

TITUS BRANDSMA INSTITUTE

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

Supplement 19

SEEING THE SEEKER

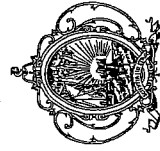
Explorations in the Discipline of Spirituality

A Festschrift for Kees Waaijman
on the occasion of his 65th birthday

edited by

Hein Blommesteijn
Charles Caspers
Rijklof Hofman
Frits Mertens
Peter Nissen
Huub Welzen

with the help of Wendy Litjens



PEETERS
LEUVEN - PARIS - DUDLEY, MA
2008

Janet K. RUFFING, RSM

HEARING VOICES

AN INTERPRETATION OF CONTEMPORARY
LOCUTIONARY PHENOMENA

Among possible Christian mystical phenomena, the emergence of words may be extremely problematic for contemporary people. The Counter Reformation's preoccupation with the theological content of such speech and its many attempts to control and monitor those who received locutions made Christians who heard voices reluctant to disclose them. Further, the classical Christian mystical tradition treats this particular phenomenon with extreme caution. Since both Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross wrote their mystical treatises in the climate of the Counter Reformation and themselves held somewhat opposing views about both the reliability of 'locutions' and the appropriate response of the person experiencing these 'words', it is difficult even today not to have assimilated some degree of skepticism or doubt about it.

Even more threatening to the educated, psychologically astute contemporary is the fear of dissociated states of consciousness, most specifically paranoid schizophrenia. Today, hearing voices is one of the most clearly recognized signs of mental disintegration indicating a need for psychiatric treatment. Thus the appearance of voices in mystical states of consciousness is not necessarily a sought after or welcome event. And for those who do experience voices, they do not necessarily make assumptions or decisions on the basis of such communications without critical assessment or even resistance.

In my qualitative research on mediated religious experience,¹ I was surprised to record accounts of hearing voices in half of the participants, twelve out of twenty-four interviewees. Interestingly, only one of the five men in the study reported hearing words at all. Since these interviewees were neither mentally unstable nor exaggerating their experiences, a more nuanced understanding of these voices and the words heard is required in relationship to the mystical tradition. For those interviewed these voices were often an aspect of their personal

¹ 'The world transfigured: Kataphatic religious experience', in: *Studies in Spirituality* 5 (1995), 232-259.

religious experience rather than prophecy. Thus the word or words were addressed to them personally and not intended for others. In a couple of instances, these voices were prophetic in character and related to the faith community to which the person hearing them belonged. In these cases, the person had to decide how and when to make the message received more public. For those who had some experience with charismatic prayer groups, this more public aspect of prophecy was less frightening than to those who received information or teachings that were interpreted to apply to others as well as to themselves but not in a group context.

Since persons from the middle ages to the present recognize that voices may mark the in-break of the Divine in a persons' life or may represent the thoughts, feelings, and desires of some part of the person themselves in either a creative trance state or a morbidly pathological state, some form of discernment is needed to distinguish among these quite different phenomena and among appropriate responses.

Psychological and theological assessments

Among contemporary psychologists who have studied mystical auditory phenomena, Harvey Egan's account of the theory of the German physician, psychologist, philosopher, Carl Albrecht is very helpful. It is entirely consonant with reliable mystical teachers such as John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila who recognized the mystical forms audition might take. Albrecht treats mystical phenomena as irreducible to intrapsychic, private processes. He identifies neither with regression, pathology, nor madness. His phenomenological analysis 'emphasizes the incredibly healing, integrating, and psychosynthetic values of mystical consciousness'.² This mystical consciousness 'detaches consciousness from its surroundings, empties it of its contents, and progressively unifies it. The controlling and directing function of the "I" disappears, discrete will acts vanish, and the person's entire being seems to be opened and readied. Extensive calm and clarity penetrate all levels of the psyche'.³ Finally, he defines the mystical experience as the 'arrival' in contemplation of an 'embracing-Something'. Further, one can distinguish this 'embracing-Something' of mystical experience from elements which arise from the self, and that this 'embracing-Something' originates neither from the unconscious nor the self, but from some unknown source. For Albrecht, the 'I' of the experiencing self is not the 'I' of ordinary consciousness but the 'I' of contemplative awareness. Thus, 'the arrival of a presence, an other, otherness,

