"God Put It Into My Heart": Omen-Seeking and Divine Communication Narratives in Contemporary American Protestantism

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"GOD PUT IT INTO MY HEART": OMEN-SEEKING AND DIVINE
COMMUNICATION NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN
PROTESTANTISM

by

Emma Crisp

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Folklore

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ABSTRACT

"God Put It into My Heart": Omen-Seeking and Divine Communication Narratives in Contemporary American Protestantism

by

Emma Crisp, Master of Science
Utah State University, 2023

Major Professor: Dr. Afsane Rezaei
Department: English

This project examines omen-seeking practices within Protestant Christianity in the U.S. Intermountain West. It collates and analyzes the results of ethnographic research into the ways that mainline Protestants experience, interpret, and talk about their personal spiritual experiences. The project finds that divinatory and other omen-seeking practices exist in this context but are not recognized or discussed as divinatory due to the conflation of divination with sortilege and the prevalence of prayer as the primary solicitation method for Protestant forms of augury. Emic categories of omen are distinguished not through generation method (such as the solicited/unsolicited distinction proposed by Tom Mould), but through reception method and the emotional and physical impact of the experience. Additionally, ominous experiences are the subject of narratives which are told in particular contexts by practitioners: the narratives are used primarily
within the religious community as ways to encourage, uplift, and bolster the faith of listeners who are expected to share the teller’s understanding of how the experiences are received and interpreted, and the act of telling the stories serves to express and reinforce a theological worldview in which God is an active force in the lives of His worshippers.

(70 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

"God Put It into My Heart": Omen-Seeking and Divine Communication Narratives in Contemporary American Protestantism

Emma Crisp

This project looks at the ways that Protestant Christians in the U.S. Intermountain West understand and talk about their personal spiritual experiences, especially experiences that are interpreted as being communication from God. Members of mainline Protestant churches in Utah were asked to share their stories of divine communication and to discuss how, when, and why they might tell those stories to other people. The project concludes that Protestants tend to experience the presence of God through feelings of peace, clarity of mind when making decisions, and the seemingly-coincidental opening or closing of opportunities, and they generally do not distinguish between experiences that were direct answers to prayers versus those that were entirely unsolicited. When they tell the stories, they typically do it in contexts where they can expect their listeners to be fellow believers, and they tell the stories for purposes such as encouragement, bolstering faith, and expressing or reinforcing a worldview in which God takes an active hand in the lives of His followers.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is dedicated, first and foremost, to the professors and colleagues whose patience, kindness, and support both practical and emotional made grad school not just bearable, but survivable. I would not have made it through these last two years without your help.

Special thanks also goes to the members of various churches in the Cache Valley area—my informants, collaborators, and in many cases, friends. Without their genuine enthusiasm in sharing their personal stories this project would never have gotten off the ground.

Finally, I wish to recognize my family: my parents, who have steadfastly supported me as I followed my dreams from one niche academic field into an even more niche academic field; Mill, who kept me going; Swan, who kept me sane; Dani, who has been my friend and sister long enough to have been around for most of the experiences that led me into this field in the first place; and all of my other siblings and friends who have played their own parts in getting me to where I am today. Thank you. I love you.

Emma Crisp
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Protestant Christianity, especially in the United States, is known for overtly discouraging divination practices in its adherents. Yet there are examples of omen-seeking traditions which have been justified and fitted into various Christian religious frameworks as ways to communicate with God. This project examines current divinatory practices within American Protestantism: what methods of omen-seeking are used by practitioners, how the distinction is drawn between acceptable and unacceptable forms of divination, whether a distinction is made between active seeking and passive reception of omens, and how divinatory practices and results are used within the religious framework to construct narratives of divine communication.

There have been collections of divinatory practices throughout the history of folklore studies (Musick 1952 and Ryan 2008 are both typical examples); however, few of them explicitly analyze how these practices fit into a vernacular religious framework (Primiano 1995), and many of the available studies were performed at a time when folklorists were mostly concerned with folklore as “survivals”, rather than as robust and living traditions of their own. As a result, there has been little emphasis on the religious nature and development of divination and omen-seeking systems, especially those that the practitioners themselves do not explicitly consider to be divination. Even within the work done on the prototypically “folky” culture of Catholicism, discussions of divinatory and other omen-seeking techniques are sparse; what little literature exists on Protestant
denominations, famously devoid of ritual and eschewing more overt forms of material engagement with the vernacular, are even more lacking.

However, I argue that divination does, in fact, form an accepted category of vernacular religious practices within American Protestantism; due to the way official doctrines of divine communication are used to contextualize and justify these practices, it is not a folk religion that is opposed to the institution, but rather runs parallel to it and is a strong part of how the practitioners conceive of their relationship to deity and to their belief system.

To fill this gap in the available data, I performed ethnographic fieldwork in order to collect a corpus of omen-seeking narratives in contemporary Protestantism. Traditions such as bibliomancy with a Bible, passive reception of omens, and the interpretation of emotional responses as the Holy Spirit, as well as how the practitioners fit these practices into their religious context, were investigated by various means, including surveys and detailed interviews with the practitioners themselves. The results, as reported in the following paper, demonstrate that these forms of divination are in fact a robust and important part of how American Protestants construct narratives about their relationship with the divine.

**Relevant Literature**

My research applies the framework of vernacular religion to an overlooked set of practices within American Protestantism. The concept of vernacular religion, as proposed by Primiano to replace the two-tiered “official vs. folk” model (Yoder 1974), has proved
a robust frame for examining religious belief within Christianity from a folklore perspective. Much of this research, however, has focused primarily on vernacular Catholicism. In particular, there is a heavy emphasis on devotionalism (Dugan 2016; Orsi 1989) and on material culture (Sciorra 1989; Sciorra 2015; McDannell 1995)—two of the aspects of vernacular Catholicism that are often held up as major distinctions separating it from Protestant Christianity. Wojcik (1996) even makes an explicit claim in his discussion of Marian apparitions that these phenomena are unique to Catholicism.

The majority of folklore work done on vernacular Protestantism consists of the prolific body of work of Elaine Lawless, whose focus on the place of narrative in Pentecostal services (Lawless 1988a; Lawless 1988b; Lawless 1991) is extremely relevant to my own area of interest. There are also occasional papers dealing with the vernacular belief practices of other denominations, such as conservative Evangelicalism (Howard 2009) and Mormonism (Mould 2009; Eliason 2016). McDannell (1995) deals with Protestant material culture, demonstrating its existence within a context that has stereotypically been considered devoid of it; Seamone (2013) proves the presence of ritual in Pentecostalism in a similar way. However, in general, mainline Protestant denominations are incredibly under-represented in this work1.

My work in this project revolves around these under-researched practices, with particular interest paid to how Protestant Christians use narratives of religious experience

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1 Part of the problem may be that the general background radiation of Calvinist Protestantism in American culture results in a fish-in-water problem: Protestant vernacular religious practices are so ubiquitous, and the perception that Christianity flavors every aspect of American culture is so strong (and accurate), that these vernacular practices are not recognized either as folklore or as Protestant.
to navigate personal and communal relationships with the divine. Robert Orsi’s theory of “abundant events”, ably summarized and extended by Taysom (2012), provides an expansive and versatile framework for discussing these concepts, and in combination with the previously-mentioned work of Lawless provides the foundational design model for examining the data I collect. I am also drawing from other recent work on religious experiences in the context of identity formation (Jones 2000; Wellman and Corcoran 2013; Bowman 2014).

By focusing on divinatory practices within contemporary American Protestantism and the accompanying experience narratives, my research highlights the importance and applicability of the ‘vernacular religion’ framework to a less-studied area, and extends further the recent lines of inquiry regarding the role of religious experience in the shaping of community identity narratives.

Definitions
Throughout this paper I will be referring to various types of omen-seeking practices\(^2\), which I consider to be any practice that interprets some form of random, randomized, or coincidental occurrence as a sign or symbol that reveals knowledge that the practitioner would not normally have access to. This relatively broad category can be divided into various sets of subcategories: one such useful division is that made by Tom Mould (2009), who sorted Mormon revelation narratives into solicited and unsolicited. The

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\(^2\) For the purposes of this paper, “ominous practice” will be used synonymously, with the term *ominous* by itself referring to both the practices and the beliefs.
process of soliciting omens is usually ritualized or formalized in some way—from elaborate methods of tool usage to spontaneous prayers\textsuperscript{3}.

