"We believe that we have a right to revelations, visions, and dreams from God"[1]

Joseph Smith, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transformation of Religious Authority in the Antebellum Period

Jan Stievermann and Claudia Jetter

Joseph Smith Jr. (1805–1844) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) are rarely viewed or discussed in connection with each other. And there are obvious reasons for this. Both men were separated by readily-apparent and deep-reaching differences, not just in terms of their ideas and teachings but also with regard to their social and cultural position. Raised in humble circumstances and amidst the turmoil of popular revivalism on the Western frontier, the poorly-educated Smith became the self-declared prophet and founder of what would turn into America's most successful new religious movement of the nineteenth century: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which, based on the revelations contained in the *Book of Mormon* (first published 1830), claimed to be the consummation of the Jewish and Christian religion. By contrast, Emerson was a rebellious scion of New England's liberal Protestant establishment, who—despite his radical forays into a post-Christian, decidedly un-churchly spirituality—remained deeply rooted in its culture of religious learning and gentility. The *spiritus rector* of the Transcendentalist movement, Emerson produced poems, lectures, and essays that are usually categorized as forms of Romantic literature rather than scripture. It is therefore not altogether surprising that few scholars have compared Smith and Emerson as religious figures. (Albanese 2008; Conkin 1997; Holland 2011; Park 2010) Those who did tended to note similarities in Smith and Emerson's postures as modern-day

1 Smith Jr. 2002c: 458–9.

prophets, but usually without a systematic look at deeper affinities as well as differences.

This chapter argues that Smith and Emerson can be understood as responding to the same general and profound crisis of religious authority in early nineteenth-century American Christianity, which will be examined in the first section. The Weberian tradition of sociology provides a useful analytical framework to think through this crisis of religious authority, especially if it is combined with current sociological research on trust as a complementary concept to authority. In this way the careers of Smith and Emerson—as sketched out in the two vignettes to follow—become legible as attempts to come to grips with a dramatic loss of trust in the institutional authority of existing churches as purveyors of salvation, but also the authority of biblical tradition as the fixed and sufficient foundation of a saving faith. The writings of both men then appear as different, but structurally related, attempts at restituting what Weber calls charismatic authority, grounded in an immediate experience of the divine. They did so by various performative practices and through distinct forms of prophetic communication. These prophetic communications are similarly informed by a "tendency to engage scripture through emendation and addition" (Maffly-Kipp 2010: vii; see also Stein 1995), even though they aimed at very different effects, just as they attempted to harness their charismatic authority for opposing ends. While Smith and Emerson each emphasized the possibility of continuing revelation in the modern age and promoted an open canon, they significantly diverged on how they understood revelatory communication and prophecy and, more profoundly, the very nature of religion. Beholden to an inherited Protestant notion of supernatural revelation, Smith claimed for himself the role of the chosen prophet in the long succession of Old and New Testament prophets called to perfect the Judeo-Christian religion and restore Christ's true church in which people should invest their ultimate trust. This new religion and church, however, he understood in fairly conventional terms. Emerson's performance of charismatic authority, by contrast, was rooted in a naturalized understanding of revelation and religion that was at once universalized and highly individualized. In contrast to Smith, Emerson actively worked against any (re-)institutionalization of the charismatic authority that people might ascribe to him and also against the quasi-religious canonization of his writings. Emerson's solution for the religious malaise of his age was a radically-individualized seeker spirituality.

The Post-Revolutionary Crisis and Transformations of Religious Authority

If genuine authority is to be understood, with Weber, as the capacity to elicit voluntary obedience, it is a quality that must be recognized as legitimate (Weber 1968/1992). It therefore has to rest, as Frank Furedi writes, "on a foundation that warrants its exercise." This foundation, according to Furedi, is constituted by basic norms that "provide the resources for narratives of validation" (Furedi 2013: 8–9), which, obviously, vary widely between different cultures, historical communities, and social sphere and are subject to constant change and contestations. While the Weberian tradition tends to conceive of the recognition of legitimate leadership primarily as a cognitive-rational act, research on trust helpfully highlights that the authority people ascribe to individuals or institutions has much to do with emotional attachments and investments in which societal norms are embodied.[2] People recognize authority because they trust it, and they trust it because it is perceived as part of an order that is believed and felt to represent a higher good. The foundational norms and aspirations of which Furedi speaks thus have much to do with a shared sense—embodied as much as cognitive, emotional before it becomes the object of rationalization—of the higher good. "Trust is a passion," Thomas Hobbes wrote in his *Elements of Law* (1640) at the eve of the English Civil War, "proceeding from belief of him from whom we expect or hope for good, so free from doubt that upon the same we pursue no other way" (Hobbes 1640/1889: 40).

