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**The Inward Move:**  
Intersubjective Asymmetries in Charismatic Christian  
Narrative and Phenomenology

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements of the degree  
**Master of Arts in Anthropology**

By

Christopher Stephan

2013

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Inward Move: Intersubjective Asymmetries in Charismatic Christian  
Narrative and Phenomenology

by

Christopher Stephan

Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor C. Jason Throop, Chair

In this paper I argue that asymmetries within and between persons or between expectations and outcomes are given salience as contingency in Charismatic Christian practice. Since Charismatic Christianity emphasizes the ubiquitous availability of supernatural empowerment and use of spiritual gifts to effect change, adherents are frequently faced with the problem of both experiencing the direction and power of a God that is absolute and all knowing, and contending with the fact that others can perceive the putatively same object in different ways, or even fail to perceive or respond to that power. Herein, I draw on narratives taken from interviews with Charismatic Christian participants to make three major points: First, that asymmetry often takes shape in Charismatic Christian settings as contingency, and that this

contingency is the experiential basis for God's seemingly paradoxical intimacy and inaccessibility. Second, these asymmetries are the basis for an attitude wherein adherents qualify their experiences as coming from a finite understanding. As a result, adherents often bracket one or more aspects of their lived experience. In such cases, the result is an "inward move" in which adherent's bracket the external efficacy or commensurability of their experience. Third, I argue that the process of bracketing what is beyond their own embodied experience is, for these participants, a significant safeguard against disillusionment since it construes contingency as the experiential evidence of "meaning-to-come."

The thesis of Christopher Stephan is approved.

Elinor Ochs

Douglas Hollan

C. Jason Throop, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

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## Prologue

At least since Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) there has been a lineage of thinkers taking up the kernel of insight that religiosity (and the germ of feeling that inspires it) is founded in the experience of sociality. Edward Sapir (1985:356) echoed this idea, claiming that one of the few things that could definitively be said about religion was that it first consisted of a feeling of community, and that, second, the feelings of humility and security that arose out of this sense of community resulted in a sense of sacredness. Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (2010:26) opens with his rebuttal to Romain Rolland's use of an analogous argument to critique Freud's more ideological conception of religion in *The Future of an Illusion*; if religion stems from an "oceanic" experience of oneness, Freud counters, it is a survival of an earlier stage of development in which the boundaries of the ego were not yet delimited. In each of these early strains of thought, religious experience is posited to derive from a conflation of our experience of being in the midst of others with something transcendent.

To some extent this line of thought has been taken up and transformed in phenomenological approaches to anthropology. Phenomenological anthropology has sought to anchor experience itself in intersubjectivity – not sociality, *per se*, but the ways in which self is correspondent to being with or toward the existence of others (Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Duranti 2010; Csordas 1990, 1993, 2008; Jackson 1998, 2012; Throop 2010, n.d.). In being, the argument goes, we are taking up positions within a world partly consisting of and already there for others (See Desjarlais and



Throop 2011:91, Jackson 1998). Consequently our understandings of self and other are intersubjectively constituted.

Often hailing Irving Hallowell's "Self and Its Behavioral Environment" (1955) as their predecessor, these anthropological approaches seek to provide a cultural ground for self-experience. Hallowell's major accomplishment was to point out the role of culture in patterning not only the perceptual dispositions, but the also the boundaries and properties of selves. Despite Hallowell's "self" being an already objectified entity rather than an indeterminate capacity to orient to the world (see Csordas 1990, also Csordas 1994b), his attention to selves and objects as variable in their composition was seminal. What he revealed was a lacuna pertaining to the social and cultural patterning of experience. Into this conceptual gap psychological anthropologists brought a bevy of insights from phenomenology. In the decades following, what emerged as cultural phenomenology and existential anthropology brought to the study of experience, including religious experience, an attention to the entailments of life in light of others. But unlike its predecessors, which saw the religious aspects of life to be unique venues of social experience, religious experience is here taken to be one intersubjectively constituted mode of being in a panoply.

In short, one can argue that there is nothing particularly unique about the origins of religious experience, as it is but one mode in which objects in the world (selves among them) are constituted through acts of perception (Csordas 1990). As Michael Jackson (1998:6) puts it, "notions of subject and object, ego and alter, are not given, but made. They can, accordingly, be placed in parentheses, reshaped, and unmade." Consequently, a productive niche for phenomenological anthropologists has been to

study situations in which the “assumptive worlds” (Cantril 1950, see also Frank 1993) of subjects are challenged, renegotiated, or suspended through extraordinary circumstance (see Csordas 1994a, Good 1994<sup>1</sup>, Throop 2010 for examples). In these conditions, subjects are often, though not always, aware that their previous perceptions of themselves, others, or the physical environment are being deferred, revoked, or transformed.

In the context of this thesis I wish to reframe, and in so doing reconfigure, these problematics. In the pages that follow I will be most concerned with what adherents make of the gap (when they perceive one) between their expectations and the results of their actions, between what one feels and another experiences. Often these gaps have been treated as problems that exist on a logical level. In a recent paper, Tanya Luhmann (2012b) has argued that neo-Pentecostal congregants at Vineyard Churches where she did her field work exhibit an “epistemological double register”; as experiences of God must be cultivated, they are both the product of imagination and perceptively real, both true to experience and self-consciously fictive. It seems that the double register is considered an inherently epistemological one rather than one realized in action because it is principally the ostensible contradiction of concepts that Luhmann looks to have consolidated in experience. On the contrary, even Evans-Pritchard (1976:221-2), whose argument beautifully showed the way cultural ideas and the attitudes people take toward them can strike a precarious but perduring balance, resigned to saying that the “intellectual consistency” he so hoped to demonstrate could

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<sup>1</sup> Katz and Csordas (2003) have labeled the work of such ethnographers as Arthur Kleinman and Byron Good “paraphenomenological” for lack of explicit links to phenomenological philosophers and particular omissions of aspects of phenomenological theory and method.

only be understood as a loose set of practices that were implemented in fragmentary fashion and not to be conceived as a whole, internally consistent system. In his formulation, contradictions were not so much things to be thought of as lived through. So what of the double register?

Rebecca Lester's (in Luhmann 2012b:388) response to Luhmann is a useful starting point. While she acknowledges the existence of a double register, Lester does not think it arises out of contradictions in postulates about God. In fact, she sees no contradiction between these postulates<sup>2</sup>. Instead, Lester locates the source of "as if" attitudes toward experiences of God within adherent's acknowledgement of human finitude: one's capacity to *fully attune* to God is what is in question. It is not far to go from recognizing that the question truly concerns one's capacity to fully experience God *as He is* to realizing that such a question requires an intersubjective ground. When I question my perception of reality I do so only in light of the recognition that what I am perceiving is in a world populated by other perceiving subjects whose own experience of that reality may be irreducible to my own. If I attend to an experienced object, thinking that it is something fantasized rather than something that exists apart from me, then there is no experience of sensing that the object has qualities that escape my perceptual grasp. On the other hand, if I attend to the object as something which has an existence apart from my perception of it then I am by extension aware that others may also perceive the same object. They may even perceive it differently. Moreover, if I am aware that others may perceive that object differently from how I have perceived it

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<sup>2</sup> Lester maintains that the idea of contradiction stems from ignoring the fact that we are selectively attending to different aspects at different times. This objection at once connects us back to Evans-Pritchard's insight and suggests a compatibility with phenomenological arguments about the role of intentionality in shaping our perception (See Duranti 2009).

then it is also possible that I might yet perceive it differently. In this case, it is my conviction of the real existence of the object and my own limits as a perceiving subject that lead me to qualify my particular perception of it. Qualification of perspective is a forbearance of contingency.

Something like a double register is required, though not one that deals with irreconcilable postulates<sup>3</sup>, but one that arises out of the conditions of intersubjectivity. An intersubjectively oriented model of religious experience must contend with the fact that the existence of other perceiving subjects is both the ground of our embodied sense of the constitution of the world, and a fault line where our embodied dispositions can be shaken and redrawn. We have our own perceptions (and efforts to perceive) to deal with but we must also contend with what others may perceive. When we move between the subjective and recognizably intersubjective we engage in a switch between registers of reality to the extent that we are operating in consideration of the apprehensible aspects of other's alterity.

In some phenomenological models, it is precisely alterity, our own as well as that of others, that is the source of religious experience. In a paper that has significantly influenced my own thinking, Tom Csordas (2004:164) argues that, "religion is predicated on and elaborated from a primordial sense of otherness' or alterity." In

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<sup>3</sup> This is, in one interpretation, cognitive dissonance. Strikingly, the theory of cognitive dissonance came out of the fieldwork of social psychologists who were embedded with a cult that was convinced that the end of the world was nigh (Festinger, et al 1956). Members of the research team surreptitiously joined the group and participated in their all night vigil. When the world-ending catastrophe did not occur (as the psychologists had guessed it might not) they recorded the members' reactions and subsequent rationalizations. Of great interest here is that the original formulation for how people could avoid total disillusionment in the face of disconfirmation contained a heavy emphasis upon the existence of a community of like-minded persons. This amounts to a social model not of the origins of religious belief/experience but of its resilience; it is, thus, a complementary model to those early formulations of the relationship between religion and society. It is also a testament to the fact that even basic cognitive processes we have since lifted out of the social world in an attempt to isolate the facets of the mind were originally formulated as models of mind in the context of others.

essence, it is alterity that is our indication that there is more; like the numbness of a limb or the fruitless search for a word that escapes our recollection, the feeling of the sacred is born of ineffability. The sense that “this is here, but this doesn’t coincide with ‘me’” is the primordial substance of the supernatural. This alterity has no pre-given object form – it is taken up and “elaborated” in particular socio-historical contexts (*ibid* 172). It is in regard to this point that it may be helpful to transition to a discussion of what processes these elaborated stances are giving object form.