However, I have found that for my purposes it is more useful to consider a distinction between what I will call divination and augury: divination I am defining as generative methods of receiving omens, with sortilege being the archetypal example. This might include using dice, cards, or other methods of randomization to generate a result which is then interpreted as an omen. I would also consider traditions such as the Epiphany “king cake”\textsuperscript{4}, in which a set omen is deliberately created and it is the person who receives it that is randomized, to be a generative form of divination. Augury, on the other hand, is receptive. In other words, a diviner creates the omens themselves, while an augur waits for the omen to appear. The omen read in an augury may have been solicited, but it is not generated by the augur. For example, the original term of augury referred to a Roman technique of marking out a section of the sky and observing the types, numbers, and flight patterns of birds that crossed through it. While the omen-seeking was deliberate and constrained, the augurs did not themselves direct the birds; they only interpreted what was already there.

There are, of course, edge cases and grey areas in this distinction, but it is the most useful one for the purposes of this particular project. I will also be referring occasionally to Mould’s ‘solicited/unsolicited’ division, using those terms.

\textsuperscript{3} As will be seen in the corpus I have collected, mainline Protestants in the Intermountain West tend heavily toward the latter end of this spectrum.

\textsuperscript{4} A dried pea, small figurine of the baby Jesus, or other object is baked into a cake, with various omens of luck (or occasionally onerous responsibilities, such as paying for next year’s cake!) attributed to the person who finds it in their piece.
Context

Most religious practices use some form of ritualized omen-seeking to construct narratives of divine communication. American Protestantism (especially Evangelical strains) tends to openly disapprove of divinatory practices as they are usually understood, equating them with witchcraft and/or the occult. However, there are still divine communication narratives happening in these congregations, even though they aren’t called divination or omen-seeking. By never explicitly connecting these practices to those overtly discouraged by official doctrine, their practitioners are able to justify their experiences to themselves and their church community, and thus fit them into a system of vernacular Protestant Christian belief. Primiano defines vernacular religion as “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (Primiano 1995:44), and these Protestant justifications for divination display exactly such a system for encounters with and interpretations of numinous experiences.

When initially designing this project, I had tentatively identified at least four general categories of folk practices falling under the umbrella of omen interpretation in an American Protestant context. The first and most obvious of these is solicitation rituals—although despite their active nature they tend to fall more under receptive augury than the generative definition of divination we are using here. One well-known form of these rituals is that of bibliomancy. In the form most often used in these religious contexts, bibliomancy is performed using the home copy of the Bible; the querent may or may not pray beforehand (practitioners often claim that they feel “prompted” to perform
the ritual), then flips through the book without looking until they land on a random page; the line or verse which their eye falls on is considered to be a message from God.

There are also widespread folk beliefs revolving around passively-received (unsolicited) signs. Examples might include various iterations of the ‘penny from heaven’ or ‘angel penny’ superstition, a variant of the ‘lucky penny’ which holds that finding a penny on the ground is a reminder of love from God, a guardian angel, or the spirit of deceased loved one. Marion Bowman references “tortillas depicting the face of Christ” as an example of “popular religious phenomena” of this type (Bowman 2003). Such apparitions can be grouped with more mundane/coincidental signs like the lucky penny due to the unexpectedness of their reception, which is key to the narratives surrounding them.

There are also extant narratives of overhearing words from others, or seeing billboards or signs in shops, that ‘happen to be exactly what the person needed to hear’, and which are attributed to God’s influence. Again, the unexpectedness is the point of these stories; I hypothesized that the attribution of coincidence to the hand of God in these narratives is a way of reinforcing the believers’ religious worldview, highlighting the overlap between the omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence of their deity and the personal and active nature of that deity’s interest in and relationship with his followers. Interestingly, narratives about, for example, the appearance of a certain animal or plant in an odd place, which are common among ominous practices, so far seem to be

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uncommon in American Protestant contexts, although this evaluation may change with the collection of further narratives.

A specific form of omen, though generally considered distinct from the above by practitioners, is revelation through feelings. This type of sign is very common in Mormonism, as described by Mould, but also appears in mainstream Protestant doctrine and personal narratives. These feelings, and in fact the interpretation of all omens, solicited or not, are almost invariably attributed to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Much as augurs and diviners in the ancient world were often considered to be gifted their interpretative powers by one or another deity⁶, the Holy Spirit in Christianity is viewed as the aspect of divinity that is responsible for prompting mortals to the correct interpretation of whatever divine messages they receive, whatever the medium of that message.

In my initial plans, this form of omen had been a simple subcategory of augury, with my intended focus on the flashier, more overt kinds of omens described previously. Instead, I found it to be the primary method of omen reception in the contexts I examined, and pivoted to examining the ways that my respondents built their categories of divine experience around this foundation. Much of the work that follows is a deep dive into the potential iterations and interpretations of this form of omen.

A fourth category of omen, which has had at least some recognition in folklore circles (such as Margaret Brady’s work on the visionary dream narratives of Mormon

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⁶ Consider, for example, Joseph son of Jacob, in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.
women (Brady 1987)), is that of dreams. These tend to be completely unsolicited in American Protestantism—they may come as a response to prayer, but the prayer never seems to be for a dream specifically, and the dreams frequently appear completely out of the blue as far as the storyteller is concerned. In practice, I found that while dream narratives are considered ominous, at appear in a few places in my corpus, they are not always distinguished as a separate category from the previous one, and so I do not focus heavily on them as a distinct set.
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY AND PROJECT DESIGN

Guiding Questions

This project is mostly exploratory, but there are three specific issues I wished to tackle through this research.

The first is that of terminology and definition. One of the reasons it has been so difficult to locate what little research has been done on Christian divinatory practices is because the vast majority of practitioners do not themselves refer to these practices as divinatory. Thus, the first question I sought to answer with the data I collected was: What terms are used to talk about omens and omen-seeking practices? A corollary to this question is the question of production: How are omens typically solicited, when they are solicited? How common is solicitation versus passive reception?

The second, and primary, issue I wished to address is that of context, including acceptability judgements. How are these practices fitted into the vernacular religious context in question? How are various forms of omen-seeking judged as acceptable or unacceptable within the community? I hypothesized that the line between ‘acceptable forms of communicating with God’ and ‘unacceptable/heretical/superstitious’ will fall more or less along the distinction between divination and augury (active generation versus passive reception).

The previous issue has focused more on the experience itself, but I also wished to examine the narratives told about them. Folklore always serves some purpose within its community, and the purpose of these particular narratives seems to be integral to
reinforcing the overall Christian narrative of a personal and active God. How are ominous experiences and their interpretations used in American Protestantism to construct narratives of divine communication? Where, when, how, and why are these narratives told within the community? How does the teller’s personal devoutness and/or level of engagement with their church community affect both their telling and interpretation of their story?

My original plan for this project was vastly broader in scope than ended up being logistically possible, focused on the wide variety of Protestant Christianities across the United States, involving archive research and widespread distribution with the help of the internet. After discussions with my advisor and the IRB, I narrowed the project immensely, turning it into an exploration of Protestant spirituality specifically in my own local area—Logan, Utah, a small and predominantly Mormon town in the Intermountain West—and the concomitant subtext of how the strongly Mormon culture of this area affected the expression of that spirituality. Within that context, the above-mentioned questions take on a less generalizable, more exploratory, and more clearly directed tone, around which I designed a two-stage research process.

**Distribution and Collection**

The survey was distributed and managed through Qualtrics. It went live in June 2022, and was deactivated in September 2022. All distributions were done via anonymous link.
The survey was primarily and most successfully distributed within specific church congregations within Cache County, Utah, with the help of church secretaries and newsletters; attempts at online word-of-mouth distribution proved unsuccessful.

Potential respondents were located by contacting priests, pastors, and other local congregational leaders of local Protestant congregations. Not all contacted parties responded; those who did were asked for permission to distribute information about the survey and to recruit respondents through official church channels. Leaders typically directed me to the church secretary for logistic work after giving their blessing for using church resources to advertise. I worked with the staff of several local churches, including an Episcopal congregation, a Baptist congregation, and a Presbyterian congregation, to distribute the recruitment advertisement approved by the IRB. In most cases this ended up being through the church's newsletter, either by mass email or in print.

The advertisement was, as discussed in the "Project Design" section, written as neutrally as possible; in particular, I omitted any mention of the term "folklore" from recruitment materials due to my awareness that colloquial usage of the word casts implications of falsehood, triviality, or both, and thus presented a possibility of offending potential respondents if applied to their religious beliefs.

