

# **Hallucinations and Spiritual Experience: Voices, Visions and Revelation**

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Hallucinations are experiences of perceptual force that are had in the absence of any actual external stimulus. They are generally resistant to voluntary control. Whilst traditionally associated with mental disorder they are now known to be common in the general population. They not infrequently have spiritual/religious content.

Spiritual experiences, including religious and mystical experiences, include a wide range of experiences, amongst which are perceptual phenomena such as hallucinations, which are of spiritual/religious significance. We might define spiritual experiences as in some way involving a relationship with the transcendent. Such experiences are necessarily subjective. We cannot know about them unless the person having them is willing and able to attempt to describe them. Both the experiences themselves, and any written or verbal account of them necessarily involve interpretation. Experience is not separable from interpretation. From the very time of having the experience onwards, prior assumptions about the world, including spiritual/religious assumptions, both shape the experience and become incorporated in accounts of it.

Voices and visions, as a part of spiritual experience, are encountered in the sacred texts, hagiographies, biographies, autobiographies and other texts associated with most, if not all, of the world's major faith traditions. Such experiences are of variable perceptual force and, at least in some cases, are not strictly hallucinatory. Even if they are, this does not necessarily invalidate the value and significance of the experience. Voices and visions are thus often understood as being, in some sense, 'revelatory'.

The concept of revelation generally includes some idea of communication with the Divine – whether directly or via some intermediary such as a saint, angel, or other spiritual being. To qualify as revelatory, there is usually the imparting of propositional information. Revelation may be public, and thus shared with a community of faith, or else private and of significance only to the individual concerned. When it occurs by way of voices and visions, revelatory experience has usually, historically, been considered in some way or another as 'supernatural' or miraculous. In the contemporary context, various other possible explanations for such experiences may be adduced, which do not require attribution to such mysterious forces. However, this does not necessarily negate their spiritual/religious significance.

By way of example, Surah 4:163-164 in the Quran refers both to the communication of God with the prophets and patriarchs and also, explicitly, to the way in which God spoke to Moses:

We have sent thee  
Inspiration, as We sent it  
To Noah and the Messengers  
After him: We sent  
Inspiration to Abraham,  
Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob  
And the Tribes, to Jesus,  
Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon,  
And to David We gave  
The Psalms.

Of some Messengers We have  
Already told thee the story;  
Of others we have not –  
And to Moses Allah spoke direct –

A similar account of God's relationship with Moses is to be found in Hebrew scripture (Exodus 33:11; Numbers 12:8), and it is not difficult to find scriptural accounts of God speaking in all three of the Abrahamic traditions. Such texts are generally obscure in terms of historical origins. We cannot know, scientifically speaking, exactly what the experience of Moses was (assuming that he is understood to be an historical character). However, the textual tradition is significant in its own right, and is held to be authoritative. Whatever the actual experience of any historical Moses, the Abrahamic faiths have a sacred tradition of the communication of God with human kind. In some sense or another, God is said to 'speak' to his people, and they are said to hear his voice.

This scriptural precedent for the expectation that God speaks to his people – at least sometimes – paves the way for believers to have similar experiences. I will only take one such example here – from the Christian tradition – but there are countless others, some of which will be discussed in other papers contributed to this conference.

Joan of Arc was born circa 1412, and was burned at the stake in 1431, in fulfilment of the sentence passed by an ecclesiastical court convened by the English authorities in France. Her story is well known, and there are good biographical accounts of her life, mostly based upon the evidence given at the trials which led to her eventual death. Clearly such accounts are not impartial – but

they are also extensive and detailed. Joan's voices were interpreted at the time either as demonic or divine, according to the view that one chose to take. These views seem largely to have been politically determined. Much more recently, Joan has been canonised by the Roman Catholic Church, and at the same time has been diagnosed by various commentators as suffering from a psychiatric disorder. Her voices are thus ambiguous, although – whatever one makes of them – one can hardly fail to admire her courage of conviction in holding so faithfully to the truth of her experience despite such appalling consequences.

Recent research, such as that conducted by Tanya Luhrmann (Luhrmann, 2012), Simon Dein (Dein and Littlewood, 2007, Dein and Cook, 2015), and others, has shown that in at least some churches, ordinary Christians today report hearing the voice of God out loud, in response to their prayers. Such experiences seem to be not uncommon, albeit they are often infrequent in the lives of those who have them. They do not often seem to be like the experiences of Joan, and they do not always have perceptual force. However, they are significant for those who have them.

What are we to make of such experiences?

A reductionist scientific approach asserts that such experiences are invariably to be explained on natural grounds and that they are often (if not always) a manifestation of psychiatric disorder. Such explanations have been offered in respect of a wide range of biblical figures and saints, including the prophet Ezekiel, Paul of Tarsus, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, and even Jesus (just to take some examples from the Christian tradition – see Cook (2012)). Everything is thus reduced to the domain of psychiatry, or at least neuroscience. At the other extreme, voices may be attributed to purely spiritual phenomena of a more or less miraculous kind. Generally, such attributions have been offered selectively, and there is a certain logic to the idea that one ought to be able to tell the difference between truly spiritual voices and those that arise from mental disorder. However, this view – which in the crudest cases amounts to a differential diagnosis between spiritual experience and mental disorder – is problematic. It involves making value judgements about other people's spiritual experiences, and it is not always completely clear what the basis for these judgements should be.

In many cases, it seems to be assumed that in the absence of diagnosable mental disorder the experience must have been a spiritual one. But why should this be the case? Can someone not be spiritually mistaken, or even downright wrong? Perhaps most importantly, however, the assumption seems to be that people suffering from mental disorder cannot have a spiritual experience. This prejudice against mental illness seems both naïve and stigmatising. If we just focus for a moment on auditory verbal experiences, why should God only speak to people who are not mentally ill? Why should it not be the case that God is more concerned about those who are mentally ill, and thus more likely to speak to them? Perhaps mental illness confers a greater

sensitivity to, and concern with, spiritual matters, so that one might be listening more attentively?

Of course, it will sometimes be quite clear that someone is ill, and that their supposedly spiritual experiences are a product of their illness. At other times, it might be equally clear that someone is not ill and has had a positive and enriching spiritual experience. But in many other cases things are unclear and complicated. Wisdom is needed to discern what is going on. It may eventually be decided that a person is ill *and* that they have had an important spiritual experience. Or they may be diagnosed as ill and it may be unclear whether or not their spiritual experience is a positive one or not. It may take time to tell – and in some cases spiritual struggles, which might be viewed as a good thing from one perspective, might still be viewed from another as having had a negative impact upon mental health and wellbeing.

The relationships between hallucinations, spiritual experiences, voices, visions and revelations, are therefore not straightforward. Voices and visions may be of variable perceptual force and may or may not be strictly hallucinatory. Even if they are, this does not negate their spiritual significance and checklists of criteria for making a differential diagnosis between spiritual experience and mental illness are often both stigmatising and naïve. Reality is untidy, and often ambiguous, not least in matters of mental health and spirituality. Discernment is needed. Let wisdom guide!

## References

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