



## Constructing “Mad” Religious Experiences in Early Modern Sweden

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In 1724, a former captain called Carl Forss had an experience that profoundly transformed his life. Early in the morning a young man dressed in black, whom he perceived to be an angel from the heavens, appeared to him: the being anointed him with oil and ordered him to proclaim “God’s truth” to the King and all his people.<sup>1</sup> All of a sudden, Carl felt that God gave him full understanding of the Scripture. Among other things, he became convinced that Jesus had died for all beings on Earth, including animals and plants, and that every living thing could thus join the eternal

<sup>1</sup>“en swartklädt yngling, hwilken han förment wara en ängel uppenbarats honom bittida om mårgeonen, smort honom med olio och befalt honom förkunna Gudz sanning för Öfwerhet och alt hans folk”. National Archives of Sweden (Riksarkivet, from now on RA): Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss: Letter of the Chapter of Turku dated 5 August 1725, also published in Akiander 1857 (vol. I), 53–66.

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S. Katajala-Peltomaa, R. M. Toivo (eds.), *Histories of Experience in the World of Lived Religion*, Palgrave Studies in the History of Experience, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92140-8\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92140-8_7)

afterlife. He soon began to publicly promulgate his revelations, in both his home parish in Southwestern Finland and the town of Turku, and wrote about the “commands he had received directly from God” to the King, privy council, Turku Court of Appeal, and other state and Church authorities.<sup>2</sup> This instigated a long process that involved not only the local clergy and the bishop and Chapter in Turku, but also the governor, the Court of Appeal, and even the King and the royal council in the Swedish realm’s capital, Stockholm. Several actors took part in making sense of the captain’s experience, transforming it into something completely different from what he personally insisted.

This chapter examines the formation and negotiation process in which religious experiences were deemed “mad” in early modern Sweden (which included the lands that now comprise Finland). Religious experiences are the kind of personal sensations and events that are given religious and supernatural connotations. In this case, they are also experiences that are far from mundane and the range of expected or everyday spiritual repertoire. Such extraordinary sensations, encounters, behaviours, or events could involve hearing voices, seeing beings, or, for example, observations of nature or weather that were interpreted within the religious framework—entailing meanings and messages from the divine or elsewhere from the spiritual sphere. This interpretation, or experiencing, is a social process in its essence: firstly, the prevalent religious cultures and discourses offer the interpretative framework and vocabulary, and secondly, when shared with others, the surrounding communities and authorities participate in the meaning-giving, further shaping or clashing with personal experience.<sup>3</sup>

Here, the focus lies on the process and the ways in which religious experiences were deemed extraordinary, norm-breaching and, in particular, *mad* in early modern Sweden. These were personal experiences that the contemporary surrounding communities and/or authorities would have deemed abnormal and pathological if those terms had been available to them. An experience is deemed “mad” if the person him/herself, or, more typically, the surrounding community and authorities interpret it as

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. and RA: Riksarkivets ämnessamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss: Extract of the notary’s letter at the Turku Town Court dated 19 August 1725. Forss spread his word especially in his home parish Kokemäki and in the town of Turku in Southwestern Finland.

<sup>3</sup> See also Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, “Religion as Experience”; Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*.

something detached from the reality that other people experience and—more or less—agree upon. From the perspective of lived religion, they are the experiences that, on the one hand, manifested the heterogeneity of faith and spirituality, but on the other hand, clashed with culturally acceptable faith as defined by the prevailing discursive authorities. The aim is to discuss the situational construction of religious experiences and the power and control dynamics in play in classifying experiences as folly and products of “insanity” as understood in early modern Sweden, rather than as legitimate, credible religious experiences. Moreover, the chapter develops the theoretical understanding of experiencing as a process.

The discursive formation and classification of religious experiences are examined especially based on two case studies of deviant religious experiences from early eighteenth-century Sweden. Both involve extraordinary angelic encounters envisioned by two laymen, a farmhand named Henrich and the aforementioned captain Carl, in the area of Southwestern Finland in the 1720s. The case studies are deployed to empirically examine and exemplify the construction of religious experiences and the power dynamics in classifying such experiences as legitimate and credible or as invalid and mad. The selected cases are fruitful in many respects: they include vivid and elaborate descriptions of multi-sensory experiences, conflicting and temporally changing, fluid interpretations, and ambivalent, competing discourses. Most importantly, they manifest the process-nature of experiencing (meaning-giving) and the power hierarchies in play. Very few religious experiences of laypeople earned that much attention from the authorities; it appears that Henrich’s and Carl’s visions caused such a commotion locally that they needed to be dealt with on all the judicial tiers.<sup>4</sup> As narratives of personal religious experiences and their reception, they are exceptionally verbose at over 150 pages each, but they consist of excerpts and letters in a non-chronological order that were sent to the highest judicial organ, the royal council.<sup>5</sup> They include several temporal layers as the investigations into both cases continued for well over a year in different

<sup>4</sup>RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson and Carl G. G. Forss n.p. For the judicial system in early modern Sweden, see Österberg and Sogner, *People meet the Law*.

<sup>5</sup>However, the preserved documents concerning captain Carl Forss mainly deal with his death. Unfortunately, for both cases the original documents of Turku Court of Appeal, the Chapter of Turku, and the lower court records have not been preserved; however, the compilations include excerpts, copies, letters, and descriptions of these. RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson and Carl G. G. Forss n.p.

courts of law before the final decisions were reached by the King and his council.

The research material consists of ecclesiastical and other court records as well as correspondence between authorities discussing the “problematic” religious experiences. The lack of ego documents means that such official documents are the only available sources on these experiences. Thus, it cannot be overlooked that the official settings and their accusatory atmosphere influenced what people chose to share and how they talked about their experiences. After all, these are the experiences of lay-people who were summoned to court and had to explain themselves to officials and clergy at the risk of criminal punishments. The nature and content of their testimonies are framed by the interests and discourses of the judiciary; moreover, the judicial, religious, and medical experts present in the investigation can have the authority to impose interpretations and thus affect the experiences. Most of what is recorded is already the interpretation of the authorities and consists of narratives of the experiences that people recall. Nevertheless, personal voices and experiences also come across, especially in interrogations (question-answer form), testimonies of pre-trial events, and negotiations over differing opinions, although obviously filtered by scribes and, at times, translations from Finnish to Swedish. Although these types of sources offer only glimpses of people’s mindsets, the discourses and power dynamics that were shaping the experiences are richly present.

Research on early modern religious experiences and lived religion offers important starting and comparison points. In general, research on mentalities, beliefs, and religious discourses gives information about the symbolic universe from which those participating in the “experiencing” draw connotations and inspiration. The topics of this chapter are related to religious pluralization, competing pieties, and the negotiation over orthodox and heterodox beliefs and experiences that have all been widely studied across early modern Europe.<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, this chapter is about the “pathologization”—in particular the medicalization and invalidation—of religious experiences and the power/control dynamics in the process.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>For example Beyer, *Lay Prophets*; Dixon, *Living with Religious Diversity*; Karremann, *Forgetting Faith?*; Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, *Lived Religion*; Laborie and Hessayon, *Early Modern Prophecies*; Lutton, “Geographies and Materialities of Piety”; Mach, *Visionary Women*; Stitzel, “God, the Devil, medicine and the Word”; Walsham, “Frantick Hacket”.

<sup>7</sup>Similarly, most studies in the history of insanity since Foucault emphasize the social construction of madness and the power hierarchies involved.

