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Understanding 'prophecy': charisma, religious enthusiasm, and religious individualisation in the 17th century. A cross-cultural approach

1 Introduction

> But the mind of man is also subject to an unaccountable elevation and presumption, arising from prosperous success, from luxuriant health, from strong spirits, or from a bold and confident disposition. In such a state of mind, the imagination swells with great but confused conceptions, to which no sublunary beauties or enjoyments can correspond. Everything mortal and perishable vanishes as unworthy of attention. And a full range is given to the fancy in the invisible regions or world of spirits, where the soul is at liberty to indulge itself in every imagination, which may best suit its present taste and disposition. Hence arise raptures, transports, and surprising flights of fancy; and confidence and presumption still encreasing, these raptures, being altogether unaccountable, and seeming quite beyond the reach of our ordinary faculties, are attributed to the immediate inspiration of that Divine Being, who is the object of devotion. In a little time, the inspired person comes to regard himself as a distinguished favourite of the Divinity; and when this frenzy once takes place, which is the summit of enthusiasm, every whimsy is consecrated: Human reason, and even morality are rejected as fallacious guides: And the fanatic madman delivers himself over, blindly, and without reserve, to the supposed ellipses of the spirit, and to inspiration from above. Hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of ENTHUSIASM. (Hume 1987 [1741])

When Hume wrote these few lines, he was in good company in assessing the perils of certain Christian groups who had influenced Western Christendom since the Reformation. In the ground-breaking multi-volume *Tous les cérémonies du monde* (1723–1743), Bernard Picart and Jean-Frédéric Bernard, Huguenot exiles in Amsterdam, described with a certain amount of criticism a recent religious phenomenon which had spread to Paris at the beginning of the 18th century. A group of followers of a Parisian Jansenist and ascetic, François De Paris, became known by the name *convulsionnaires de Saint Medard*. After De Paris' death, his gravesite in Saint Médard became a place of pilgrimage where followers had visions and were miraculously healed (Hunt, Jacob and Mijnhardt 2010, 270–95). Mainly composed of women, this movement was characterised by embodied religious practices, some of which were rooted in biblical traditions. They spoke in tongues, danced, prayed, and sang.

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Some decades earlier, persecuted French Huguenots from the Cavennes, a region in the south of France, began roaming around the country while preaching the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. Besides sermonising, they performed miraculous healings, sang, and spoke in tongues. When, through the network of Calvinist support, they moved to England, they attempted to resume this religious enthusiasm in an urban setting (Laborie 2015).

From the 1650s to the 1660s, many Jews, some of whom were of Christian descent, became caught up in the frenzy of a messianic movement led by a 'messiah' figure who heard voices and then fell into a trance-like sleep, in which they acted against established religious norms (Scholem 1973; Idel 2000; Goldish 2004). In roughly this same period, some of the most radical groups of the English dissent appeared: they spoke only when possessed by the 'Spirit' that enabled them both to be reached by God and to speak His word.

While many examples of practices such as these florished in the context of the Protestant Reformation, it is important to consider other, earlier and parallel, historical cases that culminated in highly individualised religious experiences represented by imposing personalities, who were imbued with prophetic agency.[1] A number of earlier examples can be found in the lives of Gioacchino da Fiore (1130–1202 ca.), Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498), and Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639). Their millenarianism was combined with utopian imagination and visionary experiences that exerted a meaningful influence across many areas of thought for many centuries to come.[2] The joachimite tradition embedded among the Friars Minor is just a case in point. Indeed, this tradition travelled different cultures, as European countries built their overseas empires, influencing religious movements imbued with prophetic and apocalyptic imagination (Travassos Valdes 2011).

These religious phenomena are usually linked to Christian millenarianism, Jewish messianism, apocalypticism, and the broad cultural phenomenon of 'prophecy', which is rooted in biblical traditions. These terms conceptualise complex religious experiences that often overlap and that do not appear exclusively in biblical religions, but also in other non-Christian environments, and throughout the wider religious context of antiquity (Aune 1983).

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1 This article is part of my research period at the Max Weber Centre in Erfurt in 2014–2015 within the context of the Research Group in "Religious Individualisation in Historical Perspective" (FOR 1013). For the use of this notion, see Rüpke 2013; Fuchs and Rüpke 2015; Otto 2017.

2 These are only paradigmatic examples. The bibliography on these themes is extensive since some of these personalities exerted enormous influence in many areas, as in the case of Joachim of Fiore. In other cases, they became national heroes and, accordingly, played a growing role as mythical figures of anti-clerical national narratives. For references, see Weinstein 2011; Popkin 2013.