Drawing on Csordas, among others, Jason Throop’s (n.d.) article “Sacred Suffering: A Phenomenological Anthropological Perspective” moves beyond discussions of the primordially of alterity by focusing on how the sacred is revealed through changes in our manner of attending to objects. Beginning with the fundamental insight that others and objects always possess qualities that escape our perceptual capacities Throop, following Husserl and Wittgenstein, argues that in perceiving an object we can alter (or have altered) what qualities we attend to. In switching back and forth between qualities we are engaging in the process of “aspect dawning” that Wittgenstein illustrated with his famous example of drawing that can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit, but never as both. It is in this revelatory process of shifting to the not-previously-perceived that Throop wants to locate the sacred. Throop (*ibid:19*) writes, “the experience of the sacred arises not in relation to a specific or specifiable object(s) of our attention but in relation to the very process of turning toward the world as now evidencing a new aspect...” In this conception, sacredness is not merely

perceived in confronting alterity, but is an experience of shifting our intentionality toward an object<sup>4</sup>.

At this time the point I would like to draw from this discussion about alterity and “aspect dawning” is that the experiences of others (real and perceived) can instigate these shifts. This particular way in which alterity may be revealed to us is much closer to the heart of the phenomenon I want to discuss. Others, or our efforts toward them, can trigger such shifts, but in doing so they always also reveal the limitations of our being. Sometimes you see a duck. Sometimes you see a rabbit. If the drawing is God and we are experiencing it together but each of us sees a different aspect then a whole new experience comes into being: the intersubjective revelation of contingency in perception.

The problem I am seeking to deal with herein is one of how asymmetries within and between persons or between efforts and outcomes play out as contingencies in Charismatic Christian practice. Adherents to Charismatic Christianity act on their faith in, and personal experience of, God’s Holy Spirit – which they perceive to give them supernatural abilities to heal, prophesy, and other things, but also to feel virtuous emotions and live out virtuous lives. The breadth of the ways one can experience God’s power in Charismatic Christianity opens up possibilities for perceiving His presence, but also new possibilities for ways disjunctures between one’s own embodied modes of experience and those of others can become salient. Fundamentally, adherents are faced with the problem of both experiencing the direction and power of a God that is

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<sup>4</sup> This, of course, does not mean that the experience of the sacred comes about in any and all modifications. Throop maintains that all such modifications “bear a family resemblance” (*ibid*:20) to the sacred but never directly equates all modifications with sacred experience. We should expect that cultural and individual differences come to bear on what experiences are embodied as sacred ones.

absolute and all knowing, and contending with the fact that others can perceive that God in different ways, or even fail to perceive or respond to that power. The converse is also true: sometimes the problem can be you.

In this paper I will be arguing three major points. First, that asymmetry often takes shape in Charismatic Christian settings as contingency, and that contingency, far from being an unqualifiedly bad thing, can also give rise to awe-inspiring experiences. What is occurring in many instances is that a recognition of difference in the other's experience, or a difference between the expected and the eventual outcome of one's actions is experienced not as the asymmetry of the other or the ineffectuality of one's acts, but as concrete evidence that God's being outstrips human capacities for understanding. Simply put, the contingency in experience that characterizes intersubjective engagements is the experiential basis for God's seemingly paradoxical intimacy and ultimate inaccessibility. Second, these asymmetries are the basis for an attitude wherein adherents qualify their experiences as coming from a finite understanding. As a result, adherents often "bracket," suspend judgement about, one or more aspects of their lived experience. In such cases, the result is overwhelmingly an "inward move" in which adherent's de-emphasize or distance themselves from definite judgements about the external efficacy or commensurability of their spiritual experience on the basis of their limited understanding. Third, I argue that the process of bracketing what is beyond their own embodied experience is, for these participants, a significant safeguard against disillusionment since it construes contingency as the evidence of meaning-to-come.

## Methods

During the summer of 2010 I spent four months doing pilot research at Life Church, a newly formed Charismatic church in San Bernardino California. Life Church was, and still is, very small by most standards. At the time it claimed about one hundred members, but usually held about sixty to seventy congregants on a given weekend. During the course of my fieldwork I conducted depth interviews with five of the church's founding members, as well as larger corpus of unstructured interviews, informal conversations with members of the church and pastoral staff, and recordings of services.

All five of the interview participants had been founding members of Life Church, but they had varied lengths of affiliation with the Charismatic movement and with one another<sup>5</sup>. Two participants, Rachel and Peter, were married and had been active on the Charismatic scene for forty years. Mary was a close friend of theirs who was a generation younger, and had been a member of prayer groups with Peter and Rachel for over twenty years. Then there were Debra and Hannah, two young women who were in their early thirties and mid-twenties, respectively. Debra's history in the Charismatic movement went back about three years. Hannah's went back about two, though she had only been baptized with the Spirit about nine months before our interview. Debra and Hannah were both acquainted with the three previously mentioned participants, but they were not well acquainted with one another. Though the overall collection of interview participants is small, their differing degrees of closeness to one another and length of time spent practicing their Charismatic faith

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<sup>5</sup> Another participant, a young pastor in his early thirties, was unable to manage an interview because he was moving out of state for his ministry.



provides a certain kind vantage on the impact of their interrelatedness, and their similarity of practice despite differing degrees of semantic knowledge. The data for this project comes primarily from approximately fifteen hours of video and audio from the interviews.

## **Charismata + Life**

When I began my field work at Life Church, my research goal was to understand how adherents who had converted to Charismatic Christianity made the transition from one cultural idiom to another. Resultantly, in addition to questions about transitional periods and lifestyle integration, much of my interview data relates directly to the issues of confirming and disconfirming evidence, the degree to which subjects felt that their experiences coincided with those of others in their community, and the role that others (particularly close relationships) played in structuring their spiritual lives. These conversations were what first drew my attention to the salience of intersubjective asymmetries in Charismatic practice. For reasons described below, I believe that these asymmetries have a special role in shaping the phenomenological properties of enacting or being party to an enactment of the gifts of the Spirit.

The general cast of my argument in this section is to give broad historical and particular theological context to the community in which I conducted by fieldwork; the specific goal will be to demonstrate that the Charismatic movement's emphasis upon directly experiencing and acting upon the experience of the God's Holy Spirit precipitates frequent occasions for adherent's to recognize the asymmetry between their own embodied experiences and those of others.

## **Charismata**

Charismatic Christianity is a term that applies to a broad range of denominations and congregations that preach and act upon their belief in the ubiquitous availability of direct, experiential evidence of God's power. The use of the term "charismatic" refers not to the personality of its many high profile leaders or the appeal of the movement, but to the Charismata, or spiritual gifts, exhibited by its adherents (Hayford and Moore 2006, Burgess 2006, Robbins 2004b, Westerlund 2009). In contemporary practice these gifts come in sundry forms, but variations are often expansions on the gifts of prophecy, healing, and tongues (glossolalia). These gifts of the Spirit are arguably as old as Christianity itself, but there is no unbroken chain that we might refer to as a Charismatic church linking ancient practices to contemporary ones (see Burgess 2011, Poewe 1994). By most historical accounts, what we now refer to as Charismatic Christianity is derived most directly from the birth of Pentecostalism (Linhardt 2011, Robbins 2004b).

Pentecostalism was forged in an uptick in religious fervor that marked the coming of the 20th century. In the decades preceding and following the turn-of-the-century, a number of revivals broke out in Europe and North America (Hayford and Moore 2006). Among these revivalist enterprises was William Seymour's Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles. Seymour was the one-eyed black protégé of a white radical of the Wesleyan Holiness movement named Charles Parham. It was Parham's theological innovation to insist that true evidence of God's spiritual bestowal upon his people was to be found in, and only in, speaking in tongues. Seymour preached this tenet to his growing congregation at Azusa Street. Like the day of Pentecost that would later

become the namesake of the movement, Seymour and his followers sought the impartation of God's divine essence. "Baptism in the Holy Spirit," as it was called, was the hallmark of God's redemption, manifested in divine revelations, miraculous healing, and glossolalia. The innovative aspect of this movement was to take Spirit baptism as a separate event from conversion, thus moving the goalpost – so to speak – from mere conversion to tangible evidence, default experiential proof of God's divine grace (Burgess 2006, Robbins 2004b). The brunt of this theological postulate was that all believers should expect and desire God's power to manifest itself concretely in their lives (cf. Luhrmann 2012a,b). Ecstatic experiences became the rule, not the exception.

In the years following the birth of Pentecostalism, many of its converts eventually founded their own churches (Hayford and Moore 2006). What resulted was a tremendous efflorescence of congregations that practiced the charismata. As the practices spread they diversified. By the 1960s, some forty years after the Azusa Street Mission had closed its doors, the gifts of the Spirit had become decoupled from strict Pentecostal theology and, little by little, they worked their way into mainstream Christian practice. The change was, of course, incremental, but it had a number of key turning points including the gaining of widespread popularity by faith healers Aimee Semple McPherson in the 1930s and Oral Roberts in the late 1940s and 1950s (Hayford and Moore 2006), Episcopalian minister Dennis Bennett's public endorsement of Spirit Baptism on Palm Sunday of 1960 (Burgess 2011, Hayford and Moore 2006, Poewe 1994), and the inception of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal at Duquesne University in 1967 (Csordas 2001). The Charismata had begun the process of becoming generic phenomena – hallmarks of an intensive and personal communion with God.

Believers and scholars alike divide the Charismatic movement into three “waves” (Hayford and Moore 2006, Luhmann 2012b). The first was the development of Pentecostalism; the second was long process through which the Spirit Baptism and the charismata became generic practices. The present epoch is the wake of the Third Wave, which began in the 1980s and was characterized by greater dissemination and diversification of Charismatic practices (Robbins 2004b, Westerlund 2009). Presently, all brands of Christianity that can be characterized as Charismatic and Pentecostal make up the fastest growing segment of Christianity globally (Robbins 2004b). A key aspect of the proliferation of Charismatic Christian practices has been their selective implementation. While the gifts of the Spirit that have been the hallmark of the movement still play a central role in many congregations, the neo-Pentecostal/neo-Charismatic congregations that have made up the Third Wave have, on average, were making a second extraction: where the Second Wave teased apart Pentecostal theology and Spirit Baptism, the Third Wave has seemed to downplay canonical gifts of the Spirit for a more broadly interpreted experiential Christianity (see Luhmann 2004 for an example).