Thus, also early modern understandings of madness are relevant here,<sup>8</sup> especially the spiritual forms of mental “derangement” and views on the connections between spirituality and insanity.<sup>9</sup> Various extraordinary and pathologized religious experiences have already been studied in Swedish and Finnish history,<sup>10</sup> but not so much from the perspective of how such experiences were shaped and classified.

Analysing the construction of “religious madness” is a fruitful way to tackle questions of how personal (religious) experiences and agency are controlled, interpreted, and given—in this case very negative and “medicalized”—meanings when they are performed, communicated, or otherwise shared with others. There were rarely unanimous interpretations, but rather heterogeneous and even ambivalent religious experiences; for example, what to a zealous believer might be revival or religious enthusiasm could be totally mad to another. The line was thin between credible or accepted and “mad” spiritual experiences, and individual experiences could conflict with communal or official interpretations (experiences).

### FORMATION OF “RELIGIOUS” EXPERIENCES

One Saturday afternoon in March 1721, a 22-year-old farmhand named Henrich Michellsson encountered a strange man on his way home from work. Dressed in white, the man called him to come over. Terrified, Henrich approached the man, who told him not to be afraid and that he had something to tell him. Based on the man’s appearance, Henrich

<sup>8</sup> I am using the umbrella term “madness” here to refer to conditions that were considered insanity and affecting the mind in early modern Sweden, although it must be emphasized that as a concept it is too vague and all-encompassing to aptly describe all the variations of “mental” disorders and afflictions that they early modern people spoke about. See also Lederer, *Madness, Religion and the State*, 154–155. The early modern Swedish terminology referring to disordered minds was rich and difficult to translate, including for example *hufwudswaghet* (‘weakness in the head’); *därhet*, *galenskap* (madness); *galen*, *ursinnig* (mad); *afwita* (insane), *fäbn*, *fäne/a*, *däre* (crazy); *intet wid sitt förstånd*, *intet wid sina fulla sinnen* (not in one’s right mind), and specific illnesses such as *melancholia*, *mania*, *furor/raseri*.

<sup>9</sup> For example Classen, *Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion*; Lederer, *Madness, Religion and the State*, 145–196; MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*; Rubin, *Religious Melancholy*; Sena, “Melancholic Madness”; Szarka, “The devil behind the eyes”.

<sup>10</sup> For example Anderson, “Order in insanity”; Eklund, “Drängen Henrich Michelssons änglasyster”; Eriksson, *Vägen till centralhospitalet*, 73, 80–83, 85–92, 132–137; Häggblom, “Den heliga svagheten”; Johannisson, *Kroppens tunna skal*, esp. 148ff; Olli, *Visioner av världen*; Tuohela, “The Ordeal of the Soul”; Sulkunen, *Liisa Eerikintytär*.

initially considered him to be an angel. The man began to talk about how all the water that people cleaned themselves with is in God's eyes only blood, and the birch switches (used in the sauna) were heavy with blood. He told Henrich not to use the birch switch on his body, and that going to the sauna on Saturdays is a sin. Before leaving, the man told him to be God-fearing, go to church diligently, and listen to what the priest says. Or this is at least how Henrich recounted it when he was questioned about his several encounters with "angelic" beings the following year in the local court. Seven more encounters followed between July of 1721 and January 1722, during which Henrich met more angels, including three angels flying with swords dripping blood in their hands. On some occasions, the angels whipped him. The angels had various divine messages to mankind concerning sinning and declared that the inhabitants of Turku and the surrounding parishes should be warned and punished for not following the Ten Commandments. The angels even revealed to Henrich concealed crimes and sins that angered God. His fourth vision was the most extravagant: in October 1721, he met God and was whipped by Him for all the sins of the world (though he later changed this story).<sup>11</sup> At times, Henrich visited the dean to share these revelations, once showing him and others his bloody back as proof of the whipping and bringing a stone that had fallen from the sky. According to the dean, Henrich had explained that "if people did not mend their ways, God would feed unrepentant sinners with such (stone) bread" or otherwise destroy them with a bloody sword. However, Henrich himself recalled that the message had been that if people would not repent, they would be punished with raining stones.<sup>12</sup>

Henrich was quick to attach religious meanings from various dominant contemporary cultural narratives to his envisioned encounters. The beings he met had all the characteristics of angels and messages inspired by Christianity and the Bible. Thus, Henrich had a particular type of experience: a religious (or spiritual) experience in which observation, sensation, or feeling is given meanings from the sacred and preternatural world or from the learnt precepts of religion rather than from the ordinary, temporal, or material sphere. They are given religious connotations, such as

<sup>11</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722, 18–107.

<sup>12</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722, 53, 69–70, 104; Letter from dean Ritz to Bishop Witte dated 10 January 1722. Translated quote: "Om intet bätring skie skulle, wille Gud med sådant bröd mätta de obotfärdige Syndare".

causes, origins, and purposes, and thus the contents of this type of experience are shaped by religious culture and/or the institutionalized religion. Like the interpretations, also the language for expressing (verbally and bodily) what is going on comes from religion.<sup>13</sup> As is well known, religious cultures and discourses guide the interpretation and meaning-giving, and thus experiencing, of sensations and events. For example, interpretations for hearing things, or auditory hallucinations, vary in different cultures and religions: both the tone and messages of the voice and the interpretation of whose voice people hear vary. Religions influence the experience: the voices can be ascribed to divine or supernatural beings familiar in one’s cultural setting, such as Hindu deities or Christian beings.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, for example, in the Catholic world, experiences of encounters and apparitions of saints were prevalent while after the Reformation angels increasingly took their place across all Lutheran cultures.<sup>15</sup>

Experiences of apparitions, encounters, and conversations with angels were not uncommon in medieval and early modern Europe.<sup>16</sup> Spiritual or preternatural visionary encounters, be it with angels, demons, fairies, or spirits, had some similarities around early modern Europe. They were typically vivid, multi-sensory, and traumatic experiences characterized by two-way communication and asymmetrical power relations with the being. Like Henrich, many suffered physical injuries at the hands of the beings and experienced such encounters in moments of crisis.<sup>17</sup>

Henrich constructed his experiences in the social and cultural setting in which he lived, based on cultural scripts and elements that shape situated meaning-giving, both conscious and unconscious. Although the shared cultural framework influences this experiencing, the same event or sensation can be experienced in multiple ways.<sup>18</sup> To give an example, the sensation of a presence while wandering the forests can be experienced in

<sup>13</sup>For constructivist views on religious experience, see for example Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* and Katz, “Language, Epistemology and Mysticism”.

<sup>14</sup>For example Luhrmann et al., “Differences in voice-hearing”.

<sup>15</sup>Beyer, *Lay Prophets*, passim, for example 48–57.

<sup>16</sup>For example Beyer, *Lay Prophets*; Copeland and Machielsen, *Angels of Light?*; Marshall and Walsham, *Angels in the Early Modern World*; Powell and Saunders, *Visions and Voice-Hearing*; Raymond, *Conversations with Angels*; Walsham, “Invisible Helpers”.

<sup>17</sup>For example Brock et al., *Knowing Demons, Knowing Spirits*; Goodare, “Away with the fairies”.

