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Abstract

How do you know it's God? The theology and practice of discerning a call to ministry in Church assessment conferences.

Lynn M. McChlery, BA(Hons), BD(Hons), MLitt, AFHEA

Christian churches must assess the suitability of applicants who believe themselves called to ministry. Discerning this vocation requires that Assessors, alongside an external criterion-based evaluation of applicants' personal qualities, address a less easily definable question: is this applicant called by God? This research aims to determine how Assessors sense, authenticate, and verbally articulate a spiritual discernment within the necessary practical confines of ecclesial assessment processes. Consonant with the subject matter, it employs the action-research methodology of Jane Leach's "Practical Theology as Attention", to a range of voices in mutual conversation.

The mixed-methods approach utilized here is grounded in ethnographic studies of assessment conferences in five UK denominations, and on interview data from a purposive sample of their Assessors, to establish empirically the Assessor's experience of discerning call. Thereafter, it draws on Ignatian spirituality to consider the reliability of a maturing spiritual "sense" in decision-making, both individual and corporate; and on Quaker practice for a contrasting communal discernment model. To address the identified challenge of utilizing intuitive knowledge, it engages with Iain McGilchrist's scientific perspective on how the brain processes information through a bi-lateral pattern of attentiveness. Turning to the specifically theological epistemology, two conversation partners are selected for their divergent perspectives on how God may be known. Newman represents a Catholic continuity between grace and nature, by contrast with Barth, whose negative ontology grounds a distinctive Reformed view of revelation inaccessible to unaided human reason. Attention to all of these voices illuminates how Assessors experience knowing and affirming an authentic call from God. It also provides a basis for suggesting what personal qualities and procedural tools may be required to facilitate this highly distinctive element of their task.

**How do you know it's God?
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ministry in Church assessment conferences.**

Lynn M. McChlery, BA(Hons), BD(Hons), MLitt, AFHEA

**Research conducted in the Department of Theology & Religion,
University of Durham
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

2018

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Table of Contents	3
Statement of Copyright.....	6
Acknowledgments	6
Introduction	7
The Challenge of Discerning Vocation	8
Methodology	14
Research Model: Pastoral Theology as Attention	15
<i>Strengths and Weaknesses</i>	19
The Empirical Study	23
Ethnographic Fieldwork: Assessment Conferences	23
<i>Individual Interviews</i>	24
<i>Data Analysis and Interpretation</i>	26
<i>Reflexivity: Insider Research</i>	28
The Scientific Study: McGilchrist.....	29
Discernment: A Study in Spirituality.....	30
<i>Ignatius and Personal Discernment</i>	31
<i>Jesuits, Quakers, and Communal Discernment</i>	32
The Theological Study: Newman and Barth.....	32
Conclusion.....	33

SECTION 1: LISTENING TO EXPERIENCE

Chapter 1. Discerning a Vocation to Ministry: Assessment Conferences	35
1: Observing Assessment Conferences.....	35
1. <i>Scottish Baptists</i>	35
2. <i>Church of England Bishop’s Advisory Panel (BAP)</i>	37
3. <i>Methodist Candidates Selection Committee</i>	40
4. <i>Church of Scotland</i>	43
2: Reflection and Analysis	46
1. <i>Reflexivity: what was my role?</i>	46
2. <i>Theology: What are each community’s convictions?</i>	48
3. <i>Praxis: how might practice be improved?</i>	49
Conclusion: Discerning God’s call?	53
Chapter 2. The Voices of the Vocational Assessors	56
Part 1: The Vocational Assessors	56
<i>Who are the Vocational Assessors?</i>	56
<i>The Task of Attentive Listening</i>	57
<i>Hearing an Authentic Call</i>	60
<i>Awareness of God’s presence</i>	65
<i>Discernment of Vocation</i>	69
Part 2: Reflection and analysis.....	73
<i>What helps them to know?</i>	74
<i>Attentiveness</i>	74
<i>What makes knowing difficult?</i>	79
Conclusion.....	84

Chapter 3. Individual Discernment: Listening to Ignatian Spirituality... 87

The Discerning Life: The Basis of Ignatian Spirituality	90
<i>The Spiritual Exercises</i>	90
<i>Ignatian Prayer</i>	92
<i>Sentir: a sense of God</i>	96
<i>Discernment of Spirits</i>	97
Seeking God's Will	99
<i>Defining "God's will"</i>	99
<i>Predispositions for discernment</i>	101
<i>Occasions for Discernment: Three "Modes."</i>	103
Finding God's Will.....	106
<i>Seeking Confirmation</i>	106
<i>Reasonable Certainty</i>	107
Ignatian Discernment: "Trust Your Feelings, but Use your Head"	109
Conclusion.....	112

Chapter 4. Communal Discernment: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." 114

What is Communal Discernment?	114
Jesuit Communal Discernment.....	116
<i>A Short History</i>	116
<i>Communal Discernment in Jesuit Practice</i>	118
<i>Distinctive Principles</i>	122
<i>Questions arising</i>	123
Quaker Communal Discernment.....	125
<i>A Short History</i>	126
<i>Voteless Decision-making in Quaker Practice</i>	128
<i>Distinctive Principles</i>	130
<i>Questions Arising</i>	131
Jesuits and Quakers: A Comparison.....	136
Jesuits, Quakers and Church Assessment.....	138
Conclusion.....	142

Chapter 5. "Knowing more than we can tell": brain lateralization and human perception. 144

McGilchrist: Introducing "The Master and his Emissary"	144
<i>Epistemology: A Dialectical Model of Attentiveness</i>	148
<i>Language</i>	152
<i>Creativity and Mimesis</i>	156
Vocational Assessors and "Knowing more than they can tell"	161
Conclusion.....	164

SECTION 2: LISTENING TO THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

Chapter 6. Discernment in Newman 166

Newman and the <i>Grammar of Assent</i>	167
<i>How is knowledge constructed?</i>	168
<i>How is knowledge gained? Imagination, Conscience and the Illative Sense</i>	172
Newman's style: How is knowledge described?.....	179
How is knowledge verified?	182
Communal Discernment in Newman	185
Summary: Discernment in Newman.....	189

Conclusion.....	191
Chapter 7. Discernment in Barth.....	193
Barth’s Theological Epistemology.....	195
Human Experience in Barth’s Epistemology.....	200
<i>Statements about human experience.....</i>	<i>202</i>
<i>Implications for Human Experience.....</i>	<i>203</i>
<i>Human Experience in practice.....</i>	<i>207</i>
Barth’s Vocational Theology.....	211
Discernment in Barth: How do you know it’s God?.....	215
Conclusion.....	219

SECTION 3: EXPERIENCE, THEOLOGY AND DISCERNMENT

Chapter 8. Intuitive knowledge and Discernment.....	221
Intuitive knowledge and cognition: McGilchrist and Ignatius.....	222
<i>Conflicting Perspectives.....</i>	<i>222</i>
<i>Parallel Insights.....</i>	<i>224</i>
<i>McGilchrist, Ignatius and God.....</i>	<i>228</i>
Intuition and theology: Newman and Barth.....	229
<i>Newman and Barth.....</i>	<i>229</i>
<i>Intuition: Newman, Barth or both?.....</i>	<i>232</i>
Intuitive knowledge and Discernment.....	236
<i>“Sentir” and the Illative Sense.....</i>	<i>238</i>
<i>Fostering a Discerning Spirit.....</i>	<i>241</i>
<i>Verifying a discernment of God’s will.....</i>	<i>244</i>
<i>Articulating Intuitive knowledge.....</i>	<i>247</i>
Conclusion.....	249
Chapter 9. Discernment in Vocational Assessment.....	250
Part 1: How do you know it’s God?.....	252
Discernment as Attention.....	252
<i>Attention to the applicants.....</i>	<i>253</i>
<i>Attention to each other.....</i>	<i>257</i>
<i>Attention to themselves.....</i>	<i>260</i>
<i>Attention to God.....</i>	<i>265</i>
Verification - How do you know that you know?.....	267
Articulation - How do you say that you know?.....	270
Summary.....	272
Part 2: Proposals for Action.....	274
<i>Systemic factors: interviews, exercises, and verification.....</i>	<i>274</i>
<i>Vocational Assessor’s personal development and training.....</i>	<i>278</i>
<i>Communal Discernment.....</i>	<i>280</i>
Conclusion.....	282
Conclusion.....	283
Appendix 1: Interview Questions.....	288
Appendix 2: Frequency of Responses.....	289
Appendix 3: Task Emphasis Method.....	293
Appendix 4: A lexicon for “Intuition”.....	295
Bibliography.....	300

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Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Departmental Ethics Committee in the Department of Theology & Religion at Durham University, June 2016

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the churches who trusted me with privileged access to their assessment conferences, and to the Vocational Assessors who generously shared their experience of their task. Without that, this research would have been impossible. Instead, it has been both fascinating and immensely enjoyable. My hope is that this study will enable all of us to better serve the applicants on whose holy ground we tread as we seek to discern God's call in their lives.

Thanks are also due to Dr Iain McGilchrist for access to material from unpublished talks, and to Professor Paul Nimmo for advance sight of his new work on Barth and vocation. Both are much appreciated.

In formulating this diverse and challenging study I have had the unstinting help of my academic supervisors, Professors Karen Kilby and Chris Cook. I could not have asked for greater support and encouragement. The remaining mistakes are all mine.

This research has been partially funded by the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University. More than that, the CCS has provided a generous and warmly supportive spiritual and academic community, generating many friendships and fruitful contacts. I will miss it greatly. I also acknowledge with gratitude generous financial support from the Ferguson Bequest and the Baird Trust, both associated with the Church of Scotland. These funders made this research possible, and I thank them for their investment in me.

Finally, my husband Stuart has again been left to hold the fort, the church and the dog while I hang out around universities and Jesuit retreat centres. I should ask for less; I could not ask for more. This work is dedicated to him.

Introduction

People whose judgments have a life-changing impact on others seldom take those responsibilities lightly. Those entrusted by their denominations with responsibility for assessing applicants for Christian ministry bear the particular burden that their decisions carry far-reaching consequences for both the applicants and the church.

For ministry applicants, final assessment conferences are the culmination of a lengthy and searching process of testing. They have explored their gifting and sense of “fit” for ministry during practical placements in churches, alongside an intense inner exploration of their own motives and desires, as they seek counsel and search their souls: is this God’s leading? An assessment conference is more than a job interview, which would determine their weekday employment but may leave much of life untouched. Almost uniquely among other vocations, this calling encompasses their social life and family, church life, and their interior world of prayer, beliefs, and desires – touching their core identity. Ordination for ministry is not only to do something, but to be someone. Consequently, the human cost of a negative response is high. Many applicants who are not recommended experience it as a painful existential rejection – not only “my skills are unsuitable”, but “I’m inadequate”. They may also receive it as a negative judgment by their church, which is the locus of their faith, community and service. As enquiry processes and placements cannot be secret, they are vulnerable to perceived public failure. Most fundamentally, those “rejected” may question their experience of God: if they have misheard God here, where else are they wrong? Is their faith reliable? Many churches, aware of the existential implications for non-accepted applicants, offer feedback and pastoral counseling support, and the Church of England has resources specifically for this.¹

The negative impact is perhaps even greater for applicants who are accepted, then subsequently find that they do not fit the role. “Successful” applicants usually enter lengthy full-time training, requiring them to relinquish their employment and sometimes to relocate, with associated financial and social implications for themselves and their families. Once in parish ministry (another relocation), they occupy tied

¹ Helen Thorp, *When the Church Says “No.”* Grove Pastoral Series (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2004).

housing and the habitus of their clerical identity, which shapes all their community relationships. Struggles with the role cannot be confined to “work”, and effective support is not guaranteed. Resignation from ministry feels like a painful and public admission of failure to fulfil one’s own vows to God and other people’s expectations, and practical options for alternative employment may be limited. Nevertheless, a significant minority leave ministry within a relatively short time. Others may wish to do so but remain trapped by practical constraints, and become vulnerable to stress or depression.

While pastoral considerations alone compel a sincere desire to discern accurately, the effects of poor assessment decisions are not confined to applicants. Churches invest significant amounts of increasingly scarce resources in training new clergy; they have a stewardship responsibility to do so wisely. As well as financial resources, a few ministers who require extensive help disproportionately absorb the capacity of support structures and staff. For congregations, struggling clergy can generate pastoral problems, demotivate and disempower volunteers, divide and disrupt the congregation, or gradually empty the church – pastoral and ecclesial damage which takes years to repair. These problems distract the congregation from worship and mission, and often raise the question: “How did he get through assessment?” However, all denominations currently lack clergy, and most have numbers rapidly dwindling to crisis level. Assessment conferences cannot succumb to the easy temptation to be risk-averse in declining applicants.

The Challenge of Discerning Vocation

What makes the church assessor’s task particularly difficult, more so than its secular equivalents? Professional expertise is readily available for training to elicit an applicant’s skills and personal qualities, determining their suitability for the occupation as one would in any field. Some denominations make good use of interview, psychometric testing and observation of group dynamics, and such approaches yield vital quantifiable data for assessment. However, as discussed above, ordained ministry is more than a job: it is usually seen as a vocation, something which touches the person’s core identity of deeply-held beliefs and spiritual experience. Almost uniquely among other vocations, this faith dimension is visible and explicit in ordained ministry. Preaching, leading worship and praying are all embedded in the job description, as is the requirement to permanently occupy the habitus of a church

community and, often, clerical clothing and housing. Clergy are therefore deemed to be motivated by their faith convictions to the extent that legally, these are a genuine occupational requirement. All churches therefore consider it vital to determine whether ministry applicants are called by God: across varying ecclesiologies, they regard an explicitly spiritual dimension as essential to a vocation to ministry. The nature of a call from God, how it is determined, and how it relates to other qualifications, requires theological exploration. Discerning it may also require different tools, skills, and personal qualities than assessment for more easily measurable qualities.

Assessors encounter a further layer of complexity: how does one know whether someone else is called by God? Discernment may be difficult enough to do for oneself, and impossibly difficult for others. If such a call is in some way distinct from more quantifiable criteria, to what extent can it be determined by the same methods? And if other tools are required, what are they? If the applicants' call encompasses their spiritual life alongside other aspects, it seems reasonable to hypothesise that assessing call similarly draws on the Vocational Assessors' personal spiritual qualities, beliefs and experience. This suggests that affective or intuitive, as well as rational, dimensions of experience may be operant. Exploring these hypotheses and being open to others requires listening to the Assessor's experience of discerning call. Subsequently, the question arises of how a sense of call should be heard and recorded. Must applicants verbally articulate what may be a tacit, indefinable inner "sense" of God's call? That phenomenon may be present even if it is inexpressible; however, Assessors almost always have to provide written feedback to justify their decisions in concretely referenced conclusions. In addition, the Assessors themselves may find it problematic to wrestle their own discernment of the applicant's call into words.

Assessors may experience unease in identifying the movement of God around the frequently recurring fear of subjectivity: "Is it just me?" Discernment requires reflexive awareness of one's own inner voices and perceptions. An affirmation that someone is called by God, particularly if experienced intuitively, might easily be explained reductively in exclusively scientific or social scientific terms, excluding any reference to God. Questions about how we know things about God therefore benefit from some antecedent wisdom from interdisciplinary studies concerning human cognition. It is

fruitful to explore the complex area of how intuitive insights operate in relation to noetic frameworks, what kind of knowledge they yield, and what is their epistemological validity as a basis for judgment. One may then examine how theological conceptions of discernment compare with those.

Determining a call to ordained ministry is an ecclesial as well as an individual task. Must the applicant have a felt call, or might the church corporately identify a call from God that the individual is missing? Perhaps more commonly, an applicant may have a compelling sense of call which the church cannot affirm, raising a painful tension about whose voice is privileged in the conversation. Churches may also consider whether and how their decision-making processes should qualitatively differ from their secular equivalents. If their objective is to discern God's presence and leading in a theocracy, rather than to reach mutual agreement or reflect majority rule democratically, different methodological tools might be used to facilitate that dimension of their task. Addressing these questions requires research into communal ecclesial decision-making processes which expressly aim to discern divine leading.

Embedded in all these questions are inherent theological assumptions about theological epistemology, the nature of God's call, and how it is discerned individually and corporately. God's call may be an external phenomenon revealed from outwith ourselves, or it could be interiorly present and requiring to be disclosed, or both. How do our theology and our spirituality relate in this area? A church's operant theology will predetermine their thinking about discernment, often unconsciously. A study of different ecclesial traditions with diverse theological understandings facilitates a fruitful conversation through theologians who have thought deeply about theological epistemology.

It is vital for the applicants and the Church, as well as for the Assessors themselves, to ensure that Assessors have the skills and personal qualities to make accurate determinations. Thus arises the important question: how might Vocational Assessors, in ways consistent with their communities' theological convictions, better go about the task of discerning whether to accept candidates for ordained ministry in the Christian Church, as called by God? Or, more colloquially, how do you know it's God? The research question was formed to treat Vocational Assessors as individuals, with

personal qualities and responsibilities; and also to acknowledge the communal dimension of the task. It focuses on discernment of God's call as a spiritual and theological phenomenon, as distinct from assessment of gifts or skills by criteria – though the complex interplay of these factors is an important consideration. It recognises a theological dimension, as assessment practice reflects its practitioners' operant belief system. Finally it works towards a desired outcome in practical suggestions for enhanced practice.

In delimiting these areas for research, some valid related questions cannot be directly addressed. Though the research question considers discernment of vocational call, it focuses more on the theology and practice of discernment than on a theology of vocation, except where the two cohere. Similarly, although an applicant's personal sense of call is relevant, it is considered here solely through the lens of how that is discerned by Vocational Assessors and Church assessment systems. The applicants are not the focus of the study. This same focus determines my approach to assessment conferences. The external ecclesial processes within which discernment is embedded are the immediate and necessary context for my research. However, my primary aim is not to evaluate the comparative effectiveness of systems, unless that emerges as an outcome of my research into discernment. I propose to offer a holistic view of how VAs experience discernment, of which systemic considerations form an important part.

My own use of the terms "call" and "vocation" requires to be clarified. The English word "vocation" comes from the Latin *vocare* meaning "to call", therefore the two are etymologically synonymous and the phrase "vocational call" is technically a truism. However, the theology of vocation is beset by lexical imprecision, particularly in translating *Beruf* (call) and *Berufung* (calling).² For example, Paul's instruction to the Corinthians to "remain in the calling (*klesei*) to which you were called (*eklethe*)"³ is the locus of much scholarly controversy.⁴ Following Luther (and still, I believe, the

² For an excellent discussion of these complexities, see Rhys Kuzmic, "Beruf and Berufung in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics: Toward a Subversive Klesiology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 3 (July 2005): 262–78.

³ 1 Corinthians 7:20

⁴ For Luther's exposition, see Martin Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7*, Luther's Works 28, n.d., 1–56; For his theology of vocation, see Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1957); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Spirit versus Structure: Luther and the Institutions of the Church* (London: London: Collins, 1968); Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), 14–17.

dominant view), I take the view that “call” is God’s primary and universal call to discipleship, and “calling” or vocation is the shape of that general call in an individual’s specific role or job, such as marriage or career. “Vocational call” or similar terminology, though admittedly inexact, therefore distinguishes the latter from the former.

A still more complex etymological difficulty should be noted concerning the term “intuition.” It was frustratingly difficult to find a suitable lexicon to describe the indefinable sense or faculty which became central to the research. Phrases like “spiritual sense” or “gut feeling” were impossibly vague, raising more questions than answers. An initial enquiry in to the psychology of intuition proved little less indeterminate. Intuition is to psychology what love is to theology: extremely broad and often shallow, with widely assumed but seldom articulated meanings. Few terms are as ambiguous, and its unqualified use “is so misleading that its expulsion from the dictionary has been earnestly proposed.”⁵ Nevertheless, in the absence of a satisfactory alternative “intuition” became my most frequent referent. I am keenly aware of the inadequacy.

The term “spirituality”, used frequently throughout, is also problematically vague. Its nature and boundaries are contested, and it does not speak with one voice. This study focuses largely on one voice, that of Ignatius of Loyola, as an exemplar of spirituality who is widely accredited in the Christian tradition. There are, of course, many others both within and beyond explicit faith traditions.

This thesis proposes to address the above concerns in three sections, firstly by separating the systematic theological and the empirical components. This is an admittedly artificial and unsatisfactory distinction for analytical purposes, but a temporary one pending their re-integration in the third section. The first section, Listening to Experience, begins with close attention to the Assessors’ experience of discerning God’s call, both communally in the environment of assessment conferences (Chapter 1), and in their own individual practice (Chapter 2). It then examines the spiritual practice of discernment as understood in the Christian tradition of Ignatian spirituality. Chapter 3 outlines the Ignatian basis for spiritual discernment as an

⁵ Rachel M Osbeck and Held, *Rational Intuition: Philosophical Roots, Scientific Investigations* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2014), 2.

individual practice. Chapter 4 builds on that to show how Ignatian discernment operates as a communal exercise, and compares it with an example of communal discernment in another major spiritual tradition, the Quaker. Listening to Experience concludes in Chapter 5, “Knowing more than we can Tell”, with a secular view from the modern psychological sciences. It offers a comprehensive account of how the world is perceived and knowledge is constructed through the lens of Iain McGilchrist’s multi-disciplinary study in philosophy, psychology, and the neuroscience of brain lateralization.

Section 2, Listening to the Theological Tradition, examines contrasting Christian understandings of theological epistemology in relation to God’s call. Chapter 6 focuses on the thought of John Henry Newman, whose Catholic view of grace in nature draws on traditional theological and philosophical understandings of knowledge of God. By contrast, chapter 7 examines the Reformed Protestant Karl Barth, whose theology of revelation seeks to be grounded in Scripture and explicitly rejects natural theology. Finally, Section 3 seeks to re-integrate experience and theology, in two stages. Chapter 8, “Intuitive Knowledge and Discernment”, draws together the voices of Ignatius, McGilchrist, Newman and Barth to distil their insights on the core questions arising from the Assessor’s experience. Chapter 9 applies these insights specifically to the Assessor’s personal and communal experience, and offers suggestions for enhanced practice.

Methodology

How might Vocational Assessors, in ways consistent with their communities' theological convictions, better go about the task of discerning whether to accept candidates for ordained ministry in the Christian Church as called by God? To address this challenging question as a practical theological exercise, it was decided to adopt a mixed methods approach blending qualitative empirical research with some significant conversation partners from the psychological sciences, and with theology. The study would be grounded in the Assessors' experience. Their voices would be heard in interviews, allowing their experiences of vocational discernment and its challenges to frame the conversation. Also, their habitus in Assessment Conferences would be explored ethnographically, both as the social context for communal discernment, and for its operant theological assumptions. Embedded in the research question are the complex terms "discernment" and "called by God", which cannot preclude modes of perception beyond the rational. Insight would be sought from contemporary science or social science on how the relevant knowledge, particularly intuitive or tacit knowledge, is formed. Furthermore, exploring theological convictions would require systematic engagement with selected theologians on theological epistemology, particularly relating to discernment: how do we "know" the presence or leading of the divine? This blended approach would facilitate a clear analysis of discernment processes from the personal, communal or ecclesial, spiritual, scientific and theological perspectives, insofar as these can be differentiated. Finally, it would provide a cohort of data for forming suggestions for enhanced practice.

If "all research is, to an extent, autobiography"⁶ I should identify myself as a research tool. I became a Church of Scotland minister in 2005 from a previous occupation which involved recruitment and interviewing. From a conservative Evangelical theological background, I acquired an active interest in Ignatian Spirituality 25 years ago and since then I have made annual retreats, had ongoing spiritual direction, and undertaken the Full Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius in a thirty-day silent retreat. I have trained as an Ignatian spiritual director, though I do not practice. In 2010 I was

⁶ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006) p.60

selected to train as a Vocational Assessor in my own denomination. I was immediately struck by the contrasting ways in which spiritual discernment and listening to God are addressed in the Ignatian and Presbyterian traditions, and sought a theology and practice of helping others to discern vocation in the Reformed tradition.

I researched this area for an MLitt degree, asking how the theory and practice of Ignatian spirituality might inform vocational discernment in the Church of Scotland.⁷ That confirmed my view of its importance, but raised further questions. I wanted to determine whether my findings were due to operational or theological distinctives within Presbyterian assessment, or whether assessors in other traditions had comparable experiences. I sought to further research the precise nature of Assessors' intuitive sense of God's leading, and to investigate this from non-theological sources. Theologically, I wanted to develop a necessarily brief initial exploration of the Assessor's tacit and inarticulate sense of "knowing this is of God" into more thorough research of theological epistemology, especially in relation to discernment. Finally, my previous research reached a somewhat unsatisfactory impasse over the question of how the spiritual practices of one tradition (Catholic and Ignatian) could be appropriated in practice by another tradition (Reformed) across theological and ecclesial boundaries, without reductionism or loss of integrity, and I sought to investigate that dilemma.

Research Model: Pastoral Theology as Attention

For this research, a practical theological research framework had to be established to facilitate the necessary interaction between the diverse conversation partners: primarily the Vocational Assessors and their churches; then representative voices from the psychological sciences, spirituality, and theologians across a spectrum of views. As "call" is embedded in the research question, and attentive listening is intrinsic to assessment processes, the metaphor of voices and conversation seemed apposite for investigating how God's "voice" is discerned in a vocational call.

⁷ Lynn McChlery, "How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?" *Practical Theology* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 2015): 2–18, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1756074815Y.0000000005>.

The possible model of Theological Action Research was thoroughly investigated for its applicability.⁸ TAR is a fusion of qualitative investigation and theological education, pursuing practical wisdom in how to faithfully participate in God's mission by discerning God's presence amid practical engagement in a task. It holds conversation as a core value, on the premise that God is known in moments of disclosure arising from interaction between participants. The primary conversation is between two teams of researchers, comprising both "insiders" (practitioners in the research field); and "outsiders" (trained academic researchers). Every voice is valued, and none should be suppressed or excluded. This includes people without faith, in the belief that the divine permeates all of reality and that anyone can be a bearer of theology. It is therefore ideally suited to researching group or community activities. Discourses and practices are interrogated for their operant, espoused, normative and formal theologies. Though this is acknowledged as an artificial disaggregation, it nevertheless remains illuminating for analytical purposes. The theological voice is embedded alongside social scientific methodologies, which usefully resolves some potential difficulties with interdisciplinary studies.

Despite its strengths, this model was not adopted. Although including vocational assessors in a team of co-researchers would be ideal, the operational difficulties of establishing insider and outsider teams within the parameters of a PhD project were insurmountable. Also, the matrix of the four voices was somewhat artificial for capturing all the participant voices in the vocational assessment processes. An alternative model was sought which preserved the strengths of TAR but better suited this situation.

Jane Leach's *Pastoral Theology as Attention* emerged as the strongest alternative.⁹ A Cambridge academic, Leach pioneered this action-reflection method in 2008 as a tool for teaching ordinands "the practice of a kind of spiritual attention through which we expect[ed] God to speak.... deliberately styled as a tool for spiritual discernment."¹⁰ Leach's model was partly inspired by Simone Weil's perceptive writings on "the habit

⁸ Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

⁹ Jane Leach, "Pastoral Theology as Attention," *Contact* 153, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 19–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13520806.2007.11759074>.

¹⁰ Leach, 23.

of attention which is the substance of prayer”, and attention to other things as the essential means for honing and developing a habitual alertness to the presence of God in all things.¹¹ Leach’s own *modus operandi* reflects the assumption that God’s presence is disclosed through prayerful attention. As a researcher, her practice strikingly resembles that of ecclesial assessors. She listens attentively to the voices of her subjects and determines how to weigh their responses, humbly aware of her own limitations. She is not providing answers, but crafting questions to elicit their own wisdom. Simultaneously, she is alert to her own inner voices to determine their source, and observant of psychosomatic signals both in her subject’s bodies and her own.¹² This intentionally holistic approach also incorporates the need to listen to the theological tradition, to

“... bring [theological] texts into conscious dialogue with the practice being examined. In the process, our instinctive feel for God’s presence is brought to consciousness and tested in dialogue with others.... as we seek to give an accurate and rigorous account of God at work in the world.”¹³

This sensitive synthesis of social scientific methodology with prayerfully attentive spirituality seemed ideally suited to this research project, where theology, practice, personal intuition and communal authentication are complemented by the insights of other academic disciplines to “raise our horizons” beyond the preoccupations of the narrowly religious.¹⁴ Leach embeds all of this in the context of prayerful discernment in a community of people genuinely seeking God’s will. Working among ordinands, it is striking that she asks: “I wonder how much of such discernment goes on amongst those who teach student ministers and make decisions about whom to ordain.”¹⁵ This is precisely the subject I sought to address.

Leach’s paper fleshes out her method in the specific context of ordinands reflecting on the challenge of AIDS for churches in South Africa, and detailed examination was required in order to faithfully transpose the methodology to the very different, specifically ecclesial context of this research. Under the heading of “Prayerful attention

¹¹ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 59.

¹² Leach, “Pastoral Theology as Attention,” 19–21, 25.

¹³ Leach, 28.

¹⁴ Leach, 26.

¹⁵ Leach, 23.

to who God is and what God is saying”, Leach details five stages for analysis.¹⁶ These are:

1. Attention to the “voices” – whose voices are part of the conversation, including mediated voices? Whose are absent, or deliberately silenced? Attention includes “listening” to feelings, tone and body language as well as to words.
2. Attention to the wider issues – what cultural trends, social issues and human behaviours are exhibited here? What academic disciplines or specialist witnesses might help us understand them better?
3. Attention to my own voice – what are my thoughts, feelings and instincts, and where do these come from? Where am I located in this project as a researcher?
4. Attention to the theological tradition – ethics, Scripture, ecclesial traditions, liturgical and worship resources.
5. Attention to the mission of the church – how is the Church being asked to respond in this situation, and what is my/our specific calling within that?