I received a couple of referrals from previous respondents, and contacted the potentials promptly, but for the most part this church-sponsored advertising was the

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7 I would like to briefly acknowledge the diligent labor of these secretaries and to thank them for their patience and enthusiasm in helping me with this project.
primary source for respondents. Finding other sources for respondents in order to expand the collected corpus of narratives would be highly beneficial to any follow-up projects.

Project Design

The project was designed to take place in two stages: a survey portion and an optional follow-up interview. Both sections were aimed at collecting the informants’ own personal experience narratives of divine communication and omen-seeking, their own interpretations of those experiences, and the context surrounding them. In this way I began to build up a corpus of ethnographic information—currently limited in scope and focused on the Mormon corridor, but hopefully a demonstration of what future work in this area might look like.

The survey portion of the research was divided into three sections, not including a consent form at the beginning. The consent form specifically covered both the survey and the follow-up interview if agreed to.

The first section of the survey collected demographic information about the respondent, focusing primarily on the respondent’s participation in a Protestant church community, and on how they themselves characterize the location, doctrine, and overall ‘vibe’ of their denomination.

When asking about religious affiliation, I included three primary options (and an “other” write-in response\(^8\)), all falling within what I would consider the Protestant

\(^8\) Note that because the project focuses on specifically Protestant spirituality, I deliberately wished to exclude Mormon (LDS) and Roman Catholic respondents.
umbrella, and using terms that seemed in my experience to be common ways to self-describe. One of the options was, of course, to fill in a specific denomination—I anticipated this to be the spot for respondents to put something like “Presbyterian” or “Baptist”, but did not provide suboptions, only a free-response box. This decision and the space for self-identification it provides is echoed throughout the rest of the survey; while it seems minor, it reflects my desire to collect the terminology and forms of classification used by the communities themselves, and doing it here sets up the tone of the rest of the project where self-identification is the primary focus.

The second option was a nondenominational church, the popularity of which seems to have been growing over the past decades, but which are clearly Protestant in doctrine and operation. Under this option, I also included “generic Christian”, a phrasing I intended to indicate that this was the option to be selected for respondents who considered themselves “just Christian” without putting a more specific name to their beliefs—it is my experience that those in the U.S. who consider themselves such are invariably following a Protestant (usually Calvinist) strand of theology, ethics, and epistemology; even lapsed Catholics identify their Christianity as Catholic in belief, if not in practice.

The third option I provided was a former affiliation with any Protestant church community. The rest of the survey took into account the possibility of the respondent selecting this option, and where relevant instructs such a respondent to answer based on their participation while still actively engaged in the community rather than post-separation. I included this option because I am intimately aware that growing up in a
religious system strongly shapes one’s worldview even if the external trappings of the religion are later abandoned; I was interested in noticing whether and how former Protestants maintained Protestant frameworks for thinking and talking about supernatural experiences.

After naming their denomination, respondents were asked to further describe their primary church community, first in terms of geographical location, then in an open-ended prompt of ‘unique or defining characteristics’ of the denomination’s teachings and practices.

The question about church location was partially a remnant of previous, more extensive plans, but I left it in after narrowing the scope for two reasons: first, I anticipated that a later question asking respondents to recommend the survey to someone else (the ‘snowball’ method of distribution) might result in respondents from farther afield than the main body of my corpus; second, just as with the denomination question, I was interested in seeing how the respondents themselves categorized their context and self-identified within those categories—would they choose to identify their geographical context by state or by general area?

The question of categorization, context, and self-identification became even more important when asking respondents to ‘characterize’ their own religious community. It would have been very easy for me to simply look up the basic doctrines and practices of, say, Presbyterianism; I asked this question instead to understand what the respondent felt were the most defining aspects of their religious, and thus, to understand what the most
notable contributors to and effects on the respondent’s personal belief framework were likely to be.

Finally, I asked two questions regarding the respondent’s participation in their church community: frequency and depth. Frequency was described in terms of “regular”, “semi-regular”, or “infrequent”, with exact definitions or numbers left up to the respondent—it tells me less about how much importance and influence religion has on someone’s life to hear that they go to church once per month than that they consider going to church once per month to be “regular attendance”. Depth here refers to how involved the respondent is with their religious community outside of Sunday church services; this is, again, a way of gauging the importance and influence of the respondent’s religious community on their everyday life.

Overall, this first section of the survey is aimed, on the surface, at gathering basic information about what the respondent probably believes, but underneath that, and even more importantly, this section allows me to set a baseline for what religious framework the respondent is operating under and for how much it is likely to influence what framework they use to interpret and interact with everyday experiences.

The second section of the survey is itself divided into two parts. The first part contains a list of sample narratives, which were written to model the kind of stories I hoped and expected to collect. (See Appendix A for exact text.)
The examples provided here were based on the types of ‘faith-promoting’ personal experience narratives that I have encountered in the past, but were not directly drawn from any specific incident that I am aware of. The way the stories are told attempts to model variants I’ve heard, but my own lack of familiarity with the way these narratives are told—the very thing this project is studying—is probably obvious.

I had some worries about priming with this survey, and the wide variety of sample narratives I provided here was an effort at demonstrating the broad swathe of kinds of stories I hoped to elicit. The first narrative (flipping through the Bible to receive an answer to prayer) shows an actual solicited divinatory practice. The second (a billboard message) and fourth (an overheard conversation) show unsolicited outside omens. The third (dreaming of a deceased grandmother) shows a dream narrative, and is the most heavy-handed with including the hypothetical respondent’s interpretation of a potentially controversial experience, although all of the sample narratives do this to some extent. The last narrative (a premonition of disaster) is an unsolicited internal communication—an ominous experience centered around an emotional or physiological response rather than a discrete outside event.

This spread of sample narratives thus covers fairly thoroughly the basic divisions of divine communications that I have proposed. Each narrative is structured to recount

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9 For the most part, my exposure to these kinds of narratives has been from published books, particularly from nominally-secular (but deeply influenced by the Protestant-normative spirituality of the United States) anthologies of uplifting stories, rather than from face-to-face interactions.
first the inciting situation, then the ominous experience itself, then the person’s interpretation of the experience as a divine communication.

After providing this list of sample narratives, the survey moves into part 3 (the second half of the second part referenced above) and begins by asking the respondents to make their own judgement on the narratives provided. I asked for not just terminology, but also classification, and to some extent implicitly for the respondent to accept or refute the interpretation of the experience as divine (some respondents did, indeed, classify one or more of the sample narratives as ‘coincidence’ with an implication of casting doubt on the identified interpretation).

This is the meat of the survey, and the purpose here is that expressed in the introduction: to collect actual data on how these narratives would be expected to be discussed in practice. My originally proposed categorization system is a useful one for scholarly work, but was always a hypothesis, and learning how the actual practitioners categorize their experiences is a crucial part of the project and an important piece of foundation work when planning future study.

Having elicited terminology and sorting methods through the naming and categorization of the provided, the survey proceeded to the second phase of investigating narratives: eliciting freeform personal experience narratives from the respondents. In addition to the structural and content hints modelled in the samples, I explicitly asked for both the narrative and the respondent’s interpretation of it—wording the question in the past tense to hopefully put the focus on how the experience was interpreted at the time of the experience. Especially with respondents whose relationships to their religious
community and practice have changed since the experience was first experienced, interpretations may shift and a formerly ominous encounter may be rationalized and written off, or vice versa.

I also asked the respondent to justify their interpretation, or to recount how they justified it, in the context of their religious tradition. Again, this is one of the things I’m explicitly studying in this project, so it was important to collect some direct data on it.

Finally, having collected the content of the narrative, I attempted to solicit information on the typical context of the *telling* of the narratives: expected audiences, situations, purposes, and, just as importantly, what might prompt a respondent to avoid these kinds of stories.

In eliciting these narratives, I had a few specific goals. First, I wanted to know how these stories are told by community members—the structure and wording. Especially compared to my attempt at mimicking narratives I was unfamiliar with, what do the actual community members do? Second, I hoped to get information on context: where, when and why are these stories most likely to be told or heard? I also asked about negative context—where and when and to whom would a community member *not* feel comfortable sharing these narratives? Given the personal nature of these experiences, it seemed reasonable to investigate how firm the contextual boundaries of appropriateness were, and so asking about negative context provides some very useful data points in understanding the relationship of the tellers to their stories. Third, I explicitly asked one of my guiding questions: how do practitioners overtly interpret their ominous experiences and how do they justify the experiences in terms of their religious practice? I was very
interested both in the openly-stated relationship between ominous experiences and church doctrine and in how overt and covert opinions might vary. Collecting this information upfront allowed for the first, by text, and a chance to analyze the response when compared to other responses.