<sup>18</sup>See also Backmann, “Äärellisyyden kohtaaminen”, 26–27, 35–37; Boddice and Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience*, 50–51. Generally for example Quinn and Holland, “Culture and Cognition”, esp. 19–22. See also the “Introduction” of this book.

drastically different ways: one can interpret it as transcendental or as the presence of a supernatural being—and thus have a religious experience—while for another it is an optical illusion or passing wildlife. The question of the validity of these experiences is not of interest here, no more than is imposing modern diagnostics onto the past. The visions, supernatural encounters, and the like can be very “real” for the person experiencing them, and at times, they are also regarded as real phenomena by others. Rather, the experience is real in any event when it is perceived as real and meaningful, and thus has actual impacts for the person or the community, or even more widely for the society. For example, Brita, a soldier’s wife who lived in Ostrobothnia in Finland in the 1680s, was convinced that when it was windy or rained, God made the weather so to declare or announce her sins.<sup>19</sup> This conviction caused great anguish and had impacts on coping with her everyday life. In other words, her religious experience shaped her other experiences and thus had relevance at least in regard to the lives of Brita, her family, and the household.

Some of what the “angels” told Henrich, presenting their messages as God’s opinions and divine will, were clearly inspired by contemporary Swedish Lutheran Orthodox teachings and sermons promulgating the dangers of sinning and the wrath of God. The beings he met fervently repeated their warnings about sinning and divine vengeance and continued to whip him for the sins of mankind. They also continuously tasked him to admonish people for sinning and to urge the clergy to preach repentance. Such messages were common motifs among early modern Protestant and Lutheran angelic apparitions.<sup>20</sup> The idea of God punishing unrepentant sinners with storms, pestilences, and other disasters was well known and widely preached.<sup>21</sup>

This wrath had manifested itself almost continuously in the area in recent decades. Henrich had his visions at the end of a long period of crises in Finland, from the Great Famine of Finland in 1695–1697 to the Great Northern War in 1700–1721 and the related Russian occupation of Finland in 1713–1721. The war continued for over five months after

<sup>19</sup> “tahlat enär det hade blåst och rådden varit på himmelen, sådant Gudh alt för hennes synder låthå pålysa”. National Archives of Finland: Collection of lower court records: Northern Ostrobothnia KO a 3: 162–163, Liminka 9th–12th February 1683.

<sup>20</sup> Beyer, *Lay Prophets*, 10, 48, 84, passim; Walsham, “Invisible Helpers”. For similar themes in early modern prophecies, see Laborie and Hessayon, *Early Modern Prophecies*.

<sup>21</sup> Lappalainen, *Jumalan vihan ruoska*, 26–28; Miettinen, *Suicide, Law, and Community*, 68, 137; Olli, *Visioner av världen*, 93–94.



Henrich’s first vision. He had personally lived through the war and the occupation all his childhood and youth. Being only 22 years old, he was clearly affected by this period of turmoil. A few months after the war ceased, the angels told him about the terrors that had taken place, including the Russians skinning people’s backs, cutting women’s breasts off, and breaking people on the wheel. They passed Henrich a grave warning: if people would like to continue the peace, they had to live in a godly way, but if they would not mend their ways, the enemy would strike even harder and God would make fire, sulphur, and rocks rain from the sky.<sup>22</sup>

One can note that most, if not all, elements in Henrich’s “visions” were characterized by religious and Biblical motifs. For example, the idea of water being blood is related to common Christian themes about the connection between water, blood, and life. The divine threats of bloody swords, raining fire and stones, and stone bread are associated with God’s punishment, or the latter perhaps to the story of Satan tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread to eat.

Although especially the themes of divine punishment fitted well with the contemporary dogma of the Church, some of the topics—like the angels and God himself beating Henrich and the “angel bread” he had been given and consumed—were far from the Lutheran teachings. When the local vicar questioned Henrich about his experience of being taken to Heaven and meeting a bearded God, Henrich told him about a woman who had had similar experiences. The vicar interpreted this to mean that Henrich had heard about such an event that had allegedly taken place some time ago in Ostrobothnia.<sup>23</sup> Henrich attached religious connotations also to everyday life and customs, namely the sinfulness and the prohibitions of going to the sauna on Saturdays and using birch switches. In general, people experience(d) their envisioned preternatural encounters and messages in terms of familiar cultural models, applying, living out, and

<sup>22</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722, 58–60.

<sup>23</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722, 87: (Henrich) “gifwit exempel om en qwinna som skall hafft lijka Syner som han, och hwilcken blifwit lefwandes till Himlen optagen. Om denne qwinna har Hr. Fonselius doch ingen richtighet af honom då erhålla kunnat, hwarcken till tiden, orten eller namnet. Utan förmemeente Hr. Fonselius att han sådant mötte tagit af andras tahl, hållst för en tid sedan en sådan i Österbottn skall hafwa varit”.

reproducing cultural scripts that existed,<sup>24</sup> be it in the Bible or in other dominant narratives and everyday practices.

Similarly, the experiences of Captain Carl Forss, like his anointment and the angel's outward appearance, were heavily influenced by religion. He was described as a well-read man who read "fanatic" and "mystic" books. Some of the things he spoke about, not specified in the documents, were considered similar to those preached by two radical Pietists that had been recently active in the town of Turku, Lars Ulstadius and Petter Schaefer.<sup>25</sup> One can assume that he was also well-versed in the topic of the salvation of animals, which had been a long-debated issue in the Protestant world.<sup>26</sup> No doubt, like Henrich, he was also familiar with the dominant angel narratives and discourses and had heard of other angelic encounters and prophesies around Sweden and beyond, perhaps even about Henrich's that took place only a few years earlier some 100 kilometres south.

Both Henrich's and Carl's cases fruitfully exemplify the competing and complementing religious discourses that were available in early modern culture. The plurality of early modern spirituality and faith provided several avenues to interpret and experience extraordinary events and sensations. Although the Swedish Lutheran state and Church attempted to make religion uniform and root out syncretistic, "heterodox", and magical beliefs and practices, religious culture was far from homogeneous in early modern Sweden.<sup>27</sup> Religious pluralization only increased in (and after) the 1720s, as was noted by the authorities of the time, who were worried about the threat that Pietism and various sects and mystics posed. The aforementioned crisis period was followed by a proliferation of prophets and religious movements particularly in western Finland, also in part

<sup>24</sup> See also Goodare, "Away with the fairies"; Quinn and Holland, "Culture and Cognition", esp. 19–22; and the introduction and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa's and Jenni Kuuliala's chapters in this book.

<sup>25</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss: esp. Extract of the Turku Town Court notary's letter dated 19 August 1725 and Letter of the Chapter of Turku dated 5 August 1725. Ulstadius caused great commotion in Turku in the 1680s while Schaefer was active in Turku until the 1710s, and even after that via writing while imprisoned in Gävle until his death in 1729. Odenvik, *Lars Ulstadius*; Pajula, *Pietismi ja uskonnolliset liikkeet*, 67–83, 121–134.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, esp. Chapter 3, IV.