² Cited in Harvey D. Egan, *What are they saying about mysticism?* New York 1982, 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

the not-I, an exclusive object in sharp contrast to the contemplative "I", characterizes the mystical experience. Encounter, communion, communication, dialogue, an entrusting to a non-subjective, hidden presence, predominate'.⁴

The 'contemplative consciousness', the condition of 'approaching' and the 'embracing-Something' constitute the elements of what Albrecht calls a mystical 'relation'. This mystical relation banishes all critical doubt and is irreducible to anything else. It is the bedrock of mystical experience. However, for Albrecht,

The contemplative consciousness may encounter filmstrip-like experience, intensified hidden feelings become manifest, metaphors, symbols, somatic attacks, self-understanding, and locutions. [...] [He] notes the qualitative difference of these 'arriving-Somethings' and emphasizes the importance of the mystical locutions. The underlying unity and possible union between the contemplative subject and the mystical object may incarnate itself in speech which is neither the actual mystic's self-expression nor only a signal of mystical presence. The mystical word expresses, incarnates, re-presents what is taking place between both.

[...] These primal mystical words [...] are always clear and pregnant with meaning, in contrast with other events taking place in the contemplative consciousness. The whole structure of the personality in its relation to mystery seems to speak out in an unmediated, perfectly exposed, holding-nothing-back way. Unlike thoughts which the 'I' frequently 'has', these mystical words are a total experience as knowing.⁵

Finally, the deeper the mystical experience the more integrative. This integration is a psychological indication of the difference between mystical auditions and schizophrenic ones that are disintegrative of the personality. Tomas Agosin aptly describes the negative and frightening experience of psychotic auditory hallucinations because 'they are projected, unacceptable thoughts that can no longer be kept buried in the unconscious. Or they are projected superego condemnations (reproaches of conscience) that attack the already beleaguered ego'.⁶ When psychotic in origin, these auditory hallucinations may also be aggressive and paranoid in content and demonstrate disruption of thought processes.

Karl Rahner also established criteria for genuine locutions.⁷ His theological sign of authenticity is their integrative or synthetic effect. These locutions do not injure the spiritual health of the visionary but contribute to their progress in

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶ Thomas Agosin, 'Psychosis, dreams, and mystical phenomenon in the clinical domain', in: Fredrica Halligan & John Shea (Eds.), *The fires of desire: Erotic energies and the spiritual quest*, New York 1992, 41-65, citation on 54. See this essay for further discriminations between mystical and psychotic states and their effects.

⁷ Karl Rahner, *Visions and prophecies*, New York 1979, 43.

virtue or piety. He describes their positive effects as 'a decisive transformation, a religious deepening of the person that comes with the experience and endures'.⁸ Rahner was also concerned with the trustworthiness of the content of locutions and gave greater importance to the experience of infused contemplation itself and to growth in faith, charity, and the virtues than to the words themselves. However, so long as nothing in the locution is offensive to faith and morals and the words foster spiritual development without increasing the person's self-importance, locutions may be accepted as long as they are referred to God and received in an attitude of humility, gratitude, and silence.⁹ Finally, although Rahner is more cautious about the obligation of third parties to accept the truth of someone else's locutions, he counsels that '...a spiritual director should give persons who experience locutions the 'respect due the spiritual life of sane and devout people'.¹⁰ Rahner proposes these communications received by prayerful people may, indeed, be caused by God. They may either be an overflow or echo of a deeper process in the contemplative experience and in that sense caused by God or the words themselves may not be directly caused by God but formed by the person's imagination or intellect.¹¹

Thus both contemporary and counter-Reformation writers acknowledge that these communications may originate in God, in the self, consciously or unconsciously, or in some other spiritual source either demonic or telepathic. Both Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross reject any locutions which seem to come from mental instability. Psychologists today would include in this group the voices of schizophrenics or those caused by dissociative states leading to external or internal aggression or personal disintegration.

