

What Makes You Think That Was God? A Comparison of the Criteria Used by Researchers and
Participants in the Determination of Experiences as Divine Communications

J. E. Sigler

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Douglas F. Cannon
John C. Tedesco
Damion M. Waymer

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ABSTRACT

This study brings together the scattered body of criteria contemporary scholars have used to identify divine communications (a sub-category of religious and spiritual experiences), presented as a new Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication. It compares the scholarly criteria in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication to the criteria that participants themselves (thirty-two Catholic sisters) used to distinguish divine communications from other types of experience. On the basis of this comparison, it suggests a new, altered set of criteria for future use in studying divine communications, formulated as a Model of Participants' Criteria for Divine Communication. It expands upon current research focused on the experiences of evangelical Protestants by providing the first scholarly report of modern American Catholic experiences of divine communications.

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List of Abbreviations

CDS: Congregation of the Divine Spirit

CP(s): Passionist(s)

DC(s): Divine communication(s)

PCC(s): Poor Clare(s) of the Colettine Observance

RSE(s): Religious and spiritual experience(s)

TOR(s): Third Order Regular(s) (of the Penance of the Sorrowful Mother)

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“What would the field of communication studies look like if we posited the existence of God as a speech agent?” (Schultze, 2005, pp. 5–6)

Introduction

In December 2011, I attended my first Tridentine Mass (traditional, pre-Vatican II Latin Mass) at the Priory of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Charles Town, West Virginia. I didn't like it. Being a staunch traditionalist in every other way, I was disturbed by the fact that I didn't like it. It bothered me so much that I felt I needed to discuss my experience with a spiritual adviser. He suggested that I contact Dom Daniel, superior of the Canons Regular of the New Jerusalem, the Augustinian monks who run the priory. In his response to my email, Dom Daniel asked me to return once more and promised to have a brother explain to me how to follow the Mass so that I could appreciate it. I returned and introduced myself to Dom Daniel. He appeared very happy to see me and promptly assigned to me a brother. The brother nodded quietly, picked up a red booklet from a table neatly stacked with red booklets, and led me to the “Cry Room” (the room where screaming children are secreted during Mass).

In the “Cry Room,” the brother quietly, shyly, and somewhat awkwardly walked me through the red booklet, page by page. I tried to pay attention, but really, all I could think about was how someone so young wound up with such an outrageous haircut. Most men his age—I thought, staring at his tonsure—spend half their day in the gym and half their night in the bar. When he finished his red-booklet tutorial and asked me if I had any questions, I said, “Um, no. I think... it's just going to take some time for me to practice with this.” He nodded quietly, and I

understood that at this point I was supposed to thank him and go find a seat in the pews. But he had asked if I had *any* questions, so I couldn't resist: "Um," I said, breaking a rather long silence, "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" A look of astonishment flashed across his placid face, and I wondered what in the world he thought I would ask. He quickly recovered himself and said quietly, "Y- ye- yes."

"Why did you become a monk?"

He looked relieved. "Oh. Well... I felt that God was calling me."

And then he proceeded to list the events in the timeline leading up to his entry into religious life. Now, I recognize this as the standard response from religious when asked about their "call." It's vague, superficial, and thoroughly uninformative. But it is usually all one has time for, and it probably satisfies most people.

I, on the other hand, spent the four-hour car ride home to Blacksburg wondering what in the world it means to "feel called." Did he hear a voice, or was it just a feeling? How does one interpret a bunch of feelings to mean that one should run off to West Virginia and get a tonsure? Maybe he experienced some long, freakishly coincidental series of synchronistic events that couldn't possibly have been interpreted any other way. But what experience is it—exactly, concretely—that gets translated into a request from God to enter religious life?

I could not imagine what this feeling of "being called by God" meant, *practically speaking*. Even having had a long history of rather unusual experiences with God myself, I did not consider the possibility that the phrase may refer to some experience with which I was already familiar. I was consumed with curiosity about this "call from God" and determined to figure out what it meant.

I considered myself blessed to be a communication scholar. After all, a “call from God” implies communication from God, some kind of discourse—verbal or otherwise—with the divine (cf. Baesler, 2008). Naturally, then, I turned first to communication literature. The sub-discipline of religious communication seemed a logical place to begin, but I was disappointed to discover that religious communication is pretty much confined to the study of how people’s religious beliefs influence all the other stuff we already study. I couldn’t help but think that religious communication scholars have wholly overlooked the most fascinating aspect of the study their label implies (cf. Baesler, 1997, 1999, 2008; Kaylor, 2011; Schultze, 2005).

Indeed, Kaylor (2011) points out the dearth of rhetorical scholarship taking into consideration rhetors’ claims of inspiration by God. He laments the failure of communication scholars publishing over 33 years in the *Journal of Communication and Religion* and over nine years in the *Journal of Media and Religion* to consider the roles that some religious rhetors claim God plays throughout their rhetorical process: from guide in the composition of the message itself to audience member at its delivery. I would go further and ask why communication scholars have not explored more than just rhetorical appeals to divine inspiration; why haven’t we studied those (*communicative*) moments of inspiration themselves?

In my own review of the most recent five years of the *Journal of Communication and Religion* (2007–2012, issue 1), only Kaylor’s (2011) article came anywhere near addressing the issue of God speaking. But even that article focused merely on rhetors’ claims of inspiration, rather than their actual experiences of them, thus not quite touching my subject of interest. Similarly, in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*’s special issue on religion and spirituality (2011, issue 4), no author approaches the subject of God speaking.

There are communication studies of prayer—the work of Baesler (1997; 1999; 2008) is notable here—that abstractly address the phenomenon of God speaking. But any review of religious communication research will reveal beyond the shadow of a doubt that the current focus of our scholarship is on how religious beliefs affect communication processes, not on how communication shapes religious beliefs, religious experiences, religious lives.

Fortunately, as all communication scholars know, communication is integral to all disciplines. Every object of study is interesting not only unto itself but also in the way that people talk about it. Thus it seemed to me that, somewhere, in some discipline, someone must have explored the phenomenon of this thing that people describe as “calling.” Theology, philosophy, and religious studies seemed likely candidates.

Indeed, religious writers—especially mystics—have much to say about communication from the divine. Philosophers, not so much. But what immediately stood out in flipping between St. Teresa of Avila and the analytic philosopher Wolterstorff was not the relative amounts their kin contributed to knowledge on the subject. Rather, it was the starkly different purposes for which they wrote: St. Teresa was concerned to help readers discern when a thought or feeling has really come from God, as opposed to just one’s own mind or heart. Wolterstorff, on the other hand, spends 324 pages explaining how J. L. Austin’s speech act theory justifies a belief in the possibility that God could in fact speak to individuals. Scholars of religious studies researching religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs) read like historians of the phenomenon, or else like methodology junkies.

The real surprise came in the psychological and anthropological literature. Shortly after my avowal to “figure out call,” popular media began showing a great deal of interest in the work

of T. M. Luhrmann (2012c), which explores evangelical Christians' experience of personal, direct divine communication ("DC;" Luhrmann, 2012b). Luhrmann's work straddles the line between psychology and anthropology: Her theoretical framework is psychological, but her methodology is anthropological. After immersing herself in evangelical churches for over four years, she drew heavily upon psychological concepts in order to dissect how these Christians dialogue with God.

Very few researchers have taken this direct-questioning approach. That is, you can count on one hand the number of researchers who have surveyed, interviewed, or anthropologically immersed themselves in Christian communities that claim to hear God speak. Starting with the *Report on the Census of Hallucinations* (Sidgwick, H., Johnson, A., Myers, F. W. H., Podmore, F., & Sidgwick, E. M., 1894), continuing through West's (1948) follow-up questionnaire, and all the way up to Luhrmann's own research, the primary psychological concept the direct-questioners have used in the analysis of such supernatural phenomena is hallucination.

At first glance, the enduring comparison between religious experience and a concept strongly associated with psychological disturbance feels to a believer like a secular, scientific slap in the face. But given the DSM IV's definition of "hallucination," the comparison is understandable—at least from an academic perspective. Like hallucinations, a DC very often takes the form of a "sensory perception that has the compelling sense of reality of a true perception but that occurs without external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ" (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 767). One may "hear" the voice of God internally, without using one's ears, or even externally using one's ears, but without being able to identify any physical source of the sound. Visual, tactile, and olfactory (I have never heard of someone

“tasting” a communication from God) experiences may function in the same way as media for DCs.

There is, then, a surface similarity in how hallucinations and DCs are experienced. But I could not reconcile this psychological technicality with the spiritual intuition that the two are not, in their essence, comparable. Thus was I motivated to discover the difference.

Ontologically speaking, the difference is obvious: A hallucination is generated by the mind of the perceiver, whereas a DC is generated by God (or, in rarer cases, an angel, saint, or other divine being). Theoretically, at least. Establishing the *actual* ontological status of a *particular* experience is more problematic than that. How could we even begin to investigate it?

To “figure out call,” I had chosen to follow Luhrmann’s lead in the best way I could: I did not have sufficient time to immerse myself in a community, but I could interview believers, which I considered one step up from simply surveying people, given that I could probe for further explanation in an interview but not in a survey (see West, 1948 for a discussion of problems inherent in surveying on this topic; see also Luhrmann, 2012c, p. 194). Intrigued by the experiences I heard, my characteristic curiosity ran wild wondering whether this-and-that experience I heard was truly a DC, or just a self-generated thought/feeling/etc. For months, I was perpetually waylaid from what should have been the real object of my study by this very natural—yet very unproductive—obsession with the ontological.

“*There’s something about the interpretation....*,” I kept saying to myself, but couldn’t figure out what it was. Halfway through my interviews, it hit me: Attempting to figure out the true ontological nature of my participants’ experiences is a pointless exercise in subjectivity. All I (or anyone else) can know are the descriptive details of an experience, the participant’s

interpretation of it, and my own opinion (cf. Baesler, 1997). Only God can—and presumably, will ever—know whether He actually spoke to so-and-so on such-and-such date, or whether she just imagined it. What I was dealing with, I finally realized, was the epistemological status of DCs, not the ontological one. And it is the participant's *interpretation* of the experience that establishes its epistemological status not just for her but (I argue) for the researcher, too (cf. Kaylor, 2011).

For a participant who interprets an experience as a DC, that experience *is* a DC. But much as that “is” may seem ontological, it is, *so far as we can know*, only epistemological. The participant may be correct: That is, God really did speak to her, in which case, the ontological and epistemological statuses of the experience align; the participant's interpretation is true. Were the statuses to not align, then the participant would be incorrect in her judgment; her interpretation would be false. Clearly, I am applying a correspondence theory of truth here, which assumes that there is an external world in which objects and experiences exist objectively, independent of our interpretations. This view is controversial today, but it is my view. Whether you agree with it or not should not impact your ability to accept the findings of the study that follows, as this point has no bearing on how I conducted the study. I am merely explaining how my thinking on the matter developed over the course of my research.

The realization that I was dealing strictly with the epistemological status of experiences introduced another problem: Whose judgment of an experience should I accept? Mine, or my participants'? Here, communication theory waylaid me again. Campbell's (1776/1823) theory of evidence suggests that testimony from others is stronger evidence for the true occurrence of a particular extraordinary event than is accumulated experience. Accumulated experience would

seem to marshal against the veracity of a purported DC. DCs are, after all, pretty rare occurrences, at least in my experience. And yet, accumulated testimony marshals *for* DC. These considerations, though, seemed to apply only to the general phenomenon of DC, not to particular cases. How was I to make a judgment about the truth of a *particular* extraordinary experience when there was only one witness to give testimony? Campbell would seem to boil such a case down to credibility. Catholic nuns? They certainly have little incentive to lie, I reasoned. And they often opined to me that they had the strongest evidence known to man that their experiences were indeed DCs.

In so reasoning about the relative strength of evidence, experience, and testimony, I came full circle. The bottom line was this: *I* had only the circumstances of the experiences, the participants' interpretations of them, and my own opinion. All the information I had regarding the experiences came from the participants themselves. I was not even present at the original event. It therefore seemed to me rather presumptuous to rely on my own judgment in classifying their experiences as DCs. But if I could not rely on my own judgment, I must rely on that of my participants. Their judgments of the events were the strongest evidence for or against the occurrence of a DC that I had, and so, I concluded, the epistemological status that any particular experience held for *them* must also hold the same status for *me*—at least for the purposes of study.

In making all these considerations, I was one step away from a very important issue that I had not yet explicitly identified as central to the study of DCs. All that separated me from it was the next logical question: *Why* did she believe that it was God speaking to her? When finally it occurred to me to ask that question, I made it the central problem of this study.

If a researcher attempts to describe DCs, then she must first choose which experiences to study as DCs. Making those choices requires making judgments about which experiences qualify and which do not. In the few studies of DCs that exist, the guiding principle in qualifying experiences as DCs worthy of study has indeed been the judgments of participants: If a participant says, “Yes, I believe that was God speaking to me,” then we add it to the list of experiences to examine. Once that list of experiences is complete, researchers look for similarities in circumstantial details in order to describe DCs as a class—particularly in contrast to hallucinations.

This procedure misses a critical step in the classification process. It asks participants to point out which experiences were DCs but does not ask them *why they thought* the experiences were DCs. It leaves to researchers the task of searching for similarities that are then presumed to be the reasons why. But those similarities may very well not be participants’ reasons. That is, similarities in the experiences may be just that: similarities, but they are not necessarily the particular qualities of the experiences that induced participants to believe that the experiences were DCs.

That researcher–participant gap is what this study is about. First, I look at the meager literature on DCs in which researchers have directly surveyed, interviewed, or immersed themselves in Christian communities that believe God speaks to them. From this literature, I draw out the similarities that researchers have identified among DCs and presumed to be the criteria by which individuals establish experiences to be communications from the divine. I formulate this collected, organized body of criteria into a model, which I call (rather unimaginatively) “Academic Criteria for Divine Communication.” I then present the results of

my own interviews, in which I specifically asked participants *how they knew* that an experience was a DC rather than merely a self-generated thought or feeling. Their responses provided me with sufficient information to formulate a competing model, which I call “Participants’ Criteria for Divine Communication.” Finally, I compare the two models and, on the basis of my findings, propose adjustments to the way that academics study DC.

Who cares if academics think about DC differently from lay believers? At the very least, I care. And I think that communication scholars ought to as well. Baesler (2008) agrees that other disciplines have thus far held a near-monopoly on prayer research and makes a strong case for incorporating communication into the mix. In the study of DC in particular, I think that scholars of argumentation, informal logic, and reasoning might discover a virtual intellectual amusement park still largely empty of academics. For example, individuals establishing an experience as a DC engage in a fascinating application of evidence, evidence of a very different sort from what we use under more-normal circumstances. People sometimes make life-changing decisions based upon the thorough conviction that a supremely knowledgeable, credible source has “gifted” them with some kind of knowledge. Why do they believe the “knowledge” is true? What is the evidence that it came from God? What criteria must be fulfilled, what supplementary beliefs must be present, for that evidence to suffice for conviction? How is that evidence different from the types we use to justify more banal beliefs? Is the use of such evidence to form beliefs justifiable according to current theories of evidence? If not, should we adjust our theories?

Researchers of DC should also care. Methodologically speaking, an enormous—unjustified—assumption is made when we seek out similarities among experiences identified as DCs and call those similarities people’s reasons for believing. They may not be. The individual’s

relationship with and understanding of God are so personal and unique that the academic tendency to nomotheticism may considerably distort the reality of DCs. Or it may not. We will never know either way until we examine the differences between the criteria used by individual experiencers of DCs and those posited by researchers.

Presumably, believers care, too. On delivering a first draft of this paper to my participants, I was so ashamed of the hallucination-connection that I felt the need to apologize for any offense caused by the mention of hallucination (cf. West, 1948; Luhrmann, 2012c, p. 194). Believers do not think of their religious experiences in those terms. And we should, I argue, care about the ways in which they *do* think—and reason— about their experiences, even if it breaks with the current trajectory of the academic literature (cf. Kaylor, 2011).

Finally, it would seem from the enthusiastic publicity surrounding Luhrmann's (2012c) recent work that the general public is at least superficially interested in this phenomenon of DC. In the United States, this interest is unsurprising. Talk of hearing God is priceless fuel for the "culture war" that currently divides the country into two opposing camps—religionists and atheists—at least in the media. In this war, the claim of one side that it has a direct channel to God is viewed with skepticism and cynicism by the other. Even within Christian circles, where the claim that one speaks to God in prayer is thoroughly uncontentious, the claim that God *speaks back* to the pray-er often raises eyebrows among mainstream Christians (Luhrmann, 2012c). And yet, many Christians in America are adamant that God not only *has* spoken to them directly but continues to do so (Barna Group, 2010).

I wonder how much "extreme" portrayals of Christians "hearing God" contribute to the widening culture gaps between various denominations of Christians and between Christians and

non-believers. Within academia, research on DC has focused heavily on the experience of evangelical Protestants, largely to the exclusion of mainstream Protestant and Catholic Christians (Davies, Griffin, & Vice, 2001; Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2012c; see also Barna Group, 2010). Usually, the reason proffered for this selection bias is evangelicals' much greater emphasis on personal experience of God (Davies et al., 2001; Luhrmann, 2012c; see also Barna Group, 2010). That claim implies one can expect to get more RSE-bang for one's research-buck with such groups. If that assumption is true, then it is also true that the research-as-it-stands presents a very skewed picture of Christian experience of the divine. What is worse, the sensational effect produced in the public when media seize on research focusing on "extreme" factions of Christianity—far from increasing understanding between the various camps in the American culture war—throws a spotlight on precisely that point where they are most unintelligible to one another.

Thus, in addition to presenting two models of criteria for DC and comparing their contents, the following study has a second objective: It seeks to broaden the picture currently on display in academic research of DC by presenting the experiences of Catholic Christians who have heard God speak.

Throughout this paper, I will avoid "academicizing" (i.e., "atheizing") language that refers to participants' experiences, for example, by changing "who have heard God speak" to "who claim to have heard God speak." I do this for two reasons. First, I respect my participants' beliefs and think that my reporting of those beliefs should prioritize their perspective over academic writing norms. Second, as was already discussed above, my participants were the sole experiencers of the DCs they report. I therefore consider their interpretations of their experiences

much more credible and reliable than any subjective judgment—biased by my own pre-existing theological commitments—that I could make secondhand.

In sum, I propose to (1) explore individuals' experiences of DC from a communication perspective, (2) draw out the reasoning processes that participants themselves used in establishing experiences to be DCs, and (3) broaden the denominational participant base currently available in DC literature. So far as I am aware, this study is the first to undertake any of these objectives. They are important, I think, because communication scholars ought to study *all* forms of communication (Schultze, 2005); because our research participants deserve to have their own reasoning processes heard, understood, and accurately reported; and because studying (only) extreme populations advances neither scholarship nor public civility. Mostly, though, these research objectives are important because they're just that fascinating.