In this chapter, I focus my analysis on cross-cultural religious phenomena that were defined by the negative notion of 'religious enthusiasm'. Although the term itself was used specifically to describe the practices of a number of Christian groups, and appeared more frequently in certain cultural contexts, such as those found in England and the German territories, religious enthusiasm was, in fact, a key feature of the early modern period and crossed all possible religious divides.[3] In the English parlance of the early modern period, 'enthusiasm' was a term that described religious behaviour that was considered inappropriate and dangerous to the wellbeing of society.[4] Criticism of the alleged 'gift of prophecy' appeared in the immediate aftermath of the Protestant Reformation and was primarily directed at Anabaptism. Later, the term 'enthusiasm' was applied to different realms, from medicine to philosophy, becoming a label through which to disapprove of and dismiss certain traditions as well as enemies (Heyd 1995).

A great deal of research has been conducted on this topic, with many scholars attributing the rise of the Enlightenment and criticism of religion to the repression of enthusiasm (Laborie 2015). However, religious enthusiasm persisted, both through space and time, and it is therefore problematic to assert its demise, even in the age of Enlightenment (Lovejoy 1985). Visionaries and prophets never disappeared; indeed, their practices and worldviews, as much as their cultural strategies, were replicated into the twentieth century.[5]

Religious enthusiasm encompasses a set of 'religious experiences'[6] often linked to visionary episodes, which may be rooted in biblical tradition, or, to be precise, to the textual tradition that described ancient prophetic practices, both in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Visionary experiences can also be found in texts commonly referred to by scholars as 'apocalyptic literature', a genre that spread throughout the ancient Jewish world and became exemplified in the *Revelation* of John, the apocalyptic text that closed the canon of Christian biblical scriptures.[7] Religious enthusiasm among Christians was both 'restorative', in the sense that it aimed to reinstall a form of primitive Christianity as the truest form of religion, and 'redemptive', meaning that it aimed to establish heaven on earth.

3 For a first systematic historical genealogy, see Knox 1950, although we find an attempt at a genealogy in Johannes Hornbeek (1653), who associates 'enthusiasm' with the 'libertines' (Heyd 1995, 21). For the Ibero-Hispanic world, see Silvério-Lima and Torres-Megiani 2016.

4 Hume 1987; Gibbon 1994; Foster 1997. For a historical assessment of the phenomenon in the 19th and 20th century, see Taves 1999.

5 Religious enthusiasm is still very much alive, especially in the form of charismatic Pentecostalism: Alexander 2009; Anderson, Bergunder, Droogers and Van der Laan 2010.

6 For this notion, see Martin, McCutcheon and Smith 2012.

7 The literature on this textual and religious tradition is vast. I list the most relevant references: Collins 1998; Himmelfarb 2010; a controversial text is Cohn 1970.

In analysing biblical prophecy, Max Weber labelled these religious currents as traditions of 'charismatic authority', a notion which was destined for great success and was systematically applied to many other cultural and political contexts. Charismatic authority indicated, in Weber's definition, a quality of the individual that set this individual aside, that endowed him/her with special 'gifts' stemming from extra-ordinary powers (Weber 1978).[8]

Visionary experiences vary according to their function. If apocalyptic visions were typically linked to eschatological fantasies and imbued with images of violence, death, and war, then prophetic visions tended to be more nuanced, as they also conveyed hopes of justice and redemption, and overlapped with other sensory experiences that scholars tend to describe as 'mystical'. Jews and Christians held similar attitudes, although with different connotations, towards these visionary experiences and their imagination of the end of time. For Jews, prophetic notions foretold the coming of the messianic age whereas for Christians it meant the *parusia*, the second coming of Christ on earth and the Kingdom of God.[9] Prophetic behaviour and social criticism were often linked therefore enhancing political millenarianism, which could cross many cultures (Subrahmanyam 2001).

There were at least two forms of religious experiences that overlapped in many written records. One is better describe as mystical journey, which is often depicted in autobiographical narratives as well as texts written by disciples. In general, these texts are rife with portrayals of emotion and descriptions of the path that leads to a profound encounter with God. This personal encounter sometimes prompts a person's particular ability to be empowered and to perform religious deeds.[10]

The other religious experience we find in these narratives is linked to a form of 'spirit possession', which, if properly performed, affects both the body and the mind and supports a highly individualised religious experience. The body inhabited by the supernal force is always empowered: the experience might lead to the formation of a small group of disciples or to the organization of a movement. It could also incur a condemnation for insanity or witchcraft, and therefore in

8 'A certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader [...] How the quality in question would be ultimately judged from an ethical, aesthetic, or other such point of view is naturally indifferent for the purpose of definition' (Weber 1947 [original 1922]).

