The Voice of God
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Prayer and verbally answered prayer would seem to offer powerful evidence in relation to the question of human agency. Forty members of an English Pentecostal group completed a questionnaire on prayer: 25 reported an answering voice from God, 15 of them hearing Him aloud. The latter groups were interviewed and characteristics of phenomenology and context elicited. The voice of God cannot be held to be ipso facto pathological and many reported its utility in situations of doubt or difficulty.

If religion is the externalization of certain vital human concerns (meanings and norms) onto some outside power, itself projected as independent of human awareness and agency—from which power these concerns are then taken back into human consciousness as incontrovertible and objective truth—then prayer would seem to be of its very essence. As Marcel Mauss observed in 1909 (1909/2003), whilst certain aspects of archaic religion such as dietary observance or even congregational assembly might fall into desuetude, prayer—supplication of and communication with the divine—has retained a centrality. But as an academic subject it remains relatively neglected. The older psychological and anthropological study of prayer, ontological and comparative (Tylor 1873; Wundt 1900–1920; Marrett 1903), now appears rather out of fashion (but see Headley 1996; Parkin & Headley 2000), and the contemporary psychology of religion ignores prayer (Brown 1994). By contrast with anthropology, psychological studies generally study ‘hallucinations’ per se independent of their apparent content and social context (Davies et al. 2001).

It is the responses to prayer as religious experience that present particular problems for the human scientist. If we take prayer to be a conversation with some god, as argued by Gregory of Myssa and St John Chrysostom in the Christian tradition (or by contemporary college students—Brown 1994, p. 151), then we can distinguish the communications emitted by the one who prays from those received back from God (‘answers to prayer’). Social anthropologists have normally preferred to concentrate on the former as the usual collective practice (Mauss 1909/2003) which is easily
studied, leaving uninvestigated the mode by which God replies and is interpreted by the person engaged in prayer (but compare the related oracles and also sortilege). Prayer emitted by the human subject is relatively uncomplicated theoretically, whether it is the standardized formal prayers of the daily offices, or the spontaneous utterances of one who prays whether this is illocutionary (‘expressive’) or perlocutionary (to practically achieve some result) (Austin 1962; Littlewood & Dein 1995). And it is when God replies that the particular issue of pathology in prayer seems most pertinent.2 This is of interest in relation to recent debates about agency: Dodds (1951) argues that it is the projection onto an outside sender of apparent communications to the individual (but which are actually their own creation) that enables religion to be seen as something external (similarly Slade & Bentall 1988).

Prayer and Pathology

Prayer remains a concern for comparative psychopathology where the distinction and confusion between normative religion and psychopathological religion continues as an interest (Littlewood 1993; Jackson & Fulford 1997). The 1971 report of the Anglican Commission on Christian Doctrine even argued that the practice of prayer could lead at times to personal doubts over one’s sanity (Brown 1994). In the clinic, the conventional distinction between the two—normal and pathological—is normally made by one, or both, of two procedures:

- ‘By its fruits’—assessing the cultural standardization of a religious experience by its accepted collective and individual consequences in a social setting (James 1902/1958).
- By specifically asking the individual’s own religious community about the normality or otherwise of the particular phenomenon (Littlewood & Lipsedge 1982).

Both follow on from the conventional assessment of psychopathology as inconsistent with local context (Wing et al. 1974) but can obviously cause difficulties when an idiosyncratic religious experience becomes the new norm for an emerging cultural group (Littlewood 1993).

The actual phenomenology may be identical in instances considered as pathological or normative (Littlewood 1993; Jackson & Fulford 1997), but the common clinical expedient of, for instance, distinguishing ‘real’, pathological, hallucinations (heard aloud through the ears, and located in a clearly objective dimension) from both the less pathological (a) ‘pseudo-hallucinations’ (experienced in a subjective dimension and recognized as the product of the individual) (Ey 1934), and from (b) ‘dissociative hallucinations’, which are often two-way and co-ordinated in more than one modality (and taken clinically as more evidently derived from culture or personality: Wing et al. 1974) cannot easily be applied: normative religious hallucinations themselves may certainly be ‘dissociative’ yet experienced as veridical experiences in external space (Wing et al. 1974). This distinction between ‘abnormal’ and ‘normal’ hallucinations was proposed in the nineteenth century by the French psychiatrist de Boismont as pathological versus physiological...
(Leudar & Thomas 2002). A non-culturally standardized example of the latter seems to be Socrates’ daemon, which the philosopher took as (his) higher reason although according it divine status (Leudar & Thomas 2002). In other words, Socrates externalized (experienced? represented?) a product of his own cognitions as an external divine voice which he heard aloud (and which was externally signalled by his sneezing!). Davies et al. (2001), like others (Bentall & Slade 1985), propose that hallucinatory experience in insanity is on a continuum with normality. Over the last few years, the Hearing Voices Network in Britain has attempted to minimize the difference between ‘pathological’ and ‘normal’ hallucinations through a common approach of ‘coping’ with the voices—distraction techniques or focusing and reattrition: those initially able to ‘cope’ more easily are less likely to be in psychiatric care (Romme et al. 1992). Up to a third of general Western populations seem to report auditory hallucinations (Davies et al. 2001), particularly after bereavement and sexual abuse, as well as the more common experiences on waking or falling asleep; these then are not invariably associated with psychosis (Johns et al. 2002).