All of these questions were formatted to allow freeform long responses.

After the freeform response questions, a final section of the survey sought to solicit additional information: it asked respondents to opt in to a follow-up interview, designed to elaborate on the freeform responses, and made a game attempt at the "snowball" method of recruiting additional respondents by gently prodding respondents to make potentially interested acquaintances aware of the study.

The opt-in for the interview was designed to, as much as possible, avoid pressuring the respondent and required very active and deliberate signing up. Respondents with a desire to participate in the interview were directed to input some form of contact information so that the researcher could follow up. Because contact information was not collected anywhere else in the survey, there was no way for the researcher to get in touch with respondents who did not actively and deliberately choose to opt in.

When contacted, respondents were reminded of their participation in the survey portion and of their stated interest in the follow-up interview, and informed of the additional time commitment and that the interview would take place over the Zoom virtual conferencing software so that the interview could be easily recorded. Upon a statement of continued interest, the interview was scheduled—typically for no more than
three days later—and the Zoom link emailed to the respondent. (Respondents who provided only a phone number in the survey were asked for an email address to send the link to; some respondents had provided only an email address, and these respondents were contacted solely via email throughout the scheduling process).

An example follows of an email communication from the researcher; this was typical for the scheduling process:

Thank you so much for your response to my survey on Protestant religious experiences! I am particularly interested in further discussing your comments on the use of dream narratives. Are you available in the next few days to meet with me over Zoom for a follow-up interview? I anticipate that it would take around 45 minutes.

Upon receiving confirmation of interest and a suggested time for the interview, the respondent was sent both the link to the scheduled Zoom meeting and a copy of the signed consent form from the beginning of the survey, for their own records.

The structure and content of the interviews themselves varied somewhat, although as anticipated each one took between 40 and 60 minutes. While I had drafted out basic questions to get started with, the follow-up nature of the interviews required a good deal of flexibility and focused on the specific and unique comments made by the respondent in the preceding survey, as well as following the flow of the survey itself as typical.

The primary plan for the interviews was clarifying and deepening the data collected in the survey. I was very aware that even free-response survey questions are capable of collecting only limited responses, especially in the later portions of a survey when the respondent is beginning to grow tired of answering. Thus, I opened each
interview by reminding the respondent of the demographic information they had provided
and asking for not just confirmation but expansion.

This section of the interviews tended to maintain a fairly consistent structure:
first, I ran through a clarification of privacy information. This was a fairly standard list:
reminder of signed consent form; right of refusal; right to opt out at any time; reminder
that the interview was being recorded; promise to anonymize, pseudonymize, and/or
return for vetting the interview if the respondent chose to have the transcript archived;
reassurance that this paper would deal primarily in aggregate data and a request to inform
the interviewer if the respondent wished for a particular section of the interview to not be
quoted; risk of potential confidentiality breaches; and risk of emotional distress due to the
personal nature of the topic. After the privacy discussion and confirmation that the
respondent understood and agreed to these conditions, I began the interview by referring
back to available contextualizing information, typically in a form like: "In your survey
responses, you described yourself as [a member of x denomination]. Can you tell me a
little bit about that church community?" I asked clarifying questions as necessary in order
to get a good picture of both the official stances of the relevant church and the
respondent's relationship with it. This then generally led into asking about the
respondent's personal spiritual practice, an open-ended question that sought to elicit more
detailed information about how church doctrine was implemented in the everyday life of
the individual respondent. This gave me a much clearer picture of, again, the respondent's
actual relationship with their religion. For respondents who had indicated former rather
than current affiliation, I typically asked about what aspects of the church's practice or
worldview the respondent had maintained or discarded since leaving. I did not ask about the respondent's reasons for leaving the church community, although this information was occasionally volunteered.

After establishing this personal context, I guided the interview toward discussing the church's official stance on divine communication, the general contexts for talking about it or telling experience narratives, terminology, categorization, and so forth. At some point during this conversation I typically explained in explicit terms part of my hypothesis and guiding question: "One of the things I'm specifically looking at in this project," I would say, "is the difference between things like prophecy, which Christianity has historically been pretty okay with, and divination—like tarot cards and things—which tend to be frowned on. In your experience, where would you say the line is between what's acceptable and what's not?"

Following this discussion, I would segue back into expanding on survey responses, with a question like, "In the survey, I provided some examples of stories and you said that you would expect to hear them in x context. Could you talk a bit more about that context and how these narratives fit into it?"

It is at this point that the structure of the interviews began to vary due to personalization. The personal experience narratives shared by the respondents in the survey were extremely variable in content and in tone, and transitioning from discussing typical or hypothetical context into discussing the respondent's personal experiences was done case-by-case. It did not always follow the general plan outlined above.
Once the interview began to come a close, I would finish it by asking if the respondent had anything else they wished to tell me—leaving the space open for last-minute comments—and then confirm whether they wanted their interview archived. If they said they did, I would discuss with them their options regarding anonymization or pseudonymization; check whether there was any part of the interview that they already knew that they wished to be redacted; and promise to contact them after transcription to provide them with a copy to vet. The interview ended with the normal social niceties and, charmingly, every respondent wished me good luck on my thesis before logging off of the program.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH RESULTS

Numbers and Demographics

13 surveys were submitted; 3 of these were submitted without being filled out, resulting in a final sample size of 10 respondents. 5 respondents agreed to follow-up interviews. All 5 were interviewed.

The vast majority of respondents (7 of 10 completed surveys) reported themselves as current or former members of the Episcopal Church, the U.S. branch of the Anglican Communion. The other respondents identified as current or former Baptists, Presbyterians, and Nondenominational Christians.

All but 1 respondent (9 of 10 completed surveys) located their church community as being in Utah. The outlier was located in Oklahoma (identified as nondenominational and evangelical).

When asked to characterize their denomination, respondents provided varied responses even within the same denomination (and congregation). Some of the Episcopalians identified their denomination as “mainline” or “mainstream”; some identified it simply as “Protestant” (one saying that they understand the Episcopal church to be ‘Protestant but also catholic [sic]’, which was left unexplained but may be referring to the Anglican preference for high liturgy compared to many other Protestant churches); and one as “evangelical”. Most responses referenced the theological stance of the denomination in some way, either making a subjective mainline/evangelical distinction or providing a more specific name for the denomination (but rarely both). For example, a
Baptist church was characterized as “Reformed”, indicating a subset of Baptist churches that use a specifically Calvinist interpretation of soteriological theology. Many respondents specifically noted their church’s stance on social issues, referring to it as “mainstream, progressive Protestant”, “quite liberal compared to many other Episcopalian churches”, or “main line, but very aware of social issues”.

2 of the 10 respondents specifically identified as former rather than current members of the church they described (as explained in the methodology section, these respondents were instructed to answer questions where this might be relevant according to their typical experience when still engaged in the community).

8 respondents self-reported “regular” attendance of church services; 2 reported “semi-regular” attendance\(^ {10} \). No respondents reported “infrequent” attendance at services, although it would be remiss of me not to note that due to the logistics of distribution, some self-selection bias may be in evidence in that regard.

In addition to attendance at primary church services, most of the respondents (9 of 10 submitted responses) indicated some level of participation in church-sponsored extracurricular activities. A wide variety of activities were reported, and all respondents who specified activities provided multiple activities. The reported activities fell into four general categories:

*Activities directly related to church services or rituals.* This category includes participating in a weekday communion service as well as various forms of pastoral care.

\(^ {10} \) These 2 respondents are not the same 2 who identified as “former” members.
Two respondents mentioned serving on a pastoral care committee, a Presbyterian respondent serves as a congregational “Elder”, and one respondent serves as a “Lay Eucharistic visitor”, meaning that they bring a blessed Eucharistic host to the homes of congregation members who are unable to attend church services.

*Activities encouraging study or interpretation of church doctrine.* These included several mentions of midweek house groups or bible study groups, as well as “adult education”, which in a Christian context typically refers to a catechism class for adult converts. One respondent is a Sunday School teacher. Another mentioned a meditation group, which was later clarified to refer to the Anglican practice of *lectio divina*, a form of discursive meditation focused on contemplation of scriptural texts.

*Bureaucratic or clerical work for the church.* One respondent reported that they were a “volunteer office worker” for the church, and specifically mentioned counting of offerings.