Literature Review

Distinguishing Divine Communications (DCs) from Religious and Spiritual Experiences (RSEs)

I have never seen a distinction made between RSEs and DCs, so I shall make one here for the first time (so far as I am aware). An RSE is “an experience which [*sic*] points beyond normal, everyday life, and which has spiritual or religious significance for the person to whom it happens” (Rankin, 2008, p. 5). Thus, any experience of God, the divine, the transcendent, supernatural, other-worldly, etc., qualifies as an RSE. Only experiences of God, the divine, etc., interpreted by the experiencer to have *communicative content* are DCs.

That is the theoretical distinction between RSEs and DCs. In practice, however, a Venn diagram of the larger category of RSEs containing the smaller category of DCs would likely

show very little uncommon space. When one considers the natural response of a believer to such an experience, this overlap makes sense. For most people, a direct experience of the divine is out of the ordinary—extraordinarily rare, in fact—and thus is likely to immediately cause one to question *why* God gifted it to the experiencer at this particular time, *what He was trying to say*. Thus, even if an RSE manifests nonverbally, its recipient is inclined to search for and assign it communicative meaning. For example, an experience of ecstasy may at first glance appear to have no communicative content, but the experiencer of ecstasy may insist that the experience, although non-verbal, clearly communicated to her God’s love.

I have never found an author refer to DCs as such, either. Luhrmann (2012c), for example, prefers to refer to the phenomenon to which I apply the term DC as “sensory override.” Yet the two terms do not line up precisely. As Luhrmann (2012c) explains her preferred usage:

Someone who experiences a hallucination has a clear perceptual awareness that the source of the sensation was not in his or her mind—and note that if God himself has in fact spoken, the human experience of hearing God is technically a hallucination, because God is immaterial. He is not a sensory stimulus.

Still, the word *hallucination* implies that there is nothing at all to perceive. So I call these occasional sensory perceptions of the immaterial *sensory overrides* because they are moments when perception overrides the material stimulus. They are not experienced as mis-remembering. They are experienced as the sensory perception of something external. The judgment is automatic and basic. That’s why it’s so startling.... That is what people say about sensory overrides: they saw, they felt, they heard, and in so doing, they knew. It seemed real.

Here, Luhmann does not explicitly require that a sensory override have communicative content. Conceivably, then, a sensory override might *not* have communicative content. This conception of the phenomenon under study would be more aptly described as an RSE than as a DC, as I employ the term. However, as would be expected from our imaginary Venn diagram mentioned above, all the sensory overrides Luhmann (2012c) reports her participants having actually *do* contain a communicative component. (In fact, her book-length treatise on sensory overrides is called *When God Talks Back*.) Thus, whether Luhmann intends for her term “sensory override” to refer theoretically to RSEs generally or DCs in particular, in practice it has (at least until now) referred only to DCs.

As a communication scholar, I am primarily concerned with this communicative component of RSEs, not with their sensory or perceptual components. I therefore shy away from Luhmann’s sensory-prioritizing language, preferring instead the term DCs, which I believe makes more clear the relevance of this phenomenon to communication scholarship. I have adapted this term from those coined by Baesler (1997, 1999) and Wolterstorff (1995).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the communication scholar Baesler (1997, 1999) bypasses the general category of RSEs entirely and zooms right in on DCs. He coined the term “radically Divine communication” to refer to (supposedly) ineffable communicative experiences with God during prayer. Unfortunately, Baesler’s description of the possible referents for his preferred term do not make clear precisely what phenomena count as “radically Divine communications” (see below). All the varieties of prayer he designates as “radically Divine communication” may *involve* DCs as I employ the term, but I do not believe that Baesler and I refer to precisely the same set of phenomena with our respective terms (at least not so far as I can tell from his

descriptions). I restrict my usage of “DC” to designate specific, identifiable communications in which God was clearly the sender of a message and the study participant was clearly the receiver. I do not use “DC” to refer to types, forms, or modes of prayer in general but rather to particular experiences experienced at a particular time.

The analytic philosopher Wolterstorff (1995) also does not distinguish between RSEs and DCs, as he wrote primarily to justify the philosophical possibility of personal, direct divine discourse as distinct from divine revelation. However, his usage of the term “divine discourse” refers to *precisely* the same phenomenon for which I use the term “DC.”

Technically, then, I combine adaptations of both Baesler’s and Wolterstorff’s terms: of Baesler’s, because I think it necessary to separate out from the many varieties of potential communion with the divine those unusual, isolable experiences in which God clearly speaks to an individual; of Wolterstorff’s, because I refer to precisely the same phenomenon as he, i.e., to clear, direct communication from the divine.

The Study of Divine Communication (DC)

Though research on RSEs is abundant in many disciplines, research into the smaller category of RSEs that can be distinguished as experiences of DC has been minimal. Strictly speaking, only Luhrmann (2011, 2012c), Davies et al. (2001), and Dein and Littlewood (2007) have surveyed, interviewed, or immersed themselves in Christian communities with the intent of discovering how members experience and interpret DCs. These three studies, being the closest in methodology and focus to my study, will form the foundation for the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication I have developed. However, because strictly relevant studies are so few, I will explore here a slightly broader collection of literature in order to make clear how

various disciplines may contribute to the study of DC.

Communication. In describing his term “radically Divine communications,” Baesler (1997, 1999) asserts that such experiences are “ineffable and thus cannot be linguistically captured with traditional communication concepts” (1999, p. 51). Certainly it is clear what Baesler intends to say: Some experiences of God so transcend everyday human experience as to be beyond normal human language. And yet, precisely for such experiences we have spiritual terms like “ecstasy,” “rapture,” and “mystical.” True, these are vague, but they give us a rough idea of the experience, or at least of what “mental category” we might place it in. In attempting to describe such an experience more specifically, we may indeed never be able to “capture” it perfectly in language, and yet we constantly attempt to do so *imperfectly* through metaphors, multi-sensory description, and the like. Indeed, both the Bible and believers are quite accustomed to discussing God and other spiritual beings and phenomena through anthropomorphized language. I would argue, then, that no experience of the divine is *truly* “ineffable” insofar as we can relate or compare it to the closest human equivalent.

Determining what Baesler means by “ineffable” is even more difficult when one considers the experiences he intends the term “radically Divine communications” to refer to: mental conversation with God, contemplative prayer, mystical union (1997), voices, rapture, ecstasy, and “gentle, quiet, and peace-filled infusions of Divine love” (1999, p. 54). If “radically Divine communications” are truly ineffable, then how do “conversations” and “voices” fit in? Certainly an individual who hears a divine voice would be able to “capture” what it said.

It is also not clear from the mix of experiences Baesler identifies as “radically Divine communications” whether God is in fact doing any communicating, or whether the individual is

merely speaking to the Divine, as is the case in all prayer. Baesler (1999) asserts that he assigned the term “radically *Divine* communication” to these experiences precisely to point out their origin in God. But I argue that contemplative prayer does not always involve identifiable communication from God. Does Baesler intend for contemplative prayer to be classified as “radically Divine communication” only when an identifiable DC occurs in the context of such prayer? Or is contemplative prayer to be regarded as a special genre of prayer that is always “radically Divine communication” whether God says anything identifiable or not? If the former is correct, then contemplative prayer is not, *per se*, any kind of DC but merely a prayer context in which a DC may (or may not) occur. If the latter is the case, then Baesler would seem to qualify certain types of prayer as “radically Divine communication” regardless of whether God communicates through them in any given instance—which renders pointless the classification of them as DCs.

The latter issue may be resolved by Baesler’s (1999) adoption of the Christian viewpoint that *all* prayer originates in God, from which it follows that God is *always* communicatively present in prayer. I question the usefulness of this resolution of Baesler’s definition problem, for it would “swiftly totalize the problem” (Ward, 2013, p. 209): If we justify the classification of an experience as “radically Divine communication” on the sole basis that it happened in prayer and God is always communicatively present in prayer, then we lose all ability to distinguish between different types of prayer experiences, between DCs of varying intensity, etc. That is not to mention that, to a Christian, *everything* originates in God, not just prayer, and technically God is *always* communicatively present, not just in prayer. Thus, we might just as well, on the basis of *this* Christian belief, classify everything as “radically Divine communication”—which would

render the classification meaningless.

The Christian view on prayer that Baesler cites does indeed resolve his definition problem, but this resolution is not satisfactory. Research requires that one be able to isolate particular experiences for study (Ward, 2013), and for that, one must have a way to distinguish between those experiences. Baesler's concept of "radically Divine communications" does not appear to be sufficiently well thought out to accomplish that task.

Philosophy. Like Baesler, Wolterstorff (1995) addresses the subject of DC strictly theoretically, but he does so much more successfully. And though he gives only an occasional example to illustrate the phenomenon of "divine discourse" (as he calls DC), these make perfectly clear what he means by the term. His first example, used to set the stage for his subsequent philosophical argument from Austin's speech act theory, is the most thorough. Because it does an outstanding job of illustrating precisely what is meant—practically speaking—by "DC," I will quote it at length. In order to understand Wolterstorff's explication, however, we must first be familiar with the text to which Wolterstorff applies his genius. That text is the passage from St. Augustine's *Confessions* (1961) in which the saint describes his conversion experience. I now reproduce that here:

...[I]n my misery I kept crying "How long shall I go on saying 'tomorrow, tomorrow?' Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?"

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain "Take it and read, take it and read" [*tolle lege, tolle lege*]. At this I

looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. For I had heard the story of Antony [of the Desert], and I remembered how he had happened to go into a church while the Gospel was being read and had taken it as a counsel addressed to himself when he heard the words *Go home and sell all that belongs to you. Give it to the poor, and so the treasure you have shall be in heaven; then come back and follow me.* By this divine pronouncement he had at once been converted to you.

So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting, for when I stood up to move away I had put down the book containing Paul's Epistles. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: *Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites.* I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled. (pp. 177–178)

Wolterstorff interprets this passage to contain not one, but two DCs: the first via the child as medium, the second via St. Paul's epistle. He explicates precisely how St. Augustine came to interpret the experiences as such:

Tolle lege, tolle lege; take and read, take and read: the most famous words any child has ever uttered.... [A]fter the briefest reflection, he had no doubt that by way of the child

chanting these words, *God* was then and there saying something, performing a speech action; specifically, an action of *commanding*. The command was not addressed to some collectivity of human beings but addressed specifically to him: God was commanding *him* to open *his* book of Scripture and read the first passage on which *his* eye should fall. Perhaps the child was doing no more than uttering words—over and over for the sake of the sound of them. Or perhaps the child was also performing a speech action. If so, presumably that action was also an action of *commanding* or *requesting*. The content of the command would have been different, however, from the content of God's command. For the child was not commanding *Augustine* to open *his* copy of scripture and read the first thing on which *his* eye should fall; the child didn't know Augustine, and hence couldn't issue such a command. Either way, two agents: the divine agent saying something by way of the human agent either just uttering words, or saying something by way of uttering words....

Why did Augustine believe that God was then and there speaking to him? Long before he stumbled out into the garden, Augustine believed that God was a speaking God—that God says things to human beings. That belonged to his background beliefs. Now in his misery he hears the strange phenomenon of a child chanting over and over, "*tolle lege, tolle lege.*" He can think of only one thing in human affairs which would lead a child to chant in this fashion: a game. But he can recall no game involving this chant. Then the story he has just heard comes to mind, of Antony addressed by God through a reading of scripture which he just happens to hear. That's it: background belief that God speaks, inexplicable uncanny chanting, sudden intimation of the possibility, and

relevance to his own life, of God saying *take and read*. The quick train of thought eventuates in Augustine saying to himself: “this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall.” If one is looking for it, perhaps one can spot in the process a quick calculation of probabilities; but if so, what a careless job of collecting evidence! No careful research into children’s games. No hurdling the wall to ask the child why he or she was chanting these words. And—let it be noted—no miracles! Just a few quick thoughts resulting in Augustine finding himself saying to himself that this could only be God speaking to him. Neither then nor later did anything come to mind or happen to him which led him to doubt this interpretation. Quite the contrary: the light of confidence flooded into his heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.

Augustine obeyed the divine imperative. On the page to which his copy of Paul’s letters happened to fall open, he read silently the first lines which happened to catch his eye. And then, by way of his doing this, God spoke to him a second time. (pp. 5–6)

Religious studies. The approach taken by Wolterstorff in his exegesis of St. Augustine’s conversion is similar—though much more focused on the object of study with which we are here concerned—to that of Religious Studies scholars, who have investigated RSEs (some of which, incidentally, were DCs) primarily via analysis of historical texts. Unfortunately, few writers throughout history have described such events with the detail of circumstance and on-the-spot reasoning as St. Augustine in the account of his conversion. Thus, researchers of RSEs in Religious Studies have had little material with which to craft a model of the reasoning processes behind the interpretation of RSEs as DCs and have focused instead upon the manifestation of the

more general phenomenon of RSEs across time and cultures. (See, for example, Taves, 1999.)

Religious writers (theology/mysticism/lay religion). In contrast, the study specifically of communication from the divine has long been a subject of interest in theological writing by religious authors, particularly by mystics. St. Teresa of Avila (1577/2009) offered fellow contemplatives at least eight signs by which to distinguish the truly divine origin of locutions, which are DCs taking verbal form and experienced either internally in a way similar to thoughts or externally via the ears. St. John of the Cross (1579/1991) distinguished 25 different ways that one can receive knowledge from the divine. In so doing, he covered, essentially, the full panoply of sensory experiences that may serve as channels for the reception of such knowledge (and disapproved of all but one of them). As religious, Sts. Teresa and John wrote for their sisters and brothers in the Carmelite order, with the purpose of enumerating, describing, and urging interpretive caution about the various ways God may communicate with individuals.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, on the other hand, the famous non-mystic, Jesuit author of the *Spiritual Exercises* (1548/2012), is quite keen to teach readers how to interpret the “movements of the Spirit” within them precisely in order that they may make decisions, act on, and generally live by the things they learn directly from God in this way. St. Ignatius’ most well-known modern interpreter, Father Timothy M. Gallagher (2007, 2009, 2012), writes, teaches, and even hosts a television show in which he illuminates St. Ignatius’ Rules for the Discernment of Spirits through the use of copious, real-world examples. While some of these examples are from the biographies of saints, the bulk is drawn from Father Gallagher’s personal communications with normal, everyday, modern people. After all, Father Gallagher’s goal for his work is to teach regular folks like you and me how to discern the will of God—which includes interpreting

communications from God.

Carmelite or Jesuit, cautious or eager, the writings of these religious authors often read like handbooks for the discernment and interpretation of DCs. They teach general principles that individual readers can apply to their own experience to better understand the presence and will of God in their lives. They do not examine the particular experiences of individuals and describe how those individuals determined that an experience was a DC, as Wolterstorff so skillfully did in his explication of St. Augustine's conversion. As such, these writings are largely irrelevant to the narrow focus of the study presented here.

Psychology. Psychological research into RSEs began under another name, associated not with the religious and spiritual but with the “psychical” and hallucinatory. The Sidgwick Committee's (1894) *Report on the Census of Hallucinations*, produced for the Society for Psychical Research (UK), is likely the most extensive, thorough survey of individuals on the subject of paranormal experiences ever published. Over three years, 410 data collectors gathered responses from 17,000 respondents, 10% of whom claimed to have had some kind of paranormal experience ranging from visions of the dead to strange lights. Many respondents interpreted their experiences to “mean” something, i.e., to have communicative content. However, of the 1,700 affirmative responses the Sidgwick Committee analyzed, only 22 fell into the category “angels and religious phantasms” (Table II, p. 40), of which the authors say next to nothing (see p. 128). DC was not the focus of the study; rather, telepathy was.

In 1948, West repeated the Sidgwick survey on a smaller scale, with the same focus and roughly the same findings (though he reported them with considerably less confidence than his predecessors). An earlier study of similar experiences (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886) for the

same society includes, in a few cases, slightly more detail regarding participants' interpretations of apparitions as DCs but nowhere near enough to draw conclusions or even identify patterns.

Both the Sidgwick Committee and West dropped from their analyses any experience they considered to fall outside the definition of a hallucination. Dropped categories included "visions seen with closed eyes," "visual impressions not fully externalised," "auditory impressions not fully externalised," and "experiences described as too vague to be defined" (Sidgwick et al., 1894, Appendix C, Table ii, p. 406). While the last category of experiences is understandably excluded as impossible to classify, the first three categories reveal the strict perceptual focus of these surveys. If an experience happened entirely or even partially "inside the head" of the respondent, Sidgwick and West discarded it. As we shall see, however, the overwhelming majority of DCs manifest interiorly, not exteriorly. Thus, the studies of the Society for Psychical Research were *a priori* biased against finding evidence for the phenomenon of DC.

Again, this bias makes sense given Sidgwick's and West's stated purpose of reporting objective evidence of telepathy. In fact, their research was not focused on DCs or RSEs. Rather, it focused on an even broader class of supernatural experiences usually classified as paranormal, and it focused on how respondents perceived these experiences via their senses.

Foundational studies of DC. I return now to the three studies most closely related—both in subject and methodology—to my study: Luhrmann (2011, 2012c), Davies et al. (2001), and Dein and Littlewood (2007). In their subject matter, these three focused closely on the experience of DC. In their methodology, they employed immersion (Luhrmann, 2011, 2012c), interviews (Luhrmann, 2011, 2012c; Dein & Littlewood, 2007), or surveys (Davies et al., 2001; Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2012c). In their theoretical explication, they continued in

the tradition of Sidgwick and West, who focused on the sensory perception of paranormal experiences, particularly on their similarities to hallucinations.

Davies et al. (2001) surveyed 18 schizophrenic outpatients, 29 evangelical Christians, and 55 control participants about their experiences of hearing audible voices (auditory hallucinations). The researchers found that schizophrenics were most likely to report hearing voices, followed by evangelical and then control participants. More importantly, evangelicals had the most positive affective reaction to their experiences, followed by control participants and then schizophrenics, whose affective reaction to their experiences was markedly negative. The authors argued that the meaning assigned to voices—i.e., percipients' interpretation of their experiences—is likely the factor that makes the difference in participants' affective reactions.

