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God put a thought into my mind: the charismatic Christian experience of receiving communications from God

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The agentic aspects of communicative religious experiences remain somewhat neglected in the social sciences literature. There is a need for phenomenological descriptions of these experiences and the ways in which they differ from culturally defined psychopathological states. In this semi-structured interview study, eight congregants attending an evangelical church in London were asked to describe their experiences of God communicating with them. Communications from God were related to current events rather than to the prediction of future events. These communications were received as thoughts and do not generally reveal metaphysical insights, but rather they relate to the mundane world. They provided direction, consolation and empowerment in the lives of those receiving them. Individuals recounted that on occasion God sometimes speaks audibly, or accompanied by supernatural phenomena, but in the vast majority of cases, the way God speaks is through thoughts or impressions. In all instances, agency is maintained, individuals can choose to obey the thoughts/voices or not. The findings are discussed in relation to externalisation of agency and the phenomenon of thought insertion in schizophrenia.

Keywords: god; thought; mind

Introduction

The sheep follow him because they know his voice. John 10:4b NRSV

As the controversial psychiatrist Szasz (1979, p. 101) quipped: “If you talk to God, you are praying; If God talks to you, you have schizophrenia. If the dead talk to you, you are a spiritualist; If you talk to the dead, you are a schizophrenic”. While mental health professionals have a long tradition of pathologising religious experience (Johnson & Friedman, 2008), it appears that things are slowly changing. The recent DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) states:

The judgement that a given behaviour is abnormal and requires clinical attention depends on cultural norms that are internalised by the individual and applied by others around them, including family members and clinicians. Awareness of the significance of culture may correct mistaken interpretations of psychopathology ... (p. 14)

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Like the early DSM –IV-TR , DSM-5 includes a V Code, 62.89, religious or spiritual problem. However, it also provides an expanded understanding of culture and the impact of culture in diagnosis.

Dein (2010) notes that we lack detailed phenomenological accounts of religious experiences involving communication with God and their differences from culturally defined psychopathological states. In this respect, the current paper examines how a group of Evangelical Christians in London perceive God to be communicating with them through the insertion of thoughts into congregants' minds. It builds upon recent work on hearing God's voice among Christians which suggests that hearing God is normative in some groups and that these voices differ phenomenologically from those found in schizophrenia (Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2012).

Communicating with God in Christianity

Belief in God does not necessarily require an expectation that God will communicate with human beings in any way, and Deism provides a framework within which God might be understood to have created the universe and then left it to its own devices. However, even Deists would argue that the natural order of creation tells us something about God, that we can deduce from the way things are what God is like, and thus that the world around us communicates something of the divine nature. Generally, people who believe in God believe more than this. They understand God (or gods) as having communicated with us in scripture, in history, in the natural order, through other people, and in a variety of experiences that might be more or less personal. These communications are not necessarily verbal. In some Christian traditions, for example, silence is understood as a particularly important place of encounter with the Divine, although what happens in the silence is often later translated into words.

In the broader context of the idea that God communicates with human beings, the concept of prophecy occupies a place of particular importance. It would seem that, from around the 5th Century BCE, in the Classical world, prophecy was understood as the “speaking forth” or “proclamation” or interpretation of the message of the deity to human beings, although later a particular emphasis seems to have arisen in relation to divine messages dealing with future events – predictions of the future (Wilson, 1980, pp. 22–23). In the Hebrew tradition, prophecy of an ecstatic kind seems to have been generally distinguished from the role of the seer and messenger, and so a much richer vocabulary pertained. All of this has subsequently influenced the Christian tradition.

For Christians, there is a particular emphasis on the way in which God has communicated with the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but the Holy Spirit is also understood as inspiring, empowering and communicating with people in a variety of ways, including prophecy. In certain Christian traditions, such as Pentecostalism and the ecumenical charismatic movement, this experienced and ongoing work of the Holy Spirit is particularly emphasised. Thus, for example, in relation to a Pentecostal movement known as “Blood-n-Fire”, emerging in poor communities in the southern USA, Poloma and Hood (Paloma & Hood, 2008, pp. 105–108) have observed that prophecy may take a variety of forms, for example including personal “words of knowledge” given to an individual, interpretation of “tongues” (glossolalia) spoken by another person, or inspired preaching. Prophecy in these churches (and more widely in the Christian tradition) tends to emphasise more than a personal experience – it is a corporate experience that has meaning only when shared with the wider community. However, this wider sharing is socially sanctioned – in this case, by the founder David VanCronkhite. Prophecy, then, has to be both tested (or sanctioned) as authentic, and also proclaimed to a community.

Poloma and Lee (2013) suggest that, within American Pentecostalism, prophecy “consists in hearing from God and then speaking and acting on God’s behalf as a result of the prompting of the Holy Spirit” (p. 83). The question arises, then, as to exactly how this process of “hearing from God” is experienced, although it is important to note that this alone is not prophecy. The received communication from God becomes prophecy only when it results in speaking or acting according to the message received.

Recently, an international team of social scientists have examined perceived experiences of God and their effect on human benevolence (Lee & Poloma, 2009; Lee, Poloma, & Post, 2013; Lee & Young, 2012; Poloma & Green, 2010; Poloma & Hood, 2008). Lee et al. (2013), in their study of 1208 American adults (religious and non-religious), found that experiences of interpersonal interaction with God were surprisingly common. These included: sensing a divine call to perform a specific act, experiencing God “providing direction to do something through another person”; “giving a word from God to another person”; and receiving “revelations directly from God”.