9 There is a large body of literature on millenarianism and chiliasm: see Goldish, Kottman, Force, and Laursen 2001.

10 See especially James 1902; Otto 1926; De Certeau 1987 and 2013.

some jurisdictions, the death penalty. Medical scrutiny of religious behaviour is not a new practice, especially for Catholics and Protestants, and became particularly meaningful in the first half of the 18th century. This was when it specifically targeted the religious phenomenon of enthusiasm, either as a form of superstition or illness of the mind and/or body (Laborie 2015; but especially addressed in Burton 1621; Heyd 1995). The Catholic Church's medical examinations followed specific instructions, devised to identify true holiness, to establish sainthood, and ultimately exercise a form of discipline over uncontrolled personal religious experiences.[11] Likewise, powerful and controversial mystical experiences were examined to detect inappropriate behaviour or to eliminate practices that were deemed dangerous. The most emblematic case is of course that of the arch-mystic Teresa of Avila, whose emotional experience of her encounter with God inspired numerous depictions in representational works of art. She herself kept a diary of her visions, at the suggestion of her confessor, who was able to both address and discipline Teresa's inner responses.[12]

Being possessed by any sort of extra-ordinary power entails the use of the body to convey a religious message. My goal in this chapter is to pinpoint how the body was empowered in order to convey a message, to pursue a political goal, to strengthen group identity, or to break the legal constrictions of society. Moreover, my interest is in investigating how the empowerment of the body through an altered state of mind worked across gender and class divides.

What is fascinating in analysing these religious experiences through the prism of different faiths is that, from a certain perspective, they employ a common pattern of religious individualisation. This form of individualisation involves both a strong volition and a gradual process that leads to a separation of the self, the formation of a temporary divided or enstranged ego, since episodes of spirit possession do provoke altered states of consciousness. On the one hand, spirit possession, prophetic behaviour, and visionary experiences have in common a similar structural pattern vis-à-vis the functioning of the mind. Protestants, Catholics, and Jews referred to culturally prescribed models that defined acceptable psychological behaviour, the proper way to induce visions, and the appropriate mode for reaching unity with the divine power. The transformation of these highly personal and individualised experiences into religious movements varied greatly and often depended on social settings, strategies of communication, and the intersection of the societal and psychological needs of the group. Therefore,

11 There is an extensive bibliography: I refer here specifically to Malena 2015; Luzzatto 2007.

12 For her biographical work, see Weber 2009. Female mysticism was kept under control by the presence of the confessor and the established relationship between the spiritual director and the person (who is usually part of a Church order).

as some scholars suggest, visionary and/or mystical experiences should be understood not just as a psychological experience but as an embedded part of a complex religious system (Harmless 2008).

In this chapter, I focus on marginal traditions and the question of how they might be viewed through a contemporary lens. In particular, I discuss George Fox and the rising movement of Quakerism, and Sabbetai Zevi's messianic Jewish movement. Besides their chronological proximity, there are a number of features that make these two movements suitable for parallel analysis. To begin with, in both cases we find a compelling religious leader, a highly distinct character with the power to become part of shared memory of a specific group. Second, the followers of both movements faced similar social difficulties in finding that they were often subject to persecution. Third, in both cases we can identify an interaction between collective enthusiasm and personal ecstatic or mystical experiences. My analysis will therefore focus on: the use of the body to induce an altered state of the mind, as, for example, through ascetic practices (§ 2); the significance of place in informing mystical experiences and inducing spiritual possession (§ 3); and the relationship between the individual and the social setting (§ 4).

2 George Fox, the 'twice born'

In his influential work on 'religious experiences', William James described a psychological type, the 'twice born', as consisting of those who were likely to undergo feelings of despair, melancholia, and distress in search of a plentiful experience of God (James 1902, lectures VI and VII). James made ample use of Quakers' 'autobiographical' accounts, amongst which was the *Journal* of George Fox. George Fox (1624–1691), a weaver, dissenter, and founder of the Society of Friends, which became later known as Quakerism, lived during the period of great religious conflict that struck English society in the mid-17th century (Hill 1972; Dandelion 2008). Fox recorded much of his religious journey in his *Journal*, the first edition of which was published shortly after his death and was heavily edited in order to make it resonant with the Quaker establishment.

The *Journal* is a written testimony that follows the structure of a conversion narrative (the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine are one of the most influential examples of this type of narrative). A narrative of the self is, of course, a very specific literary genre and should be analysed, among other ways, as an ego-document.[13]

13 For the study of ego-documents see: *Center for the Study of Egodocuments and History* (http://www.egodocument.net/egodocument/who-we-are.html, last accessed 15th August 2018).

Many Christian narratives about mystical practices also document the experience of religious conversion, that is, an account of a psychic transformation which symbolizes a radical transformation of personal life, a radical 'conversion', in the parlance of William James (James 1902, lectures VIII and IX). Although not all conversion narratives are mystical in content, some do provide information about a number of practices that describe the state of the soul striving for an encounter with God. These can be described as 'biographies of the soul'.

Fox was a preacher, a person who exploited the oral dimension and its performative effects to preach the word of God. The oral dimension is a remarkable feature of Christianity since its inception. Many of the leaders who were dubbed enthusiasts were preachers and their activity extended to various places, some of which were public spaces. Although preaching was regulated by the rules of classical rhetoric, it often gave an opportunity for extraordinary examples of religious individualisation, because preaching was linked to fame and success (Facchini 2017).