*Social activities.* While socialization among congregation members may of course occur in any of the above activities, some activities were mentioned whose purpose is primarily social rather than ritual or educational. The most common categories provided by respondents that fall under this umbrella are community outreach events and fellowship activities\(^{11}\). Two respondents, both Episcopal, mentioned an after-service

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\(^{11}\) This terminology refers to activities intended to strengthen social bonds among congregation members, most likely as distinguished from community outreach programs which are intended to strengthen bonds between the congregation and the wider community. There is, of course, a good deal of overlap—in particular, named church-sponsored activities such as potlucks and rummage sales can serve both purposes—but in the survey results, fellowship activities are referenced by that name 3 times and in all cases are explicitly separate from community outreach.
coffee hour (one as a participant, the other as a host). Potlucks and rummage sales were named as specific church-sponsored community activities. “Young adult social groups” were mentioned, but not elaborated on.

As a whole, then, the survey respondents show a high level of involvement in their church communities, both in terms of church attendance and of participation in community activities. While this is obviously not a direct reflection of how much a respondent incorporates or is influenced by religious doctrine in their daily life, it does provide important and suggestive context for their contributions to this project.

Responses to Provided Narratives

When respondents were asked to categorize and provide terminology for the provided sample narratives, their responses varied wildly. For the most part, respondents did not seem to use or be familiar with consistent, specific terminology for different types of spiritual experiences. Very few respondents directly discussed categorization; most responses used plural references to the sample narratives in such a way as to implicate that they considered all or most of the experiences to be the same kind of thing and did not make more granular distinctions.

It was common to define the narrated experiences according to the manner in which the perceived communication was experienced by the recipient. For example, 3 (of 8, so roughly 40%) respondents said they would call at least some of the sample experiences “coincidences”. A Presbyterian respondent credited spiritual guidance to
“divine inspiration” and “listen[ing] to the Holy Spirit”. The term “divine intervention” or a variant also appeared more than once.\textsuperscript{12}

One respondent did provide a system of terminological categorization for the narratives provided:

“For the dream of the grandmother and the avoiding of the car accident, I call these premonitions. I might also call the dream about the grandmother a vision. I might also be tempted to call the accident scenario magical thinking and a coincidence. As for the others, which involve receiving guidance without seeking for it, I would call that luck or serendipity.”

This description again sorts the narratives according to the method by which the guidance is received. Note that the term “coincidence” is used in combination with “magical thinking”, implying doubt in the veracity of the experience as true guidance.

Another respondent specifically stated that they would lump all of the given experiences into one category, and that their term for it (“divine intervention”) would not change based on deliberate solicitation.

Other terminology appears in casual usage throughout the responses to other questions. “Signs” was equated roughly with “coincidences”, and the respondent wrote the word within quotation marks, probably indicating that they had heard the word applied to relevant concepts but did not use it themself. Similarly, a respondent called out the phrase “burning in the bosom” as an identifiably Mormon usage. The word “guidance” was used quite frequently, possibly in response to my own use of the word in

\textsuperscript{12} While I did not collect age ranges as part of the demographics for this survey, based on other factors I have a faint suspicion that the users of the term “coincidence” (and its concomitant colloquial connotations) may be among my younger respondents, and users of terms more overtly ascribing the experience to the Divine among the older. This might be a potential future expansion for this research.
the survey to refer to the experiences being elicited. The broad term “spiritual/religious experience” is also in evidence. Some respondents referenced interpreting their own spiritual experiences as “direct communication from God” or “conversations with God”. Two different respondents used the phrasing “spiritual connection” to indicate the feelings evoked by the experiences under discussion.

In general, within this corpus, specific terminology used to categorize or define spiritual experiences does not appear to be determined by denomination. One possible exception is the “divine inspiration” category and phrasing being used only by a Presbyterian respondent, but that respondent did not elaborate on whether this terminology was typical or unique in their experience. Another respondent discussed in their interview the use of the phrase “God put it on/into my heart” in Baptist contexts and reported that it is common in that demographic; it did not occur in the corpus outside of that discussion.

In addition, the concept of "signs" or "coincidences" as omens was, overall, reacted to with varying degrees of skepticism by the majority of respondents. One respondent summed up this hesitancy to over-attribute external events to divine intervention by saying, "Some people insist 'everything happens for a reason.' I don't believe that and I don't believe a deity guides everything that happens. On the other hand, I believe in miracles, divine inspiration and prayer." The respondent did not elaborate on how they were defining the term 'miracle', and the implication seems to be that sometimes an inexplicable or coincidental event is the hand of God acting in the mortal world, but that this interpretation should not be over-applied and is not the typical way this
respondent experiences divine intervention. Other respondents expressed similar sentiments, preferring to describe more internal communications with God as the typical, and approved, way of experiencing guidance.

**Narratives Provided by Respondents**

The narratives provided in the survey responses were quite variable in content and, as typical for a survey/interview context, tended to be very short—potentially too short to analyze structurally, although I have still made an effort. These efforts were, frankly, primarily stymied by the fact that a large percentage of the respondents did not respond on-topic to the eliciting question as posed. Some used the free-response boxes to continue an earlier thought instead of directly responding to the question. This was somewhat frustrating, but I extracted what relevant data I could from these thoughts, and have incorporated it into my comments and analysis where it best fits. The follow-up interviews were extremely valuable in expanding on these responses, and such elaboration is incorporated where necessary.

Some respondents provided vague, generalized statements rather than narratives of specific experiences; for example, one respondent explained that they "believe [that] when confronted with a difficult challenge, a person should calm down, pray and listen for the Holy Spirit. ...if people will consider their decisions thoughtfully and prayerfully, they'll reach better decisions because they aren't being impulsive." This response provides some very useful information about how this respondent experiences and receives divine communication, but is not quite a discrete personal experience narrative so much as an
expression of a conclusion drawn from multiple such experiences (which are not recounted). A similar statement came from a respondent who judged that most of the sample narratives provided in the survey "...are not similar to any of my religious experiences. I have not heard many such stories in the Episcopal church. ...I find spiritual connection through being present in everyday experiences and less so from "signs," coincidences, etc." Another respondent responded to the question Have you had any similar experiences [to the sample narratives] with a simple "Yes, many times. Too many to type out", and then added, "this is how I live my life—by seeking and listening to God for guidance; some days I have moments like the examples above and some days I don't".

The common pattern throughout these responses was the idea of guidance from God being received in the form of clarity of thought: it is subtle, internal, and—from what I can extrapolate—primarily solicited. Despite these responses not detailing individual experiences, the phrasing these respondents used to explain their overall viewpoint seems to me to indicate that these individuals tend to deliberately seek out divine guidance when faced with the need to make a decision, actively soliciting this guidance through prayer and/or meditation ("calm down...and listen for the Holy Spirit"); "being present in everyday experiences"; a respondent who mentioned their work with lectio divina)—in other words, asking for guidance and then putting themselves in a receptive state, where they notice more overtly the thoughts and feelings influencing their decision-making. Note also that the subtlety of this type of guidance can lead to some ambivalence about whether that clarity of thought is a direct message or not—see the
respondent who referenced both "listen[ing] for the Holy Spirit" (implying direct divine guidance) and the idea that "thoughtful and prayerful consideration" is useful because the person "[isn't] being impulsive" (implying that the prayer has a psychologically calming effect). The fact that this respondent used both framing in the same response may indicate that they themself do not see a contradiction here—prayer is both a solicitation of the Holy Spirit's guidance and a way of stopping to reflect on a decision.

Other respondents did provide a more traditional personal experience narrative regarding one or more discrete events, along with the way they interpreted the event at the time.

Two respondents recounted dream experiences. One such narrative runs as follows:

"I have had a few instances, namely dreams in my youth, where I felt that God was giving His Peace during a time when I lived through traumatic family dynamics. I interpreted the dreams as direct communication from God, and my church widely supports that sort of story considering God communicates with many figures in the Bible via dreams."

The other dreaming respondent recounted several dreams in vivid detail—explaining the content of each dream, which in all cases began with the statement "I was [a specific person, varying from the dreamer's everyday identity]" before summarizing the actions they took or experienced and then explaining a realization which they came to either within the dream or after waking—and ended the narrative by saying, "After waking, that feeling and belief always carries with me... it still feels good to have the sense that God is not what many Christians have imagined him to be." I found it very
interesting that both dreamers focused on the feelings evoked by the dream, and interpreted the dreams as divine based on the fact that they not only had but were able to maintain the epiphany they had come to (the feeling of peace in a difficult situation; an understanding of God's nature.) Neither of these dreams were described as solicited in any way (although the respondent having previously prayed for peace, comfort, or understanding cannot be ruled out, it did not appear to have been deemed relevant to the story as told), and the dreams were obvious enough that interpretation as divine guidance occurred, in both cases, immediately upon reception, as well as the latter set being clearly vivid enough to be remembered in detail decades later\textsuperscript{13}.