In relation to religious voices, Dein and Littlewood (2007) studied Pentecostal Christians in London using phenomenologically based interviews. They found that God’s voice was supportive and comforting; the experience occurred at times of stress. In some instances, individuals did not hear an external voice; rather, they felt that God had placed a thought in their mind. Luhrmann (2012) conducted fieldwork among members of the Vineyard Church in the USA, focussing upon the experience of “unnatural phenomena” – voices, visions and sensations of people who were not there, addressing the question how seemingly rational, otherwise normal people claim to discern God’s will, to hear God’s voice, and, sometimes, to even see or feel spiritual beings? Such experiences were commonplace in the congregation she studied.

In both these studies, the experience of hearing God’s voice “out loud” was occasional, not disturbing, and subjects were not compelled to obey God with the person having complete control over their choices. This is to be contrasted with the voices in schizophrenia, which are usually heard “out loud” and where the individual often feels compelled to obey them.

In an often-quoted paper, Stark (1965) described a taxonomy of religious experiences ranging from the confirmatory (feelings of awe or reverence associated with a sudden “knowing” that one’s beliefs are true), through the responsive (awareness of the presence of the divinity and a feeling that the divine has taken note of the individual) and ecstatic (including elements of the former types associated with various states of bodily excitement such as shaking) to the most extreme experience, termed “revelational”, consisting of visions and voices:

The fourth, and least common, type of religious experience is the revelational. Here the divine has not only taken the person to his bosom, but into his confidence. The recipient is given a message concerning divine wishes or intentions. Upon occasion the divine may give such messages through signs or symbols, and some men have even claimed the divinity sent them written messages, but typically revelations are spoken. This raises the issue of visions and voices as characteristics of religious experiences, which we have postponed until now. (p. 107)

Stark’s fourth type of religious experience occurs less frequently than the first three types and then in those (generally) who have also had experiences of these other types.

For Stark (1999), revelations, communications from the divine, are merely the most intense and intimate form of religious or mystical experiences. However, 40 years earlier, Glock (1959) had defined all religious experience as pertaining to “those feelings, perceptions and sensations which are experienced by an actor or defined by a religious group or a society as involving some communication, however slight, with a divine essence, that is, with God, with ultimate reality, with transcendental authority” (pp. 26–27).

Revelations, as defined by Stark (1999), are significant in that they play a significant role in the development of new religious forms. Stark (1999) describes the role of revelations in the development of Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Mormonism and postulates that these experiences occur in a number of contexts. First, they tend to occur when there exists a supportive cultural tradition of communications with the divine and furthermore the recipient of the revelation has direct contact with a role model who has experienced a revelation. Second, many common, ordinary, even mundane experiences can be interpreted as divine communication. Third, most episodes of revelation will confirm the existing religious culture; it is rare that some creative individuals receive material that is so culturally impressive that it is worthy of attribution to divine sources. Fourth, validation of the revelation necessitates social support; an individual's confidence in the validity of his/her revelation is reinforced to the extent to which others accept this revelation. Finally, revelations are most likely to occur during times of social crisis (see also Littlewood, 2006).

This study focuses upon the phenomenology of the reported experience of receiving communications from God among a group of charismatic Christians in the UK and attempts to answer the following questions. How do Christian individuals in this church receive communications from God?; How do they assess whether the communications come from God and how do they confirm this?

Method

The setting

The study was conducted in a charismatic evangelical Anglican church in East London originally founded in 1874. The congregation is about 650 on most Sundays, in four separate services of widely differing styles and comprises about 40/60 male/female. The ethnic mix is now representative of the local area, mainly white British but increasingly non-White British also: at the recent welcome receptions, 75% of the people attending have been non-white. The only midweek service is a simple communion on Wednesday mornings, and there are between 35 and 40 small groups meeting weekly. Activities are run for all ages and stages, with often five or six activities taking place at the same time.

A central theme of this church is that members have a personal relationship with God and as part of this, they expect that God will regularly communicate with them. Receiving charismatic gifts is an important part of the religious life of the community and includes speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing. The theological stance is inaugurated eschatology – the kingdom of God was begun at the first coming of Jesus and is now here, but it is not yet fully consummated because that does not occur until his second coming (a tension between the “now” and “not yet”). During the weekly sermons, the worship leader asks if those who have received any communications from God would come to the front to share them with the rest of the congregation. On one occasion, several people reported dreams of “barbed wire” and “walls”. This was interpreted by the worship leader as the fact that we need to break down boundaries, both between Jew and Gentile (as in Palestine) but also between individuals and Christ.

Following ethical approval from University College, London, interviewees were selected by the vicar on the basis of his previous acquaintance with them and his knowledge that they were not mentally ill. They were subsequently approached by the researcher (SD) and provided with information about the project. Following ethical consent, participants were interviewed for up to an hour focusing on a number of topics (see [Appendix](#)). Questions were identified and constructed based upon issues identified from a reading of the extant literature. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The transcripts were read and re-read to look for emerging themes.