While the diversity of beliefs and practices produced by the introduction of Charismatic elements into existing Christian denominations, and the variegated emphases potentiated by the plurality of movements within the larger Charismatic Renewal make it difficult to make more than general statements about the contemporary nature of Charismatic practices a few should be made. First, the Charismatic movement has championed the use of the gifts and other aspects in which the Holy Spirit manifests in lived experience (Csordas 1997, Hayford and Moore 2006,

Luhrmann 2012b, Robbins 2004b). The implementation of this belief sits on something of a spectrum: on the one hand there are churches that keep the manifestations of the supernatural in daily life relatively minimal – hearing God’s voice or imagining His presence to such an extent that it feels almost real may be the outstanding achievement of one’s spiritual life (see Corwin 2012, Luhrmann 2012a for examples); on the other hand there are those communities that teach the gifts, cast out demons, and experience the manifestations of the Spirit (Csordas 1990, 1997 is on this end). Second, as Joel Robbins (2004a, 2004b, but see also Westerlund 2009) has argued, by insisting that each believer can have direct access to the Holy Spirit, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity has radically democratized Christian practice, as the new *de facto* locus of religious authority is embodied experience. By extension, one could argue that even in cases where one person’s particular actions are considered objectionable by the community, such an abuse is the exception that can never become the rule so long as believers maintain that it is possible for God to use anyone for His purposes. Third, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity is oriented toward direct divine intervention in worldly action (Csordas 1997, 2001, Luhrmann 2012b, Miller and Yamamori 2007). This is particularly the case with the gifts, where divine inspiration is, by definition, intended for the edification of oneself and others; the necessary entailment of action on behalf of believers is, by extension, a guarantee that adherents will manifest many of the particularities of God’s felt presence. Taken together, these features make up the historical/theological conditions in which individuals are primed to confront asymmetries in one another’s perceptions and

practices. All of these features were present at Life Church, the church where I conducted my fieldwork.

## **Life Church**

Life Church was founded just four months before I arrived to do my field research. The church was, perhaps, a model of the democratized format. Though, as previously mentioned, the church was made up of approximately one hundred members, they could boast the pastoral staff of a church ten times their size; there were five pastors at the time of my fieldwork, and two more were added soon after I left<sup>6</sup>. In addition to the lopsided size of the pastoral staff, the church regularly held open pulpit nights where any member could take the opportunity to speak. Sermon duties during the weekends were widely distributed as well, with a large portion of the main services being led by someone other than the head pastor. Transitory members – who often attended part time due to their affiliation with multiple Charismatic churches – held special workshops on the Holy Spirit and particular aspects of the spiritual gifts (charismata). In short, though the recognition of asymmetries is by no means (phenomenologically or theologically) unique to Life Church, the fledgling church had precisely the kind of format where divergent perspectives could safely surface. And surface they did.

## **Contingency**

Frequently the interviewees pointed out individual variations in the way the gifts were experienced. Often these conversations would focus on the way the Spirit would

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<sup>6</sup> For the record I would like to note that comparison to other field sites seems to rule out any connection between my recent presence in a church and the sudden need for more pastors.

be expressed differently in each person, as if each individual was a kind of filter. Doug Hollan (2012) has recently argued that Cultural Phenomenology has largely overlooked individual variation in its attempts to theorize broader patterns in cultural experience. This section is intended to be responsive to that critique, though not so much in attention to the sources of individual variation and its idiosyncratic construal as to its existential basis and cultural meanings. In those regards these Charismatic Christian respondents were highly attuned to the nuances of their own and one another's experience. Not only was there range to who operated in what gifts of the Spirit, there was person to person variation in the manners or situations in which a particular gift would be expressed. Rather than drawing purely subjectivist conclusions, participants frequently used narratives of these instances to illustrate how other's reactions to God's power could make them aware of ways in which the Spirit was working that they would otherwise have missed.

To some extent this apprehensible diversity was stable over time and seen as useful. Close friends would be aware of one another's tendencies to experience the Spirit in imagery, thought impressions, auditory perception, physical sensation, or emotional responses. In some cases they would recruit one another precisely because of these differences – especially when someone was known to have a gift of healing, or have special clarity in hearing God's voice. When it came to making prayerful decisions or confirming a word of prophesy, it was very common that adherents had close friends to call on whom they considered valuable counterpoints to their own experiential styles. Tanya Luhrmann (2011) has recently used a review of the literature on sensory hallucinations to underscore the point that cultural emphases on one or

another sensory modality will influence the frequency in which supernatural encounters occur in that mode; a complementary point would be that the range of modalities assumed to have validity and the amount of individual variation tolerated together make up a practical repertoire in which individuals will have varying proficiencies and may see one another's experiences as more or less relevant and supplementary to their own<sup>7</sup>. In the Charismatic setting where everyone has an equal shot at a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit, individual variation is often the basis for long-term partnerships in prayer and ministry.

Mary offered a good example of such partnerships.

- |    |       |  |
|----|-------|--|
| 1. | Mary: | Sometimes that'll happen where I'll be in the room or something and            |
| 2. |       | I'll get the knowing at the same time that another person gets a knowing.      |
| 3. |       | And there's certain people that I click with that way a lot.                   |
| 4. |       | That happens to me with Rachel. But in prayer, if I'm doing deliverance prayer |
| 5. |       | it happens with Peter. We work in tandem very well.                            |
| 6. |       | [...]  |
| 7. |       | Alright, you're across the room. You got the same thing that I got,            |
| 8. |       | so that is what God's saying right now.  |

She begins with instances in which a “knowing,” strong intuitions that are enabled by the Spirit, is surprisingly shared (2). Such conjunctive intuitions are relatively rare. Mary makes it clear, however, that they are more common in some domains and in some relationships than in others (3-5). In lines that do not appear in this excerpt she goes on to describe how they will much more rarely occur with mere acquaintances and even

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<sup>7</sup> This way of responding to and making sense of individual differences harkens back to Anthony F. C. Wallace's (1961, 2009) argument that culture is the “organization of diversity.” Cultures function, Wallace claims, to provide means for individuals to connect and live with one another by dealing directly with or ignoring particular aspects of human diversity. Correspondent with this particular attention to the ubiquity of individual variation, Hollan (2000) has argued that the fact that no two individuals will internalize or reproduce even the most common cultural forms in the same manner is productive in that it provides a “subjectivity potential,” a range of subjectivities within a culture, some of which may come to the fore should they prove well adapted to historical contingencies. Likewise, here the “subjectivity potential” of a congregation can provide different spiritual gifts or experiential styles to suit a given situation.



strangers. In all of these instances it is the surprise that two people's impressions would ever coalesce that is the basis for domain-particular partnership and the default validation that the "knowing" came from God (7-8).

Just as importantly, this practice of partnership highlights the fact that variation is thought to reveal aspects of the supernatural that might escape the perceptual grasp of one individual<sup>8</sup>. This is as true in particular moments where individuals' embodiments of the Spirit are juxtaposed as it is in more long-run patterns that register as proclivities. For Rachel, whose involvement in Charismatic Christianity began during the early days of the Third Wave at John Wimber's Vinyard church, recognizing the Holy Spirit in asymmetry of other's experiences was a gradual process. She tells me she was particularly wary of the odd manifestations she saw in others. She was very cognizant of the opacity of acts such as being "Slain in the Spirit" – falling down and "resting" when one feels the Spirit's power. What most troubled her was that the efficacy of these manifestations was unclear. She could not tell what it was that God was doing in the people she saw fall. But the spiritual leaders in that church encouraged her to ask about what she did not understand. In so doing, she came to see other's opaque behavior as evidence that the Spirit was doing unique work in them that may itself be imperceptible.

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<sup>8</sup> Another way of understanding the effect of this "supplementarity" stance on another's experience is to relate it to the concept of "distributed cognition." The basic idea of distributed cognition is that any act of cognition is an achievement that takes place in relation to other's minds and to meaningful cultural artifacts in the ambient environment (Hutchins 2000). One implementation of this idea has been to use it in describing how 'many minds make light work.' The classic example takes the various tasks and expertise entailed in sailing a ship and points out that these are asymmetrically distributed across the various crew members and officers. Working together, but having limited knowledge and experience in all but their own specific roles, the officers and crew manage the task of sailing – something no individual on board could have cognitively managed alone. Similarly, we can think of Charismatic Christian attitudes toward one another's experience as exhibiting an emic analogue to the theory of distributed cognition: with the recognition that others' experiences may be different and the belief that those differences are relevant to accomplishing the task of figuring out "what God is up to," Charismatic experience of God is itself a "distributed" phenomenon.

1. Rachel: Being down there I was able to ask questions and one of the
2. teachers down there said, you know, don't be afraid to interview
3. people and ask 'what did God do for you when you were down on the ground?'
4. And so I became an investigator for myself. And so I would question, um.
5. I, I would, if I prayed for somebody and the went down on the floor
6. and I continued to pray then afterwards I would ask them 'what happened?'
7. [...]
8. And I began to realize that God had a purpose in this and it wasn't
9. something to be afraid of.

Importantly for our discussion, these behaviors that seemed so opaque to Rachel were often responses individuals had to her own spiritual gifts. As she notes, one of the common instances in which she would encounter these opaque manifestations was when she was interceding over fellow believers (5). Later in the conversation, Rachel relates the answers people would give to her inquiries. She frequently discovered that the supplicants felt that they were being healed of internal emotional wounds, often from childhood. But Rachel was never able to discern this efficacy without these discussions. Thus, despite Rachel's very straightforward application of her gift of intercession, the movement of the Spirit did not always take obvious forms, especially when the evidence of its work was in itself very nebulous and the real efficacy is something internal. Her attitude toward this asymmetry in experience changed, and she was able to trust that there was indeed some purpose to the manifestations despite her inability to discern what it might be (7-8).

