

The Voice Of God

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Abstract

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 church completed a questionnaire on prayer, twenty-five of whom reported an answering voice from God; fifteen 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.

Introduction

If religion is the externalisation 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, 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, Marrett 1903), now appears out of fashion, 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, Griffin and Vice 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: 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), 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 standardised 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 and Dein 1997). And it is when God replies that the particular issue of the pathology of prayer seems most pertinent. 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 and Bentall 1988).

Pentecostalism and one religious experience: the current study

One group where hearing the voice of God appears relatively common are the Pentecostals. Theoretically most Pentecostal denominations are Trinitarian and align themselves with Christian evangelicalism in that they emphasise 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 1987), and there is little work on direct communication *from* the Divine. Hallucinatory experience appears more common among evangelical Christian groups (Davies, Griffin and Vice 2001) who also rate it more 'positively' than do either psychotic patients or the general Western population.

Forty members of a Pentecostal church in North-East London completed for us an introductory questionnaire on prayer, and twenty-five who reported there that they heard God's answering voice were then interviewed. Fifteen of the twenty-five 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-Elm Pentecostals 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.

"The human person consists of body, soul and spirit (at the core). God's voice is spoken to the believer in his/her 'spirit-man' and recognised as a 'still, small, voice'. Sometimes a believer hears an audible voice, but this is a rare

experience and not the norm. The object of the Holy Spirit's indwelling is to make us conform to the image of Christ".

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 twenty-five who experience hearing God's voice, either internally or externally. As James (1902) 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, ten of the twenty-five 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:

- a) *"Yes it is just very gentle, a gentle voice. It is not demanding or controlling it is just a gentle voice."*
- b) *"It always encourages and it always edifies. It brings even a conviction of peace."*
- c) *"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."*

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 fifteen 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 only happened once. For a 36 year old human resources manager:

- a) *"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."*
- b) 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 twenties 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. God’s word says he would like us to give some of our money to him as a way of saying thank you for all that he does for us, because I believe everything we have is from God. 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 I thought I would have the money ready for when we went to church on the Sunday. Anyway it turned out that I didn’t have it. I spoke to [my husband] about this and he was obviously a bit concerned as I didn’t have the money 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’. In that moment I went to my Bible. I can’t remember exactly what the scripture was; I think it was Isaiah 58 possibly. It was basically God saying about His love for us and how He forgives us and provides for us. 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’. I then 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’. I said, ‘Yes it is’.

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 incident.

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 which 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 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 a 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 retired White British care worker describes an experience whereby she was undergoing the stress of adopting a child in her early twenties. :

“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 went to sleep that night and woke up in the morning. It was a Sunday. 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 (I didn’t know whether it was Church of England) 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 his misery I call life. In that moment I did hear this voice. It wasn’t audible but in my mind [again]. 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."

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 *recognise* it. Several informants likened this to hearing a loved one such as a child. The pastor comments:

"No, you don't learn to hear God's voice, you learn to recognise the voice. It is a bit like a child recognises its parents' voice and recognises the voices they are close and attached to. I have learnt to hear and recognise 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. Ian 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 emphasises that recognising 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 emphasise that God only communicates in ways that are congruent with biblical teachings. Any communication which contradicted these can not come from Him. Informants generally said that God would only speak something from the Bible that is positively encouraging.

- a) *"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."*
- b) *"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."*

Another person goes on to explain that recognising 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.

- a) *"No I would love to but sometimes I forget and sometimes I am just being obstinate."*

- b) *"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. Ian 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, Ian 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. [Ian emphasises 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."

Conclusions

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 which 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, Cooper and Sartorius 1974).

The origin of the voice itself is often contested both by informants and by their pastor. Both ponder 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 are unlikely to have really heard God's voice. In those cases he may judge the voices to be mistaken, physiological or satanic.

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