Participants

Subjects included in the study (whose names have been changed) were:

Andrew is a 59-year-old minister originally from Leeds. He has been a Christian for about 23 years. While at college he started to question his life. At that time, he was studying for a degree in sociology. He met several Christians there. He started to read Frank Morrison's book *Who Moved the Stone?* For him, this was a good proof the resurrection. He also read a book by John Stott called *Basic Christianity* and he began to feel that the Holy Spirit was communicating with him. His life changed. He started acknowledging that he had a relationship with God. He maintains that scripture contains everything that needs to be understood about God and that God has directed him in his life.

Henrietta is a 33-year-old medical student. She has been a Christian all of her life, although her relationship with God really developed from the age of 21, following an experience at a house group meeting in New York. She said in her mind "God I'm turning back to you". A man in the group said "God is welcoming you back".

Mark, 49 years of age, is a businessman who has been a practising Christian for the past 24 years. He first attended church after meeting a woman in a pub who invited him to a local service, and shortly afterwards, he became a Christian. He was originally brought up as an agnostic. He describes himself in the past as going through a spiritual quest in the 1960s. As a young man, he mixed with Zen and also took some cannabis which resulted in developing some paranoia and also saw the "dark side of spirituality". He used to think about archetypes and read Jung, but feels that this does not explain his religious experiences. He came to Christianity to be rescued and felt a sense of emptiness. For him, Christianity is a relationship with God. He is following God's laws. He does not see God's laws as being prohibiting in any way, but more as a way of making us happy. He now works teaching Alpha courses in a London prison.

Martin: A 33-year-old man who is a vicar of a local church. He came to theology after studying sciences at London University.

Mary is a 45-year-old lady living in East London. She has two children. She described a very tragic childhood where her parents lost three children, two of whom were stillborn. She recounted that despite the fact that the family experienced tragedy both of her parents were devout Christians and never lost their faith.

Monica is a 58-year-old, retired nurse. She has been a Christian since the age of 11.

Naomi: A 26-year-old woman who has been a Christian since a very young age. She first began to experience God in her life at the age of 15 while at a worshipping event. Alongside other members of her church group, she suddenly experienced God as real. She cried inconsolably and thought to herself "I've really connected with this person". She emphasised that during the service, a lot of stuff was released. People said that she should be prayed for and she felt a strong sense of peace. This was the start of a new journey for her. She subsequently became a worship leader.

Ruth: A 52-year-old accountant, who has lived in many countries including South Africa, South America, Peru, Brazil, Africa, Mozambique and Uganda. Her father worked for the United Nations. She says she became a Christian at the age of three although her parents were humanists. When her older sister prayed with her, she began to ask questions about Jesus. She has been a practising Christian since this time and goes regularly to services in a church in East London.

Results

A number of significant themes were identified in the transcripts. In particular, it was noted that God's communications:

- (1) Were usually received through *thoughts within the mind*, rather than as an audible voice in external space;
- (2) Were usually concerned with *mundane matters concerning present life* [circumstances] rather than metaphysical insights, or future events;
- (3) Provide *reassurance*;
- (4) Are subject to a process of *discernment* to be exercised by the recipient.

Thoughts within the mind

The great majority of communications experienced to be from God concerned thoughts or feelings, rather than perceptual experiences.

Martin reported communicative experiences which he attributed to God on several occasions as a distinct thought rather than as an audible voice. In one instance, while speaking to a distressed friend, he suddenly received a thought that this friend was troubled by homosexual urges. "I had never thought that this friend was gay, the thought was illogical and there was no reason for me to be thinking this". But the thought was intense and very clear. He did not directly ask his friend about these homosexual urges, rather he kept quiet and after several minutes his friend started to speak about this. *Martin* maintained that, while generally he was not a good listener, on this occasion, God had directed him to listen and facilitate his friend's disclosure.

When *Naomi* prays she feels as if her head is in a "higher plane". She has heard God numerous times. She had studied theology, music and worship at college, but had not completed the course. A year later, her husband was driving her to a party when she heard God say to her "see you can go back to college in September". This came out of the blue and was a "strong thought" rather than an audible voice. She was very surprised by this, but she subsequently did go back and found this very worthwhile. Like some of the other informants, *Naomi* reports thoughts coming into her head abruptly reinforcing the sense of divine intervention.

Ruth has had numerous occasions where God "speaks" to her. This is usually not as an audible voice, but more as a thought. She first had this experience when she was eight years old. She was at school when a girl whom she did not like was speaking to her. *Ruth* thought she could manipulate her by complimenting her but knew she was not being honest. The girl fell for this and invited her to a party. Shortly afterwards, *Ruth* relates, God said to her "you should never do this". She wanted to run away and said "God I don't want to speak about this". God, however, said "we do need to talk about this". She felt very ashamed but *Ruth* says that God assured her that he would not tell anyone about this. She says that God told her to say sorry to the girl concerned and that when she apologised God told her that she was forgiven.

According to *Ruth*, God does not usually communicate through an audible voice, but more often God interrupts the train of thought she is having. When God does this, it is like talking to someone she knows very well. There is a sense of urgency, not that she has to do anything very quickly, but rather that God has something very important to tell her: "It's like God really wants to communicate with me". These experiences are very unpredictable. She emphasised that God speaks with a sense of certainty, but he is not dictatorial. She trusts God to tell her what to do.