Agency

The human sciences still choose between two rather different modes of thought: The naturalistic—with rule-governed and objective cause and effect relationships, independent of but accessible to human awareness; and personalistic understandings—the motivated actions of volitional human agents. It is impossible to perceive both ways of understanding at the same time, yet at some point we presume the two modes converge. We can attempt to solve the antimony by privileging one end at the expense of the other, which it incorporates (i.e. essentialism whether social or bio-psychological); by maintaining a dialectical relationship between the ends (Bourdieu, Giddens); by some fuzzy declaration of holistic unity (systems theory); or else by just edging in modestly from each end towards the presumed meeting point (Littlewood 1993, 2002).

After a long period of separate development, we appear to be approaching a period when the social sciences (here social anthropology) might once again engage with the natural sciences (cognitive psychology). Given recent neuropsychological findings that ‘personal agency’—the sense of possessing, controlling or identifying with an experience or action—is perhaps neurologically coded in cortical midline structures (through, for instance, the evaluation of apparently self-referential stimuli, with a high level of neural activity during the resting state), this has significant implications for the experience of the self (Damasio 1999; Northoff & Bermpohl 2004). If the default mode in this area of the brain is thus modulated primarily by deactivation, then we have a potential biological correlate for such diverse phenomena as spirit possession, hypnosis, dreaming, multiple personality disorder, schizophrenia, the experiences of addiction and for prayer (Littlewood 2002). And experiential aspects of each are likely to contribute to the others. Clearly we cannot assume a priori a common mechanism, but in all cases the sense of personal agency is reduced and, whilst expressed through subjective cultural idioms, is no longer felt to be owned but
is attributed to some external power—whether this is naturalistically or personalistically conceived (as for instance a disease process or a spirit). Clearly the alienation of agency may be represented as on a spectrum between the more total (spirit possession) and the more partial where some sense of the pre-existing self continues (prayer).

Social anthropology has long had an interest in how these ‘alienated experiences’ are socially understood as indigenous psychologies in local theory of mind. In the extreme case, everyday states of psychological being among the Dinka of East Africa are locally recognized not as personally engendered but as put into the individual by external agencies (Lienhardt 1961): Dinka have no conceptions corresponding ‘to our popular modern conception of the “mind” as mediating and, as it were, storing up the experiences of the self. There is for them no such interior entity to appear, on reflection, to stand between the experiencing self at any given moment and what is or has been an exterior influence upon the self. . . . As images, the [divine] powers contract whole fields of direct experience and represent their fundamental nature each by a single term’ (Lienhardt 1961, pp. 149, 169). ‘The man is the object acted upon . . . Their world is not for them an object of study but an active subject’ (Lienhardt 1985, pp. 150, 156). This is not to say that Dinka have no sense of individuality, nor that they cannot see themselves and other people as active agents: ‘[T]he Dinka can only conceptualise themselves as being under the control of powers because they are able to experience an individual autonomy and control, yet “prefer” to attribute it elsewhere’ (Heelas & Lock 1981, p. 26).

Schizophrenia and spirit possession—in both of which the individual experiences themselves as replaced or controlled by an external power—have, of course, a well documented occurrence across human cultures (Littlewood 1997). That they may be actually associated follows a finding that delusions of alien control, common in schizophrenia, can be mimicked under hypnosis (Blackmore et al. 2003). Whatever the stability of the current neuropsychological findings, it is apparent there is as yet no uniform way of presenting to them the cultural data; we do not have a relatively consistent way of recording this loss of personal agency across societies, or indeed in the same society, although initial attempts have been made to provide a pan-cultural phenomenological framework (see Heelas & Lock 1981).