In light of Rachel's account, it is also important to point out that, within Charismatic Christianity, attending to the movement of the Holy Spirit in one's own body

is itself an intersubjective mode of engagement. The intersubjective array<sup>9</sup> in Charismatic Christianity admits a number of ways in which adherents can attend to others, including the Spirit; correspondingly, there are numerous means in which asymmetry can become apparent. Most notably there are the gifts of the Spirit and other Charismatic phenomena that are believed to require the power of the Holy Spirit to operate (Csordas 1997, Linhardt 2011, Stephan 2013). To a certain extent, adherent's experience of the proliferation of the Spirit's influence on their lives entails a degree of abnegation of what in another cultural framing might be considered characteristics of the persons themselves. This is the case not only in subjective self-assessment, but also in how adherents experience certain of one another's actions. Apart from the gifts, virtuous emotions are also considered evidence of the Spirit's influence on believers. These are the "fruit of the Spirit," direct products of the Holy Spirit's presence. Love, joy, peace, and a number of other such traits belong to this list. Like the gifts, these emotions are often not thought of as belonging to the individuals themselves. A number of the participants spoke of compassion, creativity, and wisdom that they felt and expressed that was not their own. Rather, they insisted that these traits and emotions were evidence that they were only able to be good or talented because the Holy Spirit dwelled within them. As a corollary, the participants also indicated that their sense about whether the Spirit was guiding the actions of another was founded in whether that person evidenced the fruits of the Spirit, or caused them to feel the fruits themselves. In these cases the asymmetry was not thought to be

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<sup>9</sup> By "intersubjective array" I mean what is locally considered to count as attending to other subjects and how the existence of those subjects is registered. There is a direct appeal to Hallowell's level of analysis in which we are dealing with already objectified selves. However, to avoid any accidental confusion about externality (which might follow from "behavioral environment") and static objects (rather than embodied ones) I am provisionally implementing a different term.

between individuals so much as within one individual in response to another. It is by taking such embodied asymmetries as evidence of the Spirit's presence and direction that they in turn function as what Thomas Csordas (1993) has called "somatic modes of attention."

A prime example of subjective feeling functioning as a mode of intersubjective attunement is in what was described to me as "spiritual empathy" (cf. Csordas 1993). In the Charismatic idiom, the Spirit will enable an adherent to discern another's physical or emotional pain. Sometimes the adherent will feel the other's affliction mirrored in their own bodies. Hannah reported an instance in which this happened to her. She was praying over a young man she knew only casually when she began to feel a strong and foreign emotion.

- |     |         |   |
|-----|---------|---|
| 1.  | Hannah: | I was in this young adults group, and this guy who I <b>kinda</b> knew          |
| 2.  |         | was struggling with his relationship with God, you know,                        |
| 3.  |         | {we} talked a little bit about it and whatever.                                 |
| 4.  |         | And I laid hands on him and I just felt this emotion of <b>sadness</b> .        |
| 5.  |         | And, I tend to be very happy. So, um, I know it wasn't me.                      |
| 6.  |         | I mean, it was so much sadness, and it was so much pain.                        |
| 7.  |         | And, like, I could feel his lack of self worth.                                 |
| 8.  |         | I could feel him not knowing who he is in the kingdom of God                    |
| 9.  |         | and him struggling, and how the enemy had been attacking him so much.           |
| 10. |         | And he's trying, trying to get connected to God. And it's just so much attacks. |
| 11. |         | And he's like ' <b>freakin, this is crazy!</b> ' And I could feel all that.     |
| 12. |         | And so I started crying. I mean, I'm happy. I'm like <b>happy</b> .             |
| 13. |         | And I lay hands on him. I'm crying overwhelmed.                                 |
| 14. |         | Like, overwhelmed with so much sadness.   |

In her narrative, Hannah distinguishes her "spiritual empathy" from her own emotions by repeatedly emphasizing the disjuncture between what she felt then and she considers her typical emotional experience (lines 5, 12). She contrasts her own characteristic happiness with the very vivid emotions she experienced as being her

prayer partner's response to his current struggle. This is all, she stresses, despite having very limited knowledge of what he was going through beforehand (she stresses this in line 1 and elsewhere outside of the excerpt). This qualification stands in stark contrast to the vivid picture she portrays. In this particular instance, Hannah not only perceived what she believes to be the young man's emotions at the time, she embodied his subjective position, feeling his confusion, weariness, effort and exacerbation (7-11). In stark contrast to Rachel's experience of seeing others manifest, in Hannah's case she embodied what she believed to be her prayer partner's subjective experience rather than her own<sup>10</sup>. It was in this ascertainable asymmetry between what she felt then and what she considers to be her ordinary emotional response that Hannah recognized the work of the Holy Spirit.

Fascinated by Hannah's story, I asked others whether they had experienced anything akin to it. Mary had. So had some others who were not interview participants. Below I have included an excerpt of the conversation on the topic I had with Rachel and her husband Peter.

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<sup>10</sup> I should point out that while Hannah believed herself to have felt the young man's sadness, even this empathic encounter contained asymmetries. As an example of inwardly felt asymmetries I am emphasizing the extent to which Hannah feels the sadness not to belong to herself but to her prayer partner. Another framing allows us to make the observation that even as she feels herself to be provided unique spiritual access to his subjective feelings, that access is limited, since the sadness Hannah feels does not come along with the whole range of memories and associations accompanying the young man's situation. Thus, even in a situation where "Spiritual Empathy" is hallmarked by a very distinct impression of the other's experience, it does not subsume the other; it maintains some manner of asymmetry between persons.

1. Chris: I had had someone – a participant – tell me that once she had laid hands on
2. someone when she was praying for him, and began weeping uncontrollably. And
3. she said that that was uncharacteristic of her
4. Rachel: Yes.
5. C: That she knew it wasn't her because it was uncharacteristic
6. R: Yes
7. Peter: **YES**
8. R: Yes
9. C: and that, uh, she felt it was his spiritual struggle [that
10. R: [Yes.]
11. C: she] was [perceiving.
12. R: [Perceiving. Right. Right.
13. C: Um, and that she was actually feeling that through [his sadness.
14. P: [Yeah. And there are] some people who, when they pray over other people,
15. uh – if they have a gift of healing – sometimes they will feel – if it's a physical
16. problem – sometimes they'll feel a pain where the physical problem is.
17. R: I've had that happen, too.
18. P: Uh, I haven't. But, I-uh, you know.
19. R: It took me a little longer to catch on to that, because I don't have that,
20. I haven't had that happen as much. But, yeah, I've had that happen, too.

In our conversation, Peter and Rachel were both emphatic that this is a common phenomenon (Peter lines 7, 14-16; Rachel, affirmative back channeling, finishing my sentence in line 12, second story<sup>11</sup> 17, 19-20). They were also quick to point out, however, that not everyone experienced “spiritual empathy” in the same way (14-16).

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<sup>11</sup> Second stories are particularly interesting here in light of my emphasis upon asymmetry. In second stories interlocutors will offer narratives of a putatively parallel experience to the story they are being told (see Arminen 2004). These instances of talk are opportunities for interlocutors to show that they understand what their interactional partner has experienced. Of note is the fact that these are always approximations of experience, instances in which interlocutors behave “as if” they have undergone the same thing. In this regard, while I am emphasizing ways in which Charismatics are aware that their experiences do not perfectly coincide with those of others, second stories and a variety of traditional means through which experiences are shared (testimony, for example) may be popular ways in which commonality is emphasized in counterbalance to asymmetry.

Nor did Rachel, who attested to having had the experience, feel it consistently or in an easily noticeable way (19-20).

For Hannah, Rachel, and Mary, these empathic moments are rare. Much more common is the incomprehensibility of another person's subjective experience (see Rachel's earlier narrative about manifestations). "Spiritual empathy," one of the most open-ended and private spiritual experiences I documented, was, despite being widely recognized and not uncommonly claimed, still considered a highly variable phenomenon. Even when participants insisted that they were gaining a supernaturally mediated level of access to one another's subjective states, they also pointed out that God did not always provide them this access, provided others different forms of such access, and still others nothing they could recognize as such.

Throughout our conversations it was typical for the participants to stress such variation. Their persistent emphasis on variability between persons, however, was not taken to be solely a product of the differences between persons themselves. Instead, it was yet another kind of asymmetry that they understood to be evidence of God's omnipotence and individuated attention to all believers. An excerpt from my interview with Rachel sums this perspective up well.

1. Rachel: God develops this individual relationship with each of us. And that's why
2. you'll hear how He, how God talks to Peter is different than me.
3. And, and I've watched in amazement how. That's one of the,
4. to me, it's one of the most delightful things. Is as God,
5. as people press in to know God, he knows them so well that he develops
6. this relationship with them individually.
7. [...]
8. The senses are very important to me. What I see, what I hear, what I touch.
9. And so he talks to me many, from many things that would mean something
10. to me but not necessarily to someone else.

Individual variability in perception and practice is endemic. It is, she attests, a great source of wonderment (3-4). This individualization perspective, I argue, bears the mark of contingency born out of asymmetries between individuals. Even as Rachel is pointing up the reality of God's personalization, she is relating it back to her own perceptual style and the unlikelihood of anyone else being able to understand what God is doing for her and through her in those moments (10). Accordingly, she suggests that incongruent experiences have an important role in Charismatic experience and ideology.