Ruth tells of one experience when she heard God aloud. She was on retreat and felt very tired and she did not want to read the bible. She experienced the voice of Jesus saying "I will come back as a thief in the night" (cf. Matthew 24:43). She took this to mean that God was not particularly perturbed by this but, in the future, she must read the Bible more faithfully.

Ruth also related a significant "prophetic experience". When she was on a mission camp in Malawi she met a man, Richard, who she found was quite "psychopathic". One day, they were together driving in the car and Richard asked what she thought of him. She told him quite

openly “you’re manipulative”; she did not like him at all. Initially, he was very grateful that she was so open with him. However, the following day, he was extremely angry, shouting at her saying that she had made things up about him which she had never said. She in turn became angry and said to God “Why do I always meet psychopaths?” She asked God why this happened. God said (as an audible thought) “Did you ask me before you told him what you thought of him? I love him”. She was suddenly overcome with a sense of love, like love for her five-year-old child.

Mary remembers vividly when she was 13 looking after her baby sister who was 5 and suffered from diabetes. Her parents went out one evening and the little girl was in the bath. As she walked up to the door to go into the bathroom she had a vision (of a kind that was more like a thought, and not hallucinatory) of the girl floating in water. Sure enough, when she opened the door, she found that the girl had drowned. She had never really been able to come to terms with this and she shut it out. It was only many years later when she met another Christian who prayed for the chronic pain in her neck that she had another vision of her sister and felt that the pain was healed from the experience.

Mary reported several instances of hearing God in her thoughts. As a child, she was concerned that after looking directly at an eclipse of the sun she would go blind. She prayed to God for many nights that she would not go blind. On one occasion, she heard a “voice” (her thought) in her mind saying “You will not go blind”. On another occasion, while she was engaged to her future husband Alex, God told her that they should be together for the kingdom of God. She says that she heard this as a thought in her mind internally, not externally.

Henrietta has had a lot of experiences which she calls “words of knowledge” (or “words of wisdom”: 1 Corinthians 12:8) whereby God puts thoughts into her mind. She says that before receiving her first “words of wisdom”, she was quite a rebellious and moody girl. Her mother noticed that she was now much calmer and asked how this had happened. She recounted an example when she was speaking to another woman in a church meeting and she suddenly had a thought about a disappointment. She fed back the word “disappointment”, and asked “Does this mean anything to you?” The woman said “Yes, I’m experiencing disappointment in my life”. Experiences like this can occur during prayer or as part of ordinary conversations.

Henrietta says that God has also communicated with her in other ways. She receives “words” through scripture, for example a specific proverb might “light up” and illustrate a point for her. Also, she has images in her mind: For instance, she had an image of someone frantically going down a hill on a bike. She shared this with someone (thus making this a prophetic utterance) who said “I’m feeling like that at the very moment”. When she experiences these thoughts, she has a sense of joy. They confirm, for her, that it is the Holy Spirit who is communicating with her.

Mundane matters concerning present life circumstances

Communications were generally concerned with present rather than future affairs, and were about practical, mundane and matters rather than abstract, philosophical or doctrinal concerns. For example, *Henrietta* said that the thoughts that she receives from God are about the present rather than about the future.

Naomi stated in relation to naming her child:

I had been married to my husband Steve for several years. We have a young baby who is now six months old. While courting we had a brief period of separation when I felt I was not prioritising God and thought this was necessary. When we married, I asked God for a boy. Steve and I went away to Wales to a spiritual place called Ffald y Brenin. I prayed to ask God which name to go for. I told God I liked the name Mark. My head “suddenly felt open”. God had previously told me that it was up to the parents to name the child. I saw an image of God reclining in a chair with a baby in his arms and God said Mark was a lovely name. Also, during this time, my

husband Steve had been praying. He too received a communication from God saying Mark was a good name.

Andrew says that on several occasions he received what he describes as an “inner sense to move on”. In 1992, during Bible study at a New Wine conference, he suddenly fell onto his knees. He felt God was communicating and heard an inner voice which said “you are limiting what I want you to do”. This meant to him that he should not stay in Yorkshire, his then home. While there he heard a prophetic utterance from a man whom he knew to be a valid prophet say “go to Chelmsford”. He told me that he is free to obey God or not. God is the God of love and does not punish if he does not obey. He now works as an associate minister in Woodford. He has never directly heard the voice of God as an audible external voice.

Martin described an unusual experience where he strongly maintained God was communicating with him. Shortly after his arrival in his first position as curate, he began to feel disheartened; it was not the right church for him and he had a strong desire to leave. He awoke one morning with the unshakeable conviction that he would become the vicar of this church. For him, this conviction was “like I know my middle name” (i.e., he was certain he was right). Initially, he felt he would go off for 20 years and return to this church. Furthermore, when he received this communication he was only 27 years old, too young to be a vicar and there were other candidates much older and more experienced than him. Shortly after the revelation, other people came up to him stating that they had dreamed that he would become the vicar or had felt this without knowing about his revelation. Sure enough, a few months later he was appointed the vicar of this church.

Reassurance

Informants frequently stated that God provided reassurance through communicating with them. The following examples illustrate various ways in which this may happen, some of which are more through (verbal) thoughts and some more through emotions.