These broadly encompass the areas identified above as essential for this study, with some necessary modifications for this research context. It was considered helpful to disaggregate Leach’s question 1 into two closely related parts: attention to the range of “voices” present at assessment conferences (as ethnographic background); and, within that, particular attention to the Vocational Assessors who are primarily responsible for discernment. Under question 2, some wider social and ecclesial issues relevant to the selection of clergy – for example, the social issue of recruitment of minority groups – were bracketed as having only marginal significance for this study. The research question required that human behavior be treated as the focus, and this became specified as seeking an inter-disciplinary partner to offer scientific and social scientific expertise on how the mind constructs knowledge. Thirdly, Leach’s final question about what ethical or practical imperative arises from the previous reflections became specified as this research question: “Informed by this, how do we discern whether someone is called by God, and what specific practical changes might be required?” *Mutatis mutandis*, the five areas of investigation became:

1. Whose voices can be heard at Assessment Conferences? – attending to all the voices which are part of the conversation, including distant and mediated

¹⁶ Leach, “Pastoral Theology as Attention.”

voices. Given the primary role played by the Assessors, what are their own voices saying?

2. What is contributed by research into how the brain constructs knowledge? – attending to recent scientific expertise.
3. Attention to my own voice – what are my thoughts, feelings and intuitions as a researcher, and where do these come from?¹⁷
4. What does the Christian tradition have to say? – attending to specific theologians across different traditions.
5. How, in the light of this, might churches better discern whether someone is called by God to ordained ministry, and what specific practical changes might be required?

Strengths and Weaknesses

This method has obvious strengths. It incorporates both cognitive and affective responses, enabling the critical skills of data and theological analysis which disclose the underlying assumptions and questions to sit alongside the affirmation of affective modes of experience. By identifying multiple voices in this complex discussion, it facilitates building a thick description and identifying the key theological issues. Finally, it establishes grounds to propose concrete action.

Leach's method also highlights the importance of attending to one's own voice, which is axiomatic in action research: researchers cannot "leave themselves off the page".¹⁸ Since I am a Vocational Assessor in my own denomination, a practitioner of Ignatian spirituality, and theologically a Reformed Protestant, a reflexive awareness of my own positionality in these areas would be essential, and this is discussed below.

Leach's view of discernment is also helpful. One might possibly accuse her of credulity for unexamined and unverified claims to "the dawning realization"¹⁹ of a new leading from God which "emerges from their midst"²⁰, for her uncritical attention to

¹⁷ Leach uses the term "instinct" which, in psychology, is usually reserved for somatic signals common to a species, like eating when hungry. I have substituted "intuition" as a preferable term.

¹⁸ Kathryn Herr and Gary L. Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty* (SAGE Publications, 2014), 69.

¹⁹ Leach, "Pastoral Theology as Attention," 21.

²⁰ Leach, 30.

psychosomatic signals,²¹ or an “instinctive feel for God’s presence”.²² However, she is keen to interrogate these experiences on deeper reflection. She offers some clear indications of the hallmarks of authentic experience of God, bearing in mind that this paper is not a treatise on discernment. Crucially, she raises – but does not answer – the “hard question... about what we mean by “the feel of Christ” [which is] essential in seeking the mind of Christ if our discernment is not to be solipsistic”.²³ That is indeed a hard question, and one this research will attempt to address. Leach suggests that to understand this gradually produces “a kind of dispositional understanding – an attentiveness – towards deeper participation in the life and practices of God in the world”.²⁴ How such a disposition may be formed is also a key concern for this research.

Leach’s model of pastoral theology as attention also has possible limitations. Interrogating it for its operant theology and potential bias, I noted her assumption that what is needed is already inherent in the human condition. In her paraphrase of the Gospel narrative of the feeding of the 5000 in Mark 6, Jesus tells the disciples, “You feed them. You will find the resources in the community” – the latter statement is her own insertion.²⁵ For her research subjects, Leach also emphasises “the resources they already have” and believes that she “elicits from them the wisdom they need.”²⁶ This positive ontology implies a theology of common grace, inherently available to all. In the absence of counterbalancing statements, it could be read to minimise the distorting effect of sin, and inflate the sufficiency of human resources. Similarly, her incarnational emphasis on the immanent Christ present in many communities of practice, while a valid perspective, may minimize the concept of God’s transcendence, and any need for revelation or resources beyond human capacity.²⁷ This same assumption of human experience as inherently a *locus theologicus* underlies her credence of insights from other disciplines and practitioners who “help us to see issues

²¹ Leach, 25.

²² Leach, 28.

²³ Leach, 29.

²⁴ Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God.,” in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 57–65.

²⁵ Leach, “Pastoral Theology as Attention,” 21, misquoting Mark 6:37, see also Luke 9:13, Matt 14:16.

²⁶ Leach, 21.

²⁷ Leach references Clive Marsh, who presents this view in detail. Clive Marsh, *Christ in Practice: A Christology of Everyday Life* (London: Darton Longman Todd, n.d.).

in a more layered and nuanced way.”²⁸ While interdisciplinary studies are invaluable in constructing a global description of phenomena, Leach’s method does not question the relative weight of different sources. Specifically, it lies beyond the scope of her method to enter the debate over whether “the script of revelation” in Scripture and theology carries an intrinsically different kind of authority, as (for example) Swinton and Mowat, from a more Reformed perspective, believe.²⁹ Since they reflect my own theological tradition, this area must be explored.

This raises the fundamentally divisive theological question of whether, or how, reflection on human action may be a source of divine revelation. The method of Pastoral Theology as Attention implies (at least initially) that all voices are equal, and does not address the possibility of competing truth claims. Epistemologically, it implies that knowledge arises collaboratively and inductively from human experience, more than deductively from an authoritative source of revelation. This raises the vital methodological problem of whether, by adopting Leach’s conversational model, this study predetermines the theological question of how experience and revelation engender new understandings. By making conversation a starting point, all participants (theologians, practitioners and other specialists) could be assumed to be willing to converse as equals. If so, this methodology constitutes a vicious circle in which one epistemological perspective is inherently privileged and the theological conclusion is predetermined.

To mitigate any intrinsic bias, it was decided to include conversation partners from opposite sides of the theological spectrum on this question. John Henry Newman would broadly share Leach’s operant assumption of continuity between nature and grace, reason and revelation. Karl Barth was chosen as a theologian whose understanding of divine revelation contradicts Leach’s, in deliberate contradistinction to (for example) Paul Tillich, whose understanding of divine disclosure arising from critical correlation may more readily compare with hers.³⁰ A further reason for choosing Barth is his surprisingly extensive treatment of the subject of vocation. It is even possible that Barth is here being invited to a conversation in which he would be

²⁸ Leach, “Pastoral Theology as Attention,” 26.

²⁹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 5.

³⁰ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1959).

unable or unwilling to participate. However, the polemical tone of much of his work (especially *Church Dogmatics I*) demonstrates his willingness to engage with contemporary thinkers with whom he disagreed. He would nevertheless be much disturbed by the absence of Biblical study in this proposed model. However, the mature Barth more fully accommodated God's turn towards humanity as incorporated in the life of the Trinity, somewhat softening (though never contradicting) his previous denial of God's presence in culture.³¹ If Barth's theology is to be defensible, it must be open to scrutiny – and conversation does not *per se* preclude the possibility of competing truth claims, with some voices acknowledged to carry greater authoritative weight either prior to the discussion or by its conclusion.

Any research has its necessary but frustrating limitations. The addition of Biblical study on discernment would have immeasurably enriched this study, and from a Reformed perspective, I regret the omission. All that is possible here is to indicate where this might be pursued.³² Similarly, philosophical voices on epistemology (particularly Descartes and Kant) and on language (Heidegger and Wittgenstein among others) beg to be consulted. The subject of vocation and the nature of a specifically vocational call, which is one theme in this study, could usefully be expanded.³³ As previously indicated, the applicant's voices are present here only as heard by the Assessors, and a separate study would be required to hear them speak with their own voices. The most fruitful conversations are never complete, and this one will hopefully engender many others.

³¹ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, The Fontana Library of Theology and Philosophy (London: London: Collins, 1967).

³² A good Biblical introduction to the themes of this study is R.W.L. Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); For New Testament ecclesial examples see Johnson, Luke Timothy, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).

³³ See Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*; Herbert Alphonso, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning through the Spiritual Exercises* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001); John C. Haughey SJ, *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2004); Christopher (ed) Jamieson, *The Disciples' Call: The Theology of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day* (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2013); Gary D. Badcock, *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998).

The Empirical Study

Ethnographic Fieldwork: Assessment Conferences

Having established the broad research framework around attention to voices, the first question must be addressed: attention to the voices heard at Assessment Conferences, with particular emphasis on the Assessors who have primary responsibility for discernment. This would require an empirical study. An ethnographic fieldwork model was chosen to study assessment conferences as the communal context for discernment, across UK denominations which conduct similar assessment of ministry applicants. These were identified as the Church of Scotland, Church of England, Methodist Church, Scottish Baptists, and the Elim Pentecostal Church. After investigation, the Roman Catholic Church was excluded. Though the discernment process for parish priests has some similarities with other denominations, it has even more differences: it deals almost exclusively with single males, is notably lengthy, has very few applicants, and mainly comprises spiritual direction and individual interviews. Discernment proper lies with the Bishop, and the Catholic Church has no direct equivalent of Vocational Assessors or assessment conferences. However, the Jesuit process intentionally employs the practice of spiritual conversation (as distinct from interview), and this was noted for further exploration (see chapter 4).

Permission was gained to undertake three ethnographic studies by attending, as a residential observer, a Church of England Bishop's Advisory Panel (BAP), a Methodist Selection Conference and a Baptist Board Conference, to supplement existing familiarity with the Church of Scotland. The Elim Pentecostal Church was unwilling to host an ethnographic researcher as a conference observer, but gave an extended telephone interview with the process Director. The aim was to note distinctive features of each context as it influenced the practice of discernment both individually and corporately, and the operant theological assumptions.

To establish the context before exploring individual experience, attending conferences before interviewing Assessors in that denomination would be the preferred order of procedure unless pragmatic considerations dictated otherwise (conferences are usually infrequent, and sometimes annual). It was decided to call all the subjects Vocational

Assessors (VAs), though terminology varies across denominations.³⁴ Similarly, diverse denominational terminology would be homogenized under the generic terms ‘Assessment Conferences’ and “applicants”. This would both facilitate a less disjointed narrative, and maximize the anonymity required by the University’s ethical clearance, which was sought and obtained.³⁵

Individual Interviews

Paying attention to the Assessor’s voices required a qualitative research study. The senior staff responsible for vocational discernment in the five denominations willingly suggested names of experienced and reflective church assessors for interview. To mitigate bias, I did not select the Church of Scotland Assessors myself. The request for more experienced Assessors arose from my previous research, which suggested that these tend to be more alert to an applicant’s underlying attitudes and posture, as well as to the verbal content of their answers.³⁶ From the volunteers, a purposive sample of fifteen was taken. Three were Church of Scotland, three Scottish Baptist, four Church of England, three Methodists and two Elim Pentecostal. Six were women and nine men: eleven were clergy and four lay people, all spread across the denominations. All had at least six years’ experience, some much more. None of them was personally known to me except Church of Scotland colleagues; however, this was regarded as insignificant. Assessors are accustomed to appropriately present and defend their views in discussion, and the subject was not controversial or critical in nature.

Determining the interview methodology was predicated on Leach’s description of the quality of engagement required for attentive listening: the need to discern not just intellectually, but “real life.... reading body language and physical environment and group dynamics through all their senses”.³⁷ In order to establish whether and how the VAs approached the task of discernment in engaging with applicants, these interviews would reflect that quality. To facilitate the subjects’ narrating their own spiritual experience, interviews would be individual, informal, and face to face rather than by

³⁴ The Church of England has BAP Advisors; the Church of Scotland National Assessors; the Scottish Baptists Board members; the Methodists Panel members, and the Elim Pentecostal has a Church Panel.

³⁵ The ethics committee considered the proposal and approval was given via email by the Committee Chair, Dr. Marcus Pound, on 6th June 2016.

³⁶ McChlery, “How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?” 14.

³⁷ Leach, “Pastoral Theology as Attention,” 22.

Skype. The setting would be the subject's own home, church or preferred location. It was decided to employ semi-structured interviews using set questions and leaving freedom to explore where the subject's narrative was leading. Nine questions were created to interrogate what VAs experience during assessment and what (if anything) they consciously experience as God's presence in that process.³⁸ To relax the subjects and to provide their own narrative base for the study, it was decided that interviews would begin by recalling when they had discerned God's call to themselves (not necessarily to ordained ministry). Three previous research questions, which had yielded particularly productive data, were then repeated.³⁹ Further questions were constructed to disclose their awareness of what they experienced as God's presence in discernment, both individually and communally at conferences: how VAs prepare spiritually for conferences; and how and where they are conscious of God's presence in the whole task. These questions aimed to identify where their judgment is influenced by factors other than the rational process of matching performance to indicators, whether or not those factors were accessible to their consciousness at the time. The question "What's happening in you when you sense that someone's call is genuinely from God?" deliberately avoided specifying any term like "intuition", in order to be open to the subject's own chosen descriptor. Further questions about that sense, if required, would use their own lexicon. A question about whether they experience their conviction in their bodies seemed quite eccentric and intrusive, and it would be scheduled for late in the interview after trust had hopefully been established. Interviews would conclude by requesting their recommendations for improved practice.

It was decided that interviews would be recorded, freeing the researcher to observe and note the subject's non-verbal responses: body language, tone, gestures, the length and nature of silences. Thereafter, interviews would be manually transcribed without using transcription software, enabling the nuance of tone and inflection to be captured and the transcript to incorporate the manually noted somatic signals.

³⁸ See Appendix 1.

³⁹ These are: 1. What personal qualities would you say are important in a good assessor? And what gifts and skills? 2. When you assess applicants, what convinces you that they have a genuine call? 3. When you are listening to someone describe his or her call to ministry, what are you listening for?

Data Analysis and Interpretation.

Again in accordance with the “Pastoral Theology as Attention” model, it seemed important to attend first to each subject as an individual before abstracting, and depersonalizing, the data by coding and clustering. The methodology for this was informed by the Listening Guide by Carol Gilligan, a method in psychology for “tuning our ear to the multiplicity of voices that speak within and around us”.⁴⁰ It takes both narrative and thematic readings of interview transcripts in a series of “listenings” for different elements. Gilligan’s work has been developed for use as the Voice Centred Relational Method.⁴¹

Each transcript would first be read as a whole, to hear how this VA experiences discernment of God’s will and how she feels about it. Individual concerns, quirks of expression or lack of clarity would be noted in an attempt to preserve each subject’s unique voice. In addition I would note separately my personal reactions and reflections on each, to distance my own voice from theirs. This initial stage helpfully differentiates listening from coding, bearing in mind the warning that “all too often our listening deteriorates into intellectual sorting, with the professional grabbing the [subject’s] words from the air and sticking them into mental bins.”⁴² In exercising disciplined restraint before leaping to analysis, the interviewer is open to the unexpected and to being led into categories which are grounded in the data itself. This stage “feels more intuitive than anything else”, and may be “very difficult to articulate, especially in the logical, sequential, linear fashion that tends to be required in a research text.”⁴³ This

⁴⁰ Carol Gilligan and Jessica Eddy, “Listening as a Path to Psychological Discovery: An Introduction to the Listening Guide,” *Perspectives on Medical Education* 6, no. 2 (2017): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-017-0335-3>; Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice : Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁴¹ Anne Byrne, John Canavan, and Michelle Millar, “Participatory Research and the Voice-Centred Relational Method of Data Analysis: Is It Worth It?” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 12, no. 1 (2009): 67–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701606044>; Andrea Doucet and Natasha S Mauthner, “What Can Be Known and How? Narrated Subjects and the Listening Guide,” *Qualitative Research* 8, no. 3 (2008): 399–409, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106093636>.

⁴² Carol Gilligan and Jessica Eddy, “Listening as a Path to Psychological Discovery: An Introduction to the Listening Guide,” *Perspectives on Medical Education* 6, no. 2 (2017): 76–81, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-017-0335-3>, quoting Shay, J., *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the undoing of character*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010.

⁴³ N.S. Mauthner and A. Doucet, “Reflections on a Voice-Centred Relational Method of Data Analysis: Analysing Maternal and Domestic Voices,” in *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Private Lives and Public Texts* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 122.

description seemed consonant with the nature of deeply attentive listening as described by Leach. In the framework of the Listening Guide, my first reading and noting would reflect the first and third readings: Listening for the Plot (surveying the terrain); and Listening for the Contrapuntal Voices (the underlying tonal quality, and silences).⁴⁴ In the course of data interpretation, this approach would allow flexibility for further readings should other themes or terminology emerge as important.⁴⁵

Recognizing that during interview the subject's responses would not always neatly fit the questions, in a second reading each transcript would be coded into categories. I would use two kinds of categories: firstly, the question headings; and secondly, anything significant which arose outside of those. This exercise necessitated a subjective judgment for where heterogeneous terminology was used to describe the same phenomenon (and vice versa); however, it was judged that any minor variations would not be significant for the conclusions.

Firstly, responses would then be clustered under the question headings, taking care to ensure that any responses relocated from their original context would preserve the intended meaning. Then, all the responses to each question would be collated into a separate document, resulting in nine documents (one for each question), each containing the fifteen answers to that question. Having read all of these in detail, the frequency of similar responses would be recorded numerically. Should one subject give the same response repeatedly, it would be counted twice but not more than twice.⁴⁶ This would provide a qualitative guide to the strength of response, more than quantitative exactitude. Having concluded the first category of responses under the question headings, any coded responses not covered by these could then be clustered under their own heading, and the frequency of responses noted.⁴⁷

A pilot interview with one Assessor was planned, to test whether the questions were

⁴⁴ I encountered the Listening Guide later in my research, and found it an affirming theoretical angle on my method. Reading for the "I" (Gilligan's second reading) was carried out later on a sample of my interview transcripts, as well as further thematic readings.

⁴⁵ This was usefully undertaken on several occasions, as indicated in chapter 2 section 1: Discernment of Vocation.

⁴⁶ The frequency of responses is recorded in Appendix 2.

⁴⁷ This stage of the method resulted in revealing the importance of the communal in discernment, something I had not asked a question about. It also disclosed material about the nature of discernment and vocation, as detailed in chapter 2.

effective tools for disclosure and enable any necessary adjustments. Subsequent to this, it was decided not to give the subjects prior notice of the questions. Given that many VAs are clergy and that all are articulate and experienced interviewers, it was judged that extemporaneous answers would not be difficult and would give the advantage of greater authenticity in revealing their spontaneous reactions.

Reflexivity: Insider Research

A vital part of the empirical study required addressing the third of my methodological questions from Leach – reflexive attention to my own voice. With reference to my own autobiographical context above, I sought to identify my thoughts, feelings and intuitions as a researcher, and to reflect on their source.

Aware of potential bias or subjectivity arising from my situated knowledge, I considered the implications of researching my own colleagues and church assessment conferences. Merton's influential early work on a social constructivist model of epistemology describes insider and outsider structurally, as members or non-members of groups, while acknowledging that everyone inhabits a status set rather than a single position.⁴⁸ Recent research further complexifies positionality, for example Banks' four categories: intrinsic insider/outsider, or extrinsic insider/outsider,⁴⁹ and Herr and Anderson's configuration of varying forms of collaborative insider/outsider relationships.⁵⁰ Categories are not fixed: outwith my own denomination, I am an "insider" as a Christian minister and a VA; but an "outsider" as a non-member and an academic researcher. As Chavez observes, positionality is fluid even within the same relationship or event.⁵¹ That said, it remains valid to generalise that insiders have the advantage of a shared experience with the subjects, maximizing the empathy and rapport which establish trust and facilitate honesty. Assimilation into the research environment is easy, and subtle indicators are read more accurately. Conversely, insiders can be disadvantaged by those very factors: sharing the same presuppositions and myopia as the subjects, they may struggle to achieve critical distance, and the

⁴⁸ Robert K. Merton, "Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 1 (July 1, 1972): 21–22, <https://doi.org/10.1086/225294>.

⁴⁹ James A. Banks, "The Lives and Values of Researchers: Implications for Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society," *Educational Researcher* 27, no. 7 (1998): 8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1176055>.

⁵⁰ Herr and Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation*, 31–48.

⁵¹ Christina Chavez, "Conceptualizing from the Inside: Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality," *The Qualitative Report* 13, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 474–94.

quality of data collected may be adversely affected. Following Greene's recommendations for those who are "simultaneously researcher and researched", I prepared to maximize my data's credibility by keeping two fieldwork journals: an accurate log of programmed events, and a diary to record thoughts, feelings and observations.⁵² To mitigate subjectivity, I planned to member-check my Church of Scotland report with three experienced colleagues, and to ask myself the interview questions.⁵³ My fieldwork would be verifiable by an auditable trail of all records, electronic and manual.

Insider/outsider positionality also raised relevant epistemological questions around distinctions between experienced and derived knowledge, and their synthesis in tacit knowing.⁵⁴ The positivist stance assumes that research can be objective and accurate, thus favouring the outsider researcher. Post-critical epistemology denies that reality is fixed, and posits the knower and the known as co-creators. Most current thinking asserts the value of both insider and outsider insofar as these categories are determinable, as both positions offer unique epistemological insights. Outsiders often more effectively critique the global scenario, while insiders are more alert to details.⁵⁵ My own status as both "insider" and "outsider", and often both simultaneously, was therefore both advantageous and disadvantageous for the empirical study, depending on context.

The Scientific Study: McGilchrist

Having planned to address the first and third of the five questions: whose voices can be heard in the conversations at Assessment Conferences; and what is my own voice saying? – the second question was considered. What is contributed by recent scientific research into how knowledge is formed? Since the knowledge being explored in this study is discernment of God's leading, no prior limits could be placed on what epistemological form this might assume. It required investigating intuitive or tacit knowledge and its associated sense of conviction ("just knowing", without knowing how you know), as well as evaluation by reason. Finding a conversation partner with

⁵² Melanie Greene, "On the Inside Looking In: Methodological Insights and Challenges in Conducting Qualitative Insider Research," *The Qualitative Report* 19, no. 29 (July 21, 2014): 2.

⁵³ Member-checking is the practice of submitting the insider's written report to other insiders, to confirm that it is fair and accurate record.

⁵⁴ Merton, "Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge," 41.

⁵⁵ For example, Chavez, "Conceptualizing from the Inside."

the necessary interdisciplinary breadth was challenging, and several potential avenues were considered. Reading classic work on the psychology of religious experience - James, Proudfoot and Lash among others - provided rich background but insufficient specific data on the research question.⁵⁶ The extensive current research on the psychology of intuition seemed promising but proved, after lengthy examination, too diverse and illimitable to be contained within this study.⁵⁷ Michael Polanyi's philosophy of tacit knowledge was a rich and relevant source, but a little dated.⁵⁸ Finally, Iain McGilchrist's work on brain lateralization provided a specific and detailed contemporary analysis of how the brain processes information through attention. McGilchrist is a polymath: both an academic teacher of English literature and a psychiatrist specializing in neuro-imaging. His magisterial work *The Master and his Emissary* combines neurology with elements of psychology, philosophy, and history to produce a comprehensive analysis of how we experience our world.⁵⁹ In particular, the interplay between left-brain rational processing and right-brain intuitive apprehension as complementary modes of perception suggested a fruitful resource for this research.

Discernment: A Study in Spirituality

The fourth area of investigation, attention to the theological tradition, is relevant throughout this study, on Leach's assumption that "each of the five questions were sacramental.... a vehicle through which they could.... together seek to hear what God

⁵⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Penguin Classics (New York, N.Y.: New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1982); Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*, 1990th ed. (Virginia: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

⁵⁷ Rachel M Osbeck and Held, *Rational Intuition: Philosophical Roots, Scientific Investigations* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2014) is a good introduction to a very diverse field. On intuition in decision-making, see Daniel Kahneman and Gary Klein, "Conditions for Intuitive Expertise," ed. Norman B. (editor) Anderson, *American Psychologist* 64, no. 6 (2009): 515-26, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016755>; Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Extensional versus Intuitive Reasoning: The Conjunction Fallacy in Probability Judgment.," *Psychological Review* 90, no. 4 (October 1983): 293-315, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.90.4.293>; Julie Gore and Eugene Sadler-Smith, "Unpacking Intuition: A Process and Outcome Framework," *Review of General Psychology* 15, no. 4 (December 2011): 304-16, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025069>.

⁵⁸ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, New edition (London: Routledge, 1998); Michael Polyani, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

⁵⁹ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, *Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, Conn.: New Haven, Conn., 2009).

was saying.”⁶⁰ Worship and prayer infuse assessment practice, and this would be included in the empirical study. The theological tradition incorporates three components necessary for this research question. One is a voice of spirituality, to illuminate what is fundamentally a spiritual experience; another is the element of communality in an ecclesial process. Thirdly, as previously discussed, potentially conflicting theologies must be systematically heard and examined.

Ignatius and Personal Discernment

“Pastoral Theology as Attention” seeks to determine how “our instinctive feel for God’s presence is brought to consciousness and tested in dialogue with others...as we seek to give an accurate and rigorous account of God at work in the world.”⁶¹ This is a remarkably apt definition of Ignatian spiritual discernment. The 17th century Jesuit Ignatius of Loyola incorporates individual spiritual intuition, communal discernment, and scholarly rigour to seek wisdom for practical action in response to God’s leading. His work provides models for theory and practice both individually and communally, and is still widely practiced today across Christian denominations. Other traditions of spiritual discernment were also considered for their potential contribution to this conversation.⁶² However, Ignatius offers an unparalleled guide to the dynamics of interiority, and the process of formation in increasing attunement to the movements identified as connecting with God. In particular, his *Spiritual Exercises* were originally written for the purpose of discerning vocation, and these merit detailed study.⁶³ As noted by David Coghlan, Ignatian spirituality is also easily compatible with practical theological methodology. Its template of reflection on lived experience in conjunction with Biblical texts, resulting in practical proposals for action which then form the subject of further reflection, accurately anticipates the pastoral cycle.⁶⁴ Lunn also refers to the significant resonance between the practice of attention in spiritual

⁶⁰ Leach, “Pastoral Theology as Attention,” 23.

⁶¹ Leach, 28.

⁶² Mark Allen McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth : The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: New York : Crossroad Pub. Co., 2004), 3–81.

⁶³ George E. (ed) Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola* (Chicago Illinois: Loyola University Press, 1992).

⁶⁴ David Coghlan, “Ignatian Spirituality as Transformational Social Science,” *Action Research* 3, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 89–107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750305049967>.

direction and in practical theology.⁶⁵ Insights from this tradition would therefore form a valuable resource for this research.

Jesuits, Quakers, and Communal Discernment

Vocational Assessors in every denomination assess in teams, which are explicitly understood to be a microcosm of the wider Church community. Set in the context of worship, assessment conferences aim not to reach human agreement but to recognize and respond to God's leading for the applicants and for the Church – a *telos* distinct from ordinary business meetings, where a democratic vote decides the optimum outcome based on human wisdom. This difference leads one to question whether discerning groups require a methodology distinct from other decision-making bodies, to reflect their singular remit. Possible exemplars across the Christian tradition are remarkably rare. Following Ignatius' practical example, the Jesuits and female Ignatian-inspired religious congregations sometimes practice communal versions of discernment which would merit exploration. Beyond Catholicism, the Anabaptist tradition of congregational meetings is implicitly rooted in a theology of communal discernment but this is nowadays usually understood as seeking direction for congregational action more than for individual decisions.⁶⁶ Along with the Mennonites, they share a common Anabaptist root with the Quakers. Quakers are noted for their highly distinctive practice of undertaking business decisions without voting, and in an explicit context of seeking God's presence together. It was decided to research both Jesuit and Quaker examples for their contribution to this study.

The Theological Study: Newman and Barth

The specifically theological dimension remained to be explored. How does knowledge operate in Christian spiritual discernment, and how do Christians ascertain a reliable disclosure of God's leading – through experience, intuition, study, or spiritual formation? And importantly, how might the Word of God, especially if revealed in an epiphanic enlightenment, relate to or relativise other modes of knowledge?

⁶⁵ Julie Lunn, "Paying Attention: The Task of Attending in Spiritual Direction and Practical Theology," *Practical Theology* 2, no. 2 (May 12, 2009): 219–29, <https://doi.org/10.1558/prth.v2i2.219>.

⁶⁶ Stuart Blythe, "Your Will Be Done: Congregational Discernment as Contextual Discipleship," in *Gathering Disciples: Essays in Honour of Christopher J. Ellis*. (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2017), 74–88; Stephen R Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: London, 2012).

Subsequent and more systematic theologians in Catholicism can supplement Ignatian insights. From several possibilities, John Henry Newman emerged as a seminal thinker on the nature of spiritual certainty and its epistemological relationship with intellectual viability. Newman regards spiritual certainty as “the fragile fruit of dialectical interplay between the forces and factors represented by the three corners of a triangle”: personal experience (Religion or spirituality); intellectual enquiry (Theology); and fellowship with others in the institution (Church).⁶⁷ This parallels the identified areas of this research.

Catholic theological answers to the research question require to be brought into dialogue with the different perspectives of their Reformed counterparts, especially given the theologically diverse denominations in this study. As previously discussed, Karl Barth offers a model of God’s communication through revelation and the Word which challenges Ignatius and Newman’s similar theologies of how knowledge of God is reliably communicated and experienced. Barth also challenges any implication that all voices are included and none is inherently privileged. He assigns a unique epistemological status to revelation from God’s Word as the norm against which all else must be judged. This distinctive theological voice must be considered, and competing truth claims assessed for their validity.

Conclusion

This thesis therefore proposes to address the research question in a mixed methods approach, utilising both empirical and systematic approaches. Using Leach’s framework of Pastoral Theology as Attention, the core research tool will be attentiveness to the range of voices selected as conversation partners in the diverse areas of this topic: practitioners in assessment; Ignatius speaking for Christian spirituality; Iain McGilchrist contributing insights from modern neuroscience and psychology; and Newman and Barth offering contrasting theologies of epistemology. Leach’s model offers the particularly appropriate feature that listening in every area is undertaken as an intentional exercise in listening to God. The research will be grounded empirically in the lived experience of vocational assessors both individually through semi-structured interviews, and communally through ethnographic research on the conference environments. This culminates in the question: How, in the light of

⁶⁷ Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*, 134.

this, might churches better discern whether someone is called by God to ordained ministry, and what specific practical changes might be required? This will be addressed in two final chapters. The penultimate chapter will draw together the different voices of the four conversation partners – Ignatius, McGilchrist, Newman and Barth - across disciplines and traditions, to establish how they address the ecclesial, spiritual and theological issues raised. The final chapter will apply these insights directly to the Assessor’s concerns, and conclude with practical proposals for enhanced practice in the discernment of vocation in churches.