Christian preaching conveys two distinct elements of religious practice: the mimetic, which refers to the historical Jesus and the early Christian community, and the psychological, connected to the very act of preaching, with ecstatic results occurring through the performative effect of the uttered word. Fox's *Journal* describes both the development of the group and the interior story of his religious selfhood. God is omnipresent in Fox's account. He indeed describes an encounter with him at the young age of eleven, which can be interpreted as an early rite of passage:

> When I came to eleven years of age I knew pureness and righteousness; for while a child I was taught how to walk to be kept pure; the Lord taught me to be faithful in all things, and to act faithfully two ways, viz. inwardly to God, and outwardly to man. (Jones/Fox 1904)[14]

But then, according to his account, he spent several years attempting to escape the worldly temptations of Satan, fighting bouts of despair and depression. 'Temptations and despair' are two recurring words that have led to a wealth of publications about the intrinsic bond between religion, enthusiasm, and melancholia.[15] The *Journal* is permeated by a recurring trope of darkness and light, a dualism devised to describe mood swings, from melancholy and depression to enthusiasm and optimism. Overall, Fox seems to opt for an optimistic outlook, a trust in humankind. One phrase captures some of this religious ideology

14 James observed how personal crisis affected young boys at this age, which was often conceived of as a moment of change. For this ritual stage, see Durkheim 2013 and Van Gennep 1981. It may also be analysed in the context of the biological changes that occur with the onset of puberty.

15 This theme has been thoroughly explored: Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl 1964; Schiera 1999.

particularly well: 'I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death; but also an infinite ocean of light and love which flew over the ocean of darkness. In that also I saw the infinite love of God' (Jones/Fox 1904, 87).

In Fox's narrative, the Christ-like life examples are templates for his own personal transformation: 'priests' and 'temples' are not means for communicating the power of God. God does not dwell in 'dreadful places' (churches) or with priests and theologians; God lies within the heart of every man and woman, dwelling with the people (according to his own reading of Paul and Stephen). His 'openings' – that is, a type of revelation – come from reading the Bible and questioning traditional knowledge. But nothing seems to provide the answers he is searching for, nothing seems able to heal the pain of the soul (Jones/Fox 1904, 90f.).

After roaming, exploring, asking the preachers and the priests, and finally acknowledging that 'there was none among them that could speak to my condition', he heard the voice of God.

> When all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do, then, oh, then, I heard a voice which said 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition'; and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.

Fox's search seems to alternate moments of solitude with moments of socialisation, made up of encounters with people who are to become his followers and supporters. Following in the footsteps of Gospel narratives, open spaces indicate the ritual setting for meditation and individual prayer. He often spends time with people inside, while seeking loneliness outside. The voice he hears comes directly, in his imagining, from Jesus. One might be tempted to speak of a sort of Christ-mimesis, which is a common occurrence among Christians, although in many cases this is rooted in Jesus's suffering and death, as seen in many Catholic spiritual exercises, from Loyola to Catherine von Emmerick (De Certeau 2010; also Luzzatto 2007).

In one passage that, according to Jones, is emblematic of Fox's religious psyche, this model is clearly described:

> I was very much altered in countenance and person, as if my body had been new moulded or changed. My sorrows and troubles started to wear off, and tears of joy dropped from me, so that I could have wept night and days with tears of joy to the Lord, in humility and brokenness of heart. I saw into that which was without end, things which cannot be uttered, and of the greatness and infinitude of the love of God, which cannot be expressed by words. For I had been brought through the very ocean of darkness and death, and through and over the power of Satan, by the eternal glorious power of Christ; even through that darkness was I brought, which covered over all the world, and which chained down all and shut up all in death. The same eternal power of God, which brought through these things, was that which

> afterwards shook the nations, priests, professors and people. Then could I say had I been in spiritual Babylon, Sodom, Egypt, and the grave; but by the eternal power of God I was come out of it, into the power of Christ. (Jones/Fox 1904, 87f.)

The *Journal* went through substantial editing, both at the end of the 17th century and later, when a philological edition was published (Villani 2003; Smith/Fox 1998). There is no space here to reflect upon the significance of the writing phase that, as we mentioned above, plays an important role in defining truth claims and establishing an authoritative tradition. Fox founded a religious group in which contact with the power of Christ was continuously sought and experienced, both by men and women. His followers became missionaries, and enthusiasm was an outstanding feature of their practice, shaking and trembling an integral part of their ritual gatherings. Quakers were certainly 'fanatical': they embarked on dangerous missions, as with those who went to Italy with the purpose of converting the Pope, or those who were imprisoned in Malta (Villani 1996). But beyond this, they challenged theological authorities and political powers, refusing to pledge oaths and to serve in the army. As the movement flourished in the second half of the 17th century, it reached America and became established there, where it lost some of its original features. As suggested by Max Weber, the routinisation of charisma was finally institutionalised.