<sup>27</sup> For example Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, *Lived Religion*; Malmstedt, *Bondetro och Kyrkoro*; Toivo, *Faith and Magic*.

because some of those having escaped or been imprisoned abroad returned inspired by new spiritual ideas.<sup>28</sup>

### POWER DYNAMICS AND ACTORS IN NEGOTIATING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Henrich continuously talked about his angelic encounters with his parents and also with some neighbours and other locals. The local vicar had escaped due to the war and the Russian occupation of Finland (1713–1721), but Henrich had often shared his experiences and shown his wounds to the parish assistant, who acted as a stand-in preacher. As mentioned, he had also at times visited the dean. It was not until December 1721 when the new local vicar found out about Henrich’s visions, presumably because he was only recently appointed to his office. The vicar, Fonselius, had run into Henrich and his father on his way back home from Turku. Henrich was worried about his encounters and asked for advice. Fonselius told him to come visit to talk more. Two days later, Henrich arrived at the vicarage with his mother. At the time, Henrich was still describing his fourth experience as a meeting with God, who had even talked to him about the “false idol’s corpse” depicted in the local church. To Fonselius, Henrich’s experiences were senseless and outrageous. According to Fonselius, Henrich was very ignorant and confused in his knowledge of Christianity. Fonselius spent hours questioning and teaching Henrich about his visions and their improbability, giving Biblical examples of “true” prophets and Satan giving false visions, and using various theological arguments. According to the vicar, Henrich had stepped into the shoes of the clergy who, rather than simple men like Henrich, or God-sent angels, had been tasked to preach and tend to the souls and possible punishments of people’s sins. Severely reprimanded, Henrich cried and now considered all his experiences to be only “the Devil’s treachery”.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, early on the local religious and discursive authorities took part and a major role in (re)constructing Henrich’s experiences. The authority to recognize credible religious experiences, divine messages, and the like rested with the clergy, first the local vicar and other lower clergy, and at a

<sup>28</sup> Pajula, *Pietismi ja uskonnolliset liikkeet*, esp. 112–173.

<sup>29</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722, 48–53, 84–88 (Fonselius’ testimony), 103–104, passim.

higher level, the bishop and chapters.<sup>30</sup> It has been interpreted that generally the lower clergy were more inclined towards prophets than the higher clergy,<sup>31</sup> but the clerical reception of Henrich's experiences was at first mixed. The parish assistant and dean appear not to have been as authoritative, or dismissive, of his visions as the vicar.

Although upon talking with the vicar in December 1721, Henrich ended up experiencing his visions as devilish treachery, he later shifted his views. He had two final encounters in January 1722, but had then been much more suspicious about the beings and their nature, wanting to see their feet, as others had told him one could that way recognize whether they were good or bad angels. After his last encounter, he went to talk about his experiences again with the parish assistant and the dean.<sup>32</sup> These last visions appear to have convinced him again about the godly character of his experiences. A later investigation reveals that Henrich had at least in the winter continued to pass on the angelic messages to others and had still during the first special investigation in May talked about having been whipped by God and angels.<sup>33</sup>

The dean whom Henrich had spoken with wrote to the bishop of Turku on 10 January, after which the Chapter of Turku briefly investigated the case. The Chapter forwarded the case to the highest judicial organ of the Swedish realm, the royal council in Stockholm, already in March 1722.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, in Captain Carl Forss's case, the local clergy in his home parish soon intervened, writing to the bishop of Turku. Forss himself got many officials involved by writing to them about the "God's truth" he had received. His arrival and preaching of "harmful heresies" in the town of Turku in the summer of 1725 resulted in him being placed under house

<sup>30</sup> Beyer, *Lay Prophets*, 228.

<sup>31</sup> Beyer, *Lay Prophets*, 227–228.

<sup>32</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722, 91–106.

<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, the original documents of the Chapter of Turku, Turku Court of Appeal, or the lower court records concerning the case have not been preserved. However, later documentation provides information about these. RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722, 91–106.

<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, the original documents of the Chapter of Turku concerning the case have not been preserved. However, later documentation provides information about these. RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson, esp. Announcement of the Chapter of Turku dated 5 March 1722; RA: Justitierevisionens arkiv: Justitierevisions Utslagshandlingar, ansöknings- och besvärsmål March 12 1722.

arrest by order of the county governor. The Chapter of Turku carried out investigations, organized hearings, and passed a sentence of exile in August 1725, after which the royal council reviewed the case.<sup>35</sup>

The power dynamics come across clearly in the negotiations and official classifications of extraordinary religious experiences. The Lutheran Church held the monopoly over teaching and interpreting “God’s word”. Secular and ecclesiastical authorities had the ultimate power in this interpretation process, as they had the hegemony and legitimacy to determine the “correct” religion and deal with unorthodox religious views and behaviours with drastic measures, categorizing them, for example, as blasphemy or heresy and punishing those experiencing and sharing them with incarceration, exile, or even death.

In religious matters such as those of Carl and Henrich, the chapters,<sup>36</sup> presided over by the bishop and with learnt men such as theology professors and lectors as members, were the organs with the most expertise and thus discursive authority. They generally dealt with ecclesiastical matters but also acted as members of judicial courts, hearing, interrogating, and sentencing defendants over religious crimes. In Carl’s and Henrich’s cases, they had the task of interpreting their experiences and testing their theological grounds. The Chapter of Turku, presided over by the bishop Herman Witte, took different measures in handling Henrich’s and Carl’s revelations. Henrich, a young, “simple” (*enfaldig*), and illiterate landless farmhand of no status, was not questioned in person; his case was weighed by reading the descriptions sent in by the local dean, whom Henrich had already previously talked with and whom they had tasked with inspecting the matter. No separate trial was arranged, for example, in the lower court of his home parish near Turku. Instead, the Chapter issued a letter, dated 5 March 1722, for all preachers and their flock outlining answers and theological arguments about how to deal with such angelic visions and more specifically what to make of Henrich’s visions and prophesies. It forwarded the information and interpretations about the case to the royal council, enquiring what to do if Henrich would not give up his claims and cease to spread them.<sup>37</sup> Thus, at first Henrich’s case was not given a great

<sup>35</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss, n.p.

<sup>36</sup> Diocesan or archdiocese cathedral chapters, *konsistorium*, *domkapitel*. At the time, most of the area of Finland was under the diocese of Turku, with some eastern parts under the diocese of Borgå/Porvoo.

<sup>37</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: esp. Announcement of the Chapter of Turku dated 5 March 1722; RA: Justitierevisionens arkiv:

deal of attention—probably both because of his low status and because he appeared not to have caused enough disturbance. Still, the Chapter announced a letter about the outcome and instructions, which suggests that it wanted to take a public stance on this and future cases. However, Carl was an outspoken former captain and leaseholder of higher standing and wealth, and he caused commotion both in his home parish and in town, so besides reviewing his writings, he was heard and questioned by the Chapter several times.<sup>38</sup>

Visions, dreams, and messages from angels could be considered credible and acceptable religious experiences as long as their contents did not contradict the prevalent religious dogmas or question the Church as an institution. However, physical encounters with angels were more problematic in the theological sense; many Protestants argued that angels are spirits rather than appearing as bodily beings in the physical world. Prophets were dealt with, case by case, by carefully investigating the angelic apparitions (and other extraordinary religious experiences) and comparing them first and foremost against the Bible. If the angels did not look, behave, or speak in accordance with the Bible, and in particular, when they were introducing new teachings, the vision was to be rejected and the spirits were of the Devil. Since the late seventeenth century, very few orthodox theologians would support visions, as most “prophets” and their revelations were associated with Pietism or other “separatist” movements that were considered threats to the Church.<sup>39</sup>

Both Henrich’s and Carl’s angelic experiences and messages were rejected out of hand by the bishop and Chapter in Turku. The revelations could not be “divine”—and thus the “angels” had to be devilish spirits—as the contents of the experiences and the messages they had received were in drastic contradiction with the Lutheran orthodox interpretations. In Henrich’s case, it was both what the “beings” did and what they said: according to the Chapter, angels did not spread the word of God and warn people of sinning as those were the tasks of the clergy, and God did

Justitierevisions Utslagshandlingar, ansöknings- och besvärsmål, 12 March 1722.