‘Religion’ can certainly be argued to involve more than a set of standardized assertions and social practices. Tillich (1957) argues that genuine ‘religious faith’ usually involves cognitive, volitional and affective (experiential) features. Religious experience is a complex whole, which includes conceptualization of the religious self and in turn conceptualizations of identity and agency. The anthropologists Herdt and Stephen (1989) argue that a crucial element of the religious experience for the native actor is its self versus alien (or involuntary) aspect. This is the understanding that one is not the agent of experience. Taves (1999) proposes a habitual sense of an embodied self, which is often altered or discontinuous through the loss of voluntary motor control, unusual sensory perceptions (kinaesthetic, visual, auditory and tactile) and/or discontinuities of consciousness, memory and identity. Something similar may be found canonically when St Paul says ‘I, yet not I, live but Christ liveth in me’ (Gal. 2: 20). He describes his earlier experience where identity was disrupted ‘whether in the
body or out of the body, I cannot tell’ (2 Cor. 12: 3) with a modification of his usual kinaesthetic or bodily sense of himself: There shone . . . ‘a great light round about me. And I fell onto the ground, and heard a voice saying . . . Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ (Acts 22: 6–7).

Beyond recent interest in their putative biological correlatives, there has been little empirical attempt to look at the mechanisms involved in such religious experience. Luhrmann (2005) appeals to a psychological phenomenon of ‘absorption’ to account for both spiritual experience and dissociative disorders: related both to dissociation and hypnotic states, it is the capacity to become absorbed in inner sensory stimuli and to lose a degree of external awareness. There is evidence from ethnography (anthropological accounts of spirit possession), psychology (experimental work on hypnosis and meditation) and religious history (accounts of Christian mysticism) that the practice of ‘absorption’ can go along with the development of hallucinations; as the state of absorption deepens there is a shift in the sense of agency so that individual mental events come to happen to a person (similar to the earlier views of James 1902/1958 and Mead).

Pentecostalism and One Religious Experience: The Current Study

One group where hearing the voice of God appears relatively common are the Pentecostalists. Theoretically most Pentecostal denominations are Trinitarian and align themselves with Christian evangelicalism in that they emphasize the inerrancy of the Bible, but they differ from other contemporary ‘fundamentalist’ groups in their emphasis on personal religious experience. ‘Speaking in tongues’ (glossolalia) is one of the charismatic gifts (also including prophecy, healing, miracle working and others) that can follow (usually) adult baptism; it is the outer indication of a closer relationship to the Holy Spirit—being ‘born again’. The Holy Spirit is part of the Trinity of the Godhead but also is present in each believer. As a practice, glossolalia occurs also among other Protestants, and among charismatic Catholics, but as a distinct if loose denomination Pentecostalism proper now represents one in four Christians worldwide. Poloma (1982, 1989, 1998) proposes the Pentecostal worldview as a syncretism of ‘premodern’ miracles, modern technology and postmodern mysticism in which the natural and supernatural are elided. Much of the literature on divine communication within this group has considered prophecy (Poloma 1988) or glossolalia (Spanos et al. 1986), and there is little work on direct communication from the Divine: hallucinatory experience does appear more common among evangelical Christian groups (Davies et al. 1991) who also rate it more ‘positively’ than do either psychotic patients or the general Western population.

Forty members of a Pentecostal church of around 110 people in north-east London completed for us an introductory questionnaire on prayer, and 25 who reported there that they heard God’s answering voice were then interviewed. Fifteen of the 25 had heard God’s voice as coming aloud from outside themselves. Services of the church were attended, and informal conversations were held with members and their pastor. Services are held on Sundays when, after hymns and prayers, some members are ‘slain in the spirit’—falling to the floor as if unconscious. Most full
members of the church also spoke in tongues at some time during the service usually after the sermon—one at a time, and interpreted after the service by a member standing close to them: in distinction to the non-Elim Pentecostalists who are usually African and African-Caribbean. This congregation is predominantly White European. They accept the Trinity but regard the Holy Spirit as a distinct person with thoughts and feelings and who is omnipresent:

God is present everywhere. But the Holy Spirit of God also dwells in the spirit of a believer at the time of conversion. After this experience, the Spirit of God communes with the believer and provides fellowship (comfort and peace) and direction. The extent to which a person discerns the voice of God depends on her maturity, obedience and consecration as well as the desire for closeness with God.4

**God Speaks in a Number of Ways**

The informants who completed our initial questionnaire describe diverse ways in which God communicates with them: through events in the external world, as personal messages through hearing sermons, in reading the Bible, through an internal voice, through an audible external voice, as a compulsion, through interjected thoughts and emotional changes, or as complex imagery including visions and dreams. Here we specifically focus on the 25 who experience hearing God’s voice, either internally or externally. As James (1902/1958) notes, it is often difficult to differentiate between a reported internal voice and a personal thought. Some speak of God making an ‘impression’ on their spirit—a sense of conviction which occurs in ‘another dimension’ rather than in the mind. These modes of communication are not mutually exclusive; in some cases God would communicate in dreams and upon waking they would ask God what the dream meant. In other cases they would receive some words from scripture as a voice heard from God. They would then confirm this by reading the Bible and confirming the words. For the same person God communicates in different ways at different times.