3 When the body speaks: prophecy and messianism of Jews

The religious zeal of the Iberian Jews was influential in the rise of the phenomenon increasingly known as spirit possession, as well as in fuelling the messianic frenzy that erupted with Sabbetai Zevi, the 'mystical messiah', around 1665–66. Mysticism, messianic enthusiasm related to the Sabbatean movement, and altered states of the mind are ideal points of departure for analysing forms of individualisation.

While Gershom Scholem attempted to reconstruct the history of Sabbetai through a phenomenological approach, recent literature has emphasised instead the general historical contexts in which Christian millenarianism and apocalypticism overlapped with Jewish messianism (Yerushalmi 1971; Goldish 2004). It is notable that one of the most important supporters of Sabbetai, Abraham Miguel Cardoso, was a former New Christian and made ample use of Christological exegesis to justify Sabbetai's conversion to Islam (Halperin 2007; Ruderman 2010, 163–6; Maciejko 2011).

Messianism can be interpreted against a backdrop of messianic doctrines, ideas, and practices with a comparative approach that connects the Jewish and Christian realms. In the phenomenology elaborated by Scholem, Christian messianism is especially antinomian and critical of authority, whereas Jewish messianism points toward the restorative dimension (a restoration of ancient political power). This is because rabbinic agency aims to control apocalyptical leanings and, in Scholem's interpretation, all potential anarchic cultural tendencies associated with 'apocalypticism' (Scholem 1973). Sabbetai Zevi was described by Scholem as a 'mystical messiah', and he implied that mysticism explained both his action and his disruptive antinomian attitude (Scholem 1971). But there is more: When Scholem conducted his extensive research, the subject of Jewish mysticism was not yet fully established in the academy. Mysticism and kabbalistic lore had been under attack since before the early 19th century and many scholars denied that Judaism had a deep and widespread mystical tradition. Moreover, Scholem and others inferred that the kabbalah disseminated through the 16th and 17th centuries was responsible for two major historical processes: one related to a new conception of the self, through the idea of a personal conversion, a self-redemption, an inner form of salvation (Liebes 1993). The second is linked to pathways of secularisation that I shall not discuss here, as they are quite outdated according to recent reassessments of 'secularising' theories. Suffice it to say that Scholem's aim was to identify an internal religious secularising pathway in order to prove that Judaism had both the power required to modernise and its own methods for undertaking the process.[16]

Since the inception of the sciences of religion, ascetic practices have attracted scholarly attention, although they are usually associated with Christian traditions and oriental religions (Harpham 1993; Wimbush and Valantis 1998; Flood 2004). For a better understanding of messianic agency, a perspective that can be offered is one that comparatively analyses different forms of mysticism induced by ascetic practices. Ascetic practices among Jews are already detectable in ancient rabbinic sources, although many historians claim that ascetic practices were always regulated (Diamond 2004). These practices usually affect the body deeply, thus inducing a modification of the mind's setting, and hence a modification of the relationship between the self and the Godhead. Kabbalists and ascetics made ample use of visions as a way of empowering themselves with authority but, in order to do so, they had to subjugate their bodies. But not all mystics

16 It is not possible to elaborate here on this interpretation of Jewish messianism, which is, in other words, a theory of modernity and secularisation. Historiography on Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism seems to accept it without critical inquiry. See Maciejko 2011 and 2017; Engel 2017.

were destined to inspire religious movements or enthusiasm as did Sabbetai Zevi. For a long period, visionary experiences were only shared among disciples and guarded within small esoteric groups of adult males.

The case of Yosef Karo, whose mystical practice reveals certain interesting features related to textuality in both the oral and written dimensions, sheds light on some of the religious attitudes that were to reappear in the 17th century, when the messianic movement emerged. Yosef Karo was born in Spain and was an exile from 1492. He moved to the Ottoman Empire and eventually settled in Safed, the holy city of the kabbalists. He became one of the most important legal authorities through the compilation of the *Shulkan arukh*, a legal codex he authored. He also experienced ecstatic moods, which were induced through bodily practices that had an impact on the brain. I now draw from a description written by 'eye witnesses':

> Know that the saint Karo and I agreed to stay up all night in order to banish sleep from our eyes on Shavuot. We succeeded thank God so that you will hear we ceased not from study for even a moment [...] all this we did in dread and awe, with quite unbelievable melody and tunefulness [...] No sooner we had studied two tractates of the Mishnah than our creator smote us so that we heard a voice speaking out of the mouth of the saint, may his light shine. It was a loud voice with letters clearly enunciated. All the companions heard the voice but were unable to understand what was said. It was an exceedingly pleasant voice, becoming increasingly strong. We all fell upon our faces and none of us had any spirit left because of our great dread and awe. The voice began to address us, saying: 'friends, choicest of choice, peace with you, beloved companions [...] Behold I am the Mishnah, the mother who chastises her children and I have come to converse with you.
>
> (Artzy and Idel 2015, 94; for translation Jacobs 1978)