The newly-founded United States faced a general crisis of authority and trust even more profound than that of Hobbes's England. The Age of Revolution that began in America, as Shmuel Eisenstadt and Anthony Giddens have pointed out, set into motion a de-ontologizing of traditional social orders, while introducing a new kind of self-reflexivity on all levels (Eisenstadt 2006: esp. 141–142; Giddens 1991: esp. 14–21). As people experienced the collapse of the ancient regime and saw their entire world subject to dramatic change and potential future alteration, trust in every kind of traditional institutional authority eroded. For, as Furedi writes about this period, the past itself "lost some of its authorizing role." In the wake of the Revolution, authority was increasingly perceived as conventional rather than natural, fostering "a climate where authority can be contested, either implicitly or explicitly.

2 See for example Frederiksen (2014) or Weber and Carter (2003).

The most important outcome of this process was the gradual dissolution of the authority of tradition—which is the authority of the past" (Furedi 2013: 3). With the crumbling of inherited norms that had long stabilized a hierarchical order based on birth and privilege, distrust pertained not only to traditional institutions as such, but also to the social elites that had customarily controlled them. For America's rising middle-class "traditional arguments about the sanctity of hierarchy and authority lost much of their capacity to motivate" (Furedi 2013: 246). The new form of government by consent invested ultimate sovereignty in the people. Thus, institutions and their representatives now had to actively garner and constantly sustain authority through effective performance of leadership for the perceived public good and by command of public opinion. Indeed, the fierce battles over public opinion and winning the trust of the people became one of the hallmarks of America's emerging partisan democracy. The project of government by consent and command of public opinion also raised much concern and created countertendencies based on new ideals of social order, leadership, and authority hailed as natural or divine, and thus as absolute, rather than conventional and negotiable.

These post-revolutionary changes also impacted the realm of religion in the US, which, at the time, was overwhelmingly Protestant but internally diversified into a great number of churches. In the Christian tradition, religious authority is ultimately situated in God alone. By way of mediation, it is recognized in the charisma of the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and, most fully, in Jesus Christ—all of whom are believed to be from God and lead to God. The institutional and traditional authority of the church and the offices of its representatives are an extension of this mediatory function. They rest on trust in its ability to provide access to and correctly administer the means of God's grace and secure for the believer the salvation and blessings won by the Son of God and redeemer of the world, Jesus Christ. Especially in the Protestant context, the trust in this ability was closely tied to the correct interpretation of the Holy Scriptures as the authoritative record of God's revelation to mankind. In the post-revolutionary United States, the full dynamic—first unleashed by the Reformation—of inner-Christian division into competing confessional churches based on opposing scriptural interpretations came to be felt. A pluralistic and highly dynamic denominationalism developed. With the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom as an inalienable natural right of every citizen and disestablishment on the federal and state level, the realm of religion became increasingly hived off and internally differentiated. Just as religious dissent had contributed to the American Revolution, the new

democratic dispensation furthered the problematization of traditional forms of religious authority. Americans more and more refused to simply accept by force of custom the mediatory function of a given church or trust its scriptural warrant. As Emerson perceptively put it in his early lecture "The Present Age": "We have lost all reverence for the state. It is merely our boardinghouse. We have lost all reverence for the Church; it is also republican" (Emerson 1964b: 169). Under the republican dispensation, for a church to elicit recognition of its authority required voluntary consent and thus active trust-building.

From the beginning, the American tendency to distrust a strong centralized state was tied to similar distrust of European-style ecclesial hierarchies and clerical elites—a distrust that was now freely articulated in popular print and newspapers. This de-legitimization was pushed forward from different sides. It involved voices of Enlightenment skepticism, such as Thomas Paine (1737–1809), as much as representatives of popular Protestant "sects" seeking freedom from previous religious monopolies such as the famous Baptist leader Isaac Backus (1724–1806). By the 1830s, most Americans would have agreed that religion was a matter of choice based on the individual's freedom of conscience, and that churches should operate on principles of voluntarism.

The effects of this tendency were readily apparent in the crises of the formerly established churches, most prominently the Anglican Church, but they worked, more or less subtly, within every single denomination. Nathan Hatch described these effects in his classical study as *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989), claiming that "the early republic was the most centrifugal epoch in American church history. It was a time when the momentum of events pushed toward the periphery and subverted centralized authority and professional expertise" (Hatch 1989: 15). The resulting populist turn in American Protestantism was most strongly felt on the Western frontier, where a lack of available clergy and a general vacuum of institutional structures exacerbated the erosion of traditional forms of religious authority as new waves of massive revivals hit the area. The West was also a hotspot in the rapid pluralization of the American religious landscape that resulted from disestablishment, increasing and more diversified immigration, as well as racial and ethnic divisions that led to the founding of many new denominations in the United States. These trends were compounded by the countless church schisms and new religious movements that arose in the context of revivalism. In such an environment, churches and religious groups more and more had to work and compete for the trust of people, if they wished to retain and recruit members.