A non-mystical phenomenological category of voices occurred in the interviews: insights, words, or messages that originate in the subject but that is not available in an ordinary state of waking consciousness. Thus, material emerging from dialogue techniques, communications made in a hypnotic state, or other intuitions. Such words may contain helpful psychological and spiritual information but have little significance mystically and differ markedly from the clearly mystical word. These communications should not be confused with the fully mystical experience affirmed by Albrecht and Rahner as well as by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross who describe 'substantial' or 'effective' locutions which immediately achieve what they say. Teresa of Avila, when she was feeling confused and afraid prior to any other visions, reported:

⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁹ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰ Ibid., 81.

¹¹ Ibid., 46, 56.

These words alone were enough [to] bring me complete quiet: 'Do not fear, daughter, for I am, and I will not abandon you: do not fear' [...] Behold by these words alone I was given calm together with fortitude, courage, security, quietude, and light so that in one moment I saw my soul become another.¹²

Features emerging from the interviews

Among those interviewed, four types of words were reported. Among these, several fit the classical criteria for genuine locutions which I will describe later. In keeping with the methodology of qualitative research, these four categories were derived from the content of the interviews themselves and not from the classical mystical literature. They are: words of consolation; extended dialogues; prophetic words, and God's song. Most interviewees, concerned about being judged odd or unbalanced, rather reluctantly reported words. The most frequently reported type of locution were words of consolation or guidance in the Ignatian sense.¹³

Within the category of consolation or guidance, the words reported by those interviewed were subdivided into four subcategories: 1) consolation related to vocation or increasing intimacy with God; 2) help resolving psychological distress; 3) protection; and 4) direct guidance. In these categories the most frequent responses were related to psychological distress¹⁴ and to call.¹⁵

Finally, other distinguishing features of hearing voices emerged in the interviews: 1) prophetic words; 2) an internal location of the word; 3) psychic

¹² Teresa of Avila, *The life of Teresa of Jesus: The autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila* (trans. E. Allison Peers), Garden City 1960, Ch. 25.18, p. 168.

¹³ *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola* (trans. Louis Puhl), Chicago 1951, #316, Rule 3.1 call it consolation when the soul is aroused by an interior movement which causes it to be inflamed with love for its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence can love no created thing on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of all things. It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears, moved by love for God, whether it be cause of sorrow for sins, or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason immediately directed to the service and praise of God. Finally, I call consolation every increase of faith, hope and love, and all interior joy which calls and attracts the soul to that which is of God and to salvation by filling it with tranquility and peace in its Creator and Lord.

¹⁴ Antoon Geels ('Chaos lives next to God: Religious visions and the integration of personality', in: *Studies in Spirituality* 2 [1992], 221-236) shows a strong correlation between life-crisis situations and visionary phenomena. John Shea shows that people who live within a faith tradition creatively interact with it in their personal crises or questions. An existential need pre-occupies the believer. A moment of perception/revelation breaks through consciousness in response to this crisis. The person integrates this new awareness in symbolic form (*Stories of faith*, Chicago 1980, 24-25).

¹⁵ Six and four persons, respectively.

quality; 4) words which accompanied a full trance state; 5) words emerging primarily from the subjects' psyche. The vast majority of these words occurred in the context of prayer although a few occurred at other times.¹⁶ Several interviewees reported hearing or sensing the words in their hearts or somewhere in the mid-section of their bodies. Only two described words or thoughts inside their heads.¹⁷ Two reported extended written dialogues within which words and communications emerged in prayer states of varying degrees of intensity and depth. Two reported hearing God sing a song in their hearts. Four were certain that their words came from themselves while praying but found these communications very meaningful. And one person reported hearing her name called in the midst of a hurricane which empowered her to transcend herself at that moment of danger. The illustrative examples provided below for each of the features frequently show a second or third feature in addition to the general categories based on content or function.

Words of consolation or guidance

Call/Vocation

Several interviewees mentioned words which specifically fostered an increasing intimacy with God or some unfolding of their call to relationship with God, usually Jesus. Often these words paraphrased the Scriptures, but were directly addressed to them. For instance, one woman reported:

I can say that I hear, maybe [...] not often, but voices do come. I can remember years ago when [...] B. went on the Cursillo first and I was [...] struggling with him when he came back because he didn't want to spoil my experience. [...] I was feeling a little threatened by what had happened to him. And I woke up one morning during that time and there was just this incredible light and it was my voice, the voice was mine but it wasn't mine. And it said, 'C. follow me'.¹⁸

She described these words were 'not long, but held deep meaning in the moment'. Another woman, a sister, was in the midst of a month long discernment:

¹⁶ Teresa of Avila also reports both contexts.