This is an extraordinary excerpt. According to Moshe Idel and Shahar Artzy, this is an 'experience of trance', the outcome of deep study sessions and sleep deprivation. It is performed within the frame of a liturgical moment, the festival of *Shavuot*, a celebration that is part of the yearly calendar and is a commemoration of the Torah being received by Moses on Mount Sinai, in which the tradition is to remain awake and study throughout the night. It is a public experience shared by a small group of devotees, which indicates the esoteric element of collective mystical practices. The experience is a positive manifestation of 'a voice' (the *maggid*), which is allegedly linked to the extra-ordinary realm. It is based on auditory perceptions, embodying the whole of the oral Torah. The written word of the 'oral Torah' is heard. The body of the 'saint' is the means through which the voice manifests itself. This voice is, as the Mishnah/Torah (the Law), a feminine character: it is melodic, pleasant, strong, the mother, the friend, who comes and speaks out. Furthermore, if we follow the description of Shlomo ha-Levi Alkabetz (the author of this account), the experience affects the body of the saint (Karo)

and the bodies of those who witnessed the event. Although the saint has the auditory hierophany, the group is struck by the same experience: their bodies are immediately drained of strength. We may assume that the ecstatic experience is contagious (as also happens in other religious groups).

Maggidic experiences became widespread and were sought after; they varied to an extent, although they were usually reached through bodily practices, which combined sleep deprivation and mind concentration, and through games of memory' (letters, prayers, cognitive concentration, textual exercises). Often, this experience was conducted in solitude. It would then be 'remembered' and written down. Sometimes, it was described by disciples/witnesses and from that moment it became socialised.

Let us turn briefly to the testimony of another rather well-known mystic from late 16th century circles. This interesting account describes the ecstatic experience of Hayyim Vital, one of the most prominent representatives of Lurianic Kabbalah (Scholem 1941). The dynamic here is between the teacher (who left no written sources) and the disciple. Vital was allegedly instructed to fast for forty-eight hours and perform a practice of 'unification' (*yichud* – a combination of Hebrew letters and prayer). Then, before the High Holy Holidays, he was sent to 'the cave of Rabbi Abaye and Rava', where he stretched over the tomb of one of them, performed *yichud* (of mouth and nose), and fell asleep. He awoke and nothing had happened, so he performed a second *yichud*. He became confused and ceased. A voice in his consciousness spoke to him, inviting him to try once more, which he did. He concentrated and succeeded.

> Afterwards, a great and exceeding fright and trembling seized me in all my limbs and my hands were trembling, knocking against one another, and also my lips were trembling in an exaggerated way and were moving rapidly with forcefulness exceedingly fast [...] And the sound exploded in my mouth and tongue and said more than 20 times 'the wisdom, the wisdom'. Then it went on to say, the wisdom and knowledge, many many times [...]. All this was with great wondrous speed, many times in the waking state. And I have fallen on my face, spread out on the grave of Abaye.
>
> (Artzy and Idel 2015, 95f.; Kallus 2003, 408–13)

In this case, as we will see also in instances of spirit possession (*dybbuks*), there is an interesting added element concerning the significance of 'place', as the experience occurs on the grave of a rabbi in a holy city, Safed. Rituals performed at grave sites share a similarity with cults associated with Muslim holy men. In this case, the gravesite is linked to the ancient sages who were held in high esteem and were considered to be the founders of the kabbalistic tradition, such as rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (Chajes 2003).

If we now turn to participants in the 'messianic frenzy' of the 17th century movement, we are able to trace new attitudes. We will refer to internal narratives

generated by members of the Sabbatean movement and will not take into consideration those composed by critics of the movement.[17] I will describe the experiences of Nathan of Gaza (in 1665) and some of the followers of the movement before Sabbetai converted to Islam.

> When the holiday of Shavuot arrived, Rabbi Nathan called the scholars of Gaza to study Torah with him the entire night. And it occurred that in the middle of the night a great sleep fell on Rabbi Nathan; and he stood on his feet and walked back and forth in the room and recited the entire tractate Ketubot by heart. He then asked one of the scholars to sing a certain hymn [...] meanwhile he leaped and danced in the room, shedding one piece of clothing after another until his underclothes alone remained. He then took a great leap and fell flat on the ground. When the rabbis saw this they wished to help him and to stand him up, but they found he was like a dead man [...] Presently a voice was heard, a voice emitted from his mouth, but his lips did not move. And he said: 'Take care concerning my beloved son, my messiah Sabbatai Zevi'; and it said further: 'Take care concerning my beloved son, Nathan the prophet.' [...] Afterwards he rested a great rest and began to move himself. His colleagues helped him to stand up on his feet and asked him how it had happened and what he had spoken. He replied that he did not know anything. The sages told him everything that had happened, at which he was very amazed. (Artzy and Idel 2015, 97f.)