Most historians of religion, including Hatch, have viewed this process as a liberation and successful individualization that made an important contribution to the growth of democratic culture more generally. Indeed, many Americans at the time hailed this emerging marketplace of religion as an expression of Protestant and republican liberty that gave power and choices to people also in matters of ultimate concern. For many others, however, it was a veritable Babel of confusion that induced insecurity and anxiety. Assuming that there was only one true religion, how was one to pick it out from amidst all the false options? If a church and its ministers were to lead people on the way to salvation, how could the authority of their rites and teachings be dependent on the assent of the people? A number of recent studies have foregrounded the widely felt confusion and spiritual frustration amidst America's denominational chaos and the upheavals of the Second Great Awakening (Bratt 2004; Porterfield 2012).

In his autobiographical "History, 1838" Joseph Smith remembers how, as a young man, he experienced the surrounding diversity and the absence of a generally recognized religious authority as deeply unsettling—as something that threw him back upon himself in the search for a saving truth:

> Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, […]. On the other hand the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally Zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others.
>
> In the midst of this war of words, and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself, what is to [be] done? Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together? And if any one of them be right which is it? And how shall I know it? (Smith Jr. 2002a: 229)

Overzealous Baptist and Methodists might have made few inroads into Boston. Religious pluralization and the struggles attending it, however, were hardly any less intense in America's capital of liberal Protestantism and spiritual experimentation. With the old Congregationalist unity and ascendancy gone, countless options vied for the attention and trust of Boston's genteel class. Looking back over the New England scene in 1860, Emerson would write in "Worship": "The stern old faiths have all pulverized. 'Tis as whole population of gentlemen and ladies out in search of religion" (Emerson 2003: 108).

The pulverization of the stern old faiths, like the dynamics of religious experimentation and diversification, was connected to another dimension of the crisis of religious authority that went deeper than distrust in tradi-

tional clerical elites and forms of church government. At the very same time that traditional and institutional authority came under pressure, American Protestantism was thrown into further turmoil as the trust in its inherited *auctoritas auctoritatum* came to be shaken: the Bible. Deist attacks on Scripture as a deeply irrational and mythic text à la Paine's *Age of Reason* had gained considerable traction in the early nineteenth century; even among common folk (Porterfield 2012). In more elite circles, a revolutionary type of historical-contextual criticism from Europe, notably Germany, did much to dispel orthodox Protestant beliefs in the unity and infallibility of the Bible as the inspired Word of God (Grusin 1991; Packer 2007).

While a full-blown de-supernaturalization and historicization of the Bible remained confined to the upper echelons of society, few Americans during the antebellum period would have escaped the sense that the authority of Scripture was not what it used to be. For more than anything, the forces of religious freedom and democratization were—albeit wholly unintentionally—undermining its foundations. Unshackled from the restraints of binding traditions, institutional control, and clerical oversight, scriptural interpretation in antebellum American Protestantism multiplied to an unprecedented degree. Every religious debate and church schism saw scriptural arguments tossed back and forth, contributing to this proliferation of opposing readings. Many religious reform movements aimed to restore the unity of the church on purely scriptural grounds and ended up adding another denomination to the American religious marketplace. The self-declared Restorationist movement of Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell that gave birth to the Disciples of Christ is only the most obvious example here. An overwhelming number of different Bible translations and commentaries flooded the print market (Gutjahr 2000). Self-taught individuals, in the spirit of the prevalent "common sense realist"-approach to the Bible, turned to their own private judgment as they attempted to decipher the mysteries of the Word, especially the Book of Revelation (Noll 2005). In the early 1840s, William Miller gained widespread attention and a large following with his predictions about the imminent coming of the return of Christ. He was not the only exegete-turned-prophet of this kind.

For those who put their trust in these inspired exegetes, these interpretations might have, at least temporarily, cured the crisis of biblical authority. For those who did not trust figures like Miller or Smith, this flood of competing interpretations was only further evidence for how malleable biblical texts were. Especially to intellectuals like the Transcendentalists, who already harbored radical doubts about the divine stature, coherence, exclusivity, and

final truth of the Bible, the exegetical "civil wars" that swept the US during the antebellum period would have deepened their skepticism that this book alone provided a reliable and permanent basis for modern religion. But even to seminary theologians and ordinary "Bible Christians" with a firm faith in the divine stature of Scripture it became painfully apparent that the good book could not be simply referred to as an unquestionable, unified source of authority, from which an unambiguous message of salvation and precepts for modern life could be derived. As they watched with frustration how interpreters tried and failed to settle central questions of religious and political life (what was the nature of Jesus Christ and his relation to the Father? Was slavery biblically sanctioned or a sin?), they felt keenly the wide distance between nineteenth-century America, the biblical texts, and the historical realities behind them. Could this gap be bridged by better interpretations, be it in terms of method, be it in terms of piety? Or was further divine communication possible and indeed necessary to fill out the lacunae in Scripture, maybe even to fulfill its true meaning only incompletely revealed in the canonical Bible? As Seth Perry has recently argued, the canonical Protestant Bible was still widely regarded as the most important source of authority during this period, but in actual cultural practice it was an increasingly contested site of authority which created "authoritative relationships" that were constantly renegotiated within and among religious groups as well as the larger public (Perry 2018). Hence the problematization of biblical authority and the problematization of ecclesial and clerical authority kept feeding each other.