<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, the protocols of the hearing have not been preserved but a “sentence” letter of the Chapter of Turku mentions that the conclusion was reached based on Carl’s writings, his “confession” in the chapter as well as letters sent by the local clergy from Carl’s home parish. RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss: Letter of the Chapter of Turku dated 8 August 1725.

<sup>39</sup> Beyer, *Lay Prophets*, 188–200; Olli, *Visioner av världen*, 147; Walsham, “Invisible Helpers”. See also for example Stitzel, “God, the Devil, medicine and the Word”, 332–334.

not whip men nor feed them stones. However, most of the long theological arguments given against Henrich’s experiences discuss Biblical texts and examples of the Devil tricking people and appearing as an angel. The Chapter was not convinced that Henrich’s experienced encounters had taken place at all, or if they had, they were of Satan and his “false spirits”.<sup>40</sup> In Carl’s case, it was the problematic contents of “God’s truth” that he had received; they outraged the Chapter by attacking several central articles of faith as well as the Church. The Chapter used a great amount of time debating with him and tens of pages for theological arguments against his claims about the salvation of all beings, the body and blood of Christ being present in all that one eats and drinks (thus attacking the Holy Communion), and that philosophy and other “worldly” subjects taught at universities and schools were of the Devil. He had even threatened the bishop and the county governor with God’s punishments and believed that the devil made the bishop forsake his divine message. Most abominably, he claimed to speak “God’s truth” and in God’s words, experiencing that he had suddenly received a full understanding of the Scripture and had the power of God within him to the extent that he could undergo severe fasting and cold exposure without harm.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, as their experiences had a distorted theological basis, they could not be real angelic encounters, and another predominant cultural script was adopted for their interpretation. The royal council in Stockholm agreed with the incredibility of their revelations. The weight of the Chapter’s expertise in spiritual matters was heavy, and it convinced many of the invalidity of Henrich’s and Carl’s visions. The Chapter of Turku discussed and explained both cases especially in the demonological framework that was still strong in the early eighteenth century in the Lutheran discourse and popular culture; indeed, it was used as an explanatory model.<sup>42</sup> However, neither Henrich nor Carl agreed with the Chapter of Turku,

<sup>40</sup>The chapter stated that it should be first examined if other boys had tricked the “simple” Hendrich and put on white clothes, or if Hendrich might have made up his experiences to get attention, even whipping himself to produce the wounds. RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: esp. Announcement of the Chapter of Turku dated 5 March 1722. Similar theological arguments as in Hendrich’s case were generally used against angelic apparitions and visions. See Beyer, *Lay Prophets*, 188–200.

<sup>41</sup>RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss: esp. Letter of the Chapter of Turku dated 8 August 1725.

<sup>42</sup>Eklund, “Drängen Henrich Michelssons änglasyster”, 59–61, 66–67; Eriksson, *Vägen till centralhospitalet*, 75–85, 131–133; Heikkinen, *Paholaisen liittolaiset*, passim; Olli,

as they did not begin to experience their past encounters as devilish. Instead, Henrich was in later investigations more vague and doubtful about his experiences, but at no point did he ascribe them to or refer to the Devil.<sup>43</sup> Carl continued to be steadfast and unwavering about his experiences. He stated that he would “rather die than take any of his words back”. The Chapter sentenced him to be exiled from the Kingdom.<sup>44</sup>

Henrich’s ordeal was far from over. In March 1722 the royal council, which had received the documentation from the Chapter, still required more investigation. This soon continued in Henrich’s home parish, Pargas, and in Turku. Thus, alongside the local clergy, the bishop and the Chapter of Turku, and the royal council in Stockholm, more actors—including the lower court and its audience in Pargas, the Turku Court of Appeal lawyers, and a professor and doctor of medicine—participated in the meaning-giving and classification of Henrich’s experiences.<sup>45</sup> More discourses than the religious, demonological, and juridical were taken thoroughly into consideration, providing new meanings and possible explanations for his unusual encounters and visions. These came especially from scholarly medicine and will be discussed next. In turn, in Carl’s case, when the Chapter of Turku forwarded their investigation and sentence to Stockholm, the royal council set a new interpretation, and thus reconstructed Carl’s experience as being drastically different from Carl himself or the Chapter.

*Visioner av världen*, 87–88, 92, 98–104. For similar continuities, for example, in eighteenth-century England, see Davies, “Talk of the Devil”.

<sup>43</sup> Hendrich’s case was further investigated in May and July 1722 in the lower court of Pargas and in November and December 1722 at the Turku Court of Appeal. RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722 and Copy of the records of Turku Court of Appeal 16 November–17 December 1722.

<sup>44</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss: n.p., in various documents in the compilation. Translated quote: “helre wil mista sit lif än taga et ord tillbaka” from the Letter of the Chapter of Turku dated 8 August 1725.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. note 42 and RA: Justitierevisionens arkiv: Justitierevisions Utslagshandlingar, ansöknings- och besvärsmål, 12 March 1722.



## MAD OR “FANATIC”? PATHOLOGIZING AND MEDICALIZING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

As we have seen, the authorities determined Henrich’s and Carl’s experiences to be invalid when it came to their “divine” character, but there were still many options as to what they could be. In early eighteenth-century Sweden, there were several complementing explanatory models and frameworks that could, besides the Devil and malevolent spirits that the Chapter had suggested, produce such extravagant religious experiences. Religious, demonological, moral, and medical discourses and world views did not compete but rather accompanied and supplemented each other. For example, medicine did not exclude the influence of the spiritual world, as illnesses could be instigated by the supernatural, and recovery was considered to rest ultimately in God’s hands.<sup>46</sup>

Interpretation of the *cause* of sensations, feelings, and the like was central for constructing the experience, as different explanations had very different connotations. Take, for example, ascribing one’s sensation to God or the Devil, or explaining an illness as God’s punishment of a personal sin or with one’s diet: the attached cause entails different feelings, social ramifications, and distinct modes of expression, such as vocabulary and bodily and behavioural expressions.<sup>47</sup> For example, in the aforementioned explanations, the personal and social reactions could range from guilt, shame, and moral judgement by others to piety and reverence. In other words, the cultural scripts providing meanings to similar or even the very same sensations, events, and situations varied depending on the interpretation of the cause or instigator.

Although in March 1722 the Chapter of Turku ascribed Henrich’s visions to the devil, they had in fact already briefly pondered other possibilities. The first were the pragmatic and the simplest ones: perhaps other

<sup>46</sup>Eklund, “Drängen Henrich Michelssons änglasyster”, 59–60; Johannisson, *Kroppens tunna skal*, 138, passim; Olli, *Visioner av världen*, 87–88, 92, 98–104. See also Cunningham and Grell, *Medicine and Religion* and MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, esp. 173–179.

