

The Experience of Hallucinations in Religious Practice

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Introduction

In no way should a person who experiences hallucinations look at this work as being a substitute for adequate psychiatric help. I want to call to attention right at the start that the hearing of voices is often very dangerous and can have very damaging consequences. Hearing voices can lead people to do stupid and even criminal things. It has been proven scientifically that among a group of hallucinators, IQ's decreased after the onset of hallucinations (Johnson, 69).

It should be noted that I am making a distinction between people who hear voices and do not show other symptoms of schizophrenia, and those that are diagnosed and treated as schizophrenics. Even though many psychologists and even psychiatrists have rejected the classification of "schizophrenia," it's not the purpose of this book to engage in such topics and I am staying free from that controversy. I am not describing in this book anything more than the experiences that are often reported today by functional religious people. Such experiences make up the volume of many religious books. Hallucinations are only one of many symptoms in schizophrenia. I am merely pointing out that this book does not pretend to be a cure for mental illness. A point of this book is that many mentally healthy and functional people hallucinate as an unnecessary byproduct of their religious experience, and this book occasionally looks at ways that might help them avoid putting too much belief in such experiences. Therefore, if one does not feel mentally healthy, one should seek professional help instead of using this book for serious therapy.

I have to say that I am by nature a religious person. I respect traditional religious values as well as secular and scientific ones. I have a great prohibition in me of trying to explain away possible spiritual experiences as being mere hallucinations. I see what I am doing as trying to help liberate those who are

religious and are bound by negative experiences. Just because one sees lights and visions, does not mean that these experiences have a spiritual nature. The fact that many seriously mentally ill people also have such visions and voices proves that such experiences are as much of a warning sign as a sign that one is being visited by heaven. These experiences can take place in the brain, in the same part of the brain that can be called for the lay person, the "dream hemisphere." The position of the historical Judeo-Christian churches and other world religions has been to avoid "spirits" perhaps for this very good reason: that in fact one is avoiding the causation of the brain to hallucinate. I do also believe that a holy power does guide people, and perhaps by understanding hallucinations, one may better see the power of the holy when it does manifest.

It is well known the major world religions believe that visions and voices can come from the dark side, forces that actually are mischievous and want to do mankind harm. If one merely looks at the illogical and "evil" behavior of some human beings, one could see the possibility that beings from other realms may act in similar ways to the worst in our world. The lack of logic in people acting poorly in our world at least suggests the possibility of the lack of logic operating in other worlds. The idea of evil spirits is present in virtually all world cultures and religions. There are religious books that deal with ways of handling such spirits by spiritual methods. This book is a way of dealing with similar symptomology but taking another approach.

Many who have visions, voices and the other types of experiences do not easily seek psychiatric help. For many of these people, this phenomenon falls under the heading of being spiritual. People who have religious-based hallucinations can spend many years under them. Some never try to get help for them, for they do not believe in the model of psychiatry. They may read this book because often visions and voices can become confusing. Once they find out there is a modern scientific explanation for some of these experiences, written by someone who even shares their belief that sometimes such experiences are in fact of a divine origin, they may see that many of the voices were really not divine at all. This change of thinking can have dramatic, even life saving consequences. They may possibly see they are finding a dead end in life by trusting in these hallucinations and decide to identify them as a problem and get help for them.

Some people fall under the delusion that just because they are having an extra-sensory experience, that makes it supernatural and hence divine. This problem happens to many people. The person does not see their condition as a mental illness, so it is a diagnosis in which it is hard to do therapy because the person doesn't admit that they are sick. In these cases, the hallucinations are often

solacing to the person. They may give the person esteem or be an extension of the type of experience of having imaginary companions in childhood. When a person realizes such experiences are probably subjective, and the experiences may even affect one's better judgment or thinking processes, they may then begin to realize that the experiences are problematic.

I believe more people hear voices, or hallucinate in some way, than most would imagine. It could very easily be that 30 percent of people at some time or another experience, or if you will, "hallucinate," some type of voice or guidance. It is believed heavily in modern fundamentalist or evangelical Christianity that feeling God's presence or experiencing demonic persecution is something one can experience, as it is believed in New Age circles that spirit guides can lead them and that it is possible to talk to the deceased. I do believe that ultimately a sincere and educated religious seeker will understand what has a divine source and what has a personal source, but surely some guidance is needed.