The outcome of this crisis, however, was not simply a diminishment of religious authority per se; certainly not in the sense that would neatly fit into older grand narratives of secularization. After all, religious life in America flourished, even though it took forms increasingly different from those of the Old World. Nineteenth-century American Christianity could not and did not dispense with need for religious authority—even in its most populist strands. Rather, the post-revolutionary crisis brought forth changing configurations of religious authority and trust that found embodiment in new types of leadership, communication, church structures, devotional practices, and approaches to Scripture, together with fresh conceptualizations of the divine and its relation to humanity and revelation. Two general trends are observable in these processes. One is that religious authority becomes increasingly and self-consciously performative. Under the conditions of denominationalism and voluntarism, the recognition of one's authority from God now has to be more actively pursued and negotiated; it can no longer be taken for

granted, is highly instable, and in constant need of re-affirmation. The other trend is that the ultimate locus of recognition is the individual and its experience. Men and women have to personally experience a message or practice as convincing, meaningful, and, ultimately, potent with divine power, or else, in the long run, they will not keep attending to them. Heightened participation is crucial to this. But what changes most dramatically across the American religious landscape are the modes of communication, now geared toward actively eliciting trust from the respective target audiences, and constantly appealing to individual experience. Besides innovative oratory and literary styles, a uniquely American type of religious evidentialism is part of this development. In preaching and print, religious authority has to be asserted by recourse to persuasive evidence, whether textual, commonsensical, empirical, or even somatic. The pronounced supernaturalism of American popular religion, with its proclivity for signs and wonders, ecstasies and revelations, is very much part of this. The performativity of religious authority also involves new forms of recourse to, and legitimization of, scriptural authority that foreground experientialism. In this, the boundaries often become fluid between biblical exegesis and forms of "devotional creativity" (Maffly-Kipp 2010: vii), in which inspired or visionary readings of the Bible turned into prophetic productions of new quasi-scriptural texts.

The resulting configurations of authority and trust are very diverse, often contradictory, and inadequately described by the totalizing category of "democratization"—although that process is certainly part of the picture. This is not the place to go into a fuller discussion of the different paths that American denominations took in adjusting to the new circumstances. Suffice it to say here that all denominations, to some degree, felt the necessity to replenish ecclesial authority by transforming the structures of church government and worship to balance traditional forms of institutional, clerical, creedal, and scriptural authority with the principles of voluntarism, lay participation, and the empowerment of ordinary Christians. Moreover, they had to work hard for a more effective socio-cultural accommodation of their congregations in terms of class, race, ethnicity, education, and style. These accommodations led to a great deal of differentiation and the founding of more and more churches even within the same denominational family. A key factor in these adjustments were communication styles and practices well-attuned to the needs and sensibilities of a highly diverse and stratified population. Some of the new religious movements that emerged in response to the pervasive revivalism, including the Latter-day Saints, combined steeply hierarchical, even

authoritarian, models of church polity with a strong emphasis on lay priesthood, while others, like Transcendentalism or Spiritualism, were more conducive to a hyper-individualized seeker spirituality.

In the second half of this chapter we will focus on one specific re-configuration of authority and trust that was uniquely characteristic of the American religious scene especially, but not exclusively, during the antebellum period: the restitution of what Max Weber called charismatic authority. For Weber, *charisma* is the original form of all religious authority, before its, from his perspective, inevitable routinization and institutionalization. It has its purest expression in the figure of the prophet and thaumaturge who "is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities." Because of their gifts of the spirit, or charisma, that "are regarded as of divine origin " (Weber 1968/1992: 48), people follow such figures and their teachings. In a situation where inherited institutions and ways of doing church failed to convince, and Scripture appeared doubtful, not a few Americans once again felt the pull of charismatic authority embodied in and performed by exceptional preachers, writers, or even self-declared prophets and miracle workers. The spectrum of such figures in antebellum America was as wide as the religious landscape itself. It reached from spell-binding revivalist preachers, such as the fabled Lorenzo Dow (1777–1834), who used their gifts in the service of conveying the gospel and expanding an existing church, to American thaumaturges and messianic figures like Jacob Cochran (1782–1836) or Robert Matthews (1788–c. 1841), who healed, resurrected the dead, and proclaimed themselves divine. It also included a host of new prophets that produced a variety of American scriptures. Weber himself saw Joseph Smith with his *Book of Mormon* as a truly extraordinary new example of a charismatic prophet in the modern world (Weber et al. 2013, 491–492). There were many more, however, including, as we wish to argue, genteel "apostles of culture" (Robinson 1982) like Emerson, who mesmerized their audiences not by miracles or golden plates, but by the poetic expression of their revelatory spiritual insights drawn from a direct experience of God in nature and history.