Dein and Littlewood (2007) surveyed 40 Pentecostal Christians and interviewed the 25 of them who reported hearing the voice of God. Unlike for Davies et al., Dein and Littlewood interpreted “the voice of God” to include both externally and internally perceived experiences. The authors found that individuals received DCs in different ways at different times. (Contrast this finding with the Sidgwick Committee's that hallucinations of the variety they investigated appear to run in families and to manifest similarly among family members.) Participants received DCs both during and outside of prayer. They were easily able to distinguish God's voice from their own and felt themselves to have no control over it. Like Davies et al., Dein and Littlewood found participants' affective reactions to DCs to be generally positive. Participants even reported some physiological reactions, such as “warmth or lightheadedness” (p. 219). Participants commonly reported that DCs were accompanied by an “inner sense of knowing” (p. 219). The content of a DC was often reported to be very practical, concerning decisions or activities of

importance in the life of the percipient. Internally perceived DCs were often distinguished by their occurring out of the blue (rather than naturally arising out of a gradual train of thought) and of being perplexingly persistent if ignored. Finally, DCs were perceived as not compelling, i.e., as leaving the percipient's agency and free will intact.

Luhrmann's (2011, 2012c) study of DCs (which she calls "sensory overrides") is hands-down the most extensive of any to date. For over four years, the Stanford anthropologist immersed herself in two Vineyard Christian Fellowship church communities. She prayed, worshipped, and studied with the evangelical members and interviewed over 30 of them. In her book-length analysis of her contact with Vineyard Christians, she draws on four primary psychological concepts to explain how they experience DCs: sensory override, learning, absorption, and reality monitoring.

Sensory override. Sensory override is the central concept in Luhrmann's investigation of DC in the evangelical community. One experiences a sensory override when one perceives the immaterial with one's physical senses: sight, sound, touch, etc. Both hallucinations and sensory overrides involve perception in the absence of a material stimulus. A sensory override is distinguished from a hallucination in this way: Whereas a hallucination is experienced without *any* stimulus, material or immaterial, a sensory override is experienced as the result of an immaterial stimulus, i.e., God.

Learning. According to Luhrmann, learning is critical to hearing and discerning DCs. She found that new Vineyard members undertook a specific learning program with the express purpose of experiencing more DCs. This program involved training members' attention to slight differences in thoughts, feelings, and events. Once members learned to recognize the subtle

differences, they were able to interpret thoughts, feelings, and events either as DCs or as self-generated (or diabolical) phenomena. Specific activities that Vineyard members undertook to train their attention and interpretive skills included spending increased time and focus in prayer; journaling; contemplating (rather than simply dismissing) dreams; learning general guidelines for the discernment of DCs from books, sermons, and conversations; and searching for patterns in their mental activities. The practice of kataphatic prayer in particular was critical (perhaps absolutely necessary) to such training. Kataphatic prayer (as opposed to apophatic, “centering” prayer, which is more like Buddhist meditation) is Ignatian-style prayer, which trains people to imagine sensory stimuli (such as how a biblical scene looked, smelled, and sounded) in great detail. The result of such practices, as Luhrmann (2012c) describes it, is that Vineyard members “speak as if they had literally developed a sophisticated map of their own mental life and become able to recognize God’s presence in what they had previously experienced as a fuzzy mental blur” (p. 60).

Part of this learning process focuses not just on attention but on interpretation itself. Learning to discern DCs involves an opening-up to one’s own imagination, a willing suspension of belief in the self-generation of (i.e., locus of control within the self over) mental events. As Vineyard members learned to discern DCs, the usual boundaries people draw in assigning agency shifted; their designation of the source of a phenomenon as internal or external became much more flexible.

The main point is that the mental muscles developed in prayer work on the boundary between thought and perception, between what is attributed to the mind—internal, self-generated, private, and hidden from view—and what exists in the world. They focus

attention on the words and images on one side of the boundary, and they treat those words and images as if they belonged on the other. (Luhmann, 2012c, p. 184)

Absorption. Absorption, measured in Psychology by the Tellegen Absorption Scale, refers to a capacity similar to transportation in Communication literature. The difference is that, in transportation, an individual is transported into a narrative, an external text, whereas absorption is the ability of an individual to be transported (so to speak) into her own internal world: imagination, sensory perceptions, etc. Absorption is the ability to focus intensely upon inner mental processes—thoughts, feelings, perceptions, or even nothingness, “emptiness”—to the exclusion of external distractions. In a narrow sense, the Tellegen Absorption Scale measures one’s capacity for intense, focused prayer or meditation.

Luhmann found that a person’s score on the Tellegen Absorption Scale was not determined by the amount of time the person spent in prayer. This finding supports the generally agreed upon conception of absorption as a relatively constant personality trait. However, absorption scores did correlate with *how* one prayed, particularly, with how much one felt one’s senses to be involved in prayer and with how many DCs one received. Holding absorption scores constant, time spent in prayer turned out to correlate directly with how personally one experienced God. Thus, in contrast to the conception of absorption as generally unchanging, but in consonance with Luhmann’s learning theory, it appears that individuals can indeed learn to increase their capacity for absorption and that more absorption/more time in (kataphatic) prayer can increase one’s experiences of DCs.

Reality monitoring. Reality monitoring—the brain’s automatic process of establishing the source of an experience—ties the previous three concepts together and provides Luhmann’s

ultimate explanation of how believers experience DC.

From the reality monitoring perspective, hallucination-like experiences [i.e., sensory overrides/RSEs/DCs] occur not because there's something wrong with your mind, but because you interpret something you imagined as being real in the world. The issue is perceptual bias, not perceptual deficit. The psychologist Richard Bentall, who is the primary intellectual architect of this interpretation, suggests that the most common conditions that lead to hallucinations—what we might call the ingredients of a supernatural experience—are an ambiguous stimulus, emotional arousal, and cognitive expectation. Someone who perceives an ambiguous noise is more likely to interpret it; someone who needs an answer is more likely to listen for one; and someone who believes that an answer can be heard is more likely to hear one. (Luhrmann, 2012c, pp. 218–219)

When an individual experiences an ambiguous sensory stimulus, the human mind automatically fills in the ambiguity gap with information drawn from similar experiences in the past. For example, if I hear a vague but indistinguishable sound in the distance and see a dog far off that appears to be moving its mouth, I am likely to “perceive” the sound as barking, even though I do not, technically, perceive it as such with my ears. Rather, my brain puts the ambiguous sound and the mouth-moving dog together and completes the experience for me with the (based upon previous experience) most logical filler: barking. My brain's automatic interpretation has, in a manner of speaking, caused me to believe that I have perceived something via my senses when, in fact, I have only foisted imagined barking upon the reality of my perception.

People with background belief in a personal, loving god, argues Luhrmann, experience

DC in the same way. Belief in a god who intervenes in human affairs, who directs and guides the actions of those he loves, is interpretatively foisted onto ambiguous stimuli to create the “perception” of God speaking to His beloved. Learning and absorption can increase the frequency with which this occurs because humans discern real from imagined experiences on two bases: the amount of sensory detail that the person remembers about an experience and the relative amount of cognitive effort the person feels she invested in generating the experience. Experiences that can be recalled in great sensory detail or that required very little cognitive effort to perceive are presumed to have been real. Vague recollections and experiences that required a great deal of cognitive effort to perceive are presumed to have been imagined. The type of learning that Vineyard Christians undertake—especially the practice of kataphatic prayer—trains them in absorption, i.e., the mental creation and recollection of great quantities of sensory detail. The more they practice it, the more cognitively effortless it becomes. The more effortless extremely detailed imagining becomes, the more it seems real.

The practice part is critical to experiencing sensory override with any degree of regularity because it is the process that, essentially, “re-wires” the way the brain fills in the gaps of ambiguous stimuli. In a typical person unpracticed in kataphatic prayer, the brain draws filler from years of everyday experiences of reality. In a person practiced in kataphatic prayer, the brain has learned to draw not from everyday experiences but from the background belief in a God who loves—and speaks. In this way, Vineyard members blur the line between the imagined and the real, between the internal and external, between the self-generated and the DC.

Luhrmann’s common features of DCs. In addition to this elaborate explanation of the perception of DCs, Luhrmann (2012c) cites several common features of such experiences: Like

Dein and Littlewood (2007), she found that DCs were “rare, brief, and not distressing” (p. 234); occurred spontaneously, seeming to come out of the blue; were experienced as more intense or perceived as “stronger” than everyday perceptions; were more emotionally potent, i.e., often accompanied by intense feelings of joy, peace, calm, etc., and by “a sense of knowing somehow deeper than everyday knowledge” (p. 58); and were not compelling, i.e., left the experiencer’s agency and free will intact.

Seeing versus hearing. Although Luhrmann’s (2011, 2012c) research focused on evangelical Protestants, she makes several comparisons between the experiences of her participants and those of Catholics. The “biggest” claim in this regard is that evangelical Protestants “hear more” while Catholics “see more.” Dein and Littlewood (2007), also interviewing evangelical Protestants, likewise found that few of their participants saw things; hearing was much more common.

The findings of Sidgwick et al. (1894) and West (1948) are interesting in this regard. The Sidgwick Committee interviewed primarily Anglos (Britons, Americans, Australians, etc.) and French. Many of the French may have been Catholic, but the committee did not specify religious affiliation of participants in its report. West surveyed only Britons and likewise did not specify religious affiliation in his report. Nonetheless, considering that West based his survey questions and data analysis upon the Sidgwick Report published 54 years earlier, it is interesting that the relative frequencies of visual and auditory experiences reported changed: In 1890, 54.8% of hallucinations were exclusively visual, and 25.6% were exclusively auditory. In 1948, 48% were exclusively visual, and 31.7% were exclusively auditory (West, 1948, Table II, p. 191). Thus, the historical trend in experiences of this sort appears to be toward the auditory and away from the

visual.

Luhrmann's claim that Protestants "hear more" while Catholics "see more" is based upon the writings of various authors and, apparently, her personal experience of Catholic churches: "Catholic churches are like a feast for the senses, vision above all" (Luhrmann, 2011, p. 77). This observation is narrow-sighted, at best. Certainly, if one enters a Catholic church as a tourist, one will mostly see: stained-glass windows, statues of saints, intricate paintings, ornate altarwork. But if one attends a Mass in a Catholic church, then one may encounter all manner of sensory stimuli: singing, chanting, call-and-response prayer, bells, organ, incense, the taste of the Body and the Blood (offered at *every* Catholic Mass), etc.

Bauer et al. (2010) found auditory hallucinations most prevalent in a sample of 1,080 schizophrenic patients from 7 countries. As Luhrmann (2011) reports Bauer et al.'s findings, the patients from "Catholic Poland" (Luhrmann, 2011, p. 77) experienced a higher proportion of visual hallucinations than patients from (presumably Protestant) Austria. In fact, 90% of Poles are Catholic (only 75% being practicing Catholics; Central Intelligence Agency, 2013c). But only 5% of Austrians are Protestant; 74% are as Catholic as the Poles (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013a). Furthermore, another Western country sampled by Bauer et al., Lithuania, showed *lower* rates of visual hallucination than Austria despite having a larger Catholic population: 79% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013b). This finding does not support the claim that Catholics "see more" than Protestants, and Luhrmann does not report it.

The other authors Luhrmann (2011) cites to support this claim are Christian (1981, 1987, 1998), who explored apparitions in 14th- to 20th-century Spain; De La Cruz (2009), who analyzed Marian visions (some of which included auditory phenomena) in the Philippines in

2004; Dyrness (2004), who studied visual culture in the Reform tradition from 1500 to 1750; Shenoda (2010), who provides an ethnographic account of miracles among Egyptian Copts; and Schmidt (2000), who explores how religious communities and atheists during the American Enlightenment fought over the claim that God speaks to man and over the proper roles of hearing and listening in a changing age. Schmidt (2000) states in his introduction:

In giving such concerted attention to listening, there is one historical echo that I imagine could prove particularly misleading and that I wish to forswear at the outset: namely, the apparent reiteration of Protestantism's bias toward logocentrism. As Martin Luther famously declared, "God no longer requires the feet or the hands or any other member; He requires only the ears.... The ears alone are the organs of a Christian." Given such foundational preoccupations, Protestants have long been presented as exclusive privilegists of the auditory, iconoclastic Hebraicists in an increasingly ocularcentric world. But Protestantism's visuality—from emphases on the visible gospel of the sacraments to the use of popular prints to spread its teachings to a proliferation of devotional souvenirs—has now been well established, so aurality can hardly be taken as coextensive with Protestant sensibilities. The presentation of hearing as "the sense of faith, the sense which receives instruction and accepts the divine word," is, after all, as much a Catholic as it is a Protestant understanding. While Luther, Calvin, and their varied descendants intensely valorized hearing, the singular anatomy of Protestantism, its common reduction to the ear, comes now with a lengthy proviso. Any schema that continues to posit predictable ratios between the eye and the ear in any given tradition (whether Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim) needs to be laid aside. (p. 13)

Suffice to say, none of these authors used a methodological approach comparable to Luhrmann's, nor even a demographic group remotely comparable to hers. And while it is clear from Bauer et al. (2010) that culture may impact the particular sense via which hallucinations are most frequently experienced, that study does not support the conclusion that Catholics “see more” than Protestants, a claim that Schmidt (2000) also directly counters. It should be interesting, then, to discover whether contemporary American Catholics do indeed “see more” or “hear more.”

Summary of the Literature

While RSEs have been extensively studied, DC has received scant attention from scholars. Writers in philosophy, religious studies, theology, lay religion, and psychology have all contributed to knowledge of DC from different angles. These different angles are the very reason that more study of DC is necessary: to synthesize what is known about the phenomenon and to systematize the way it is studied.

From the angle of psychology, the work of Davies et al. (2001), Dein and Littlewood (2007), and Luhrmann (2011, 2012c) rightfully belong in the tradition of Sidgwick (1894) and West (1948) on account of their focus on the *sensory perception* of supernatural experiences. From the perspective of *epistemology and interpretation*, however, the phenomena investigated by the contemporary researchers seem starkly different from those of their predecessors. To advance the study of DC as its own phenomenon—rather than as a subspecies of hallucination—it is necessary to explore what makes DC different. Given that the sensory perception of DC is largely similar to that of hallucination, the epistemological and interpretative aspects of DC would seem to be a good place to start looking for differences.

To discover the epistemological and interpretative aspects of DC, we must get inside the

heads of our participants to understand how *they* believe, understand, and interpret their experiences. To infer participants' reasoning from similarities that scholars studying hallucinations discover in participants' descriptions of their experiences of DC is not only insufficient for this purpose but also fallacious. We need to discover whether the similarities that scholars have found in participants' reports of DC are in fact the phenomenological qualities that participants use to discern an experience as a DC.

A Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication

Before we can break away from the academic hallucination model of DC, we must establish what it is. Fortunately, in the process of attempting to distinguish between DCs and hallucinations, several authors (Davies et al., 2001; Dein and Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2011, 2012c) have haphazardly compiled lists of the phenomenological similarities they discovered among the specific instances of DC reported by their participants. These I have gathered into a single, easily referenced collection, which I call the "Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication" comprising the eight criteria below.

1. The experience is rare, not something one experiences every day (Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2011; Luhrmann, 2012c). This criterion appears important for distinguishing DC experiences from one's own thoughts (including from psychotic hallucinations, which are experienced frequently) as well as for providing a stronger guarantee or assurance of certainty regarding the divine origin of the communication.
2. The experience is brief, lasting only a moment or two, not enduring over minutes or hours (Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2011; Luhrmann, 2012c). Again, this criterion appears to distinguish the DC from the self-generated fantasy and from psychotic hallucinations (which are enduring).

3. The experience is spontaneous, comes “out of nowhere,” is startling, manifests in its entirety in an instant as opposed to at a “normal” pace, and is not a natural or logical continuation of what the person had been thinking at the time the communication occurred (Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2012c). This criterion appears to distinguish the DC from experiences that are self-generated with cognitive effort over the course of a gradual process of reasoning.
4. The experience is not distressing (Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2011; Luhrmann, 2012c). This criterion appears to distinguish DCs from psychotic hallucinations and diabolical communications (which are distressing).
5. The communication is “stronger” or “louder” than other thoughts, feelings, or sensations, to the extent that it forces itself on one’s attention and cannot be ignored (Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2012c). This criterion appears to distinguish DCs from the “normal” thoughts, feelings, and sensations that one experiences all day, every day. It implies that one has control over the “volume” of self-generated thoughts and that one is sufficiently familiar with the “average strength” of feelings and sensations to know when that average has been significantly and abnormally exceeded. It also implies that most thoughts, feelings, and sensations are fleeting, or at least can be willfully ignored or dismissed.
6. The experience is “more emotionally potent” than other thoughts, feelings, or sensations and is especially marked by intense positive affect such as feelings of overwhelming peace, joy, relief, certainty, clarity, etc. (Davies et al., 2001; Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2012c). This criterion appears to perform the same function as (5). The intense positivity of the experience would also seem to strengthen and reinforce (4), particularly with regard to the

distinction between DCs and psychotic hallucinations, which are typically accompanied by intense negative affect.

7. The experience is accompanied by noetic knowledge, i.e., “a sense of knowing somehow deeper than everyday knowledge” (Luhmann, 2012c, p. 58; see also Dein & Littlewood, 2007). This criterion appears, like (3), to distinguish the DC from “normal” means of coming to know, i.e., from self-generated knowledge that results from an effortful process of reasoning. It also appears to distinguish between the usual kinds of knowing that are strictly cognitive and a divinely imparted kind of knowing that is experienced with one’s whole being.
8. The communication is not compelling (Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhmann, 2012c). In the academic literature, this criterion appears to serve the sole purpose of aiding the researcher in distinguishing the DC, which leaves one’s agency and free will intact, from psychotic hallucinations, which often feel as if they usurp the individual’s agency and drive him to behaviors beyond his control.

As has been stated above, these criteria appear in the literature to have been derived by a questionable process of collection and inference: A researcher asks a participant to describe experiences in which she heard God speak; the participant describes her experiences; and the researcher adds them to a collection of DCs for future analysis. Once all the data are in, the researcher pores over the experiences described, looks for similarities, and assumes these similarities are the reasons people believed their experiences were DCs as opposed to psychotic hallucinations or everyday, self-generated experiences. All the while, the researcher’s desire to contribute to academic knowledge of hallucinations biases what s/he sees and acknowledges as important in participants’ descriptions.

In fact, the phenomenological similarities we find among DCs may not be the qualities of those experiences that participants use to discern them at all. Perhaps participants as a group are using a wholly different set of criteria to form beliefs about the nature of their unusual experiences. Perhaps different individuals use different criteria. Or perhaps the criteria participants use depend upon the nature of the experience (e.g., verbal, non-verbal, contextual conditions, etc.). We do not know.