This case suggests both a trance and spirit possession. Although there are some contradictions between the narrator – who knows the content of the voice that spoke through Nathan – and the lack of understanding of the witnesses, what is interesting here is the process that leads to the consecration of the messiah and his prophet. Language, study, and chanting are linked as means to produce an emotional reaction, suggesting a bodily possession that is manifested through alteration of the body, dancing, and disrobing, leading to a loss of conscience. No memory of the experience is left, as is known to happen in cases of spirit possession (Halperin 2007 with a different translation; Artzy and Idel 2015). The report also mentions a strong scent coming from Nathan as he became increasingly possessed by the extra-ordinary force.[18] In this account, we read that Nathan undressed himself, although within the safe, closed context of followers. Christian enthusiasm often ended with 'disrobing' in public spaces, which contributed to the perception of their madness and social dangerousness (Heyd 1995).

17 Criticism of these experiences was voiced but remained quite marginal due to the success of the movement. After the conversion of Sabbetai critics became more vocal and persecutions of alleged Sabbatians were widespread, see Carlebach 1990.

18 'Then did the rabbis come to realize that the aroma they smelled had emanated from the same spark of spiritual holiness that had entered into Master Nathan and spoken these words' (Halperin 2007, 36).

As the movement gained traction among Jews of the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere, prophetic symbolical acts spread and antinomian activities increased. The *Memorial* describes many instances of prophesying through trance (*tardemah* – becoming weak, almost falling asleep, as with Nathan).

> This was the manner of prophesying in those days: people would go into a 'trance' and fall to the ground as though dead, their spirit entirely gone. After about half an hour they would begin to breathe and, without moving their lips, would speak scriptural verses praising God, offering comfort. All would say, Sabbetai Zevi is the messiah of the God of Jacob. Upon recovering, they had no awareness of what they had done or said. (Halperin 2007, 36)

This form of prophecy also affected women who, we can assume, had limited access to the study of ritual laws. Nevertheless, they were very active, both through the organisation of confraternities or the cultivation of their own charismatic behaviour, as is suggested by some cases among former Christians of the Ottoman Empire (Chajes 2003). Trance and spirit possession became widely practiced during this period of enthusiasm and were accordingly recorded across the diaspora (Scholem 1973 and Villani 2015).

4 Spirit possession

The religious movement that gave rise to Sabbatean messianism was characterised by the phenomenon known as spirit possession, which, superficially, resembles practices pervasive among Christian enthusiasts (Knox 1950). This experience was pursued, indicating a strong volition, and empowered the body with new forms of religious agency. Externally, the messianic movement resembled other religious movements that sought pneumatic experiences and social changes.

Spirit possession in Judaism is also known through the notion of the *dybbuk*, a concept that was fictionalised in the early 20th century through theatre and film, yet based closely on kabbalistic lore dating back centuries. Although described as possession by a malevolent spirit, the *dybbuk* bears some resemblance to the maggid experience. However, it portrays, if analysed through the perspective of religious individualisation, a different set of cultural problems. A *dybbuk* is the evil spirit of a person who has allegedly come to a violent or dramatic death. A *dybbuk* is more likely to be associated with religious deviance (Rüpke 2016) and requires religious training and expertise in order to be removed. In other words, it demands a ritual expert specialised in expelling evil spirits.

In the Christian world, exorcism was defined by precise laws and was considered a dangerous practice, and it still occurs within the Catholic Church.

The question of control over spirit possession opens a complicated chapter related to the repression of witchcraft in Europe, which dramatically increased after the Protestant Reformation. It will suffice to observe that those who underwent charismatic experiences could potentially be charged with the crime of witchcraft.[19]

From my perspective, alleged demonic possession is a type of individualisation in which volition is minimised: often, cases of evil possession are the result of traumatic experiences (rape, abuse, social discrimination) and it is through the spirit possession that a person strives to socialise his or her traumatic experience. If, from a cognitive and neurocognitive perspective, demonic possession is similar to ecstatic experience, from a social and cultural perspective it narrates a different story. Spirit possession is one of the most widespread religious and psychological experiences and is found across diverse cultures.[20] I address it here because cases of *dybbuk* possession are described in hagiographic sources devoted to the deeds of the kabbalist who could, in turn, perform exorcisms. Somehow, kabbalah and spirit possession emerged simultaneously and thus appear to be linked.

Among Jews, exorcism was not regulated as it was for Christians, and the spirit might be evil but not necessarily demonic. Exorcism was performed as a way of communicating with the spirit in order to identify his/her history. The spirit often spoke, but the rituals were so invasive that the person they inhabited could easily die. The dybbuk's story often described traumatic family situations, sexual abuses, conflict among relatives, misery, and unhappiness. Being dispossessed of his/her own self was a way of revealing the socially unspeakable. It was a means to give voice to a self that was denied expression, even at the risk of being destroyed. In a similar way to 'prophetism', which was less common in Jewish spheres than among Christians, possession reveals a gender issue. Spirit possession and ecstatic experiences were common among women. Jewish women were often recipients of *dybbuks* and were more frequently possessed by evil spirits than men. Among Christian women, by contrast, these experiences had more chances to be socialised positively. Nevertheless, they were always considered extremely dangerous and kept under strict surveillance. Indeed, in many instances women who had such experiences were ultimately persecuted in an atrocious manner.

