God is supposed to be unique, private, and personal; he or she is meant to understand that this common text is a "love story . . . written to me," as the congregant put it. What seems to enable congregants to experience this personalization of a common text is their ability to identify their own bodily reactions as indicating God's responsiveness as they read the Bible, and as they pray.

At Horizon reading the Bible is modeled as an interactive process, a way to know God better and to learn what he has to say specifically to you in this love letter that he has written. God is understood to be communicating when, as one congregant put it, "a verse just jumps out at me" or when you have a powerful bodily feeling—perhaps you feel peace, or intense joy, or suddenly you feel very tired as if a burden has been lifted and now you can sleep. Another congregant told this story:

All of a sudden I was in the Book of Isaiah. . . . I felt that the Spirit was leading me. . . . I started reading about what the chosen fast was, which was to break the bonds

of wickedness. And something about it made me think about my family members and how I wanted to pray for my family members. Like that was the answer for me. I really felt that God brought me to that Scripture and that this is where I need to be. . . . It was just such an amazing thing. It was like 2 o'clock in the morning, and I remember reading it wide awake, and as soon as I read that it was a relief, and then I felt really sleepy. It was comforting. And so that's an example of how I think God speaks to me through the Word.

She knows that God "speaks" to her because she feels different when she reads a particular scripture: that scripture then becomes what He "says" specifically to her.

Metakinetic states—when God gives you peace, speaks to you outside your head, when you feel that He carries you down to the altar—give a kind of real reality to God because they create the experience of social exchange between opaque individuals, between individuals who cannot read each other's minds and must exchange goods or words in order to become real to each other, in order to know each other's intentions. Adam, then a college undergraduate, told a story about how he didn't understand what a pastor was talking about when he spoke of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Then went on a trip to Acapulco with his friends and got high (as was his wont):

And this night I was laying on the bed over to the side and all these guys were talking and stuff and I was quiet. I hadn't said a word in like over an hour because I was communing with Him again, and He was telling me all these things. . . . Usually when I'm high I'm kind of tingling and stuff, but this time I felt a wave going through me, though all my body. . . . I felt like I was floating. I was like, *dude*. . . . Overwhelmingly I knew that it was Him and He said, this is Me, filling you up. For the first time it was like I was being filled with the Holy Spirit and I knew what that meant because I was filled with it and I was floating.

He was, of course, high. But at that time, he was often high. He experienced this high as different, as identifiable through bodily sensations, and as proof of God's spiritual presence in his life.

Congregants seem to use more dramatic experiences as a model for their experience of everyday interaction. Later in the conversation, Adam went on to describe the way he experienced prayer on a daily basis: "When we worship we sing songs and I just close my eyes and it's like I'm talking to Him again and communing with Him. *It's the same experience I had in . . . Acapulco*. It's like me and Him talking. He knows me, He knows my name, and we just talk back and forth. . . . It's so cool" (emphasis added). It was not, of course, the same experience: Adam only felt the body wave once. But he uses that dramatic initial experience as his mnemonic marker for his ongoing experience of his relationship with God.

Dramatic experiences like hallucinations do not, in fact, seem to be nearly as central to the process of building that ongoing relationship as metakinetic states like "peace" and emotional responses that congregants come to interpret

as God's participation in a daily personal dialogue with them. People say that you learn to know God by having a relationship with Him through His text, and part of that involves just getting to know the kind of "person" He is. Texts and sermons constantly discuss some Biblical passage and ask how God is reacting and why. "How is God feeling at this point?" a book asks when describing the Eden story (Curtis and Eldredge 1997:79). People read Biblical passages over and over, noting their thoughts about particular verses, or what others have said about them. Bibles are accreted with the personal history of reading; the typical congregant's Bible is stuffed with notes and sticky notes, its pages marked up in different colors and papers from past meetings stick out from the unbound sides. But a significant part of developing that relationship with God is learning to *feel* God actually interacting, and that demands that worshippers pay attention to their own bodily states as they read, as memories of previous readings wash over them, as they think about the associations of particular verses for their lives, and as they use those experiences to build a model of who God is for them in their relationship with Him. A guide for Bible Study begins with this how-to advice: "This Bible Study has been created to help you search the Scriptures and draw closer to God as you seek to understand, experience and reflect his grace. . . . Before you begin each chapter, pray for attentiveness to how God is speaking to you through His Word and for sensitivity to His prompting" (Heald 1998:v).

Adam describes his ongoing relationship with God here:

I wake up in the morning and I thank Him for nothing bad happening throughout the night because you never know what can happen. I thank Him for letting me sleep well and I ask that He blesses my day, that it will go okay, and I'm not hurt, and whatever He wants me to learn that day I'll learn. When I talk to Him, He's always listening. He doesn't talk to me verbally like, "Adam, this is God." It's more like a feeling I get inside of me that I know He is listening. Or when I go to bed at night, . . . I'll read some scripture. Like now I'm studying Acts. . . . I'll pray that He opens my heart so that I can kind of be transported back into that time so it makes sense to me. . . . By reading the Bible, that's His Word. That's where He talks to you.

Adam knows from "more of a feeling I get" that God is listening. He is used to that feeling. From his personal history, he has many memories of prayers where he spoke to God and felt familiar emotions that made him confident that God was listening and answering. Adam develops through this a comforting familiarity with who God is in the relationship and who he, Adam, is in that relationship. And Adam experiences that relationship as intimate and good.

