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# Somatic Experiences and the Source of Religious Conviction

Joel Inbody

Why is it that religious believers accept the validity of doctrines that seem outlandish and strange to outsiders? Religion is truly a simple phenomenon, when it is broken down to its simplest form: a set of beliefs concerning what is sacred and profane and how one must behave accordingly. Despite this unifying Platonic idea, the various forms of religion are an extremely variable and widespread phenomenon among humans that cannot be as easily accounted for. The simplest tribes and peoples, such as the Aborigines of Australia, have fetish or totem objects; more complex societies tend to have institutionalized specialists who instruct the faithful in more complex dogmas and practices. Each physical representation is different and has characteristics so strange and alien that continuity between certain systems would seem mere contrivance. Yet each finds itself with followers who embrace the teachings and find truth in them. One must take into account the cultural and social influence, that is, the context in which the religion dwells. Tradition and training certainly play a great role in training up new generations of the faithful, as does the text or teachings found in each system. May there not be, however, a more natural element behind why such a multitude of humans, regardless of background and culture, place their trust in some religious faith? It seems strange that the human mind will merely accept the words of their elders without further reinforcement. Moreover, can any one source be touted as directly creating faith, or is belief produced by the interworking of multiple cogs and gears? While religion can be found on practically every inhabited landmass, an encompassing explanation for this phenomenon still remains elusive and transitory.

According to sociologist Clifford Geertz, the ritual itself is the source of religious conviction. Says Geertz, "...It is in ritual--that is, consecrated behavior--that this conviction that religious conceptions are veridical and that religious directives are sound is somehow generated... In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world." (Religion as a Cultural System) It is through the ritual that participants gain confidence that their beliefs are accurate depictions of reality. Religion, in Geertz'

words, is a set of cultural symbols that unite and personify a group of unique preferences. These preferences make up a cultural system that educates the performer concerning the values and norms that are acceptable and unacceptable in this social body. Without some means to prove these things, they would stand amongst and equal to others of differing sentiments and possibly opposite opinions. The purpose of acting out a ritual, then, is to make one particular set of preferences become true to the performer; it is to make the subjective, objective.

Though Geertz has clearly identified the ritual as the source of religious conviction, he is unclear as to how exactly it works to generate a belief in the performer's mind. Is it in seeing all his or her fellows carrying on in the same way that the neophyte understands, because he or she knows their companions and trust them, "This is true, this is what we should be doing"? Is it by acting in strange and unique manners that the reveler realizes the specialty of the event; that it is the culmination and self-fulfillment of their instruction? Or, rather, is it by some physiological means that this occurs, by some feeling called up and invoked for the occasion through an inherent something within the music; within the words on a page filtered through the mind; within the movement of the individual's body? Geertz does not elaborate, simply stating that conviction is "somehow generated" by these "acts of religious observance." Where, then, within the context of the ritual, does religious conviction emanate from? What is the actual mechanism? A ritual by itself can be very simple or very complex; it can be as basic as praying to a god with folded hands or as intricate as a dramatized performance on Cumorah Hill. It would be elucidating, then, to attempt to reveal just what it is that a ritual contains that inspires confidence in a set of sacred values. May it be that there are rituals that do not work because they lack certain components? Perhaps the entire process is subjective and varies based on the tendencies of the group and the individuals therein. Geertz' theory, while helpful in providing a specific area of focus, leaves considerable ground untouched in discovering the wellspring of certainty.

Within the context of the ritual, somatic experiences may provide the evidence required for

individual participants to accept the doctrines of that particular religion. These sensations, which seem to be provoked by music and the mental grasping of ideas, can give great internal satisfaction and meaning to the person experiencing them; they have a tactile character and bring stimulation to the mind and much of the body as well. Such sensations seldom occur and are unusually pleasant. Because of these factors they could be interpreted as, based on the context, a sign of spiritual activity or the specialty and sanctity of a performance. They are also intensely intimate and personal: somatic experiences seem to be brought on by some physiological reaction within the brain in connection with the conscious workings of the mind. For this reason, it seems safe to think that they may be experienced by all human beings regardless of their location or upbringing. If this is the case, cultural and social factors would work cohesively with the internal biology of an individual in creating religious conviction. A person who had rarely or never been exposed to somatic experiences in a secular setting may judge that responsible rituals are endowed with some spiritual energy or sacred fire. Somatic experiences, when encountered within the context of a ritual, may give the performer religious conviction.

## Methods

Four individuals from Crossroads Christian Church in Elma, New York were interviewed concerning source(s) of religious conviction and the role somatic experiences might play in them. These persons have been dubbed Moses, Eve, Daniel, and Abraham, for the purposes of convenience and organization. The church they attend (usually referred to as simply "Crossroads") is self-described "non-denominational" though it is Protestant and Evangelical in doctrine (main beliefs include the necessity of personal salvation through the Sinner's Prayer and the Bible's inerrancy and sufficiency for Christianity.) It fits neatly into the recently devised category of neo-charismatic as described by (Robbins, 2004) and (Wuthnow, 1998). That is, it contains aspects of the charismatic and Pentecostal movements while eschewing institutionalization of these behaviors. For example, "worship" (a time of music and singing) is often energetic and individual, with a fairly even mix of participants who dance and wave their hands about while others simply stand and sing. Congregants can be infrequently heard praying in tongues under their breath, though this is a private act that will