Asymmetry provides the basis for contingency by ensuring that no single perception of the spiritual goes without some modification by another person's differing perception. While these narratives indicate that asymmetries are often salient to Charismatic Christians, the recognition of these asymmetries is not taken to be disconfirmations that what they were experiencing was the divine. Rather, Peter and the other participants take asymmetries between persons as indications that the Holy Spirit was doing something more or something other than what they were able to perceive in the moment. These moments, I suggest, are instances where the surplus of the other, and the intractable aspects of our relation to the world are entified as God's



involvement in human affairs. Thus, like Csordas (2004) has argued, the participants' accounts indicate that alterity plays a significant role in constituting sacred experience. In this case, however, it is a particular sense in which alterity is revealed – through the realization of intersubjective asymmetries in perception – that they are taking as evidence of a supernatural power that outstrips their finitude. This takes us back to Throop's (n.d.) point about phenomenological modifications constituting sacred experience. It also suggests that the real or imagined presence of the other is a significant factor in that experience. When you see a rabbit and I see a duck, together we have each potentiated shifts in one another's perception of the object. The next step is to ask what effect knowledge of asymmetry and its construal has on the way these participants handled contingency.

### **The Inward Move**

For these participants, asymmetry is experienced in multiple ways. In some instances, like in Hannah's empathy, the asymmetry is perceived as something internal. In others, such as when Rachel prayed over Vineyard members who were "slain in the Spirit," the asymmetry is felt to exist in the space between people. What I want to argue in this section is that while asymmetry is the basis for the perceptual shifts that are entified as the Spirit's movement, the recognition of asymmetries in perception between people, and between efforts and outcomes also constitutes the basis on which these participants qualify their perspectives and, in some cases, bracket claims to certain knowledge of the Spirit's activity and the reason for the outcomes they witness. What I have taken to calling "the inward move," in which adherents bracketed claims to surety about the external efficacy of their acts without foreclosing their possibility or flagging

in their faith in the validity of their spiritual encounters, abounded in their narratives. This argument will prepare us to understand how adherents deal with a more blatant form of contingency: the possibility that no externally perceptible change will happen at all.

Minor versions of this bracketing would show up frequently in response to my interview questions. In the instance below, I asked Mary what I naively thought would be straight-forward question about the Holy Spirit.

- |   |
|---|
| 1. Christopher: Can you describe the Holy Spirit?                         |
| 2. Mary: Well I don't think I've experienced him in any kind of full way. |
| 3. But what I know of him is wisdom, immediacy, inaccessibility.          |

I want to draw attention to two things from this brief exchange. First, Mary immediately qualifies her knowledge of the Holy Spirit (2). This stance is very consistent with those taken by the other participants, especially when my questions contained implicit biases toward absolutes rather than appeals only to personal experience. Second, Mary generously redirects my question into an answerable framing that privileges her partial experience and in itself gives an explanation for why she cannot speak categorically: she knows the Spirit both in its immediacy and its tendency to enhance her ability to have insight, and for its inaccessibility. It is to the experience of inaccessibility and its impact on the way the participants make sense of the contingency experienced in that inaccessibility that I now wish to turn.

Recalling Rachel's narrative about becoming accustomed to the manifestation of the Spirit, I noted that her shift in perspective entailed both a new way of understanding the opacity of others' responses as evidence of the Spirit's movement

and as an assurance that certain aspects of even her own spiritual actions would remain opaque. Hence, becoming intimately aware of the Spirit's power meant also becoming equally aware of the fact that there were aspects of the Spirit's movement that she could never have direct knowledge of. The only way to know was to ask the other party to the event what they had experienced and from that have an understanding of her experience that was greater than her own embodied understanding of her actions. In Rachel's case, however, because the asymmetry appeared in the difference between what Rachel perceived herself to be doing and the impact her actions had on the supplicant, the other's response was informative of both the direct, intimate influence of the Spirit on the event at hand, and the ultimate inaccessibility of the full extent of the role of her actions in the Spirit's work. In such instances where the external modality of spiritual experiences is thematized, the other goes full circle from being the source of intentional modifications predicating the experience of the Spirit to the experiential basis for the Spirit's ineffability. Revelation and obscurity go hand in hand.

The possibility that asymmetries offer limited revelations of what the Spirit is doing in an event was very important to Peter. In our discussion of "impartation," the practice through which the power of the Spirit is passed from one individual to another through the laying on of hands, he frequently brought up the perceptible differences in the experience of people involved in the same action. Contrasting perspectives of the person doing the imparting with the perspective of the person who is being imparted to, Peter draws a number of distinctions relevant to the limitations of his own perspective:

1. Peter: “[I found out that] I could impart life to them – that people  
2. had assignments of death against them, or they were feeling  
3. depressed or overwhelmed or whatever. And so by laying hands on them,  
4. I would be able to transmit the power of the Holy Spirit through me to them,  
5. and build them up in **different** ways. I mean, I’ve described a couple  
6. but undoubtedly there are more ways than that.  
7. Or, there are ways that I **thought I was imparting** that were exceeded  
8. by what the Lord did in a person’s life. Sometimes you find out about it,  
9. sometimes you don’t. But, the impartation is the laying on of hands,  
10. sometimes it’s to stir up spiritual gifts, it’s to give people a touch from the lord,  
11. sometimes they can feel it physically. Sometimes they’ll feel a tingling.  
12. So they’ll get different sensations – different ways of reacting to the power  
13. of the Spirit that flows through you to them.

Here we see yet another way in which asymmetries between persons’ perceptions form the basis for contingency, the possibility that one is missing out on some aspect of the experience. Peter is, in various ways, making distinctions between what he feels and what others feel, what he can know about the Spirit, and the full scope of the Spirit’s activities. He first establishes that the act of impartation varies based on how it is received, and that following from that any account of the ways in which the Spirit could work through impartation would necessarily be incomplete (5-6). Its reception is not necessarily predictable, nor is it always perceptible (7-9). What is interesting here is that despite the fact that only variation one finds out about should be affirming contingency, Peter is predicating his perspective on spiritual experiences upon the consistency of asymmetries he has found in the past. He is careful to point out that there can be ways he has never experienced God’s power being manifested in impartation; nonetheless, they “undoubtedly” exist (6). What comes to the foreground is the act of impartation, not its contingent reception. This goes beyond qualifying his in-the-moment experiential understanding. In essence, the “inward move” is feeding forward into Peter’s expectations for experience.

Debra offered me yet another glimpse at how asymmetries between effort and result lead adherents to emphasize their limited understanding of the Spirit. Now in her early thirties, she had grown up Christian but left the church during a particularly hard time in her life. She had come back to Christianity just a few years before we met. In the process of her reconversion Debra discovered Charismatic Christianity through a series of ecstatic experiences in which she claimed she had received a great deal of emotional healing. As we talked, she kept referring to God as “the God of my understanding,” a phrase I at first believed she had borrowed from a twelve-step program. It was only when we began to discuss a recent event in which some Life Church’s members had unsuccessfully prayed to heal her injured foot the phrase took on new meaning.

- |     |        |   |
|-----|--------|---|
| 1.  | Debra: | I was wearing this thing, and, yeah, they prayed healing over it.         |
| 2.  |        | And like, I have my doubts.   |
| 3.  |        | But like am I going to say those doubts are more concrete than the faith? |
| 4.  |        | It's just a matter of this is where I am at right today.                  |
| 5.  |        | I still have some doubts, I still have some fears.                        |
| 6.  |        | Like, yeah, I think my foot's still broke and they prayed for me.         |
| 7.  |        | Like, <b>what am I supposed to do with that?</b> Right?                   |
| 8.  |        | So I'm like, ok, yeah, I have some doubts about that.                     |
| 9.  |        | <b>But</b> , like, I've seen in other ways like,                          |
| 10. |        | I had some doubts about things and I was just moved along                 |
| 11. |        | where I could look back and say   |
| 12. |        | oh, that was just a <b>limited</b> point of view.                         |
| 13. |        | That's why I say the God of my understanding today.                       |

As someone on the receiving end of an ostensibly unproductive attempt at healing, Debra has, as she notes, significant cause for doubt. There is an obvious disjuncture between what she and her prayer partners set out to do (heal the foot) and what ended up happening (the foot remains painfully injured). If she was judging solely on the basis

of her present understanding of the event she might well have speculated that nothing at all was happening. Her response, however, is to stress the limits of her own understanding of the Spirit. Similar to Peter's account of impartation she is confident in the limits of her own understanding (4,12). It is that limitation that she turns toward in her narrative as it develops. When she defines what she means by using the phrase "the God of my understanding today" she reframes the experience from my emphasis upon tangible efficacy, to her own perspective on her finitude. She is literally saying that her inner experience of faith is the paramount reality, while contingency is a product of her own limitations in understanding (3-4). Sitting in the interview, I realized that the recurrence of this phrase at key points in our interview amounted to a way of bracketing what she takes to be outside of her experience. The continuity drawn between this and other portions of the interview where the phrase appears indicates that this perspective was not merely a way of rationalizing a glitch, but was a persistent element of her understanding of her experience.

Immediately following the portion of our interview displayed above, Debra drew on a number of other incidents in which she was at the time unaware what God was doing, only to feel later on that she understood the reason why her life course took the direction it had (cf. Lurhmann 2012a, ch. 8), or what a particular spiritual event had meant. Included in these events was her introduction to Charismatic Christianity. Consequently, she was not only saying that there are things that elude her sensibilities. There was a story-arch that Debra indexed with the phrase "the God of my understanding today." There was a difference between her understanding at the time of our conversation and her understanding before it. Like the other participants, Debra

portrayed herself as on a spiritual journey that entailed ever-increasing, but never-complete knowledge of God. In that journey the faith was realer than the doubt, and the fact of spiritual experience was surer than its consequences.

The inward move is not reactionary solipsism. Each of the participants expressed full confidence in the validity of their experience. They were also confronted, however, with the fact that spiritual experience of a God who was greater than their understanding meant that the embodied understandings they possessed were only partial. This incompleteness presents itself at once as fallibility and the opportunity for more understanding. Their sense that they had grown in their understanding led them to project greater understanding and diversified experience to come. They reconciled defied expectations or opaque results to their actions as part and parcel of their finitude. Indeed, we have seen how asymmetry bears out as contingency, mixing modalities of experience that intimate the Spirit's movement with the articulation of new and more salient ineffability.