Joseph Smith Jr.—The "Ethical Prophet"

In 1842, Joseph Smith, founder and prophet of the Mormon church, had been asked by "Chicago Democrat" newspaper editor John Wentworth to write a

sketch on the foundation and 12-year history of the Mormon church. Besides recounting the already familiar story of his "First Vision" and the founding of the church, Smith responded with a "Historical Sketch, 1 March 1842," in which he described the hardships and persecutions Mormons had endured, especially during their time in Missouri. In spite of these trying experiences, Smith boldly predicted that

> no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing, persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished and the great Jehovah shall say the work is done. (Smith Jr. 2002a: 247)

Needless to say, Smith believed God's truth to be exclusively incorporated within the restored sacred order of his church and would continue to be channeled through his person. While the "Sketch" was a refined version of the foundation of Mormonism than earlier accounts, it was more than just a reflection on Smith's life and the twelve-year history of the church. The "Sketch" presented a powerful religious leader who had successfully performed as a modern-day prophet and established a loyal and trusting followership that would thrive as a church within a competitive religious landscape. In several accounts of his life prior to his "First Vision," Smith reported to have witnessed a "great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection." Believing in a consistent God, however, Smith decided to take matters into his own hands and "investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a church it would not be split up into factions" (Smith Jr. 2002a: 242). All existing churches therefore had to be wrong and new revelation, as would become apparent in the production of the *Book of Mormon*, was necessary to complement the Christian canon and correct false traditions in order to restore the one salvific Christian church.

In a powerful vision that came upon Smith after meditating on James 1:5, God warned Smith, "that I must join none of them [i.e. existing churches], for they were all wrong, and […] all their creeds were an abomination in his sight" (Smith Jr. 2002b: 230–1). Substantiating this warning of existing apostate traditions even further, Smith received scorn and encountered skepticism for his revelatory experience by a Methodist minister and fellow citizens (Smith Jr. 2002b: 231). Yet, the hostile reaction would not prevent Smith from continuing

to believe in his revelations. Although the production of the *Book of Mormon* and the foundation of the church would take another decade, the future path for Smith had already been made clear in this very first vision: direct divine guidance displaced ecclesiastical tradition and clerical authority. And in this, Smith believed he was following the traditional biblical prophets who similarly faced adversity and rejection. Sharing most Americans' common faith in biblical prophecy, Smith concluded from this experience that he had been chosen as the new mediator between God and the world, conveying divine orders he himself received through supernatural revelations, visions, and auditions. As historian and Smith biographer Richard Bushman has aptly put it, this self-declared modern prophethood created "a fear of the familiar gone awry. Joseph was hated for twisting the common faith in biblical prophets into the visage of the arrogant fanatic," as he had "turned something powerful and valued into something dangerous" (Bushman 2007: 553).

Unlike more spiritualized interpretations of revelation in the antebellum period, Smith believed in an actual, supernatural discourse between the believer and God or, as Terryl Givens has put it, "dialogic revelation" (Givens 2002: 218). And the *Book of Mormon* was a clear case in point of this continual revelation as a process of divine discourse, especially when considering how much divine communication was involved in the production process. Smith received divine instructions from the angel Moroni on how to obtain the plates with the original text. He then translated the plates, at times with the help of seer stones, at other times without. He would receive divine rebukes when breaching the covenant with God and handing out the proof sheets to Martin Harris who then lost them. All these aspects suggest a continuing divine interaction between God and man. The myth around the production testified to God's promise to communicate eternally.

The extent to which revelatory authority was available to other members of the Mormon church continues to be debated until today. Smith did not found a democratic church where all would be equal, but he nevertheless believed the reception of continuing revelation to be the natural right of every believer. Although he was the only one authorized to produce inspired translations and revisions and receive revelations effecting theology and church organization with comprehensive appeal for all believers, he did not think he was essentially different. Writing to a non-Mormon in 1839, Smith argued, that "We believe that we have a right to revelations, visions, and dreams from God, our heavenly Father; and light and intelligence, through the gift of the Holy Ghost, in the name of Jesus Christ, on all subjects pertaining to our spir-

itual welfare" (Smith Jr. 2002b: 458–9). In correction of Hatch's claim about Smith as a populist within a democratized church, historian Michael MacKay convincingly argued that Smith "established himself as a type of theological king, yet Mormonism succeeded because his concept of kingdom included the ability to distribute the power of governance to other leaders in a form of hierarchical democracy" (MacKay 2020: 2). Smith had been chosen by God in spite of his lack of education but he did not believe that God might elect competing new prophets who would simultaneously reveal new orders.[3] Instead, Smith embedded the "disruptive" element of revelation within a new ecclesial tradition that included additional rites and practices, and a clearly distinguished hierarchical order, and then legitimized it with new scripture. Religious authority thus became centralized, transferring the originally anti-hierarchical "pure charisma" in a routinized form to the highest offices in the church (Weber 1968/1992: 57–58). Smith efficiently created a new distinct tradition, tying elements of religious innovation to specific positions in church governance through new revelations. After all, he was a prophet, not a debater.