Chapter 1. Discerning a Vocation to Ministry: Assessment Conferences

Discerning someone's vocational call from God may seem an esoteric quest, located in the mystical communication between divine and human nature. However, ecclesial discernment is incarnational, embedded in social decision-making processes which contextualise the VA's experience of God, the applicants and each other. In and through these, they attempt the presumptuously ambitious task of hearing God's voice to applicants and the Church. To research their experiences, I became a participant observer of assessment conferences in the Scottish Baptist, Church of England and the Methodist Churches. In this chapter I also share my experience as an insider researcher of conferences in my own denomination, the Church of Scotland, describing all of these in the first section. In the second section I offer a reflexive analysis of my experience, before briefly exploring each denomination's relevant ecclesial distinctives and concluding with preliminary observations around practice in interviewing, paperwork and modes of assessment.

1: Observing Assessment Conferences.

1. Scottish Baptists

Applicants for accredited ministry in the Scottish Baptist Union are assessed by the Board of Ministry, which meets for that purpose (among others) in a 36-hour conference three times annually. The Board comprises about 24 people, ordained and lay, and predominantly male although the Chair is a laywoman. The Baptist Union's Ministry Development Co-ordinator (full-time, salaried and ordained) acts as secretary, aided by an administrator. None of the Board is trained by the Baptist Union in assessment skills, although a few have experience from secular contexts. Prior to the conference they receive application forms, theological statements and references for the applicants – about an hour's reading for each.

The conference I observed followed the usual format. After a short business meeting on the morning of the first day, the Board first met the applicants informally over coffee. This conference had three (fairly typical) applicants. All were in their 20's-30s and were former or current students at the Scottish Baptist College. All were full-time

salaried lay ministers in large Baptist churches or chaplaincies.⁶⁸ A Board member (their appointed mentor) accompanied each applicant throughout the conference. Over coffee, they showed visible signs of nerves despite genuine attempts to make them comfortable. The community ethos continued into the first session, held in a large lounge. Each applicant was asked to give a short testimony to the whole group – their story of conversion to faith and call to ministry. In Baptist churches this is a standard ecclesial motif, with which the applicants were clearly familiar. I noted that a common thread in their conversion and call narratives was an element of unusual or supernatural intervention: a phone call “out of the blue”, a name that “just came” in prayer, waking during the night with a sense of being addressed by God. I sensed that these occurrences were considered to be an authentication of genuine spiritual experience.

After lunch, the Board interviewed each applicant in four groups of four or five assessors, covering personal discipline and development; communication skills; church co-ordination skills; and intellectual aptitude. Set questions were provided and assessor teams relied heavily on these, though customised questions were permitted and even encouraged in the Board member’s written guidelines. There was minimal preparation (five minutes) to allocate questions. Pressure to “get through” the questions (about seven in each 25-minute interview) discouraged follow-up questions to elicit deeper responses, despite an instruction that not all questions are compulsory – interviewers were anxious not to omit anything. Board members varied widely in their interview skills, and I observed several indications of lack of basic training: interviewers asking multiple or leading questions, giving advice, or sharing their personal experiences. Some questions and comments revealed that not every Board member had assimilated the prior reading. After each interview, teams had 10 minutes to grade the applicant A to J according to criteria describing the core competencies. The Board guidelines make it clear that assessing competency is distinct from discerning call. Some Board members freely communicated their “gut feeling” at this

⁶⁸ Applicants for accreditation by the Baptist Union must first have been affirmed in their call to ministry by their local Baptist church. Local congregations may employ, and even ordain, someone as their minister who has not been otherwise accredited or trained. The Baptist Union accreditation, which these applicants seek, confers recognition of full training and accreditation for ministry in any congregation in the Union; however, ordination must still be local. Consequently, although not every applicant is already formally employed, most have some ministry experience.

stage, for example: "whatever grades you come up with, my answer about him is – absolutely, yes." In the evening, the Board met to collate feedback on applicants and to identify areas for further questioning. Feedback to the group communicated both interview data and the interviewers' opinions, without differentiation. The mentors were present, both to contribute the applicant's response to the conference and to communicate the Board's feedback to the applicant: essentially, they were the applicant's advocates. The day closed with a short act of corporate worship for everyone.

On the second day, again after worship, the full Board formally interviewed each applicant for about 30 minutes round a large table in the Boardroom. I observed that the Chair made an intentional effort to put applicants at ease, for which she was particularly gifted. Nevertheless, applicants displayed visible signs of nervous tension in their breathing, speech patterns and posture. Questions proceeded in the predetermined order, with some follow-up questions and discussion among the Board. A few (older male) Board members used a notably assertive interrogative style as a form of testing the applicant's call.⁶⁹ After each interview, the Board had 15 minutes to make a final decision. I observed full discussions but little disagreement, and the Board reached a communal mind without difficulty. All the applicants were accepted, again fairly typically.⁷⁰ There was more debate about pre-ordination training requirements, an area where the Board has some latitude. Applicants do not receive a report, and the decision is communicated via the Vocations Advisor.

2. Church of England Bishop's Advisory Panel (BAP).

Discerning vocation in the Church of England is entrusted to three Advisors at a BAP, each specialising in one area: Education, Vocation or Pastoral. At a conference, two panels each assess six to eight applicants, guided by a Panel Secretary.⁷¹ The Church has over 400 BAP Advisors, and around 40 conferences annually. Applicants vary widely, from those experienced in lay ministry to new Christians. Advisors have one day's compulsory minimum training at diocesan level, with further training recommended, and a highly comprehensive 114-page Advisor's Handbook. Before the conference they receive the applicant's paperwork (approximately two hours' reading),

⁶⁹ This observation was also made individually by every Baptist assessor I interviewed.

⁷⁰ According to the Chair and the Secretary, 80-90% of applicants are accepted.

⁷¹ A full-time salaried role.

with an Assessment Sheet as a matrix for grading the information. Thorough reading is imperative. On arrival, Advisors have an hour to meet together with the Panel Secretary – few will have met previously. At the conference I observed, this initial meeting seemed somewhat formal, with Advisors politely evaluating each other as colleagues by mutual discussion of prior experiences. The team I observed were mature and experienced, all having senior ecclesial or secular professional backgrounds.

The applicants arrived at 5pm for introductions, prayers and a lighthearted icebreaker activity in which the Advisors participated. During the evening, applicants completed a personal inventory⁷² followed by a written pastoral exercise,⁷³ while Advisors met in teams. This revealed impressively detailed preparation and disciplined attention to the boundaries of their assessment areas. Previously prepared questions were mutually discussed and allocated for best fit, to avoid duplication. The Handbook gave detailed advice on interview skills and topics to explore in each area, but no set questions.

The first day began with Communion, before breakfast. Advisors retained allocated seats in the dining room throughout, and applicants were asked to sit at different tables for each meal, so that advisors met many applicants over meals – this is an acknowledged factor in shaping impressions. Thereafter, the Advisor's morning consisted of observing and assessing their eight applicant's five-minute presentations, each followed by a 15-minute discussion. Advisors allocated a mark according to criteria. After lunch, these marks were shared in a team discussion chaired by the Secretary, and a grade agreed from 1-6. From the outset, pass/fail was a recurring question: "Is this above the line?" (i.e. 3.5 instead of 3). I observed their rigorous adherence to the nine criteria for assessment throughout, with the Secretary clearly referencing which criterion is currently being evaluated. In the rest of the day each advisor conducts four 50-minute interviews, with 10 minutes afterwards to grade for each of his three criteria. Punctuated by refreshment breaks and evensong, and a team update chaired by the Secretary to monitor concerns, the day concluded with evening prayer at 9pm. I did not observe the interviews, but I was present for the Advisors'

⁷² This is a three-page questionnaire summarising their faith journey and call, and any updated information from their submitted paperwork.

⁷³ A complex pastoral problem to which they must respond in writing. This can be completed any time before the conference concludes, in their otherwise unoccupied time.

subsequent mutual feedback. Interviews had sometimes taken unexpected directions as each applicant's responses were pursued. One Advisor was extremely animated after an interview, having discovered an unexpectedly positive dimension of an otherwise unpromising applicant which reversed his previous judgment.

After morning Communion, the following day concluded the interviews. The closing worship service late afternoon was very poignant, thoughtfully conducted by one Advisor with the specific spiritual needs of both applicants and advisors in mind.⁷⁴ After the applicants' departure, Advisors assessed their pastoral exercises, reaching an agreed grade. The evening was for report-writing. Each Advisor writes three paragraphs for each applicant, one for each criterion. This usually takes well into the early hours of the morning and advisors may sleep badly, particularly where they must make difficult judgments. One told me that he sometimes spent nights in prayer for marginal applicants; another that she had had only three hours' sleep.⁷⁵ The Vocations advisor, who discerns call, carried a particular burden: a positive report from her is essential for the applicant to be accepted. I observed her displaying great humility about this, and seeking to be informed by her colleagues.

The following morning began the interview feedback. As the Secretary moderates all discussions, each panel had an hour of formal discussion followed by a (usually unnecessary) hour to adjust their reports. For each applicant, each Advisor read his three paragraphs and grades. The nine grades were recorded and did not necessarily agree, though significant disparity was discussed. These meetings were revelatory, as advisors collated their individual conclusions and coherence was celebrated with a note of relief. The Panel Secretary kept any discussion tightly focused, and there was none at all where the grades and reports were unambiguous. I did not observe a difficult discernment, though I was informed that discussion can be lengthy. One Advisor voiced serious unease about accepting an applicant, but because her scores were high, the concern was dismissed.

⁷⁴ This was unique in my observation. In all denominations I was curious to observe that worship was not customised to the needs of the occasion.

⁷⁵ Marginal applicants are those for whom it would be possible to reference a positive or negative report: they are borderline. The term is mine.

Detailed discussion then focused on the reports: each box must contain the correct elements, and it is compulsory to include some sentences verbatim: “Don’t worry if it’s all a bit formulaic.”⁷⁶ At this stage, form took priority over content: “Does that box have something on conflict?” was more important than what the “something” was. I observed a marked contrast between the somewhat driven style of the formal meetings with the Secretary, and the interim hours where teams were not permitted any fresh discussion. Once, immediately after the Secretary’s departure, an Advisor vented his frustration over the “box-ticking mentality” of the system and the poor quality of candidates. “It’s demotivating.... I don’t even want to write these reports...we’re serving the church faithfully but we’re not growing the Kingdom.” There was a clear dissonance between what was visible in the formal part of the process (chaired discussions and final reports), and the Advisor’s underlying feelings. 82-85% of applicants are accepted.⁷⁷

3. Methodist Candidates Selection Committee

The Methodist’s CSC meets annually for four days. It comprises eight Panels of committee members each with eight members, and two Panels of Reference; in total, over 70 people. Prior to the conference, each receives substantial paperwork detailing every encounter in an applicant’s journey through local, Circuit and District assessment: approximately three hours’ reading per applicant. A beautiful Christian conference centre has been their long-established venue, and on arrival there was a sense of family reunion as people greeted colleagues they rarely see. One panel member told me, “I come here every year to see my friends - the fellowship is wonderful. In the Methodists everyone is known, not like the Church of England.... it’s easier to hear God when you know the other assessors.” I was recognised as a speaker at their previous annual training conference, and warmly welcomed.

Each team assesses two or three applicants in a 24-hour cycle: up to nine applicants per conference. I observed two cycles. On the first, I followed a single applicant to gain an overview of the whole process; on the second, I shadowed the team responsible for questioning all applicants on Call and Commitment. On the first morning, everyone met in full committee before Panels met in their panel rooms for preparation. One Panel, who had often assessed together, came prepared to decorate their room as a

⁷⁶ Quote from the Panel Secretary.

⁷⁷ From the Head of Formation, Ministry Division, Rev. Dr Ian McIntosh, January 2018.

welcoming environment with candles, Christian symbols, fruit and home baking; another less established Panel was similarly concerned with creating a hospitable “home base” for themselves and their applicants.⁷⁸

There was plenty of time before the applicants arrived at 4pm. After brief introductions, they proceeded immediately to three “triangle” interviews, each conducted by two Panel members: on Call and Commitment; Church and Ministry; and Making Connections (between theology and life). There were 20 minutes for each interview, then 10 minutes for criteria-based grading. Many set questions (14-16) are suggested, and panel members used them extensively with few candidate-specific questions. I observed an urgency to “get through”, with few follow-up questions to elicit deeper answers. I noted a marked variation in panel members’ interview skills.⁷⁹ Grading must be substantiated by written comments, and interviewers were very diligent about wording these: “Did we get it all?” Applicants for Presbyterian ministry (which covers most applicants) must first have trained and served as lay preachers, so this call has already been locally affirmed and the discernment at national level is of a further call to sacramental ministry.⁸⁰

Seating at meals was not allocated. After dinner, the applicants had a practical group exercise, observed only by the panel chairs. Then, feedback from the triangle interviews was mutually shared in the panels. There was excitement where their observations cohered, and discussion where they differed. I observed significant variation in the panel members’ contributions, some being very reflective and astute, and others much less engaged. Some comments revealed a lack of preparatory reading, for example not knowing the applicant’s current occupation. An important issue had been raised in one applicant’s Circuit reports, with a request that the Panel investigate it - this was noticed by only one of the eight panel members. I judged one panel member’s reported feedback to be significantly more negative than the interview

⁷⁸ There is a jocular ongoing competitiveness between Panels, for example when I was commissioned to write an Egon Ronay Guide to panel snacks. For the record, the winner was Panel E, for their home-made chocolate fudge. I promised to mention it in my thesis because I ate so much of it.

⁷⁹ The Methodists have a compulsory annual conference for Panel members but as far as I could determine, it is dominated by procedural updates and does not include specific training in these skills.

⁸⁰ Deacons (a minority) are also assessed at the same conference in the same process, with different criteria.

warranted, and her partner was fairly passive. Panel members sometimes observed that an applicant's answers lacked depth: "He sounds as if he's just ticking the boxes", "We're not getting the depth", or "We're not seeing the real person". The panel chair then returned from observing the practical exercise to feed back to the group each applicant's performance, graded by criteria with detailed comments. This two-hour information-sharing session concluded by composing each applicant's questions for the following day, before evening worship at 9.30pm and relaxation together with applicants in the bar. Over these five 14-hour days, familiar signs of fatigue emerge. Headaches, IBS and "getting a bit giggly, it's a safety mechanism" were all mentioned, and there was strong mutual support in the panel teams.

After worship, the following morning comprised a 30-minute whole-panel interview for each applicant, which included the applicant's five-minute topical presentation. The prepared questions were asked in pre-arranged order with little further discussion, despite opportunities. For example, one applicant used the phrase "it's what God has written on my heart" in explaining her passion for her role: nobody asked her what God had written on her heart.⁸¹ The panel then had 15 minutes to reach a final decision before the next interview. The language of call was frequent in these discussions ("What's her call?") though, as one panel member noted, the question was not asked specifically in interview. As panel members had only seen each applicant for a short time, small details of wording become very significant: one panel extensively discussed an applicant's use of the term "bullying". I noticed that the first person to speak was influential in orienting discussions, though honest debate was encouraged and one sole dissenter was treated sympathetically. However, panels were keen to build consensus. Without a unanimous decision, the applicant is referred to the Panel of Reference. These are experienced members tasked with exploring specifically identified problems in targeted interviews which are very testing for applicants.⁸² After each decision, the panel prayed for the applicant in extempore and spontaneous prayers. This revealed a notable depth of genuine pastoral concern, especially for those not accepted.

⁸¹ This applicant was later referred to the panel of reference because her panel felt they were not seeing the real person.

⁸² In one cycle I observed, 11 of the 17 applicants were referred at some stage, which I was told is higher than usual.

After lunch the Chaplain dismissed the applicants with final prayers,⁸³ while panel members assembled in full committee to share their decisions. Where a conference runs late this is omitted, and many Panel members question its value. All paperwork was forwarded to the Ministerial Co-ordinator, who conveys the decision and its reasons to the applicants by letter – there is no report. Around 85% are accepted.⁸⁴

Perhaps because they had met me previously, I was aware that insider/outsider boundaries were very fluid at this conference (“You’re an honorary Methodist!”), and my visit featured several unsolicited conversations with panel members. One (in my judgment very astute) Panel member sought me out to voice his frustration that “we’re just not getting it” with applicants. Indicating the sunny gardens, he said, “I wish I could just ask them what is their call. We could have a walk around here, or a coffee, and I could hear the story of their life.” Another felt that “the system is complex, but it doesn’t get good results”. He believed the process to be erratic in making judgements, though he could not say why. Several other assessors praised the system as being thorough and reliable.

4. Church of Scotland.

Here I am an insider researcher as I am an experienced Assessor and did not attend a conference specifically to observe. Applicants for ministry in the Church of Scotland attend a 28-hour National Assessment Conference as the culmination of a (usually lengthy) prior period of discernment.⁸⁵ They are assessed by teams of three Assessors: two Church Assessors and a psychologist, with one of the Church Assessors acting as Lead Assessor for the team.⁸⁶ Two teams operate independently at each conference. Assessors are both lay and ordained, selected and rigorously trained by the church in interview and assessment skills, with an additional annual compulsory training conference. Assessors therefore know each other, in varying degrees. The Conference

⁸³ The presence of conference Chaplains is a Methodist distinctive.

⁸⁴ From an interview with the Ministerial Co-ordinator Rev Dr Jonathan Hustler, March 2016.

⁸⁵ Applicants receive minimal initial screening before entering a Period of Discernment. They commit to work with an experienced minister (mentor) for around ten hours per week of observation and participation in ministry activities, alongside journaling and other tools for prayerful reflection on their call. After an agreed time (usually around six months) they undergo a formal Local Review by their mentor, a Presbytery representative and a National Assessor. Those who pass proceed to a National Assessment Conference as the final stage in discernment.

⁸⁶ Psychologists are Christians and are paid a (reduced) professional fee for their services, the only example of payment I encountered within any assessment system.

Director is an experienced Assessor in overall charge, supported by one of the Church's administrative staff. Prior to the conference, Assessors receive nine documents for each of their 3-5 applicants detailing their journey thus far; approximately two hours' reading per applicant.

Assessors arrive late morning on the first day and meet briefly with the Director. They then meet in their teams of three to discuss their applicants, to determine areas for interview questions and to explore potential difficulties. Insights are shared in detail, and assessors arrive remarkably well-prepared. After lunch and opening worship with the applicants, the day consists of observing assessment exercises: a practical exercise where the group undergoes a fun challenge; and a situation exercise in three stages where applicants reflect both individually and communally on a complex ecclesial problem. Assessors are trained to use the Task Emphasis Method for focused observation of exercises involving group discussion, and this yields quantifiable data.⁸⁷ Exercises are graded A, B or C according to set criteria immediately after observation. There is a continual tension between thoroughness and speed, and assessor teams must work well under pressure. Each Assessor's grades are recorded and they need not agree, though significant disparities would elicit discussion. Assessors regard this stage of the process as data-gathering, and are trained to refrain from sharing opinions or conclusions prematurely. During this day, newer Assessors often experience anxiety about their inadequate familiarity with a complex and fast-moving process. At mealtimes, Assessors use a separate table from the applicants, to provide a proper break for everyone. After evening worship with the applicants, assessing the exercises is completed and the working day aims to end by 10pm. Assessors do not socialize with applicants, but have their own refreshments provided. All the Assessor's evidence for their decisions must arise from the formal assessment, and Directors are concerned not to "contaminate the process" (a common phrase) by providing applicants with grounds for appeal.

After morning worship on the second day, applicants present their pre-prepared five minute talks and chair a subsequent group discussion, both of which are assessed by

⁸⁷ TEM is an observation method for discussions, where one observer notes Flow (number of interactions per applicant); another notes Ideas (quality and nature of each applicant's contribution), and a third Interpersonal skills (body language and interaction with others). See Appendix 3.

criteria. Assessors then conduct two hour-long interviews for each applicant. One is by the psychologist, focusing on personal qualities and resilience; the other by the two church assessors, on discernment of call, and pastoral and leadership skills. Assessors must cover the six broad areas for assessment but there are no set questions, and depth of response is encouraged. The conference concludes late afternoon with a Communion service with the applicants before they depart, following which the Assessors assess the written pastoral exercises.⁸⁸

In the evening, each team collates all the information about each applicant and reaches an accept/non-accept decision. Grading from the exercises is a good indicator but is not infallible: feedback from the interviews can be determinative. This team discussion is sometimes preceded by informal prayer, and has a characteristic atmosphere of gravitas: a deep awareness of making crucially important decisions. Clear accept decisions are reached most easily; clear non-accepts less so. A marginal applicant can be very testing, and sifting and weighing evidence and intuitions may take over an hour. The Conference Director maintains a watching presence and can help to clarify issues, but cannot make decisions. Assessors are tired, and this stage may dig deep into their physical, spiritual and emotional stamina. Discussions should be complete by 11pm.

After worship on the third day, reports are written. Each Assessor writes one or two detailed referenced reports (approx. 2000 words) in about six hours, under the six assessment criteria: integrity of life and faith; handling and facilitating change, teamwork and interpersonal skills; openness to learning; preparation and reflective skills; and discernment of gifts and call.⁸⁹ This last category is determinative, and the others must support it. Again, assessors must perform well under pressure and some find report-writing stressful. There is a mutually supportive team environment, with frequent peer review and collaboration on sensitive wording. By late afternoon, assessors are ready for the final conference led by the Director. Both assessor teams gather to read the reports from a screen. The non-assessing team is asked to predict from each report what its conclusion will be before that is revealed, thus ensuring that

⁸⁸ For this, applicants are presented with a complex pastoral problem to which they must respond in writing. It is completed during their otherwise unoccupied time.

⁸⁹ This requires a sophisticated level of literacy. A common reason for potential assessors failing selection is their inability to produce adequate reports.

the report supports the decision. Each report is then scrutinized for inaccuracies, infelicities and pastoral insensitivities. This may take time, and the conference usually concludes mid-evening. In Presbyterian polity, reports are not subject to a higher court and are sent directly to applicants.⁹⁰ Applicants can appeal, and the Director would defend the report to an appeals panel. On average, two thirds of applicants are accepted.⁹¹

2: Reflection and Analysis

1. Reflexivity: what was my role?

Conducting this ethnographic research was very rich experience, requiring reflexive awareness of my multiple roles. To every denomination, I represented myself as a minister and a National Assessor in the Church of Scotland as well as a doctoral researcher, locating my research within my own vocation and stressing my ultimate aim to enhance practice for all our churches. All initially required a face-to-face meeting before permitting me to observe a conference.⁹² They sought basic assurances around protocol, though I sensed that my personal credibility was ultimately determinative. After a thorough discussion with the Church of England around boundaries, I was welcomed to observe a whole conference except the interviews. For the Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals, I also indirectly communicated that I am theologically conservative (an ex-Baptist, who used to work in a well-known evangelical para-church organization). I believed that for them, my “insider” theological affinity would balance my “outsider” academic credentials. Both Baptists and Methodists offered me a “backstage pass with unrestricted access.”⁹³

Even though their denominational office-holders permitted a researcher, Assessors cannot be compelled to like it and in all denominations I sensed some initial reticence

⁹⁰ The Recruitment Task Group, to whom Assessors are procedurally responsible, read the reports. However, they would have no grounds on which to challenge the Assessors' decision.

⁹¹ Statistics from the Ministries Council Report to the General Assembly, 2015-2017. Applicants can re-apply up to three times, so the final percentage of acceptances will be higher.

⁹² After extended discussion with their Assessors, permission to do this was eventually refused by the Elim Pentecostal Church, whose assessment process is currently under radical review. However, they welcomed me warmly to visit their College and interview their assessors, and I had an extended interview with their vocational director who described their Assessment Conference in detail. It very closely parallels the Scottish Baptist process.

⁹³ In the words of one conference director to the Assessors. For Scottish Baptists, the Church of Scotland is usually mistrusted as being theologically liberal.

about being observed. At conferences I similarly chose to present myself as clergy and a fellow assessor as well as researcher, minimizing power differentials by situating myself as a traditioned observer. I also told both assessors and applicants (where appropriate) that I was supporting and praying for them as well as observing. This was perfectly genuine, as well as building trust by highlighting my insider status. For me, this raised the complex question of how you research God, and the place of prayer in research. As conferences progressed I was accepted without difficulty. I would seat myself unobtrusively outwith the group. This worked for smaller groups (observing interviews) but in panels or when applicants were not present, assessors invited me to join them - "It's nicer for you - and less intimidating for us!"⁹⁴ A fluid positionality, both physical and social, was established as it became natural for me to engage in any conversation not involving the applicants. I took notes when formally observing, but this was impossible in informal conversations and I noted salient points of these as soon as possible afterwards, in a fieldwork journal.

Presenting myself as a praying Christian and an assessor raised some tension around role boundaries. Assessors in every denomination were intrigued by my research and curious to hear how their practices compared with others. I realized my unique position: inter-denominational research on assessment practices is unprecedented to my knowledge, and no assessor had ever experienced practice in any other denomination.⁹⁵ I judged it appropriate to share personal experiences from my own denomination, in my insider role as a fellow assessor. However, I refrained from any comment on the churches I observed as an outsider researcher, in the interests of ethics and courtesy. I also experienced conflicted boundaries with my perceived role as a consultant. Occasionally, after final decisions I was asked whether I would have accepted a marginal applicant, and I agreed that it was a difficult decision. A few assessors jokingly sought reassurance of my approval ("Are we passing so far?) or my analysis of their processes ("What do you think of it?"). Where I could not defer a response, I said something affirmative. This occurred more formally after both the Baptist and Methodist conferences, when the senior staff member requested a one-to-one interview to hear my observations. This was a difficult challenge in managing expectations. I responded by raising the boundary issue, reminding them that this was

⁹⁴ Quote from the Methodist conference.

⁹⁵ The exception was the Methodist Ministerial Co-ordinator, who had observed a BAP.

beyond my authorised remit and seeking their explicit assent to a different role. In both cases that was agreed, and I gave limited, courteous but honest feedback in what was a valuable discussion for me (and, I hope, for them). Later I fulfilled a request to make written comments on the Baptist's proposals for procedural changes.

Another kind of tension arose in my inner life, particularly as I observed interviews and worship. Both are holy ground, and I was aware of being in the context of prayer and worship within myself as well as in the conference, and grappling with the multi-faceted experience of my academic research as a spiritual exercise. It was curious to note a similar kind of empathy with the applicants as I experience as an assessor, and praying for them was natural. I also resonated deeply with some assessors' comments and practice, and monitored my irritation or anger with others where (in my opinion) poor practice meant an applicant being inadequately assessed. This was stronger where I had read an applicant's paperwork and formed a preliminary apprehension of their personality. This raised the intriguing question of how much my assessment of another assessor's discernment is simply how far it agrees with mine; and how far it may be possible to find a common matrix in what resonates with the mind or spirit of God.

2. Theology: What are each community's convictions?

Even a superficial observation reveals a division into two distinct assessment styles: the Methodists and Baptists⁹⁶ are broadly similar, as are the Church of Scotland and Church of England. This reflects different ecclesiologies. Methodists and Baptists are often gathered congregations, and privilege the local church as the locus of discerning vocation. For them, national accreditation affirms and extends an existing call. Applicants have begun their ministry journey, and the decision determines the next step. Paradoxically, I judged that this could make discernment of call more difficult: straightforwardly unsuitable applicants are rare, and the difference between a call to local and to national ministry may be quite nuanced. This assessment style could be described as broad and shallow. Multiple assessors engage in a communal process with little individual responsibility, and much depends on corporate agreement. In large groups, the need for training is minimised as assessors can learn on the job – though they may absorb poor practice as well as good. However, lack of training and the

⁹⁶ Secondary evidence from the Elim Pentecostal Church indicates that this category would include them in every respect.

operational constraints of set questions and short timescales militate against listening to the applicant's story, and eliciting more revealing responses.

By contrast, the Church of Scotland and Church of England are both theologically broad national churches with territorial ministries. Local congregations are subsumed in a greater whole, and call, selection and ordination are national concerns from the outset. Consequently, applicants are assessed at widely varying stages in their spiritual and vocational journeys. Assessment is narrow and deep: a small number of assessors observe an applicant in activities as well as interviews. Interviews are fewer but longer, with customized questions. Assessors have considerably greater individual responsibility, and specific gifts enhanced by training are essential.

Both assessment styles discern call, but at different stages in the applicants' journey and within different ecclesiologies. The Church of Scotland and Church of England devote significant interview time to encouraging applicants to express their story of call in their own words. For Baptist and Methodist applicants more is assumed, and the Methodists ask no direct question about call. A minority of Baptist assessors regard the applicant's defence of his call against assertive interrogation as important, and Baptists (and Elim Pentecostals) tend to highlight elements of the unexpected or supernatural in a call narrative. Otherwise, I observed no substantive denominational differences in defining or expressing call. All denominations explicitly differentiate between call and competence, and regard a sense of call as "essential but not adequate".⁹⁷ In the Church of England, the absence of call explicitly invalidates all other indicators, and this is strongly implicit in all the other churches. Nevertheless, there is a universal vagueness about defining call. The Anglicans ensure that the sense of call is "realistic, obedient and informed" but do not precisely describe it; other denominations avoid criteria entirely.⁹⁸ Call is undefined but definitive, and the VAs' personal and communal intuitive judgment is the prime indicator.

3. Praxis: how might practice be improved?

The purpose of this ethnographic research was to become thoroughly familiar with the ecclesial contexts in which the VA's discernment is embedded, both individually and corporately. While this is not primarily a comparative study of operational

⁹⁷ Quote from the Methodist handbook, which is not publicly available.

⁹⁸ Quote from the BAP Advisor's handbook, which is not publicly available.

effectiveness, common features of good practice emerge from my observations thus far, bearing in mind my research question: how might Vocational Assessors, in ways consistent with their communities' theological convictions, better go about the task of discerning whether to accept candidates for ordained ministry in the Christian Church as called by God? I therefore offer tentative suggestions around interviewing, paperwork, and modes of assessment, which will be considered more fully in the final chapter.