<sup>47</sup>For example, examples of distinct, dramatic bodily sensations and expressions when people ascribed their sensations to the Devil: Eriksson, *Vägen till centralhospitalet*, 80–83, 132–137 (descriptions of cases of possessed women in Sweden from 1701, 1709, and 1782); Olli, *Visioner av världen*, 101, 103, 142–145, passim. The influence of the ascribed causes and thus selected cultural scripts can be seen in various cases where somehow afflicted people describe and “live out” their experiences and explanations for their anguish. See for example Fasshauer, “Thick blood” and Engelhardt, “Anxiety, Affect. and the Performance”. See also for example Fischer and von Tippelskirch, *Bodies in Early Modern Religious Dissent*.

people, like young boys, had dressed up in white and tricked Henrich, who was after all, based on the description in the dean's letter, "very simple" (*mycket enfallig*). Or might Henrich have made it all up to get attention? The Chapter had tasked the dean with examining these options and Henrich's personality, conduct, and physical and mental condition. Thus, also some natural causes were taken into consideration. However, Henrich's character was calm and decent, he showed no signs of insanity or illness, nor had he ever been ill, and he slept peacefully at night. Medical explanations were thus inapplicable, at least based on the dean's opinion after he had observed and talked with Henrich and his family and his employer's household. In addition, as Henrich slept well, it was interpreted that he could not have dreamt it all. After these natural causes were ruled out, the Chapter opted for the supernatural explanation, namely the Devil.<sup>48</sup>

However, the royal court still required more information before passing a criminal sentence, if such was necessary. The case was thoroughly investigated in the lower court of Pargas twice, in May and July 1722, and at the Turku Court of Appeal in November and December 1722. Now Henrich himself was repeatedly questioned and more experts and witnesses were heard. The matter was taken seriously at the local level: the copy of the lower court record of Henrich's investigation in July 1722 comprises 130 pages. In particular, the interrogation of Henrich and his parents, written down in question-and-answer form, is very detailed.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: esp. Announcement of the Chapter of Turku dated 5 March 1722. The Chapter's interpretations over Henrich's case have already been briefly discussed from the point of view of early modern demonological and medical explanations of deviant behaviour: Eklund, "Drängen Henrich Michelssons änglasyster". Similar lines of enquiry and inductive reasoning were applied in classifying extraordinary religious experiences elsewhere in early modern Europe, see for example Beyer, *Lay Prophets*, 193 and Stitzel, "God, the Devil, medicine and the Word", 327–334.

<sup>49</sup> The second investigation in July 1722 was organized because the records of the first from May 1722 were accidentally lost by the district judge. Thus, unfortunately, not much information is available about the first lower court sessions in May, although in July the lower court tried to recreate it and ask the same questions. Moreover, the participants still recalled some of the answers given earlier and noted many discrepancies. The material includes copies of the records of the July 1722 investigation, the Court of Appeal hearings, and letters providing information about all the investigations. RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: esp. Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722; Copy of the records of Turku Court of Appeal 16 November–17 December 1722; Letter from Turku Court of Appeal to the King dated 19 April 1723.

Besides going through each of Henrich’s eight angelic encounters in turn, he was closely, but with very simple questions, interrogated about his knowledge of Christianity, including his catechetical knowledge and various basic tenets of faith, such as the concept of sin, God, and Jesus.<sup>50</sup> The possible natural explanations for Henrich’s experiences were now more thoroughly investigated. The lower court found it particularly suspicious that his stories on many relevant details had changed between May and July. Although other boys teased him often for his “dumb simplicity” and considered him a “fool” (*giäck och narre*), it was ruled out that he had been tricked by them because witnesses said that they would have noticed it. Also, it was considered unlikely that Henrich had made his experiences up, because of his simplicity and lack of wit. Even a moral explanation was pondered, but Henrich did not have any known vices or anything on his conscience. This religious-moral explanatory model was connected also to the demonological model: a person with sins and compunctions was considered more vulnerable to fall into the Devil’s grasp. Even the possibility of haunting and ghosts was discussed. Henrich and his family were also further questioned about the possibility of him experiencing his encounter in a dream, but Henrich firmly denied it, stating that he had never had dreams like that and his encounters had taken place in broad daylight.<sup>51</sup>

Instead, other medical-physiological grounds for his experiences were given more emphasis, both in the lower court and especially in the Court of Appeal of Turku. Although the dean’s initial examinations for the Chapter of Turku had found no applicable explanations based on health or bodily, mental, or emotional conditions, the lower court hearings revealed more interesting and vital information about his mind or disposition (*sinne*). He had nothing wrong with his sense or comprehension (*förstånd*), nor had he had fantasies or madness (*galenskap*), but had been “very dumb and simple-minded” (*mycket dum, enfalldig*) since childhood, to the extent that as a hired farmhand, he could only do some of the simplest physical work tasks and had to be guided through his tasks while having

<sup>50</sup>The questions were presented to him in a very short and simple form, for example, “Are you a Christian?”, “How many Gods are there?”, and “Was Jesus a human being?”. RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722, 2–15.

<sup>51</sup>RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722, esp. 107–126. On dreams in early modern mentality and world view, and their use as explanations for extraordinary experiences, see for example Vilkkuna, “Katse menneisyden ihmiseen”, 60–70.

his hand held. Moreover, he was reported to have a melancholic disposition or mind (*Melancholisk sinne*).<sup>52</sup> This was a point that the Court of Appeal some months later emphasized.

Melancholia had several meanings in early modern culture: either it was an illness as a pathological humoral condition, or it could refer to a sorrowful mood and melancholy passions or a person's natural disposition and temperament in humoral thinking.<sup>53</sup> In particular, the illness of melancholia and having a melancholic disposition were associated with "deviant" spirituality. The illness, characterized by sadness, low spirits, and fears, could manifest itself as a subtype, religious melancholy. It typically drove the sufferers to excessive religious zeal, immoderate worry over one's salvation and sinfulness, and over-enthusiasm in spiritual matters and practice, but it could also entail hallucinations in the form of supernatural visions.<sup>54</sup> A melancholic constitution was also linked to extraordinary religious experiences and behaviour. Firstly, melancholics were considered especially prone and susceptible to illusions and hallucinations that were sent by the Devil.<sup>55</sup> Secondly, this constitution could manifest itself in religious non-conformity and enthusiasm.<sup>56</sup> Many early modern writings reveal the close relationship that contemporaries envisioned between religious enthusiasm, religious melancholia as an illness and a form of insanity, and a melancholic disposition.<sup>57</sup>

Like in many places around Europe,<sup>58</sup> in Sweden this was a time when religious and demonological explanations for "madness" still held ground, although "secular" medical psychopathology was on the rise. Deviant behaviour, including religious enthusiasm,<sup>59</sup> was increasingly medicalized and forms of insanity were explained by natural rather than supernatural causes. However, in early modern Sweden, scholarly medicine and doctors

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Gowland, "The Problem of Early Modern Melancholy".

<sup>54</sup> MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 153–158, 218–229; Rubin, *Religious Melancholy*; Sena, "Melancholic Madness". See also Schmidt, *Melancholy*, esp. 49–64.

<sup>55</sup> Heikkinen, *Paholaisen liittolaiset*, esp. 332, 337, 340.

<sup>56</sup> For example vicar Samuel Wacklin considered in 1751 that religious separatists "are partly disturbed by natural *Melancholi*". Swanström, *Separatistledare*, p. 193, 203 (esp. note 452).

<sup>57</sup> See the three previous notes and Rosen, "Enthusiasm".

<sup>58</sup> See for example Lederer, *Madness, Religion and the State*, 19–241; MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 229–231; MacDonald, "Religion, Social Change, and Psychological Healing", esp. 101–106, 125.