As Debra and Peter's narratives have shown, however, the bracketing that follows from entifying these asymmetries as the evidence of the Spirit's inaccessibility at the same time earmarks ineffability as meaning-to-come. As an extension of this insight, we can ask whether it is possible that the inward move can consequently insulate adherents from disenchantment. To a great extent, such a question can be answered by taking a more fine-grained look at the act of narrating itself.

### **Hannah's Dance**

Narratives are a productive resource for phenomenology because they reveal individual's cultural expectations for experience, as well as how they make sense of

instances where those expectations are defied (Bruner 1991, 2002; Garro and Mattingly 2000; Ochs and Capps 1996, 2001). Moreover, as I sought to demonstrate with Peter's narrative about impartation, narratives reveal how the pattern identified in past events feeds forward into ways of inhabiting the now and future present. As Jerome Bruner (2002:9) writes, "narrative meanings impose themselves on the referents of presumably true stories [...] And eventually we ask how story, *eo ipso*, shapes our experience of the world". Likewise, the causal pattern of a narrative communicates the expectation that future experiences will follow a similar pattern (Ochs and Capps 2001:192). It follows that where and how participants make use of the inward move they are adumbrating a cultural understanding of spiritual experience that draws upon embodied recognitions of asymmetry to make sense of and project future instances of the same.

I have thus far privileged narrative data over abstract statements the participants made not only for the reasons stated above, but because they favored this medium. There was only so much tolerance for categorical statements and conjecture before the conversation would be directed back to narratives of personal experience. As such, it seems only appropriate that we continue with a closer look at one such story: Hannah's story – the one she used to tell me what it was like to be a Charismatic Christian and the one that originally compelled me to tackle this issue of contingency.

I met Hannah a few weeks into my fieldwork. At the time, she was in her mid-twenties. She is somewhat modest and a little sullen in appearance, but she becomes vivacious and jovial in conversation. Hannah trained at a dance studio for almost a dozen years during her adolescence. Though she's a life-long Christian, her



involvement in the Charismatic movement had really only begun a couple of years before we became acquainted. For a few weeks I had seen her dancing off by herself in the back of the church. I had assumed she positioned herself that way because she was shy, but it turned out that she did so because she was relatively renowned within the church for being highly skilled, and she didn't want her expertise to be a distraction to others.

We were introduced by a member of the church who was already assisting me with my research. Hannah quickly granted me an interview despite feeling under-qualified. When we sat down to chat she warned me that she was new to "this Holy Spirit stuff." I did my best to explain that, for my purposes, everyone was an expert. The thing of interest was how she came to be involved in a Charismatic church, and how she related to her gifts. She obliged my inquiries seriously but happily. Perhaps because she was still relatively new to Charismatic Christianity we chatted quite a bit about her introduction and adjustment to it.

Hannah's transition into Charismatic practice took several years. In our interview, Hannah did not pinpoint a particular event as the moment she discovered the power of the Holy Spirit. Instead, she picked out a series of salient events in which she had been confronted with the possibility that there was more to Christianity than she had previously known. A major point of transition for her was when others in the church began to tell her that her dancing had spiritual effects. At first, she was surprised by this attribution, "They would be like, 'something shifts when you dance.' And I was like, 'oh for real? Really?'" But as she learned more about the Spirit she began to see, and feel what they meant. She began to feel a greater sense of intimacy with God when she

danced, and what she described as the “freedom” to dance without choreographing her steps<sup>12</sup>. She understood this shift in her experience of dancing, from dancing as an effortful and contemplative skill to a free-flowing expression of her love for God, as evidence of the Spirit’s implication in her actions (see Stephan 2013).

In our interview, Hannah treated her dancing as her spiritual gift par excellence. It was the first medium in which she felt the Holy Spirit working through her. It was also an important facet of her personal relationship with God and her unique identity as a believer. In our discussions about what it was like to have spiritual gifts it was her prime example of the difference in feeling between doing something on your own and doing it with the Holy Spirit. To my surprise, however, instead of choosing to explain her spiritual gifts through a story where the impact of the supernatural was clear-cut, Hannah chose a story about a recent incident in which a little girl died despite her prayers.

It was through her network of Christian friends that Hannah first heard the story of a family whose child was in the hospital, projected to die of a heart condition within a very short period of time. Despite not knowing the girl, her family, or even their immediate friends, Hannah was moved. This point warrants some elaboration since it is another example of an instance in which a feeling of compassion took Hannah by surprise by being seemingly unlike her.

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<sup>12</sup> Of note is the fact that this is an instance where Hannah took her actions to be more opaque to herself than they were to others. It was in others’ reactions that she discovered the spiritual nature of her dancing. This experience resonates with many of the narratives reported herein, but stresses a slightly different aspect: that an incongruence in the way others perceive us can instigate shifts in the way we experience ourselves. I am dedicating much more attention to this transition in a forthcoming paper on the role of phenomenological modifications in socialization into spiritual gifts. For now I intend only to gesture toward the results of a process that is itself quite complex.

“It’s not that I don’t care,” she explained, “but I’m very, you know, [focused on] Hannah. Some might call that selfish. But I just deal with – tend to think about what’s going on with me or my immediate family or people I’m in contact with. But for me, for example, with dancing at this hospital, it’s not even like I know this child... and so for me to even be moved to do anything. Like, it’s not me. It’s definitely not me, you know?”

Like the instance above in which Hannah experiences “Spiritual<sup>13</sup>,” she is again pointing to an asymmetry between the emotions she embodied in this instance and her sensibilities about her typical disposition. In this case it was compassion for a stranger – a little girl whose family were only vaguely known by even her friends’ friends. Since she had no relationship with anyone directly involved, Hannah believed this compassion was the result of the Holy Spirit prompting her to do something for the ill child.

When she prayed about the situation she heard God telling her to go and dance in the hospital as part of an effort to save the girl’s life. Her friends had similar impressions. Despite reservations about looking foolish she went along with a couple of her church friends to worship God and pray for the healing of the little girl’s affliction, only to experience tremendous self-consciousness once she was there.

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<sup>13</sup> The idea that there is a particular mode of Spirit enabled empathic experience that supersedes ordinary human abilities is an important issue in the Anthropology of Christianity that has been addressed somewhat by both Csordas (1993) and Luhrmann (2000). On a related issue, Robbins (2001, 2008) has made the case that Christian language ideologies that stress the importance of intentions and sincerity have been the basis for cultural innovations among the Urapmin that accommodate the idea that one can, at least inasmuch as they are expressed in prayer, know another person’s thoughts. Such findings speak to the importance of considering the ways in which subjective experience of feeling into another person’s embodied state, and what conditions are thought to be necessary for such an achievement to be possible, can be variously configured in correspondence with cultural understandings of the properties and possibilities of persons (see Hollan and Throop 2008, 2011).

Just before looking at this first segment of the story it should be noted that Hannah first brings this experience into our interview as an example of how her emotional state can function as an indication of the Holy Spirit's presence. As with many of the interview excerpts that have appeared in this paper, we had been discussing how the Holy Spirit could be discerned in everyday situations and in worship. For Hannah, this entailed discussing instances in which the difference was clear cut. She provided the story below as an example of how she could pray to bring the Holy Spirit into a situation where she felt danger, uncertainty, or fear.

- |     |              |   |
|-----|--------------|---|
| 1.  | Christopher: | How does that change sort of manifest itself? Do you feel a sort of shift       |
| 2.  |              | in your mood, or is it like a bodily thing, or just a thought that you have?    |
| 3.  | Hannah:      | I do feel. Let's go to an example. Ok. Can I do this? I'm gonna do a story.     |
| 4.  | C:           | Yeah, yeah. As many stories as you want to.<br>[...]                            |
| 5.  | H:           | Right. Yeah. So. Um. Recently, I was outside of the Loma Linda Hospital.        |
| 6.  |              | God had called me to. It was crazy. A couple of my friends and I to worship     |
| 7.  |              | for a child was on her deathbed.<br>[...]                                       |
| 8.  | H:           | So we decided to go out. It was like twelve o'clock in the morning.             |
| 9.  |              | And we're outside and we're worshipping and we're just praising God             |
| 10. |              | because we just really thought that God was going to heal this child.           |
| 11. |              | And so I was dancing and every time a car came by I would feel this             |
| 12. |              | fear of like, I should stop because they're gonna be like "what are you doing?" |
| 13. |              | You know, outside the parking lot of Loma Linda Medical Center.                 |
| 14. |              | You know? 'cause that's normal!   |
| 15. |              | Anyways, and so I would feel this fear and I would have to,                     |
| 16. |              | I would have to be like, in the name of Jesus                                   |
| 17. |              | I declare you to leave in the presen{t}. And it was continuous,                 |
| 18. |              | like every time a car came by I would feel that feeling and feeling.            |
| 19. |              | And I would have to automatically shift and to be like, no, Father, I will,     |
| 20. |              | I'm telling Him, Father God, I will not allow, um, spirit of fear,              |
| 21. |              | anxiety to come upon me. I am worshipping you.<br>[...]                         |
| 22. |              | So I'm like {mimes dance with hands and hums}                                   |
| 23. |              | and then I was like, there's lights! Stop freaking out.                         |
| 24. |              | Stop freaking out, keep it going.   |

What I would first like to draw the reader's attention to is Hannah's tremendous sense of effort to maintain her dancing in the face of her anxiety over being so conspicuous.