Recruitment interviews differ according to the anticipated role, and interview style as well as content requires careful consideration. Assessment conferences embrace the challenging remit of requiring applicants to articulate something of their spiritual life and their sense of hearing God. They also encroach on personal areas which would be unusual (or illegitimate) in secular interviews. Interviews might facilitate this by being as relaxed and supportive as possible. Thorough preparation is essential to establish trust by indicating that personal care for the applicant has long preceded the interview. Interviewers also require training, especially in the skill of follow-up questions: listening intently to the applicants, hearing what is important in their responses, and pursuing that in the next question. This is impossible where interviews are over-scripted in advance, for example in large groups or using set questions. The applicant above, who used the phrase "what God has written on my heart", excellently illustrates where a sensitive interviewer could have elicited a crucially revealing response. It also requires longer interviews with time to hear the applicant's story in his own words; again facilitating a rapport between interviewer and applicant. For this, a few long interviews are more revealing than multiple short ones. This also minimises the need for time-consuming interview feedback between VAs. Where information-sharing is necessary, careful factual reporting is essential to minimise distortion by the interviewer's subjectivity. Panel interviews struggle to establish rapport and elicit deeper responses. While it is legitimate to test applicants' ability to express themselves publicly, in my view this is better assessed elsewhere. These changes in interview style may address the frustration that applicants are responding superficially and that interviewers are not seeing the real person.

Assessment processes generate much paperwork, and its value should be critically assessed. For preparatory material given to VAs, my observation indicates that the

greater the volume, the less they are likely to read it all. Many assessors skim-reading voluminous pages are more likely to miss vital data than a few who are close-reading a manageable amount, especially where larger groups do not require information to form questions. At conferences, the purpose of completing detailed feedback forms is unclear where the information is not communicated to the applicants. I tentatively suggest that completing paperwork affords both VAs and denominations a comforting sense that something measurable is being achieved, at the expense of more time for human contact with applicants. For example, the Church of England's personal inventory on arrival seems superfluous, while the Methodist's exhaustive recording of every encounter at every level may ultimately conceal as much as it reveals. The Church of Scotland's distinctive focus on legally defensible reports inhibits personal contact at conferences, and artificially limits the collection of data. The purpose of assessment is to make accurate discernments, not to produce perfect documentation, and attention is required if the servant becomes the master.

This raises the related question of the optimum number of assessors. It can be argued that a broad church necessitates assessment by a range of people, a valid point where one congregation has already given affirmation.⁹⁹ Intriguingly, this issue is not raised by the two established churches, which are governed by leadership bodies. It arises in the Baptists and Methodists, who are governed by congregational meetings at local level. I suggest that the number of assessors therefore does not reflect theological breadth, but differences in church decision-making polity, rooted in where and how God's leading is communally discerned. Breadth is not necessarily guaranteed by the presence of a large group, and my research suggests that small numbers of trained VAs achieve a more thorough assessment. Gaining the level of trust needed to delegate decision-making may be challenging for denominations where this is not normal practice. For the Methodists, over 70 assessors for (in one cycle) 17 applicants begs to be challenged on the grounds of efficiency. However, here I observed that the conference has multiple valuable functions in church life apart from its apparent task.

The table below summarises the differences in assessment systems.

⁹⁹ Both Baptist and Methodist assessors expressed this opinion to me at conferences.

	<i>No. of Assessors (No. of App'ts)</i>	<i>Conf. length for App's</i>	<i>Each Assessor's observation time per App't</i>	<i>Non-interview activities assessed</i>	<i>No. of interviews</i>	<i>Acceptance rate (average)</i>
<i>Scottish Baptist</i>	20 (2-3)	24 hours	55 minutes	0	4 in 1.75 hours	85-90%
<i>Ch. of England</i>	3 (6-8)	48 hours	3.5 hours approx.	2	3 in 2 hours	82-85%
<i>Ch. of Scotland</i>	3 (4-5)	28 hours	3.5 hours approx.	6 ¹⁰⁰	2 in 2 hours	66%
<i>Methodist</i>	8 (2-3)	24 hours	55 minutes	1	2 in 55 mins	85-90%

One notable difference is the observation of practical or group exercises alongside interviews. The Baptists have no exercises and the Methodists one, observed by only one member of each panel. The Church of England assesses two practical components, group discussions and an individually written pastoral exercise. The Church of Scotland focuses extensively on four group practical exercises, three of which are observed by trained assessors (including a psychologist) using a specific observation technique. There is a corresponding difference in each assessor's total time spent in direct formal interaction with each applicant. Baptists and Methodist assessors have 55 minutes with each applicant in a 24-hour conference; Anglicans, about 3.5 hours in a 48-hour conference; and the Church of Scotland, about 3.5 hours in a 28-hour conference.¹⁰¹ Smaller assessor teams require much less discussion time, though the Baptists and Methodists include their decision-making time within the conference. It is interesting to correlate this data with acceptance rates. Baptists and Methodists accept 85-90% - not unexpectedly, given the nature of their applicants. The Anglicans also accept 82-85%, perhaps surprisingly given their applicants' greater diversity. The Church of Scotland is significantly lower at 66%. This is a striking disparity with the Anglicans with whom they are otherwise similar, and requires explanation. I

¹⁰⁰ There are four non-interview activities, one of which is in three distinct parts each individually assessed.

¹⁰¹ For each, the exact time depends on the number of applicants.

considered that the Anglican pre-BAP preparation might filter out more unsuitable applicants, particularly through the DDO, who has no counterpart in the Scottish system.¹⁰² However, Scottish applicants have undergone a structured Period of Discernment and have passed a Local Review where a National Assessor (among others) reviews them; I do not consider the difference sufficient to explain this result. It seems more likely that observation of exercises yields greater insights than interviews alone, as applicants inadvertently reveal themselves in action. This is supported by my own experience.¹⁰³ It is also backed by research into recruitment techniques, which consistently finds interviews to be relatively ineffective indicators of job suitability.¹⁰⁴ The strongest predictors of future performance are past and current performance. A third possible explanation is the unique presence of psychologists at Church of Scotland conferences. While this is probably significant, part of the psychologist's role is to professionally observe interaction during the exercises, making the interplay of these two factors difficult to distinguish. It is possible for non-psychologists to make these observations, though with less acuity. My initial findings suggest that churches should utilize a range of modes of assessment, and the importance of references should be highlighted as evidence of past and present performance. Observation of practical exercises and using psychologists are the only features of final assessment conferences that qualitatively differ from prior assessment in the preparatory stages in any denomination. Applicants in all denominations have been interviewed several times before, completed many forms, and have almost certainly given simple presentations. Offering more of these at final assessment adds volume, but not necessarily depth. The Church of Scotland's focus on non-interview modes of assessment, professionally observed, seems the most credible explanation for the strikingly lower acceptance rate.

Conclusion: Discerning God's call?

The rich experience of four conferences described in this chapter demonstrates a necessary variance in ecclesial practice. Many obvious differences (like the number of assessors and the role of reports) arise directly from denominational distinctives in the

¹⁰² Diocesan Director of Ordinands, a full-time salaried post in every Diocese.

¹⁰³ Among many examples, I once observed an applicant use a markedly inappropriate level of assertiveness to another applicant when under time pressure to complete an activity. This would never have been visible in interview.

¹⁰⁴ For introductory studies, see David G Myers, *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils* (New Haven: New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 187–98.

applicants and the precise ecclesial nature of the task. Other differences are not: interview styles, training of assessors, and the use of exercises are consistent elements across denominations. My initial findings suggest that small numbers of trained assessors, using observation of exercises along with long semi-structured interviews, gain more revealing insight into applicants – and lower acceptance rates. Whether that is desirable in the current climate of clergy shortages, each church must decide for itself.

I draw the preliminary inference that one determines a person's vocational call from God most effectively when one hears and sees people most clearly. The evidence thus far suggests human interaction as the prime revelatory source; both observed interaction between groups of applicants, and verbal dialogue in interviews between assessors and applicants. Practices that hinder authentic listening and relating – scripted interviews, excessive paperwork, inadequate time, focus on criteria – render interaction more superficial and less revealing. In particular, the sense of authentic call seems to be apprehended through the individual and communal affective senses more than reasoned by criteria. This tentative conclusion must be tested by the individual experiences of the Assessors, which is examined in the next chapter. Meanwhile, an assessor's frustrated voice in a sunny garden, yearning to throw off the constraints of the system, seems remarkably apposite. "We're just not getting it.... I wish I could just ask them what is their call. We could have a walk around here, or a coffee, and I could hear the story of their life."¹⁰⁵

I conclude this chapter by recording three incidents I observed, in three different denominations, as focal examples of the challenge under discussion. They speak their own story, and are presented without further commentary.

Three VAs were making a final decision about an applicant whose paperwork was positive and whose exercises at conference had scored well. Nevertheless, all three were reluctant to accept her. Something felt wrong, and in an extended discussion they probed themselves for reasons. Someone noted, with genuine fear of bias, that it seemed they just didn't like her. Eventually they identified a sense, hard to specify, that she was "performing" and they were unsure that they had seen the real person.

¹⁰⁵ From an informal conversation at an assessment conference.

However, the applicant was a European whose excellent English was not her first language, and her tiny infelicities may have had semantic or cultural roots. Eventually the decision was made to accept her: as one joked, “against my better judgment”. It would have been almost impossibly difficult to evidence a negative decision. After the conference, they discovered that this applicant had been notably rude to support staff, both in the denomination’s administrative process and at the conference centre.

At an assessment conference, an experienced VA who holds a senior position in his denomination said that he had a reservation about one applicant but he wasn’t sure why. This observation was quietly but persistently reiterated about three times throughout the conference, with the VA still unsure about its cause. When the team was finally deciding on this applicant, weighing mixed but marginally positive evidence, the VA expressed his disquiet again: “I have something uneasy about this applicant, it’s intuition.” The chairperson’s response was blunt and immediate: “Does she meet the criteria?” He replied, “Yes, but it’s more than criteria, that leaves no room for intuition.” The chairperson responded, “There is room for intuition, as long as you can back it up.” The VA replied, “That’s the thing with intuition, it can be hard to back up.” From there, the chairperson systematically interrogated the root of his unease via the criteria, and traced it to the external decision-making process. The Advisor thanked him. The applicant was accepted, and afterwards the VA was philosophical: that kind of thing had happened before.

A group of VAs was making a final decision about an applicant who seemed straightforwardly acceptable. One was uneasy, and asked the group to take time to pray, which they did for several minutes in silence. Asked to say what she felt, she said she felt wrong about this candidate but “I can’t put my finger on it.” The chairperson was supportive, saying: “These feelings are often right”. There was a sympathetic discussion, but the VA was unable to clearly articulate the source of her reservation. Eventually, the clock was ticking: they had other applicants to see, and they could not process this contribution further without specifying its nature. The VA was sensitively offered the opportunity to record dissent, which would have initiated the process for a split decision. She declined, and voted with the majority.

Chapter 2. The Voices of the Vocational Assessors

Part 1: The Vocational Assessors

Who are the Vocational Assessors?

VAs have much in common across denominations. All are volunteers, and they include both clergy and lay people.¹⁰⁶ Every denomination requires (proportionally) significant numbers of VAs, and aims to balance lay people and clergy, male and female.

Individuals are therefore invited to serve because they satisfy various criteria, not least their willingness and availability to invest significant time. Almost all lay VAs are retired, in every denomination. Selection for their personal gifts and skills is less rigorous, and only the Church of Scotland and Church of England have any formal selection procedures, with some being rejected.

Training is similarly variable. Presbyterians and Anglicans provide skills training, including requiring trainees to observe a full assessment conference before actively participating. They are trained in interview, listening, and report-writing skills as well as acquiring thorough familiarity with the process. For Methodists and Baptists, training is on the job. Each denomination, except the Baptists, holds an annual overnight training conference. Attendance is strongly encouraged, but is only mandatory in the Church of Scotland. The content of training conferences is largely administrative, updating VAs on necessary procedural changes. Sessions on skills and personal development are less common. No denomination recommends VAs to read any theology, or gives any formal teaching on vocation, call or discernment.

Much of the variation in recruitment and training is easily explicable systemically. As seen in the previous chapter, there is a major division between the Anglicans and Presbyterians, and the Baptists and Methodists. Anglicans and Presbyterians assess small groups of applicants in teams of three, guided by the conference leader. Though generic questions are available, VAs must produce their own candidate-specific interview questions before the conference. Final decisions are made in the team of

¹⁰⁶ Clergy are volunteers in the sense that they are not paid to do assessment. Though conferences happen in paid working time, their other duties are not significantly reduced.

three, who then produce comprehensive evidence-based reports which are scrutinized before being sent to the applicant.¹⁰⁷ Their task would be impossible without training. The stress of responsibility for decision-making and report-writing on time is often very intense, both individually and communally.

Baptists and Methodists assess smaller groups of applicants (two or three) in larger teams of VAs – eight for the Methodists; a Board of twenty for the Baptists. Set questions are provided for semi-structured interviews, which VAs may customize for each applicant. This is possible with less thorough preparation, though many prepare well. The whole team finally decides by voting. Thereafter, these VAs do not write reports but provide the leader with written feedback on the interviews, evidenced against detailed criteria. While all VAs are serious about their task and wrestle hard with decisions on marginal applicants, there is notably less individual responsibility in larger teams. Training can be minimal, and on the job.

All the VAs I interviewed were asked the same questions and were keen to discuss the challenges of their task. The questions are provided in Appendix 1, and a precise analysis of the frequency of responses in Appendix 2. Here, I have provided a number in brackets to indicate the number of responses in each area. I have also highlighted the questions in italics, and provided the VA's coded initials after each quote.

The Task of Attentive Listening

How do the VAs understand the nature of their task? They summarize this as attentive listening, both to the applicants and to God. When asked, "*What are the necessary personal qualities of a good VA?*" two clustered responses almost equally dominate in importance. One is listening and paying attention to the applicants (13) – everyone interviewed referenced this in some way, often as the first response. This was richly amplified in various descriptions: active listening, deep listening, awareness, and "I'm a giant pair of ears." (DG). One commented that it's the ability to read people as well as to hear them, i.e. to accurately identify and understand what is heard (DN). "Listening" in this context is active and global, not confined to the verbal. Another specifically articulated what I sensed that others struggled to convey: it's about a quality of

¹⁰⁷ For Anglicans the final scrutineer is the Bishop; for Presbyterians, a team of their peers.

attentiveness to the other, “the ability to truly and deeply *be with* another person.” (LT).

Thus understood, alert and fully present listening to the applicants reveals its relationship to other less frequently identified necessary qualities – compassion (1), the ability to draw people out (2), knowing and setting aside one’s own biases, “the ability to step out of yourself, a kind of self-emptying.” (BN) (3). Most VAs are very alert to the danger of importing their own preconceptions, some acutely so (one said, “But that might just be me” or “maybe I’m biased” (DG) ten times in her hour-long interview). A good VA enters as fully as possible into the applicant’s world, entering her story empathically to try to hear from her perspective what she is hearing.

The equally dominant necessary quality identified (14) is the ability to listen to God – variously described as being spiritually attuned, alert to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, or discerning. Within this category, four respondents identified the fundamental need for VAs to have their own lives habitually rooted in God and in prayer, which was a less directly articulated assumption for others (for example, “I just include it in my daily prayers.” (BD)) As one said, “You can’t just rock up and do this.” (LT). The complex question of exactly what constitutes listening to God is disaggregated in other questions but the ability to do this, however defined, is universally acknowledged as essential.

The theme of listening emerged in a smaller number of responses relating to teamwork (3), which specified the ability to humbly value the opinions of colleagues. Careful listening to colleagues was a more minor but identified strand. It also relates more tangentially to the other major required quality, openness to difference and diversity (8). VAs cannot have a fixed or narrow prior assumption of what is required, but must be open to receive and evaluate whatever reality they encounter.

Asked *how the various discernment practices could be improved*, more training in listening skills, and more time and space for both devotional and practical tasks, were raised eleven times by the subjects (6 and 5). One summarized it:

“We [could] be trained to listen for that inner voice, both in ourselves and in the other person.... I’m off to learn to be a listener and I think any training in

that for an assessor is good. So maybe we need training in spiritual direction.” (DN)

The pressurized sense of hurry was a general feature, with the implication that this hinders the spiritual element of the task. “I wish our process was more spiritual, that there was time and space for proper prayer and listening within the formal process.” (BE). One VA, in a process that requires her to conduct five intense 45-minute interviews in about seven hours, nevertheless sounded apologetic:

“With time, I know how crowded it is – I try to make sure I get five minutes between interviews, ten minutes would be easier but I don’t like to give them less time. That would help, I’d have my gut reaction with number [grade] and get my bullets down – I could *make* ten minutes but.... I want them to answer the right things, to give them enough time and prompts. If they’ve got answers with more depth they need time to give them.” (DG)

Ten minutes seems little to ask in these circumstances; however, the substantive point is the tacitly-assumed link between more time and deeper disclosure. The VAs are selfless in their focus on giving to the applicants, and also in their awareness of the financial cost of conferences for the churches: many mentioned this in relation to the shortage of time. Nevertheless, it is unsurprising that one VA found the whole process “an exercise in macho stamina” (TD).

Asked *how they might improve their practice*, two assessors, perhaps unconsciously, specifically linked the quality of attention paid to the ability to discern:

“Something around that practice in daily life, a discipline that enables me to be fully present with somebody – and then discernment follows.” (LT)

“(after a long pause) Seek always to see God in the person you’re seeing. That sounds super-spiritual but it can’t be anything else. Likewise, give due and proper attention to the information you receive.... I’m always in awe and wonder of panel members who have read everything about every person and can pick out minute details that are important...then seeing where God is in that person. (BD)

One VA rather diffidently commented that her prayer at conferences may simply be “Here I am” [DN]. This profoundly simple prayer captures the essence of the qualities described above: the commitment to be wholly focused in the moment, undistracted and unhurried; and alert and attentive to the applicants, to God and to other voices. “In interview you’re listening like mad, and it seems extraordinary presumptuous to think you’re listening for God and making a decision about that – but somebody has to try to do it.” (DG).

Hearing an Authentic Call

What are assessors listening for, and what convinces them that a call is authentic when they hear it? The most frequent response to this question was passion, a sense of life and energy around the applicant’s response to God. (16). One VA described it as:

“... something bubbling – some people have a call that you just can’t keep the lid on. But not everyone.... quite often you see this effervescence in someone’s life - but sometimes it’s not sparkling water, it’s still water and still water does run deep. But even with that quiet call there’s still something that can’t quite be kept in check, something has compelled them, God has compelled them to go through this ordeal because, let’s face it, it is. (DN).

I coded as “passion” the three VAs who mentioned a sense of compulsion:

“...someone who ...somehow...convinces me that they can’t not do this, it’s an inner compulsion, something planted of God that they’ve *got* to do this because God’s almost *driving* them into – though “driving” has a negative connotation. As opposed to someone who just says maybe I’d like to.” (QS).

Another echoed that this desire springs from the depths:

“Some people come with a level of passion that comes from here, [*hand high on her chest*] and they’re not grounded in the same way. So there’s a palpable action orientation, an excitement. And those who seem to have a true calling from God, it’s back to the core [*fist to her stomach*], they’re speaking from their belly, there’s a depth quality to what they’re bringing.” (LT).

This links naturally with integrity (9): the sense that VAs have seen an authentic person whose inner identity fits coherently with the call, and is also externally

consistent across their work, social and family life. “It’s something about their whole-being alignment. From the heart to the whole being, integrity, is the plumb line true?” (LT). Elsewhere, VAs have noted that the hardest people to assess are those in whom, consciously or not, there are barriers which mask the real person.¹⁰⁸ One VA mentioned the ability to enable disclosure as a quality of a good VA: “The first thing is to help people be themselves. How can we try to get out of this person the reality, we don’t want them just to perform well in the interview. We need to help them to relax and be themselves, we need them to be natural”. (QS)

External confirmation (8) is widely found convincing. Almost all find the local Church’s affirmation to be vitally important; some added that un-churched people (through secular references) could have unique insight. Seven VAs were convinced by tangible confirmations from Scripture, circumstances and words, which ground the affirmation in real life. Of these, three prioritized “supernatural” confirmations in dreams and extraordinary occurrences. “I want them to have some personal encounter through the Holy Spirit meeting them, then some more encounters where there’s been validation.” (NO). These VAs came from Pentecostal or charismatic Baptist traditions, which emphasise the important role of unmediated and unexpected revelation from God in discernment. Data analysis revealed that they used the language of revelation more frequently: “The Lord said/told me/revealed to me.”¹⁰⁹

A desire to serve (6) was disaggregated as serving God, the church or the community:

“... compassion for people, care for the lost, weeping for injustices,
wanting to connect with the community – doing the Jesus stuff.

These things you sense as the presence of God in them, you sense,
see, hear that they’re the real deal, not just ticking boxes.”(CMPre)

One VA saw the spirit of kenosis towards others as the essential hallmark of Christ-like service, while simultaneously conscious that this must be checked by a realistic awareness of their capacity to give, in order to avoid burnout (BN).

¹⁰⁸ McChlery, “How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?” 14.

¹⁰⁹ A thematic reading of the transcripts for these and similar phrases yielded this data.

The main theme emerging from these responses is that the applicant's orientation is outward and altruistic, which relates to humility (6). All six find a humble spirit convincing, but one VA significantly differed over humility about the calling itself.

Most VAs would agree that:

“It's about their spiritual posture; relaxed, humble, questioning whether they're hearing it right – but balanced by faith-filled confidence that if it's of God it will prevail, and if it's not they don't want it anyway.” (BE)

Two of the VAs who privileged “supernatural” confirmations differed here:

“If someone is absolutely convinced, if they're passionate that this is the way God's leading me, almost to the point where if we as [a church] say “Nah, not convinced”, they'll still say: “You know, I'm really not all that bothered, I know what God saying to me” – not in an arrogant way – “No, I know this is the call of God in my life and I've had so many confirmations.” To me that can be a major confirmation as well – they're willing to be obedient to God in spite of anything else.” (CMPre)

Another VA would certainly read that as arrogance:

“If a candidate says, “The Lord told me”...I'd unpack it by saying how do you know, what evidence do you have? I can't hear your inner voice, and what right do you have to prioritise your inner voice over what others might be saying about you?” (TD)

This indicates both diverging positions on the Church's role in communal discernment, and the subtle but important difference between a genuine call from God and the applicant's conviction that he is called. These differing ecclesiologies reflect different theologies of call.

Wrestling and testing (5) indicate challenges on the journey where doubts and hindrances have been incorporated into increasing maturity. Failure to integrate life's challenges with spiritual growth is specified by one VA as a counter-indication. She described an applicant:

“...who'd had awful things happen to her and wasn't prepared to reflect or comment on that, it must've had a huge impact.... she didn't comment or

give evidence that she'd thought that through with God. [She was] gliding over the surface - as clergy you'll have all kinds of people's stuff, if you haven't dealt with it..." (DG)

Finally, four VAs found convincing a sense of their own connectedness with an applicant. Two expressed this theologically, as a mutual recognition of the same indwelling Spirit: "If I have the Holy Spirit and so does she, we should be able to sense that." (CU). For another, it was emotional: "I can [emotionally] connect with most people so if this person can't, why is that?" (LT). A fourth expressed it almost mystically:

"... just feeling the texture of the field (I'll call it that) that operates between us - when we're talking, it has a different feel to it, a texture. (long pause) It has peace in it, a deep connection - so there's something about a knowing that takes place beyond two humans coming together, an intimacy that goes beyond a conversation, and it extends beyond... beyond a transaction so it's a field, a sphere that extends beyond." (LT)

One experienced the "resonance" between herself and the applicant as part of the applicant's overall integration:

"There's a resonance between what you see and what you hear, there's a congruence between what they say and how they're holding themselves, for example [*in an exercise*]. So you're seeing that congruence and that's resonating within you, there's a sense in which you start to believe that they can do it." (NO)

Initially this seems a hopelessly biased, or even dangerously subjective dependence on whether the applicant establishes a personal affinity with the VA. However, given that discernment is about the indefinable capacity to hear and respond to God in relation to other people, this connection must be noted and explored (chapter 4).

In a further attempt to elicit what the VAs experience affectively as well as cognitively, they were asked *what is happening within themselves when they hear a call they judge to be authentic*. This question elicited a range of verbal and non-verbal responses. There were notably longer pauses before answers, uncharacteristically so from some highly

articulate subjects. Two of them prefaced their response with an affirmation of the importance of feelings: “It’s not just a head thing, not professional, it’s based on feeling.” (BD) Conversely, two others added an explicit caution: “That’s such an unreliable science - but this isn’t a scientific process.” (BE) “I go to the feelings part of my personality first – but I’m aware I mustn’t be driven by my emotional response.” (SM) Taken together, their hesitancy suggested both uncertainty about the phenomenon itself, and a difficulty or lack of practice in articulating it.

Joy or elation, a sense of being lifted, was by far the most common response (7), followed by excitement (3) or tears (2). It seems that the sense of positive energy and passion they identify in the applicant’s call communicates itself to the VAs emotionally as well as rationally. One described it as a sense of God’s pleasure: “It’s almost like the Eric Liddle thing, when I do this I sense the smile of God, I sense God’s pleasure in their obedience to the call.” (QS).

With an authentic call, two VAs also noted a change in the communal atmosphere, one with an intriguing observation about the ability to read the “mood” of the group:

“You feel something come over the room as one person who had a great reservation subsides, then another then another, then when [the applicant] leaves you know - OK, we’re OK. And then the discussion is into competencies. There’s a [VA] who’s on the autistic spectrum and he doesn’t get any of these mood things, he said, “But we haven’t made the decision yet,” and everybody else in the room is like.....we have, we haven’t said it but we know we’ve decided and we’re talking competencies now. I found it very interesting that he didn’t get that.” (BN)

This indicates her awareness of a tacitly operant “emotional intelligence” or ability to read subtle social signals, which is less readily accessible to people with autism.

Only two VAs replied spontaneously by describing psychosomatic signals; others were asked subsequently *whether they felt their sense of conviction in their bodies*. This unusual question elicited more somatic signals of deep reflection, and three commented that it was an interesting question. Two said that tension lifted; for one, the relaxation in her body posture is so marked that colleagues who know her well can tell by looking at her that she has “got it.” (DN) Two said they feel it in their gut, with a

first to illustrate. For one it was a sense of “very strong positive energy.... either that or DULL” (BD). Another responded similarly: “There’s something – I don’t know, physiological? Some sort of chemical reaction thing that must happen in me because you feel this YES!!” (QS). There were few common responses and a high degree of individual variation: nevertheless, most (11) answered affirmatively.

One response exemplifies the others:

“In my body? (*long pause*) That’s a really interesting question. My intuition about people is often.... (*hesitating*) I often notice it in terms of how able or willing I am to give eye contact. I can think of applicants I’ve not recommended and one of the difficult things about them is giving eye contact – that does sound weird. For some – I actually force myself to do it. It’s that initial hesitation, reluctance, whatever it is that I find.... I suppose uncomfortable, because by being unable to give eye contact to [*an applicant*].... am I prejudging them? And you asked about the body – yes, it is something in here.” (TD)

Here is the tentative balance of consciously hearing an embodied message, with cautious awareness of its limitations and the danger of bias, and a high degree of self-awareness. Asked to reflect further, he suggested that his difficulty in eye contact reflected his inability to trust, to be authentic and vulnerable to the applicant. This recalled another VA’s description of an authentic applicant, “Someone I can trust with my spiritual life.” (SM), who was tacitly measuring authenticity by his own ability to trust. In the task of hearing an authentic call body, mind and spirit are all engaged.

In all the responses to hearing an authentic call, there was a sense of wrestling with something which essentially eluded articulation. One VA concluded:

“I never know how I’m going to discern a call but when I hear a call I know I’ve heard it. And how on earth do you explain that, because you just know. I come back to our own reflection and our fellow assessors, encircled by prayer. It has to be grounded in God, we have to trust God.” (DN)

Awareness of God’s presence

How do VAs experience the presence of God as they undertake their tasks? I asked *how they prepare spiritually for assessment conferences*. The answer was overwhelmingly prayer (10), disaggregated as praying for the applicants, for discernment for

themselves, (“to see with God’s eyes and hear with God’s ears” (DN)), and for the other Assessors. One prays for words of knowledge and pictures as direct revelation from God, to convey to the applicants if possible (CMPre). Another prays over each of her applicants in 24-hour cycles before the conference, holding them and her information about them before God (LT). Most VAs stressed the paramount importance of prayer both before and during conferences: “We start to create a community of prayer before we even meet. That’s important. They’re held before God by me, and by other [VAs] and by other candidates and those supporting them on their journey.”(TD). Universally, they regard this as a spiritual process with prayer as its vital context.

Reading the paperwork (8) is also consciously undertaken as a spiritual exercise, demanding full attention. “I offer the reading to God, with my highlighters.” (KD). “It’s not something you can read on the train.” (LT). Its purpose is to form a strong sense of the applicant’s identity (4). One described it:

“... listening to voices of the paperwork and the voice of the person before you’ve met them - then putting that aside and being still. It’s hard to describe - the spiritual weighing going on - inner weighing and listening. Do I feel disturbed, excited? Do I have a vision for who this person is or might become?” (BE)

Another finds that reading the paperwork is itself an exercise in prayerful discernment:

“I ask God to help me to spot things that are relevant to ask questions about. So I might be asking something about their story I’m picking up on, or educational processes. So before I even read all the documents I say God, bring to my attention something I shouldn’t miss, what we need to see. I don’t ever go through the names and pray for them all.” (QS)

This implies that the spiritual is indistinct from the material - assessment is holistic. Giving time and energy (6) is a sacrificial discipline for very busy people. The “donation of time, energy and space” (SM) is essential as the intense 14-hour days are physically exhausting as well as being demanding mentally and spiritually. Several of these mature VAs related how they have learned from experience not to over-work before conferences and to schedule rest afterwards; some said their demanding nature means they can only do one per year.