¹⁷ Scientists have discovered that hallucinatory Schizophrenic voices register as activity in the speech center of the brain rather than in the auditory centers. Reported by Daniel Goleman in *The New York Times*, September 22, 1993.

¹⁸ EC8. FM. The interviews are identified by EC for East Coast or WC for West Coast, the number = the sequence, the first F. or M. gender, and the last letter(s) state of life, married, divorced, religious.

...the end of August, I was [...] discerning my mission. [...] I felt called up on the mountains and I just sat there under a tree and I really called out to God, 'Here I am. Am I to go to mission at this age. Am I really called there?' And I felt the same type of power of God just coming to me there and really, I cried. I really cried and screamed, 'Here I am Lord' and I can feel Him say, 'Be not afraid'. 'Be not afraid'. 'Let Go'. And I made my decision there.¹⁹

The final illustration in this category was reported by a middle-aged man. Although he only heard one sentence of a passage from Scripture it was still affecting him five or six years later.

I had just done an exercise after reading...the New Testament [...] I was not protesting myself but I was sort of on my hands and knees really just bowing myself to the Lord. And I don't want to say [a] voice because [...] it didn't come from my mind, it came more from my inside [...] I would say gut feeling. But it was definite [...] I was so startled, I came to [my spiritual director] and said, you know, would you think I was crazy, would you believe? [...] And all I got was [...] 'Be like a little child'. Now I know the reading that's part of [...] I don't know where it came from, why it came. I've never been able to lose [it]. It comes back to me and back to me [...] From that time on my deepening relationship with the Lord became more available.²⁰

This event marked the beginning of affective prayer of discerning a call to become a permanent deacon after years on a police force.

Psychological distress

Several reported consoling or guiding words in the midst of psychological distress. For some the psychological states lasted for a considerable period of time, for others they were moments of exasperation or intense feelings. One woman was making a Novena about her marriage.

I was [...] at a point where [...] I needed to make a decision, I needed to know what to do. I began a novena, which is not my style of prayer [...] But two people [...] had gone out of their way to get a novena book for me. [...] so I began the [...] rosary novena [...] asking always for direction, for a sign. And [I] kept hearing a voice telling me that divorce was O.K., that I could do that. And I kept pushing that away, saying, you know, 'that can't be, it's not right [...] give me some other answer!' And every time I would [...] pray that novena, I would get that same voice. I did not act upon it at that time. But I do believe, in looking back on it, that I could have. And I do believe that [...] it obviously wasn't my wishful thinking because that wasn't the answer I wanted.²¹

¹⁹ WC8. FRel.

²⁰ EC3. M.M.

²¹ EC10. FM.

A very depressed woman recovering from brain surgery reported, 'I can remember on a retreat, I walked into the chapel. I knew it was empty, no-one was there, but I could hear the words. "It's good to be alive"'. Inside of me someone spoke. It was a real turning point'.²² She began to cope more effectively with her depression and with her disability so that she could resume her ministry.

Finally, another woman reported two experiences of varying levels of distress when she felt herself addressed by God after some kind of interior verbal challenge to God.

I was a director of religious education at the time [...] and [...] on a couple of days I didn't have a teacher for two grades. In the beginning I, I had taken them myself. But after awhile it was getting a little hard because I wasn't in the office and available to other people. So one day I walked into the chapel and I said, 'God, You don't give a damn, You don't care'. I said 'I've been in this place every Tuesday and Wednesday asking You. I need a teacher for these two grades'. And I said 'You haven't come through'. And honestly, and it was another one of those times when I laughed because I said I'm not gonna make it. And this voice within me said, 'Is there any Tuesday or Wednesday that you haven't been able to get through?'²³

Although these words could be interpreted as reproach, they do not have the harsh quality that would originate in the superego. Rather than being rigid, or excessively demanding, there is humor and freedom. This sister felt consoled and strengthened to cope with the unpredictability of her situation.