If this book is successful, a fight may be won in generalized mental health care that is represented on the level of such groups as Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve Step programs. I believe that the problem of hallucinations is very high, but it is not something that one can readily admit to because of the stigmatization associated with it. Right now the hearing of voices is considered a stigma, except of course when it is confessed as a virtue of many religions. That is, people often do not stigmatize the religious as mentally ill who hear God's voice or who sense the oppressive presence of demons or "Satan." Many people often consider hearing or experiencing some kind of guidance part and parcel of the mentally healthy who happen to hold a certain religious belief. This belief can range from a type of biblical fundamentalism to an Eastern philosophical or New Age belief in the so-called "astral planes." For this very reason, that it is both accepted by some and stigmatized by others, the problem is not often approached by people in a logical way because there is no guide for people to understand the situation outside of a personal religious context or a wholly scientific psychiatric one. Experiencing hallucinations in an unprepared way may underlie some problems in the mental health of the elderly. It would be good if more was known among the general populace about the "non-psychotic" or "non-schizophrenic" experience of hallucinations.

The religious should be able to take on both aspects of fighting this problem: seeing it as a medical condition that exists only in the brain and seeing it as a situation that can develop from the spiritual path that can sometimes be overcome by spiritual means. Many people are trying to fight this problem in themselves and often do it in one of the two ways, not knowing the benefits of

the other methodology. The medical way of fighting it does not have to be the use of medication, as psychologists recently authored a book on cognitive therapy for overcoming voices ("Cognitive Therapy for Delusions, Voices and Paranoia" by Paul Chadwick, Max J. Birchwood, and Peter Trower (John Wiley & Sons Inc, 1996)). It is written however at the doctoral level.

The problem is that there doesn't seem to be a readily identifiable and popular psychoanalytic therapy for the treatment of the hearing of voices, only the psychiatric prescription of taking medication seems to be the well-known cure for this. So, while still stating medications can be helpful, this work tries to identify non-drug therapies against the hearing of voices for those who are not diagnosed as schizophrenic. These therapies can be used in unison with medication. The main therapy that this work describes is the simple insight that visions and voices often have no objective external reality.

Medication is simply not a welcome option for many people. The type of medications used to fight hallucinations are thought to not be tolerable by those who must earn their own living, or at least by those who don't want others to think they have a mental problem. Those medications can create physical side effects like the slowing down of movement, the stopping of thoughts, the slurring of speech, and other problems. When one is on such a medication, sometimes others know it, and one then one may receive the cruel stigmatization that the mentally ill often receive. There is the possibility that medications may be developed that do not have such side effects.

For simplification, I will call the "hemisphere" of the brain, in which the unconscious attains visual imagery and auditory sensation, the "dream hemisphere," and avoid scientific terminology that refers to parts of the brain.

Some who hallucinate are more capable of living a normal life than others who hallucinate. There are many people in the world who hold normal jobs and responsibilities and subscribe to various worldviews that actually support having what are most likely hallucinations. While I have great hopes for everyone with mental illness, it's apparent that some people are not able to be helped as much as others. There is the probability that the more that some people view their hallucinations as being from divine sources, the more likely they are to get worse in time. One interesting thing to note here is how often one person's hallucinatory material can contradict another person's hallucinatory material. Hallucinations can also be contradictory in the same person. Logically, this would tend to point that much of the material is not of any higher source. Such

people who hallucinate must be able to follow logical conclusions in regards to whether or not there is any truth to what they are hallucinating.

Some of the greatest healings of mental illness that are taking place today are not because of professional psychiatry. Every good psychologist or psychiatrist knows this is true. Some people are more responsive to Alcoholics Anonymous, 12 Step groups, and other manifestations of religious faith. These groups are often able to do what professional psychiatry fails to do. Such, I believe, can be the case with some people who hallucinate. The type of people that I hope to reach by this book may be those who are not educated about modern psychology, who may in fact mistrust it, and are not probably able to take the usual doses of anti-psychotic medication because they must stay alert at their job. There are those who are otherwise psychologically healthy but were led to experience hallucinations because of certain worldviews which encouraged hallucinations. One might recall the popularity of Carlos Castaneda in the 1970's to remember how many people were affected by such beliefs, and expect to have extraordinary hallucinations as part of their religious experience.