There was a hint, articulated by a few subjects and implied by others, that the reason for the serious spiritual and practical preparation is the personal attentiveness required for proper assessment. The aim of all the preparation is to enable them to be as fully and attentively present with the applicants as possible: “If I’m expecting the person in front of me to give of their all, the least I can do is give as much of myself that I can.... I know I need to be able to give my all.” (DN). The VA who prays intensely in 24-hour cycles identifies this as her reason:

“This is hard work, 24-hour prayer cycles 3 or 4 or 5 times depending on how many [applicants], to maintain the level of deep listening, attunement; you can’t do it by having a good night’s sleep the night before.” (LT)

VAs were then asked where in the process they most keenly sense God’s presence. Many instantly said “all of it”, and were asked to specify. Collective prayer and worship (6) was most frequently cited, because it gives space for quiet reflection, and also for the experience of shared fellowship between VAs and applicants on level ground: “I’m grateful that the whole [conference] is set in worship and prayer, in a horseshoe, all there equally before God.” (DG)

Almost equally (5) VAs sensed that themselves to be entering holy ground when interacting with applicants.

“Every time a candidate walks in to the room, whether they’re going to be accepted or not, I sense that God has walked in.... there’s no sense that God hasn’t been walking with those not accepted. It’s always a privilege to walk with them. (BD)

Some found hearing the applicant’s stories of their lives and call very moving. “The conversation is where candidates are vulnerable, open to scrutiny, it’s a difficult place to be – in many ways the Christ place, therefore the interview is extremely holy space.” (SM). Several (4) experienced the depth and quality of fellowship in the common task with other VAs as God-infused.

One gave a different response, after a long pause: “Where you leave space for God is where God is in the process. You could process God out of existence, and one of the

things we're doing now is looking for whether there's enough space for the Holy Spirit to work, for discernment to have a chance to be effective." (BN)

This indicates a different operant theology: that God is around the events and people rather than in them, and speaks in the silent spaces rather than through the tangible and material. This is not her espoused belief, as she proceeded to explain:

"My theology is that God is in the candidates, the assessors, the talk among us, worship at the beginning and end of the day, at mealtimes, in all of it really. But sometimes the process can be driven on from one thing to another without the reflective space – and making those spaces seems to me to be quite critical. There's not a lot of space, and sheer financial constraints come in." (BN)

Again, the connection between hearing God, and adequate time and space, is strongly implicit.

Finally, regarding their awareness of practice in vocational assessment generally, I wanted to elicit *whether years of experience had changed their attitudes or praxis*. Four had increasingly realised that discerning call is more than words: attitudes and impressions are critical. Others showed that disposition in their answers. For the only respondent who answered in terms of what applicants say, this was not accidental but consciously shaped by her ecclesial context where sensitivity to the affective has sometimes historically been dismissed as "female intuition".

Their main identified difference was a growth in confidence (6). Four related that to greater familiarity with the process; more (5) described the freedom to be themselves:

"I've grown in quiet confidence, also you learn to develop your own posture in assessment over and against learning a process and the way other people say you should do it. I know the indicators and the nuts and bolts. That frees you to be you and to bring what you as a person bring." (BE)

Two specifically mentioned that being less self-conscious and less concerned with paperwork enables deeper listening. "I focus more on what the suggested questions are really about, I'm better at listening to the answers than taking that forward rather than

just, what will I write?” (LT). The other intriguingly commented on a change in how she prays.

“To begin with I was praying hard, I need to know I need to know, and now when I hear it, I know. I don’t say to God I want to hear that again, I trust it, I’m more relaxed; if it’s there I’ll hear it.” (DN)

This suggests that greater self-confidence facilitates deeper absorption in the process, and enhances the ability to listen to God.

Discernment of Vocation

This section moves beyond directly analysing the interview questions, as no question specifically requested definitions of vocation or discernment. However, thematic readings of the interview transcripts yielded revealing incidental comments on these, which are not captured elsewhere and merit recording. They have been clustered under the broad headings of discerning vocation, vocation and identity, vocation and calling, and communal discernment.

On discerning vocation, one VA said he believes that God’s greatest desire is what gives you life, what brings you closer to God – so one of his personal questions in discernment is: is this bringing the applicant closer to God? (BD). Another described something similar in terms of “pull and push”:

“[Applicants] have broadly discerned some kind of spiritual pull or push – both apply – to some form of specific ministry or service. Beyond that are many layers distinguishing between pull and push, the pressure of other voices, conscious or unconscious desires, all are factors - which is why it’s difficult to discern call.” (BE)

Another VA’s thoughtful response saw discerning vocation in a wider context:

“We need to use the language of discernment in church generally, creating a culture of discernment not just for ministry. It could be good for society too – we’ve lost the courage to say what’s right and wrong and that’s what discernment is, the capacity to make good decisions. It’s a quality of living that the wider world needs and the starting point is the church, talking about it and helping all its members to see their lives as a vocational journey, not just ordination.” (SM)

A final view of discernment came from two subjects for whom the challenge of wrestling their judgment into words became part of the discernment itself.¹¹⁰ One revealed that for difficult marginal decisions she sometimes writes, or tries to write, two reports to see which feels more credible – often, one will be much easier to write than the other (DG). Another amplified this:

“[Discernment is] the writing process as well, it’s bloody difficult, getting it down to 100 words. I quite like words and enjoy the process of writing everything, I transcribe the interview and take my notes into report-writing – I’m literally sifting, looking for what’s important. That discipline of getting it down to 100 words is a really helpful part of the process for me. If I was allowed to write long reports it would muddy the water. It’s part of the discernment process...if you can’t quite get the words, if I’m struggling with something, can’t express it, I keep testing within myself why I’m struggling here. (SM)

Discerning an inner call from God (as distinct from evidence-based assessment of qualification according to indicators) is essentially difficult to quantify or articulate. The difficulty is acute both for applicants in describing their call, and for VAs in discerning it, and this experience will be explored below for its theological and epistemological significance (chapters 8 and 9).

The link between vocation and identity is strongly implied in the interview data.¹¹¹ For example, the prime indicator of authentic call (along with passion) is integrity: the sense that what they are seeing is consistent across the applicant’s whole life and so reflects their true personality. This is also seen in the frequently-expressed concern that they are “seeing the real person.” Four VAs spontaneously linked vocation to identity. One of them, who was diagnosed in childhood with a permanent disabling illness, has reflected deeply on this from personal experience:

¹¹⁰ Both of these are Anglicans; for the others, the nature of their process precludes this possibility. Given that delimitation, two out of four is a high occurrence.

¹¹¹ This major theme is frequently iterated in literature on the theology of vocation and I find it striking that the VA’s responses correlate with these studies. See, for example Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1999); Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010); Herbert Alphonso, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning through the Spiritual Exercises* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).

“... how you respond to [*the illness*] is a calling as well, trying to stay who you are despite the limitations, not letting it make you somebody different. So though some paths have closed down I’ve always tried to use the gifts I’ve been given in the same way, as a Christian in this context.

(BN)

She believes that God’s core calling is to be who you are, and the context of the particular vocation may vary. She worries for applicants who “are very starry-eyed and idealistic. I look at them and think how difficult it’s going to be for them to stay who they really are through ministry” (BN). Another VA has wrestled with the question of identity as a clergy spouse, noting and challenging the common assumption that a vocation to ministry is somehow superior to other vocations:

“Vocation is one of those things that can screw people up and I’m not sure we’re well taught about it, I’ve looked at it long and hard. We have multiple vocations and that label [*clergy*] doesn’t necessarily describe our entity..... being a clergy [*spouse*] – you keep being moved and having to re-think who am I, what does God want me to do in this place? I’m thinking maybe if I had that label [*Rev*] I’d know, then looking at a [*clergyperson*] I think, I bet he doesn’t think that describes entirely who he is. So vocation is not that simple really, and we screw people up by making it one thing when we have multiple vocations.” (DG)

The triple distinction voiced here is between the call to discipleship, a calling to a particular vocation, and the identification of either or both of these with our existential self. These are vital questions in any theology of vocation which this research cannot further pursue.¹¹² Another VA, who described true identity as a person’s inner light, echoed this theme. Her explanation of how she discerns the shape of that merits quoting at length:

“There’s a being.... the essence of me, that sits within here [*hand to chest*] It’s as though light reflects in here, this place that.... I know, this is God. There’s something around being who you’re meant to be, nobody else can be who you are – so the responsibility of discernment is really really strongFor some [*applicants*] – this is difficult to say - for some I have a compassionate

¹¹² For good contemporary introductions to the theology of vocation, see Haughey, *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*; Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*.

love that says, oh I can see how great you are but you're already great in your ministry, I don't know why you're here, you don't need to be ordained. And there's another kind – God's light shines through them in a different way.... the ones who have had a quest, and they've come here to realize it. So there's a texture to it, [*hand gesture*] a different light that shines in their eyes. (LT)

On vocation and calling, two pointed out that we are continually called by God, and expressed the desire for ongoing vocational discernment as part of the task of churches – not just for entry to ministry, and not just for clergy.

Regarding the role of special revelation in calling, opinions diverged. One pointed out how seldom she heard someone definitively claim an epiphany experience:

“I've not often heard people say, God is telling me to do this. More often circumstances fall into place, they hear people tell them, or they start pushing a door. I know we joke at assessment about “the voices are telling me” but I've never heard somebody say that.” (DN).

Most VAs would agree: a call to ministry usually unfolds incrementally, often punctuated by small epiphanies. An alternative view, espoused by a minority of VAs, privileges unusual revelatory experiences (perhaps a dream or a voice), followed by confirmations in the form of unusual “coincidences” (for example, contingent factors falling into place unexpectedly). As previously noted, these VAs use the language of “the Lord revealing” in a distinctive way, though “either instantaneous or gradual” (QS) experiences of God would be affirmed as valid. This may arise less from differing theologies of vocation than from variant epistemologies, privileging knowing God by means of direct revelation or mediated through natural phenomena. This is discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

Despite not having been specifically questioned about communal discernment, eleven VAs spontaneously highlighted this. They defined “communal” as wider than the people present at the conference: four specifically mentioned the applicant's home church, four mentioned their referees, and three the denominational appointees involved with their journey through the process. Three experienced the sense of fellowship or unity of mind among the VAs as a particular locus of divine disclosure; another three mentioned the importance of a community of prayer.

Only a few cautioned that communal assessment has its drawbacks. Three VAs were wary of the danger of “group-speak” (LT), of some people being swept along by dominant voices; they usefully noted the importance of hearing from quieter panel members. However, disagreement among the VAs was never seen as a major obstacle. Almost all valued different perspectives as prompting the discussions which are inherent in discernment processes. Six stated that it is reassuring when others affirm what they perceive themselves. Communal discernment is explored in chapter 4.

In summary, with the few caveats mentioned, the VA’s voices are remarkably coherent across denominations. Universally, they speak of the importance of their task: they are making life-determining decisions and, no-one was unmoved by that. Core to the task, they identify attentive and fully engaged listening: to the applicants, and to God. Embedded within that, they listen to each other and to their own inner voices. The interviews reveal their awareness of a range of psychosomatic signals, alongside other data, in hearing a call which they believe to be authentic. They are hesitant about identifying these, and conflicted over how they should be interpreted as evidence. In the time-pressured bubble of a conference atmosphere - people often remark that they’ve forgotten what day it is in the outside world - they seek to discern God’s authentic call in the passion, authenticity and humility of the presenting applicants, and to integrate the person before them with the external evidence from the paperwork. Integration or authenticity is part of what resonates with them as authentication of call. From their preparatory reading and praying, through the holy ground of shared worship and interviews, to the final communal decision, they experience assessment as a spiritual exercise with God’s presence keenly felt at key moments. Despite the challenges, “I’ve never walked away thinking I don’t want to do this again.” (NO).

Part 2: Reflection and analysis

From the evidence gathered in interviews and supported by observations at conferences, this section synthesises what the VAs are saying about how they “know” they are hearing God in an applicant’s call: how they become confident that they are

making a reliable discernment. I will first summarise what they experience as affirming their judgment, then examine what they find problematic.

What helps them to know?

Attentiveness

Attentive listening is noted as the chief quality required of a VA, equally defined as listening to God and listening to others. Discernment begins with what is received in their encounter with the applicant. The vocabulary of listening and attention is embedded in the VA's responses, sometimes unconsciously. This implies a dispositional attitude which enables the VA to put herself and her own preferences aside.

Experienced VAs are listening for more than words: they seek to be alert to the underlying tones, attitudes and assumptions that reveal unconsciously who the person really is: "It's about reading the person as well as hearing them" (BE). Their responses support a previous theory that more experienced VAs listen not only for what applicants say, but perhaps more for the underlying tone and attitude, "listening for the bass notes".¹¹³ "Attentiveness" is a more accurate descriptor than "listening", described by one VA as "having my antennae up" (DG). The VA aims to be with the applicant; to empathically enter into her experience, and thus to weigh the significance of what she is hearing from her own perspective as far as possible.

Attentive listening to the applicants was articulated as a required quality; listening to oneself was not, though this practice was evident in their responses. This observation has important practical and epistemological implications. VAs are not trained or encouraged to regard their own intuition, including their psychosomatic responses, as valid indicators in discernment; nevertheless, on reflection they are aware that these influence their judgments.

Listening to God was regarded as equally important with listening to the applicants, though this was not defined. Asked where they encounter God in the process, none had a single answer though all emphasised the importance of prayer. Some highlighted

¹¹³ McChlery, "How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?" 15.

God's presence in the applicants and found the interviews "extremely holy space" (SM); others emphasized the need for worship and prayer as oases for prayer and reflection in a busy schedule: "God is where you make space for God" (BN). This was not conveyed as a clear or troubling disconnection; there was a strong implicit connection between time (in interviews) and space (in worship), and hearing God. The VA who commented that longer experience led her prayers to change alluded to another distinction. From an implicitly anxious request that God's call in an applicant's life would be revealed to her, she moved to a more settled conviction that if it's there, embedded in the story, she will see it. This may hint at a subtle shift in her epistemological understanding of how God speaks: from revelation by supernatural or external means, to greater confidence that God can be clearly revealed in natural phenomena. Again, I did not sense this as an uncomfortable dissonance. Interestingly, the three VAs who had frequent personal experiences of God speaking extraordinarily through voices, dreams and pictures, were less aware of how God might speak through their own bodies. One was unaware of any somatic signals during assessment, though he recounted strong physical and psychosomatic experiences in prayer and worship at other times (for example, being thrown to the ground). The other two agreed that a sense of affirmation of call was felt in their bodies during assessment, but could not specify where. This may indicate that an expectation of explicitly "supernatural" elements in a genuine experience of God reduces their sensitivity to less obvious bodily signals; however, such a sweeping suggestion would require to be validated by further research. Taken together, it is important that the differences between the VAs are not over-stated. All of them took a holistic view of what constitutes listening to God, with differences of emphasis according to differing operant theologies.

Listening to others and to God were the direct responses to the question of how you know; communal discernment emerged strongly and spontaneously in answering other questions. For example, "external confirmation" is a strong indicator of a genuine vocation and indicates that the voices heard through the paperwork are taken very seriously. Careful reading is a prerequisite, and is also seen as a spiritual discipline: "I offer that reading to God, with my highlighters". (KD). This makes audible in the process the voices of the applicant's congregation, placement church, work referees and the church's mentors involved in their journey thus far. In conferences I observed that all the VAs have the applicants' paperwork to hand and may refer to it frequently,

especially in decision-making. External evidence from others in the church is usually seen as confirmation; however, none of the assessors felt that someone should be pursuing a call primarily on the urging of others.

Listening to others also includes hearing the other assessors – referenced spontaneously by every VA. Discernment is communal, and no-one would feel confident to undertake it alone. Unanimous agreement is seen to strongly affirm the sense of God’s leading. Diverse opinions, however, are a welcome opportunity for healthy sifting in discernment, and VAs value colleagues who notice something they have missed.

Communal discernment is also theologically rooted. The church’s role both locally and nationally in determining a vocation to ministry is embedded in Christian praxis. The divergence has been noted between the view that the national Church ultimately decides (the predominant Anglican and Presbyterian view), and the Baptists and Methodists who privilege the person’s call, recognised by an individual congregation, prior to the national Church’s affirmation. For some of these VAs, the individual call is more convincingly heard when it seems external to the person: through words, signs and improbable coincidences, and contrary to the person’s natural inclinations or expectations. This very unexpectedness is regarded as indicating divine disclosure, and the language of revelation may be more frequently used. Thereafter, submitting to the Church’s discernment further tests the strength of conviction. Where the national Church disagrees, a minority believe that telling the church it is wrong may constitute passing the test, and therefore they may favour an assertive style of questioning.¹¹⁴ This raises the vital distinction between testing the genuineness of God’s call, and the strength of individual’s conviction that he is called. Perhaps the expectation that God will speak externally by “signs and wonders” also reduces recognition that God will speak either internally through gift and desire, or externally through the Church. Again, further research would be necessary to confirm this.

“Knowing” a call is from God therefore emerges in the convergence of all the above factors and more, as everything - personal cognitive and affective responses, prayer

¹¹⁴ This view was expressed explicitly by two of the three VAs who privilege signs of the extraordinary in a vocational call.

and worship, communal discussion - fits coherently together. That sense of connectedness emerged as the other main affirmation in knowing.

Connectedness

The two main qualities which convince the VAs that an applicant is genuinely called by God are integrity and passion. For integrity, VAs must be sure that they have seen the real person. At Church of Scotland conferences, every applicant is asked, "Have we seen the real you?"¹¹⁵ Integrity is first of all within the applicant: "something about their whole-being alignment – is the plumb line true?" (LT). VAs trace the applicant's life and faith journey, identifying themes which are consistent over time. Positive indicators of integrity may be where an applicant has worked through obstacles, or is sacrificing a career or salary. Another is an open manner that inspires trust. Integrity extends around the applicant to her family, friends, colleagues and church family – all should be hearing the same story and seeing the same person. The applicant's leisure interests should be consonant with his Christian values and spirituality which permeate all of life. Most assessment conferences include shared meals and casual conversations where VAs and applicants cohabit and meet, despite the artificial circumstances, as real people. Finally, integrity is sought in the applicant's relationship with the wider world in awareness of global issues, and willingness to serve sacrificially as part of the Church's witness and mission.

My research shows strikingly how both inner and outer integrity are mirrored in the VA's own experience of the applicant, where they discern a genuine call to ministry. Regarding inner integrity, VAs personally sense whether they can trust this applicant, for example with eye contact or "someone I can trust with my spiritual life" (SM) – the tacit use of himself as an indicator is revealing. For passion, however effervescent or deep, VAs note their own raised energy in joy, or emotional depth in tears. Conversely, where this is absent they sense "DULL" (BD) lifelessness, or something indefinable missing. In observing group interviews, VAs sometimes assume or even state that the applicant has "filled the room" or, alternatively, has failed to "excite" or convince.¹¹⁶ For the overall sense of God's real presence, VAs mirror an indefinable resonance with an applicant which suggests a shared spirit: "we have the same Holy Spirit" (CU).

¹¹⁵ Some Church of Scotland VAs believe that a negative answer to this question is, *per se*, grounds for non-acceptance.

¹¹⁶ Both these quotes were noted during observation of conferences.

Outward integration or coherence is similarly reflexive. VAs seek a sense of integration in their own world through the affirmation of their colleagues at conference, and the wider Church through the paperwork, which parallels that of the applicant. The VAs see their task as holistic. Getting enough rest before and after conference, and arriving alert is important. Hospitality is taken seriously, and a conscious effort is made to create a supportive and reassuring physical and spiritual environment for applicants. For both inner and outer integrity, this consistent reflexive “mirroring” (or transference) was rarely consciously noticed by anyone, but I suggest that the links are clearly indicated by the data.

A final level of reciprocity can therefore be posited within the VAs themselves. For them as well as for applicants, discerning vocation is inseparably linked to their own identity: “[calling is] a self-remembering: I remember that this is who I’m meant to be.” (LT) The task embraces who they are, as well as practical skills or words. The phrase “spiritual posture” (BE) used to describe an applicant applies equally to the VAs: more an attitude of spiritual alertness than any specific character trait. VAs aim to echo the applicant’s level of commitment to the process: “If I expect them to give their all, I need to give my all.” (DN) This is underlined in the remark that greater experience brings “greater freedom to be themselves” (BE), an interesting and perhaps unexpected response. The notable advantage of experience is not primarily increased skill or accumulated wisdom from previous applicants. It is more about fully inhabiting their true identity— again, mirroring what they seek in applicants. It seems that in order to discern God’s authentic voice, everyone involved in the process must be free to be fully authentic.

If applicants struggle to identify their genuine vocation, so do VAs. Hearing what God is saying to you is difficult; hearing what God is saying to someone else is very difficult indeed and perhaps impossible. It is therefore vitally important that the VAs are spiritually mature people who are sensitive to God’s presence in everyday life and not just at conferences. Some VAs were definite about this: “Our level of attunement comes from deep practice ourselves.” (LT). Chapter 3 on Ignatian spirituality suggests how this might be deliberately fostered.

As with attentiveness, the VAs sense God's authentic affirmation in integration within the whole person, and outwardly in that person's relationships. I suggest that the sense of connectedness is most deeply experienced in corporate worship, where the relationships of everyone present are consciously held in the context of their mutual relationship with God, and this is why worship is so fundamental to all the conferences.

What makes knowing difficult?

Examining what helps them to know reveals the converse factors that make discernment difficult for the VAs. There are three main difficulties: with intuition, with articulation, and with call.

Problem with intuition

The influence of intuition or tacit knowledge in the VAs decision-making is evident above. For them, this raises the possibility, or even the fear, that where their conscious attention and analytical faculties are less dominant, they are more easily misled. Many are acutely aware of this and reluctant to trust the intuitive, some excessively so. One said "but that might be just me" or "but that's my bias" repeatedly; others echoed that sense less emphatically. Another hinted at theological uncertainty: "I don't want to be led astray by something that isn't God." (LT). The interviews suggest that VAs have a conflicted relationship with their inner life: they sense that it may speak a deeper wisdom, yet simultaneously they mistrust it. This emerged particularly in their comments about feeling a conviction in their bodies. A few found this level of reflexivity very challenging, and only one answered readily because she had previously considered it. When invited to consciously attend to their bodily experience, they affirmed it as an operant source of knowledge – but one with questionable validity. An almost universal cognitive procedure is for assessors to internally acknowledge their "gut instinct", and then seek external verification:

"When I've done the interview, I'll put my number down from my gut, then write three bullet points of evidence from the interview, from my notes. That's the combination, balance, of Godly intuition and evidence." (DG).

“I know within five minutes when someone is right, and I spend the next six months getting the evidence.... I reckon I’m right 80-90% of the time.”
(PC)¹¹⁷

Many VAs affirm that procedure but some, especially those who write evidence-based reports, are cautioned that it is technically invalid. Their unease is exacerbated by the dominance of formally articulated, written criteria in all assessment systems. One expressed the difficulty as finding a “metric” (or matrix) for intuition:

“So yes I think [intuition] is important – but I’m still trying to think of what a metric of intuition would be. Maybe we struggle because it doesn’t have a metric...is God in the intuition? I think so – but the power of self-delusion can be very great.” (SM)

Another said: “I almost feel embarrassed to say something’s intangible, and yet it’s hugely significant. There’s a sort of dissonance in there, you’d think if it’s hugely important we should have six criteria to say what it is (*laughs*).” (QS) This difficulty is illustrated in three observed incidents at the end of chapter 1 (in three denominations) where the VA’s intuitive judgments conflict with the systemic requirement for specific evidence. The fact that this occurred at two of the three conferences I observed supports my own experience that this happens routinely.¹¹⁸ Where intuition conflicts with observable data, the latter invariably triumphs. Usually the senior figure at conferences, the gatekeeper responsible for errors and charged with ensuring procedural regularity, rigidly maintains the criteria’s final authority.¹¹⁹ Intuition alone is unreliable and indefensible, and in these scenarios there may be an element of relief that the process ultimately fences excursions beyond the comfort zone.

A second problem with intuition was raised by one VA, who was initially reluctant to answer questions about it or to admit that influenced her discernment. She is a laywoman in a denomination with few female leaders, and where the discernment process has traditionally been an all-male preserve. Her mistrust of intuition in favour of “hard evidence” arises from her evidenced belief that, in her context, intuition is

¹¹⁷ From a conversation with an experienced Diocesan Director of Ordinands (DDO) in the Church of England, Quoted with permission.

¹¹⁸ The third is from my own experience.

¹¹⁹ For the Church of Scotland this is the Conference Director; for the Church of England the Panel Secretary, for Baptists the Chair of the Board, for Methodists the Panel Members.

seen as “female” and therefore dismissed. Questioned on intuition, she responded, “people say that” it is feminine, and had to be pressed to distinguish this from her own (different) view. She was wary that opinions which are merely idiosyncratic or biased might potentially seem credible if “intuition” was taken seriously. Here, intuition is mistrusted because it is misunderstood.

In summary, the VA’s problem with intuition is how far to trust its epistemological reliability amid theological and social uncertainty about its nature, and within systems that struggle to validate it. This problem requires comment particularly by the scientific conversation partners in this research (Chapter 5).

Problem with articulation

One difficult aspect of intuition is the challenge of verbally articulating its judgments. This is illustrated in the three scenarios noted in chapter 1, and also by those writing reports. Applicants can struggle to elucidate their experience of God, and VAs themselves have to elucidate their sense of an applicant’s call or lack of one – which may be impossibly difficult. The deepest human experiences of God seem to be pre-verbal, and the need to clearly articulate them can seem reductionist or even demystifying, like “slitting apart the nightingale to find the song”.¹²⁰ The VA’s awareness of this is seen in their response to the “bass notes” – they are resonating with much more than words. Yet words are essential for communal verification and reports, and may even deepen and enhance the experiences they describe.

The VAs used a wide lexicon of approximate descriptors for this intuitive aspect of their experience. The most common were very loose: a “sense” or “feeling”. “In my gut” or “gut feeling” occurred frequently; occasionally, “in my spirit”. “Intuition” was a frequent descriptor, and some spontaneously defined themselves as intuitive people. A few were wary of that term: “intuition - if you call it that...” (LT). One, as noted above, actively suspected it because of its assumed association with “feminine”, and preferred to call it “emotional intelligence” (BN). Some contrasted it with a counterpart: “the balance of intuition and evidence” (DG), “Gut reaction yes, but the thinking part wants to justify that, intuition isn’t alone.” (TD) One referred to “my antennae” (DG). An attempt to analyse the exact frequency of lexical terms (Appendix 4) felt like nailing down jelly, as every VA used several different terms interchangeably throughout their

¹²⁰ The origins of this phrase are obscure.

interview. The effort was abandoned mainly because the VAs themselves were overtly dissatisfied with precise semantic definitions: “I don’t know what you call it – I know there is a something...” (BN), “It’s hard to describe” (QS), “I don’t know how you know, you just know!” (DN). One VA described wrestling it into words as a stage in his processing: “I’m intuitive person, sometimes I’ll feel an awkwardness before I know what it is. I’ll listen to that inside myself to then tease it out. Often I then have to write it down...” (SM). The interviews suggest that this aspect of experience is not accidentally but essentially indeterminate, and to insist on a precise lexicon would necessitate altering the experience by analyzing it.

The sense that language is inadequate was supported by the VA’s body language. The question, “What’s happening in you?” elicited longer pauses and more hand gestures than other questions, even in very articulate subjects. Where they identified a felt sense of God’s leading, they were asked whether they experienced that in their bodies. Perhaps surprisingly, most responded positively with examples of involuntary somatic signals. Most said, “I feel it *here*”, with a fist to the chest or waist. For two, it was a noticeable relaxation of previously unrecognized tension in the shoulders. One said that colleagues who know her well can see that she has “got it” by the relaxation in her body posture. More unusually, one identified his eyes as the source: only when he is convinced an applicant is genuine can he readily make eye contact, and he deliberately compensates for this by forcing himself to do so with all applicants, to avoid bias. One or two felt moved towards tears. Further insight came from the only VA who intentionally practices somatic awareness as a spiritual discipline:

“I’m reading the signals coming from my body - am I really in tune with the subtle messages from my body – there’s a bit of gurgling going on, my heart feels a bit warm, my throat feels a bit closed – so that’s another level of intuition I think.” (LT).

For most, though not all, the affective dimension of their experience is experienced bodily, whether or not they are consciously aware of that at the time. The problem is how this can be validated both in their personal judgment, and in assessment systems.

Problem with call

There are three challenges with the concept of call. One is the problem of discerning specific call: as one VA said, “everyone is called to something.” (BD). One explicitly affirmed the Lutheran view that each individual’s vocation has multiple

complementary elements. (DG). Discerning whether someone is called to this particular ministry at this time can be difficult, and some theological background on the distinction between a call to discipleship and a calling or vocation to a role would be helpful. Though no precise verbal formula is sought, VAs say during discussions “I’m not hearing a call” and may even agree on that, without specifying what they mean.¹²¹ From my own experience and ethnographic observations, I suspect that vague uncertainty about an applicant may be located under “call” simply because it is hard to reference elsewhere, and this is an area where practice could be improved by enhancing their theological understanding.

Others raised the intriguing question of whether call is discerned by its presence or its absence. Two VAs commented that sometimes it’s easier to identify its absence, and a third refused to answer the question affirmatively, saying that she always knows better when people are not called. I analysed separately the counter-indications identified by these VAs to probe them for additional insights; however, they were almost exactly the converse of the convincing features already identified.¹²² It is more interesting to probe why some VAs might more easily discern call in the negative. It may simply relate to reliance on the communal discernment to date. The local church and others already believe this person is called; the VA therefore assumes that this is true unless proved otherwise. That describes the third VA mentioned above, who also commented that she delays being influenced by negative indicators:

“I can’t tell you how hard I try not to let the flags flag. I want to get as far as possible with someone before letting anything I’ve heard divert me into a worry path – you can get diverted too early – I try to push that as far down the line as possible until I’ve heard all that they want to say, and sometimes that’s enough to allay the fears.” (BN)

However, many others would question an overly positive predisposition, especially if the applicant’s reports and references lack enthusiasm. This area would be more important if the counter-indications identified by those who discern call by its absence were different from the positive indicators identified by the others, which is not the case.

¹²¹ This comment was noted in group discussions at every assessment conferences.

¹²² They were: not seeming their true self or inconsistency; lacking conviction; insincere motives; narrowness and rigidity; arrogance, and a sense of entitlement.