Naomi recounted an instance when she attended a prayer ministry mainly attended by homeless people. She was praying for a woman in distress. She did not know what to pray for and asked God. She looked at the woman’s name badge. God said to her (as a thought) this is not her real name. Naomi asked the woman whether it was her real name and she said “no”. The woman started to cry. She lay on the floor. Naomi said to her “can you tell me what is going on”? This woman had been sexually abused by her relatives. When her grandmother found out, she drowned herself. She was very distressed by this experience. Naomi believes that God said to her that the grandmother’s death was not her fault. Naomi describes this information as a “blob of knowing or the faintest touch of butterfly wings”.

Martin reported a communication directed towards himself which provided reassurance. The church needed some building work to be done, but this proved to be very expensive. The issue caused Martin a lot of anxiety. When he was away from the church on an “away day”, a woman whom he had never met before and was unaware of the financial issues in Martin’s church reported that God had suddenly communicated to her that money would be available for the rebuilding of the church. Martin commented:

The actual situation was that I was away from my church at a training event – the woman didn’t know me or my situation so this was a complete leap of faith for her to suggest this, coupled with the timing (I had only been given the project total target on the evening before)

This allayed Martin’s doubts and shortly afterwards the money was found to conduct the repairs. Martin stated: “The fact that she mentioned the financial issues not only made me feel better but also reassured me that this was a genuine communication from God”.

Mark says that God does not communicate with him through an audible voice, but rather through reading scripture or by purely mundane circumstances such as seeing “signs” on vehicles. If he has any experience of communication, he confirms this through scripture. He said he feels peace because he knows God is communicating with him. He is continually in communion with Jesus who he feels is “love”. God has communicated specifically on a number of occasions. For instance, recently, he went along and met a prophetic woman who said to him “God is telling you to step into marriage”. He used to be an anxious, neurotic person, but now feels a great sense of peace. He mentioned that the occurrences of communication confirmed his belief in God and it is too much to accept if God did not exist.

Mary reported that she prays in order to find people whom she needs to give encouragement to. She gave me an example of an actress called Michelle. She had been thinking about Michelle, although she had met her only once in the past. She was praying that Michelle should be successful. She then got a text from this Michelle asking to meet up. When they met, Michelle said that she was suffering because she could not find work. Mary and Michelle prayed together and Michelle felt better. When asked God’s role in this process. She responded:

God arranges for these things to happen, i.e. that she should meet people whom she can encourage. It is not really about asking, it is about communicating with God. The numerous occasions in which these phenomena have occurred convince me that God exists: Other people might say it is coincidence or imagination. I believe it is really set up by God.

Monica hears God in numerous ways, sometimes as an audible voice. At other times she “hears” words (thoughts) coming into her mind. Several years ago she experienced symptoms of dizziness and went along to the GP. An audible voice said to her “you need neurosurgery” and she did indeed require neurosurgery. She recognised this as Jesus’ voice. She also feels God warns her in other ways. For instance, she was going to see her friends in Cardiff. She was not worried about going there, but suddenly had a “sense” that she should not be going. She does not know what would have happened if she had gone. She is not normally an anxious worrying person, but this alien emotion made her realise it was God communicating with her.

Monica also reads the psalms, for instance, Psalm 91 gave her encouragement before she underwent a second round of neurosurgery. According to her, God communicates through scripture and through sermons, in which she finds that there are sometimes messages specifically related to her. More particularly, she hears God speaking to her through other Christians. For instance, when she was mugged, friends said to her “when did you last hear God telling you to move?” She also writes down questions that she has for God in one colour of ink, then listens for the answers and writes them down in another colour. She finds doing this very peaceful.

Discernment

For *Martin*, it was the clarity, intensity and unexpected nature of the thought about his gay friend that assured him that it was coming from God. As he said “the words were so clear it was as if God had spoken them into my mind”.

Henrietta commented that when God communicates with her, she is able to differentiate God’s thoughts from her own thoughts and knows it is God’s voice because of several aspects. First of all, she can recognise it as a child’s voice. Second, she identifies it as coming from God when a thought suddenly comes into her mind interrupting an existing train of thought. Henrietta’s experience of an alien thought convinced her that God was communicating with her. She said: “We need to learn to recognise the words of God. This can take some time”.

When *Naomi* was asked how she knew that her thought about going back to college was from God, she said it was “a print of a thought”, it was like an impression. She said she was not thinking about this matter in any way before this thought came into her mind. It was like the “backdoor opened” and the thought “popped” into her mind. She said “You have to learn to discern the voice. By doing this you hold it up to the Bible. There is a lot of faith involved”.

As part of discernment, Naomi checks whether communications come from God or from Satan. According to her, God only convicts through his Spirit, he never condemns. Sometimes, she discusses her experiences with other people. For instance, she has a mentor, a “spiritual mother” called Chris. She helped Naomi very early on to “hear” God. This is a sort of an apprenticeship. She will pray with Naomi. Chris “hears” God’s voice. Naomi then begins to realise this is possible and develops faith. Chris also challenges Naomi about the “voices”. Naomi further recounted that she could not cope without hearing God: “Each month I pray with my husband Steve for finances”, she stated.