This book can be seen as a warning against taking hallucinations seriously as religious experiences. When findings in modern brain science has begun to be better disseminated, I believe more people who hallucinate will understand more about what is a spiritual experience and what is not. Because of this knowledge, many people's lives may be drastically changed for the better. People will finally know where the dysfunction and confusion is coming from in their lives. There may even be a rebirth in a true spirituality based on altruism, instead of some of the rather delusive forms now present. Presently however, such knowledge of brain science is buried in difficult to understand psychology and medical books.

There is a wonderful book called "The Anatomy of Hallucinations" by Dr. Fred H. Johnson (Nelson-Hall Chicago, IL. 1978) from which I have taken much of my understanding of hallucinations. Quoting the book on page 29: "...of the 113 geniuses that have most helped civilization, 37 percent to 40 percent were psychotic, 83 percent to 90 percent were psychopathic or sociopathic, and 30 percent of the most important were committed (Lange-Eichbaum 1932, Stein and Heinze, 1960)." This does not necessarily mean that they were or were not in contact with angels, the deceased, or an invisible brotherhood of telepathic men, or any of the other subject matter of hallucinations. It could mean instead they were so conscious of their interior life that they saw into the dream hemisphere in their waking state of consciousness. Some of these figures described their "hallucinations" as voices from God. Others may have believed in ideas of communicating with angels and the souls of deceased men.

This work is not, although it may seem to be in parts, an entire denouncement of the idea that man can have miraculous powers. My model is that we indeed live in a world that has miracles -- however, what some people call miracles are in fact often a form of wish fulfillment. The distinction between cultures that have a high predominance of so-called miracles as opposed to ones that balance those views with logic and science is important. This distinction has some bearing on a culture's relationship to education and the incorporating of important scientific achievements, such as medicine, advanced surgery and even psychology, into their culture. What is known as necromancy in the bible is a good example of this. Whether or not a culture allows necromancy to go unchecked in some ways determines aspects of the mental health of the populace.

In case one thinks it's too strange to hear voices, one has to just realize that the great psychologist Carl Jung himself went through this. One problem in this area is that many educated and academically respected people may seem to value various aspects of hallucinating, and it may not cause much of a problem in them, but which opens some up to this internal force that can have disastrous effects in people who have the misfortune to have psychological imbalances. The huge topic of "esotericism" is fascinating to intellectuals like Jung, yet it seems that, like the way various subjects are broken down into more exact sub-studies, these esoteric studies must be broken down into sub-categories if they are really going to be studied. Now that science has proven the origination of much hallucination to be in the brain, previous ideas about esotericism and "astral planes" may be seen to be radically changed.

Freud's idea of wish fulfillment is important for the hallucinator to understand. It states that often the mind will take the image in the imagination of something as the actual achievement of something. Esotericism that induces people to live in another world, develop special invisible bodies and so on, is often a dangerous road because such practices can replace normal relationships with people and such a person can begin to live in a closed-off system of personalized logic.

One can basically divide religious practice along these lines: ones that have an overt acceptance of the cultivation of voices and visions, relying on modern teachers who claim such contacts, and ones that do not. This realm of believing in the self-induced mental voices as being external to oneself is probably not often isolated as something in religion that can cause harm. There is often a consensual understanding in religion that it is a part of the public's knowledge. That is, we can see that society's major religious leaders usually do not state that it is good to hear disembodied voices, other than the voice of the direction that we call God. The practitioners of society's major religious do not seem plagued

by hearing voices in the way that the New Age communities now host thousands of various channellers and seers who write books about voices and visions they've had.

Traditional Yogis and Buddhists always mentioned along with mystical Christians to not pay attention to the phenomena of visions and voices but to merely let such experiences pass by. In modern times, it is schools that make a huge show about hidden "masters of wisdom" who supposedly have a telepathic communication who are the most problematic and dangerous to those prone to become hallucinators. Before I became more centered in my Judeo-Christian tradition (which still accepts some ideas from other religions), I had two teachers, one of a old Theosophical background and one of a Yoga background that both said not to pay attention to phenomena and never talk to spirits or think too highly of those that did. This was before the "channeling" schools became popular which changed the face of alternative spiritual practices.

The idea will often come up when one has a religious outlook on life that one can't ignore the fact that traditionally religions have often believed that these voices were from demons. If these voices are from evil spirits, if there is a way that one can handle them, it most likely will be the way people handle undesirable people in real life: they ignore them. So, this book takes an approach of shutting oneself off from voices. There are already hundreds of books about fighting demons using religious methods. This book may be looked at as a totally different method of spiritual warfare.