Post Hoc Application of Rules qua Criteria

Luhrmann (2012c, pp. 60–65) reports four “rules” that her participant pool uses to identify a communication as of divine origin:

1. Is the communication something one might have thought or said to oneself anyway?
2. Is the communication in harmony with Scripture?
3. Can the communication be externally confirmed (via the prayer or life experiences of others, for example)?
4. Was the communication accompanied by feelings of peace and comfort?

As should be readily apparent, these rules are applied to an experience *post hoc* to “test” whether one’s interpretation of that experience as a DC could in fact be accurate. Such testing is often an important process for Christians, but it is very different from the more subtle, rapid process that an individual undergoes *during the experience itself*. During the experience itself, the individual (usually unconsciously) takes note of the ways in which the experience differs from natural, everyday experiences, and from these concludes that the experience was not natural but supernatural. The eight criteria above are the only experience-internal criteria that modern scholars have reported as integral to participants’ making that inference from “different” to

“supernatural.”

For researchers, rules applied *post hoc* are problematic for the reliable classification of DCs. Taking Luhrmann’s participants’ rules as an example: The first may be extremely difficult to know. The second may depend upon how one interprets Scripture and/or which place in Scripture one looks for confirmation. The third is staunchly opposed by St. John of the Cross (1579/1991), as human beings tend to interpret DCs “corporeally” as opposed to “spiritually” and thus search for external confirmation in the wrong ways. The fourth is, as seen above, already one of the experience-internal criteria that individuals use to establish the difference/supernaturalness of an experience anyway.

Given the already great difficulty of accurately classifying experiences as DCs according to participants’ interpretations (Taves, 2005), it seems prudent to focus research only on those that participants identified *immediately* as *unquestionably* of divine origin.¹ An experience that left one wondering, “Was that God, or was that just me?” and that was only determined to be of divine origin upon a *post hoc* application of experience-external rules provides the researcher with far less guarantee that the participant’s designation of the experience as a DC is not merely the artifact of confirmation bias, misinterpretation, misapplication of the rules, etc.

Acknowledging such a distinction in the classification of DCs does not deny that experiences determined to be DCs *post hoc* may sometimes be correctly categorized as such. Nor does it claim that God never speaks in more subtle ways that do not immediately and undeniably betray that He is the speaker. It merely suggests that experiences about which participants immediately

¹ Luhrmann (2012c) provides examples that make clear that she did not restrict her data pool to such experiences. In Davies et al. (2001) and Dein and Littlewood (2010), it is impossible to tell. I suspect that the media excitement surrounding Luhrmann’s work is partially due to this loose categorization of DCs. Granted, Luhrmann was faithful to her participants’ interpretations of their experiences, and as an anthropologist, she was exploring broader patterns than I am here. However, in qualifying experiences *for study* as she did, her work sometimes gives the impression of Christians as people who believe they have God on speed-dial. That is priceless fuel for the culture war.

have no doubt whatsoever regarding their divine origin are the “safest” ones to study.

Research Questions

On the basis of the newly developed Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication, and the flaws inherent in it, I propose to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What criteria do participants use to determine that a communication was of divine origin?

RQ2: How closely do the criteria that participants use to establish the origin of a communication as divine align with the criteria in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication?

Dein and Littlewood (2007) found that individuals may experience DC differently at different times. This finding contrasts with the more general finding of Sidgwick et al. (1894) that the propensity to experience paranormal phenomena appears to run in families, as does the manner in which such experiences manifest. My study involves religious orders, which are social groups that are, in some ways, similar to families. Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ3: Are individual participants prone to experience DCs consistently in certain ways, or does the way they experience DCs vary at different times?

RQ4: Do participants in particular religious orders experience DCs more or less than participants in other religious orders?

RQ5: Do participants in different religious orders experience DCs in different ways?

Luhrmann (2011, 2012c) makes the poorly supported claim that Catholics “see more” and Protestants “hear more.” This claim is ambiguously worded. It seems clear from her subsequent discussion of it that Luhrmann intends to say that Catholics have more visual DCs than

Protestants do while Protestants have more auditory DCs than Catholics do. On closer inspection, though, she may just as well be saying that Catholics experience more visual DCs than they experience auditory DCs while Protestants experience more auditory DCs than they do visual DCs. In other words, the claim could be reflexive (e.g., the proportion of visual vs. auditory experiences among Catholics) or comparative (e.g., the proportion of visual vs. auditory experiences between Catholics and Protestants)—or both.

It is possible that both claims are the case, but it is also possible that neither or only one of the two is. Bauer et al. (2010) provide evidence that the manner in which schizophrenics experience hallucinations is indeed influenced by culture, which might support the “both” conclusion. Schmidt (2000) vehemently denies that any sensory bias can be attributed to any religious group, which would support the “neither” conclusion. In order to explore the possibility of all three—particularly the “one but not the other” conclusion—the following two research questions are proposed:

RQ6: Do Catholics “see more” than they “hear”?

RQ7: Do Catholics “see more” than evangelical Protestants?

Methodology

Depth Interviews

I chose to solicit information about experiences of DC via depth interviews as opposed to immersion or survey. Immersion was simply impossible given the geographic, financial, and time constraints on my research. Surveys on topics like DC have proved problematic in the past (cf. West, 1948; Luhrmann, 2012c, p. 194).

Depth interviews provided an appropriate “data middle ground,” so to speak. Surveys—

either closed- or open-ended—suffer the disadvantage of severely limiting disclosure, explanation, and detail. Imagine, for example, the question “How did you know that was a DC and not just your own imagination?” The most common response to such a question is a list of the *post hoc* criteria the participant applied to *confirm* the experience as a DC. On a survey, I would not have been able to probe further for experience-internal criteria (at least, not without copious—spoon-feeding—explanation myself), and any DC reported in that fashion would have become essentially useless for me.

Immersion, on the other hand, provides one with so much data that systematizing the information becomes exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. My primary goal for this study was to bring a degree of systematic order to the study of DC. Thus, even if immersion had been possible for me, it would have been data-overkill.

Participants

I chose to interview Catholics in order to expand the relatively narrow picture of evangelical Protestant Christian experience of the divine currently dominant in the literature.

I chose to interview Catholic sisters² rather than Catholic laypersons for several reasons. First, vocational discernment is currently a “hot topic” in Catholic circles on account of the shortage of religious vocations, and of religious sisters in particular, in the USA. Interviewing sisters therefore allowed for multiple uses of the interview data. Given the time, expense, and effort I invested in collecting and analyzing data, this “recyclability” of the data was important to me. Second, the questions of whether participants across various social groupings experience

² Technically, the term “nun” refers only to religious women who have taken solemn, perpetual vows. “Sister” is the general term used to refer to a woman belonging to any Catholic religious order, regardless of the type of vows she has taken. Which vows a sister takes depends upon the community she lives in. Since the women I interviewed included both sisters in solemn, perpetual vows (nuns) and sisters in simple vows (non-nuns), I will use the general term “sisters” rather than “nuns.”

DCs more or less than participants in other social groupings (RQ4) and whether these participants experience DCs in different ways (RQ5) require clear boundaries between the social groupings. Such boundaries are difficult to establish among Catholic laypersons; between religious orders, they are very easy to establish. Third, it seemed to me easier to recruit, schedule, and organize participants for participation in a place where they all lived together. Such is the case in nunneries.³

Previous literature has consistently found that women report more DCs/RSEs/etc. than men (Luhmann, 2012a, 2012c; Sidgwick, 1894; West, 1948; see also Barna Group, 2010). Luhmann (2012a) suggests that this finding is attributable to differences in gender enculturation regarding use of the imagination. In fact, I did not select women religious for this reason. Rather, I selected women over priests, deacons, seminary students, or brothers because I am female, and it seemed to me that interview dynamics would be more comfortable between same-sex persons. The questions I planned to ask were very personal and could conceivably bring up discussion of intimate relationships prior to entry into religious life, sexual issues (resulting from the vow of chastity, for example), etc. Indeed, such topics did often come up.

I located sisters using the community directories at the [Religious Ministries](#) (Catholic News Publishing Company, 2012) and [CMSWR](#) (Congregation of Major Superiors of Women Religious, 2012) websites. I filtered out nunneries further than five hours' drive away and those with fewer than 10 sisters. Those filtered out would simply not have been feasible to interview in time-, cost-, and effort-wise. I contacted the remaining nunneries by email. In my email, I asked

³ “Nunnery” is the “umbrella” term referring to both convents and monasteries housing Catholic religious sisters. Convents house sisters whose apostolate (religious work) is primarily active (e.g., nursing, teaching, social work, etc.). Monasteries house sisters whose apostolate is primarily contemplative (e.g., prayer, Scripture reading, religious study, etc.). Since the women I interviewed included both active and contemplative sisters, “nunnery” is the most convenient term to reference them all. Where it is accurate to refer to an exclusive group of either active or contemplative sisters, “convent” and “monastery” will be used instead.

the community's superior to request among the sisters volunteers for participation in depth interviews researching "how God communicates His call to religious vocations." I confirmed with the first three communities to respond with at least eight willing sisters, and we scheduled interviews. These interviews included:

1. Eight Poor Clares of the Colettine observance (P.C.C., a cloistered, contemplative Franciscan order) at the Bethlehem Monastery in Barhamsville, Virginia.
2. Seven⁴ Passionists (C.P., a cloistered, contemplative order originating in Italy) at the St. Joseph Monastery in Whitesville, Kentucky.
3. Fourteen sisters of the Congregation of the Divine Spirit (C.D.S., an active order originating in the USA and engaging in elder care and teaching) at the House of Loreto in Canton, Ohio.
4. Three Third Order Regulars of Penance of the Sorrowful Mother (T.O.R., an active–contemplative Franciscan order engaging in campus ministries at the Franciscan University of Steubenville) at Our Lady of Sorrows Monastery in Toledo, Ohio.⁵

In all, I interviewed 32 sisters. Their ages at the time of the interviews ranged from 19 to 89. Their ages of entry into religious life ranged between 17 and 36. They had been in the nunnery between 1 and 63 years.

I conducted the interviews between March and July 2012. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted in a private room in the nunnery. At the request of the sisters, the interviews were audio-, not video-, recorded.

⁴ Originally, eight sisters committed to be interviewed. On the days of the interviews, however, one sister was detained by a computer meltdown and was therefore unable to spare the time for an interview.

⁵ I contacted the T.O.R. sisters separately from the other sisters, as I was scheduled to be at Franciscan University in Steubenville for a conference anyway. I interviewed only three sisters because most of the women were on home visit at the time (during the summer months). The T.O.R. sisters refer to their motherhouse as a "monastery" because their apostolate, though active on campus, also includes a strong contemplative component.

Interview Questions

Despite the usually fluid, conversational nature of depth interviews, I needed some structure to ensure that I covered all the important topics with each sister. I therefore wrote a set of interview questions in advance. I designed them to press especially hard on the concrete manifestations of participants' experience of God's call to religious life, e.g., whether the call manifested as an emotion, thought, circumstance, voice, vision, etc. After a pilot study, I narrowed the questions to focus more exclusively on how participants knew that the experiences were of a divine rather than a natural origin. The change in questions did not appear to change the nature of the interviews but only helped me to focus more clearly on my research objective. See Appendices A and B for the lists of interview questions.

Interview questions focused on the experiences of DC pertaining specifically to participants' call to religious life because it helped to focus participants on specific, concrete cases of DC rather than on a general pattern of DC. This focus was critical to discovering the criteria participants *actually* used to distinguish a DC from a natural experience, as opposed to eliciting *post hoc* criteria that may derive not from actual experience but from institutional formation and/or generalized assumptions about such experiences.

Principles for Inclusion/Exclusion of Experiences for Study

To my knowledge, I am the first researcher of DCs to explain the principles I used to qualify experiences for study. If researchers continue to report study results without clarifying the principles they applied to include or exclude experiences for study, we may never know the relative frequency or comparability of DC experienced by various groups of Christians and other believers. Because a thorough explanation of such principles has never been given, I will spend

considerable time in this section explaining my logic as well as providing examples and pointing out methodological issues.

I focused on establishing what characteristics of a communication experience persuade individuals that the communication is of divine origin. It should be obvious, then, that I included for study only those experiences that participants themselves identified as DCs. This much appears to be consistent with the two primary studies from which the criteria in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication were drawn (Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2012c).

However, among experiences identified by participants as DC, there is a great deal of epistemological variation. The variations I identified are:

1. Some experiences (a) were instantly clear as DCs in the moment, whereas (b) others were not.
2. Some experiences (a) were identified as undoubtedly from God, whereas (b) others were identified as being *probably* from God, but there could be a doubt.
3. Some experiences (a) were identified as DCs via the application of experience-internal criteria, whereas (b) others were identified as DCs via the *post hoc* application of external rules. (Note that 3a and 3b are not necessarily co-extensive with 1a and 1b, as should become clear below.)
4. Some experiences (a) were identified as DCs via the application of specific, concrete criteria, whereas (b) others were identified as DCs more fundamentally (e.g., “I just knew”).

Of these four variations, I admitted for study both (1a) and (1b), provided those falling under (1b) met several further criteria, which shall be clarified below. For (2), (3), and (4), I admitted only those experiences that could be classified under the (a) branch of each division;

any experience falling under the (b) branch was excluded from study.

Furthermore, generalizations about “how one knows” were not included for analysis. Such generalizations were common (especially among the more “cerebral” sisters), and they helped me to come to a clearer understanding of what the sisters had been taught about discerning God’s communications, but they did not always align well with the criteria sisters *actually* used to discern those communications as divine. Thus, only the reasons that sisters gave for believing that a *specific* instance of communication in their personal lives was of divine origin were included for analysis.

I shall now explain more thoroughly each of the four divisions above, and why I chose to study their members as I did.

Instant versus delayed clarity. It should be obvious what instant clarity looks like. How delayed clarity can manifest is more varied, so I will provide an example. During a period of intense anxiety and doubt just before taking final vows, Sr. Mary Agnes (TOR) had this experience:

Sr. Mary Agnes: There was a prayer experience that I had, sitting in the chapel and... I don’t even remember what I was... I think I was praying the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary actually, and it must have been the fifth, the crucifixion. I saw myself as a little... So again, I’m using my imagination as I’m praying, you know, with a scene. This scene, of the crucifixion. And so, Christ is on the cross, crucified. I’m at the foot of the cross, and I’m a little urchin. I’m a dirty little urchin. I’m just playing in the dirt. [laughs] And then, the Blessed Mother comes up, and she swoops me into her arms, and the blood and the water that came from the cross washed over me and cleaned me off. I know blood

doesn't usually do that, but His blood does. [laughs] But just like... the blood and water, and then I was clean, and there I stood. I was at the foot of the cross with Mary, and I'm like, "Woah." Just that... that was it. But as I thought about it, I'm like, "Wow!"

That scene totally confirmed this community, so that's what helped... confirm this community. It was like... our logo is Christ meets Mary at the foot of the cross, and our charisms are crucified love... Okay, here's crucified love. Poverty... I was a dirty little urchin. Mercy... the Merciful Mother just swooped me in her arms and adopted me. And contemplation: It happened during a contemplative moment. So those are our four charisms, our logo—woah. I'm like, "Okay, get it!" [laughs] "Get it!"

....

JES: Was this an image like the image that you had before at the Statue of the Blessed Mother, when you were—?

Sr. Mary Agnes: Nuh uh.

JES: It wasn't the same?

Sr. Mary Agnes: No. I mean... no. I guess it was, I guess it was. It was just my like... it was like visual imagery.

....

JES: Are you saying that it was more gentle than the one, than the visual image that you had before the statue of the Blessed Mother?

Sr. Mary Agnes: Um, I guess more gradual, more gradual.

JES: Because the other one was a sudden thought?

Sr. Mary Agnes: Bam!

JES: Okay.

Sr. Mary Agnes: Yeah, and this... this unraveled over time just sitting there quiet in the chapel for like... what? A half an hour, or an hour or something. So it took a much longer time. Whereas the other was like pretty much instant.

JES: Did you understand its meaning instantly as soon as it was over?

Sr. Mary Agnes: No, I had to think about it. Like, go back and think. And I... through journaling. I think I was journaling, getting it out of myself, writing it down, what did I imagine? You know, this is what I imagined, da da da da. And then I looked at the words, I think, and I just went [gasp], “Oh my gosh!” And then I could pinpoint.

JES: After you left chapel?

Sr. Mary Agnes: Mhm.

JES: Okay. Same day?

Sr. Mary Agnes: I think so.

JES: Okay.

Sr. Mary Agnes: Mhm, yeah. I’m pretty sure, yeah. Because I had to journal that day because so much, there was so much happening so fast, so many prayer experiences. So I was like, gotta get it, get it, get it out before, you know, the next one. It was looking back on it, and then I was able to see—“Oh my gosh!”

JES: And after that point did you doubt that were called to this house anymore?

Sr. Mary Agnes: Nuh uh.

Sr. Mary Agnes recognized the power of her prayer experience in the moment, but she did not recognize the awesome significance of it until she returned to her room to journal about

it. It was only upon looking at the description of the scene *outside of prayer* that she understood it to be a DC rather than just an RSE. Even so, her interpretation of the experience as a DC is not the result of an application of external rules. It is the result of her noticing the subtle spiritual significance of features internal to the experience for the first time—on delay.

Certainty regarding the divine origin of an experience acquired only *in hindsight* poses special problems that require special criteria. Such experiences often arise in the stories of participants who lacked religious education, spiritual maturity, belief in God, etc. during the time of their life in which the experience occurred. I used three criteria to qualify such experiences for inclusion: (1) The participant still remembers the experience in detail (i.e., the experience was *that* memorable). (2) The participant has no doubt *at the present time* that the source of the experience was God. (3) At the time of the experience, the participant had no doubt that something about the experience was “odd” or “unusual” or “not quite natural,” even if she was not yet in a position to identify that “oddness” as supernaturalness, specifically. Any cases of delayed clarity not meeting all three of these criteria were dropped from analysis.

Under these criteria, the experience of Sr. Mary Agnes qualified for study because: (1) She still remembers the experience in detail, e.g., the symbols of the story, where she prayed it, how she felt, etc. (2) She currently has no doubt that the experience was a DC. (3) At the time of the experience, as it was going on, she recognized it as an RSE, even though she was not yet aware of the communicative content that actually made it a DC.