receive neither praise nor admonition. In the service, great emphasis is placed on emotion, though it is restrained and kept in check by the music itself as well as the order of the program. At services, people talk openly about spiritual events that they have experienced. The general demographic of Crossroads is white, middle class, and middle-aged. There is also a substantial amount of the elderly, children, teens, and young adults. Minority groups, such as African-Americans, are either absent or are minute percentages of the population. The populace is mainly made up of those who live in the suburbs and outskirts of the city of Buffalo, which includes the towns of Elma, East Aurora, West Seneca, Holland, etc. About 100-200 people attend Crossroads each Sunday morning. A point was made to ask individuals for interviews with whom a pre-existing relationship existed and whom had spoken publicly about related issues.

The decision to focus on somatic experiences was based inductively on comments made during past church services. While preaching last winter, a Pastor at Crossroads once remarked that people have told him that when God speaks to them "they get goose-bumps." Additional comments have been made by congregants that seemed to imply that God's presence could be drawn from emotional experiences, or through music, and that he acted "inside." Tentative parallels could be drawn between the first example of "God speaking" by way of goose-bumps and something this researcher has dubbed the "realization sensation." The realization sensation involves an experience where someone who is contemplating an idea, whether in written or spoken form, makes a connection or realizes something. When this occurs, mentally, there is the onset of the awareness that something makes perfect sense; a concept or idea is incredibly clear and has been grasped like nothing else. Physically, a sensation of goose-bumps begins. It moves down the body from the top or middle of the head along the neck towards the shoulders. It is an objective sensation and can be clearly discerned when it occurs (the interpretation of its meaning, of course, is up to the individual.) This researcher has experienced it several times. At the earliest point, it was triggered while reading the Bible when a connection was made between the name of an angel in Revelation and a character in *Pilgrim's Progress*. It has also been elicited under a secular context, such as while studying Durkheim and collective effervescence. Such a potent perturbation may be

interpreted by some as God speaking or the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Questions were designed to gain information concerning somatic experiences and their possible role in religious conviction. These experiences included the realization sensation, but also encompassed tingles brought on by music as well as other peculiar happenings. The role of more traditional sources of conviction, such as the Bible, was also explored for each subject. Other questions were included with the purpose of discovering whether or not (assuming somatic experiences were considered evidence of spiritual things) this was due to socialization within the group. A sampling of questions appears below:

- Can you remember the first time you experienced or remember a sense of conviction? Was there some event or occurrence that caused you to really truly believe?  
If you were raised a Christian, were you raised among the congregation of Crossroads, whether here or at a different location? (If no) What church or body?
- How important would you say that the Bible is to your faith?
- I often hear people at Crossroads talk of a personal relationship with Jesus, or walking with God; do you believe in such a thing? (If yes) What does this mean for you personally?
- Have you ever had an experience where you believed that God was directly communicating with you or leading you to do something? (Assuming the answer is yes) Could you please describe it to me?
- Do you believe that God can speak to you through the Bible? (Assuming the answer is yes) Have you ever felt that he was? How did you know?
- Do you believe that the Holy Spirit resides in you? (If yes) What evidence does he give you of his occupancy?
- Have you ever felt a tingling sensation up and down your spine, or along your skin, or in your head, during the praise and worship? (If yes) What do you think that means?
- During worship time at church, I sometimes observe people putting their hands into the air. Have you ever participated in this action?
- What is the meaning of that action, to you? Why did you choose a particular time and not another to act in this way?

- I often feel vivified and empowered by the music, have you ever felt that way from listening to or participating in it? (If yes) Was this ever a trigger for you acting out?
- I've heard a Pastor at Crossroads mention people telling him that when God speaks to you get goose bumps; do you believe this to be true? (If yes) Have you ever experienced this for yourself? What were you doing when it happened?

## Data

Somatic experiences, particularly goose-bumps, were considered to be evidence of religious truth by all four subjects. The emphasis placed on them by the individual, however, varied considerably, as did the circumstances allowable in counting an experience as spiritual. (See: Findings) Abraham explained how so-called goose-bumps could be a sign that God was speaking to him through the Bible. He said, "...when reading God's word, I get some understanding, it often is accompanied by, just kind of a, washing over my body...[of] goose-bumps..." Daniel also described a similar phenomenon. He said, "Sometimes you get goose-bumps... Holy Spirit goose-bumps... it's just this sense of, you feel like, like, a breakthrough, almost, Wow, things get clearer, it's almost like a light inside... something just... resonates... in some ways it's a somatic resonate, I hate to say clicks, but something just seems... more right, than ever before" (See: Findings). Eve and Moses, who also described goose-bump-like feelings, believed them to be the physical body's way of expressing spiritual things. The latter said that goose-bumps was the body reacting to "the presence of the Lord. I don't know how else my body's going to handle it, you know, this physical body's so limited..." Others described physiological reactions of a different nature. For example, the tingling effect of music on the body was considered evidence by several of the subjects, such as Moses and Daniel. Moses was more conclusive in this area than was Daniel, but both agreed that it could be the result of the Holy Spirit. In his interview soon after a particularly energetic service, Moses told me, "Something happened in there today... I think... they [the congregation] just connected with the Lord. You know, [the Bible] says there's cherubim... always going around the throne... And I think in some ways we're seeing a little bit of what they see." Though each individual

showed a preference for certain types of somatic experiences, all counted one or more as a source of religious conviction.