The final difficulty with call is the difference in perspective between the majority view, and the minority of VAs who are convinced by a strong individual conviction confirmed by unusual signs. In this minority view, individual call is verified by its ability to overcome opposition even from the church to which one is called. One reported feature of this view was an assertive style of questioning from a few VAs to test the applicant's strength of conviction. All of those I interviewed were uneasy about this. One VA who referred to the VA's ability to "see into other people's lives and discern what God is doing" (NO) reflects the same difference from an assessor's perspective. Most VAs would hesitate to define their insight quite so directly in these terms, and at least one would refute it: "I can't hear your inner voice" (TD). These different perspectives are rooted in theological differences: these VAs embrace a Pentecostal pneumatology and, perhaps, a Barthian view of revelation as being epistemologically distinct from natural knowledge. This is evidenced in the language of revelation, in phrases like "the Lord told me". The epistemological implications of these different views will be further examined in the study of Barth and Newman (chapters 6 and 7).

Conclusion

The main findings of this chapter concern attentive listening, the importance of integrity and how it is experienced, and the role of intuition in discernment. An uncertainty about the nature of call, and denominational distinctives in how that is understood, emerged as less significant factors.

The interview data indicates that VAs become convinced that someone is genuinely called by God through their own attentive listening. They articulate their awareness of their empathic attentiveness to the applicants, and communal listening to their colleagues' contributions. They also identify the importance of listening to God, though this is more challenging to define: metaphors like "a sense", "inner weighing", "antennae", "resonance" and "spiritual posture" feature here. A close analysis of their responses suggests that pressure of time and lack of space for worship and reflection mitigates against their sense of God's presence. Finally, it emerges that most are able *a posteriori* to identify their own psychosomatic and affective responses, though only

tacitly aware of them at the time. Attentive listening to oneself plays a complex role in their decision-making, sitting uneasily and sometimes conflicting with the operational requirements for evidenced criteria.

The interviews also reveal that they are listening for two things: passion, and integrity. They are convinced when applicants speak of faith and ministry with a vibrant note of life, not necessarily loud but conveying energy and sincerity. Equally they seek consistency, both within the applicant's personality and across his whole narrative. Assessors must sense that they are encountering the real person and the whole person.

The data analysis suggests strong correlations between what the VAs seek in the applicants and what they reflexively experience in response. The passion they seek in applicants is often indicated by their own psychosomatic reactions: a rising energy, excitement or emotion. A few explicitly describe this theologically, as an indefinable resonance with the spirit of God. Regarding integrity, the VAs are reassured when the wider community, through references and reports, mirror their own communal agreement that they are hearing the same story. There is also a personal dimension, tacitly measured by a level of trust: could they respond openly to this person, including in the intimate place of their own spiritual lives? I suggest that at each level, the VAs' intuitive and explicit experience reflexively mirrors the qualities they seek in the applicants: passion, integrity, relational harmony and connectedness with God. This finding was not apparent prior to the study.

A difficulty for discernment arises over the role and reliability of intuitive or tacit knowledge within assessment systems. Assessors mistrust it because it is subjective, and potentially misleading. They lack a ready vocabulary to define it or a matrix by which it can be measured, and it cannot be referenced in evidence-based reports. Their relationship with it is conflicted: they find its insights compelling, but require them to be validated by other kinds of knowledge which are held to be more reliable. This important insight will be explored in the rest of this study.

Less disturbing difficulties arise with inadequate or conflicting concepts of call. Its definition is vague, and the distinction between a call to ordained or other ministries may be very nuanced. The data suggests that "call" is an undefined category within

which many indeterminable uncertainties may be located. A more robust theology of call would be helpful in discernment.

Given their ecclesiological differences noted above, my research revealed a perhaps surprising degree of unanimity in responses from the VAs interviewed. *Mutatis mutandis*, denominational variation in their responses was insignificant. The core task of discernment, what is being heard and weighed and the inner movements associated with that, is relatively consistent across denominational boundaries

Chapter 3. Individual Discernment: Listening to Ignatian Spirituality

Probably no individual has more greatly influenced the spiritual question of discernment and decision-making than the founder of the Society of Jesus (SJ), Ignatius of Loyola. His *Spiritual Exercises* are widely practiced today across Christian traditions, and sometimes by people of other faiths or none.¹²³ Though useful for any kind of discernment, they were originally devised for applicants desiring to join the early Jesuit movement, as a means of testing their vocation. It is therefore particularly apposite to include them in this study.

The *Spiritual Exercises* arose directly from Ignatius' own experience during his conversion and subsequent spiritual growth, which has been exhaustively documented.¹²⁴ During his lengthy convalescence from a war wound, Ignatius had leisure to note that certain kinds of daydreams – for example, about heroic knightly deeds in pursuit of a maiden – brought exhilaration at the time, but afterwards left him restless and dissatisfied. Other imaginary scenarios, focused on Christ or on selfless acts of service, carried similar excitement while engrossed with them but, by contrast, left an afterglow of peaceful fulfillment. This deceptively simple insight, augmented by his later theological studies and spiritual experiences, led Ignatius to produce the *Spiritual Exercises*: a guide to the movements of the inner life and their connection to God through Jesus Christ. Spiritual exercises were an established concept in the late Middle Ages, and Ignatius drew on this tradition.¹²⁵ However, he made striking modifications to the established norms. His requirement for engagement with a Spiritual Director enhanced the *Exercises*' communal dimension, and ensured both ecclesial control and theological orthodoxy. Paradoxically, due to this restriction he became free to offer the *Exercises* widely beyond the cloisters; and customized them to an unprecedented degree so that hours and texts, for example, were determined for

¹²³ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*.

¹²⁴ For example, W. W. (William W.) Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola : The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: New Haven : Yale University Press, 1992), 3–276.

¹²⁵ Moshe Sluhovsky, “St. Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises and Their Contribution to Modern Introspective Subjectivity.” *Catholic Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (October 2013): 653–55.

each individual by his Spiritual Director. Despite many anachronisms to modern ears, the *Exercises* remain striking in their psychological acuity and spiritual wisdom. The attunement to God and discernment of God's leading fostered by the *Exercises* for individuals is foundational for the discernment by communities discussed in the next chapter.

This chapter will use the *Exercises* to explore how people hear God speak to them individually for discernment in decision-making, according to Ignatius. As prolegomena, some distinctive features of the text and its author should be noted. Ignatius is not a systematic theologian, and *prima facie* he may not be considered a theologian at all. He wrote nothing apart from the *Exercises*, his autobiography, a diary, the Jesuit *Constitutions*, and many letters.¹²⁶ All are brief, and it is possible to read everything Ignatius ever wrote in a relatively short time. The *Spiritual Exercises* have a distinctive character. They are not a theological treatise or any kind of didactic narrative, but a practical manual for Jesuits giving the *Exercises* to exercitants who seek to deepen their Christian formation and to discern God's will. In terms of literary genre they are less like a novel, with all the information narrated, and more like a play, giving terse and elliptical instructions intended to be fleshed out by active participants. As they were intended for internal Jesuit use, even key terms are not explained and uninitiated enquirers often run aground in the misguided attempt to read them for themselves.

These characteristics have important implications for scholars of Ignatius. The genre of the *Exercises* is an open invitation for theologians and others to interpret the text freely, and most Jesuit scholars do so with varying degrees of creative insight but a notable general consistency.¹²⁷ This creative flexibility partly accounts for the *Exercises*' remarkable transferability across historical, ecclesial and cultural contexts, including our own.¹²⁸ They particularly lend themselves to fruitful reading through the

¹²⁶ All are contained in Ignatius, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, Penguin Classics (London: London: Penguin, 1996).

¹²⁷ Good modern introductions include Michael J Ivens SJ, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: Text and Commentary* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1998); John E. (ed) Dister, *A New Introduction to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993).

¹²⁸ David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*, [Rev. & updated ed.], Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series (London: London: Darton, Longman

lens of modern psychology.¹²⁹ However, great care is required to distinguish Ignatius' actual content from the readings of his commentators.¹³⁰ Jesuits may occasionally find Ignatius seminal for their own legitimate adaptation of his thinking, but in the process may – perhaps unwittingly – misrepresent him.¹³¹ Here, the work of Jules Toner SJ merits particular comment. Aware of this potentially confusing conflation between Ignatius and his commentators, Toner undertook the task of producing a detailed exposition of exactly what Ignatius wrote. Where the text of the *Exercises* is inherently unclear he uses only Ignatius' other writings to explicate it, and he allows conflicting possible readings to co-exist rather than imposing clarity where none reliably exists. No expositor can be completely objective, but where Toner comments with his own voice he aims to do so explicitly. The resulting pair of volumes, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision-Making*, and *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits*, together constitute an exhaustive study and demonstrate an impressive consistency in Ignatius' underlying theology.¹³² Toner's work is still accorded magisterial status among commentators today.¹³³

Ignatius therefore operates from a demonstrably coherent theological framework, which will become evident in this discussion of his work. He could be described as a thoroughly practical theologian, in that his espoused theology is not immediately accessible but is embedded in material written for practical purposes. It must be deduced and extracted from his operant theology.

and Todd, 2000); James Martin S.J., *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperOne, 2010) are useful modern introductions to Ignatian spirituality for non-specialist readers.

¹²⁹ For example, Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint*; Michael J. O'Sullivan SJ, "Trust Your Feelings, but Use Your Head: Discernment and the Psychology of Decision Making," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 22, no. 4 (1990).

¹³⁰ For the limits of authentic Ignatian interpretation, see Philip Endean, "How Far Can You Go?" *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, 1998, 87–99.

¹³¹ One example is Karl Rahner, whose reading of the three times for election, for example, is significantly at variance with Ignatius' theory and practice. Rahner's own theological genius is beyond doubt, but he is at times an unreliable exponent of Ignatius. See Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Karl Rahner SJ, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1964), 95.

¹³² Jules J. Toner SJ, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision-Making* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991); Jules J. Toner SJ, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982).

¹³³ For example, in James L. Connor SJ, *The Dynamism of Desire: Bernard J.F. Lonergan S.J. on the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 330; Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, 178–80.

The Discerning Life: The Basis of Ignatian Spirituality

The *Spiritual Exercises*

The fuller, original title of the *Spiritual Exercises* was: *Spiritual Exercises to Overcome Oneself, and to Order One's Life Without Reaching a Decision Through Some Disordered Affection*. In the Introduction Ignatius establishes their goal: "Seeking and finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul."¹³⁴ The aim is repeated in the "First Principle and Foundation"¹³⁵ and in every single prayer session (usually five times daily) in the unchanging Preparatory Prayer: "To ask God our Lord for the grace that all my intentions, actions and operations may be ordered purely to the service and praise of the Divine Majesty".¹³⁶ This constantly repeated orientation of the exercitant is profoundly significant: it is the compass, relentlessly pointing north, orienting the soul to its goal. Ignatius never assumes this or trusts that we will remember it; for inconstant and sinful humans, it must be ingrained in the rhythm of prayer. The *telos* of the greater glory of God is always reiterated whenever decisions are taken about the best course of action.¹³⁷ The *Spiritual Exercises* function like physical exercises, Ignatius says: they keep us fit and strong to live well, "to prepare and dispose the soul to rid itself of all disordered affections."¹³⁸ The *Exercises* are not an end in themselves, but the means to the end of our salvation and a life given fully to love, service and praise of God. It is vital for this present study of one aspect of Ignatian spirituality to recall that its aim is not right discernment, vocational or otherwise. The aim is total personal transformation: to form, more than to inform. Those being formed daily in the likeness of Christ will be informed by the mind of Christ in specific instances.

The *Exercises* are designed to be undertaken in a 30-day retreat and are structured in four stages, or weeks. The first week is a series of meditations on sin on earth below and on hell, looked down upon by God above as the good Creator. From the outset, the fundamental dialectic of Ignatius' thought is established, and the topography of his

¹³⁴ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 28.

¹³⁵ Ganss SJ, 32.

¹³⁶ Ganss SJ, 40.

¹³⁷ For example, Ganss SJ, 30.

¹³⁸ Ganss SJ, 21.

theological universe. These exercises bring the exercitant to realise his personal sin and that of the world, and to decisively renounce it. Here Ignatius also introduces the basic rules for discernment of spirits, discussed below. This phase culminates in the first exercise of the second week, the Call of the King, inviting the subject to submit to Christ and to labour with him for God's glory. This existential turning (or conversion) to become oriented towards God is axiomatic for all that follows: it grounds the assumption that the exercitant will seek, or wish to seek, God's Kingdom and God's glory in all of life. The next three weeks follow the pattern of praying through the life of Christ, based on Gospel passages. Immediately in week two, the incarnation and the nativity recollect Christ's coming to the world as the mediator in whom God and humanity come together – the middle ground between God above and earth below. He is the focal point in whom both God and all earthly things are illuminated. Again, Ignatius directs the exercitant to meditate on two standards – Christ's and the Devil's – and to affirm the foundational choice of which he will follow. There are meditations on being humble, in imitation of Christ's essential humility of birth and life. Ignatius also introduces the principles for practical discernment in life choices – first, second or third time “elections” – and further, more complex rules for discerning spirits. In the third week, the exercitant prays through the main events of Christ's life until the Passion, and in the fourth, prays with Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. By this stage, the prayer patterns have been reiterated in the text to the point of tedium. The aim is not to follow them by rote repetition but that they should become second nature, forming a habitual mode of prayer: “For the purpose of these meditations is to furnish an introduction and a method for meditating and contemplating, that one may do this better and more completely later on.”¹³⁹

The *Exercises* culminate in the “Contemplation to Attain Love”, a total self-giving to God as a responsive reflection of God's self-giving. The goal of the *Exercises* is perfectly summarized in the famous final prayer, known as *Suscipe Domine*:

“Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will, all that I have and possess. You have given all to me; to You, O Lord, I return it. All is yours; dispose of it wholly according to Your will. Give me only your love and your grace, for that is sufficient for me.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Ganss SJ, 71.

¹⁴⁰ Ganss SJ, 186.

This prayer captures the dialectically circular dynamic movement which, for Ignatius, is paradigmatic for all of our relationship with God because it follows the pattern of Christ's incarnation and ascension. All that we are and have descends from on high as God's self-gift; it is offered up in return as our response of total self-giving love for God, and returned again to us.

Ignatian Prayer

Two forms of prayer undergird all of the Ignatian *Exercises*: the *Examen*,¹⁴¹ and imaginative contemplation.¹⁴² In the *Examen*, the exercitant prayerfully recollects her own experiences and feelings over a recent period of time, asking for the Holy Spirit's illumination on where God has been present or absent in them – what, in daily life, has drawn her towards or away from God.¹⁴³ Practiced as a regular daily habit, this prayer builds an increasingly intuitive recognition of affective movements that are taken to reliably indicate God's spirit. Ignatius regarded the *Examen* as the core spiritual exercise which cannot be omitted.

In imaginative contemplation, the subject considers a Gospel narrative in detail. Then, using the praying imagination, she inhabits the narrative as one of the characters and allows it to unfold. The exercise usually culminates with the subject imaginatively engaging one-to-one with Christ in conversation, activity or silence. In further prayer sessions the same contemplation is often revisited - but not in straightforward repetition. Rather, points of particular consolation or desolation or other insight are experienced again until their significance, whether affective or cognitive, has been fully explored.¹⁴⁴ Ignatius directs that every prayer time then conclude with two prayers: a conversational prayer in which the exercitant speaks her thoughts to God or Christ; then a formal prayer such as the Our Father. Personal colloquy and liturgical orthodoxy are preserved together.

¹⁴¹ Ganss SJ, 33.

¹⁴² Ganss SJ, 58–59.

¹⁴³ This form of prayer is not unique to Ignatius and different versions are practiced in many spiritual traditions. Ignatius' distinctive insight lies in its function as part of the whole system. Regular practitioners normally pray the *Examen* daily, though on a 30-day retreat it may be much more frequent.

¹⁴⁴ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 59.

The aim is to more deeply encounter the person of Christ as a living reality, so that conformity to Christ increasingly becomes the intuitive paradigm for evaluating other experiences. Simply put, the *Examen* asks, “Where is God in my story?” and imaginative contemplation asks, “Where am I in God’s story?” As tools of formation, these gradually synchronise to enhance awareness of God’s presence in everyday life – finding God in all things; and awareness of all things as situated eschatologically within the context of God’s cosmic purposes. When decisions arise of any kind, the person praying is already sensitized to which available option draws him more towards God. This basic attunement is fundamental to all Ignatian discernment: “Resonance means little if the tuning fork is bent.”¹⁴⁵

A third kind of prayer, the Application of the Senses, is mentioned only once in the *Exercises*, but merits discussion here as it is often understood to be a “higher”, more mystical type of prayer involving the development of “spiritual senses”.¹⁴⁶ In this prayer Ignatius rather enigmatically instructs the exercitant to bring the “imaginative senses” of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch to bear on the subject of contemplation – it is more directly affective than other prayers. Joseph Marechal gives the classical modern interpretation of the text.¹⁴⁷ The prevailing view has been that meditation (discursive prayer which includes the understanding and will, i.e. both prayers described above) is superior to the Application of the Senses, which is a more intuitive form of prayer for the less educated. As light relief when energy is low, it is positioned at the end of the day. However, this dominant view has consistently been challenged by a minority who assert the opposite: that the Application of the Senses moves towards a “higher” form of prayer, “more fully enlightened regarding the same material, through a certain kind of intuition of it, as though it were actually present.”¹⁴⁸ They regard it as more difficult and perfect than meditation, positioned at the day’s end because it is climactic and requires the preceding exercises as preparation.

¹⁴⁵ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 154.

¹⁴⁶ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 60.

¹⁴⁷ Summarised in Philip Endean, “The Ignatian Prayer of the Senses,” *The Heythrop Journal* 31, no. 4 (October 1990): 393, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.1990.tb00145.x>.

¹⁴⁸ Endean, 395.

It is important to define what Ignatius means by the “imaginative” or “spiritual” senses. Marechal draws on Origen to do so, calling them the metaphorical senses: “a way in which the discursive understanding operates under conditions which draw it close to the intuitive style of sense-awareness.”¹⁴⁹ In “The Ignatian Prayer of the Senses” Philip Endean describes this as an “affective state” which plays a linking role between the senses and the understanding.¹⁵⁰ For Endean, the Application of the Senses evokes a reality in the life of prayer which the conventional manualist distinctions lead us to overlook.

Endean does not critique Marechal’s analysis so much as its theoretical basis in the neo-Scholastic dualisms of meditation and contemplation, asceticism and mysticism, body and spirit. Endean believes these dualisms to be untenable for a Christian worldview: we need a new incarnational paradigm where the spiritual and the material, God and Nature, continually inter-penetrate and cohabit. Not only does he consider this more satisfactory theologically, it is also a more accurate exegesis of Ignatius’ text for this prayer. Ignatius’ apparently mystical references to “smelling and tasting the divinity” focus, in fact, on meditations on the flesh and blood people in the Gospel narrative, as they interact with the Holy Spirit. It is superfluous to invoke an extraordinary or super-sensory grace to do this. Moreover, in close textual exposition Endean evidences that Ignatius does not use “contemplation” and “meditation” hierarchically to describe higher and lower forms of prayer. Rather, they differentiate prayer based on a Gospel narrative (contemplation) from prayer on non-canonical material (meditation).¹⁵¹ Both are incarnational, as both focus on an object. Ignatius also distinguishes between contemplation, meditation, repetition, and Application of the Senses – but he does not clearly define the difference. This lack of clarity may be frustratingly inconclusive, but etymological precision should not be imposed where none exists. The balance of evidence indicates that these are four different versions of essentially the same kind of prayer. Finally, Endean highlights what others have consistently missed: the significance in the Prayer of the Senses of continually “reflecting, in order to draw profit.”¹⁵² He argues that this is essentially the articulation

¹⁴⁹ Endean, 396.

¹⁵⁰ Endean, 397.

¹⁵¹ Endean, 401.

¹⁵² Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 60.

of deeper and deeper desires, to be used as raw data for discernment and decision-making.

For our current purposes, it is sufficient to note that conflating traditional theological understandings of the “spiritual senses” with Ignatius’ Prayer of the Senses is likely to be misleading. Ignatius’ prayer is more accurately understood as a straightforward imaginative application of the five physical senses, and he teaches nothing about any “higher” supersensory capacity in prayer. Certainly, his autobiography relates his own rare and extraordinary experiences of illumination in prayer, including occasional visual sensations.¹⁵³ However, the one he regards as the pinnacle of his devotional experiences had holistic significance. As he says (through his scribe):

“And as he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened: not that he saw some vision, but understanding and knowing many things, spiritual things just as much as matters of faith and learning, and this with an enlightenment so strong that all things seemed new to him.... He received great clarity in his understanding, such that in the whole course of his life... he has never attained so much as on that single occasion. And this left him with the understanding enlightened in so great a way that it seemed to him as if he were a different person, and he had another mind, different from that which he had before.”¹⁵⁴

This incorporates cognition as a whole – both faith and understanding - not any spirituality divorced from ordinary sensory experience. The Application of the Senses prayer does not invoke a new or elevated mystical sense-faculty, but like the other two forms of prayer, fosters an incarnational sensitivity to God in all things. Speaking of spiritually mature people, Endean concludes:

“... their sensibility has been schooled in the Gospel – and hence, quite spontaneously, they see in ordinary everyday occurrences the power and wisdom of God.... The spiritual senses are possessed by those who are able to find God in all things. In this light, the Ignatian prayer of the senses is

¹⁵³ Autobiography n31, in Ganss SJ, 27.

¹⁵⁴ Autobiography n30, in Ignatius, *Personal Writings : Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, 27. Ignatius’ Autobiography is written in the third person, having been transcribed from his own spoken narrative by his colleague Goncalves da Camara.

not, itself, directly an application of the spiritual senses, but rather a pedagogy for acquiring them.”¹⁵⁵

Sentir: a sense of God

The spiritual sensitivity fostered by these prayer practices is described by Ignatius as *sentir* – the resonance of one’s own inner spirit in attunement with the movement of God’s Spirit. In the second of the 370 exercises, Ignatius says in Spanish: “*No el mucho saber harta y satisface al anima, mas el sentir y gustar de las cosas internamente.*” Ganss translates this as: “What fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing (*saber*) much, but in our understanding (*sentir*) the realities profoundly and in savouring them interiorly.”¹⁵⁶ Alternatively, the key phrase is often rendered: “an intimate understanding (*sentir*) and relish of the truth”.¹⁵⁷ Occasionally Ignatius seems to associate it with a particular sense-faculty.¹⁵⁸ However, with characteristic semantic imprecision he uses it flexibly in different modes, making it difficult to specifically define – for example, one can *sentir* the will of God.¹⁵⁹ John Futrell SJ explains:

“In the process of discernment, *sentir* comes to mean above all a kind of “felt-knowledge”, an affective, intuitive knowledge possessed through the reaction of human feelings to exterior and interior experience. Knowledge for Ignatius was not merely an intellectual grasp of abstract propositions, but a total human experience of understanding with all of its emotional resonance. It is through attention to one’s *sentir*, the vital testimony of profound human feelings during the discernment process, that one discovers from the orientation of his impulses towards decision or action whether or not they lead to authentic response to the word of God. And at the same time, one discovers the origin of these impulses: “discerning the spirits.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Endean, “The Ignatian Prayer of the Senses,” 412.

¹⁵⁶ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 22.

¹⁵⁷ Louis J Puhl SJ, 1962, Quoted in L. Orsy SJ, “Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment,” *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* V, no. 5 (October 1973): 144.

¹⁵⁸ Endean, “The Ignatian Prayer of the Senses,” 411.

¹⁵⁹ Endean, 411.

¹⁶⁰ Futrell SJ, J.C., “Ignatian Discernment,” *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* III, no. 2 (April 1970): 56.

“*Sentir*” is familiarity with one’s own inner voices, feelings and psychosomatic reactions, and a sensitive awareness of where these are inspired and directed by God’s spirit. Again, it is foundational to forming spiritual maturity, and is not just a tool for decision-making.¹⁶¹ However, as Futrell notes above, it is essential to discernment. The spiritual maturity of the practitioners is infinitely more important than the system used. “It is of some importance that discernment be made in a prayerful framework; it is of greater importance that those who discern should be prayerful persons.”¹⁶² Each discerning person must be able to evaluate the material for discussion against his own *sentir* or sense of God: without that, discernment is impossible. Including and exceeding a rational assessment, it is a religious experience of the movement of God within him.

Discernment of Spirits

Reflecting his fundamental dialectic, Ignatius identifies two spirits – the good spirit and the bad spirit.¹⁶³ Discernment, from the Latin *diakrisis* meaning to separate or render discrete, is the ability to identify the source of our own thoughts or impulses; and the discernment of spirits disaggregates the mass of our inner thoughts, feelings and intuitions into those which are simply the self, which are from the spirit of God, and which from the bad spirit. It is important to clarify this definition, as it prevents misapplying Ignatius’ rules to other kinds of spiritual discernment. For example, the New Testament refers to the need to “test the spirits” to identify false prophecy and false teaching.¹⁶⁴ Jesus also speaks of discerning whether other people have good or evil hearts, and of discerning the “signs of the times” or spiritual significance of events.¹⁶⁵ None of these parallels Ignatius’ definition of the discernment of spirits, and to apply his rules to them would be misleading.

For the person whose life is turned towards God, the good spirit “touches the soul gently, lightly and sweetly, like a drop of water going into a sponge”, as this spirit is

¹⁶¹ Orsy SJ, “Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment,” 144.

¹⁶² Orsy SJ, 78.

¹⁶³ Jesuits usually identify the good spirit with the Holy Spirit, who is otherwise rarely mentioned by Ignatius. Ignatius adopted the contemporaneous belief in the existence of a (presumably literal) Devil. Today it is more widespread to use the term bad or evil spirit, both of which he also used. The value of Ignatian insights does not require these to be defined further.

¹⁶⁴ ¹ John 4:1-3, 6

¹⁶⁵ Matt 12:33-35 and Matt 16:2-4 respectively.

consonant with the direction of the person's life.¹⁶⁶ Conversely, to someone who is "going from one mortal sin to another" the good spirit comes painfully, to challenge and confront.¹⁶⁷ The opposite is true of the bad spirit, in both cases. For the person maturing in faith, the good spirit directs the soul towards consolation. Consolation is a God-given grace that intensifies love for God, gives a sense of peace and joy, and increases faith, hope, energy and courage, beginning "when some interior motion is caused within the soul through which it comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord."¹⁶⁸ While consolation is usually traceable to a cause, Ignatius highlights the unusual experience of consolation without the stimulus of an intermediary: an influx of affective joy, wellbeing and sense of God's closeness, with no source other than the grace of God himself.¹⁶⁹

An experience of desolation is the opposite:

"... obtuseness of soul, turmoil within it, an impulsive motions towards low and earthly things, or disquiet from various temptations. They move one towards lack of faith and leave one without hope and without love. One is completely listless, tepid and unhappy, and feels separated from our Creator and Lord."¹⁷⁰

Having established this apparently simple principle, in the second week Ignatius introduces further complexities. Consolation is not always synonymous with good feelings. It is possible that a right decision, made to the glory of God, may be painful, as in Jesus' experience in Gethsemane. The good spirit may be present in this kind of desolation and Ignatius advises how to recognise that, for example by resisting the temptation to reverse a decision made in consolation.¹⁷¹ Ignatius also warns that the bad spirit can be present in consolation, masquerading as an angel of light.¹⁷² Like a weak woman, a false lover or an army general, he seeks to deceive or mislead.¹⁷³ The discernment of spirits in complex circumstances requires nuanced insight from the spiritually mature, and the help of an experienced guide is strongly recommended.

¹⁶⁶ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 127.

¹⁶⁷ Ganss SJ, 121.

¹⁶⁸ Ganss SJ, 122.

¹⁶⁹ Excs n330, Ganss SJ, 126.

¹⁷⁰ Ganss SJ, 317.

¹⁷¹ Ganss SJ, 122.

¹⁷² Ganss SJ, 127.

¹⁷³ Ganss SJ, 124-25.

Much of what Ignatius describes here echoes the work of earlier figures, though perhaps with greater acuity.¹⁷⁴ His unique contribution is in harnessing an awareness of spiritual consolation and desolation to the discernment of God's will. It is important to clearly distinguish the two, as superficial commentators frequently confuse or conflate consolation with an indication of God's will.¹⁷⁵ The relationship requires now to be explored in detail. What ultimately brings consolation resonates with a person's deepest desires, her identity in Christ, and the unique vocation for which she was created.

Seeking God's Will

Defining "God's will"

Ignatius believes it possible to be convinced of God's will in a given situation. This claim seems impossibly presumptuous: as a Jesuit once remarked tartly to me, "I can't see the mind of the divine!"¹⁷⁶ It is vital to grasp Ignatius' definition of "God's will" in decision-making, and exactly what insight is being sought.

According to Ignatius, seeking God's will is unnecessary in areas where an option is deemed morally wrong by Scripture or the magisterium - questioning this would be a matter for ethics, not discernment.¹⁷⁷ Discernment is concerned only with distinguishing, between morally indifferent or good alternatives, which one is more for God's glory than another. Further, Ignatian discernment is practiced in situations where a choice is required between concrete alternatives: to do or not to do something, or to choose one alternative over others. Both theoretically (in the *Exercises*) and in practice (in his diary and the *Constitutions*), Ignatius' given examples are mainly of individual or communal vocational decisions - famously, he records his own 40-day discernment of whether the Jesuits should embrace a vow of absolute

¹⁷⁴ For a discussion of Ignatius' sources, see Hugo Rahner, *Be Prudent Money Changers: Towards the History of Ignatius' Teaching on the Discernment of Spirits*, in F. Wulf SJ, ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: His Personality and Spiritual Heritage* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978).

¹⁷⁵ For example, O'Sullivan, "Trust Your Feelings, but Use Your Head: Discernment and the Psychology of Decision Making," 4.

¹⁷⁶ McChlery, "How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?" 8.

¹⁷⁷ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 75.

poverty.¹⁷⁸ While such a lengthy exercise is not necessarily desirable, the same principles hold for any kind of discernment.

Discerning God's will in this context can therefore be defined as: "... a call that is personally addressed to the individual person in a concrete situation for choice; a call for a personal response of love to be expressed by finding and choosing whatever in this situation is for God's greater glory in all of us."¹⁷⁹ It is individual: what is God leading me to do? No-one can responsibly determine God's will for someone else. It is specific, operating in a particular instance – no one can see the global perspective, though as much relevant data as possible should inform the decision. It is immediate, not predictive: one is not asking for seer-like foresight of future outcomes, only to respond faithfully to this stage in the process. No one can see the whole counsel of God, but one may reliably know what one's own immediate choice must be. Yet it is ultimately communal and even eschatological, aiming towards God's glorious purposes for the Church and for all of humanity.