<sup>59</sup> Rosen, "Enthusiasm", esp. 412–421; Sena, "Melancholic Madness".

did not yet have the exclusive authority over the determination of in/sanity, especially in criminal trials, although they increasingly participated in the process.<sup>60</sup>

The Turku Court of Appeal wanted to take into consideration the two dominant discourses in interpreting extraordinary religious experiences, and thus it heard both theological and medical experts. The lower court in Pargas had been content with hearing primarily lay witnesses, the local peasantry, but also the local vicar. However, Turku Court of Appeal turned to bishop Witte and a professor and doctor of medicine, Pehr Elfving. Furthermore, they summoned and interrogated Henrich and subjected him to careful examinations. By this time—November and December 1722—Henrich had already toned down his claims and was much more obscure and less sure about his envisioned encounters, probably because he had become more concerned about the outcome of the prolonged judicial process. An appearance before the elite lawyers of the Turku Court of Appeal no doubt made him nervous, and he might have been informed that if he did not moderate his claims, he might face serious penalties. Or perhaps Henrich had started to doubt his experiences, as he now, for example, stated upon questioning that it is possible that it was fantasy and that he did not know who had whipped him.<sup>61</sup>

Doctor Elfving introduced a new diagnosis and explanation for Henrich’s experiences. When he was conducting his medical examination of Henrich in the town of Turku, he found out that Henrich was in love with a maidservant whose father was against their marriage; the doctor connected it to Henrich’s anxieties. The doctor interpreted that other people, who had known about their relationship, had beaten him, which Henrich shyly admitted. Being asked if he would give up his ideations if he could marry the maid, he answered that he would never be anxious about these things, and asked permission to return home to Pargas. According to the doctor, Henrich “was suffering from delirious love-melancholy, that is delusions without fever or fury”.<sup>62</sup> In early modern medical thinking, it was well established that love troubles could cause madness, and

<sup>60</sup> Eriksson, *Vägen till centralhospitalet*, 83–87, 104–127, 140, passim.

<sup>61</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Copy of the records of Turku Court of Appeal 16 November–17 December 1722.

<sup>62</sup> “han wore bekajad med *delirio Melancholico ab amore; hoc est delirio sine febre et rabie*”. RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Copy of the records of Turku Court of Appeal 16 November–17 December 1722, n.p. 4 December 1722.

love-melancholy was a commonly known malady and subspecies of the melancholia illness.<sup>63</sup> In Henrich's case, his envisioned relationship with the maid was interpreted as folly; the maidservant claimed she had never even spoken to or seen him.<sup>64</sup> The Court of Appeal considered that already his shifting stories and vague talk proved he was insane (*fåne, afwita*). Moreover, his "physionomy" showed that he was not in his right mind but a "Delirant" whose melancholy induced angel visions were "mere fantasy and groundless delusions".<sup>65</sup> Like the lower court in Pargas, the Turku Court of Appeal passed no sentence on the case, but simply referred it to the royal council. Although the final outcome is unknown, one can assume that the royal council agreed with the Court of Appeal. Thus, as an insane person, Henrich was not to be held criminally liable for his folly. Instead, he was most likely left unpunished, and further encouraged to give up his claims and instructed in Christianity by the local clergy.

Labelling persons who had norm-breaching religious views and experiences as "mad" was one measure to uphold the discursive hegemony over religion and silence dissident voices. Accusing or classifying someone as being insane was a common early modern strategy of theological disqualification, and a much-utilized tool in campaigns against religious "enthusiasm".<sup>66</sup> For example, André Swanström's studies have shown that a declaration of insanity and confinement to mental asylums was not uncommon for religious non-conformists—some of whom had no apparent mental problems whatsoever—in early modern Sweden.<sup>67</sup> These were typically individuals who were publicly declaring their views and gathering followers, and thus they were posing a threat to the existing order and the discursive authority of the Swedish Lutheran state Church.

<sup>63</sup> MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 89–92; Wells, *The Secret Wound*, esp. 19–70.

<sup>64</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Copy of the records of Turku Court of Appeal 16 November–17 December 1722.

<sup>65</sup> Incl. "af dess Physionomie lättel:n slutas kan det han intet är aldeles Compos mentis eller wid sine fulla sinnen" and "Henrich Michelsson är en Delirant den der regeras af ett melancholiskt gifna Ånglasyster härrörande af ijdel phantasi och fåfång inbilning pröfwad wara uthan grund och af intet wärde". RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: esp. Copy of the records of Turku Court of Appeal 16 November–17 December 1722 (esp. 13 December 1722); Letters from Turku Court of Appeal to the King dated 8 February 1723 and 19 April 1723.

<sup>66</sup> For example Rosen, "Enthusiasm", esp. 412–421; Sena, "Melancholic Madness"; Walsham, "Frantick Hacket".

<sup>67</sup> Swanström, *Separatistledare*.

Both Henrich and Carl Forss were problematic individuals in exactly this sense: they had publicly promulgated their “divine messages” and spread the word about their experiences. As mentioned, Henrich spoke about his encounters with many locals, and he appears to have had at least a few curious followers, gaining notoriety and stirring up rumours.<sup>68</sup> Forss had even declared “God’s truth” at Turku cathedral after the Sunday sermon. His activities were described as causing “danger” and “anger” in his home parish and in the town of Turku.<sup>69</sup> Awaiting the sentence from the royal council in Stockholm, he was kept under house arrest and had started fasting upon God’s order, refusing to eat or drink anything. But he still kept on spreading the word, continued to attract more followers, and appeared more credible to some of the “curious” because of his godly conduct and fasting.<sup>70</sup>

The Chapter of Turku sentenced Carl as a dangerous fanatic to be exiled in August 1725, but they were still awaiting the confirmation and final sentence from the royal council in Stockholm, which did not arrive until late September. The royal council concluded that, taking into consideration all the circumstances, Carl was not in his right mind but a crazy person (*dåre*), and was thus sentenced to be confined to the Själö hospital on an island near Turku. It also stated that this would make it impossible for him to spread his “harmful” teachings, presumably a significant motivator for this ruling. The royal council did not list the grounds for his classification, except that his stubbornness only further proved his insanity (*oförstånd och dårheet*).<sup>71</sup> No doubt, his extravagant and dangerous spiritual practice—including freezing himself in the river and his extreme fasting that endangered his life—contributed to this conclusion. Carl’s behaviour was not uncommon in the era; for example, fasting was a

<sup>68</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Henrich Michelsson: Lower court records of Pargas 19–21 July 1722, esp. 112–119.

<sup>69</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss, esp. Letters from the Bishop and Chapter of Turku to the King dated 28 July 1725 and 12 August 1725.

<sup>70</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss: Letters from the Bishop and Chapter of Turku to the King dated 15 September 1725 and 22 September 1725.

<sup>71</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss: Resolution letter of the royal council dated 29 September 1725 and Letter from the King to the county governor dated 29 September 1725.

common mode of self-denial, asceticism, and piety among the evangelicals.<sup>72</sup> In fact, Carl's story ends as his life ended, as a result of this fasting in September 1725, before the resolution of the royal council had arrived. His death instigated an even longer investigation as to whether his demise should be punished as a suicide or not. The aftermath reveals how he had gathered many supporters and followers, who sought to ensure Carl a Christian burial; this was later allowed by the Court of Appeal.<sup>73</sup>

Both Henrich and Carl are good examples of how power hierarchies influence what is considered righteous and what heretic, and the classification of some personal sensations as valid, credible religious experiences and others as incredible products of folly. Moreover, the cases exemplify the discursivity and negotiation of religion in general—like history has shown, theology and dogma are products of renegotiations and are subject and adjustable to changes.