The day the church was officially founded on April 6, 1830, Smith received a revelation testifying to him being "a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church through the will of God the Father" (Smith Jr. 2013a). Recorded as D&C 21 in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, a collection of authoritative commandments, the revelation established Smith as the central instrument to receive new divine commands from God in order to direct church governance, and directed all other members of the church to submit unto his orders. He was God's mouthpiece, as the "Comforter" had revealed unto him, thus his words would ultimately help bring about Zion (Smith Jr. 2013a). Smith's authority, however, did not remain unchallenged. Between the foundation of the church in April and September, Smith had been confronted with rivalling revelations by Hiram Smith, who professed to have received new divine knowledge with the help of seer stones. Shortly before a conference in September 1830, Joseph Smith received another revelation, now recorded as D&C 28, which responded to the confrontation and eventually dissolved the problem of rivalling revelation. While the "Comforter" may speak to all, only Joseph Smith had been given "the keys of the mysteries" as the head of the church and would therefore receive divine instructions and orders that would

3 The fact that he did not publish his "First Vision" until after the publication of *The Book of Mormon* and the foundation of the church, underlines this point. For a discussion on Smith as a visionary, see: Bushman (1997–98).

surpass individual edification. Only the chosen prophet could differentiate between Satan's words and God's and only he should preside over things relating to church governance. "For all things must be done in order, and by common consent in the church " (Smith Jr. 2013b).

Once Smith's position as sole prophet within the church had been cemented, theological innovation would continue to enter the church—but only through him. Revelation provided the mechanism to adjust a church and its tradition to present needs. God provided revelations so that truth could be "adapted to our situation and circumstances […] to ameliorate the condition of every man under whatever circumstances it may find him" (Smith Jr. 2002b: 458–9). However, the centralized structure did not guarantee peace since new revelation would always pose the danger of upsetting even devout church members, as can be seen in Smith's unsuccessful proposal of plural marriage to the daughter of a leading Mormon. After Smith had introduced plural marriage as a part of the "new and everlasting covenant," many members of the church had been alienated. When Nancy Rigdon, daughter of one of Smith's closest associates, refused to become his plural wife, Smith, by then sole prophet of the church for over a decade, explained why the new doctrine was not unethical but instead part of a new covenant with God: "That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be and often is, right under another. […] Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire" (Smith Jr. 2002c: 538). That is to say that while plural marriage may seem disturbing at first, it would promote man's happiness in the long run because God had a plan and would make his will known to his people via his mediator Joseph—revelation by revelation.

Emerson—the Weberian "Exemplary Man"

Emerson, of course, would have had nothing but scorn for Smith's supernatural revelations, priestly offices and temple rites. He never dreamed of founding a new church. While there have always been self-declared Emersonians since the nineteenth century, this diverse and diffuse group never organized into a movement with a codified teaching tradition (Schmidt 2012). This has to do with the pronounced anti-institutionalism and anti-traditionalism of Emerson's own lectures and essays. "A religion," he would characteristically say in the eponymous lecture from the series *The Present Age* (1839/40), "that stands

on authority, what degradation in the word! What a gulf between the supple soul and its well-being! Man […] dares not say, I think; I am; but quotes some saint or sage" (Emerson 1972b: 282). Such a religion of authority was dead and no longer sustainable in democratic America. It was the root cause of the "decaying church and a wasting unbelief" (Emerson 1971: 88–9) that Emerson saw around him. Accordingly, Emerson did not wish to be a saint who would be quoted as a formal authority, but rather a sage whose charisma would inspire others to find its divine source inside themselves. In this, Emerson was much indebted to the Romantic discourse on the "religious genius," which, as sociologists of religion have pointed out,[4] also informed Weber's subcategory of charismatic authority: the "exemplary prophet." Such a prophet was one, as Weber writes, who "by his personal example, demonstrates to others the way to religious salvation," and whose preaching "directs itself to the self-interest of those who crave salvation" (Weber 1968/1992: 263). The Emersonian understanding of exemplary prophethood must be seen as part of his post-ministerial, Transcendentalist re-interpretation of religion, which was first fully articulated in several lectures and publications on the topic between 1836 and 1841, including his famous "Divinity School Address" (1838). In these, he radically challenged the exclusivity and finality of Christianity, while, at the same time, propounding a comparative, universalistic concept of religion.