Certainty versus doubt. Again, experiences in which a person has no doubt whatsoever of their divine origin are easy to imagine. The various degrees of doubt, though, and the precise location of the DC threshold, are more complex. Sr. Judith (PCC) explains:

I think God gives that gift of understanding in different degrees.... Let's say He gives a 10% gift of understanding. It humbles you, because you feel that your mind is inadequate. Then you start to lean on God, and pray more, to learn discernment. "I don't understand, Jesus. What do you mean?" It humbles you. It's a humbling experience, so you have to start practicing virtues like persevering in prayer, calling on God, learning distrust of yourself, maybe trying to get a spiritual director, which is an act of humility. From "I can do it. I can think of everything on my own. I don't need anybody," you start realizing you need contact with God to discern, a spiritual director to teach you humility of some kind. And when you do have those 100% experiences, maybe you could get proud if you got them all the time. So God doesn't give such a high level of understanding. Sometimes, if people had huge gifts, they may think they are a mystic, and start getting proud.... Peak experiences aren't every day, otherwise they wouldn't be peak experiences, you know? And for our own good God makes the journey go up and down, up and down. He doesn't give it all high all the time for our own good.

The "10% experience" leaves one questioning whether God has really spoken. One may decide that He has but will always leave open the possibility that He has not, that it may just have been oneself. After growing closer to Him in prayer, better learning to discern His communications and His will, working with a spiritual director, etc., one may look back on such an experience and recognize that it was not God after all. The "100% experience," on the other hand, leaves no room for doubt, and sisters would not hesitate to attribute such an experience to God.

Sr. Mary Ignatius (CP) provides a concrete example of how a person can make the distinction between the grayer varieties of experience:

JES: When you went on a walk that day and realized—long ago, before you were Catholic—and realized that you would have to let go of the vocation and just trust that the Church will provide a vocation of some sort, did you recognize that as being from God?

Sr. Mary Ignatius: I think that was me. Um... I think God agreed. But that was my own thought process.

JES: How was that different from the Ignatian experience?

Sr. Mary Ignatius: That was the result of my own reasoning. And my own grappling, my own... trying to make sense of the situation. With the Ignatian experience, I had to make an effort to start it, you know, to enter into this scene and decide what color the tablecloths are, you know, whatever! [laughs] But once I imagined it and allowed it to begin.... Once that started rolling, it just went! Like I was watching a movie or something almost.... much more effortlessly.

These excerpts illustrate that sisters could clearly distinguish (1) when God had spoken to them *without a doubt* versus (2) when He *may* have spoken, but there could be a doubt, versus (3) when they had merely generated an experience themselves. Their ability to make these distinctions themselves made it possible for me as researcher to clearly categorize the three types of experiences according to the sisters' own interpretations. Categories (2) and (3) were dropped from analysis. Category (1) was maintained (even in cases in which a sister didn't understand what God had meant, so long as she had no doubt that He *had* spoken).

Experience-internal criteria versus experience-external rules. *Post hoc*

determinations made according to “rules” (along the lines of the four “rules” that Luhmann,

2012c, discovered at Vineyard churches; see also Dein & Littlewood, 2007) were excluded from analysis for the reasons already stated above. Sr. Judith (PCC) provides a good example of such *post hoc* determinations:

I think how you distinguish from your own voice is perseverance, courage, happiness... courage I think. Fortitude is one of the gifts. It's one of the cardinal virtues: fortitude, prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. You feel "I'd cross a desert. I'm Mother Teresa of Calcutta." She jumped out of a train, knew God spoke to her. She had to found a religious order. She left her own order all by herself in stinking Calcutta. Fortitude. Well... something more than human strength. If it was just her own imagination, she'd be so indecisive. "Well, I don't know if I can do this. I'm afraid." But when you study vocations, look for fortitude. It can only come from the Spirit who spoke.

Note that Sr. Judith describes two phenomena but does not seem to realize it herself: The first is the *feeling* that a person has coming out of a DC, the feeling of courage and fortitude, that one can overcome all odds—or must try, anyway—even in the face of fear. This feeling could easily be used to determine for oneself that one has indeed heard God speak, particularly if one were normally rather timid. But the other phenomenon—that of attempting to judge *post hoc* whether a person has heard the Spirit by looking for signs that she persevered through great trials or overcame incredible odds—that is the application of a “rule” that is typically applied by a third party to pass judgment about the true nature of the experiences claimed by another. The first type of criterion, applied by the experiencer herself to the experience itself, consciously or unconsciously, has been included for analysis. The latter type, even if applied by the experiencer herself, has been dropped, because the application of a rule later on would make clear that,

coming out of the experience, she had some doubt about its origin. Those who have no doubt about an experience have no need of rules to confirm the experience.

Concrete criteria versus “I just knew.” Cases in which “I just knew” was the *only* reason a sister gave for understanding a communication to be divine were dropped from analysis. In fact, this criterion may often be the only one an individual can come up with, especially for incredibly powerful experiences. Sisters were probed at length when “I just knew” was all that they could initially muster, and most were able to give more reasons as a result. In those cases where they were unable to identify more reasons, it often seemed to me that the cause was a lack of articulateness, insightfulness, or extensive thought on the matter. “Gosh, I never thought to dissect it like that!” was a common response to probing. Because, however, almost all sisters *were* able to summon more reasons upon being asked to reflect, those experiences where the sister was unable were simply dropped.

Of course, logically speaking, a total inability to pick out phenomenological indicators of divine origin for any given experience does not necessarily reflect an actual (i.e., ontological) absence of those indicators. It may reflect nothing more than the individual’s inability to pick them out. If an experience was indeed a DC, but the participant is unable to explain how she knew that beyond “I just knew!,” then dropping that experience from analysis would appear to be incorrect. However, a researcher has no way of knowing the ontological status of an experience except via the interpretation of the participant and must make methodological choices about the “explanation threshold” for experiences to be included for study. Almost every sister said at one point or another, “I just knew!” Since I was trying to compare the *variety* of criteria that individuals apply to the determination of an experience as a DC, I chose always to err on the side

of conservatism in this regard. That conservatism is why I dropped experiences for which “I just knew!” was the only criterion offered.

It may be that cases with a strong “I just knew!” component actually describe a noetic quality about the experience (criterion 7 in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication). But it is important to distinguish between “I just knew” as applied to the *content* or *meaning* of the DC versus to the determination itself that the communication was divine. I was attentive to this distinction. I was also attentive to the relationship implied by sisters’ descriptions between the “I just knew!” response and the criteria of spontaneity (criterion 3), strength (criterion 5), and emotional potency (criterion 6)—from which the “I just knew!” response seemed most often to be derived. Indeed, as will be discussed below, these four criteria alone (noeticism, spontaneity, strength, and emotional potency) seem to be the primary ones by which sisters established that an experience was a communication from God. In other words, it seems that these four criteria are the concrete ways that most sisters “just knew.”

The problem of the “I just knew!” response (and of noetic knowledge generally) points up an interesting epistemological problem. Many cases of DC—coming as they do all of a sudden, all at once, and very powerfully, rather than by a gradual, moderate process—seem to be experienced by many individuals as a form of “instant knowledge acquisition” that is not easily “dissected” for analytic purposes. Would modern epistemological theories grant that this type of “knowledge” is, in fact, knowledge? It is not “figured out” for oneself by reasoning, inference, examination of evidence, etc., but rather *given* to one by an all-credible Source. If one can make the assumption (hard for most academics) that the Source of such knowledge is in fact all-credible, and grant that the belief resulting from such a “gift of knowledge” (Sr. Judith, PCC) is

true, is one then justified in believing it? Seen from this perspective, experiences of DC seem to put an interesting, real-world twist on the Gettier problem (cf. Gettier, 1963).

So far as I can determine from example statements in previous studies, the above criteria for inclusion/exclusion of experiences of DC are relatively conservative (cf. Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2012c). Use of these criteria resulted in the analysis of 45 instances of DC across 16 of the 32 sisters interviewed.

Classification of Experiences

Once I knew which particular cases of DC I could include in my analysis, I broke them into categories according to communication medium. This categorization was necessary to answer RQs 3, 5, 6, and 7. The 45 cases I gathered included the following types:

- **Internal locutions:** These are verbal statements (such as “I am the One you are looking for”) heard internally, similar to the way one “hears” a thought.
- **Internal conversations:** An “internal conversation” consists of multiple successive internal locutions that take place over a longer period of time than a single internal locution. Because of the back-and-forth exchange, it is difficult to count individually the internal locutions of which an internal conversation consists.
- **External locutions:** These are verbal statements heard externally via the ears but pronounced either by oneself or by another human being. For example, if a participant blurts out “Yes, I think I’ll become a nun,” and that statement surprises her, came out of nowhere, felt as if it did not come from her, and “rang through the room,” she may identify it as an external locution. The same may occur with a statement uttered by a human interlocutor.
- **Audible voices:** These are verbal statements heard externally via the ears. They are different

from external locutions in that they are not a human voice but the “voice of God” itself, or that of an angel, saint, etc.

- Mental impressions: These are visual images seen internally, the way one “sees” an imagined image.
- Physical–emotional experiences: These are experiences of affect so strong that they are felt physically, e.g., sudden conviction, overwhelming peace, barely controllable urge, etc. Oftentimes, a physical-emotional experience accompanied one of the verbal or visual phenomena and was used as a criterion to establish the verbal/visual aspect of the experience as a DC. When that was the case, I categorized the experience elsewhere. Experiences categorized as “physical–emotional” had no verbal or visual components.
- Tactile: These are non-verbal, non-visual experiences felt externally, just the way one feels normal tactile sensations on the skin.
- Multi-sensory: These experiences comprised more than one of the previous categories as part of a single experience. Multi-sensory experiences were rare, extraordinarily complex, and prolonged (lasting at least several minutes). They typically included auditory, visual, tactile, and affective components.
- Circumstantial: These are experiences of synchronicity or uncanny “coincidence” in external events in the life of the participant.
- Ecstasy: These are very difficult to describe. They have a long history in religious literature, where they are typically explained using metaphors. The only participant I interviewed who had experienced ecstasy described it as “being lifted up into Heaven for just a moment,” though it felt to her to last much longer than a moment.

In addition to these, one sister experienced a clear diabolic internal locution, which I did not include for study.

Each experience of DC was classified into only a single category. No experience was cross-categorized.

Results and Discussion

The 45 instances of DC included for analysis break down as follows:

- 16 internal locutions
- 2 internal conversations
- 5 external locutions
- 2 audible voices
- 3 mental impressions
- 7 physical–emotional
- 1 tactile
- 3 multi-sensory
- 4 circumstantial
- 2 experiences of ecstasy

RQ1: Criteria Used by Participants

RQ1 asked what criteria participants use to determine that a communication was of divine origin. Table 1 shows the criteria used by sisters and the relative frequency of each. To determine that an experience was a DC, sisters used the fact that an experience was rare; spontaneous; stronger/louder than everyday experiences; more emotionally potent than everyday experiences; noetic in quality; clearly not coming from themselves (lack of agency); distressing

(e.g., opposed to their own desires); linguistically indicative of an interlocutor (linguistic/content cues); and compelling (i.e., reversed long-standing desires/will/emotions in an instant).

Table 1

Criteria Participants Used to Distinguish an Experience as a DC

Criteria	Number of Cases	Percentage of Cases
Rare	2	4%
Spontaneous	25	54%
“Stronger”/“Louder”	8	17%
“More emotionally potent”	26	57%
Noetic	25	54%
Lack of agency	16	35%
Distressing	9	20%
Linguistic/content cues	3	7%
Compelling	3	7%

The criteria of rarity, spontaneity, strength/loudness, emotional potency, and noeticism are not new. They have been discussed in previous literature. The last four criteria, however, are new. I shall therefore give an example of each in application.

Lack of agency. Sr. Mary Agnes (TOR) describes her use of this criterion (in the italicized portion) during an internal locution:

Now, mind you, I wasn't even going to Mass every Sunday... God wasn't speaking to me. But when I just went before Him and asked that question and I sat there in silence, I heard an answer. It just cut through my thoughts. And it wasn't like a locution; it wasn't an audible voice. It was such a loud thought *that was not from me, because I wouldn't have thought of this, and I wouldn't be talking to myself anyway like this. So I knew it was*

from Him. But, all I can say is that it was a really loud thought, is what I can compare it to. And, I felt like He was saying—when I said what is standing in the way of me surrendering myself completely to you—He said, “Your desire to get married. That’s what’s standing in the way.” And I was like, “My desire to get married... ? What else is there?” [laughs]

This criterion is by far the most heavily used new criterion. It was often mentioned as a sort of intermediate criterion. That is, during the process of interviewing, the participant would often offer this criterion first, then, upon probing, explain more precisely *why* she felt the experience could not have come from herself. It thus frequently led to such further criteria as “loudness” and “strength,” emotional potency, and opposition of the message content to the participant’s own will. In several cases, it led to content cues that indicated an external source of the message because the participant did not understand the words used until years later.

Dein and Littlewood (2007) indicate that a sense of reduced personal agency is fundamental in all cases of DC⁶ as the basis for the attribution of the experience to an external agent. In light of this view—which makes a great deal of sense—the most surprising finding with regard to RQ1 may be that sisters used lack of agency as a criterion of DC in only 35% of cases. However, many may have simply assumed that, in attributing an experience to God and not themselves, lack of personal agency was obvious, and it was therefore unnecessary to state it explicitly.

Distressing. Sr. Mary Ignatius (CP) applies this criterion (in the italicized portion) to another internal locution.

⁶ As well as in all cases of “spirit possession, hypnosis, dreaming, multiple personality disorder, schizophrenia... addiction... and... prayer” (p. 215).

Sr. Mary Ignatius: That was probably the most important hour of my life. Um, you know, I kind of went in like, “Okay, you need to tell me where to go next year.” [laughs] And, first thing I heard was like, “You need to lose your agenda!” Um, I would say like I didn’t hear the words, but I knew, I came with the agenda and I needed to lose it, and okay... and um, then I realized it’s like He, it’s like He made me understand, “You have lost sight of what you really desire.” And it was true, you know, when I thought about it. Like in the course of applying, and writing your “why I want to come to your school” essays and what do you want to do with your Master’s Degree after, I had made them sound very convincing and in a certain sense, true. But I had gotten myself confused as to what I really wanted.... And so, you know, after that kind of ceases [laughs] like, “Forgive the question, God, but what does graduate school have to do with that at all?” [laughs] And the answer I got, and this was like the last 10 minutes of it, or, you know, close to the end of Adoration at this point, is, “I want you to go to [name of university].” Which was the one school I hadn’t visited, and I hadn’t received admittance notice. But it hadn’t bothered me because it was a super-safety school, and it wasn’t really a program that... It was a Catholic studies program. It wasn’t Scripture. But it was like, “I want you to go to [name of university].”

....

JES: What convinced you that they [the words] were from God and not from just your own mind?

Sr. Mary Ignatius: ...I think context.... It was just simple, unexpected. You know, *that would have been my last choice of where I wanted to go*. And the speed, I suppose, with

which the answer came. It was unlooked for in that context.

JES: It was sudden and unexpected?

Sr. Mary Ignatius: I certainly wouldn't have made up that answer myself. And it came promptly after my question.

Of 45 cases of DC included for study, 9 of them were identified partly by the use of this criterion. Many of those were in fact extremely distressing, on account of the participants' strong opposition to the content of the message. Several caused a reaction so violent that they invoked a feeling of physical illness.

One of the ways academics distinguish DCs from hallucinations is by the "distressing" criterion: According to contemporary research, DCs are not distressing; psychotic hallucinations are. My finding is therefore interesting. Of course, the *type* of distress that participants felt was of a different nature altogether from that experienced by psychotics. This difference shall be discussed in the next section.

At any rate, until now, this relatively common feature of DCs has been altogether missed in the academic literature. Possibly that is because of the narrow focus on evangelicals. Possibly it is because of the narrow focus on what distinguishes DCs from hallucinations. For Catholics not focused on hallucinations, but on discerning the will of God, it is no surprise that His will may very often be diametrically opposed to ours and thus provoke considerable distress in us.

Linguistic/content cues. Sr. Maria Felicitas (TOR) provides an example of the application of a content cue (*italicized*) as criterion during an internal locution.

Sr. Maria Felicitas: *I didn't understand what exactly was happening at that moment*, but I read the lives of some of the early Christian martyrs, and when I was reading that,

particularly two women martyrs, from like the 200s, Perpetua and Felicity, I just told the Lord—I was talking, I guess, to the Lord—I was like “That’s the most awesome thing you can do with your life, is to die for love of You.” And in that moment, I felt Him speak in my heart and ask me, “Will you be a spiritual mother? There are many young children whose mothers do not care for their souls.” And then He said, “You will experience a death,” but I had a sense it wasn’t the same martyrdom, so I didn’t exactly understand what it was, and *I had never heard “spiritual mother” before. So I totally knew that was from Him, it didn’t come from my mind.*

...I would kind of wonder through high school—since I was a freshman, when that happened—I’d wonder exactly what that meant. It was so profound that it stuck with me, that experience.

....

I knew it had something to do with what he was calling me to, but I—sometimes I would think, maybe it’s being a sister. But even before I was thinking of totally being Catholic, even had that thought but wasn’t sure what it meant.

JES: How did you know it was Him and not just your own thoughts?

Sr. Maria Felicitas: *Well, for one thing, “spiritual mother.” I had never heard that before.*

Eight years later, on a visit to a convent, Sr. Maria Felicitas discovered for the first time what “spiritual motherhood” means.

The criterion of linguistic/content cues aligns well with Dein and Littlewood’s (2007) finding that participants sometimes know the divine origin of an experience by the fact that it imparts knowledge the participant could not otherwise have had at the time. Luhrmann (2012c)

reports several examples that make clear she also found evidence of this experience. In those studies, however, the authors did not seem to make much of this feature of an experience being used as a criterion for discerning a DC. Cases such as Sr. Maria Felicitas' make clear that it can be used in this way. But perhaps the other authors are correct in lending it short shrift on account of its relative infrequency.

Compelling. Sr. Ruth (PCC) provides an example of the application of this criterion (*italicized*) during an internal locution.

Sr. Ruth: All of a sudden from the depths of me I heard myself saying, "I'm going to be a nun." And it shocked me because it was the last thing that was going to be on my mind was that I was going to be a nun.

....

JES: And you'd never thought of being a nun before?

Sr. Ruth: No! I wouldn't. I didn't want to be a nun. You know in grade school teachers usually ask little girls, "Would you like to be a nun when you grow up?" And I said, "Noooooooooooo." And she says, "Why not?" I couldn't think of any good reasons, so I said, "You must be cold in the wintertime." (It was very cold up there.) And she was like, "Come up and see," and she was so sweet, and she showed me all the things she had on underneath the habit and what else they could wear. They were funny, but that wasn't the reason. I just couldn't think of any reason to tell her except I didn't think I wanted to be a nun.

....

JES: So after the voice there was no doubt?

Sr. Ruth: No! No, and it just kept getting stronger and haunting me and um, it wouldn't leave. I just couldn't ignore it, and just go on with life.

JES: And did you have any other—in that intervening period between hearing the voice and entering the cloister—did you have any other experiences that you felt were God confirming that this is the right path?