Another highly specific narrative recounts the situation that prompted the request for guidance: two job offers, difficulty deciding, and an active solicitation (no method is given; prayer is presumed). The way the respondent phrases the result is intriguing:

"After much soul-searching I chose the one." This seems to hearken back to the thread of solicited guidance being received through clarity of thought rather than a directly recognizable external omen. The narrative ended by describing the outcome of the whole situation, which reinforces that the correct decision was made and that the guidance was genuine—"a month later the local newspaper headlines stated that the company I did not choose was being investigated for tax evasion and fraud", while the company that was chosen provided the respondent with a long, successful, and "happy" career.

\textsuperscript{13} The respondent specifically claimed that these dreams occurred when they were in high school.
One response presents a case of generalized experience told in a way that bridges the gap between narrative and doctrinal statement. The respondent said that they consistently feel their sense of faith in God grow "when I bring communion to elderly parishioners who cannot attend church. To hear the strength of their belief in Christ brings a greater strength to me." They later expand the idea—"I spend a great deal of time with true believers and they bring me closer to God." This narrative does not overtly ascribe any action or feeling as being received from God directly—indeed, the respondent confesses that they "don't specifically know that God is guiding [them]"—but instead describes a sense of community connection that provides validation for the teller's religious beliefs and the actions they take because of that belief.

Another respondent provided not their own experience, but a secondhand narrative from someone else outside their own community: "One specific example is from a Mormon lady," they explained, "who told me that an angel came into her bedroom, sat down on the bed with her and told her that Mormonism is true and Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God." This is a uniquely Mormon narrative and is presented with a degree of skepticism; the respondent additionally mentions that they commonly hear narratives "concerning their 'testimony' or 'burning in the bosom'" from Mormons in Utah. (This narrative and the relationship between Protestantism and Mormonism in the area that it displays is discussed in more depth in chapter 3.) Unlike the other respondents who provided their own stories as a positive illustration of the accuracy of their worldview, this respondent uses their explicitly-disbelieving retelling of an outsider's PEN, and a later comment that they have heard similar stories from Muslims about Islam,
as a rhetorical device to support their own stated perspective on how to verify an experience like this.

Several respondents discussed conversion narratives as a specific subgenre of spiritual experience\(^{14}\). One interview described the overall pattern as: "[the storyteller is] a terrible person and then this experience leads them to Jesus, and then they are saved and then their life is remarkably better, so I would say that's the overall outline". The interviewee then mentioned that one of the most common catalysts for spiritual experiences in their experience was "childhood trauma", including poor relationships with parents, and that a common way of framing these narratives was feeling "broken" and then receiving a "wake-up call … the internal conviction that you can't keep going this way". There are not a lot of external signs, this respondent said; "if I had to put a number about 90%" are descriptions of that internal "brick wall". Despite this identifiable outline, respondents asserted the uniqueness of individual conversion experiences, particularly as far as the prompting event goes.

When comparing all of these narratives together, a general loose structure emerges\(^{15}\). Typically, these stories include the following elements:

- The way the guidance was experienced (e.g. "I had a dream", describing a feeling).

\(14\) Conversion narratives, specifically, are a topic with relatively decent coverage in the field of religious history; Lawless (1988a) discusses Pentecostal conversion narratives from a folklorist’s perspective.

\(15\) For a short example of one of these narratives, see Appendix B for an interview excerpt.
• The situation prompting the experience (a certain time of life, engaging in a particular activity, attempting to make an important decision).

• The interpretation of the experience (choosing a specific option, "they bring me closer to God", "God was giving me His Peace").

• Some sort of validation for the interpretation, demonstrating why the experience reinforces their belief system.

The validation often occurs in the form of a positive outcome to acting on the guidance (the chosen option successful, the unchosen option revealed to be secretly harmful, the feeling of peace or the doctrinal epiphany lingers, faith is strengthened) but sometimes\(^\text{16}\) as a doctrinal justification for why the guidance is interpreted as such. In the case of the secondhand Mormon testimony, the justification is negative: this experience does not reinforce the respondent's belief system, and this is given as a reason why the experience should not be interpreted as divine. Interestingly, this respondent does not necessarily automatically discount the fact that the experience happened; they raise the possibility that the angelic visitation was real, but of demonic rather than divine origin. Similarly, the respondents who describe subtle guidance such as clarity when decision-making do not dispute that the clarity and/or calmness is present, regardless of whether they interpret it as a message from God or not, and it is telling that despite potential ambivalence to an individual interpretation as such, experiences of clarity are on the respondents' radars as a potential manifestation of divine guidance.

\(^{16}\) And possibly as a response to the context in which the narrative was elicited rather than as an integral part of the story itself.
The importance of this validating and reinforcing element makes sense when we consider the described potential contexts for these narratives.

"95% of the time, stories like these are shared in midweek home groups. Either as a "Praise Jesus" moment shared with the group or as a bolster for that night's lesson," explained one respondent. Other respondents agreed with this assessment: "I hear these stories during church activities and when I bring communion to those who cannot attend church," "in a bible study class to enhance a better understanding of a scripture", and "in a study group such as education for ministry" are comments which reinforce the idea of using PENs as educational tools.

Many additional reasons were given for sharing these narratives. Many of them can be summarized by the response "for support, guidance, [or] comfort for someone". Sharing one's own experiences of divine guidance can be used as an indirect way to advise another person—the advice is not necessarily to repeat the action in the story, but is more likely to be to turn to God for personal guidance specific to the situation. Similarly, it can be deeply comforting and encouraging for someone dealing with a trial to hear confirmation that God is both present and active in the world. Other specific suggestions for why a narrative might be told included "[to express or elicit] shared awe of God's love for us"; "to justify a decision"; or "[to] share something that has meant a great deal to them".

Some respondents indicated more private settings by preference or experience. "Only with close family and friends" was an extremely common sentiment. "I would consider [divine guidance] an intimate experience, not to be shared publicly or for
sensationalism," said one individual. Unsurprisingly, the primary boundary for both hearing and discussing these narratives seems to be trust that the interlocutors will take the experience seriously. There is a pervasive sense that speaking about these experiences, particularly the more overt or dramatic ones such as dreams, to the wrong people will lead to the teller being labelled "crazy [or] silly"; that is, a social stigma surrounding overtly ‘miraculous’ experiences renders these narratives untellable in casual contexts\(^{17}\). This is the explicit reason that several respondents provided for avoiding talking about their spiritual experiences with people whose belief system they were unsure of or believed they were incompatible with. "Many people do not believe in a God that would have a personal relationship with us in this way or they don't believe in a God at all," as one person put it; "I would generally not share something like the above examples with them." Another somewhat drily remarked that if someone has had bad experiences with Christianity in the past and abandoned the religion because of it, "I am not inclined to try to change their minds."

These narratives, then, are not shared with outsiders in an attempt to convince or convert them to the teller's belief system. Rather, these stories are shared with the in-group, in order to "bolster" and reinforce existing beliefs, both doctrinal and emotional (the idea that God does communicate, or does involve Himself in the lives of His worshippers, is not only proven true by these stories, but is used as comfort and encouragement—"God cares about you and will help you in your difficulties"). In the

\(^{17}\) The concept of contextual untellability here is derived from Goldstein and Shuman (2016).
words of one respondent, "I think stories are given when we are all together and safe in our assurance that we are all believers." These narratives are, fundamentally, used as tools to strengthen community bonds.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Summary of Conclusions

In Chapter 2 (Methodology) I detailed the guiding questions which I hoped to answer through this project. While the bulk of the analysis of my collected corpus occurs in Chapter 3 (Results), I wish to conclude by summarizing the overall answers to my guiding questions.

The primary terminological distinctions were made between different types of omens, although the lines between the terms were not always strict. There did seem to be a specific set of categories used to distinguish these types, but often they were described and discussed in detail rather than using certain terminology as a shorthand. It is almost more noticeable what terms did not occur: the terms "revelation", "testimony", and "sign" were not typically used within a Protestant context, and seem to be heavily marked as specifically Mormon usage.

"Coincidence" and "miracle" were frequently used to refer to overt external incidents. These types of omen were also met with the most distrust and hesitancy to ascribe them to divine intervention; the individual level of skepticism is fairly accurately reflected in which term is chosen.