Emerson's Romantic understanding of religion combined metaphysical, epistemological, and moral elements with a strongly experiential and expressivist twist: the divine is experienced primarily in the intuition of spiritual laws as emanations of a non-anthropomorphic divine, or "Over-Soul." These intuitions can also be reflected upon but make an immediate demand upon the individual to obey them by moral self-cultivation, virtuous action, and creative self-expression. In the "Divinity School Address," Emerson speaks of the "moral sentiment" that derives from an intuitive "insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul," and explicitly states that this sentiment is "the essence of all religion" (Emerson 1971: 77). This universalistic concept of religion allows Emerson to integrate a great variety of traditions across different periods and cultures, all of which now appear as historically and locally specific expressions of the religious nature of man without fundamental differences. Emerson thus imagines a religious history of mankind that neither

4 Several sociologists have pointed out the similarity between Weber's concept of charismatic leaders and the concept of the artistic or intellectual genius in Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes*. Cf. Gerth and Mills (1958: 53).

started with nor culminated in the revelation of the canonical Bible and did not have its telos in Jesus Christ. Neither Son of God nor savior, Emerson's Jesus is no longer categorically different from Zoroaster, Muhammad, or Buddha, but appears as a *primus inter pares* among the moral teachers of humanity; one of the "primeval bards and prophets" who could be found among "each portion of mankind" (Emerson 1964a: 90). Provocatively, Emerson included in that group not only the founders and prophets of world religions, but also great philosophers along with more recent religious figures such as George Fox and Emmanuel Swedenborg, as well as major artists like Shakespeare or Milton.

Christianity's relative primacy of purity, for Emerson, was dramatically impaired because the churches had corrupted the historical Jesus's pure teaching through a mythologizing, cultic worship of his person and a false veneration of the Bible. This christocentrism and bibliolatry, which Emerson so forcefully denounced, pointed to a general problem of historical religions. As they, in Weberian terminology, routinized the charisma of their founders, they came to rely on traditional and institutional authority. But this "reliance on authority measures the decline of religion, the withdrawal of the Soul," Emerson asserted in the lecture "Religion" (Emerson 1972b: 282). What he called "historical Christianity" in his address to the Harvard divinity students, suffered from a detrimental "stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed"; just as much as from "the fear of degrading the character of Jesus by representing him as a man" (Emerson 1971: 89). Such a religion of mediation and tradition led people not to, but away from, the divine.

Emerson's critique of Christian bibliolatry reflected his conviction that revelation was not only progressive but also ought to be understood much more broadly. In contrast to Smith's more conventional views, revelation to Emerson was not a supernatural vision or auditory message sent only to elect men of God during a specific period of time. Like other Transcendentalists, Emerson basically viewed the entire developmental continuum of nature and history as a self-revelation of the divine, and, thus, as a medium through which every individual could have religious experiences. If all experience potentially revealed the divine, the "sacred writings" of all world religions, like great works of art or philosophy, or the teachings of modern prophets merely constituted revelatory media of a higher order: they condensed and interpreted the experiences of original religious geniuses in symbolic-poetic language. By necessity, these revelations took shape in historically

conditioned, culture-bound forms, always affected by the limitations and errors of their own age and thus never wholly fitting for a later age. "But the Revelation and the church both labor under one perpetual disadvantage," Emerson announces in the lecture "Religion" from the series *The Philosophy of History* (1836/37). "They need always the presence of the same spirit that created them to make them thoroughly valid." For this reason, "[a]ll attempts to confine and transmit the religious feeling of one man or one sect to another age, by means of formulas the most accurate or rites the most punctual, have hitherto proved abortive" (Emerson 1964a: 93). In this regard, Emerson differed dramatically from Smith's belief in the possibility of a final revelation. There was always the possibility and felt need—if not institutionally suppressed—for new interpretation and expressions. For Emerson, revelation became a continuous, inherently pluralistic, process, coextensive with humanity's historical development and its cultural achievements. Accordingly, he demanded that "We too must write Bibles, to unite again the heavenly and the earthly world" in a way fitting for the modern age, by revealing the deeper spiritual truth of "all that we know; [...] and first, last, midst, and without end, to honour every truth by use" (Emerson 1987:166).

However, this emphasis on the evolution of religion and the continuity of revelation did not imply a disdain for or a naïve rejection of tradition. No (religious) experience or utterance was made ex nihilo. Indeed, there was a right use of the rich heritage of the past, not as ultimate norm and limitation, but as inspiration and material for further creation. In a journal entry from July 21, 1836, Emerson noted: "Make your own Bible. Select & Collect all those words & sentences that in all your reading have been to you like the blast of trumpet out of Shakespear [sic], Seneca, Moses, John, & Paul" (Emerson 1965: 186). There is no room here to discuss the complex theory of creative reading and (re-)writing that Emerson developed in his lectures and essays, which themselves are woven from a dense fabric of intertextual references, including countless, often very idiosyncratic, readings of biblical citations, as well as passages from Asian scriptures. In very simplified terms, one can say, however, that the period's tendency to "devotional creativity" manifests itself in Emerson as a Romantic program of individualistic, free-wheeling appropriations of inherited canonical texts.