The actual voices are experienced at various frequencies: some people hear them daily and others hear them only occasionally, perhaps once every few months. They occur at any time and not just during prayer. A voice can happen during mundane activity, such as walking to work, or driving a car, or standing at the sink washing up. The church members state that this was fairly commonplace in their group.

They are clear that this voice was not part of their own thoughts. As Diana, a 26-year-old housewife, comments:

It is not like, when say for instance my body is telling me I am thirsty so I think in my mind, I think I will make myself a drink now. It is not like that. It is definitely something outside of me, talking to me.

They characteristically talk of His voice being similar to a human voice and as ‘still’, quiet, authoritative and powerful: ‘It’s so strong it penetrates the heart.’ Some say that they could differentiate God from a human voice. Although they generally record God’s voice as being male, 10 of the 25 hold that it had no gender.
Sometimes God can have an accent: One informant from Belfast speaks of God talking to him in a Northern Irish accent. Others comment:

Yes it is just very gentle, a gentle voice. It is not demanding or controlling it is just a gentle voice.

It always encourages and it always edifies. It brings even a conviction of peace.

I hear God as sharp, crystal clear and very soft. It touches you so deeply. It is so clear you know it is not your own thinking.

I wouldn’t describe it as a voice of another human being. It is a voice I came to recognize in the early stages of my Christianity as being quite distinct, quite unique… It is soft, not like a male or female voice. I couldn’t really put a gender on it.

As with human speech, our informants are quite clear when God commenced and ceased talking. His voice can often come suddenly, can be short lasting, and may end suddenly. They feel themselves not to have any control over when it starts or stops. Hearing God’s voice is generally associated with ‘positive’ affective changes including feelings of peace, certainty and well-being. Sometimes there are also associated physical changes such as feelings of warmth or lightheadedness. This often seems to enable them to clearly differentiate this voice from their own thoughts and indicated its divine origin.

Yes I have had quite a few experiences, one in particular when I was working in my first job as a window fabricator. This immense peace just came over my entire body. It was like something I had never experienced and it lasted for seconds but it was like, wow, like nothing I had experienced in my entire life.

Yes there is normally an emotion attached. It is an emotion of forgiveness in myself or happiness.

Our informants often point out that God’s voice was associated with an ‘inner sense of knowing’ which guarantees the voice as being of divine origin. Charles, a 30-year-old office worker, comments:

I think the key characteristics for me are that there is a sense of knowing on the inside, which is supernatural, which is divine and it is always consistent with the word of God. That’s the kind of benchmark. If it is not consistent with the word of God I reject it immediately: I would throw it out even if it looks like it was supposed to be from God or even if it looked like it was going to be beneficial for me or my family. I would still reject it if it was contrary to what I understand God’s will to be.

The External Voice

In 15 cases the voice comes from outside the head. This is often associated with initial feelings of bewilderment and disbelief. For most the experience of external voices is very rare and often happened only once. For a 36-year-old human resources manager:

There was one time in a church in London and I think they were preaching about forgiveness. I went to the front and there was this peace and joy inside of me and I broke down and cried in [the] front of the church. God just said aloud to me ‘you need to
serve, just to be a servant’. I then joined the church and started serving the ministry and have just gone from strength to strength.

Charles again:

Only once ever, that was when I was at university and I was praying about an issue that was quite personal to me. I heard a voice in the room outside of myself giving me an answer to the issue. I opened my eyes and looked around the room but there was no one in the room or in the vicinity. I concluded God was talking to me through action based on what I heard and it all went well.

Another informant—a 28-year-old housewife—speaks of an audible voice only once in her life. This occurred after she and her husband had been praying fervently for a baby for several months:

I was driving back to work in my car and saying thank you God for the day and singing hymns. It all went quiet and all of a sudden I heard an audible voice. I believed it was in the car and it said, ‘you will have a son and you will name him Isaac’. I turned round and looked behind me because I thought this is crazy: how did someone get in my car? I looked but there was no one so I carried on driving and thought, ‘Is this you God or am I losing my mind. I have finally lost it!’ I wanted a baby so much I thought there was a voice talking to me telling me I am going to have a baby. The voice repeated the same thing, ‘You will have a son, you will name him Isaac.’ At that moment I believed it was the Holy Spirit talking to me.