The Bible, that is, the claims presented in the Bible, were also considered to be a source of religious conviction by all four subjects. Three subjects stated that the Bible had been the initial source that convinced them of the truth of Christianity. According to Eve, there was and is “nothing else.” She truly embraced Christianity as a child when she was “watching Billy Graham on TV” and “realized that what he was saying was true.” She acknowledged, however, that she had been raised believing the Bible since birth. Abraham, too, was raised a Christian, and attributed his conversion to hearing and understanding the message of Jesus as presented in the scriptures. The Bible was also his guidebook: when asked if every other experience had to come back to the Bible he answered, “Yes. I want to say that, but honestly, I feel, I really have to say that, because if I divert from that, whatever. You can do whatever you want.” Daniel also considered the Bible to be the integral source of his first conviction. He told me, “The Bible was very strong to my conversion because [a relative of my wife] would [say]... the Bible says Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father except through Him. And, every time we would say something she would quote the Bible, and somehow it did its work... so I started reading the Bible and really taking it into my heart and became convicted by it. So, the Bible is huge.” Moses, when asked of the Bible’s relevance to his faith, answered, “He sent us a letter, that, if you read it... you can really know what He’s thinking... you can know Him through His letter to us, it’s huge, it’s like everything.” Moses was the only individual, however, for which the Bible was a subservient or secondary source of conviction (See: Findings). All four subjects considered the Bible to be a source of conviction and useful in verifying or rejecting other sources.

A third source of conviction was strange happenings or coincidences that seemed too far-fetched to have occurred without the involvement of an outside agency. This, too, was mentioned by all four subjects. Whatever the occurrence (for they varied considerably), each one made the subjects abandon naturalistic explanations for God-directed ones. Daniel told me a story of his childhood where his father made a point of telling him about a very important report on a medical condition. At the time, he saw little importance in such a thing; yet

for the past twenty years he has worked on researching the very same condition. For Daniel, this was proof that “God has led my life... [and] is in control of my life too.” Moses mentioned an occurrence that took place over a shorter time span. He told me, “I had a dream the other night... about a young guy in the church here.” It was “out of the blue” and seemed odd, so he decided to approach the boy in question to tell him of it. After he had done so, the boy reportedly told his father that, “when I was walking over there to see Pastor I knew exactly what he was going to tell me.” The father later related this comment to Moses. This dialectical relationship, where both individuals had a peculiar subject on the mind for no discernible reason and informed the other, was proof of God’s hand; after recounting his tale Moses told me, “A lot of times [God] speaks to me in that way.” Abraham also made reference to such things. Before making a trip to Israel, he had prayed for God to give him a more charity-oriented heart. At some point on the trip, a man approached him to ask for money, and Abraham gave him all the money he had. When he returned home, he received a gift basket from a woman he had never met. Therein was a check for \$1000, and it had been written “on the same day, and perhaps the same point of time, when I’m giving [charity]... [and] God’s over here, moving this woman to give to us.” He conceded that it could be “a coincidence” but that he believed it to be “God speaking, you know, that was a good thing you asked of me.” Eve concurred with the rest on this point. Responses [like Abraham’s] were usually conditional, but still embraced belief. By the reasoning of the four incredulous subjects, a highly improbable event at the very least implied the hand of God.

A fourth source of conviction was positive emotions, which were felt and asserted by all four subjects. This category includes internal head feelings of joy, peace, comfort, and hope. It was also a compelling source: none of the subjects expressed skepticism as to the nature of such emotions (See: Findings). Most of the subjects talked of these as if it were commonplace to understand such emotions in a spiritual way. Daniel discussed all of them with no sign of reservation or doubt, unlike other sources. Eve, too, found them to be proof of the Holy Spirit’s work. Upon being asked of the evidence the Holy Spirit gives her of his presence, she answered conclusively, “He gives me great joy... no matter what the circumstances are around me... He gives me peace.” She then echoed the Bible’s explanation of this phenomenon,

stating, “It’s the fruit of the Spirit, because when the Holy Spirit resides in you, you have love, joy, peace, patience...” Abraham, too, described an “internal peace” and “an inner confidence”; this was the only source of conviction besides the Bible which he spoke of without reservation. Moses expressed a similar opinion, explaining, “The evidence is real simple, Jesus said, I must leave you, so that the Comforter can come, so, first off, I feel comfort, a sense of peace like you said.” Positive emotional feelings were seen as originating from a divine source and were proof of the presence of God.