Emerson thus radically democratized religious authority as something theoretically available to all because it was rooted in a universal moral sense and individual spiritual experience. Yet, he also acknowledged massive differences in the degree to which this authority was realized in people. The

religious genius was able to perceive more fully the divine in Nature and to effectively communicate this experience to others. The most gifted ones, Emerson described as "divine bards" (Emerson 1971: 83), who, like Jesus, could express their inspired insights in poetic-prophetic discourse that simultaneously harked back to and creatively transcended tradition. Their authoritative voice was enabled by perfect holiness or lack of egotism. Such a person, Emerson wrote in allusion to the Bible, "speaks with authority, and not as the Scribes, he becomes passive to the influence of God, and speaks his words." (Emerson 1991: 123) But this authority, in contrast to Smith, was not conceived of as commanding obedience. Instead, Emerson imagined the office of the "divine bards," past and present, as giving inspiration and "noble provocations," encouraging others "to emancipate [themselves]; to resist evil; to subdue the world; and to Be" (Emerson 1971: 83). Following in the footsteps of the poet-prophet, individuals were to learn to follow their own moral sense and inner genius, to achieve what Emerson calls self-reliance. Emersonian self-reliance must not be misunderstood as a crude notion of personal autonomy, but as a spiritual principle and aspiration of living in communion with the divine through the progressive cultivation of the moral sense—something for which he deemed the guidance of religious teachers indispensable, if only temporarily and in the right spirit. The oft-cited passage from "Self-Reliance," "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string, … [a] man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages," does not translate into an imperative of solipsism. Instead, Emerson wants his audience to learn to instinctively recognize "[i]n every work of genius," which they read creatively and for a higher sense, "our own rejected thoughts" (Emerson 1972a: 77). But even the most inspired poet or prophet can only provide fragments—their particular angle—of the divine truth. Ultimately, every teacher was, by necessity, outlived.

Similarly, Emerson always underlined that revelation would not cease and thus new bards with new spiritual insights were always a-coming. Thus, he finished his "Divinity School Address" with a dramatic, John-the-Baptist-like gesture of messianic announcement, expressing his hope to see "the new Teacher, that shall follow so far those shining laws, that he shall see them come full circle" (Emerson 1971: 92). He never saw himself as that figure, however. And he did not expect this "new Teacher," this great religious poet of the modern age, when he would come, to have the final word. Indeed, in Emerson's mind, there never could be an ultimate revelation, a closed canon for all

mankind and all ages. For different individuals would, based on their unique experiences, continue to find new and deeper meanings both in nature and in the religious and cultural traditions of the past. If no longer hindered by institutional authorities, people would pursue spiritual self-reliance and become religious geniuses in their own right. Mankind's religious development, in his view, would move forward through a progressive ethicization, de-institutionalization, and individualization of religion.

Emerson thus responded to his disaffection with "churchly" religion by an appeal to charismatic authority, ideally embodied in the religious genius or poet-prophet. His own writings are attempts to generate and convey that kind of charisma. At the same time, Emerson very self-consciously sought to decentralize and democratize charismatic authority by making its performance a vehicle for moral self-culture, the nurturing of spiritual experiences, religious experimentation, and, ultimately, the self-authorization of the democratic individual to which he appealed. Also, the charismatic authority of each prophet was marked as being only relative and temporary. No sacred text embodied the full truth, nor was to have a final, doctrinally fixed, meaning. In this spirit, he routinely undercut his own charismatic authority, always pointing out that he was "only an experimenter," "an endless seeker with no Past at my back" (Emerson 1979a: 188). With formulations like this one, Emerson can be seen as the pioneer of a post-Christian, thoroughly individualized and syncretistic seeker spirituality in the US.

Conclusion

Joseph Smith and Ralph Waldo Emerson were part of the deep-reaching, structural transformations of American Christianity during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Each in his own way exemplifies one specific form among many others that this transformation could take: a turning to what appeared to many a source of religious authority they could trust when established churches and their official Bible interpretations failed to convince - the charisma endowed by immediate relation with the divine. Smith and Emerson illustrate how this anti-traditional attitude required new forms of legitimization. Both no longer relied on ministerial office in an established church, or other kinds of institutional credentials. Instead, they spiritually empowered themselves by persuasive performances of their distinct prophetic personas. Smith, the "ethical prophet," was thus able to found a rapidly growing new

church that promised his followers to lead them into latter-day Zion. Thousands of people were happy to trust him with "the authority of a prophet if he would connect them with heaven, and that was the key to his success" (Bushman 2007: 560). Thus, they submitted willingly unto him, as the "common man" Joseph Smith had finally restored the sacred order.

On the other hand, Emerson, the "religious seeker," rejected any institutionalized and centralized form of religious authority and actively worked against the routinization of his charisma. His oratory and literary performances created an enthusiastic but unorganized, highly individualistic circle of Emersonians, seeking to follow their teacher on the path to spiritual self-reliance until they could ultimately shed the need for any mediator. Instead of a new scripture in addition to the canonical Bible, he revealed a method of appropriating existing scriptures by creative higher readings in light of one's own spiritual experience. The teachings of the holy bards of the past were to serve as a means of self-revelation and realization for the modern individual that needed to trust their own "instinct to the end" (Emerson 1979b).

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