Grasping this carefully delimited definition of God's will eliminates many potential misunderstandings. For example, someone having wholeheartedly and prayerfully undertaken a thorough discernment process may become convinced of God's will for her to apply for a particular job. If she doesn't get the job, she may doubt that her discernment was accurate. This doubt is unnecessary: it may have been God's will for her to apply, but not (or not yet) to take this path. This applies where any course of action is sincerely discerned and undertaken, but unforeseeable contingent factors make its implementation unsuccessful. Alternatively, a high school student may attempt to discern which of several hypothetical possibilities is God's will for his future vocation – should I be an accountant, a businessman or a teacher? This is too vague and predictive to be a viable subject for Ignatian discernment. Rather, definite options should be in view, one of which requires an immediate and specific decision (should I commit to this training course, or that one?)¹⁸⁰ Finally, in ecclesial or other corporate

¹⁷⁸ Spiritual Diary, in Ignatius, *Personal Writings : Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, 73–109.

¹⁷⁹ Toner, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision-Making*,

30.

¹⁸⁰ Other aspects of Ignatian spirituality, for example discovering one's deepest God-given passions and desires, may very helpfully indicate the shape of one's vocation – but they are not, properly speaking, discernment of God's will. The core vocation may potentially be fulfilled in a

contexts any decision is usually subject to a legitimate authority, which may over-rule it. Again, this need not necessarily invalidate the decision. Ignatius believed that God may legitimately lead people to different conclusions on the same matter – and, of course, one of them may be misled.¹⁸¹ It means that the decision cannot yet be implemented and must await further discernment.

In the context of vocational assessment in churches, this raises the legitimate question of whether anyone can make a discernment for someone else. This does not contradict the Ignatian principles outlined so far. VAs are being asked by their Churches to use their gifts and resources to recommend whether or not applicants should be accepted for training at this time. They are not being asked, strictly speaking, whether it is God's will for this person to be a minister – a non-accepted applicant may be accepted in future, or a recommended applicant may fail in training. The applicants' own belief in God's will for them will certainly influence the VA's decisions, but need not be determinative. The VA's decision to recommend (or not) can be carried out on Ignatian principles: what is God leading me to recommend, at this time? Ignatius also gives an example of requiring discernment for a decision which was personal to him, and deciding to entrust that discernment to someone else, with the commitment to follow whatever outcome was recommended.¹⁸² Again this need not contradict Ignatian principles. The first person (Ignatius) is discerning that another person should make the decision; and the second person is discerning how she is being called to direct the first.

Predispositions for discernment

The everyday process of formation in the likeness of Christ is a necessary context for disposing someone to discern God's will in specific instances. Some characteristic dispositions are essential to Ignatian thought, summarized in everyday terms which have a specific and distinctive Ignatian meaning. The key dispositions are freedom, detachment, indifference, and desire.

number of different contexts. See the excellent analysis in Alphonso, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning through the Spiritual Exercises*.

¹⁸¹ Toner, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision-Making*, 219.

¹⁸² Autobiography n36, in Ignatius, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, 29.

In everyday parlance, when someone is asked if she made a decision freely, it usually means without being coerced in any way by another person (e.g. emotional pressure) or by external circumstances (e.g. financial considerations). The Ignatian use of “freedom” carries the same connotation but applies to pressures brought to bear on a person’s inner motives by his own desires, formed by his personality and life experience. For example, someone may have a disordered attachment to money arising from early deprivation, or a reluctance to acknowledge his gift arising from a negative self-image. These drive or limit his decision-making, usually unconsciously, making it impossible for him (and difficult for his spiritual director) to separate his own desire from God’s call.

The process of increasingly mature self-awareness (through spiritual direction, the *Exercises* and prayer) enables Christians to identify their authentic and deepest desires, which Ignatius believes are embedded by God in each uniquely created personality. The surest indicator of these is discovering what brings true consolation: deep satisfaction, wholeness, purpose and energy, fulfilling him and drawing him closer to God. Following his desires is not simply doing what he wants – his superficial inclinations, demanding instant gratification, may well arise from disordered desires. Right desires which should be followed are anthropologically basic, embedded by the Creator God. The lifelong process of ordering all our desires gradually brings the person to a measure of detachment from the disordered affections that make his decisions unfree. Detachment renders him indifferent to his vocational choice. Indifference does not mean not caring what he does. He may care passionately about the outcome, but he will be able to hold the available options open before God with an equal freedom to carry out any of them, as God directs. Ignatius illustrates indifference as being like a pointer on the balance of scales, weighted towards nothing except what is for God’s greater glory.¹⁸³ In Ignatian terms, a reasonable degree of interior freedom and detachment is an essential prerequisite for the freedom to discern God’s leading.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 77.

¹⁸⁴ An excellent example of perfect detachment and indifference is Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer: “If you are willing, take this cup from me. Yet not my will but yours be done.”

Finally, the discerning person must be committed *a priori* to carrying out the will of God once it is known. God's will is not offered as an option, and volitional resolve is an essential prerequisite.

Occasions for Discernment: Three “Modes.”

Faced with a significant decision, Ignatius describes three possible modes for making it, known as “times of election”.¹⁸⁵

In a first time election, the discerner has an immediate and settled conviction of what decision is consonant with God's leading, without any particular thought or process. “God so moves and draws the will that, without doubting or the power of doubting, the faithful person follows what is shown.”¹⁸⁶ This certitude often carries an accompanying affective sense of consolation, but not necessarily. For Ignatius the profound conviction itself, the knowledge that it resonates with one's deepest desires and God's intentions, is intrinsically a grace from God and not reproducible by human effort. This is not to render the discernment unquestionable: it may be prudent for the discerner or others to consider the wisdom of the decision and its consequences. However, in a first time election no amount of probing will weaken the indubitable belief that this is God's will. Some Jesuits helpfully distinguish between a dramatically immediate revelation from God, which is unassailable, and the kind of conviction described here. The former would not, properly speaking, constitute an election at all, but this is usually believed to be rare.¹⁸⁷ In the latter case, opinion varies as to the frequency of such experiences. Most scholars believe a first time election to be unusual, and Ignatius' own experiences would bear that out. Karl Rahner identifies the first time election as a common human experience, but this view has won limited acceptance.¹⁸⁸

In the absence of a first time conviction, Ignatius directs moving to a second time election which rests on different God-given insights. Here, the discerner notes and weighs the inner experiences of consolation and desolation accompanying each

¹⁸⁵ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 76–79.

¹⁸⁶ Ganss SJ, 76.

¹⁸⁷ Toner, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision-Making*, 122.

¹⁸⁸ “The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola”, in Rahner SJ, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* See also; Edean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, 12–32.

option. Which, according to her prayer-formed *sentir* or sense of God's presence, seems to draw her closer to God and to better conform to Christ's example, for God's greater glory? This kind of election may require skill in the complex discernment of spirits discussed above. The subject's adequate level of freedom, indifference, and awareness of her own disordered desires are vital to good discernment, and for major decisions in this mode experienced accompaniment is helpful. Ignatius seems to regard the second time election as a common experience, and many examples are found in his own narratives.

Ignatius directs a third time election when the discerner must make a decision within a specified time frame, but experiences no particular affective or volitional responses in prayer. For this, he gives instructions in the *Exercises* on making lists of reasons for and against. He also directs that discerners reflect on questions designed to enhance their objectivity and provide some critical distance. What would they advise someone else in this situation? On their deathbed, and then before God's judgment, what will they wish they had done?¹⁸⁹ In this way, the discerner may reach an intellectual evaluation of the better option for God's greater glory. Although this does not depend on the grace of the inner movements of God's spirit, Ignatius regards it as an equally valid way of making a right discernment. He implies that the cognitive functions are themselves a gift from God and to be used accordingly. "I should beg God our Lord to be pleased to move my will and to put into my mind what I ought to do.... by reasoning well and faithfully with my intellect."¹⁹⁰

For this research, two main questions arise from this analysis of the three modes. The first is whether or how they inter-relate in practice. Does a decision made in one mode rest on, or require validation by, evidence from another mode for the same decision? Ignatius does not mention this in the *Exercises*. He implies that they should be approached in this order according to the grace given, but that each is discrete and leads to an equally valid conclusion. Yet his other writings show that, in practice, he often used the second two modes for the same decision. A genuine first time election requires no validation, and in fact it may indicate a lack of faith to submit it to external criteria. However in major decisions (for example, his extended discernment on Jesuit

¹⁸⁹ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 79.

¹⁹⁰ Ganss SJ, 77.

poverty), Ignatius demonstrably utilised both second and third time modes. The crucial observation is that each should follow its own ordered way of proceeding and they should not be confused or conflated, as each relies on different data and methodology to support a conclusion. Where he uses both, Ignatius sometimes castigates himself for over-scrupulousness in taking too much time and seeking too much confirmation.¹⁹¹ A reliable discernment can usually be made in any one mode alone, though they may inform each other. Ignatius does not discuss the possibility that the two modes may yield different results.

This leads to the second question of how the three modes of election inter-relate in theory. Are they hierarchical in importance, with the first indicating greater spiritual acumen and the third reserved for the more spiritually obtuse? The tacit assumption that the first two modes are superior to the third is a commonplace in Ignatian scholarship.¹⁹² The third mode is often assumed to be a last resort for dull days, where time is pressing, or when discernments reached in the second mode require to be validated. However, there is no hint of this in the *Exercises*. Ignatius' order of proceeding seems to follow simple logic. Where an overwhelming conviction is present in a spiritually mature person, one affirms it; where movements of the spirit are notably present, they form data for discernment; otherwise, grace-infused reason is a permanent gift. The extensive instructions (much longer than for the others) given for a third mode election in the short text of the *Exercises* negates any suggestion that Ignatius considered it unimportant. Moreover, a detailed study of his own discernment practice indicates that he used the third mode most frequently, including where an election has been made in the second mode.¹⁹³ This is consonant with his logical procedures and practical turn of mind, and his slogan "Contemplation in Action."

¹⁹¹ Spiritual Diary, in Ignatius, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, 98.

¹⁹² "The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola", in Rahner SJ, *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, 167; See also Toner, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision-Making*, 255.

¹⁹³ Toner, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision-Making*, 257-65.

Finding God's Will

Seeking Confirmation

It is a feature of Ignatian humility, and of the communal context in which he regarded all decision-making, that an election made in any of the three modes is incomplete until it has been confirmed by God including, where relevant, ratification by any legitimate authority. There should be no premature assumption of having discerned God's will, and an impatient desire to move from decision to action should be resisted. Confirmation is not a formality, but a requisite component of sound discernment in important decisions.

After reaching a decision, "the person who has made it should with great diligence go to prayer before God our Lord and offer him the said election so that, if it be for his greater service and praise, he may be pleased to accept and confirm it."¹⁹⁴ Ignatius says no more than this in the *Exercises*, but his practice offers a lengthy example.¹⁹⁵ He regards the election made in any of the three modes as initially tentative, and confirmation as necessary to finalise the decision for choice. In the forty days taken to discern whether or not the Jesuits should embrace perfect poverty, Ignatius' tentative decision was clear after eight days and the rest of the time was spent seeking confirmation. During this time, several mystical experiences assured him of his reconciliation with God but seemed to him to be unrelated to the election, and failed to resolve his unease about it. Eventually he recognised that the protracted tension was itself a misguided over-scrupulousness, and a source of desolation inspired by the bad spirit.

Ignatius' experience indicates that seeking confirmation is necessary in all modes, particularly the second and third. Some Jesuit commentators believe that confirmation is only to be sought for a third time election, but this is a misreading of the (admittedly ambiguous) text, and ignores Ignatius' practice.¹⁹⁶ The primary

¹⁹⁴ Excs n183, Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 78.

¹⁹⁵ Spiritual Diary, in Ignatius, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, 73–99.

¹⁹⁶ In the text of the *Exercises*, the three modes of election are given in sequence, then the need for confirmation is discussed. The need for confirmation therefore follows immediately after the third mode of election. This is a feature of the text and should not be taken as limiting the

confirmations sought are either spiritual consolation and peace, or new “understandings” (*intelligencias*).¹⁹⁷ Either of these may come directly from God, or be mediated through the opinions of trusted others. Where no particular confirmation or disconfirmation is given, the decision should be adopted after reasonable time, without either undue indecisiveness or impetuosity. Should subsequent contingencies render it impossible to execute, that does not disconfirm the discernment, as discussed above. Discernment is not predictive.

Reasonable Certainty

All of Ignatius’ writings and practices attest his conviction that we can reliably find God’s will, as delimited above. Whether he envisaged a certain or only a probable mode of assent is never discussed thematically, leading Ignatian scholars to offer their own views. Some assert that the process of discernment and its effect on the discerners is at least as important as the decision reached, particularly for communal discernment (chapter 4). While this may occasionally be true, it evades the question: Ignatius believes that God has a will to be discerned. Toner considers what kind of data is analysed in each kind of discernment and evaluates what level of assent it can justifiably bear.¹⁹⁸ None of them is infallible – the sincere discerners may be misinformed or ill-advised, misread his personal experience, use defective reasoning or inadequate data. Even consolation without previous cause, which Ignatius held to be indisputably from God, does not yield absolute certainty in discerning God’s will – it is data for discernment, not evidence of the decision itself. All of this adduces a highly probable discernment at best.

Yet Ignatius speaks with a degree of certitude that transcends doubt and any fear of error. He consistently conveys a sense of “certainty” and “security”.¹⁹⁹ It becomes clear, in both the *Constitutions* and the *Deliberatio*, that the source of the Jesuits’ certainty is not their data or even their sound process, vital though these are. The *Constitutions* contain multiple references to the Holy Spirit leading them to know God’s will,

need for confirmation to the third mode. Toner, *Discerning God’s Will: Ignatius of Loyola’s Teaching on Christian Decision-Making*, 202.

¹⁹⁷ Spiritual Diary, in Ignatius, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, 75–76.

¹⁹⁸ Toner, *Discerning God’s Will: Ignatius of Loyola’s Teaching on Christian Decision-Making*, 276–81.

¹⁹⁹ Spiritual Diary, in Ignatius, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, 75.

teaching it, inspiring those who seek it, and providing a true conclusion.²⁰⁰ In the *Deliberatio*, ultimately they trust God's grace in leading them:

“In full agreement we settled on this, that we would give ourselves to prayer, Masses and meditations more fervently than usual, and after doing our very best [in discernment], we would for the rest cast all our concerns on the Lord, hoping in him. He is so kind and generous that he never denies his good Spirit to anyone who petitions him in humility and simplicity of heart, rather, he gives to all extravagantly, not holding back from anyone. In no way, then, would he who is kindness itself desert us; rather, he would be with us more generously than we asked or imagined.”²⁰¹

This is vitally important for assurance of God's will. The grounds for genuine certitude are ultimately not any experience of consolation or peace, or any acute intellectual evaluation. Having made every reasonably possible human effort in achieving personal indifference and following sound method, faith ultimately rests on God's gracious gift of the Holy Spirit who alone is infallible. Ignatius' certainty is consonant with his concept of God's nature, providential goodness and power. He holds in fruitful tension God's eschatological purposes and the boundaries of limited human discernment; nature and grace; and the need for trust with the necessity to strive with our utmost effort:

“Natural means should be developed and exercised sincerely for God's service alone; not, however, in such a way that all our trust be set in them, but rather that, with their aid, we may co-operate with divine grace according to the order of providence laid down by God, who for his greater glory wishes us to refer back to him both the natural gifts which he bestows on us as Creator and the supernatural gifts which he grants us as author of grace.”²⁰²

²⁰⁰ George E. Ganss SJ, trans., *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970) sections 583, 161, 414, 700, 624.

²⁰¹ Jules J. Toner SJ, *The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits : A Commentario on the Deliberatio Primorum Patrum*. (St. Louis : American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality, 1974), 185–86, <http://archive.org/details/deliberationthat64tone>.

²⁰² Ganss SJ, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 227.

Ignatian Discernment: “Trust Your Feelings, but Use your Head”²⁰³

The psychologist William James wrote: “Saint Ignatius was a mystic, but his mysticism made him one of the most powerfully practical human engines that ever lived.”²⁰⁴ All that has been said in this chapter illustrates that in both his theology and practice, Ignatius inhabited a permanent tension between the mystical and the practical or (in his terms) above and below, seeking – and often seeming to achieve – a perfect balance.

Many aspects of his practice in discerning God’s leading in decision-making illustrate the dialectic in his thinking. His modifications to the traditional spiritual exercises make them both more communal, requiring a spiritual director to ensure orthodoxy; and more personal, offering an unprecedented degree of individual flexibility. Through obedience to outwardly mechanistic instructions, he sought to establish an inner pattern of prayer that would form the tacit habitus of the subject’s devotional life. The prayer patterns thus established are beautifully balanced: the *Examen* drawing out awareness of God in the person’s life; and imaginative contemplation placing the praying subject in the life of the Gospels. The pattern of concluding prayer includes both personal colloquy and set liturgy, placing the individual in the context of the Church community and tradition.

The balance between the affective or sensory, and the cognitive or intellectual, is similarly seen in practice throughout. The three modes of election offer a directly affective mode, a wholly rational mode, and one combining both. Assumptions by many commentators that Ignatius believes the first two to be spiritually superior to the third are demonstrably erroneous when his own practice is taken into consideration. Similarly, confirmation for tentative decisions may come either as spiritual consolation or as “understandings”, or both. The prayer of the Senses, which again *prima facie*

²⁰³ O’Sullivan, “Trust Your Feelings, but Use Your Head: Discernment and the Psychology of Decision Making.”

²⁰⁴ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience : A Study in Human Nature*, 413.

seems to privilege the mystical over ordinary sensory experience, emerges on closer examination as a synchronic blend of both.

The operant theology underpinning Ignatius' practical advice on discernment is, not surprisingly, coherent with his teaching. Hugo Rahner helpfully suggests that Ignatius' theology can be summarized as a triptych with a dialectical interplay between the three panels.²⁰⁵ (This idea is even more valuable if the panels are envisaged as vertical, running from top to bottom.) Rahner focuses this on a key saying in Ignatius' *Diary*, describing a significant moment of illumination: "It seemed to me as though the inner visitation moved between God's seat above, and the letter."²⁰⁶

The first or top panel represents *de arriba*, from above – a frequent and favourite expression of Ignatius to describe his mystical experiences. This was the lens through which he came to see all things – or more explicitly, the light by which visible created things became transparent to him, and he saw that they veiled the Creator who inhabits them all. This is the theological basis of his motto, "Finding God in all things". The topographical location "above" is vital – God is the fount of grace from whom all blessings are poured. This is the source of the feelings of love which constitute consolation, particularly the immediacy of consolation without cause. It is also volitional in motivating right choice, as Ignatius explains in the *Exercises*:

"That love which moves me and brings me to choose the matter in question should descend from above, from the love of God; in such a way that the person making the election should perceive [*sienta*, or sense] beforehand that the love, whether greater or less, which he has for the matter being chosen is solely for the sake of our Creator and Lord."²⁰⁷

The third or bottom panel which frames the triptych Hugo Rahner calls *la letra*, or "the letter" in Ignatius' quote. Its immediate denotative referent is the written text of the Mass. However, it can be reasonably extended to connote the written word or the visible, external forms of the Church. Positioned "below", it symbolises the natural world, under judgment and crying out to be redeemed. This model stresses the

²⁰⁵ Hugo Rahner, *Ignatius the Theologian* (London: London, 1968), 3-23.

²⁰⁶ *Spiritual Diary*, in Ignatius, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, 94.

²⁰⁷ Excs n184, Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 78.

essential distance between natural things and their Creator, who is to be approached in reverence and fear.

The *mas en medio*, or Mediator, in whom both are contained and merge, is the person of Christ.²⁰⁸ Ignatius' theological vision is entirely Christocentric. In the *Exercises*, having surveyed "above" and "below" in the first week, the remaining three weeks are occupied with detailed contemplation of the One in whom "the 'above' of the Father has become permanently fused into the elements and atoms of the world 'below'".²⁰⁹ Ignatius found that "the very contemplation, not of what was above but of the middle" increases both his intense devotion in closeness to God, and his awe and reverence of the distance between them.²¹⁰ Christ embodies the paradigm of descent from above, union with below, and the return of that which has been redeemed back upwards to the greater glory of God. In him the permanent tension between above and below is resolved.

Hugo Rahner's image of the triptych provides a valuable sketch of Ignatius' global theology, against which his particular theology of discerning vocation assumes its fullest significance. Rahner believes that "the three times of the election can only be understood if it is fitted in to the perspective of above, middle and below."²¹¹ The insight is helpful, provided that the pervading presence of Christ (or the Holy Spirit) in all three is maintained, as Ignatius would stress. The greatest value of the triptych model is that it resolves what would otherwise be an excessively dualistic dialectical pattern of Ignatius' thinking into a model which is not dualistic, but triadic. This threefold movement is, I suggest, the key to Ignatius' achievement of a near-perfect Christocentric balance in his thinking on discernment.

²⁰⁸ Ignatius also sometimes refers to both Mary and the Church in mediating roles (for example, in Ignatius, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, 77. A detailed discussion of his full cosmology is beyond the scope of this study; however, the supreme role of Christ as Mediator is beyond dispute. The others bear their roles only because of their relation to him. .

²⁰⁹ Rahner, *Ignatius the Theologian*, 17.

²¹⁰ "Constitutions", Quoted in Rahner, 11.

²¹¹ Rahner, 29.

Conclusion

In the empirical part of this research, it was noted that VAs identified two main concerns: what is happening in their inner experience, and where that fits in their external systems. Internally, they struggle to identify, articulate and evaluate their somatic and affective movements: “Maybe that’s just me”; “All this spirituality is a bit woolly; we don’t talk about it much.”²¹² Externally, the affective is rarely (if ever) validated in assessment systems which inherently privilege quantifiable, criteria-based epistemic modes which can be concretely articulated.

Both concerns are addressed by an Ignatian approach to individual discernment. Firstly, an Ignatian approach assumes what would nowadays be termed a phenomenological basis: people do have affective inner movements and psychosomatic reactions, whether we care to acknowledge it or not. Ignatius would agree that indiscriminating validation of our affective and volitional impulses is unwise: we are sinful people whose desires are disordered. However, rather than suppressing, mistrusting or ignoring them, Ignatius provides a matrix by which they can be reflected upon and discerned or “rendered discretely” into what is of God and what is not, as reliably as possible. More than that, he outlines a habitus of prayerful formation which increasingly attunes the maturing Christian to the movements of the Holy Spirit, experienced as being consonant with the life of Christ. While this invaluable illuminates the VA’s experience, it carries significant practical challenges. Ignatian discernment requires practice in the Ignatian exercises: it cannot be learned on a weekend course.

Secondly, Ignatius shows how an intuitive sense of God can be responsibly weighed as data for discerning God’s will, being neither determinative *per se* nor dismissed as irrelevant. However, that assumes a process which validates individual intuition as a source of discernment, and recognizes it systemically. The practical challenges for church assessment systems will be further discussed in chapter 9.

²¹² McChlery, “How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?” 4.

How can people hear God speak to them individually for discernment in decision-making, according to Ignatius? Ignatius sets the whole question of discernment of God's will against the wider backdrop of the discerning life – no discernment is possible as an isolated event. He is primarily concerned with forming discerning people, who may then know the mind of Christ for specific instances. For this, through regular prayer and the *Exercises*, he offers not a technique but a habitus – the imitation of Christ. Counterbalancing this, he lays down a rigorous and forensically detailed system with which to map the movements of the inner life, and clear directives for a robust procedure by which a methodical discernment can be executed. Far from being mutually exclusive, the affective and the intellectual, spirituality and practicality, above and below, symbiotically form a third “sense” which Ignatius calls “*sentir*” – the sense or intuition of God. We attune ourselves to God so that the tones of his voice are heard the environment we daily inhabit. Hearing God's voice for a decision or specific vocational call is essentially a matter of tuning the frequency with greater precision. Ignatius is certain that it is possible to know which alternative is for God's greater glory in the specific choice before us.

For major decisions or those taken in community, discussion with others is assumed and these Ignatian insights are transposed to a communal context. This vital element of discernment must now be examined.

Chapter 4. Communal Discernment: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”²¹³

What is Communal Discernment?

In discerning the call of applicants for Christian ministry, Assessors must decide both individually and corporately whether to authenticate someone’s sense of call. The explicit *telos* is to find God’s leading – a different aim from other decision-making which seeks an outcome based on informed human wisdom, democracy, or other corporately held criteria. The result is often a balance of competing interests, not necessarily related to God. This chapter proposes that the Church’s discernment processes should be consonant with its distinctive claim to be God’s people who seek God’s will as a theological and spiritual exercise, and that churches should characteristically be communities within which this is facilitated.²¹⁴ Theoretically, it would be possible for a communal discernment to result in a decision that nobody wants or considers sensible, but which all agree to be God’s calling.²¹⁵ However, explicit communal discernment practices are surprisingly rare in the Christian tradition. This chapter will examine two main exemplars: the Ignatian model, and the Quakers. It will describe each practice, and elicit its distinctive features and underlying theology. Finally, it will identify where comparison is valid with the ecclesial practice at assessment conferences.

As prolegomena, some clarifications are necessary. Communal discernment has been perceptively described as “a process undertaken by a community, as a community, for the purpose of judging what God is calling that community to do.”²¹⁶ This apparently simple definition touches three complex areas. Firstly, is discernment the process, or

²¹³ Acts 15:28

²¹⁴ For example, Johnson, Luke Timothy, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983) Johnson’s bibliography is notably thin, and almost exclusively on Biblical study. There is no reference to other work on communal discernment, indicating the paucity of resources in this field.

²¹⁵ A moving example is seen in the 2010 film “Of Gods and Men”, a true story set in North Africa in 2007. A community of Cistercian monks collectively decides to maintain their vocation despite life-threatening political opposition.

²¹⁶ Jules J. Toner SJ, “A Method for Communal Discernment of God’s Will,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* III, no. 4 (September 1971): 124–25.

the decision arising from it? As previously noted, discernment (from the Latin *diakrisis*) means to divide, or render discrete: making an evaluative judgment that separates one strand from another. However, the term is widely assumed to incorporate the necessary process preceding such decisions. The Jesuits more accurately describe this stage as deliberation²¹⁷, and the Quakers may cover it in a separate meeting (as discussed below). I find it acceptable to use “discernment” for both, so long as the distinction is understood. Secondly, not every discernment for a community is a communal discernment. Leaders, in varying levels of dialogue with their community, make some decisions. While this obviously has its place, communal discernment, strictly defined, requires the equal and active participation of every member in a wholly corporate process. Finally, this definition helpfully avoids the phrase “finding God’s will” in favour of the more concrete “what God is calling the community to do.” As discussed in the previous chapter, God’s will is theologically complex and mysterious, and ultimately beyond human comprehension. Avoiding this term preserves humility, realistically checks what is achievable, and recognises that any insight by fallible humans is itself fallible and subject to further wisdom. To fully ascertain the mind of God is impossible, but direction can be found for the next step.

More widely, this definition requires consideration of which phenomena require communal discernment. Some decisions can be made by sanctified common sense, using our God-given intelligence to good purpose. “No extraordinary illumination should be expected from the Holy Spirit when the ordinary use of human intelligence, assisted by grace, is enough to decide an issue.”²¹⁸ Other situations, however, require specifically spiritual insight unattainable by reason alone. The difference is exemplified in the apostle Peter.²¹⁹ No study of Jesus’ teaching could have revealed to him that he would be the Church’s rock: that required special revelation. However, no such revelation was given for subsequent decisions: presumably, God provided adequate insight by ordinary means. Orsy distinguishes between communicating a revelation and creating a decision: “We need to know whether we’re looking for new light from God to be given to man, or a new decision about something already there, to be

²¹⁷ Care must be taken over Ignatius’ exact vocabulary, and the tendency to anachronistically attribute modern terminology to him should be avoided. Orsy SJ, “Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment,” 140.

²¹⁸ Orsy SJ, 154.

²¹⁹ Orsy SJ, 159.

created by man.”²²⁰ In practice, many decisions taken by churches combine both, and deciding whether to adopt a specifically communal discernment process may itself be a question for discernment where that model differs from everyday practice.

Jesuit Communal Discernment

A Short History

In 1534 Ignatius of Loyola and his six companions took religious vows to form themselves as the Society of Jesus (SJ), a mendicant apostolic order devoted to mission and Christian education.²²¹ The decision followed prolonged wrestling amid conflicting views to make the crucial discernment of whether this was God’s will, detailed in the *Deliberatio primorum Patronum* - the only extant description of original Jesuit communal discernment.²²² The method therefore presumes, without prescribing, the context of a lifelong religious community. Communal discernment was embedded in early Jesuit life but later became episodic: in an active missionary order with small numbers, routine practice was not required. Its revival in the 1970s post-Vatican II, elicited a number of studies.²²³ Its disappointingly limited success was arguably circumstantial, from which valuable lessons emerge about how it can best be applied.²²⁴

My own informal enquiries to current Jesuits about their practice of communal discernment elicited some awkward silences and the sense, articulated or not, that it doesn’t really happen.²²⁵ One elderly lifelong Jesuit mused that he thinks he

²²⁰ Orsy SJ, 154.

²²¹ With nine members, the Order gained Papal commendation in 1540 and the founding document, the Constitutions, was adopted in 1553.

²²² Toner SJ, *The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits*.

²²³ Toner SJ, “A Method for Communal Discernment of God’s Will”; “Ignatian Discernment”; Orsy SJ, “Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment.”

²²⁴ Andrew Hamilton SJ, “Correct Weight for Communal Discernment,” *The Way Supplement* 85 (1996): 17–27; Philip Endean, “The Draughthorse’s Bloodlines,” *The Way Supplement* 85 (1996): 73–83. Hamilton and Endean point out that the model was introduced while the Society was in an uncertain phase of transition, which problematized making evaluations against a norm. Insufficient consideration had been given to how an egalitarian model of communal discernment would operate in the hierarchical structure of the Jesuit movement; and the expectation that it would be universally applicable and effective for every kind of discernment was unrealistic. Both remain convinced that the model *per se*, properly understood and practiced, is sound.