Visionary trance

The sister who discerned a missionary call also heard her name spoken in midst of a hurricane. There were no other words, but this incident was one of her most powerful experiences of God that empowered remarkable self-transcendence. There is a unique intensity and enduring quality when she is empowered in her crisis.

My whole life changed. I was in New Orleans, [...] when we had a very bad hurricane, Hurricane Betsy. It hit at a force of 150 mph winds and we were right in the front of the hurricane. There were five or six of us there and I was the superior. [We] got [...] absolutely no warning because the hurricane came in so fast [...] So we had to stay where we were. No one was moving out into the Church which was supposed to be a center for people [...] But it all changed because the Hurricane blew in so fast that the Red Cross did not have time to bring the people in. The Church was blown to pieces and we were in [a] little small room [...]

²² WC3. FRel.

²³ EC5. FRel.

and there were heavy benches. Everything was blown to pieces. I mean everything. Walls, windows, the whole bit. And there I was [...] just crying out to God, 'Please save us', crying and praying, 'God, please save us'. Something happened to me that night. I mean, all of a sudden in the middle of this wind and this terrible blast, I thought I felt my name being called. I pulled myself together and we were all frightened because the winds were terrible and we knew that something was blown to pieces in the Church. I pulled myself together and I felt [...] God. [...] I knew it was a voice beyond any other voice and I got some courage and I turned to the sisters and said, 'Jesus is in this tabernacle, present, really present. And we'd believed He was there and if we do, I'm opening this tabernacle and got up in the middle of all this wind and I opened the tabernacle and I said now, let's receive the Lord, take the Lord'. And each one of them came up in the middle of the wind shaking [...] And they went back and sat down just waiting for death and we prayed the prayers of the dying. We prayed, we gave ourselves over to God. And I was able to do all of this, and I couldn't believe what I was doing. [...] Something happened to me. I absolutely felt God's presence that night in that building and my life has never been the same since [...] I did things that night and following that night, that I never could do if I thought about it or had the courage to do [...] I was called out of myself. Out of ego, out of the fear, out [...] no one will ever tell me there's not a God. Since that time, I had never doubted because of that experience. The presence of God has been a power for me even in my darkest moments.²⁴

Protection

The woman who made the Rosary Novena also received a communication that came out of the blue and protected her from danger.

For a long time, I had experiences where I had felt, heard, sensed, a communication of thoughts that came to me, that I knew weren't my thoughts. Not that I'd hear voices, but it's almost like an internal voice that I hear, that I know isn't mine. [...] One time when I missed being in a very serious accident. [...] The whole day had kept me back, and I kept making up time and then something else would happen on the journey back, but I kept making it up, until finally, I was driving to N.Y., I got [...] so sleepy, I had to stop, and get coffee. When [...] I was still in the restaurant, I heard a voice saying: 'There has been a really serious accident, and you have been saved from it by being here' [...] and I got in the car and drove on, and within a few miles, came upon what looked to have been a very serious accident.²⁵

²⁴ WC8. FRel.

²⁵ EC10. FM.

Psychic quality

Another woman who received words of guidance also reported being guided by similar intuitive and uncanny events.²⁶ She was led to purchase a music stand also out of the blue. After she bought the music stand, she began to sing again. This singing became a regular feature of her contemplative process.

Prophetic words

Two interviewees received prophetic words. Both understood the communication was meant for a particular community. The sister whose emerging words expressed her desire to live also received prophetic insight for her religious community. She had prior experience in a charismatic prayer group. The woman whose mystical interludes were initiated by the experience of buying the music stand also on one occasion received words of guidance for her parish community. She was reluctant to act on them but after careful discernment with her pastor shared some portion of her mystical experience related to the parish's call to evangelization.

Extended dialogues

The majority of those who received words sensed them internally and reported brief, single sentence communications. There were three women who carried on extended dialogues in their prayer, two in a written form. One expressed enormous relief when she heard a spiritual director describe conversations with an unseen, but felt interlocutor. This description freed her to talk about her lifelong experience without fear in an individually directed retreat. The other two women, a single mother and a sister reported several months or years in which they wrote dialogues as part of their prayer. Both described initially writing their own thoughts and feelings. At some point, they would enter a meditative state and then write what emerged in their awareness of God. One described experiences of all three persons of the trinity at one time or another, while the other was more consistently communicating with Jesus. For one of the women, after almost three years of a deepening intimacy with Jesus through written dialogues, they ended and she was feeling the loss of this mediation. She described:

²⁶ WC4. FM.