Sr. Ruth: Just the strong urge to go and um... nothing as strong as what happened at the chapel. Nothing. Even afterward, never anything quite that strong or that.... I knew I had to go.

....

Sr. Ruth: *Oh, I lost interest in marriage when this happened to me, when I had this experience. I think I lost interest in it, so I knew it had to be from God. That wasn't from me.*

This criterion is an interesting one, in that it reveals the Christian belief that God can change the human heart instantaneously. Our own efforts to alter our wills, on the other hand, require slow, gradual, laborious effort. Thus, an experience of a sudden and total change of heart is attributed to God.

No researcher of DC has mentioned this feature of DCs as a possible criterion. Indeed, it was used rarely. But it is something to watch out for in future research.

RQ2: Participants' versus Academics' Criteria for Determining Divine Communications

RQ2 asked how closely the criteria that participants use to establish the origin of a communication as divine align with the criteria in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication. Table 2 summarizes the comparison.

Table 2

Comparison of Criteria Used by Scholars and Participants to Distinguish DCs

Criteria	Scholars	Participants	Opposites Used
Not distressing*	Yes	No	“Distressing”
Not compelling*	Yes	No	“Compelling”
Brief*	Yes	No	
Rare*	Yes	Infrequently	
“More emotionally potent”*	Yes	Yes	
“Stronger”/“Louder”	Yes	Only for locutions	
Noetic	Yes	Yes	
Spontaneous	Yes	Yes	
Lack of agency	No	Yes	
Linguistic/content cues	No	Infrequently	

Note: Asterisks indicate criteria used by scholars primarily to distinguish DCs from psychotic hallucinations.

“Hallucination criteria.” Table 2 suggests that the criteria most commonly cited by researchers as indicators of DC are hit-or-miss, at least for Catholics. In particular, three of the five indicators used to distinguish DCs from psychotic hallucinations were not applied by the sisters themselves (briefness, “not distressing,” and “not compelling”). One criterion (rarity) was applied infrequently. Of the traditional “hallucination criteria,” only the criterion of “more emotionally potent” bridged the researcher–participant boundary.

What is more surprising is that, in the case of two criteria commonly used by researchers to distinguish DCs from hallucinations, participants used the *exact opposite* criteria to discern a DC. This was the case for the “not distressing” and “not compelling” criteria. The “not distressing” criterion was expressly contradicted in 9 out of 46 cases. That is, in 20% of the

analyzed cases, sisters considered the fact that the communication *was* distressing to be an indicator that the experience was from God and not from themselves. Sr. Mary Agnes (TOR), continuing her description of the experience already quoted above, provides an example of how distressing DCs can be:

Sr. Mary Agnes: I felt sick. I actually felt like I was going to throw up. And I was like, “Oh my gosh, why me?! Noooooooo! ... I don’t know! I don’t want to! That’s just the most—I mean, that’s repulsive to me!” I’m like, “I’m sorry, that’s just awful! I can’t even...!” So I was just kind of whining and complaining, and I was just feeling so sick inside. So I guess, just like a spoiled little brat, I said, “Do I have toooooo?!” [laughs] “I really don’t want to! Are You gonna make me? Do I have to?” And again, just a gentle cut through my thoughts, “I’m not going to make you do this. But will you do it for love of Me?”

This finding stands in direct contrast to that of most researchers (Davies et al., 2001; Dein & Littlewood, 2007; Luhrmann, 2011; Luhrmann, 2012c) that DCs are *not* distressing. True, the sisters did not find their experiences distressing as schizophrenics do: The sisters’ distress was typically caused by the message content being directly opposed to their own desires combined with their own recognition that, if God’s desire is otherwise, then they must submit their will to His—which is distressing.

The “not compelling” criterion was directly contradicted three times. That is, in three cases, the sisters felt that their experience of the DC compelled an immediate turnabout in their will/affect in a way that felt beyond their control. Sr. Ruth (PCC), discussing the same experience already described above, provides an example:

JES: When you heard that voice for the first time, what made you listen to it?

Sr. Ruth: Well, I couldn't *not* listen to it. It was so strong. Also this whole um... not the discernment... I just knew I had to go. The Holy Spirit moving me through all that painful time when my mother and the family... what I was going to do. And then um... simply no matter what anyone said or did, I had to go. It was just that strong. I couldn't resist it. It was such a powerful experience.

In many more cases, sisters expressed a sense of “compulsion” to do the will of God once it had been communicated so clearly to them. Sr. Mary Ignatius (CP) explains what this feeling of compulsion is like outside the context of a DC:

Sr. Mary Ignatius: It was at night. The sun was setting at my bedroom window, and um... [long pause] I just... I don't know that it was anything specific that I heard in my heart or anything, but it was like I thought aloud to God, I'm like, “I have to, don't I? I have to consecrate myself to You.” The necessity of it impressed me. It wasn't anything specific that I heard, but it was just such a strong imperative from Him that I'm not going to be at peace, at all, until I turn to You. Actually turn and listen and follow. And hear what You have to say, because I've been trying not to hear for however long. And so, at that point, the crucifix was on the wall, opposite the window, and so I turned around to prostrate myself before Him, and say, “I don't know what it means, but I promise I will find out what consecration you want from me. And I will do it.” And that's when my serious discernment started. [laughs]

Again, this “compulsion” was not the same as that experienced by schizophrenics, who feel that their agency has been totally usurped. Rather, it is the “compulsion” of intense love that demands

that one bring one's will and actions into alignment with the will of the Beloved immediately, regardless of how difficult or unpleasant this may be.

Were I interpreting the sisters' stories myself, it would be clear that many of the experiences analyzed met the scholarly criterion of being brief. However, no sister used this quality as evidence of an experience being of divine origin.

Similarly, only two sisters used the criterion of rarity. As can be seen in Sr. Judith's (PCC) reference to "peak experiences" in her first quote above, however, several sisters did discuss generally—without reference to any particular experience—that such experiences are indeed rare. Sr. Madonna (PCC), discussing experiences not "direct" enough for her to label them DCs, said:

Sr. Madonna: There were a few other things... I wouldn't call them communications from God. [laughs] Oftentimes, they're not real point-blank things; they're more quiet things in your life. You just kind of understand that the Lord would probably like to talk about them. Not so much directly, but He would just like to have you think about them and work them into your life, and somehow they would affect your behavior. Or some such thing as that. It's not a very, very direct thing.

Note Sr. Madonna's use of "probably," echoing Sr. Judith's scale of certainty about 10% versus 100% experiences.

Other criteria. The remaining criteria in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication were used by the sisters themselves. The least-used—that of a communication being perceived as "stronger" or "louder" than everyday experiences, as forcing itself upon one's attention—was used only for locutions (both internal and external). This limited use makes

sense, given that “strong” and “loud” are more likely to be applied to voices and sounds than to other sensory phenomena. However, the exclusive application of this criterion to locutions raises questions about the applicability of the eight criteria commonly presented by researchers to the wide variety of “media” or “channels” through which God communicates. Perhaps each medium presents its own set of criteria.

On the other hand, perhaps the criterion of “strength”/“loudness” refers to the same phenomenon as the “emotional potency” criterion, only experienced in a different mode. If so, then the two criteria may reasonably be conflated for the sake of parsimony.

The criteria of “noetic,” “spontaneous,” and “more emotionally potent” were heavily used, in 54%, 54%, and 57% of cases, respectively, a finding that supports previous research.

RQ3: Individual Differences

RQ3 asked whether individual participants are prone to experience DCs consistently in certain ways, or whether the way they experience DCs varies at different times. Table 3 presents a breakdown of all participants who experienced DC, their religious orders, and their experiences.

Table 3

Breakdown of Individuals' Experiences of DC

Sister	Order	Experiences
Mary Agnes	TOR	2 internal locutions, 1 multi-sensory
Barbara of Damiano	TOR	2 multi-sensory, 2 external locutions, 1 internal locution
Maria Felicitas	TOR	1 internal locution
Judith	PCC	3 physical–emotional, 1 internal locution, 1 external locution
Fatimah	PCC	2 experiences of ecstasy, 1 internal locution

Esther	PCC	1 external locution
Teresa	PCC	1 physical–emotional, 1 internal locution
Ruth	PCC	1 internal locution
Mary	PCC	1 mental impression, 1 internal locution
Madonna	PCC	2 internal locutions, 1 external locution
Mary Anna	CP	3 circumstantial, 1 internal locution
Mary Collette	CP	2 internal locutions
Mary Ignatius	CP	2 internal conversations, 2 mental impressions
Mary John the Baptist	CP	3 physical–emotional, 2 internal locutions
Patricia of Loreto	CDS	1 circumstantial
Clara	CDS	2 audible voices, 1 tactile, 1 diabolic internal locution

Given the wide variety of experiences reported, Table 3 appears to indicate that individuals do tend to experience DC in certain ways. However, the pattern is not strong enough and the participant pool not large enough to claim anything with confidence. Additionally, I did not analyze whether individuals experiencing different types of DC experienced the various types at significant, discrete times in their lives.⁷ Thus, it is difficult here either to affirm or disconfirm Dein and Littlewood’s (2007) finding that individuals may experience DC differently at different times.

From the sisters’ perspective, it would be reasonable to expect individual differences. As Sr. Mary John the Baptist (CP) stated, “Grace builds on nature.” Sr. Mary (PCC) explains:

It can go as I said, with me, I’m a very direct person and not subtle, so He had to be very

⁷ Here it is important to note that, even though my interview questions focused sisters on the time in their life during which they discerned their call to religious life, not all of the experiences reported were drawn from their time of discernment. Once sisters were clearly focused on particular experiences, and had understood that I was looking for experience-internal criteria as opposed to generalized rules applied *post hoc*, I asked them if they had any other such experiences to tell me.

direct with me, and quick, easy. Otherwise, I wouldn't have gotten it. With other people He communicates gradually.... People who are more orientated toward their emotions will probably be given more feelings; He will give in that way. Those that are more intellectually geared, they'll learn from a book, you know, take it from a book or from a thought or from something that makes sense to them. So, yeah... He's different for everybody. Although there are certain patterns that you see developing, but it's different for each.

RQ4: Quantitative Order Differences

RQ4 asked whether participants in particular religious orders experience DCs more or less than participants in other religious orders. It was unquestionably the case that sisters in different orders experienced direct DC with considerable variations of frequency. Table 4 shows how many sisters in each order did and did not experience direct DC.

Table 4

Number of Sisters who Experienced/Did Not Experience Direct DC, by Order

Order	Direct DC	No direct DC
TOR (Franciscan active–contemplative)	3	0
PCC (Franciscan cloistered contemplative)	7	1
CP (Passionist cloistered contemplative)	4	3
CDS (American active)	2	12

This difference was the most immediately noticeable and glaring macro-pattern I discovered. I call it “the Franciscan Difference.” Ten Franciscans experienced 26 of the 46 DCs analyzed. Six non-Franciscans experienced 20 of the 46. Looking at just these numbers, the breakdown appears about equal. But when one considers the number of sisters I interviewed in

each order, the difference becomes clear. Notice particularly the number of CDS sisters who did not report any direct DC, and the near 50-50 split in the CP.

Furthermore, the experiences of Franciscans were qualitatively different from the experiences of non-Franciscans: Franciscans' experiences were *on average* more dramatic, more "spectacular." There was also a less pronounced but equally discernible "contemplative difference," at least if one considers that the TOR sisters are not just an active but also a contemplative order.

This finding supports the more general finding of Sidgwick et al. (1894) that the propensity to experience paranormal phenomena appears to run in families. The dramatic differences across orders—history, charism, apostolate, daily life, spirituality—may be likened to those of families. Unlike in biological families, however, religious orders lack the commonalities of genetics and upbringing. It is therefore less clear (and possibly less easy to establish) *which difference* between the orders is the one responsible for the difference in the propensity to experience DC.

In attempting to explain the propensity difference, it is also important to recognize that most of the experiences reported by the women occurred *before* their entry into religious life. An explanation by institutional formation within the order is therefore untenable, unless one wishes to argue that formation "conformed" sisters' perceptions of their past experiences. While this "conformity" is possible, it seems unlikely given the wide qualitative variety of experiences reported by sisters within the same order, as well as the unique, very personal ways in which they reported their experiences. They showed great variety of vocabulary and explanatory "style:" some were more cerebral, others more "heart-centered;" some used a great deal of theological

vocabulary, while others phrased everything simply in their own terms.

Furthermore, sisters do not commonly share their experiences of DC with one another. Sr. Mary Agnes (TOR), after just over an hour of conversation, in which she described to me multiple DCs in considerable detail, remarked with surprise that “that was the most thorough version” of her vocation story that she had ever related to anyone. At the time of our conversation, Sr. Mary Agnes had been in religious life for 13 years and had been asked to share her vocation story many times. With quite a few sisters (as with the Augustinian brother with whom this entire project originated), I had to spend considerable time digging past the “standard vocation story” they had already prepared as a stock answer to the question “Why did you become a nun?” Some of those stories did indeed involve a DC, but most held back the DCs until it became clear that that DCs were actually what I was looking for. (God bless them, sisters just want to be helpful!)

There are multiple reasons for this “secrecy.” First, there is very little opportunity for chatting in monasteries (and almost all of the DCs recorded were reported by nuns, i.e., from sisters in monasteries, not convents). Schultze (2005) cites a common monastic expression: “Speak only if you can improve upon the silence” (p. 6). Nuns speak to one another primarily for utilitarian reasons (i.e., to accomplish work). When they do chat, they typically do so all together, in the one or two (depending on the order) hour(s) of the day set aside for group “recreation.” I have heard that intimate, dyadic friendships can rarely develop in monasteries, but I have never figured out how any could ever develop at all, given that opportunity for intimate, dyadic conversation is so sparse. On entering religious life, one gives up all worldly attachments, including attachments to other human beings. A sister ought to love her sisters, but she ought to

love them all equally.

Second, Catholic culture generally looks down on the broadcasting of one's intimate experiences with God. To announce that one has experienced a DC would likely be viewed as bragging, self-righteousness, or both. At the very least, it would be considered inappropriate and a sign of spiritual immaturity, the spiritual equivalent of discussing one's intimate marital relations in public. There are appropriate times and places for discussion of such things: in private, with one's priest or other spiritual director and possibly with a close friend (who would very likely tell the announcer to go talk to a priest or spiritual director!).⁸ I suspect that one of the primary reasons for this taboo is the potential for public discussion of DCs to incite "spiritual envy" and dejection in others.

Third, discussion of DCs that occurred within the context of a call to religious life may be particularly taboo. Younger sisters who, given the difficulties of adjusting to monastic life, may occasionally feel insecure in their vocation, could easily find reason to believe that they are not in fact called to sisterhood if regularly confronted with stories of sisters whose call involved spectacular DCs. In fact, as I know from my interviews, the call can manifest in infinite ways, many of which do not involve any kind of DC at all. Even so, no sister would want to risk inciting "spiritual envy," doubt, or—worst of all—the abandonment of a religious vocation in a fellow sister by her recounting of her own DCs.

In short, an explanation of the propensity difference even by *informal* institutional

⁸ For example, I am an active member at the world's largest Catholic online forum for discerners of religious life ([the Phatmass "Vocation Station"](#)). In December 2012, a relatively new, 13-year-old member of the forum started a new thread in which she announced that she had visions from God and thought that she was called to religious life, but needed advice (cartermia, 2012). Immediately "VSers" chided her for announcing her DCs in the forum and advised her to keep such things between herself, God, and her spiritual director. (See that exchange [here](#).) Compare this Catholic cultural norm to that of Luhrmann's (2012c) evangelical Protestant participants, many of whom discussed such experiences openly and with gusto.

formation is highly unlikely.

It does seem possible that women who have certain kinds of experiences are attracted to certain kinds of orders. Such a tendency might explain both the Franciscan and the contemplative differences. The Franciscans (est. 13th century, Italy) and Passionists (est. 18th century, Italy) are both European orders with long histories and well-established traditions on many continents, whereas the CDS is a relatively new (est. 1956) American foundation. The Poor Clares, Third Order Regulars, and Passionists all have an exclusively contemplative or strong-contemplative charism. The CDS' charism includes prayer and daily Mass but is strongly active. It may be, then, that women who have had a powerful experience of God communicating directly with them feel drawn to older, more established orders, or to orders with a strong contemplative component. Or it may be that the same personality differences discussed above to explain why some sisters tend to experience DC in certain ways also explain why some women choose certain orders.⁹ More interviews with a wider variety of orders would be necessary to support any of these explanations with confidence.

RQ5: Qualitative Order Differences

RQ5 asked whether participants in different religious orders experience DCs in different ways. This question sought to shed light on Sidgwick et al.'s (1894) further claim that family ties influence not just the propensity to experience paranormal phenomena but also the manner in which they are experienced. Table 3 indicates that any argument to this effect would be something of a stretch. If anything can be said, it is that Franciscans appear to experience more

⁹ Here it seems necessary to point out explicitly that every single sister interviewed answered "yes" to the question: "Do you feel God called you to be a religious sister?" Even CDS sisters, then, had experienced God's call. They simply experienced it in ways that did not meet the rigorous criteria for inclusion in this analysis. More specifically, far fewer CDS sisters had experienced *direct* DC.

variety of DC. But given that their numbers were larger (at least among those experiencing DC), I point out that difference very tentatively.

RQ6: “Seeing” Versus “Hearing” Among Catholics

RQ6 asked whether Catholics “see more” than they “hear.” Undoubtedly, they hear more.

Table 5 groups the experiences reported by sensory function.

Table 5

Reported DCs, Grouped by Sensory Function

Sensory Function	DC Categories Included	Total Number
Auditory	Internal Locution	25
	Internal Conversation	
	External Locution	
	Audible Voice	
Visual	Mental Impression	3
Tactile	Tactile	1
Multi-sensory	Multi-sensory	3
Other	Physical-emotional	13
	Circumstantial	
	Spiritual Presence	
	Ecstasy	

Note: No sister reported a vision (i.e., an externally perceived visual experience, as opposed to an internally perceived but image-based mental impression), olfactory, or gustatory experience.

Among the Catholics interviewed, auditory experiences outnumbered visual experiences by more than 8 to 1. It is thus most definitively the case that Catholics “hear more” than they “see.”

RQ7: “Seeing” Between Catholics and Evangelical Protestants

RQ7 asked whether Catholics “see more” than evangelical Protestants. Precise numbers for the breakdown of auditory and visual experiences among evangelicals are not available.

Davies et al. (2001) and Dein and Littlewood (2010) reported only experiences of locutions. However, the balance of examples provided by Luhrmann (2012c) suggests that the relative frequencies of such experiences among her participants are comparable to the frequencies I report here among Catholics.

