

Hearing Voices in the Christian Mystical Tradition

Professor Chris Cook



According to Bernard McGinn (1991):

‘The mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God’.

Mystical experiences frequently include visions, voices and ecstatic states, but are not defined by them. They are (at least in theory) distinguishable from other kinds of religious experience on the one hand and psychopathology on the other. There is a complex relationship between mystical experiences and the mystical texts to which they give rise. In the case of ancient texts, it is often impossible to know exactly what that relationship is, or even whether the experience is in any sense intended to be veridical rather than simply an heuristic device of the author concerned.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) developed a taxonomy of visionary experiences which became very influential upon the Christian tradition. According to Augustine, visions can be corporeal, spiritual, or intellectual. The taxonomy can be applied to auditory experiences (locutions) as well as to visions. Corporeal locutions are essentially the equivalent of auditory verbal hallucinations, being heard ‘out loud’ with the bodily ears. Spiritual locutions are of a more mental nature – rather like inner thoughts. Intellectual locutions are neither bodily nor imaginary, and represent (in Augustine’s understanding) the most reliable and significant kind. Conversely, corporeal locutions are the least reliable.

Many examples of voice hearing may be identified within the Christian mystical tradition, and examples of all three kinds of experience, as classified by Augustine, can be found. Amongst others, the following are of note:

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Margery Kempe (c1373-c1440)

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi (1566-1607)

Maria Faustina Kowalska (1905-1938)

Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997)

Some of these individuals, such as Francis of Assisi, appear to have heard voices on only a limited number of occasions during their lifetime, whereas others, such as Margery Kempe, reported hearing them on an almost daily basis. Generally speaking, the experiences were positive and represent a form of communication with the Divine, but some had negative experiences. Both Margery Kempe and Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi heard demonic/blasphemous voices at least on some occasions. All of these individuals except perhaps Teresa of Calcutta appear to have had visionary as well as locutionary experiences.

Margery Kempe is unique in this group for being both a lay woman and married, although she eventually negotiated a celibate relationship with her reluctant husband, and she clearly modelled her expectations and ideals on the lives of devout religious women (nuns) known to her. Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Calcutta both led active lives in the world, whereas the two Marias were largely confined to their respective convents. Mystical voice hearing is thus not only the preserve of the cloistered monk or nun. It has a very practical expression in active lives of service and reform.

Voice hearing as an aspect of Christian mystical experience thus seems to be a very varied phenomenon. Its significance has also been widely questioned and qualified. For example, St John of the Cross expressed concern that if given too much weight, visions and voices could diminish faith, impede the spirit, cause possessiveness, result in loss of spiritual benefit and loss of God's favour, and lay the recipient open to deception by the Devil. The cautions expressed by Augustine of Hippo and John of the Cross, which have been widely affirmed and accepted by other commentators, together give rise to the paradox that the more tangible the experience, the less spiritually beneficial it is perceived to be. Divinely inspired inner thoughts may be more significant than external voices and visions, even if the latter have, in some sense, also been inspired by God.

Of the individuals listed above, both Margery Kempe and Teresa of Avila have been the subjects of psychiatric interest. Margery has been variously diagnosed. Teresa has been thought most likely to have suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy. In both cases, such diagnoses appear to have been a way of explaining away their experiences and denying their spiritual significance.