The recent Christian books on fighting demons state that demons bother those who have used things like pornography, occult books, drugs or alcohol. This is a different approach than some therapists who tend to see persecutory voices coming from the "shadow self." They believe that when one is trying to be good, perhaps in a scrupulous way, and one projects or imagines a world out there that is very bad, the projection becomes so strong that it splits off a part of one's energy and becomes animated as a persecutor. My view is that it is best for the religious to always act spiritual in that I do not believe that religious people will be freed from their voices by becoming less truly spiritual. I don't see any historical precedence for this. However, the use of drugs and alcohol should be stopped by hallucinators. Marijuana is known to be a hallucinogen itself, and it was noted a few years ago in a British psychological study that marijuana can be a precipitator of some types of schizophrenic-type illnesses. (Perry, et al.).

If a belief in persecutory demons is an integral part of our belief structure, we can at least believe that our God wants us to be free from them. So, if we believe

something is real, we experience what it is like if these voices are real. If we believe something in our own psychology can mimic something that we believe has an objective reality outside us, we do not have to believe that what we experience is really that objective reality. We can believe in the traditional religious view that demons or evil spirits are real, but we can also believe in the scientific view that hallucinations also occur in people. Hallucinations are like waking dreams that come from the same part of the brain that dreams at night do. We further separate ourselves from these dreams by not allowing them the part of our consciousness that they used to hold. It is as if our fear of them being really demons kept them in us.

In psychological literature, voices are said to come from one's own "inner speech." One exercise recommend is this one that deals with the mind's ability to focus on things other than the part that is speaking the voices. One focuses on other forms of sensation than the "inner speech" that is causing the voice. This avoids in some way the presence of the voice. There is the sensation of how one feels to be in one's body, the sensation of muscles, of the skin, of the bones. Perhaps one can release some muscle tension by focusing attention there and calmly asking the muscles to relax. There are also the sensations of hearing, sight, smell and taste. There is also the sensation of consciousness. That is, we can put awareness on that interior part of ourselves that experiences the other sensations. We can call that part of us the "I," the kernel of who we are. If we focus on it more, we may be able to control the inner speech of the parts of ourselves that may be causing the hallucination.

The freeing experience is understood by understanding that we are causing the voices. People essentially act the parts of the voices that they hear. They don't notice it, but they are actually playing the roles of the voices. They cause these roles to exist. People who don't have serious mental illness may get themselves to stop this acting by working on building up in themselves the faculty of holding their attention on the process in them that is capable of doing the acting. One might call it "finding the inner voice."

At some times, the inner speech seems to cause the voice to make a type of cycle, a type of "breathing" cycle of the voice, and cause the person's attention on that aspect of this inner speech which causes voices. When one is stressed by a certain thing one may find one's mind is drawn to do this kind of "breathing" of the attention toward the dysfunctional inner speech. But one can then realize that one is being metaphorically "lulled to sleep" to listen to the voice, to exist in this combination of the dream hemisphere and waking state. One might try to get the voice to say what one wants it to say, such as something pleasant. It might be

that in the initial stages of establishing control with that voice, that the voice will stop. It stops in a sense because a person "wakes up" -- the person activates that part of their inner speech that was rumbling on, so to speak.

When people describe their fight against the devil, they don't imagine a hoofed and horned goateed Casanova is bothering them, but they do mean that there is a relationship with an entity or a force that they experience as negative.

Hallucinations can be said to form the basis of this experience, but it should be remembered that many very functional and competent religious people report this experience. Many New Age believers experience hallucinations also on a daily basis and are even encouraged to do so. These are the so-called "normal" people who hear voices.

Perhaps understanding the origin and manifestations of hallucinations could instill in one the possibility of avoiding some types of mental illness, such as those that may be more common in old age. If one is prepared to understand this process, old age in some may pose fewer difficulties. Some types of mental disorders of old age may have an organic origin but it's often believed that attitudes often change organic processes over time.

I have had experiences that took the form of visions and guidance that I believe were guidance from a higher source, and I have also had similar experiences that I believe were from my own mind. It is based on this personal experience that I write this book. I do not know of any book that has been written from a spiritual perspective that is informed by psychology of how to distinguish the two sources of these experiences. I believe that by understanding this book a person may begin to see a pattern emerge about the two possible sources of all these experiences.