Clearly, my findings do not support Luhrmann's (2011, 2012c) claim that Catholics "see more" and Protestants "hear more" but rather support Schmidt's (2000) vehement denial that any sensory bias can be attributed to any religious group. This finding of "non-bias" is hardly surprising, given the weak support that Luhrmann proffered for her assertion: a cursory glance at Catholic churches and a list of sources, not one of which examined contemporary American Catholics. My research is much more comparable to Luhrmann's own and finds little difference between evangelicals and Catholics as regards the frequencies of experiential mode.

If there ever were a difference between Protestants and Catholics in this regard, then Dein and Littlewood (2007) might explain the turn of the tide toward more similarity. They suggest that the logocentric turn in religious experience is a product of history— particularly of the post-Enlightenment age, in which seeing has come to be equated with scientific empiricism. Bauer et al.'s (2011) finding that culture influences the ways in which psychotics experience hallucinations may also explain why we *don't* find such differences among Protestants and Catholics when both are American.

Other Findings

Luhrmann's (2012c) general explanation of DCs suggests that the more one engages in kataphatic (Ignatian-style) prayer, the more DCs one should experience. This explanation relies upon an understanding of DCs as, fundamentally, a "reality monitoring" glitch: Belief in a god

who intervenes in human affairs, who directs and guides the actions of those He loves, is interpretatively foisted onto ambiguous stimuli to create the “perception” of God speaking to His beloved. Some people—those already possessing a propensity to absorption—do not require training to have such experiences (but more prayer, according to Luhrmann, should increase the frequency of such experiences for these people). Others—those whose propensity to absorption is naturally low—require training.

Only two of the sisters who reported DCs mentioned Ignatian-style prayer. (I did not ask about it.) Furthermore, many of the experiences reported occurred during childhood and adolescence, well before most people undertake training regimens of the type Luhrmann describes. Thus, on Luhrmann’s explanation, all but two of the sisters who reported DCs would have to have been naturally high in absorption. Such a high concentration of high-absorption-scorers in monasteries is certainly possible: Perhaps women with a naturally high capacity for absorption are drawn to contemplative orders. However, given the vast range of personalities I observed among the sisters, it seems to me highly improbable that all of them would score high on absorption.

It was my impression that the two sisters who did discuss Ignatian-style prayer had the most difficulty drawing the line between experiences that were self-generated and those that were not. They had this difficulty only for those experiences that occurred during Ignatian-style prayer. Thus it does indeed seem that training in kataphatic prayer “blurs the line” between the imagination and the external world, making it difficult to establish on which side of that line the source of an experience falls.

Luhrmann’s theory cannot, however, explain the vast majority of the experiences I heard

about. Take, for example, this experience reported by Sr. Judith (PCC):

Sr. Judith: All of the sudden, I think I saw the owner, and he was a Jewish man. And I had this tremendous urge in me to run up in back of him, grab ahold of his sports jacket, and shake it back and forth, and say, “I want to come with you, I want to come in Judaism with you.” But I didn’t want to be a Jew; I didn’t want to enter a synagogue. And I knew that Christianity stood on the foundation of Judaism. No one taught me this. It was just this Jewish connection I had. It’s complete knowledge from God.

....

Then one time I was a hair dresser, and I was doing someone’s hair and someone next to me was getting their hair done, and I just simply asked a question: “Oh, what religion are you?” And she said Jewish, and there it happened again. I mean it was just like... I wasn’t religious, but this experience of God... It’s like nobody was in the room, just me and this woman, and I wanted to touch her, like I wanted to grab hold of that Jewish woman. I wanted to physically be the one that was doing her hair and touch her. I call these experiences “touching Jews.” That was my way of mentally—the way I would describe these to myself. But it was really a touching, and a penetration of the spirit of Judaism fulfilled in Christianity, this Jewish connection since childhood.

....

One day I understood my experience as a child and as a young woman in [name of store], when I got to know the Scripture. So one day I was reading the Prophet Zechariah chapter eight, and it said, “Bless us the Lord God, and on that day 10 men from different nations will come speaking different languages, and grab the hem of every Jew’s cloak,

and say, ‘Let me come with you, for I have heard that God is with you.’ And I dropped my Bible, and I started to cry. I said, “You were giving me knowledge of those Scripture verses that I never read.” ...It was completely infused knowledge as a young person. I didn’t get it through reading; I didn’t get it through a person. It came to me directly from God. I said, “Lord, I experienced that, that strange phenomenon, of wanting to get up and grab Mr. [name]’s suit jacket and shake him back and forth.” ...I said, “Jesus, that was Zechariah, what you prophesied to the Gentiles would happen to them.”

At the time of her “touching Jews” experiences, Sr. Judith was not religious. She had had next to no formation as a Catholic. She had not read the Bible. She knew that the urges she felt were bizarre, but she did not understand them until years later, when she returned to the Church. When she finally did understand them, she interpreted them to be—beyond the shadow of a doubt—communications from God telling her to enter into the Church.

Where do “sensory override,” learning, absorption, and reality monitoring enter into an experience such as this one?

Even many of the locutions I heard about would be very difficult to explain using Luhrmann’s theory. Take again Sr. Maria Felicitas’ (TOR) experience in which she heard the phrase “spiritual motherhood.” Sr. Maria Felicitas was a freshman in high school at the time. Her family had left the Catholic Church when she was a young child and converted to Protestantism. During that time, her religious formation was anti-Catholic. When she was in seventh grade, the family reverted to Catholicism. Sr. Maria Felicitas, however, quietly contemplated going back to Protestantism until her junior year of high school. In all that time, she never heard the words “spiritual motherhood,” a phrase well known to women discerning religious life but not to many

others. It is one thing to argue that Sr. Maria Felicitas, as a freshman in high school, had a naturally high capacity for absorption that facilitated her experience of the internal locution she heard. It is another to attempt to explain the uncanniness of the use of the phrase “spiritual motherhood” with that explanation.

Then there is this experience from Sr. Barbara of Damiano (TOR):

Sr. Barbara of Damiano: And afterwards he’s like, “You can get prayed over, by prayer teams.” And I didn’t know what that meant, but I just went with him because he went. So there’s a group of three people who are about to pray over me, and my prayer in my heart was, “Lord, am I supposed to marry You, or am I supposed to marry this man?” Because we’d been dating for two months, and we’re both 26 years old. It’s kind of like, you know, you’re not gonna drag it out if it’s not going towards marriage and not the right thing. So that was my prayer inside my heart, but I didn’t tell the people who were praying over me anything, I just stood there silently and let them pray over me cuz I didn’t know really what it was all about and wasn’t really open to it. And the Scripture passage that they read me was Isaiah chapter 62, which says, “As a young man marries a virgin, so shall your builder marry you. As a bridegroom rejoices over his virgin, so shall your God rejoice over you.” And the guy I was dating... was a builder... so I was like, “Oh Lord, you made it so obvious I’m supposed to marry my builder! This is great!” [laughing] And I believed it all night. And then I went back later that night and opened my Bible, and reread the Scripture.... yeah... like I said, the Scripture just hit me like a ton of bricks. And I go back and read it and see it’s a capital “B” like “your Builder”—your Maker, your Creator—shall marry you. And I was like “Oooh, no!” I’m

still supposed to be a nun! So again, that's another way He spoke to me is through the Scriptures, and I knew instantly what it meant. Closed my Bible and I was like, "Nope, we're gonna pretend this didn't happen also." And I dated him for a whole 'nother year.

....

I understood it as Him speaking through these people, through these Scriptures, but I just thought it was interesting more so that these people read this Scripture to me right now. When they were speaking it, it was powerful, and it was beautiful. Like I said, I thought it was the most beautiful Scripture passage I'd ever heard. I mean people can read the Bible and say, "Yeah, yeah, I've heard that story" kind of thing, but this was just like *bam! This is for you!* And it wasn't until I read my Bible that night that I was just like, "And this is what this *means* for you." When they were reading, I was, like I said, confused what it meant. [laugh]

JES: So you had misinterpreted the first time.

Sr. Barbara of Damiano: Uh huh. Which is hilarious, I think, in retrospect, because St. Francis, when he was in front of that cross that we first saw at St. Clare's Basilica [where Sr. Barbara's call to religious life began], the Lord spoke to Francis, "Go rebuild my Church. It's falling in ruin." And Francis starts fixing up the church with bricks. But the Lord meant, "Renew the Church with your life." And I get the word "builder" wrong, too, like build-build, like I interpret it as marry your builder when he really meant marry your Creator. Which—I was consoled by the fact that Francis got the word in his message wrong, too, and they both included the word build! [laughs]

In sum, Luhrmann's four-pillar explanation of DCs may explain how people learn to

assign meaning to certain experiences that occur during kataphatic prayer—or even outside of prayer but in the context of a larger training program in kataphatic prayer—but it is a long way from explaining the DCs of people who do not look for such experiences.

Over half of the sisters I interviewed were contemplatives, who pray up to six hours a day (liturgically, not kataphatically). They all agreed that God spoke directly to them more often during their period of discernment pre-entry than post-entry. Sisters provided various explanations for this phenomenon. The most common was that God speaks directly only when it is absolutely necessary to get His message through (e.g., because the participant is being stubborn, fearful, dense, inattentive, etc.). Such extreme measures are rarely necessary in a monastery, where sisters understand God's will to be communicated via the will of the community or that of the superior, who represents God in the community. Thus, at least in a monastery, more prayer (generally speaking) apparently does not lead to more experiences of DC.

Overall, the Catholic sisters I interviewed appear to exercise more caution in ascribing an experience to God than the evangelical Protestants interviewed by Luhrmann (2012c) and Dein and Littlewood (2007). This caution may be a legitimately existing difference between the two Christian groups, the result of varying religious education and training regarding the discernment of such experiences. It may also, however, be an artifact of the more-stringent criteria I applied for including experiences. Luhrmann (2012c) herself appears to distinguish between the type of experiences I included and the more-common phenomena she focused on. In discussing what Sr. Mary would call a “10% experience,” Luhrmann says, “...[A]ny congregant who hears God speak necessarily hesitates” (p. 71). In her discussion of peak experiences, she says, “...like

mystical experiences, these moments were rare—people typically described just a few—and they were associated with confident knowledge” (p. 127).

Thus, similar as my research is to that of Luhrmann and Dein and Littlewood, the method of analysis applied here has been more exacting and therefore possibly more exclusive of legitimate experiences of DC. In my opinion, however, the caution I observed among sisters is a genuine denominational difference. Both factors—the denominational difference and the method of analysis—are likely contributors to the varying frequencies of DC so far discovered between evangelicals and Catholics.

A New Model of Participants’ Criteria for Divine Communication

As we have seen, there are significant differences between the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication and the criteria used by participants to discern a DC. Most of those differences occur among the criteria that have traditionally been used to distinguish DCs from psychotic hallucinations (see Table 2). This is hardly surprising, as “hallucination criteria” focus on the *perceptual* aspects of supernatural/paranormal experiences. They seek to distinguish DCs from some other kind of perception that concerns researchers but not participants. If researchers of DC want to understand how participants think about their experiences, they must move away from the historical emphasis on DCs as perceptions and toward a focus on the epistemological and interpretative aspects of DCs. In so doing, it would be helpful to have a model with which to begin. The Model of Participants’ Criteria for Divine Communication, presented in Table 6, reflects participants’ own reasoning about their experiences.

Table 6

Model of Participants' Criteria for DC

Criteria	Likelihood Participant Will Use Criterion
More potent than everyday experiences	High
Noetic	High
Spontaneous	High
Distressing	Average
Compelling	Low
Rare	Low
Lack of agency	Low
Linguistic/content cues	Low

Likelihoods in the right column of Table 6 are based upon the frequency with which my participants used each criterion. Obviously, this column will require adjustment as more data are gathered, especially across religious groups.

Due to the wording of their labels, several of the criteria in Table 6 appear to be the same as (or the semantic opposite of) criteria present in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication. In some cases, this wording is misleading. One must consider the religious (as opposed to psychiatric) context, background beliefs, etc. of participants in order to understand the real meanings of the criteria as participants employ them. In order to illuminate these critical differences, I shall here explain in detail what specific phenomenological qualities of an experience each criterion refers to.

More Potent than Everyday Experiences

Rather than create criteria that apply only to a single mode of DC (locutions, affect, etc.), I have opted to collapse the “stronger”/“louder” criterion with the “more emotionally potent”

criterion for the sake of parsimony. Both were used with considerable frequency, but it seems to me that a new beginning to DC research ought to start with the simplest model possible. If further research reveals that various criteria are commonly applied only to DCs experienced via particular modes, then there will be no difficulty in separating them out again.

This criterion, then, is used to identify a DC on account of the experience being “stronger” or “louder” than other thoughts, feelings, or sensations, to the extent that it forces itself on one’s attention and cannot be ignored. It may also identify a DC on account of the experience evoking intense (more than “normal”) affect in the participant. This affect need not necessarily be positive (see criterion 4), though it often will be.

Noetic

This criterion remains undifferentiated from that described in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication and from Luhrmann’s excellent description of it as “a sense of knowing somehow deeper than everyday knowledge” (Luhrmann, 2012c, p. 58). Researchers should take extra caution not to settle for a checkmark by this criterion when participants state, “I just knew.” Further probing of *how* the participant knew is most productive and may contribute to a deeper understanding not just of other criteria but of how those criteria contribute to the application of this one—arguably the most mysterious of them all.

Spontaneous

This criterion also remains undifferentiated from that described in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication. It identifies a DC on the basis of its being spontaneous, startling, coming “out of nowhere,” manifesting in its entirety in an instant as opposed to at a “normal” pace. Such DCs are not natural or logical continuations of what the

participant had been thinking at the time the communication occurred.

Distressing

This criterion must be differentiated from the “not distressing” criterion present in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication. The two criteria appear, superficially, to be semantic opposites; in fact, they are not. The *quality* of the phenomenological experience (distress) to which they refer differs significantly across the models.

In the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication, “distressing” refers to the affective and psychological effects of a psychotic hallucination on an individual. “Not distressing,” then, on that model, refers simply to an absence of the affective and psychological effects that typically accompany a psychotic hallucination. Because, however, the Model of Participants’ Criteria for Divine Communication does not use psychotic hallucination as its comparison point for establishing an experience as a DC, its operationalization of “distressing” and “not distressing” must be different from that of the academic model.

Indeed, “distressing” in the Model of Participants’ Criteria for Divine Communication refers to the affective and psychological effects of a *DC* (not a hallucination) on an individual. The affective and psychological effects of a DC are very unlike those of a psychotic hallucination on account of the dramatically different *interpretation* that the individual gives to her experience: not of malicious forces persecuting her (as in a psychotic hallucination), but of God’s will being opposed to her will. If the experiencer of a DC loves and strives to obey God, then this conflict of wills usually results in distress. In a sense, the distress experienced by the recipient of a DC is more like that experienced in an intimate relationship that has run into conflict rather than that of a person who feels tormented and powerless (like a schizophrenic).

Compelling

Like the previous criterion, this one must be differentiated from its apparent opposite in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication. In that model, “compelling” refers to the total lack of agency many schizophrenics feel in response to constant urgings to engage in certain behaviors; they feel their free will has been usurped.

On the other hand, when a DC is compelling, it is not because one feels one’s free will has been usurped; it is because of intense love. The same epistemological context that shapes the interpretation of a distressing DC is at work here, too: “I love God, and I strive to do His will; therefore I *must* do what He has told me to do.”

Rare

This criterion remains undifferentiated with the same one in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication. It is used to establish an experience as a DC on the basis of its being qualitatively different from more-everyday experiences. As with the “noetic” quality, this criterion appears to obscure deeper, more meaningful distinctions that participants make. Researchers should therefore not settle for this criterion when it is mentioned but instead probe participants about *what* in the experience made it so different from more-everyday ones.

Lack of Agency

This criterion is new, with no correspondent in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication. It is applied to DCs that participants feel would have been impossible for them to generate for themselves. Of course, almost all participants feel that almost all DCs would have been impossible for them to generate for themselves. This criterion, then, seems to be like the “noetic” and “rare” criteria in that it likely obscures deeper reasons for identifying an experience

as a DC that the participant simply has not identified yet. Researchers should probe.

And yet, sometimes, for an especially powerful experience (e.g., ecstasy), a reference to lack of agency will be all that a participant can muster. In such cases, it may seem absurd even to the researcher to probe further, particularly if the participant's description of the experience makes obvious why it is impossible to believe that it was self-generated. Under such circumstances, further probing can be awkward.

Linguistic/Content Cues

Like the previous criterion, this criterion is new and has no correspondent in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication. It is applied to DCs that used the second-person singular to refer to the participant, words the participant had never heard or did not understand, etc. Participants may also apply this criterion to a message that itself was not something they would have said to themselves (as in the case of Sr. Barbara of Damiano, TOR, who found it inconceivable that she would "welcome herself back to God"). (This criterion obviously applies only to locutions, but it seems genuinely inapplicable to other modes, hence I have maintained it in spite of my decision to collapse the "potency" criteria for the sake of parsimony.)

One should note that, in applying any of the criteria above, participants *do* make a comparison. But rather than compare their DC experience with that of a psychotic hallucination (which most of them will never have had), they compare them to everyday experiences perceived via the same mode. That is, a DC that has come through a thought is experienced as more potent than thoughts are usually experienced. One that has come through a feeling of conviction is experienced all of a sudden, rather than through the gradual process by which we normally

reason ourselves to conviction. One that comes via an external locution is experienced as strangely compelling, much more so than we usually feel when just any random person gives us a command. Etc. The criteria are applied on the basis of a judgment of relativity, and the point of comparison is not how psychotics experience the same type of perceptual phenomenon but how participants experience perceptual phenomena generally every day. Participants do not compare one extraordinary experience to another, but one extraordinary experience to many ordinary ones.

Finally, *no participant* identified a *single experience* as a DC on the basis of only a single criterion. This fact seems to indicate that individuals do not assign divine origin to an experience lightly. Rather, they build a *cumulative case*—consciously or unconsciously—for the extraordinary. Wolterstorff (1995) appears to have surmised this reasoning process. Recall that, in his analysis of St. Augustine’s conversion, he states:

That’s it: background belief that God speaks, inexplicable uncanny chanting, sudden intimation of the possibility, and relevance to his own life, of God saying *take and read*. The quick train of thought eventuates in Augustine saying to himself: “this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall.” If one is looking for it, perhaps one can spot in the process a quick calculation of probabilities... (p. 6)

Probabilities like: “Well, I suppose there was only a 10% chance that was God,” versus, “That was a 100% God experience!” We have heard such talk before. Researchers should be on the lookout for this kind of reasoning. May the probe, “How *else* did you know?” be ever on our lips.