[I would] sit down, spending hours writing my thoughts to God [I would] pick up the odd information that struck me about a day or a week and start to find a pattern in it, reflect on that, and [...] take that back into prayer and very frequently the way God and I were with each other was that God simply answered back in the same form. I have notebooks and notebooks of long conversations with God. [...] Sometimes just being with each other, sometimes laughing, sometimes I was being instructed in certain things and a lot of it just pouring my heart out. [...] Often if I hit a very intense place that would move me, I'd simply stop writing go into prayer and often not realize how deeply in prayer I was until I surfaced again and then [went] back to the writing to talk with God at this other level about where we had just been. It was not automatic writing [...] when the answers came back. It was a very slow and conscious experience where I was hearing what was being said. Inside. Very clearly, just like writing a conversation down.... And sometimes it wasn't words. It was an impression [...] some other knowing and I would hesitate. And I would struggle, for I'd had an inner experience and I'd be struggling for the word. [...] And sometimes stop and check and say have we got it? At other times [...] I'd be very unsure. I wasn't sure they weren't just dark spirits sneaking in and I'd stop and just say I only want you. I don't want the thrill of this. I just want this to be us. [O]ften if we were talking in that way the prayer experience would be silent and no images.²⁷

This narrative shows the interviewee's ability to discern among different experiences in prayer. Her prayer was deeply intimate and she was careful to renew her intention of being with God rather than being deluded or distracted by fascination with the process itself. There are also indications that the writing was frequently not the experience itself but an expression or overflow of something that was happening at a deeper level.

Soul singing

Two women also described either their souls singing to God or hearing God sing a song in their souls. The woman above who was adjusting to the end of her dialogues was gradually becoming aware of a new experience of her soul being tuned into God. She would become aware:

that unconsciously all the time I'm working, something inside me is going on in words. It's usually music, a scripture text with that. And when I would stop and tune in, it wouldn't be at the beginning of it. It had been going on before I tuned in and would continue afterward. [...] I recognized that and realized that the prayer went on no matter what and that my soul kind of sang to God no matter

²⁷ WC11. EDiv.

what and [I] wept to realize that I was sustained in that contact with God when I had the least notion [of God]. It was like deliverance and a gratitude for me. [...] I didn't know where I was with God because at the time I was so damn mad I couldn't see straight, frankly. I thanked my own soul for doing her work.²⁸

A sister acknowledged: 'God sings a love song in my heart some times. [...] It's not my ears, it's in my heart'.²⁹ She was relieved that she 'was not nuts', and described that sometimes it was only a melody, sometimes it had words, but neither the words nor the melody were familiar. Two classical precedents, Brother Lawrence and Walter Hilton,³⁰ describe something similar. Brother Lawrence observes that 'if we knew what our souls said to God, when we weren't aware of it, we would be surprised'.³¹

Both women clearly experience consolation that comes as internal music and feelings, with or without words; both express delight, gratitude, and wonder; both were somewhat perplexed about them. This experience seems to be related to the jubilus, spontaneous songs or sounds of praise in mystical states, described by the nuns of Hefta and the beguines although neither woman was influenced by these historical precedents.

Words emerging from the psyche

Finally, four of the interviewees clearly were aware that their 'words' came from themselves while praying. Everyone in the sample characteristically experienced visualizations. They were more comfortable with visual imagery than with auditory experiences, which were simply an auditory vision of the same type as their more acceptable visual ones. Respondents were not questioned about words they may have heard which accompanied visions unless they volunteered them. Most took such words for granted. Some of those who mentioned them explicitly were somewhat perplexed

²⁸ WC11. FDiv.

²⁹ EC6. FRel.