This is a viscerally intimate God, a God who cares about your haircut, counsels you on dates, and sits at your side in church. One congregant talked about the fact that God speaks to her through His word on the page, but He also interacts in a more personal manner when He "puts a thought" into her mind. Then she talks to Him the way she talks to anyone—just more intimately. "Sometimes I

feel a real closeness to Jesus. . . . I just talk to Jesus through the day." As another congregant said, "You start to know the fulfillment and comforting feeling that God gives you. Sometimes, sitting in church, I have this overwhelming feeling that God is speaking to me and sitting right there with me. . . . It's just so much peace." A congregant I call "Alexis" said that at first it was a great struggle for her to pray. She couldn't bring herself to kneel. She still can't. But now, prayer is easy for her. I can see from the way she prays that she has learned to interpret God's presence through her own bodily experience and she has, I think, learned to integrate that awareness of an external being with her ideas about who she is and who God is within the relationship. And, for her, that the relationship is real. She did not, she said, ask the Lord whether she should paint her toenails. Then she seemed to hesitate, as if she wondered whether she wouldn't. She experienced Him as a person deeply involved in her everyday life, like a husband. And that, she knew, was amazing. "It's a very humbling experience, because you're talking to the Creator, and you're an ant. . . . You know, He created the human race so that He could have fellowship and He could have a relationship with us. It's almost like—I wonder whether He's lonely, or was lonely. . . . It just kind of blows my mind."

DISCUSSION

Why now? What is it about late-20th-century U.S. life that has lead people to search out psychologically anomalous experiences and to use them metakinetically to build a relationship with God? Two tentative explanations present themselves.

The first is the rise of television and modern media. The literary scholar Mark Hansen (2000) points out that the radical technological innovations of our time have fundamentally altered the conditions of our perception. Technology, he argues, changes the very way we experience with our bodies. Television, the virtual reality of the Internet, and the all-encompassing world of music we can create around us seem clearly to be techniques that enhance the experience of absorption, the experience of being caught up in fantasy and distracted from an outer world. We play music to create the shell in which we work or to soothe ourselves from a daily grind. We wear headphones on buses and subways specifically to create a different subjective reality from the frazzled one that sways around us. We park our children in front of videos so that they will be absorbed into their own little universes, and we can cook or clean around them undisturbed. A classic book on trance says that "The trance experience is often best explained . . . as being very much like being absorbed in a good novel: one loses awareness of noises and distractions in the immediate environment and, when the novel is finished, requires a moment of reorientation to the surrounding world" (Spiegel and Spiegel 1978:23). Not all people have that experience of absorption in a good book, and even for those that do, it may not be that often. Television, with its gripping images

and mood-setting music now provides that experience throughout the day.

The second is what one might call the attenuation of the U.S. relationship. This is a controversial issue, but a great deal of sociological data suggests that the U.S. experience of relationship is thinner and weaker than in the middle of our last century. Robert Putnam's (2000) massive analysis of the decline of civic engagement in the United States argues powerfully that U.S. citizens have become increasingly disconnected from friends, family, and neighbors through both formal and informal structures. Union membership has declined since the 1950s. PTA membership has plummeted. Fewer people vote in presidential elections (except in the South). And with data collected since 1975, one can see that people have friends to dinner less often (and go out with them no more often): "The practice of entertaining friends has not simply moved outside the house, but seems to be vanishing entirely" (Putnam 2000:100). Time diary studies suggest that informal socializing has declined markedly. Between 1976 and 1997, family vacations (with children between 8 and 17) nose-dived as a family practice, as did "just sitting and talking" together as a family (Putnam 2000:101). Even the "family dinner" is noticeably in decline.

Putnam uses this data to argue that social capital is on the wane in the late-20th- and early-21st-century United States. It also suggests, however, that U.S. citizens might feel lonelier. They are certainly more isolated. More U.S. citizens live alone now than ever before: 25 percent of them compared to eight percent in 1940 and none in our so-called ancestral environment (Wright 1995). It is possible that this increased isolation contributes to a putative increase in mood disorders (Wright 1995), as isolation is a leading risk factor for depression: Isolation certainly increases morbidity and mortality (Cacioppo and Hawley 2003).

What may be happening is that these congregants and others like them are using an ease with trancelike phenomena supported by our strange new absorbing media and using it to build an intensely intimate relationship with God to protect them against the isolation of modern social life. After all, the most striking consequence of these new religious practices is the closely held sense of a personal relationship with God, and this God is always there, always listening, always responsive, and always with you. In this evangelical setting, congregants learn to use their own bodies to create a sense of the reality of someone external to them. That learning process is complex and subtle: It involves developing a cognitive model of who the person is in the relationship; a metakinetic responsiveness that can be interpreted as the presence of another being; and many repetitions of apparent dialogue through which a person develops an imagined sense of participation and exchange. And the experience of faith for these Christians is a process through which the loneliest of conscious creatures comes to experience themselves as in a world awash with love. It is a remarkable achievement. In the end, Harding's (2000) question—"How does the supernatural become real,

known, experienced, and absolutely irrefutable?"—is the deepest question we ask of faith.

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NOTES

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1. All quotations are taken from a series of taped interviews conducted in May 2000; fieldwork spanned a considerably longer period of time.

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