Internal experiences were divided, fairly clearly in practice although not necessarily by terminology, into emotional responses and logical responses. Emotions were typically portrayed/discussed as obviously coming from outside sources, with the emotion referenced with constructions such as "God's peace" or "feeling the holy spirit".
Logical responses were generally portrayed with some degree of ambivalence; God's help when coming to a decision was often ascribed after the fact, based on the outcome of the decision, rather than recognized at the time of the decision (even in cases where the help was solicited through prayer). In these instances, the outcome of the decision itself was taken as the omen that the decision had been in line with God's will and thus inspired, on some level, by the touch of the holy spirit. One respondent described in depth during an interview that they often prayed that God would "close doors instead of opening them"—i.e. that if a choice was not the correct one, the opportunity to make it would disappear. They provided several examples, such as a job opening which should have been incredibly easy to obtain but for which the respondent could not even get an interview; they reported that this incident made it obvious to them that God did not intend for them to get the job, and so instead they looked elsewhere. The blurring of internal and external omen here is interesting.18

These instances of decision-making as communicative experience, which I tended to refer to in my notes as "revelation by epiphany", were not typically described using a single term in Episcopalian contexts, but an interview with a Baptist respondent turned up the phrase "the Lord put it on/into my heart" to refer to such experiences. The respondent reported that they tried not to overuse the term, as they were wary of ascribing personal desires to God, but that other Baptists were not so hesitant and that the phrasing was very common in that context.

18 See also the Ch. 3 discussion of "clarity of thought" as evidence of divine connection.
A minority of respondents reported physiological responses as part of their spiritual experiences, but indicated hesitancy to discuss this aspect in communal contexts; the primary worry was that the most accurate phrases they had to describe the experience, such as "feeling energy leaving my hands" or "I tingle when I pray", would be misconstrued or even reported to church authorities—that is, they felt that these experiences fell on the wrong side of the communally-determined acceptable/unacceptable line.

Contrary to this rough delineation of methods of reception, respondents to the study did not typically consider solicited versus unsolicited communications to be separate categories. However, all reported communications fell into my proposed "augury" distinction. No provided narratives, either in survey or interview responses, touched on any form of sortilege or other deliberate omen generation. Reactions to bibliomancy, specifically, did not draw a distinction between this and other omens; the idea of deliberately invoking and randomizing the text of scripture was downplayed or ignored in reactions to the sample narrative, and provided narratives seemed to focus similar experiences on coincidence during pre-existing scripture study practices. The use of scripture was instead largely described as part of a vetting process for experiences that occurred through primarily emotional means. The only form of solicitation reported was spontaneous prayer, and while experiences solicited this way were referred to with terms such as "answer to prayer", the content and interpretation of the experiences was never differentiated from unsolicited experiences. Most if not all respondents seemed to take
the idea of prayer practices as the primary way of soliciting guidance or connection with the divine as default and unremarkable.

Due to the lack of consistent distinction between directly solicited "answers to prayer" and unsolicited spiritual experiences, it is difficult to judge the relative commonality of solicitation versus passive reception. Respondents did not always reference a specific prayer as being the one answered, but implicitly lumped technically-unsolicited experiences that occurred in conjunction with a regular prayer practice in as "answers to prayers" in general. This seemed to be more common in respondents who were more engaged in other aspects of the church's religious life, correlating habitual prayer with other forms of participation in ritual and/or expression of religious belief.

The narratives collected in this corpus tend to be told, at least overtly, for purposes of assurance and reassurance in a personal and active God. An important secondary purpose seems to be as a way of justifying decisions or actions, but this is not explicitly admitted by the tellers and if suggested by a listener implies a degree of doubt and even moral judgment. The narratives are told, as one interview succinctly put it, when the teller feels it will "benefit the people who are going to hear it". The respondent suggested that this is why Bible study groups tend to be the most common context for this kind of story-telling—it is more personal and intimate than a large church service, and is structured in a way to not just admit but encourage lay participation. This is backed up by comments from several of the Episcopalian respondents who reported not having much community space for these kinds of discussions—Episcopal services and sermons are led entirely by the priest, and as one respondent commented, the after-church coffee hour that
is a primary source of socialization for church members is not an environment where deeply spiritual matters tend to be discussed. Extra-curricular study groups, such as conversion classes or the lectio divina meditation group discussed by one of the respondents, are more likely to admit the kind of discussion where these narratives would naturally arise.

For the most part my original hypothesis about the divination/augury distinction being the main locus for acceptability judgements was somewhat implicitly upheld but very rarely expressed explicitly. The method of solicitation was important to a Baptist respondent, who spent a good portion of the follow-up interview discussing acceptability judgements in depth and at length; in keeping with the concept of sola scriptura, which the respondent identified as a foundational and identifying doctrine for Baptist belief, not just the method of solicitation but the content of the divine message was to be vetted according to its adherence to the Bible. In this system, God is consistent, and so a message received in a way (such as necromancy, which in the discussion was conflated by the respondent with sortilege in general, under the belief that forms of divination such as cartomancy function by calling on spirits) or with content (e.g. a thought or desire that would lead one to break one of the Ten Commandments) that is expressly forbidden by scripture must not be coming from God. This respondent was very clear in expressing the opinion that these experiences and the information received from them were not necessarily false; they explained that they believe that the Devil is supernaturally knowledgeable, and that numinous experiences are perfectly capable of being real but of demonic rather than divine origin.
Other respondents did not provide concrete answers on acceptability judgements; most spoke in ways that simply assumed that prayer of some kind was the only way of soliciting divine guidance, and that whether or not the prayer would be answered—whether by an internal experience or external results—was up to God. The discursive meditation practices in the lectio divina described by one person are on the surface an alternate way of soliciting numinous experiences. When digging deeper, these practices were, contrary to my expectations, not considered a subset of prayer; rather, the few respondents who discussed meditation or meditation-like practices seemed to consider prayer to be a subset of meditation.

One very interesting case here is that of the physiological experiences discussed above; the issue here was not method of solicitation but method of reception. The respondent who provided the most elaboration on this topic ascribed the discomfort with sharing this aspect of their spiritual experiences to a general reservedness in their current church community, noting that they had felt much more free to be open in a previous church in a different area. The respondent described the former church as "charismatic Episcopal" and described their current (non-charismatic) Episcopalian church as taking a deeply intellectual approach to religion that did not engage with emotions in the same way. The respondent indicated that this caused them some dissatisfaction and a sense of alienation from their church community. In addition, a large portion of the respondent's hesitancy seemed focused on specifically the word "energy". Later parts of the interview

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19 This description is borne out by my own previous experiences, and sheds some interesting light on some of the response trends from other Episcopalians in the study.
indicated that this term was associated with forms of spirituality already perceived as deviant within the respondent's social circles, with “horoscopes” being specifically mentioned. "Energy" is a term frequently used in New Age and other occult circles, which seems to have tarred the concept with the brush of superstition.

Not only does this correlation support the divination hypothesis, it was explicitly placed in a context that connects it with my observations about the similar avoidance of Mormon-coded terminology like "revelation". This avoidance, and especially how obvious and overtly recognized it was, was one of the most fascinating and least-expected trends I noticed in this study. Several respondents directly discussed the influence of Mormon culture on the practice of non-Mormon Protestantism in Utah. All agreed that this influence was primarily negative—not necessarily in the sense that it was detrimental to the Protestant culture (although some respondents did say this; the respondent who discussed the idea of “energy” directly attributed discomfort with discussing emotional experiences, and their resulting feelings of isolation from their community, to Utah Mormon culture), but in the sense that a large vector of influence from Mormon culture is the deliberate rejection of both terminology and practices that are associated with Mormonism as practiced in Utah. There seems to be a current of anxiety surrounding the fact that Protestantism of any kind is a minority religion in the Mormon Corridor, and steering clear of talking or worshipping like one’s Mormon neighbors is a way of validating and maintaining a sense of unique religious identity. This is complicated
further, in the Episcopalian church specifically\textsuperscript{20}, by the high percentage of members who converted to Anglicanism after leaving the LDS church; overt rejection of the trappings of Mormonism—while potentially retaining subconscious assumptions about how religion is supposed to work—is both an affirmation of the new belief system and can be a way of dealing with religious trauma\textsuperscript{21}.