Although Naomi considers that her experiences of communication from God are generally reliable, sometimes this information does not work out in practice. For instance, she knew an infertile woman and “received” a mental picture of a baby. She thought that God said “you have a son”, but in the end, this woman never had a son. Naomi stated that when you are talking about people, “hatching, matching and despatching” you need to talk to your faith team first. This meant that prophecies pertaining to births and deaths can be complex and often require confirmation through prayer.

For *Ruth*, it was because she suddenly switched from anger to love that she was convinced this was actually God speaking to her. For *Monica* it was the “alien” emotion of anxiety that confirmed to her that she must be hearing God’s voice.

Mark indicated that all experiences of communication from God need two to three forms of confirmation. Congregants who claim to have received divine communications frequently discuss these with the vicar and other members of his team. On occasion, the vicar will pray to receive further clarification of these communications from God. The vicar emphasised that individuals need to ask themselves whether the impression that they have is something that could come from God (because it is consistent with his revealed character and will), or whether what they have is something from their own minds and imaginations, or even from “the enemy” (cf. Matt. 16:22–23). Spiritual warfare begins in the mind (2 Cor. 10:4f). He maintained that until Jesus returns, prophecy is necessarily incomplete; it is not always authoritative, and needs to be tested. Finally, congregants are cautioned that they should not share prophecies pertaining to birth, marriage and death publicly since these are often wrong and could do considerable harm to those involved. Rather, they should discuss these with the vicar first, who will pray to receive confirmation.

Voices and thoughts: how does God communicate?

We have presented a number of cases whereby members of this congregation claim to experience divine communication. As in any qualitative study, the questions asked shaped the responses obtained. While this study is limited by small numbers and the data cannot be generalised, we have provided in-depth data relating to religious experience and agency. For the vast majority of these participants, communications from God were related to current events rather than to the prediction of future events. These thoughts do not generally reveal metaphysical insights; rather, they relate to the mundane world.

These communicative experiences provided direction, consolation and empowerment in the lives of those receiving them. Individuals typically recounted that on occasion, God speaks audibly or accompanied by supernatural phenomena, but in the vast majority of cases, the way

God speaks is through thoughts or impressions. In all instances, agency is maintained, individuals can choose to obey the thoughts/voices or not.

Interestingly, participants in this study rarely deployed the word prophecy when referring to communication from God. This may be because many of the examples discussed were not strictly “prophetic”. That is, they involved an element of receiving a communication from God, but not of acting upon, or communicating this to others (as in “forthtelling” or “foretelling”). Such experiences are what Joyner (1997, p. 97) calls the “lowest level of prophetic revelation”, that is, impressions or “generally revelations that we put into our own words”. However, in some cases (as in Ruth telling the man that he was manipulative), there is clearly both the element of the experience of receiving communication from God and also the communication of this to another person which would potentially fulfil a traditional understanding of what constitutes “prophecy”.

Congregants pointed out that the process of hearing God is a learning process and occurs over a period of time. You need to “listen and learn”. The experiences documented contain elements of all the four types of religious experiences as elaborated by Stark (1965).

At times, it was difficult to clearly define from the informants’ narratives whether what they received was an “impression”, a “feeling” a voice or a thought. Where they are clearly thoughts, they can be differentiated from religious obsessions in which subjects are aware that the thoughts are their own (i.e., not deriving from external sources). Several congregants mentioned the authoritative nature of their experiences. In his discussion of mystical experience, William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) mentions the noetic quality of such experiences – the fact that mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge and carry with them a sense of authority. In his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), he distinguishes between two types of knowledge: knowledge about and knowledge by acquaintance. The former is discursive knowledge, the latter is non-discursive and is immediately perceived, intuitively understood and is perceptually based. It provides the raw data that “knowledge about” then refines. For James, mystical states are not just emotional, but are also cognitive states of knowledge. In the mystical experience, a completely new understanding comes in an instantaneous fashion, a knowledge which transcends previous understanding. He wrote in 1902:

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time. (p. 300)

Whilst the experiences of our subjects may not be strictly “mystical”, they clearly display similar affective and noetic qualities, and are associated with a similar sense of associated authority.

The authenticity of divine communications

The degree of certainty pertaining to the divine origin of these experiences varied. In some instances, recipients were doubtful that the communication came from God. In other cases, the divine origin, at least to them, seemed blatantly clear. How does a recipient of such experiences know that the communication is from God, rather than from their own thoughts or from other agencies, such as those of Satan? Subjects in this study described a number of ways for discriminating between God’s voice and their own thoughts.

First, our subjects said, the clarity and authoritative nature of the communication reveal its divine origins. Second, sometimes, a thought just “pops” into their mind and is not something

that they would ordinarily be thinking of; for some, it “sounds” different from their own thoughts. It is the abrupt intrusion of this thought which indicates its external and divine origin. Third, there is often a discursive process whereby the content of the communication is discussed with the vicar or other members of the congregation. Finally, the content of the communication determines its origins. Divine communication will never contradict scripture.

For the majority of participants, there was no doubt that the communication derived from outside their own minds and personal agency for it was externalised. It is through this externalisation of agency that believers come to maintain that the communication “really” originates from God, that is, religious believers attribute their thought processes to external, divine influence.

James (1902) again discusses similar phenomena in relation to mysticism. Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet, when the characteristic sort of consciousness has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.