Dialogic Quality

Our informants commonly speak about having a conversation with the voice, whether external or internal. They could question or clarify what it said. For instance, Jane, a woman in her 20s describes a time when she had spent all her money and was not able to give her tithe (subscription) to the church:

It was about three weeks ago when we were supposed to pay a big tithe…. Anyway we saved up the money over Christmas because we hadn’t been to church as it was closed but when it was time to attend church I had actually spent some of the money to buy food for us… and then I started to feel—not condemned, but convinced of the fact that I didn’t want to confess to God that I had actually spent the money, even though it was obvious to me that He knew I had spent the money. So I prayed and said ‘Look Lord, I have spent the tithe money and I just haven’t got the full amount’. At that moment I repented and said ‘Look Lord, I am just confessing that I have spent the money and I just don’t know how I am going to pay it back to You’. Then I heard a voice that was in my head and I knew it wasn’t me speaking. It basically was saying ‘It is a huge amount of money you owe’ and I said, ‘Yes it is’. The voice continued to say ‘You can’t pay it back, it is an unpayable debt’. … At that moment I felt such a peace and I said ‘Does that mean that I don’t have to pay it Lord’. Then this voice said to me ‘What does God’s word say?’ I said that God’s word says you give a tenth as a tithe and a voice said, ‘Well you know what to do then’. I said ‘Okay’ and we paid all the money but it meant that we had no money for food or bills or anything.

On sharing this account with the pastor, he notes that her behaviour did not immediately change for the better after this episode.
God is Pragmatic

God’s voice often focuses on immediate issues. He seldom offers metaphysical insights. This seems a way of regulating and evaluating daily activities and providing guidance to those whom He communicates. He may either support or prohibit a course of action, or else provide a way forward at times of difficulty. Some people speak of Him providing information that could not possibly have been known before. Many hear God’s voice at times of emotional turmoil. This guidance can relate to any aspect of their life and at times could be fairly mundane. A woman of Black Caribbean origin describes:

A really simple thing was I had short hair up until a while ago and God has been changing me from within so that I am much more feminine person than I was maybe five years ago. I was looking in the mirror one day and God said to me, ‘I don’t want you to be afraid of growing your hair’. I know I wasn’t thinking about that at the time and since then God has revealed that it was part of what he had been developing in me in making me a more feminine woman.

A number of informants report practical communication through hearing scriptures. Often they claim that they were not aware of this specific scripture before they heard it and it was only after they looked it up in the Bible that they found verse coincided with what they had heard in their mind. Sometimes they hear the number of the psalm, rather than the words of the psalm itself. A middle-aged White British woman describes an experience whereby she was undergoing the stress of adopting a child in her early 20s:

There was one event I remember today very clearly. I have an adopted daughter, who is now eighteen. I fostered her from a baby. Although I was approved to adopt a child, social services said I could not adopt Rachel. There was a policy that she should be sent right out of the area and I must wait for another child to come along. She was nearly three years old and they were still saying she would have to go. I remember taking her to play school. It was a windy day, I can picture it now and her blond hair was blowing in the wind. I said to God, ‘Lord, am I going to keep Rachel or are they going to take her away?’ What amazed me was this thought that came straight into my head: ‘Psalm 29 verse 4’. I didn’t know what Psalm 29 verse 4 said. I took Rachel to play school and rushed back home and got my Bible. The Psalm said ‘The voice of the Lord is powerful’. I knew then no matter what they said Rachel would stay.

In many instances God speaks at times of a major life crisis. One female student told us how a broken relationship led her to thoughts of suicide:

I hadn’t been religious and hadn’t been to church, only rarely as a child. I didn’t know about Jesus although I did believe in God. I woke up feeling very lousy and thinking I would take my own life but I didn’t know how. I turned the television on. There was a service and in that moment I cried out to God saying ‘If you are real you need to let me know because if you don’t I am going to kill myself.’ I didn’t want to kill myself but couldn’t see any other way out of this misery I call life. In that moment I did hear this voice. It wasn’t audible but in my mind. It wasn’t me, I knew it wasn’t and the voice said, ‘Tracey get up, get dressed and walk’. Those exact words I won’t forget. I knew it wasn’t myself talking. I got up and dressed and started to walk. I didn’t know where I was going but I knew I could trust this voice.
I started walking and literally three minutes from where I lived there was this huge cathedral—it was in Bristol. I stood close to the door and thought I couldn’t go in, the service could have started and I just couldn’t go in. The voice was very confident and said, ‘You can go, you can do it’. So I walked in and there was an usher there, a man who was very kind to me and said, ‘Please sit down’. When I got to one side of the church there was this huge stained glass window and in that was a picture of Jesus. I knew it was Jesus even though I hadn’t read about Jesus. I just knew it was him. There was a picture of him being held by two Roman guards: he was being beaten. I stood and stared at it and in that moment I heard the voice again. It said to me ‘Tracey you don’t need to endure any more suffering, I have already done it for you’. I broke down crying and people were staring but I didn’t care. I just felt such relief and felt such love and peace and a kind of sense of forgiveness for the things I have done wrong in my life. Even though I didn’t connect it to being God or His Spirit, I knew I could go and just heard the voice say, ‘Just go home, ring your parents and go home’. This was an internal voice.