³⁰ 'Some people feel what seems like a heavenly sound, or some sort of sweet sound, in their hearts; this can sometimes be good but can sometimes be deceptive. It happens like this: they set their hearts to think only of the name of Jesus, hold their thoughts constantly on this, and in due course the name becomes a source of comfort and peace, so that they think they can "hear" the name playing sweet music in their hearts. [...] If they are really hearing this sound and feeling this peace in their hearts, then this is a good thing and comes from God, and you can be sure that as long as they remain humble, they will not be deceived. This is not the divine harmony, but the soul rejoicing through the offices of the good spirit'. Walter Hilton, 'A letter to a friend on hearing the song of angels', in: John Griffiths (Ed.), *The call of self-knowledge: Seven early English mystical treatises*, New York 1981, 57-58.

³¹ Cited by Gerald May, *The awakened heart: Living beyond addiction*, San Francisco 1991, 54.

about them. The first examples from WC3 and EC5 illustrate this type of words. George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan makes a similar assumption in this dialogue:

Robert: How do you mean? Voices?

Joan: I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God.

Robert: They come from your imagination.

Joan: Of course, that is how the message of God comes to us.³²

In the contemporary context, discerning whether these voices are a result of people's mystical union with God or mediated through their imaginations is not particularly significant. The tradition of discernment of spirits in relationship to this kind of phenomenon suggests that it is not entirely necessary to determine the origin of such consolations, words, or inspirations. It is important that the person receiving them respond appropriately when they lead the person to greater faith, hope, and love, to deeper intimacy with God, and to greater vocational clarity. In Ignatian discernment, one pays attention to consolations, in this case locutions, when they have positive long-term effects without becoming distracted by them or attached to them. If they deepen or expand one's experience or response to God, they should be entertained. As long as hearing voices does not lead to greater self-centeredness, exaggerated self-importance, destructive behavior, nor to psychological fragmentation but instead, result in gratitude, awe, constructive action and humility, they can be interpreted in relationship to religious experience and the mystical tradition. In virtually all the accounts in my interviews, the locutions tend toward psychological integration, spiritual growth, and strength or encouragement for living a life of increasing intimacy with God or in overcoming obstacles related to their mission. Those reporting locutions are already skeptical and reflective about them. They are aware that their words could as easily embody their own wishful thinking, unconscious, or unacceptable desires as much as they could be the overflow of their communion or union with God. In today's psychological climate, there may be less fear of exaggerating the importance of these experiences and perhaps a greater tendency to fear or ignore them rather than receive them as one mode of mediated experiences of God or of communication with less conscious aspects of ourselves.

Discernment of locutions

Because Teresa of Avila was both helped by her locutions and aware of their complexity and counterfeits, I believe she remains a helpful guide combined with Ignatius for us today. Teresa treats this phenomenon in both *The Interior Castle* and *The Life*. Throughout *The Life*, she describes her experience and offers signs by

³² George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan*, New York 1925, 16.

which to recognize when locutions originate in God, in the devil and in oneself³³ Teresa believed many prayerful people experienced this phenomenon. In general, she advises rejecting them if they have any doubts. If people manifest signs of mental instability,³⁴ she advises they should ignore these words and treat them as part of their illness. Further, she is suspicious of prideful inflation and affirms their value if they help those who receive them. Finally, she counsels ignoring anything not harmonious with Scripture or contrary to a confessor's advice. She trusts God to change the confessor's mind if the person is, indeed, to act on these words.³⁵

Teresa developed criteria that convinced her when locutions originated in God. She asserts that once a person has experienced a truly mystical locution, she or he can never be confused between these mystical words and words originating in one's own imagination or wishful thinking.³⁶ The surest sign they come from God is their power and authority. These words effect immediately what they say. The second sign is their effect: 'the great quiet... the devout and peaceful recollection, the readiness to engage in the praises of God'.³⁷ Third, the word is remembered a long time and some are never forgotten. They are accompanied by a certitude that what seems impossible to them they can accomplish. The consoling conviction lasts as long as needed to fully empower the person to act. Teresa reports that eventually the words are fulfilled in fact.

Teresa, herself, benefited greatly from the locutions she received. She described locutions that occurred with visions and helped her understand the deep graces she was being given. She was particularly guided in her many foundations by concrete information and directives that reassured her when she became uncertain.³⁸

³³ *The life* Chapter 25. In *Interior castle* she recapitulates her teaching from *The life* and adopts a more cautious attitude (VI. 3.1ff), 370-385. *The collected works of Teresa of Avila*. Vol. 2 (trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez), Washington, DC 1980.