Swedish history certainly has its fair share of noted “mad” religious prophets, mystics, and visionaries. In the early modern period, they include many famous persons such as Lars/Laurentius Ulstadius (d. 1732),<sup>74</sup> Margareta in Kumla (d. after 1628),<sup>75</sup> Eva Margaretha Frölich (d. 1692),<sup>76</sup> and Karin (Catharina) Pehrsson (d. ca. 1785),<sup>77</sup> who gathered some followers but ended up classified as insane. Many were inspired by the Pietist, Moravian, Anabaptist, and other religious movements that the Swedish Lutheran Church regarded as separatist. Also, the Raskol movement and its most radical group, the Old Believers—formed by the schism of the Russian Orthodox Church and active since the mid-seventeenth century—had followers especially in the eastern parts of the realm.<sup>78</sup> Thousands of people were involved in mystic or ecstatic movements and cults, such as the *Gråskoltarna* (Grey Robes) in Stockholm in the 1730s

<sup>72</sup> Beyer, *Lay Prophets*, 117–120, 217–219; Fischer and von Tippelskirch, *Bodies in Early Modern Religious Dissent*, passim; Rubin, *Religious Melancholy*, 48–49, 56–58, 87–90, 164–167.

<sup>73</sup> RA: Riksarkivets ämnesamlingar: Acta Ecclesiastica vol. 114: Carl G. G. Forss: incl. Letters from the Bishop and Chapter of Turku to the King dated 22 September 1725 and Letter by the Chapter of Turku dated 9 October 1725.

<sup>74</sup> See for example Odenvik, *Lars Ulstadius*.

<sup>75</sup> Eriksson, *Vägen till centralhospitalet*, 73; Linderholm, “Margareta i Kumla”.

<sup>76</sup> Andersson, “Order in insanity”.

<sup>77</sup> Höggblom, “Den heliga svagheten”, esp. 107–114, 120–128.

<sup>78</sup> For example, a Royal letter from 1688 mentions them as a threat advancing in Sweden. Pajula, *Pietismi ja uskonnolliset liikkeet*, 73. For more information on the Old Believers, see for example Robbins, “Religious Mass Suicide”.



and *Lillhärdalsläsarna* (the Lillhärdal Readers), or following the above-mentioned people or other religious movements. Many of the cults and sects were subjects of famous scandals that were publicized in their time.<sup>79</sup> As these movements did not prevail, that is, did not gain enough of a foothold in the state church or a widespread enough following, they have largely been forgotten in the main narratives of Swedish (and Finnish) history. However, unlike the cults, sects, heresies, and superstitions of their time that “lost”, some experiences won and were given legitimacy, at least later when they were interpreted as accepted revival movements and construed as monuments of religious change and transformation in Lutheranism and the Swedish Lutheran Church.<sup>80</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The extraordinary religious experiences of farmhand Henrich Michellsson and Captain Carl Forss set in motion long judicial, theological, and medical negotiation processes in the early 1720s. Though they were certainly not the most famous, prolific, or influential religious lay “prophets” in eighteenth-century Sweden,<sup>81</sup> their cases illustrate the bewilderment and conflict that such norm-breaching spiritual experiences produced among the authorities and communities.

Their experienced “angelic encounters” and divine messages exemplify the early modern diversity of religious understandings and experiences. In both cases, the men constructed their experiences with symbols, vocabulary, and an interpretative framework coming primarily from Christianity and its branches. Their cultural and social environment, especially religion and the cultural scripts and long traditions of angelic encounters and

<sup>79</sup> For example the incident known as The Passion Play of Stora Bjurum in 1738–1741 and the sect involved. Countess Eva Margareta Clerck/Stenbock (d. 1743) housed and supported the sect in her manor in Bjurum and her reputation was ruined after that. Bergstrand, *Separatistiska oroligheter*, 89–124. The scandal was discussed in many letters and, for example, in the diary of Metta Magdalena Lille. Eriksson, *Metta Magdalena Lillies dagbok*, 174.

<sup>80</sup> For example the Swedish Lutheran Church later adopted Pietist elements into Lutheranism. For example, Abraham Achrenius, Lisa Eriksdotter, and Anna Rogel similarly proclaimed unorthodox religious views and manifested aberrant and ecstatic behaviours but were not classified as insane and are now considered important historical figures in the Lutheran Revivalism in Finland. See for example Sulkunen, *Liisa Eerikintytär* and Häggblom, “Den heliga svagheten”, 101–105, *passim*.

<sup>81</sup> For more noted self-acclaimed prophets or “separatists” in eighteenth-century Sweden, see for example Swanström, *Separatistledare* and Akiander, *Historiska upplysningar*.

prophetic messages, provided them with the meanings and ways to make sense of the sensations, visions, voices, and events they envisioned. However, it was also their personal backgrounds and past lives that influenced their meaning-giving and construction of experiences.<sup>82</sup> Both had lived through a long period of crises, of war and occupation. Henrich had been clearly affected by the turmoil, as suggested by the divine warning messages he experienced. He had also talked about his unrequited love. For both men, these experiences were moments of crises in themselves, irreversibly changing their lives.

Constructing such experiences as “mad” was only one way to handle them, though it was commonly used to discredit unorthodox religious experiences and views. As in general, in defining and classifying in/sanity, the negotiation between “mad” and “sane” experiences was characterized by distinct relations of power. Henrich’s and Carl’s experiences were considered invalid because they conflicted with the dogma of the Swedish Lutheran Church, after which several possible explanatory models and cultural scripts were adopted and attached to them by different discursive authorities. Though demonological explanations were still valid in the early eighteenth century, the medical pathologization of supernatural experiences and religious enthusiasm was slowly but surely gaining more ground. Mental derangement, or other natural or medical causes, were taken up and emphasized by the educated jurists and medical experts especially in the higher judicial levels, namely at the Court of Appeal and royal council. Views about the relationship between madness, especially religious melancholia, melancholic humoral disposition, and delusional religious experiences, manifest the era’s secularized or naturalized views of insanity. Indeed, modern psychology has built on these, noting the prevalence of religious delusions among patients with certain psychotic and serious mental illnesses.<sup>83</sup>

However, neither Henrich nor Carl appears to have shifted their personal interpretations, and experienced them as suggested by others, either first as devilish or later as folly. Carl refused the experiences others tried to pass onto him, adamant of his initial interpretations. Henrich started to downplay his claims, probably in order to avoid penalties and to get back home from the prolonged interrogations, presenting himself as much more uncertain about what had taken place. In the Court of Appeal, he

<sup>82</sup> See also for example Boddice and Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience*, 50–51.

<sup>83</sup> For example Huguelet, “Spirituality, religion, and psychotic disorders”.

sidestepped the questions and provided more vague answers. On the other hand, as we have seen, Henrich’s case includes several temporal layers in which his experiences (and interpretations by others) change. His stories changed throughout the investigations, perhaps also because his memories faded, or as his memory changed his experiences over time.<sup>84</sup> It is also possible that the authoritative lawyers and doctors questioning him were successful in persuading him and transforming his personal experiences, like the local vicar had for a while convinced him of the devil’s instigation and false visions. After all, experiencing is a continuous process that is shaped and reformulated by cultural scripts, power structures, and the implementation of new discourses. But in the end, their religious experiences “lost”, as the authorities were able to invalidate and impose medical discourses onto their experiences, ultimately censoring them and transforming their religious experiences into folly.

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<sup>84</sup> See also for example Boddice and Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience*, 24.

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