A fifth source of conviction that was mentioned solely by Daniel was the universe itself and the complexity of living things. Said Daniel, “I really think it takes more faith to be an atheist than it does to believe, based on what I think the scientific evidence points to, you know, the universe had a beginning, and if there’s a beginning there’s a beginner, and... the design in life... and if there’s a design it means there’s an intelligence beyond the design... [T]he most primitive form of cell... they have as much specified complex information as 1000 encyclopedias. And... I don’t believe that can happen by chance.” His argument stems from the absence of a materialistic explanation for certain phenomenon. Akin to the third source of conviction, personal incredulity at an event occurring “by chance” is grounds for a divine explanation. In describing this source, Daniel mentioned several authors who he agreed with or had read, such as Michael Behe, Lee Strobel, and William Lane Craig (these are current figures in the apologetics or Intelligent Design movement). All three use “scientific” arguments to prove the reliability of Christianity. It seems reasonable for Daniel to ascribe to their claims: as an academic professional who described himself as a “wired skeptical,” he wanted more reputable proof for Christianity than the circular reasoning of believing the Bible because the Bible says so (See: Findings).

## Findings

Daniel, Abraham, and potentially Eve described experiences that accurately mirror the previously described “realization sensation” (See: Methods). Their episodes began with the sense that they had experienced “a breakthrough”, had a “revelation”, or gained “understanding.” For Abraham this had occurred during reading of the Bible. He explained, “...when [I’m] reading God’s

word [and] I get some understanding, it often is accompanied by, just kind of a, washing over my body... [of] goose-bumps.” Daniel was vague as to the setting for his own experiences but seemed to mention the Bible being involved. Eve spoke of her spirit “Bear[ing] Witness” when someone “say[s] something that’s a revelation to me... something that I was trying to understand.” When she was asked if it was similar to making a connection, she said, “Absolutely, it’s just like, that’s awesome, that’s it, that’s the answer.”

In all three cases something “click[ed]” and two of the three described this as being akin to a light bulb turning on inside. For Daniel and Abraham, the immediate response to their discovery was a washing over sensation of goose-bumps. The two men’s described experience matches the realization sensation on all points. Moreover, Daniel explicitly described the sensation as a “somatic resonance” while Abraham mentioned being “emotionally... pricked.” Both men believed these experiences to be the work of the Holy Spirit, or God himself, and used them as evidence of spiritual things. Eve’s, while containing the mental components, lacked a description of goose-bumps. For this reason, her description only implies the realization sensation and may actually be relating a separate phenomenon. Nonetheless, the experiences of these three provide evidence for the conclusion that Christians, when recounting an experience where God spoke to them through the Bible, may mean or be describing the realization sensation.

While somatic experiences were noted by all individuals as a source of conviction, Moses alone considered such an experience to be his primary evidence of spiritual things and what led him to become a Christian. He stated that, while lying in the snow hoping that God would respond to his supplications, he experienced “...a heat, that overcame me. And it was just amazing; I never experienced anything like it in my life. I just really, just really experienced the presence of God...” Follow up questions were able to elicit further details: Moses explained that it felt like “Something in my body...just went into an over acceleration... my body kicked into another gear... And I just knew that I knew. That there was a God.” When he was asked of his opinion of the Bible before this experience, he responded, “I was aware of it... it was like everything else, it was just a bunch of philosophical thoughts and opinions of people... and, you know, why are their thoughts any better than my thoughts?” The day after his somatic

experience, he woke up "...at 4 o'clock in the morning, and all I could do is just read the Bible, I just wanted to find out who this God is." His statement runs contrary to the experiences of the other three interviewees who claimed the Bible to be their original source of conviction. For Moses, the Bible was a secondary source of religious truth in his conversion that was subservient to a somatic experience.

On a similar note, Moses' and Eve's conviction seems to conflict with parts of an explanation (Luhrmann, et. 2001), which claims that coming to understand God's role in an "unusual, vivid spiritual experience" is a learning experience. According to Luhrmann, identifying God's involvement (or lack of involvement) in a situation requires social instruction and may take multiple tries. Says Luhrmann, "...we work with a theory that learning to experience God depends on *interpretation* (the socially taught and culturally variable cognitive categories that identify the presence of God), *practice* (the subjective and psychological consequences of the specific training specified by the religion: e.g., prayer), and *proclivity* (a talent for and willingness to respond to practice)." In regards to the interview with Moses, two of Luhrmann's categories (proclivity and practice) seem questionable: Moses elucidated no previous cultural or social training that led him to the conclusion that God had caused his somatic experience. On the point of interpretation, conflict appears: Moses had received no "specific training specified by the religion." There was no doubt in his mind that the heat-related somatic experience was God, even though he explicitly stated that he had "never experienced anything like it in [his] whole life." This was something new, something completely alien to his mind and body; yet he still believed it to be God, and immediately so, if his recollection is accurate (See: New Questions).

Eve, too, was willing to make conclusive statements on phenomena that she was unfamiliar with. Towards the end of our interview, she read me a journal entry about something her husband had experienced at church after she finished describing this, the claims were verified with her husband, who was present in the house). During worship time, he reportedly felt "something going into his wrist... it was painful...it was like a spike..." Her husband was apparently unsure as to the meaning, but Eve thought it meant that Jesus was helping him understand part of what he suffered through on the cross. She saw it as "a powerful example of the love that [Jesus] has for

[my husband]." Eve asserted this experience to be from God despite the fact that she had never experienced it for herself. This highlights Luhrmann's emphasis on practice and perhaps proclivity while calling the need for interpretation into question. On the count of practice, Eve was in a situation prescribed by the religion for encountering God ("worship time" at church). On the count of proclivity, she connected this unprecedented experience to the Bible, a source of conviction. However, there is neither Bible verse nor social/cultural teaching, to this researcher's knowledge, that asserts that physical pain is evidence of God's presence. Where exactly did she get this idea? Typically, pain in the wrist would be interpreted as a sign of an internal problem or a strained muscle and would be dealt with medically. Perhaps the context directed Eve's thinking in this situation (See: New Questions). Overall, both Moses' and Eve's statements call into question certain aspects of Luhrmann's explanation.