The anthropologist Stephen (1989) refers to the autonomous imagining as a specific imaginary mode involving: “imagery so compelling, so powerful, it can even override all demands of external reality” (p. 56), imagery experienced as an external independent reality “which is grounded in the psychological reality of a special imaginative process operating outside ordinary awareness” (p. 212). James (1936) describes the religious imagination in similar terms. It emerges into conscious awareness in the form of vivid hallucinatory imagery that is experienced as an external reality. This form of richer imagery in thinking, according to Stephen, is drawn upon in all human cultures by artists, poets, writers, mystics and prophets.

In a similar way, Stark (1999) argues that, in some instances, those receiving revelations are actually externalising their own imaginary thoughts – their creative imagination – but are unaware of this process. He proposes that

certain individuals will have the capacity to perceive revelations, whether this be an openness or sensitivity to real communications or consists of unusual creativity enabling them to create profound revelations and then to externalise the source of this new culture. (p. 295)

A similar phenomenon occurs in composition of music. In a letter to Isaac Goldberg, Gershwin described the genesis of his *Rhapsody in Blue*:

It was on that train, with its steely rhythms, its rattlety-bang that is so often stimulating to a composer – I frequently hear music in the heart of noise – I suddenly heard – and even saw on paper – the complete construction of the rhapsody from beginning to end ... All at once I heard myself playing a theme that must have been haunting me inside, seeking outlet. No sooner had it oozed out of my fingers than I knew I had it. (in Peyser, 1993, p. 80–81)

The similarity between artistic and religious creation has long been noted. As Evelyn Underhill (1911, p. 63) put it:

In all creative acts, the larger share of the work is done subconsciously: its emergence is in a sense automatic. This is equally true of mystics, artists, philosophers, discoverers, and rulers of men. The great religion, invention, work of art, always owes its inception to some sudden uprush of intuitions or ideas for which the superficial self cannot account; its execution to powers so far beyond the control of that self, that they seem, as their owner sometimes says, to ‘come from beyond’.

The relationship between thought insertion and psychotic disorders

The similarities between mystical and psychotic states have long been recognised. William James (1902, p. 426), for example, asserted that “in delusional insanity, paranoia as they sometimes call it, we may have a kind of diabolical mysticism, a sort of religious mysticism turned upside down”. Subsequent commentators have observed a wide variety of shared phenomena: time distortion, synaesthesias, delusions, hallucinations, loss of self-object boundaries and the transition from a state of conflict and anxiety to one of sudden “understanding”, all of which are reported in both spiritual and psychotic experiences (Brett, 2003; Buckley, 1981; Wapnick, 1980).

In their comparative study of individuals professing spiritual experiences and those with clinically diagnosed schizophrenia, Jackson and Fulford (1997) suggest that religious experience looks very much like psychotic experience meeting many PSE criteria. They assert that psychosis (descriptively defined) cannot be differentiated from mystical experience on the basis of either form or content, but rather depends on the way in which the phenomena are “embedded in the values and beliefs of the person concerned” (p. 41). They propose a “cognitive problem solving model”, according to which altered states can be triggered by intense stress or existential crisis, and that if the resultant paradigm shift provides an “insight” that is utilised to solve the initial problem, the process will be self-limiting and non-pathological.¹

Arguing from a cognitive science of religion perspective, Dein and Littlewood (2011) propose that schizophrenia and religious cognition engage cognate mental modules in the over-attribution of agency and the overextension of theory of mind. In everyday religious cognition, agency detection and theory of mind modules function “normally”, whereas in schizophrenia, both modules are impaired. These authors suggest that religion and schizophrenia have perhaps had a related evolutionary trajectory.

While Dein and Littlewood (2011) focus on agency detection, in this paper, we examine a rather different aspect of agency – personal agency – the subjective awareness that one is initiating, executing and controlling one’s own volitional actions or thoughts in the world. It is the sense that I’m producing the thoughts occurring in my subjectivity, that is, that I’m bringing about the occurrence of these thoughts, intentionally or not. Recent neuroimaging studies support the idea that at least some aspects of personal agency are “located” in the posterior parietal cortex; posterior parietal lesions, predominantly on the right side, impair the ability of recognising one’s own body parts and self-attributing one’s own movements (Daprati, Sirigu, Pradat-Diehl, Franck, & Jeannerod, 2000). Personal agency is to be differentiated from ownership of a thought – the experience that a thought occurs in a person’s mind and it is he or she who is experiencing this thought. In being aware of my thoughts I am, *ipso facto*, aware of them as occurring within the boundary of me.

In some pathological conditions such as schizophrenia, there is a disturbance in personal agency (“thought insertion”) while thought ownership remains intact. The standard approach to the core phenomenology of thought insertion characterises it in terms of a normal sense of thought ownership coupled with an abnormal sense of thought agency. Patients do not have a sense of being the producers of the thoughts they become aware of. Furthermore, there is alien agency – the occurrence of the thoughts in their stream of consciousness is not experienced as being produced by them but by another agent. The alien agent produces the thoughts in the patient’s subjectivity. As well as being alien, patients state the thought could be “felt” to enter. Hence, thought insertion might not be solely a belief: in some (if not all) patients, it can incorporate abnormalities of perception.