Tracey admits that she did not become a Christian immediately, but she started reading the Bible even though she did not really understand its words. But clearly her knowledge of Christ’s Atonement suggests a fair previous familiarity.

Source of the Voice: God, Self or Satan?

Our informants would often not differentiate between a thought, a voice and a feeling. Rather than calling it a ‘voice’, many informants talk about God ‘putting a thought’ into their head. This characteristically occurs suddenly against a quite separate train of thought, thus signalling to them that the thought had a divine origin. There can be some uncertainty as to whether this thought comes from God (i.e. it is not their own thought), or whether God uses their own thoughts to communicate with them. Such thoughts have a persisting quality although they are often unaware of why they should be thinking them. As one man says:

It is not necessarily anything I had been thinking. God just drops things in, simple things like I will help you. He pops these things in at a time when you are not thinking about him and when I am not searching for him.

In a similar way David reports how God used his own thoughts to communicate:

Now my brother who I haven’t seen for ages, months, possibly eighteen months, his name kept popping up in my head for a couple of days. I thought why am I suddenly thinking about him? He was due to go into hospital but I didn’t know at the time. I thought I have got to phone Bill and I was thinking why have I got to phone Bill. I thought I would do it next week. I did phone him and found he was going into hospital to have a pacemaker fitted but I had no idea that was going to happen, no idea.

Informants claim that they are now able to clearly differentiate God’s voice from their own thoughts. This has usually involved a process of learning. When they first heard God’s voice they had to learn not to hear it but to recognize it. Several informants likened this to hearing a loved one such as a child:

No, you don’t learn to hear God’s voice, you learn to recognize the voice. It is a bit like a child recognizes its parents’ voice and recognizes the voices they are close and attached to. I have learnt to hear and recognize God’s voice but nevertheless no matter what I get
in terms of inspiration it has to be assessed because I have to be responsible for my actions.

When the voice is heard, informants often ask God whether or not it is God communicating (‘testing the spirit’). Sometimes informants ask religious leaders about the voice, to confirm that it is the voice of God or they look at a scriptural verse. David discusses the voice with God in his mind:

Yes, because the Bible says to test the spirit. If you have got a voice it could be a spirit. It could be God’s spirit, which is good. It could be a negative spirit, which is bad, so the Bible says to test every spirit, which will confess that Jesus Christ is God. If it [doesn’t] say He is, then I won’t entertain him.

Everyone emphasizes that recognizing God’s voice is a process of elimination. God’s voice must be differentiated from that of the enemy (Satan), from evil spirits or internal voices deriving from internal bodily signals such as hunger and thirst. All hold that hearing God’s voice is normative for Christians; however, they emphasize that God only communicates in ways that are congruent with biblical teachings. Any communication that contradicted these can not come from Him. Informants generally said that God would only speak something from the Bible or that is positively encouraging.

The only response to that is when I have heard people say ‘It was God’s will that I went and slaughtered or killed a person’ you know it is a mental illness, because God would not have said that.

God does not act outside of his nature or his character. If people were saying things outside his nature and character I would question it.

The only thing I would say to that is if it contradicts anything that I believe God is about I would say it wasn’t from God.

Another person goes on to explain that recognizing God’s voice has to be by elimination:

I suppose by a process of elimination when he speaks to me. It is like, well hang on, I wasn’t thinking about that. It is developing the relationship as well and knowing that something he tells me can only come from him.

Sometimes the stuff that I hear back, I think, um, I don’t know and you have to kind of test this and think to yourself, would God really say that or is it me, is that my flesh or is it something else that is trying to communicate with me? Scriptures talk about us testing the spirits to see whether they are God or not. I think when we are communicating with God in that sort of way as well as when those thoughts come into our mind we have to test them and say, now this thing which I believe God is saying to me at the moment, does it actually tie up with what the scripture would tell me anyway. Because if it won’t, it is either my flesh or else it is the Devil.