³⁴ 'persons with a weak imagination or in those [...] who suffer noticeably from melancholy', *Castle VI*. 3.1, 370.

³⁵ This consultation with a confessor should always occur if the locution concerned business affairs or involved a third party.

³⁶ Locutions which originate in oneself are aptly described by Teresa. They have none of the signs described above. One knows the difference between when one is composing and speaking. These words do not produce any noticeable effect, they do not rivet attention, and one is often distrustful of them. If consolation comes with them, they are extremely short-lived and evaporate quickly especially in the face of required action. *Castle VI* 3.10, 374.

³⁷ *Castle VI*. 3.6, 373.

³⁸ John of the Cross is far less positive about this phenomenon and preferred to pay little attention to them. He considered locutions to be an obstacle to mature spiritual development in good people. He warned against sincere people becoming so involved with experiences of God that it easily distracted them from the interior contemplation transpiring in the soul. In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chapters 17-22, and 28-31 he gives extensive counsel. John's aim is to guide people as rapidly and directly as possible to union with God and so he recommends leaving behind all natural and supernatural apprehensions.

Teresa relied more on locutions than did John of the Cross who remained suspicious of them except when they clearly originated in God. Although she recognized they were not always from God, she was more willing to make discriminations about this phenomenon. She, like many women mystics, was more dependent on 'The Living Book' that Jesus promised to be for her than was John. She needed the guidance her visions and locutions offered because she was deprived of theological education and the spiritual books that fostered her development. Teresa recounts that her locutions empowered action. They not only resulted in humility but in courage and the capacity to trust God in the midst of complex circumstances.

The interviews revealed the entire range of auditory phenomena. The respondents were often aware that words originated with themselves but also often judged that the words they heard were the effect of grace. They served a useful and limited role of illumination, guidance, and resolution of conflict and crisis. At times, they empowered remarkable self-transcendence. At other times, they were simply markers that indicated growth and psychological healing. Although they could lead to a sense of self-importance or an attachment distracting the respondents from focusing on God, that was not very evident within this group committed to spiritual life. Among the specific words of illumination or reassurance, the respondents tended to remember those that were meaningful and illuminating for a particular phase of their spiritual journey. Ordinarily they were less interested or absorbed in the words they heard unless they led to a

He classifies locutions as successive, formal, and substantial. Successive locutions are the words that the spirit receives under the influence of the Holy Spirit. But John warns that it is easy to confuse the delicate communication of the Spirit with one's own composition. These words can be full of error. Because people can become preoccupied with their desire for locutions and become attached to them, he considers them to be obstacles to union (*Ascent II*, 28-29). He does give guidance for discernment but thinks it is easy to become confused in the discernment. If this experience is from God, he expects the person will simultaneously love God and receiving this love with humility and reverence. He is suspicious if there is no accompanying virtue. However, he acknowledges that sometimes the manifestations of virtue or of consolation are so subtle, they may not be entirely apparent. Thus, he concludes *Ascent II*. 29. #12 to avoid any delusion, 'We should pay no heed to them'. Formal locutions are produced supernaturally but without the use of the senses nor do they occur during recollection. They don't originate in the person and may offer guidance or teach something, but otherwise have little effect. Again John counsels to pay no attention to them (*Ascent II*. 30). Substantial locutions are produced by God and effect what they say, therefore, the soul has nothing to do, neither to desire them nor reject them. These John recognizes 'are important and valuable because of the live virtue, and incomparable blessings they impart to the soul' (*Ascent II*. 31). Because the effects of these locutions are clear there is nothing to fear from them in terms of deceit. Consequently, they are a great aid to union with God. *The collected works of St. John of the Cross* (trans. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez), Washington, DC 1991.

qualitatively more adequate relationship with God. When that was the case, they remained a continuing consolation for them. Given contemporary suspicion and fear of locutions, it seems important to be able both to take into account clinical caution from psychological criteria and the classical criteria for discernment of spirits both from Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila in relationship to this phenomenon. The narratives of contemporary people in this very small sample remarkably reveal that hearing voices led them to reflective and critical attempts to engage in such discernment.