The responses also suggest that why one converts and what one finds to be compelling proof of religious claims may depend on one's period of life at the time of conversion. Abraham, who was raised Baptist from birth and stayed so throughout his life put primary and solitary emphasis on the Bible. When he "was 5 years old" he had "the simple understanding of... what I believed in, the Bible's teaching." This occurred chiefly at an evangelical service where a preacher used "...the word of God. And the law of God converts the soul, the Scripture says." In discussing other sources of conviction, Abraham often added the precursory statement, "Scripture says," and ensured other experiences lined up with the text. He stated, "It [corporate worship, emotional experiences] needs to be based on the word of God, and not a superficial understanding, you want to go deep." Somatic and emotional experiences were acknowledged, but downplayed; Abraham tended to use conditional phrases when he discussed them, such as, "You know, I believe *at times* [goose-bumps] is [proof of God's presence]" (Italics mine). He also made sure that I understood that somatic experiences "...don't have to be [evidence of spiritual things]. Because my emotional experiences can be completely wrong..." As should be clear, Abraham was raised believing in the Bible and continues to rely on it as his primary source of spiritual truth.

The three other subjects (barring Abraham) converted to their current faith in middle age and placed more emphasis and confidence on emotional

or somatic experiences. They still believed the Bible to be an adequate proof, but spoke more conclusively of other phenomena. Moses, as previously mentioned, considered a somatic experience to be his elementary proof of God's existence. Like Daniel, Eve was raised in a form of Christianity but left that faith entirely for a time: she told me, "My whole family, is believers, and I [was] like... I don't want to hear that anymore." Now that she has returned, she claims the Bible to be compelling truth of Christianity and claims it to be "everything" to her faith; but in answering a question on her walk with God/relationship with Jesus [a fundamental trait of Evangelicals] she exclusively discussed emotional satisfaction. She was also much more prone to emphasize or speak conclusively of somatic experiences as a source of conviction. At the end of our interview, Eve asked me if she could read me a passage from a "powerful little book." She proceeded to do so, and the words/the imagery evoked a tingling sensation in my skin and neck. When I mentioned this sensation to her, she replied, "Yeah, because something's bearing witness in you, in your spirit. It's bearing witness about the truth." Eve used no conditional phrases here, which were the rule with Abraham. These examples show that individuals who converted later in life still believed in the Bible but were more willing to unconditionally accept other sources of conviction.

Daniel's responses reinforce this notion that one's reasons for conversion may be based on the period in which one converted. During the interview, Daniel actually stated that there were "two parts to [his] life. There's being raised Catholic, and falling away, and then coming back a follower of Christ." He also stated that he has held "different levels of belief." When he was younger, said Daniel, "I... had sort of a child like belief" but now through the works of apologists and scientists he has "take[n] it a notch higher... [and] come to the conclusion that [his] faith is a reasonable one." A follow up question was asked, that being, "Would you say that when you were a child it was because of tradition or upbringing?" He responded, "Yeah, very much. It was, very much." These comments seem to imply that a person may have to re-evaluate and lay new foundations for their faith at different points in their life. That is, what a person finds to be compelling proof of their faith at an early point may no longer convince them in subsequent years. As a child, Daniel believed because he had been taught to; now as an adult he believes because of his own study and efforts.

Based on Daniel's and Abraham's comments, there seems to be a correlation between the reasons for one's conviction and the life period of the individual at the time.

The interviews with Daniel, Eve, and Moses also tend to show that individuals who embraced a religion later in life did so in times of crisis. In the case of Daniel and Moses, these crises involved the realization of human mortality. In the former, this came by the death of family members, and in the latter, by a diagnosis of cancer. Daniel explained that "...we converted shortly after my [family member's] death... And it became very obvious to me that, it shook the foundations of my life [which was] I must be the power." A similar experience occurred with Moses, who expounded how years prior when he was diagnosed with cancer he "began to search for God..." Eve was vague about a crisis, but she mentioned being wounded emotionally and having family related problems. After having found a place at Crossroads, she reports, "My spirit... it's been completely healed." All three of these episodes involved instability, were emotionally detrimental to the person, and occurred within close proximity to that individual's conversion (See: New Questions).