In response to our question, ‘Did you have to learn to distinguish God’s voice from your own thoughts?’ Chris responds:

Yes I think you do. Sometimes you think it is your own voice speaking but there is no doubt when he is speaking to you, you know when he is speaking to you. Just the feeling and the words, it is a completely different sort of thing. You know
when you are talking to something else in your head and you know when God is talking to you.

**Does God Compel? Individual Agency and the Response to His Voice**

Although generally our informants state that they would automatically obey God’s voice, in practice many tell us that they have not: they still have a degree of freedom. They feel themselves clearly responsible for whether they do obey.

No I would love to but sometimes I forget and sometimes I am just being obstinate.
I can’t say God told me to do something and I have no choice. This is never the case. I always have a choice.

This element of choice differentiates God’s voice from some voices arising in mental illness. David had a psychotic breakdown several years before:

When I was going through my breakdown I would get quite nasty and aggressive thoughts and voices in my head, which I didn’t know how to handle. These were very forceful and pushy, like a nagging woman, so to speak.

After a difficult and unhappy childhood, bullying at school, David had become an angry man, drug using and in trouble with the police. The voices started after a marital breakdown resulted in a period of depression. They were persistent and were worse when he felt particularly low. On our questioning how these voices differed from the voice of God:

God says something and doesn’t force you, so you do what you like with it. It is much easier to respond than with a negative voice.’ [By contrast, with the psychotic voices] ‘you can’t refuse to do something when you hear them. They are very pushy.’

He now compares the voice of God to the psychotic voices:

It is very calm and peaceful and doesn’t force you. He tells you what you should do but basically it is up to you. [He emphasizes that God will only negate something if it is for your benefit. So if you ask God a direct question] ‘Should I go for this job, for instance, or should I do such-and-such?’ the only time you will get a no, is when it is for your benefit and it is not good for you.

**Discussion**

Informants then receive God’s voice in many different ways. As a ‘voice’ it is recognized as not part of the individual’s thoughts although when it first occurs it may be difficult to distinguish personal thoughts from an external voice. Communication with the divine is almost a learning process. Some liken God’s voice to a human voice, and the communication generally has a dialogic quality that follows human conversation. There may be other associated feelings in the body, some only with difficulty interpreted as physiological: comfort, forgiveness, knowledge. God’s communications are often pragmatic and problem solving, often in a situation of moral conflict. He may issue commands but these seem to be different from, say, schizophrenic passivity in which the individual experiences their thoughts, emotions or actions as replaced by another power (Wing et al. 1974).
The origin of the voice itself is often contested both by informants and by their pastor. Both wonder whether these are really divine voices and seek confirmation from the Holy Spirit. They try to distinguish them from voices coming from their own body or from demonic entities. For the pastor, the voices have a divine origin only if they result in changes of behaviour, which are morally significant; those who hear voices but whose behaviour does not then immediately change in any way, such as Jane or Tracey (see earlier), are unlikely to have really heard God’s voice. In those cases he may judge them to be mistaken, physiological or satanic.

We cannot assume that Pentecostalists are necessarily ‘typical’ of those Christians who talk to God—or that they represent some type of primordial experience found to a lesser extent in other groups. They themselves place equal emphasis on prayer as on glossolalia. That glossolalia and spirit possession seem more common among Pentecostalists, along with the divine voice, might however argue that the contemporary ‘Pentecostal indigenous psychology’ (without a conception of inherited internalized guilt) has an essentially ‘looser’ sense of some central self and its agency, such that it can be displaced more easily by something external, both in a theoretical schema but also in experience. Starting from the graphical representation of Heelas and Lock (1981, p. 40) we can plot this against a more stable, say Anglican (liberal, bourgeois, private), self (Figure 1). Referring to Figure 1, clearly, the ‘displaceable’\(^8\) self has affinities with the self in spirit possession and multiple personality disorder (cf. Littlewood 1997, p. 59), but note that with our current Pentecostal population, it is primarily restricted towards the bottom of the dotted line, dependent on the strong awareness of the persistence of an autonomous human self during the experience. (The top of the dotted line in Figure 1 indicates where an external intrusion may
control the self.) The experience of the participants is that whilst the voice of God appears independently of their volition, it is generally not opposed to that volition, and that God, unlike a possessing spirit, does not totally replace or control their essential being: Hence, towards the bottom of the line.