This is quite different from her typical embodied disposition toward her dancing. Prior to her shift into experiencing her dancing as a spiritual act, she danced in many settings with a sense of pride in her competence as a performer and a choreographer. When she began to use her dance as a form of worship she maintained these senses of herself, but also began to feel a great deal of intimacy with God through the act of dancing. She started improvising – even improvising in front of others. In this setting, however, she felt great anxiety. This anxiety was triggered when passing cars would remind her that unknown others may be judging her for her actions. While she has no direct contact with anyone who does, in fact, question her behavior, Hannah is convinced that what is for her an act of worship looks to these faceless strangers something abnormal (see her voicing their imagined dialogue in line 12). It is her imagination of other's negative perceptions of her actions that is the major source of her anxiousness. Hannah, however, attributed her “freaking out” to a “spirit of fear” (20). Perhaps she actually perceived this “spirit” as a demonic presence, but in the absence of any outright discussion on our part of what she meant by a “spirit of fear” a less rich interpretation would be that she entified the emotional state as something foreign to her attempt to follow God's direction to worship Him by dancing at the hospital. In either interpretation she articulates an opposition to a reified feeling that she revokes with prayer (17-21, see below). The asymmetry here is temporally arrayed as a shifting between different feelings – peace and anxiety. In this case what she is struggling to do is maintain a particular embodied orientation to her action. While neither peace nor anxiety are feelings she portrays as natively her own, one of them (peace) is entified as the Spirit's comfort enabling her to carry on her dance. The

contingency here pertains to whether or not she will be able to continue to exercise her gift of dance at all.

In this example, the contingency of whether her embodied state reflects an peaceful attunement to the Spirit or an anxious orientation to her self-consciousness necessitates some regulatory action on Hannah's part. Hannah portrays herself as mentally stepping back from the action in these moments of anxiety; she depicts these imminent negative feelings as necessitating a dialogue of prayer ("I would have to be like, in the name of Jesus I declare you to leave"). This dialogue is primarily not self talk (with the exception of her "Stop freaking out. Stop freaking out, keep it going") but rather, it takes the form of reported speech that joins a larger corpus of incidents in which she portrays herself as in dialogue with God. The impact of this dialogue is something she elaborates in a portion of our interview that does not appear in the above excerpt:

And so, after saying it, and for this example I had to actually say it for me to go, go back into that peace, into that me not caring 'cause I was praising God and it didn't really matter what was happening. 'Cause that's what God had called me to do. But at that time I could actually feel the fear and when I said "in the name of Jesus" or whatever came out of my mouth I did feel emotionally safe again.

Despite her fears, Hannah perseveres and, in fact, uses her fear as a way of increasing her reliance upon God. Where Hannah is dwelling on her struggle to maintain her dance she is also indicating her search for and discovery of inward, emotional evidence of the Spirit's involvement in her activity. She is narrating not only her anxiety but the evidence she found of the Spirit's movement through the asymmetry between

her personal level of discomfort with the act of dancing in the parking lot (see sarcasm in line 7) and the peace she feels when she prays. What is happening here is key for our analysis, since it illustrates that her later “inward move” is not so much rhetorical strategy imposed on the narrative as a particular way of attending to the experiential material of the event itself.

Hannah’s story has thus far turned on a series of inwardly felt asymmetries. Each of these is attended to as intersubjectively constituted experiences, evidencing the presence and direction of the Holy Spirit. First, there was her unexpected and atypical sense of compassion for a complete stranger, which she registered as the Holy Spirit moving her to act on the girl’s behalf. Second, there was the initial disjuncture between her typical experience of freedom when dancing and the fear she felt in the parking lot that gave way to peace as she prayed herself through those moments of self-consciousness. In both instances she attends to a change in her emotional state as an indication of the Holy Spirit’s empowerment. Together, these experiences provide a kind of backdrop for Hannah’s upcoming narration of the difference between her inward experience of God’s power and the ostensible ineffectuality of her actions.

She and her prayer partners remained at the hospital praying for the girl’s healing for three hours in the middle of the night. The child’s condition did not improve. At some point that night the family had to make the decision to take their little girl off of life support. Hannah and her friends were there with them in the hospital.

I’ll never forget, um, being in the hospital room, like, this waiting room, with this family whose baby girl, she was like 6, you know, they’re like going to, to pull the plug in like 45 minutes. So they’re talking about do they want to give the organs

away. Do they want to do this or that thing. And I'm sitting in this room, in this hospital room. Just, it's surreal to see so much hurt and pain. I was just, this is not ok with me. And I know it's not ok with God.

She had experienced God prompting her to dance for the girl's healing and the courage to continue dancing through her anxiety. Nonetheless, the girl passed away. There in the waiting room, Hannah was certain that God could not have abided such suffering. If God had inspired her action, and her experience to that point had provided her all indication that He had, what was the meaning of her actions in light of the child's death?

This was my question, too. My hunch, which was wrong, was that she would explain that she had misunderstood what God was saying to her (something she explained had crossed her mind but that she had ruled out early on), or that there had been something wrong with the ritual itself. Instead, Hannah moved to distance herself from a position that reduced the hallmark of God's presence to ritual efficacy. Rather, she insists on the possibility of meaning-to-come and emphasizes the importance of her experience for her overall spiritual development. My interview methods leave something to be desired here, since I get caught up in a very active co-narrator role. Be that as it may, I think that my misstep offers a useful opportunity to see both how Hannah makes sense of her disappointing experience, and how she handles an instance in which asymmetries in construals of an event (in this case hers and mine) are made explicit<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> As an aside: I have selected here a portion of our interview in which we were speaking of this event the most explicitly and where I felt most comfortable asking her tough questions. When in line 10 I say that "perhaps something happens," I am not suggesting a solution but eluding to one she had already implied in an earlier episode of her narrative.



1. Christopher: So as far as your spiritual gifts go,
2. Hannah: Ok.
3. C: Could you feel that you were operating in, like, the appropriate gift at the
4. appropriate time?
5. H: ((Laughs)) Ok.
6. C: On a God-inspired mission, right?
7. H: ((Laughing)) OK.
8. C: Like, you're dancing in the parking lot, right? And it's a God-inspired mission.
9. And, um, things don't come to fruition the way. (.5) You know.
10. Perhaps something happens but it's not what you expect.
11. H: Ri::ght.
12. C: How does that make you feel about your spiritual gifts in general?
13. H: Mhmm. Ok. U:::mm. ((Shrugs)) It. Oh, we:ll, I think I know
14. what you were trying to ask. Ok. So. I mean, like.
15. Once again, with these gifts and stuff, God does not have,
16. I don't have to do anything for God to do what he wants to do.
17. C: Mhmm.
18. H: So. Or not do. So::: me dancing at 12AM in the morning
19. for a couple hours, tha:::t as (2s). It does, **something has changed.**
20. I have to believe. I have to have faith that something has changed.
21. However, I have to understand that, once again there's a choice.
22. Like, God, you have a choice and I have a choice. And
23. God's gonna do what God's gonna do but I have to believe that
24. partnering with Him does something different.
25. C: Right.

26. H: Something that if I didn't dance. Now, it might not have been.  
 27. You know, eh, who knows. Dancing and me stepping out and  
 28. doing that could have just been about me. **It could have totally**  
 29. **been about me** and my relationship with God and growing like that.  
 30. But I have to believe that even in regards to [name of child], doing that  
 31. changed something. What it is, I guess, you know you said,  
 32. it didn't come out that she lived, and that's how I thought, you know.  
 33. I'm partnering with you that she, like, lives. And granted, you know I  
 34. have to say that she was supposed to die um, like, like her heart wasn't  
 35. strong enough of something like that, at like 12:30 or 1? And she made it  
 36. through like, the rest of, you know, the day and stuff like that.  
 37. And I can't sit up here and be like, it's because I danced.  
 38. But I have to understand that God does value us when we partner with him.  
 39. He, you know. ' Cause why would he, why would he even ask?  
 40. You know? **Why would he even give use the choice** if it was like,  
 41. you don't need to do it anyway.  
 42. C: Yeah.  
 43. H: Like, I got it all. I got it all taken care of.  
 44. H: You know? So I definitely believe that. I think I'm.  
 45. I, when I decide to step into that, something's growing inside of me.  
 46. And if my. You know, **who knows** what's happening outside and if  
 47. people will be healed or not healed or. You know, **who knows** if people are  
 48. seeing it and changed. **Who knows** about all those external things. But  
 49. I know that when I partner with God **I am being changed**. Simple.  
 50. C: Mhmm.

This final narrative episode is noticeably fragmented. I would submit to the reader that that this fragmentation is partially brought on by the unexpected task of having to contend with my own problematic co-narration. It may equally be due to the vagueness of my inquiry (13: "U:::mm. {Shrugs} It. Oh, we:ll, I think I know what you were trying to ask"), but this is not all that is going on. When I first pose a new narrative framing that highlights the problem of efficacy, she struggles to begin her narrative anew in a manner that will address my question (14-15: "Ok. So. I mean, like. Once again, with these gifts and stuff").

It is also evident, however, that my framing is problematic for her because it requires her to provide an account of a process that is still ongoing. How can it be that

God would ask her to do something that did not pan out? As we discussed the event she told me frankly that she was “still working that out.” There remained a mystery. To put problem in her own words: “why would he even ask? You know? Why would he even give us the choice if it was like, you don't need to do it anyway.” In my role as interviewer I am asking her to have meaning now, to have resolved the uncertainties. Based partially on my problematization, she reexamines the disjuncture between her expectation (based on what she heard God tell her) and the result, trying to explain to me how she understood her experience (to the extent that she did).

Embedded in her explanation are two different notions of how God interacts with human agents and to what extent anyone may know what His purpose is. On the one hand, Hannah believes that God does reveal Himself to His believers – “I should say that I hear from God,” she explained earlier in our interview. She refers to God as a personally knowable and communicative agent with whom she has ongoing contact (see above on reported speech, shift in experience of dancing). In this regard her descriptions map onto the Charismatic conception of God's will as something that can become manifested in one's actions and is therefore intimately knowable. Moreover, she has embodied experiential evidence of the Holy Spirit's influence on the events at hand.