Daniel's interview supports the possibility that what one considers to be a compelling source of religious conviction (and why) can be influenced by education or occupation. In discussing the Bible, the other three subjects used no extraneous evidence as a base for their conviction; a solitary reference was made by Eve to the Bible being trustworthy because prophecies made in the Old Testament came true in the life of Jesus. Such was not the case with Daniel: he backed up his belief in the Bible by making reference to empirical evidence which collaborated the Bible's account. Said Daniel, "I have studied... a lot of the archaeology stuff and my beliefs about the Bible... the Hittites, some people say, the Hittites never existed, and then they dug up the Hittite library. The Bible seems to stand the test of time, more than any other ancient book." Another example was given concerning textual reliability: reportedly, early Christian letters quote almost the entirety of the New Testament. Thus, one does not have to assume the existence of an unadulterated text, but can verify this using contemporary sources. These proofs have a more empirical basis than others provided by him and other subjects. As an academic professional who publishes research, it makes sense for Daniel to place trust in such proofs, as they align more accurately with his

thought process. Daniel's experience implies that individuals can be shaped by both the type of the work they do and the education they have received.

Sources of conviction that can be found explicitly described in the Bible were embraced more intensely than those that seem to lack textual support. For example, all four individuals spoke with certainty that emotions such as peace, joy, and confidence were from the Holy Spirit (See: Findings). These emotions and more are explicitly described in the canon: Galatians 5:22-23 gives an list of moods that may be considered "Fruit of the [Holy] Spirit" (which includes peace and joy), while John 14:26 describes how Jesus would send "the Comforter" to his disciples. The interviewees, as previously described (See: Findings) placed great confidence in the Bible; some (Moses, in certain situations, and Abraham in all) even used it to discern the nature of external phenomena. It can be safely concluded, then, that their confidence in positive emotion as a source of religious convictions originates from the Biblical writing on the subject. This would also assist in understanding why interviewees were less confident (in general) concerning other sources of conviction. While all the subjects believed that somatic experiences could be proof of spiritual things, they never made blanket statements and considered the context before making such a judgment. Conditional phrases such as "could be" or "maybe" were used, with rare exceptions (such as Moses' heat related somatic experience). Clearly, the Bible is still an important source of religious conviction to Christians and may set standards for gaining belief from other things.

### Limitations:

The responses of those interviewed, for the great majority, indicate the validity of this study and the conclusions drawn from it. Interviewees seemed to have a good grasp on the concept being pursued as well as what exactly was meant by somatic experiences. When they were unsure, they asked questions. For example, when Daniel was told that somatic experiences were being researched, he asked, "What kind of experiences?" for clarification. After being informed of what was included in that category, he immediately began to talk about his experiences with goose-bumps. The only potential problem encountered was the occasional difficulty of separating emotions from somatic experiences when subject's talked of both in close vicinity. This interchangeability is

understandable as both emotions and somatic experiences involve sensations within the head. Both are also experienced as reactions to the outside world. For example, Abraham mentioned being "emotionally" pricked by finding understanding within the Bible, but then immediately went on to describing goose-bumps. To him, goose-bumps and "head feelings" were counted as emotions. The line between the two can be hard to draw, thanks to the similar characteristics of both. However, particular terms could be used to divide these apart (goose-bumps, tingles, etc. meant somatic experiences, specific named moods are emotions). Thus, this was no significant problem and could be easily sorted out. Overall, the subjects seemed to grasp the concepts being studied and answered questions accurately.

How far this study can be generalized is uncertain and probably limited as the group interviewed was considerably limited both in number and variety. It encompassed a total of four individuals, all of whom were Protestant and Evangelical. This sample was also unrepresentative of the population of the area and the church: all of the subjects (one female and three males) were white, middle class, and middle aged. Moreover, three of the subjects had received at least some level of education beyond the high school level (and for two this education was extensive.) The background of the subjects, though, provides some assistance in extending the scope of this study. Of the four individuals, only two were raised in the same faith. Moses came from a non-religious background, as was previously mentioned, which is helpful in that he was less influenced by religious believers. Daniel was raised Catholic, but left his faith during his college years. He experimented with various Eastern religions for a time before coming back to a different form of Christianity. Both Abraham and Eve were raised Baptist, and at least Abraham has stayed very much so. This variety of past faiths lends credibility to the idea that an emphasis on somatic experiences may not be a merely Protestant Evangelic phenomenon, but rather a human one. Overall, it would still be necessary to have a more diverse sample in order to reveal some general principle that would help in explaining the source of religious conviction.

The reflexivity of subjects seems to be limited if present at all. Leading questions that made explicit reference to the details of particular somatic experiences were purposefully left till the end; this ensured that individuals would not highlight such experiences unless they felt that they

were crucial to their faith. There were also times when answers that would have assisted the thesis of this research were not given under further inquiry. Toward the end of Eve's interview, she mentioned a potential connection between speaking in tongues (to her, a Holy Spirit-given ability) and goose-bumps. A question was asked as to which came first in the sequence, and she indicated that glossolalia did. By that point, she was aware of the focus on the primacy of somatic experiences, but did not give a response conducive to that conclusion. Furthermore, when inaccurate conclusions were drawn, the subject (always, as far as could be discerned) spoke up to correct the mistake. For example, based on Moses' claim that "the Bible is God's letter to Christians," a statement was made to Daniel as part of a question which assumed this to be his view as well. He corrected this assumption immediately, and started his response to the full question by saying, "I don't think that the Bible is a letter from God to Christians, I think that the Bible is a letter from God to man..." For these reasons, it can be safely concluded that the presence of the researcher had little effect on those interviewed.