**Implications & Further Work**

When I began this project, it was prompted by the desire to locate the cultural place of things like bibliomancy and angel-penny signs in American Protestantism—the flashy, obvious pieces of folklore, the places where there is tension between vernacular and institution. Instead, what I found was an opportunity to paint a portrait of the subtle yet pervasive ways that Protestant Christians use an oft-overlooked, intensely normalized form of spiritual narrative to develop and enforce a particular conception of their relationship to both the Divine and their community. Understanding this relationship, and the assumptions made by American Christians about how it is supposed to function and how it's supposed to look—or feel—is far from a trivial endeavor.

This paper ended up delving into the way these assumptions are made and used in a very specific area of the country which has a unique historical and cultural relationship to Christianity. Other projects like this one might—and hopefully will—be carried out in

\textsuperscript{20} I have no actual numerical data on the other denominations studied but anecdotally the majority seem to be born-and-raised Protestants who moved to Utah from elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{21} It is particularly common for young queer people to be attracted to the Episcopal church as a reaction to the well-known homophobia of the LDS church as an institution—the inclusive nature of American Episcopalianism was explicitly mentioned as a distinguishing factor by multiple respondents, and a couple indicated that the Utah branch leans into that inclusiveness more heavily than those in some other states.
other regions. Building up even a modest corpus of American Protestant spiritual experience narratives is a sorely needed contribution to the field of vernacular religious studies. But beyond that, the opportunity to compare those potential other projects to this one is also an opportunity to understand the ways that vernacular Protestantism defines itself both on national and local scales, and to interrogate the relationship between those things.

In addition to using—and hopefully improving!—this project as a model for gathering similar data in other locations, the data I collected turned up several intriguing ideas that could be usefully expanded on in future research. These include more granular demographic divisions in order to sort out factors that might contribute to the multivariable ways of interacting with and participating in a communally-based belief system; a deeper dive into the relationship between prayer and meditation; and, of course, the social influence of Mormonism in areas where it is a majority religion. I confess as well to the hope that the divination/augury terminology I have worked with here could be a useful addition to the toolbox of folklore studies, and that more directed fieldwork might strengthen our understanding of how a distinction between generated and received omens factors into the use of divinatory practices in both religious and secular contexts.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A. Full Survey Text

Page 1 of survey as distributed: demographic information

How would you characterize your religious affiliation?

- Member of a specific denomination (please specify)
- Non-denominational or “generic Christian”
- Former member of a Protestant church community, including a nondenominational one (please specify) [if selecting this option, consider all references to “your church community” below to refer to your former Protestant affiliation.]
- Other (please specify)

Where in America is your church community located? A state or general region is all that is needed here (e.g. “Alabama”; “eastern Maryland”, “The Pacific Northwest”).

How would you characterize your church community? Does it consider itself to be part of a particular subset of Protestantism, such as mainline/oldline, evangelical, fundamentalist, charismatic, Black, etc? Are there any defining or unique characteristics of your church’s doctrine, theology, or practice that you feel might be relevant?

How would you characterize your participation in your church community? Note: if you no longer participate in your Protestant church community, answer this question according to your participation when you were fully engaged with your former church, rather than during the process of leaving it.

- I attend church services regularly
- I attend church services semi-regularly
I attend church services infrequently

Do you participate in church activities other than regular services? This might include anything from Bible study groups to church potlucks.

Page 2 of survey as distributed: sample narratives

Consider the follow sample narratives that you might hear told by a friend, family member, or fellow member of your church congregation.

Jeannie was struggling with a decision and prayed to be guided to an answer. Soon after she prayed, she flipped randomly through her Bible, and the page that it landed on contained a verse that seemed to directly answer her question.

Samuel was feeling down one day, but as he drove to work he happened to see a billboard advertisement on the highway whose words reminded him that he was not alone. Even though the advertisement itself said nothing about God directly, Samuel is adamant that the feeling of peace it triggered in him was God’s hand at work.

Luisa dreamed of her beloved grandmother sitting with her in her kitchen and talking to her, providing words of wisdom and comfort; when Luisa woke up, she was informed that her grandmother had passed away that very night. As she works to arrange the funeral she takes comfort in having been able to say goodbye, and thanks God for allowing her grandmother’s spirit to visit her.

Thomas had a fight with his wife and left the house to cool down. As he walked through the park, he overheard a woman talking on the phone, encouraging someone to reconcile with a family member and “not to go to bed angry”. Thomas feels strongly that
he was meant to overhear this conversation, and he decides he can take a hint: he goes home and apologizes to his wife.

Anne was invited to a party by her college roommate, but when she thought about going, she felt a deep sense of dread or anxiety that she couldn’t place. She turned the invitation down, and later found out that there was a car accident on the way home from the party that she would certainly have been injured in if she had gone.

Page 3 of survey as distributed: categorization of narratives

What would you call this kind of experience? Would you consider these stories to be describing different types of experiences, or would you lump them all into one or two categories? Are there specific words you would probably use or hear when discussing these experiences? Would the way you describe these experiences change depending on whether the guidance from God/the Divine was deliberately sought out or not?

Have you had any similar experiences of seeking or receiving guidance from God/the Divine, or have you heard any stories of this kind from someone else? Please narrate them below.

How did you interpret the experience? How does that interpretation relate to/fit in with the official doctrines, teachings, or traditions of your denomination?

Where, when, and to/from whom would you usually tell or hear this kind of story? (for example, in church, family settings, Bible study, etc.)

Why/for what purpose would you expect this story to be shared?

Is there a context in which you would not share this kind of experience?
Page 4 of survey as distributed: opt-in to follow-up

I would like to follow up on the narrative(s) you have shared in an interview. I will ask clarifying questions about the experience, the way it is told as a narrative, and the context you would expect it to be shared in. It will also give you a further opportunity to share other examples of similar narratives or insights into how members of your church community tend to interpret such experiences within your doctrinal framework.

If you are willing to participate in this follow-up interview, please provide your name and contact information (email preferred; phone number also accepted) below so that I can contact you with further information and scheduling.

Do you know anyone else (a friend, a family member, and/or someone in your or another church community) who might be interested in participating in this study? If so, please forward them this survey and/or the researcher’s contact information!
Appendix B. Interview Excerpt

*Interviewer:* So prayer, then, is probably going to be—it sounds like that's kind of the only real acceptable way to explicitly go to God and say, “hey, please, you know, help me with this, please give me guidance, please tell me your will.”

*Respondent:* Yes, absolutely.

*Interviewer:* And then—[laughs] I'm asking a lot of mechanics questions!—so let's say then that I decide that I'm having trouble with deciding, oh, let's say whether I should, like, move away for a job or stay here or something like that. So I go and I pray, and I say, “God, please help me to make this decision. What is most in line with your will and what you have planned for me?” So, how, then, am I going to receive—in what ways might I receive that answer?

*Respondent:* So, something that I typically do in a situation like that, where I'm really wanting wisdom, I mean—I'll actually ask God to close doors. Like, slam doors in my face.

You know, I had a situation—perfect example of what I'm talking about, years ago. My brother-in-law is an engineer for [REDACTED]—I'm from [REDACTED]; I know you probably can hear that I'm not from here—but, you know, he's pretty high up in the company and I was trying to get a job with [them]. And you know, he had the pull, and I had a pretty decent resume, and there was no—from a practical standpoint there's no reason that I shouldn't have gotten that job. But I said, “Lord, if this is not your will, I
want you to slam the door in my face.” And sure enough, I couldn't even get an interview. And my brother-in-law told me, “I don't understand this. I can't even get you an interview.” And I said, “Well, I understand.” And that's all I needed.

And so I've seen that happen, many times, because I would much rather be in the will of God than have this really good paying job with all the benefits and perks and everything else. And so I can't tell you how many times something like that has happened.

*Interviewer:* So almost the... the negative space, where “if this is not supposed to happen then don't let it happen”.

*Respondent:* Exactly.

*Interviewer:* Okay.

*Respondent:* And there is a certain... you know, if you're really seeking the will of God and you're trying to stay in line with the word of God. I mean, I've asked Him, too, in situations where it may not be as simple as a door closing: “Lord, either give me peace about this or not”. There's been situations where maybe it made sense to do something and I just didn't feel right about it, didn't have peace about it. And you know, my wife is the same way; usually, you know, if something's right we're going to be in tune with it.

And there's been times where I can look back and see, well, that's probably why that didn't work. But yeah, that would be probably the biggest way that has worked in the past for me.
Interviewer: So when—so if a door opens or closes, do you generally recognize in the moment, “Oh, this is the hand of God at work”? Or is it usually more kind of after the fact? How do you tell that this is, you know, God working deliberately in your life?

Respondent: You know, God works in such a way to where when He's doing something, you just know it's Him.