On the other hand, Hannah portrays God as opaque, beyond the scope of the human intellectual capacity to comprehend what is at work. Throughout much of Hannah's narrative she makes tacit reference to an idea that she had expressed earlier, “God, you have to understand that God is so:: much bigger than our brains [...] you just never know how God's moving.” Like the other participants, various forms of

asymmetry endemic to her embodied practice of her gifts mean that Hannah confronts the alterity of God even as she experiences intimacy with Him. In this case there is a disjuncture between her experience of the Holy Spirit leading her to dance for the girl's healing and a tragic outcome that seemingly contradicts Hannah's embodied sense of God's direction. There is an inherent inaccessibility to this mystifying event, because she cannot know what effect her actions had if not the curing of the child.

We return, then, to one of the key problems of this text: that spiritual experiences entail both intimacy and inaccessibility. One way in which Hannah recognizes and attempts to deal with these dichotomous views of God is expressed strongly in her use of modal and mental verbs. She frequently uses the modal verb phrase "have to" to denote obligatory actions. Her first use of this modal verb is to begin to parse the problem she faces by drawing a distinction between God's power and her own (15-16: "God does not have, I don't have to do anything for God to do what he wants to do"). God is all-powerful, and it is his prerogative to do whatever he wants. In contrast, Hannah's efficacy is contingent upon God's will. Having experienced His influence on her actions she seems compelled to believe that God has used her somehow (19-20: "Something has changed. I have to believe. I have to have faith that something has changed"). Her phrase "have to believe" does not seem to indicate something dutiful as much as the necessity of availing herself to a foundational truth of her experience. Mirroring the problem of identifying God's overarching plan rather than merely one's particular involvement, Hannah articulates a dichotomy between her own experience of God's power and what results it may have in the world outside of herself. If God may be personally knowable (intimacy) but unpredictable (opacity), so too her actions can

provide a personal encounter with God's power but have potentially unknown consequences. This is not unfamiliar ground for Hannah, since it was only after others pointed out that her dancing had spiritual power that she began to recognize it as a spiritual gift and embody it differently.

Hannah begins to resolve the problem of efficacy by recasting it as a problem of what she can apprehend with her finite perspective (46-48: "Who knows about all those external things"). The "who knows" motif runs throughout the latter portions of her musing, informing an emergent bracketing of the external results of her action. By situating her internal experience as separate from the objective effects of her actions, Hannah sets up a schism between her own spiritual development and the ostensible efficacy of her spiritual gifts. It is that moral endeavor to act in accordance with what she has determined to be God's will that she begins to identify as a possible reason for her experience (28-29: "It could have totally been about me and my relationship with God and growing like that.") While she does not rule out the possibility that acting in her spiritual gifts may have had some effect on others, Hannah resolves the uncertainty by implementing a dichotomy of internal and external efficacy. Using one's spiritual gifts is meaningful in itself, because it contributes to one's spiritual development: "You know, who knows if people are seeing it and changed. Who knows about all those external things. But I know that when I partner with God I am being changed." "Simple", she concludes.

What Hannah arrives at is a process of self-transformation that is founded on her experience. She struggled to do what she perceived God asking her to do, and she endured. Throughout that struggle she relied on prayer to help her maintain her

sense of the Holy Spirit's presence. One result, the healing, was the complete opposite of what she expected. She is not ruling out the possibility that her dance had an impact on others (46-48). Hannah is not, however, banking on a purpose outside of her experience. While not foreclosing the possibility that others experienced something in her dancing that is outside of her awareness, and thus, maintaining an expectation for meaning-to-come, she moves to place primacy on her inner experience of "growing," being changed into someone who is willing to do whatever God requires of her (45, 49). Like Rachel and Peter she cannot say for certain how people will react when she follows the Spirit's direction, like Debra she cannot be sure why the attempt to heal didn't have the ostensible effects she believed it would, but similar to each of them she is certain of her inner experience and it is there that she locates the validity of her actions.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing from the literatures of Phenomenological Anthropology and the Anthropology of Christianity, I have argued that the recognition of intersubjective asymmetries informs the meaning Charismatic Christians derive from their experience of the gifts of the Spirit. Coming from the insights provided by phenomenology, phenomenologically oriented anthropologists have argued that the singularity of each person plays an important role in structuring cultural phenomena. Our own embodied experience of the world never matches its fullness and complexity, nor is it coterminous with the way that others may experience it (see Desjarlais and Throop 2011, Throop 2012). Drawing on Throop's (n.d.) argument that sacred experience is founded in phenomenological modifications, I have argued that recognizing the difference in

another's embodied mode of being in the world can instigate such shifts, and in the cultural idiom of Charismatic Christianity, these brushes with the surplus that others represent is entified as experiential evidence of God's magnitude.

Intersubjective asymmetries, I have argued, are also the bases for contingency in the practice of the gifts. Inasmuch as individual's will react differently to a particular practice or instantiation of the gifts, their use reveals a degree of uncertainty that must accompany their enactment. Likewise, any form of asymmetry that is revealed in the Charismatic intersubjective array, such as moments where certain emotions or the outcome of one's actions are perceived to have their basis in the movement of the Spirit, reveals the possibility of not getting the whole picture and thus the possibility that one's perception was wrong or incomplete.

While this intersubjective basis for contingency is an existential reality of all human life, I have sought to portray its unique way of taking shape in Charismatic sensibilities toward spiritual experience. Accordingly, I have shown that recognition of asymmetry leads the participants discussed herein to partake in a sort of "bracketing" attitude wherein they abstain from absolute determinations of what God has and will do through their enactments of the gifts. Rather, they maintain a certain degree of indetermination about what others may experience and foreground their own embodied understanding of what the Holy Spirit enacts through their gifts. One might incorrectly consider this a rationalization or a somewhat solipsistic attitude. I have, however, argued that rather than consider this a mere rhetorical strategy or a solely *post hoc* rationalization, this attitude is feeding-forward into expectations for future experiences; they are certain that God's Spirit is doing something through them, but they content

themselves with a partial understanding. Significantly, the manner in which this bracketing, which I have referred to as “the inward move,” turns into projections about the future provides a basis upon which to regard currently inscrutable experiences as evidence of “meaning-to-come.” In the cases of Debra and Hannah this becomes a significant failsafe against disillusionment in the face of what might appear in the moment as a baffling misfire.

The inward move is the product of an attitude toward spiritual experience that sees it as containing aspects that are beyond human explanation. There are certainly ways in which this move can be colored by optimism or doubt. Debra openly acknowledges she has doubts about attempted faith healing that left her still dealing with the pain of her foot injury. But despite her doubts she abstains from determining that the experience was a farce. As I’ve shown with various other narratives in this essay, the inward move she makes in response to doubt is the same as the one others make in response to experiences that are far less troubling. The process of the inward move feeding forward into the expectation of meaning-to-come is maintained. The temporality of such experiences means that many contingencies that could be the basis for doubt may also be recast as evidence that God works in mysterious ways.

A final story should help illustrate this point. In a tandem sermon, Peter and Rachel once recounted the story of how years ago during a visit to a local Vineyard church they had a baffling word of knowledge spoken over them by one of the local prayer ministers. The man praying over them declared to them both that God intended to strengthen their marriage. Already married for well over two decades and still strongly devoted to one another, they received this word of knowledge with skepticism.



In fact, Peter was unable to keep himself from laughing outright. To make matters worse, when the prayer minister saw Peter's laughter he believed it was Holy Laughter, a manifestation of the Spirit – evidence that his word was hitting home. Realizing the minister's misinterpretation, Peter was confronted with a blatant disjuncture between his experience of the prayer minister's gift and the minister's own read on Peter's reaction. The misunderstanding concerned Peter, who wondered how someone who was so gifted could be so wrong. It was days later that he had an experience that fundamentally altered his understanding of the event:

[I heard God say to me] “You think your marriage is so good it couldn't be better?” “Well, uh, no God. I guess not, Lord. I hadn't thought of it that way.” And it's like He just stood me up. And He said, “you think this is all there is? You think this is the end of the deal? I mean, you know, you don't think it could be better than this? You don't think I can improve it? Come on!” So you know, I, I got all snotty nosed and got on the floor and repented and spent some time, yeah, three days. Yeah. We had kind of a painful three days here just kind of repenting. So um, I, I just want to point that out to you [...] The Lord always has more.

In Peter's case there was a two-fold disjuncture. In the first place, the Vineyard prayer minister had given him a word of knowledge that seemed totally inconsistent with Peter's own evaluation of his marriage. Second, it had only made matters worse when the minister had misinterpreted Peter's scoffing as something sacred. The blatant mismatch between Peter's attitude toward the word and the minister's interpretation was perhaps the most aggravated example of an asymmetrical experience I have access to. Nonetheless, a subsequent experience reconfigured Peter's assessment of

what had happened there in the Vineyard. Peter's story is especially patent, but not unusual. What it reveals is that doubt is not a final determination on experience so long as adherents remain open to the possibility of "meaning-to-come." So long as adherents maintain an orientation to the Spirit's excess they are also preserving the possibility that future experiences can build on past ones.

Finally, the argument I have laid out provides us some grounds for reflecting back on the epistemic attitude Luhmann (2012b) has identified. Attitudes toward experience are wrought out in an interplay between cultural modes of objectification and the existential conditions of phenomenal experience. Accordingly, I have argued that Charismatic adherents' practice of qualifying their experiences has its basis not in logical contradictions but in the way that the existential condition of intersubjective asymmetries are brought into phenomenal form. Because others and our efforts toward them will always present a surplus that is beyond our presently embodied experience, intersubjective asymmetries and their cultural elaborations are imminent. In the Charismatic context they serve the dual role of presenting the direct and outstripping influence of the Holy Spirit on human action and affording the possibility that those actions will have unforeseeable consequences. God is intimate and inaccessible because Charismatic Christians experience Him to be so as a product of the intersubjective constitution of experience.

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