Why the religious emphasis on voice rather than on vision or other modalities, as perhaps in earlier Christianity? Few of our informants ‘see things’. Schmidt (2000) argues that the Enlightenment attempted to ‘tame’ the excessive fluorescence of the senses, including the auditory, to produce a demystification which disciplined the sense of hearing—Ong’s (1967) desacralization of the universe—with the supremacy of the eye now as the primary empirical instrument (Classen 1993). There is an old and debatable notion of Protestantism’s bias to logocentrism, and Schmidt argues evangelical Christianity at least was a rebuttal of the turn to the occulocentric: ‘God was hardly falling silent’ (2000, p. 11).

By the eighteenth century, God’s communications had become variously auditory or else internal thoughts modelled on a voice rather than the other more florid senses: ‘[A]s plain as it could of spoken to my outward ears’ as one revivalist noted (Schmidt 2000, p. 56). Some early nineteenth century alienists considered hallucinations were the primary symptom, and cause, of insanity, often stimulated by religious revivals (p. 56). Two thirds of pathological hallucinations were auditory and these have since become the popular hallmark of insanity: ‘Hearing voices’. Compared with the occular, the auditory was associated with obedience, with passivity, with participation, and indeed the feminine (Schmidt 2000). And with the aural texts of Protestant worship—and response.

The group we have worked with is a late modern church, subsequent to centuries of debates about the validity of religious experience and indeed of the divine. In the course of modern history, prayer seems to have become internalized, less of a public social ritual and more of an experiential dialogue with the numinous, for ‘in liberal Protestantism, prayer has become practically the whole of religious life’ (Mauss 1909/2003, p. 23).

Notes

[1] Even when silence, as so often, is seen as the essence of prayer, it is still a communicative silence.

[2] Thomas Szasz (1974) mischievously remarks that ‘when you speak to God it is prayer, when God speaks to you it is schizophrenia’.

[3] Thirteen men, twelve women, aged 18–68, largely social classes 3 and 4, two with degrees. The study had the following initial aims: (i) ascertaining the prevalence of direct communication from God among the group (63% of respondents); (ii) the phenomenology of God’s communications; (iii) the effect of religious communications on subsequent religious behaviour; (iv) understanding how those experiencing God’s voice conceptualize their own and God’s agency; (v) and how members differentiate these communications from their own thoughts; (vi) identifying their conceptualizations of normality and abnormality (and psychopathology) in relation to hearing God’s voice. Copies of the questionnaire can be obtained from RL.


[5] Clinically known as ‘command hallucinations’ and often associated with ‘passivity’—delusions of external control in which the subject feels their will, affects, thoughts or actions
are *made* by another (Proust 2003). But for a non-pathological instance of something very similar see Fox (1694/1952, pp. 71–72).

[6] Recalling James’ (1902/1958) description of conversion in which there are two preliminary states of mind—to believe and not to believe, the former often being semi-conscious. Many authors share the view that religious and spiritual experiences are adaptive psychological processes, a problem-solving process triggered by existential crisis involving both emotional and cognitive tension. In benign spiritual experience the problem-solving process is homeostatic.

[7] God’s voice leaves the individual with a choice as to whether to lead advice or admonishments; psychotic voices are often intrusive and replace individual volition. Both divine and psychotic voices can be heard as words or sentences, from outside or within the head, and can occur at any time or any situation. Whilst God’s voice is characteristically gentle and supportive, often associated with peaceful bodily sensations, psychotic voices are variably aggressive and disparaging. The divine voice seems to help immediate problem-solving and psychosocial functioning; not so psychotic voices.

[8] To call it ‘dissociation’ of the self or a ‘labile’ self (Lienhardt 1985, p. 142) both rather assume an invariant empirical convergence of will, memory, experience, action and responsibility; and which then moves about. Not so, it is less coherent. The theoretical doctrine that the Holy Spirit already dwells in the human self (section 190, page 10) would argue for Heelas and Lock’s (1981, p. 42) ‘modified idealist’ system, but this does not seem true of the actual experiences we describe.

[9] Or indeed of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in general: ‘In the Beginning was the Word.’ Consulting the Concordance of the Bible in James Moffat’s translation (Grant 1950), we obtain: 67 citations for *voice* (most of them ultra-human, 34 from the New Testament, 33 from the Old); 42 of them *voice of the Eternal*; 142 citations for *word*(s); 7 for *whisper*; 65 for *speak*, etc.; 1 for *noise* and 23 for *sound*; as against 21 citations for *vision*(s) (11 New Testament); 51 for *light*(s) (21 New Testament, most of the Old Testament citations being metaphorical); 23 for *touch*, all except one (Dan. 10: 16) inter-human and physical: 21 for *sight*, only one of which—the case of Paul—involving divine intervention (Acts 22: 13).

References