In relation to agency and religious experience, James (1902, p. 416) speaks of passivity – the sense that mystical experiences happen to someone; that they are somehow beyond the range of human volition and control:

Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power

In this paper, our main interest has been in how God is understood by a group of evangelical Christians to communicate with his subjects and the role of personal agency in this process. It is useful to compare the phenomenon of thoughts experienced by congregants as “put into their minds” by God to the phenomenon of thought insertion occurring in psychotic disorders.

The loss of the ability to differentiate our own thoughts from those inserted by others is a defining characteristic of schizophrenia (thought insertion). Philosophers Stephens and Graham (1994) conceptualise thought insertion as a problem of agency. In thought insertion, the subject’s own agency is absent and an alien thought is “inserted”. The ensuing thoughts are seen as “alien”. It is more than a belief; it is also a perception which can be felt. Frith (1992) has proposed that this phenomenon arises from a defect in internal monitoring. Its neuropathology awaits elucidation.

In the phenomenon of thought insertion, as encountered in schizophrenia, there is a breach of ego boundaries and thoughts are experienced as inserted (or in the case of thought withdrawal, actively removed). It has been suggested that disorders of thought possession lie on a spectrum and when thoughts are completely divorced from the agent thinking them they manifest as auditory hallucinations. Mullins and Spence (2003) provide an excellent overview of this area. The experience of thought insertion comprises two components: the ego is intruded upon; the ownership of the thought is alien.

Jaspers (1963) distinguishes surprising or incongruous “inserted/implanted” thoughts from those that are “made by others”, by which he seems to mean thoughts that emerge under the perceived influence of an external agent (so-called “passivity thinking”).

Patients think something and yet feel that someone else has thought it and in some way forced it on them. The thought arises and with it a direct awareness that it is not the patient but some external agent that thinks it. The patient does not know why he has this thought nor did he intend to have it. He does not feel master of his own thoughts and in addition he feels in the power of some incomprehensible external force. (pp. 122–123)

Mellor (1970) provides an illustrative example of this:

I look out of the window and I think the garden looks nice and the grass looks cool, but the thoughts of Eamonn Andrews [a television commentator] come into my mind. There are no other thoughts there, only his ... He treats my mind like a screen and flashes his thoughts on to it like you flash a picture.

For our interviewees, agency is attributed to God. How cultural and religious contexts influence attribution of agency remains an important area for future research on religious experience and psychosis. Ownership of the thoughts concerned seems to be affected less in our subjects than in the pathological phenomenon of thought insertion; they are less alien in some way, although this is a difficult quality to quantify.

Future research

What should future work in this area involve? One focus involves the relationship between emotional distress and receiving divine communications. While in the study by Dein and

Littlewood (2007) God's voice was heard following a life event and its occurrence ameliorated distress, this was not as evident in the present study. Further research on larger and more diverse samples, in different faith groups, and with slightly different questions would facilitate understanding of the contexts and modes of communication in which God is perceived to communicate. Such research would also have relevance to our understanding of the role of religious experience in spiritual and psychological healing.

Conclusion

The experience of alien thought insertion is not necessarily pathological and is very similar to the phenomenon recognised in popular culture as telepathy. Such experiences can occur in individuals defining themselves as spiritual and do not impact their ability to function in everyday life (Jackson & Fulford, 1997). The possibility therefore arises that the experiences of Christians, as reported in the present study, who report that "God put a thought into my mind", might also be a non-pathological form of this phenomenon – akin to that of writers and other artists who find their composition coming, as though from outside themselves. The findings of this study support previous studies on other Christian congregations (e.g., Dein & Littlewood, 2007 on British Pentecostals, Luhrmann, 2012 on American Evangelicals) which suggest that analogues of psychotic phenomena may be normative, that is, non-pathological, in these groups. Finally, the current study contributes to the emerging literature on psychotic-like phenomena in the general population (e.g., Herriot-Maitland, Knight, & Peters, 2012) which suggests that it is not the OOE (out of ordinary experience) itself that determines the development of a clinical condition, but rather the wider personal and interpersonal contexts that influence how this experience is subsequently integrated.

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Note

1. While some authors have argued for close links between anomalous experience, spirituality, psi and psychosis (Clarke, 2010; Jackson & Fulford, 1997; McClenon, 2012), we argue instead that religious/spiritual experiences and psychotic phenomena are different cultural phenomena. The relationships between religious and paranormal experiences have been discussed in the literature (Tobacyk & Milford, 1983). Further discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

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Appendix. Interview schedule

Communicating with God

Age, occupation, gender and religious denomination

- (1) Tell me about your religious life –
- (2) When did you become a Christian?
- (3) How did you become a Christian?
- (4) Does God speak to you?
- (5) When does God speak to you? During prayer? At other times?
- (6) In what way(s) does God speak to you?
- (7) Does God ever speak with you through
 - (a) Visions?
 - (b) Dreams?
 - (c) An audible voice?
 - (d) Putting thoughts in your mind?
 - (e) Through scripture?
 - (f) Through everyday events?
- (8) Please describe the experiences above.
- (9) How do you know it is/was God communicating with you?
- (10) How has the experience of communicating with God affected you?
- (11) Have you discussed these experiences with anyone else?
- (12) What do you understand by prophecy?
- (13) Have you ever had an experience of prophecy?