Limitations of the Present Study

What you're researching here now is very mysterious. It happens differently in different people. You know, you are asking the questions and trying to find out, but there will always be this element of mystery. You'll never come to a totally rational... if you could, it would be wonderful. But maybe it wouldn't be so wonderful, because we would be in control of it. (Sr. Mary, PCC)

In applying the rigorous method that I have to the subject of DC, there is undoubtedly a degree of artificiality in the objective appearance of the results. They are not as precise as they may seem. My own mistakes in questioning my participants (especially that of getting so wrapped up in their stories that I occasionally forgot to ask, "How did you know that was God?") is the first limitation.

The second is my own interpretation of the results. In order to avoid artificiality in the interviews, I avoided asking the sisters to "make a list" of the criteria they used. Thus, for many of the criteria I counted for each experience, I had to infer from their timing (in response to my various questions), wording, and other subtle cues which qualities of the experience they discussed were the ones they used to determine the divine origin of their experiences. Other researchers would undoubtedly interpret their explanations differently.

Third are the inherent limitations of depth interviews, which allegedly provide less comparability and quantifiability of responses than surveys. Conducted as they are more in the style of a conversation than of a person-to-person survey, depth interviews do not ensure that all participants are asked all of the same questions in the same order and in the same way. This increases the chance that different participants responded to "different questions" (on account of

either variations in question wording or where the questions occurred in the interview) and correspondingly decreases the comparability of results across individuals. Taking these weaknesses of depth interviews into account, I nonetheless believe that the greater detail and opportunity for explanation and clarification afforded by depth interviews greatly outweighs the “scientific” advantages of a survey. In fact, I am of the opinion that a survey administered in exactly the same way to all respondents is still just as likely as a depth interview to present the “different questions” problem on account of the vast variation in people’s interpretations of questions. In a depth interview, should such a misinterpretation become evident in a respondent’s answer, the researcher at least has opportunity to correct it and still get the data s/he needs.

One serious flaw of depth interviews is the potential for the researcher—through speech, facial expressions, body language, etc.—to influence respondents’ answers. Spoon-feeding of responses to elicit the desired information is perhaps the worst outcome of this, and is difficult to control when a researcher enters an interview wanting or expecting to find certain things. Surveys pose the same potential problem in question wording and ordering, though presumably to a much lesser degree. I cannot say with total certainty that I was never guilty of “*a priori* mining” or spoon-feeding. I can say that, in the first community I interviewed in, I was so clueless as to what I’d find that I could not possibly have been guilty of it there. In the second community, the stories I heard were so different from the first community that I found myself asking questions that clearly sought to establish more similarity with the first community. As I became aware of this, I stopped it.

Additionally, asking an interview participant something directly as opposed to eliciting it via description may evoke rationalization not unlike the *post hoc* application of a general rule

rather than a deep recollection of one's thought processes at the time of the experience. My asking participants, "How did you know?" may have fallen prey to this inherent weakness of interviews. That is, how can *I* know that my participants did not just tell me how they know *now* that the experience was a DC, as opposed to how they knew *then*? I cannot know with absolute certainty which they did. I do believe, however, that the degree to which this may have been a problem was probably very limited, due to two precautions I took: The first was focusing participants on particular experiences of DC and allowing them to describe them at great length, in order to "take them back," before asking "how they knew." The second was restricting the pool of DCs I studied to only those about which the participant had absolutely no doubt that they were from God, because experiences about which one ever had a doubt are much more likely to elicit *post hoc* rules. At any rate, given the goals I set for this study, I thought it "less dangerous" for accuracy that I should risk the ambiguity created by direct questioning than that I should not ask participants how they knew at all and rely instead upon my own inferences from their descriptions. That, after all, is how we arrived at the faulty Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication in the first place.

Finally, the principles I used to filter experiences of DC for study appear to be considerably more stringent than those applied by previous researchers. This choice renders my results less comparable to those of other authors than one would hope. I made this sacrifice because I felt it more important to make a methodological point about research in a fledgling field than I did to provide comparability to only three other studies. Hopefully, the bulk of research into DC is yet to be done and future researchers will take care to consider and clearly report the principles they use to select experiences of DC for study.

Suggestions for Future Research

What the study of DC needs more than anything else is firsthand data. To date, the phenomenon has been studied almost exclusively via texts. The bulk of the firsthand data that does exist has focused on phenomena more general than DC, such that instances of DC emerged only incidentally and were not explored as the unique phenomena that they are. More scholars need to investigate firsthand experiences of DC via surveys, interviews, and immersion.

These methods of data-gathering ought to be employed in a wider variety of religious groups: not just among evangelical Protestants and Catholics but also mainstream Protestants, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jews and Muslims in all their stripes. In so doing, researchers may discover to what degree the experience of DC is universal versus mediated by religious belief.

As more researchers begin gathering data from various religious populations, agreement upon which experiences to include for study as DCs will become critical. Without this agreement, comparability across studies may be severely limited and a great mass of data (and resources) may all but go to waste. I hope that my thorough discussion of methodological issues in the selection and exclusion of experiences for study will help guide the field toward greater agreement on this matter in the future. At the very least, my detailed description of the criteria I used in selecting experiences for study should serve as an example in the reporting of future research.

In considering experiences for study as DC, it is just as important not to unnecessarily exclude certain categories of experience as it is to ensure that one consistently selects particular experiences for inclusion. To date, two of the three studies that have explored DC directly may

have unnecessarily limited their data collection: Davies et al. (2001), who examined only audible voices, and Dein and Littlewood (2007), who examined only locutions. In my experience, it can be extremely difficult to secure agreement for participation in a study on DC. Thus, when researchers do manage to secure participants, they ought to milk the experience for all its worth. Luhrmann (2012c), who examined all manner of experiences of DC without regard to medium or mode, should set the major trend for the future of DC research in this regard. “He can use *anything*,” said Sr. Esther (PCC), and indeed, many believers’ experience confirms that DC may come via thoughts, feelings, external sounds, tactile experiences, uncanny series of events—*anything*. It is always possible to later separate out DCs by medium or mode for analysis and report, but it is a shame to lose a rare opportunity to record participants’ experiences of DC in *all* media and modes simply because of researcher “over-focus.”

As the pool of data builds, the need for a theoretical framework with which to make sense of it all will become more urgent. Luhrmann (2012c) has already provided a framework for the study of DCs as perceptions. Here, I provided the Model of Participants’ Criteria for Divine Communication with which researchers might pursue more study of DCs as epistemological phenomena, i.e., as objects of interpretation rather than perception. On this model, the medium and mode of an experience matters considerably less than the reasoning processes, background beliefs, and experiential comparisons involved. In providing an organized, tested, “base” set of criteria some participants are known to use in discerning an experience as a DC, the Model of Participants’ Criteria for Divine Communication should help future researchers design their own survey, interview, and immersion experiences. It may serve as a sort of “entry-level guide” to what one can expect to hear from experiencers of DC and can be used to prepare researchers to

pose informed, useful probe questions.

The Model of Participants' Criteria for Divine Communication should, however, be tested and revised accordingly. The criteria of noeticism, rarity, and lack of agency in particular seem to obscure deeper reasons for believing an experience to be a DC, but it is not clear what reasons those might be: only those criteria already discovered, or something more? Further empirical research is needed to discover what might underlie the more "mysterious" of the criteria.

More light should also be shed on the *relationships* between various criteria in the model. Certain criteria (e.g., "linguistic cues" and "lack of agency") seem to imply one another, and yet participants do not always mention both together. Despite its relatively infrequent usage, "lack of agency" might reasonably underlie *all* criteria for believing an experience to be a DC; it may be that participants do not expressly cite "lack of agency" simply because the mention of other criteria seems to them to render this one obvious.

The Model of Participants' Criteria for Divine Communication is an excellent starting point (if I may say so myself) for the much-needed research of DC across religious groups. As scholars begin to gather DC data from a wider variety of populations, they may discover variations in the frequency with which members of different religious groups employ each criterion. They may even discover new criteria that could be added to the present model or used to create new, different denominational models. Any of these findings would be exciting indeed, and may necessitate the repositioning of my Model of Participants' Criteria for Divine Communication as the basis for a "Model of *Catholic* Participants' Criteria for Divine Communication." The discovery of such significant differences in the ways that believers of

various religions and denominations reason about their experiences of DC would surely generate new insights into the epistemological assumptions, background beliefs, and contextual factors that religion and spirituality contribute to the interpretation of experience generally.

Finally, I reassert here the urgency of the call of previous communication scholars (Baesler, 2008; Schultze, 2005) for intensified study of DC within the discipline of communication and for greater cooperation in the study of DC across disciplines. Given the rapidly rising popularity and institutional acceptability of interdisciplinary research, contemporary scholars are much better positioned than their forebears to round up, reconcile, and synthesize the historically scattered, departmentally segregated bodies of DC knowledge. Communication scholars, whose field of study is by its very nature interdisciplinary, are well prepared to pioneer this endeavor.

Conclusion

Study of religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs) is abundant, but research into RSEs having a *communicative* component has been sparse. That which exists is scattered across various disciplines, not focused upon divine communication (DC) as its own phenomenon, and typically conducted via textual analysis. This study gathered into a new Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication the previously unorganized criteria that contemporary scholars have implied participants use to determine the divine origin of a communication experience.

The weaknesses of the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication arise from two biases presently dominant in the research: The first is the academic preoccupation with DCs as perceptual experiences, which has given rise to a fixation with what distinguishes DCs from

psychotic hallucinations. The second is the limited body of firsthand data on DC, all of which has been drawn from evangelical Protestants. Together, these two biases create the appearance of DC as something that happens only to those who are borderline-mentally ill or members of “fringe” Christian groups. What is worse, these biases hamper efforts to see DCs as anything other than sensory phenomena—i.e., as the epistemologically fascinating, interpretatively complex, communicatively extraordinary experiences they are.

In order to break the literature out of its current trajectory, I interviewed 32 Catholic sisters about their experiences of DC. I asked, in particular, *how they knew* their experiences were divine, i.e., what criteria they used to distinguish DCs from other types of experience. From the 45 cases of DC I analyzed, it was apparent that the sisters did not use the same set of criteria presented in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication. Differences were particularly stark among that subset of criteria traditionally applied by academics to distinguish DCs from psychotic hallucinations. I proposed that the differences are attributable to the fact that, unlike academics, participants do not compare their experiences to psychotic hallucinations. Rather, in establishing the “extraordinariness” of an experience, they build a cumulative case for that status using multiple criteria that point to various ways the experience is unlike ordinary experiences they have every day.

On the basis of the different criteria I found participants apply, I developed a competing Model of Participants’ Criteria for Divine Communication comprising eight criteria. Several of these redefine criteria included in the Model of Academic Criteria for Divine Communication for the purpose of more focused (i.e., hallucination-free) study of DC. All of the criteria in the new model require further study and refinement.

I also found that contemporary American Catholics experience DC primarily via auditory as opposed to visual channels, which suggests they are not different in this way from evangelical Protestants. Indeed, the relative frequency of auditory versus visual experiences reported by my participants appears comparable to those reported in previous literature focusing on evangelicals. I found evidence of a stark “Franciscan difference” (and possibly a “contemplative difference”) that suggests individuals across different social groups experience DC with considerable variations in frequency. This finding requires further research to explain. Similarly, the evidence that individuals are prone to experience DC via certain modes, and that individuals belonging to particular social groups tend to experience DC via similar modes, was inconclusive.

Overall, the most well developed theory to date of how people experience DC—that of Luhmann (2012c)—appears insufficient to explain the vast majority of experiences reported to me. My research left me with the impression that my Catholic participants were considerably more cautious than Luhmann’s evangelical Protestant participants about assigning divine origin to a communication experience. This impression may be partially attributable to the more restrictive principles I applied in selecting experiences of DC for study, but I doubt that it can be attributed entirely to that difference.

The methodological differences between my study and those of previous authors were many. To date, few if any scholars of DC have reported the principles they used to select experiences of DC for study. I urged that this omission be corrected in the future and provided a thorough explanation of the epistemological variations I discovered in my research for the purpose of generating discussion about which principles researchers ought to use. I pointed out the fallaciousness of searching for similarities among experiences identified by participants as

DCs and calling these participants' reasons for believing their experiences to be DCs. I cautioned against the studying experiences determined by participants to be DC via the application of *post hoc* rules or generalizations as opposed to the application of experience-internal criteria. In avoiding this last quandary, I noted that focusing participants on specific experiences of DC from particular periods in their lives—at least to start—is of inestimable value.

These many methodological differences between my study and others suggest that any comparison between my findings and those of previous authors be made with caution. The discussion I provided of these methodological issues should, however, render future studies of DC more consistent and therefore comparable.

The phenomenon of DC sorely needs more study: more data, more variety of participant populations, more methodological transparency and consistency, more theory-building, more synthesizing of existing knowledge. I propose that communication scholars take up the charge. DC is, after all, communication, and the study of DC could benefit immensely from more attention in a discipline that is already strongly interdisciplinary. Expertise in religion, relationship, and reasoning are all critical to an understanding of DC, and all of these already have their experts in communication departments.

So much for what communication scholars can do for the study of DC. What can the study of DC do for communication scholars? Well, studying the ways that religious organizations do public relations is sometimes interesting. But studying the manifold ways that God maintains His private relationships—*that* is just riveting.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Pilot Study (PCC Sisters)

Basic Questions (BQ = 7) & Probe Questions (PQ = 23)

BQ1: How did you become a nun?

PQ1: Can you close your eyes and think back to the first time in your life that you realized God was calling you to become a nun?

PQ2: What were you experiencing in your life at that time?

PQ3: Through what channels did you feel God was speaking to you? Through other people, experiences, feelings, thoughts, all or none of these?

PQ4: Did God communicate this to you in a gradual or cumulative process of communication, over a period of time, or did it “hit you” all of a sudden?

PQ5: So, God communicated this to you gradually/instantly. On your side of the communication, did it (also) take a while for you to realize or interpret these messages as what they were, or did that hit suddenly (as well)? Once you’d put it all together, did you feel instantly 100% certain that this was God’s will for you, or did you doubt or “stew on it” for a while?

BQ2: How did you feel about God calling you to this specific vocation?

PQ6: Were you afraid, angry, or worried about anything in particular?

PQ7: Did the prospect of making vows and that life-long commitment worry you at all? Did you feel certain you could stick with it?

PQ8: Were there any sacrifices you knew you would have to make that you thought you might not be able to make, or that you mourned in particular?

PQ9: Did you feel that God was helping you to accept this calling in any way?

BQ3: Looking back now, with more experience in discerning God's communications with you, do you recognize any other times or "messages" in your life when God was communicating with you, that you didn't realize at the time?

PQ10: What was going on in your life or in your heart at that time that caused you to "miss" the message?

PQ11: Comparing those times you "missed" the message with the message you clearly did get about your vocation, what would you say was the difference, either in the way God was communicating with you, or in the message itself, or in your receptivity to the messages?

PQ12: Is there anything you've done, or are now doing, that you feel has helped "open you up" to God's communication with you? Anything that has helped you to become more receptive to His voice, or that's helped you learn to discern it from other people's voices, or from "noise" in your mind or in your life?

BQ4: Have you ever felt certain that God was talking to you, but you ignored it or tried to convince yourself otherwise?

PQ13: What was the difference in you or in the message in that case, compared to cases in which you were more receptive?

PQ14: How did God respond to your ignoring His message?

PQ15: Did He give up? Did His tactics change? Did He use different or more media to try to reach you?

BQ5: How has responding to God's call changed your life?

PQ16: Has it changed how God communicates with you? In quantity or quality?

PQ17: If you've become more receptive to hearing God's voice, do you find that God communicates now with you through different channels than before? Say, more through external events than internal feelings, or vice versa? Does He communicate more or less?

BQ6: How do you feel about this calling now?

PQ18: Do you still feel certain that this is what God intends for your life? More certain than before? Less certain?

PQ19: Are you more/less at peace with it? How has God helped to bring you to this acceptance of your vocation?

PQ20: Do you feel God continues to communicate to you, constantly or intermittently, that this is indeed your vocation? Can you remember specific events, experiences, feelings, or thoughts you've had in which you believed God was doing that?

BQ7: If you could tell people who have not yet found their calling how to discern it, what would you suggest to them?

PQ21: In your experience, what are some reasons why people fail to hear God's voice in their life?

PQ22: Are there practical things that people can do, or stop doing, to make God's voice more discernible?

PQ23: If you've ever had the experience of not being able to tell whether a strong feeling you had was God trying to talk to you, or just your own or the world's or other people's influence on you, how did you eventually figure out whose voice it was? What were some things you did to help make that distinction?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Post-Pilot Study (CP, CDS, and TOR Sisters)

Basic Questions ($N = 7$) & Probe Questions ($N = 24$)

1. Do you believe that you are called by God to be a nun?
 - (1) Can you explain what that call was like?
 - (2) Was there any salient or sudden moment of calling?
 - (3) Did you know at that very moment that this meant you should become a sister, or did you only figure it out later?
 - (4) How did you know that's what it meant?
 - (5) What made you certain that this was God and not just your own mind?
 - (6) Was this the first/only time you felt that God was calling you?

2. How did you feel about God calling you to this specific vocation?
 - (1) Did you feel instantly 100% certain that this was a call from God, or did you doubt or "stew on it" for a while?
 - (2) Did you immediately resolve to obey, or did you think of pulling a Jonah?
 - (3) Were you afraid, angry, or worried about anything in particular?
 - (4) Did your feelings change at all from the moment of the call until entry, or after entry, or now?
 - (5) Did you feel that God was helping you to accept this calling in any way?

3. What were you experiencing in your life at that time?

4. Can you tell me about your religious formation?
 - (1) Did you attend a Catholic school?

- (2) Was it faithful to the Magisterium?
 - (3) Was it run by religious?
 - (4) Was your family pious?
 - (5) Would you say that you had good formation?
 - (6) Did you ever stray from the path?
5. How do you feel about this calling now?
- (1) Are you still certain this is God's will for you?
 - (2) Do you feel that God still calls you to this vocation even now? Can you give me some examples of those confirmations (maybe events, experiences, feelings, or thoughts)?
 - (3) Have you had any disconfirmations, doubts, or temptations since entering?
6. Have you ever struggled to discern God's will for you?
- (1) How did you go about figuring it out?
 - (2) Compare this case to your calling experience. What was it about this other case that made it so difficult to discern God's will?
7. If you could change something about your calling experience, what would it be?
- (1) Do you wish you had been more open/obedient to God's communications?
 - (2) What could you have done to be more open/obedient?