### **Suggestions for future research:**

Further research could be conducted to determine how influential somatic experiences are overall in creating religious conviction. This researcher feels that the main deficiency in this study was the lack of a diversity of religious faiths. An interesting group to focus on in the future may be Muslims. Recently, this researcher heard the Qur'an being sung/recited by an imam, and this elicited a somatic response. Moreover, the realization sensation seems to be best evoked when a connection is made between two ideas. The Qur'an is a vast piece of literature with sections divided seemingly haphazardly; finding new details on existing characters in separate Suras might be enough to evoke goose-bumps. It would be interesting to see if Muslims likewise experienced such sensations and gained religious conviction from them. If this is the case, it is possible that the same thing could be true of Jews who recite or study the Torah. Ensuing research could also deal merely with other Christian sects: if it is a wholly Christian phenomenon, perhaps one particular sect is responsible for the spread of this idea. The Gregorian chants of Catholic monks could presumably incite such responses, as could perhaps particularly vivifying organ music. Subsequent

research, to remain free of bias, should also target those groups that are hostile or silent concerning somatic experiences, such as fundamentalist Baptists. It has been shown by comments in this study that somatic experiences can still be encountered in a non-music based setting. Thus, even those that frown on emotional music but have individual's reading the holy text could potentially have somatic experiences. If somatic experiences were encountered, would predisposed individuals still gain conviction from them? Investigating the opinions of both those in an environment that is and is not favorable to interpreting somatic experiences in such a way would be the best route to a general answer.

Another study using the same religious group or Crossroads itself would still be beneficial and could be done with a more diverse sample. A more balanced study could make use of several elderly and young-adult subjects; this would be more representative of the population as a whole as well as most churches. Likewise, future subjects could be selected in ways to better avoid bias. During Crossroads' services, one can tell (with relative certainty) which individuals are receptive to certain somatic experiences and which are not (for example, people can be observed throwing their hands up when the music evokes a tingling sensation). A point was made in this study to avoid bias by not purposefully picking those who seemed the most responsive to such things, but this was hard to accomplish. Preliminary questions, or more extensive observation, could sort out a future group of those who do not seem inclined towards somatic experiences. It would be interesting to see if this group would still consider somatic experiences to be a source of religious conviction. Such a study would show whether or not the four individuals researched are typical within the group or merely a radical minority. Further research along this line would help reveal the influence and scope of somatic experiences for neo-charismatic Christians.

It would also be beneficial to discover more details concerning what exactly is required and involved in the creation of a somatic experience. They clearly involve the nervous system, in at least some capacity, but what is it about connecting two ideas or hearing particularly powerful music that evokes such feelings? Does the realization sensation come on from the connection of synapses in the brain (which seems to be where the sensation starts) or is it merely a worked up mind releasing stress? As music is involved, could certain specific keys or chords bring on tingling sensations by

making certain neurons fire in a peculiar pattern? Most religions and rituals, regardless of their locality, make use of music in some capacity. If somatic experiences are a widespread source of religious conviction, this could give a potential explanation for the cultural retention of certain rituals (See: New Questions). Somatic experiences as a whole could be studied on a psychological or biological level by attempting to pinpoint integral regions of the brain that are involved in the reaction (it is possible that literature already exists that provides such an answer). Further sociological study could be targeted on those individuals who have experienced these sensations. In-depth and specific questions could then be asked concerning the person's mood at the time, what they were thinking of, where they felt the sensation begin and end, etc. Whatever the branch of science, any of these approaches would help light the darkness surrounding these unusual sensations and their origin.

Based on Moses' conversion, further research could be conducted to see if other individuals have embraced a religion thanks to a somatic experience. This would not need to be limited to actual interviews with believers, though this would be helpful. Instead, or in cooperation, historical research could be conducted on the autobiographies of past and current believers. This medium may be a great source of information based on a recent finding. A few weeks ago, this researcher read through a chapter of *Godless* (which chronicles the conversion and de-conversion of Dan Barker, an evangelical pastor turned atheist). According to the author, he was raised a Christian, but gained his real conviction and direction one evening at a "revival meeting" when he believed that he was "communicating with God." Says Barker, "[That evening] I experienced strong inner sensations that I could only describe as "spiritual"... I had never had these feelings in any other context, and since the "spirit-filled" environment triggered them, I knew that I had confirmation of the reality of God." Such sensations, which seem to be brought on by the music, have been previously described as a source of conviction by the four individuals in this study (See: Findings). Their remarks and Mr. Barkers' remarks assist in the conclusion that other neo-charismatics may gain conviction from such experiences. As the neo-charismatic camp seems the most promising at this time, its literature could be dredged to find the sources of conviction leaders and followers embraced or embrace.