19 The literature on this topic is extensive. For general references: De Certeau 1970; Douglas 2004; Coudert 2011. On anthropological views of exorcism and spirit possession more generally, see Csordas 1994, who examines contemporary exorcism.

20 The bibliography is vast, especially when it includes shamanism. One relevant example of this research is provided by Lewis 2003; Crapanzano and Garrison 1977; Ginzburg 2017.

5 Preliminary conclusions

A summary analysis of prophetic/visionary experiences among Jews and Christians, in which signs of prophecy were sought or stimulated, indicates a bi-directional movement. On the one hand, one may identify the way in which body practices were employed in order to attain a religious experience that subsequently produced a radical modification, both of the self and of the religious group. On the other hand, religious beliefs and practices were needed in order to activate a bodily mutation that could be validated socially. Furthermore, spirit possession could be ritualised and pursued by male members of esoteric groups. Conversely, these experiences could happen with a lower level of volition and with a greater amount of self-induced violence, as can be seen in the convulsionary followers of Jansen.

Religious enthusiasm unquestionably combines two distinct elements that are significant vis-à-vis religious individualisation. The first involves the deeply personal experience of being possessed by spirits, the 'Holy Spirit', God, Christ, the divine, and partially coincides with a religious practice which conveys mystical experience of encounter and identification with the divine. The other significant element is the social dimension of the experience, as it was not confined to individual experience *per se* but was, rather, translated into action, meaning that it was performed within a social context and, ultimately, translated into a text.[21] The process of writing is pertinent because it translates the sensory experience into language, through its literary, semantic, and symbolic devices. The texts do, according to some scholars, undeniably betray the actual experience by patterning them on authoritative models. One could suggest, that they indeed reproduce religious experiences patterned on authoritative models.

If religious enthusiasm was a cross-cultural phenomenon, the specific path leading to an encounter with God could vary. Enthusiasts employed similar practices – primarily possession, speaking in tongue, trances – which enabled men and women to transform into 'prophets'. The body was the main means through which to communicate this experience, which could be sought through a great number of ascetic and semi-ascetic practices. In many cases – especially among Christians – war and social strife had a strong impact on the type and quality of asceticism and ecstatic behaviour. Religious persecution had a strong impact on Huguenots, such as the 'French prophets', as well as on Quakers, although these groups differed in supporting or condemning violence and war. Jewish enthusiasm was to some extent the outcome of exile and oppression,

21 The mystical experience is ephemeral, transitory, but when it is recorded, it survives.

and surely created conflict among Jews themselves. Despite behavioural similarities – trance, possession, speaking in tongue – the *convulsionnaires* emerged within the context of Cistercian traditions in the Catholic Church. In their case, we find an enormous amount of violence present in ascetic practices that involved self-infliction of pain to an extent that seriously concerned the political authorities (Strayer 2008).

The search for a profound personal encounter with God through ascetic and mystical practices involves a double paradox. This quest often requires a ritual setting or the support of followers and disciples. In certain cases, it generates a community; very rarely does it remain an isolated individual experience. Furthermore, as Idel and Artzy suggest, Jewish mysticism involves an experience in which the self is always divided (Artzy and Idel 2015, 111f.). In itself, the mystical experience is unique and represents a radical form of religious individualisation, yet it may only be possible through a dissociative experience, which affects both the body and the soul. Furthermore, one may suggest that to be of any significance, even the most radical personal religious experience of an encounter with God must be recorded and thus socialised. In other words, it must be offered for the consumption of a group of followers, at least in the case of 'enthusiasm', which is undeniably always collective.

Religious enthusiasm offers a wide range of types of individualisation: one easily identifiable type is 'competitive individuality' (Rüpke 2013), although this exists in the context of a religious market that was not endowed with 'individual rights'. Against this backdrop, mystical and ecstatic experiences used the body/mind relationship as a repository of charisma,[22] that is, as a receptacle or source of 'extraordinary power'. This proved to be successful in reinforcing processes of individualisation, eventually contributing to the growth of religious enthusiasm that crossed into both Jewish and Christian faiths. These distinct yet similar phenomena highlight a certain amount of visionary agency. They subsequently fuelled both de-traditionalisation processes, with the invention of new religious forms (many of the Christian groups that emerged from the Reformation), and, as in the case of Catholics and Jews, a substantial attempt to innovate within a superimposed system. Criticism of 'enthusiasm' must therefore be understood as a strategy to oppose truth claims on religious legitimacy, rather than a rising rationalised mode for interpreting religion.

22 On the notion of charisma, I refer here to Taves 2013.

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