Further study could try to ascertain exactly why certain devotees believe somatic experiences to be a source of religious conviction. To this researcher's knowledge, neither Bible verse nor Christian dogma supports the idea that such feelings are proof of the Holy Spirit's presence. Why, then, do these Christians believe that they are? Either the Bible is not the filter for all other experiences, and Christians merely play lip service to it at times, or a description of certain somatic experiences can be found in the text. There are enigmatic references in the Book of Ephesians and the Book of John that may potentially be referring to somatic experiences. For example, John 16: 13-15 reads in part, "When the spirit of truth comes he will guide you in all truth... He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and will declare it to you." In Ephesians 1:17, the Holy Spirit is called "the spirit of wisdom and truth," while Ephesians 5: 18-19 mentions that one can be "filled with the Spirit" by "psalms, hymns, and songs." Could the declaration mentioned in the Book of John involve the realization sensation, which accompanies understanding and the connecting of ideas? Likewise, could this filling of the spirit spoken of by the Book of Ephesians refer to the tingling sensations brought on by particularly powerful music? Ephesians 3:16 may reinforce this conclusion: it says that God will "strengthen [believers] with power through his Spirit in your inner being." Even with these verses, neither of these interpretations is conclusive; nor is any of this evidence beyond the circumstantial. The best way to verify such an explanation would be to search through the writings of early church fathers to see if they interpreted such passages in a similar way. Or, interviews could be conducted where Christians would be asked to interpret these passages as they understand them. Until either of these can take place, a reason for the acceptance of somatic experiences as evidence of spiritual things is uncertain.

The context surrounding a somatic experience could be explored further as it seems to have importance in the interpretation of such as a source of religious conviction. Humans who are unfamiliar with these experiences and then have them during a ritual may see that ritual as endowed with some holy fire. This explanation was explicitly given by Dan Barker earlier in this section for his belief, and this may be the case with others. Something to this effect was mentioned by Abraham, who gained faith from somatic experiences even though he noted "Not [because] the Bible tells me that

[they're spiritual]." Instead, he implied that he believed them to be from "the spirit of God" because "when reading God's word, [and he] gets some understanding, it often is accompanied by... goose-bumps..." That is, because the realization sensation frequently occurred within the context of a religiously prescribed ceremony, Abraham believed it to be proof of God's presence. Based on these items, a study could focus on individuals who have had somatic experiences (preferably, in both secular and religious settings). Likewise, it would be best to include both those embrace a religious faith and those who do not. Each person could be asked of their experiences, under what circumstances they happened, their interpretation of a few, and why they came to such a conclusion. This researcher would expect a connection between those who had somatic experiences under religious circumstances and those who interpreted them as a source of religious conviction. Somatic experiences under a secular context should not be expected to be viewed as commonly as a source of religious conviction. Interviews of this nature would help elucidate whether or not a particular setting is necessary for a somatic experience to be interpreted as "spiritual."

### New questions

The experience of several subjects who converted later in life raises a question in regards to the origin of their desire to pursue the divine. Daniel and Eve were raised in various branches of Christianity, which they later rejected; they returned to a different form of Christianity later on in their lives soon after a crisis. It can be safely concluded that the idea of an afterlife and a loving God had already been implanted in their mind at a young age. This, most likely, provided an impetus for their return. The same conclusion cannot be as easily made for Moses, who also converted in a crisis: he was not raised religious and had little if any previous experience with Christianity. Moses did describe an employee at his workplace that may have influenced him: this individual "...believed that [the Bible] was true, that everything in it was true." Later in the interview, Moses made the comment that this person was unaware of his search for God, which would seem to indicate that discussion between them on the subject was limited, if it did occur. It is possible, therefore, but not likely, that Moses was socialized into accepting the existence of the Divine before beginning his search. If this is the case, then his yearning for God comes as no surprise, as the idea of pursuing God

had already been placed in his mind by his co-worker. If this was not the case, then an obvious question is: from whence did his desire to pursue God arise? Is a yearning for some form of truth greater than oneself a part of the natural human being, or is it a socially constructed urge? May it be that, in crisis, the human mind simply latches on to whatever possibility seems most immediate? As it is impossible to completely isolate an individual from religious influence, an answer to this question is difficult to determine. Though there are possible intrusions of influence, the source of Moses' desire to pursue religion is unclear.

The fact that interviewees considered somatic experiences to be a source of religious conviction raises the question of whether or not certain rituals are purposely used because they can elicit such responses. Whether or not current rituals were designed this way would be impossible to ascertain, if they were designed at all, as many have their root in antiquarian practices. For example, a modern practice known as the altar call can be commonly found in Baptist churches. This ritual involves the offering of salvation to unbelievers and is usually accompanied by the playing of particularly inspiring music. Of course, the use of music in religious rituals is hardly original; it can be inferred from certain shamanistic cave paintings in France that this practice may date back to nearly 30,000 BCE. Thus, if there was a single motive behind the "choice" to use music in a religious context, it cannot be known. However, individuals in the religions today still choose to use music in certain ceremonies. Do pastors or choir directors consciously choose a piece because of its ability to (to use an Evangelical term) "make the Spirit move"? Or are they simply following the traditions of their church with little interest in the results? Do imams recite the Qur'an in such a melodious fashion to send tingles across the skin of their listeners and endow the performance with a spiritual energy? Or were they merely trained to do this as a child and have received no other explanation as to why this must occur? This should not be read as an accusation that religious leaders are manipulating their followers' faith. If in fact a conscious decision is being made to use rituals because they incite somatic experiences, those making this choice may honestly believe that these rituals are necessary to feel the presence of the divine. At this current time, it cannot be concluded one way or another whether somatic experiences are merely the unintended consequences of a ritual or whether they are the intended result.