²²⁵ Without conducting formal interviews, I have had separate lengthy conversations with two Jesuits, one ex-Jesuit Novice, and a *La Retraite* sister (an Ignatian-based order for women).

remembers doing that, once.²²⁶ Probed for reasons, a senior Jesuit responded with lucid common sense: today's Jesuits are few in number, mainly elderly, and inhabit very established communities. They pray the daily offices together and know each other inside out.²²⁷ Elaborate formal processes for communal decision-making are redundant, not because the concept has lost value but because the practice has become intuitive.

500 years later, however, Ignatian communal discernment has spread beyond Jesuit communities and today, recognizable adaptations are practiced in at least two other forums: by Ignatian-based orders of women Religious; and by ESDAC.

One example of the former are the Sisters of *La Retraite*, an Ignatian Congregation who share the Jesuit's foundational principles and model their important determinations on Ignatian communal discernment.²²⁸ In their six-yearly General Chapter, they meet to discern and articulate what specific form their foundational charism will take for the next six years. This includes critical and emotive decisions, for example whether to maintain an existing ministry or withdraw from a country. Existing leadership is then dissolved, and new team elected by all the sisters to implement the renewed vision. Over many days, the Sisters adopt a rhythm of individual and corporate prayer and discussion consonant with that outlined below.²²⁹ Ideally, this produces a unanimous conclusion which is different from their prior thoughts, in which any pain is named and shared, and which is communicable to all Sisters as a shared conviction of God's leading. The Sisters also adopt a modified version of this process for significant smaller decisions.

²²⁶ From a conversation with Adam O'Boyd, ex-Jesuit Novice, November 2017. Used with permission.

²²⁷ From a conversation with Piaras Jackson SJ, Director of Manresa Jesuit Centre of Spirituality, Dublin, January 2018. Used with permission.

²²⁸ From an informal interview with Sr Avril O'Regan RLR, January 2018. Used with permission.

²²⁹ The affirmation of the foundational charism, information-gathering, individual prayer, and structure of the discussion are the same. Some vocabulary differs: for example, sisters will be asked "Do you have a leaning?" to describe their felt sense of direction in prayer. Variant prayer practices, like praying with Scripture, may be included. Given the context of a residential Chapter, sisters may also engage in informal conversation – and always intersperse their intense discussions with practical work, a thoroughly Ignatian emphasis. Informal Interview with Sr Avril O'Regan RLR, January 2018. Used with permission.

More formally and more widely, the 1980s saw a movement to make Ignatian principles of communal discernment accessible to both ecclesial and secular groups.²³⁰ Today this has become ESDAC (*Exercices Spirituels de Discernment Apostolique en Commun*), which offers facilitators trained in group discernment to Religious, churches, Christian groups and occasionally others on request.²³¹ ESDAC specifically aims to integrate Ignatian communal discernment, the *Spiritual Exercises*, and a Jesuit theology of vocation into a framework for discernment which alternates personal prayer and communal discussions. A primary tool is developing the group's capacity for spiritual conversation (discussed below). Theologically, they are grounded in the conviction that "the Spirit of God is in everyone", and all can experience the Spirit's activity.²³² However, they hold both a Trinitarian understanding of the Holy Spirit and Ignatius' belief in a bad spirit, hence discernment of spirits is needed. ESDAC's material is a significant effort to express Jesuit spirituality in universally accessible terms, while maintaining a Christian theological basis.

Today, communal discernment is increasingly being prioritised for Jesuits. In 2016, Pope Francis issued an allocution to members of General Congregation 36 re-affirming its importance and charging the Jesuits to wholeheartedly pursue this element of their vocation. Consequently, Arturo Sosa SJ (Superior General) wrote to the Society clarifying "Discernment in Common" and exhorting greater attention to this distinctive gift of Jesuit spirituality in service to the wider Church.²³³ Before further comment, the relationship of these contemporary examples to the core model of Ignatian communal discernment must be examined.

Communal Discernment in Jesuit Practice

Though Ignatius gave no theological grounding for his ideas on communal discernment, these can be deduced from his operant theology. Jesuits acknowledge that the Biblical account in Acts 15 contains the essential elements.²³⁴ Extracting a framework from the *Deliberatio* requires familiarity with the *Spiritual Exercises* and

²³⁰ Known as ISECP (Ignatian Spiritual Exercises for the Corporate Person).

²³¹ A good summary of ESDAC principles, by its practitioners, is George J Schemel SJ and Judith A. Roemer, "Communal Discernment," *Review for Religious* 40, no. 6 (November 1981): 825-36.. Other material including the full manual, "Welcoming and Building Communion Together", is found on the website www.esdac.net.

²³² From the ESDAC manual, p.4, available on the website www.esdac.net.

²³³ Available on the ESDAC website www.esdac.net.

²³⁴ Orsy SJ, "Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment," 145.

Ignatius' other writings. Two Jesuits have offered this, and each identifies a core model (with insignificant variations) which is outlined below.²³⁵ Ignatius neglected to prescribe a process (by contrast with the *Exercises*), suggesting that the model itself is not determinative: different procedures can exemplify the same principles, and as with the *Exercises* Ignatius recommends making context-specific adjustments. Essentially, the *Exercises* for individuals are transposed to a group: "Just as we learn to perceive our interior movements, discernment in common requires that we develop the ability to perceive and interpret spiritual movements of the group which is listening to the Spirit in order to find the will of God."²³⁶ The process comprises a foundational base, procedural steps, and confirmation of the final decision.²³⁷

First, the community requires a permanent shared foundation for their joint existence. Differences will arise in how to achieve their shared vision, but there can be no possibility of dissent on the *unio animarum* (union of souls), the touchstone by which all else is evaluated. For the Jesuits, this is "the scope of our vocation" – the existential statement of Jesuit identity. Without this, Toner asserts, there can be no hope of communal discernment.²³⁸ Discernment begins with reference to this, and it may be revisited throughout. For groups who have no articulated shared vision, even to reach a compromise will require a common understanding of their values and priorities.

Individual ongoing formation is intensified in prayerful preparation for discernment. The prayer of *Examen* (described in chapter 3) is for each Jesuit to attain the proper disposition: the spiritual freedom to seek God's will, indifferent to all else and free from prejudgments of the outcome. Ignatius suggests praying for the opposite of one's natural desire, for the capacity to see opposing viewpoints, or for dissociation from the outcome – all as means of attaining indifference.²³⁹ Furthermore, there must be a sincere volitional commitment to act in obedience to the outcome – God's will is not pursued as an option. The prayer is also to trust others to play their part, as without

²³⁵ Toner SJ, "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will"; John C. Futrell SJ, "Ignatian Discernment," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* II, no. 2 (April 1970): 47–88.

²³⁶ Letter from Arturo Sosa SJ, November 2017. See ESDAC website www.esdac.net

²³⁷ Futrell SJ, "Ignatian Discernment."

²³⁸ Toner SJ, "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will," 130.

²³⁹ Toner SJ, 129.

this “the Holy Spirit cannot reach us through each other.”²⁴⁰ “These attitudes are vital to success: “without them this method cannot help, nor can any other.”²⁴¹ Anyone insufficiently prepared may impede the Holy Spirit’s moving, and should withdraw. The disposition of the discerning persons is more important than methodology.

The first step in discernment is to frame the question to be considered, and to outline concrete alternative outcomes as clearly as possible.²⁴² This is deceptively simple: much effort can be wasted in examining the wrong question, or in framing responses in a yes/no binary. The procedure here is not detailed, but the whole group would participate.

The next stage is information-gathering. Everyone receives the necessary information simultaneously, including consultation with secular experts where appropriate. Only information is shared at this stage. Questions for clarification are welcome, but not either formal or informal discussion. The phenomena under discussion are understood as the word of God manifest in material form, to be drawn into dialogue with the Word of God in Christ, Church and Gospel.²⁴³ This stage requires the grace of *parecer* – forming an opinion based on attentive observation of appearances.²⁴⁴

Individuals then prayerfully consider the information, to discern what has greater weight. By way of *examen*, each Jesuit examines his own sense of the information’s meaning, and checks his interior life to confirm his previously attained indifference and freedom. He is not asking which option is correct, but for the Holy Spirit’s enlightenment on what insight he should contribute to the discussion. Crucially, each must form his own contribution as each may have a unique insight unseen by others, and the Holy Spirit may speak through anyone. The less intellectual brother may be more fully yielded to God. This prayer is *mirar*: reflection beyond superficial appearances to confront the spiritual reality of the situation, and identify the response

²⁴⁰ Toner SJ, 127.

²⁴¹ Toner SJ, 130.

²⁴² The steps are outlined in Futrell SJ, “Ignatian Discernment,” 60–65.

²⁴³ Futrell “Ignatian Discernment,” 48.

²⁴⁴ Futrell SJ, “Ignatian Discernment,” 55 All notes on the Ignatian vocabulary of discernment are from Futrell; their insertion into the discernment process is mine.

most consonant with Christlike obedience. More than a rational exercise, it is an experience of God's Spirit moving in his own.

Then the community meets, with a skilled chairman and a note-taker, in a process designed to facilitate discussion but prohibit debate. The group first considers one possible outcome, and notes the points in its favour. Each participant in turn speaks his contribution to the whole group and is heard in attentive silence.²⁴⁵ Then the process is repeated for the points against. Then follows more individual prayer, as previously. They meet again to consider the second possible outcome, in the same manner, again followed by individual prayer. This cycle continues through all possible responses. Addressing one viewpoint at a time avoids contentious debate and divisive polarization.

By this time each Jesuit should be acquiring *sentir* (as described in chapter 3): emotional resonance, the intuitive knowledge arising from the reaction of feelings to interior and exterior experience. The weight of evidence favouring one outcome may be clear enough for consensus, but usually they will vote. Unanimity is not required and may not even be ideal, as difference allows subsequent discussion and growth. Though not all are equally mature or gifted to make every decision, everyone must accept this as the decision for now. This is *juzgar*: the penultimate determination which awaits confirmation.

Confirmation is sought by monitoring a sense of consolation about the decision – a “communal intuition of ease or dis-ease”, even if the outcome is hard or contrary to personal inclination.²⁴⁶ This is not to be confused with psychological relief at getting the job done. Without consolation, further sharing and discussion are needed. Final confirmation is when the Local Superior affirms the decision, and the community is committed to action. However, events will be continually monitored, as the ultimate teacher is always lived experience. Finally, Jesuits often voice the reassurance that God can use even our sincerely-made mistakes. This echoes Ignatius' belief that certainty is ultimately rooted not in personal conviction or in sound process, but in the character of God.

²⁴⁵ Various instructions are given for how this model can be adapted for larger groups, without violating the principle.

²⁴⁶ From an informal interview with Sr Avril O'Regan RLR, January 2018. Used with permission.

Distinctive Principles

A specifically Ignatian understanding of communal discernment depends on:

“the articulation of a contemplative insight into the working of God’s grace on a community.... knowledge obtained not so much by human effort and creativity as through God’s gracious gift, a knowledge akin to “the intimate understanding and relish of the truth” (*el sentir y gustar de las cosas internamente*) of which St Ignatius speaks in his *Exercises*.... We may even say that community discernment is the discovery of a gift by another gift; the gift of God’s plan for the community through the light of faith infused into the minds of its members.”²⁴⁷

Since this is discovered and appropriated through consolations from God and exceeds the logical outcome of a rational process, it requires contemplative persons, well-versed in sensing God’s presence.²⁴⁸ This privileged intuitive knowledge is informed by rational data-gathering both theological and practical, confirmed in its resonance with communal spiritual wisdom, and ultimately submitted to the external authority of the church – an epistemologically balanced process.

Ignatian discernment is thus characterized by full information, communal discussion but not debate (spiritual conversation), prayer (in varying forms of *Examen*), and monitoring of *sentir* both individual and corporate. Each individual is equally valued, and the aim is a reliable (if not unanimous) shared sense of God’s leading. A mature level of spiritual reflexivity and inner freedom are essential, as are honesty and openness in the community. Conversely, the absence of these factors hinders the process. Sr Avril O’Regan identifies as pitfalls: a lack of individual freedom (“multiplied by 22-25 people”), withholding information; lack of transparency; inadequate prayer; relational difficulties; and the “burden of history” to do something or not.²⁴⁹ This confirms the other studies cited above.

²⁴⁷ Orsy SJ, “Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment,” 144.

²⁴⁸ Orsy SJ, 145.

²⁴⁹ From an informal interview with Sr Avril O’Regan RLR, January 2018. Used with permission.

A vital Ignatian distinctive is the art of spiritual conversation. This is a primary tool in Jesuit discernment of God's call in new applicants to the Society: potential candidates engage in spiritual conversation individually with three appointed Jesuits, each of whom then submits an account of their leadings to the Superior.²⁵⁰ ESADC train groups in its use, and the Superior General regards improving this skill as essential to discernment in common.²⁵¹ Although this term is absent from the process outlined above, the discussion phase is cognate with spiritual conversation.

Spiritual conversation is defined as a conversation in which the participants desire to be open and sensitive to the Holy Spirit.²⁵² Participants listen to each other's insights from prayer or personal reflection in respectful attentiveness, seeking to hear the other's mind rather than to change it. Contributions are offered as simply and clearly as possible, leaving space for a silence in which all are listening for "a spiritual echo.... giving rise to a fresh way of perceiving things."²⁵³ It is more purposeful than ordinary conversation, but less directive than interviews and less individually focused than spiritual direction. One to one spiritual conversation may be quite spontaneous, but more participants require greater structure.²⁵⁴

A final Ignatian distinctive is the degree of confidence with which the outcome is decided. "The systematic practice of the examen.... allows us to pass from *seeking* to *finding* the will of God."²⁵⁵ Jesuits have a quiet assurance that you can be as certain of God's leading as you can reasonably be about anything.²⁵⁶

Questions arising

There are three major theological questions arising: about the word of God in revelation, the persons to and through whom God speaks, and the limits of corporate discernment.

²⁵⁰ From a conversation with Piaras Jackson SJ. Used with permission.

²⁵¹ Letter from Arturo Sosa SJ, November 2017, section 7. See ESDAC website www.esdac.net

²⁵² ESDAC manual p.5, on website www.esdac.net

²⁵³ Letter from Arturo Sosa SJ, November 2017, section 7. See ESDAC website www.esdac.net

²⁵⁴ ESDAC manual p.14, website www.esdac.net

²⁵⁵ Letter from Arturo Sosa SJ, November 2017, section 8 (italics original). See ESDAC website www.esdac.net

²⁵⁶ McChlery, "How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?" 10; Toner, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision-Making* chs 15,16.

Firstly, there is a fundamental question about the nature of God's word and how God communicates with humanity. For Ignatius, God speaks in everyday events, and the word embedded in everyday phenomena is brought into dialogue with the revealed Word in Christ, Scripture and Church – all of which seem to have equal authority.²⁵⁷ Where they are not harmonious, which has priority? For Ignatius, it is the spiritual sense of God's leading (*sentir*) backed ultimately by church authority – again, assuming that they agree.²⁵⁸ Submission to Church authority for major decisions is mandatory for Jesuits, but should they conflict, this does not necessarily indicate that the acquired communal *sentir* is wrong: it may simply mean that action is currently impossible. While Ignatian discernment incorporates consideration of Scripture and tradition, it differs from the Reformed belief in Scripture as having its own authority over ecclesial structures and traditions.

Secondly, there are conflicting views of who can participate in Ignatian discernment. Traditional Jesuit practice, described above, stresses every member's prayerful preparation to attain sufficient indifference as vital to success. Ignatius also assumes (at the start of the *Exercises*, chapter 3) the need for every person to intentionally turn towards God. However, Jesuits acknowledge the problem of including members who do not grasp problems which require a trained intelligence: a graced use of natural gifts which itself is glorifying to God.²⁵⁹ The modern practices of ESDAC notably depart from these foundations in their assumption that anyone can participate – though occasionally, someone may be excluded.²⁶⁰ Here, the generous spirit that motivates marrying Ignatian spirituality to universalism may be stretching the model to breaking point. ESDAC openly identifies the theological shift involved: for example, privileging Spirit (capitalized, but undefined) over Christ.²⁶¹ Piaras Jackson's summary is an apposite rejoinder: "It's like running a race, or playing in an orchestra. If one person has been lax individually, it'll show. If all have been lax, it can't be done."²⁶² In

²⁵⁷ Futrell, "Ignatian Discernment," 49. Note that "word" is not capitalized.

²⁵⁸ This was one reason for the limited success of attempts at communal discernment in the 1970s. See footnote 225.

²⁵⁹ Orsy SJ, "Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment," 172–73.

²⁶⁰ Schemel SJ and Roemer, "Communal Discernment," 5–6.

²⁶¹ ESDAC Handbook, p.4. See ESDAC website, www.esdac.net

²⁶² From a conversation with Piaras Jackson SJ, Jan 2018. Used with permission.

this traditional view, discernment is only possible where at least the majority, if not all of the participants are actively seeking to be attuned to the Holy Spirit in daily life.

Thirdly, the complex link between the discernment of spirits and making an election (above, chapter 3) is magnified when the process is transposed to a group and incorporates the group dynamic. Toner's analysis cautions that consolation may legitimately arise from achieving a harmonious group decision, particularly where previous divisions have been overcome.²⁶³ A frequent (and often valid) outcome of communal discernment is a more deeply bonded community. Thus it would be possible, and even legitimate, to have communal consolation but to know that the decision will have to be revisited.

Both of these points raise the difficulty that the best decision may not result where the majority view prevails. There is an inherent conflict between the belief that all are equally spirit-led, and the fact that not all are equally mature or adept—yet having the expert take the decision would conflict with communal discernment principles, unless the community gave him that role. As well as potentially stifling the voice of experts, majority rule also leaves inadequate space for a prophetic voice speaking from the margins, or a visionary with a genuine special revelation. The Ignatian process is a dynamic dialectical movement between individual particularity and the common mind, and this may be the best hope of resolving these tensions particularly in a close community where individual giftings are known and weighed. However, the resulting decision may not be the best but the best attainable at the time: God's will for now. Ideally all would rise to the level of the most mature; in practice, compromise often prevails. Whether such limited expectations compromise the will of God is an intriguing theological question.

Quaker Communal Discernment

The other major tradition which characteristically practices communal discernment is the Quakers.²⁶⁴ The vastness and diversity of Quakerism makes any short study seem

²⁶³ Toner SJ, "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will," 145.

²⁶⁴ For an introduction to Quakerism by a Quaker, see Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For primary sources, see Thomas D. Hamm (ed), *Quaker Writings: An Anthology* (New York: Penguin, 2010) and *Quaker Faith & Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*

presumptuous. British and American Quakers differ; today's Quakers hold a plurality of theologies and sometimes none; and on both sides of the Atlantic, a growing post-modern individualism brings community, let alone communal discernment, under threat.²⁶⁵ Despite its current challenges, Quaker discernment as traditionally understood and practiced remains a distinctively valuable resource. This research focuses on that process, while aware that current praxis is fluid.

A Short History

If Jesuits have only sporadically practiced communal discernment, the same cannot be said of the Quakers who have done so continually throughout their 350-year history (without using the term). Founded in 1647 by George Fox, Quakerism was based on his four cardinal principles: an "inner light" of divine origin in everyone; universal grace; a universal call to moral perfection; and the continuing progressive revelation of God's will throughout time.²⁶⁶ These arose from his own revelatory experience of God giving him a discerning spirit, defined in Quakerism as the ability to differentiate reliable spiritual leadings from unreliable ones.²⁶⁷ Early in Fox's life,

" the spiritual discerning came into me, by which I did discern my own thoughts, groans and sighs, and what it was that did veil me, and what it was that did open me....I saw plainly that when many people talked of God, the serpent spoke in them."²⁶⁸

Fox believed in original sin, and the need for restoration to prelapsarian perfection. Since God's direct revelation to someone thus restored cannot be wrong, Fox believed his discernment of spiritual movements in himself and others to be infallible: ' I was commanded to turn people to that inward light,

(*Quakers*) in Britain, 5th Revised edition edition (Quaker Books, 2013). For Quaker decision-making, see Jane Mace, *God and Decision-Making: A Quaker Approach* (kindle edition: Quaker Books, 2012) and Michael J. Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Pennsylvania: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1983).

²⁶⁵ For this phenomenon in British Quakerism, see Dr Pink Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: The Silent Revolution* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press Ltd, 1996) p.xviii-xxix; for the USA, Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality Vol II* (Patricia Loring, 2009) pp.130-132.

²⁶⁶ Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, 11.

²⁶⁷ Sheeran SJ, 22.

²⁶⁸ Sheeran SJ, 22-23.

spirit and grace...which I infallibly knew would never deceive any.”²⁶⁹ He rejected any theological doctrine in favour of experiential knowledge (“this I knew experimentally”), believing that the character of someone who experiences inner light matters more than dogma.²⁷⁰ Thus Quakerism’s foundations explicitly reject any creed or text. Since the same Spirit or Inner Light resides in everyone, those who inhabit the touchstone experience of a gathering “in the Life” will be unanimously led to Truth.

Modern Quakerism has evolved into a more diverse, yet structured movement than Fox could have anticipated. Claims of infallibility have collapsed, and the absence of any authority structure or coherent belief system has inevitably been modified. Local, District and Yearly Meetings form a structural hierarchy, and the manual *Quaker Faith and Practice* encapsulates Quaker norms. Though Christian Quakers remain numerous, Quakerism’s anti-doctrinal experientialism and ethical practicality render it accessible to atheists, universalists and many religions. Its diversity makes it intriguing to research, as no single voice speaks for all. Christian Quakers still articulate their praxis in their tradition’s language of union with God, growth in Christlikeness, discerning the Holy Spirit and obeying God’s will.²⁷¹ Universalist Quakers describe corollaries of these in less restrictive spiritual or social scientific terminology, for example decision-making as releasing collective intelligence for the common good; or worship as “an exercise of the spirit, with no particular object in mind”.²⁷² In the absence of theoretical coherence, homogeneity of practice is essential: silent worship, corporate discernment, and ethical commitments. Amid modern Quakerism’s diversity of ideologies and motives, an old Friend notes that people eventually either embrace Quaker worship, or they leave. “After all, we try to base our actions on divine leadings. And that means we’re more interested in finding the divine than in any given cause taken by itself.”²⁷³ The real division today is not the oft-observed (and vastly oversimplified) theological dichotomy between Christian Quakers and their

²⁶⁹ Sheeran SJ, 23.

²⁷⁰ “Journal of George Fox”, Quoted in Hamm, *Quaker Writings: An Anthology*, 11.

²⁷¹ For example, Paul Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted - Quaker Decision-Making Process as a Factor of Spiritual Discernment.” *Quaker Religious Thought* 106, no. 45 (2006): 26-47.

²⁷² Mace, *God and Decision-Making: A Quaker Approach*, 217; See also Leonard Joy, “Collective Intelligence and Quaker Practice,” accessed November 27, 2018, <https://www.collectiveintelligence.org/P-QuakerCI.html>.

²⁷³ Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, 89.

Universalist Friends, but the chasm between those who have a spiritual sense of “covering” in the meetings and those who do not.²⁷⁴ This marks the distinction between decision-making as a human construct, and discernment of God’s leading.

Voteless Decision-making in Quaker Practice

Early Quaker gatherings acquired the features that still distinguish them today.²⁷⁵ Meetings for worship are conducted in an unadorned room, without liturgy, clergy or any formal structure. In attentive silence, each participant searches within for divine revelation, experienced as a sense of Life or leading of the Light. The silence may be interrupted at any time by anyone who senses a leading to bring vocal ministry – words understood to articulate the spirit for the gathering – followed by silence as these are contemplated. Meetings conclude after about an hour by shaking hands. These Meetings seek “covering” or being “in the Life” – a quality of experience in silence which epitomises Quaker worship. The almost sacramental Presence may occur with an extraordinary, existentially life-transforming power, and its participants yearn for it again.²⁷⁶ Words and leadings which emerge from this “covering” and with which everyone can unite are accredited with divine authority.

As the name suggests, Quaker Meetings for Worship for Business are an extension of meetings for worship: the identical discernment of divine Presence and leading is applied to practical matters. The group finds God’s leading by first finding God. The context is the experience of the community “gathered” in worship. There is no sacred/secular dualism; the difference between worship and business is one of degree.

“Every business meeting was concerned with knowing the mind of the Lord, and sought to guide the action by the weight of spiritual judgment, rather than by mechanical counting of heads or the rhetorical and argumentative skill of the speaker.”²⁷⁷

Heterogeneous belief systems necessitate homogenous practice to maintain identity, so procedural conformity is essential. In a discipline that is cultivated rather than

²⁷⁴ Sheeran SJ, 87.

²⁷⁵ Mace, *God and Decision-Making: A Quaker Approach* provides excellent accounts of contemporary Quaker meetings from her ethnographic research.

²⁷⁶ Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, 5 records Quaker testimonies to this experience.

²⁷⁷ W. Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, Quoted in Sheeran SJ, viii.

regulated, a common pattern emerges.²⁷⁸ An open initial discussion allows ambiguities or wild-card opinions to be freely expressed. Having assimilated the necessary practical information and agenda in advance, Friends are expected to come to Meeting with open minds, disposed to seek clear guidance by listening respectfully to others and to silence.²⁷⁹ Meetings open and close by drawing into silence. A clerk, who ensures orderly participation and “reads” the spirit of the meeting to produce an agreed minute, facilitates the meeting but must not dominate. Strong unwritten conventions govern participation. Anyone may offer vocal ministry, and all have equal rank. Speech is concise and emotion is suppressed, so that no-one persuades others by force of rhetoric. There are (usually) effective non-verbal sanctions against speeches made in an un-Quakerly spirit.²⁸⁰ From this initial stage, suggestions may be voiced as “trial balloons” which test the spirit of the meeting and identify its underlying movement. Ideas which resonate with the group proceed to serious discussion, with the tide of consensus building. Finally the clerk captures the spirit of the meeting by proposing an initial minute, written in silence with the Friends’ attentive support, and reads it out. This may be modified several times until, to the Clerk’s question: “Is this minute acceptable?”, Friends unanimously reply, “I hope so”, and it is recorded as the voice of the meeting. A minute thus identifying the Meeting’s spirit is more than compromise or even consensus – it is regarded as Truth. “Neither effectiveness nor efficiency is the goal...the decisions provide a wondrous opportunity for the central work of our lives: seeking the Lord’s leading prayerfully in community.”²⁸¹

Where there is dissent or lack of clarity, the clerk or a Friend recalls Meeting to communal silence as the foundational guiding experience. Nuanced levels of disagreement are registered in time-honored ways. Mild discomfort often goes unvoiced. Stronger dissent can be minuted as “I disagree but do not wish to stand in the way.” Further along the spectrum is “I am unable to unite with the proposal”: this blocks it, and necessitates further discussion or a decision not to decide. A more complex objection is a Friend’s deliberate decision to be absent from a meeting where

²⁷⁸ The procedure is outlined in Sheeran SJ, 63–71.

²⁷⁹ It is an idiosyncrasy of Quaker speech to use some key terms (e.g. Meeting, Way, Friend) without the definite article. This conveys that they are simultaneously noun and verb, entity and dynamic process. I have adopted that usage, and other Quaker vocabulary, in this chapter.

²⁸⁰ Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, 56.

²⁸¹ Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted - Quaker Decision-Making Process as a Factor of Spiritual Discernment,” 6.

she disagrees with the inevitable outcome. Where agreement cannot be reached, there is a moratorium on action. Quakers never vote, and decisions must be unanimous. Where the spiritual sense of being “gathered” is particularly strong, volitional commitment to subsequent action is very compelling. However, every routine decision does not require this level of religious validation. Recourse to silence or religious awareness happens in an intuitive “sliding scale” of the decision’s importance.

Quaker discernment is not confined to Meeting for Worship for Business. The Threshing Meeting offers a less structured environment for detailed discussion of complex, contentious or emotive issues, separating the chaff from the grains of truth before bringing them to Meeting for Worship for Business for formal discernment. Directly relevant to this research is the Clearness Meeting, where a small group of trusted Friends gather to authenticate a personal leading sensed by one Friend, usually in a developed way over some time.²⁸² Traditionally this was for marriage, or to authorise a wider ministry by one Friend travelling to other Meetings. As Quakers rarely have clergy, a leading towards a travelling ministry would be their comparable role. Today, Clearness Meetings may be sought for any significant lifestyle change. Preparation usually includes receiving the Friend’s carefully written testimony of the sensed leading, which other Friends will read attentively several times. Meeting proper begins, as always, with silence. Attention then moves to the focal Friend, who is invited to articulate her testimony. Punctuated by periods of contemplative silence, the companion Friends will probe how the leading has been experienced and developed, the attendant feelings, and practical considerations. Though the focal Friend may ask the others for comments, they hold no authority over him and make no judgment. The purpose is to enable the Friend to clarify how Way is emerging, and to discern whether the leading seems authentic to the group of Friends so that they can “get under the weight of the testimony” i.e. support the decision.

Distinctive Principles

From these descriptions, essential features of Quaker discernment can be identified.²⁸³ The basis is a belief in one divine spirit by which all persons enjoy direct access to “God”, variously understood. Attentive silent waiting on the Light or Truth within them will create unity, and this grounding is the locus of Quaker worship by which all

²⁸² Described in Loring, *Listening Spirituality Vol II*, 97–99.

²⁸³ These are summarised in Joy, “Collective Intelligence and Quaker Practice.”

else is authenticated. All voices are listened to respectfully, since anyone can be spirit-led. However, the focus is not on individual agendas but on the gathering: what is for the common good and maintains relationships of loving unity. Thus, Friends address the Clerk and not each other, refrain from emotive persuasion, check inwardly that a sensed leading towards vocal ministry arises from the spirit and not from a selfish personal agenda, and refrain from repeating what has already been offered. Dissent should be aired, and legitimate individual interests respected. The Clerk's reading of the spirit of the meeting is decisively important, towards a decision not by majority or consensus, but in unity. The clerk's role is vital, and seldom manipulated - Meetings are very sensitive to even subtle abuses, and Friends select their clerks for their integrity and insight. The gift of discerning a meeting is an acknowledged charism of Quaker leadership, and for religious Quakers, divinely authenticated.²⁸⁴

Conversely, Quakers identify "blockages" to good discernment as: fixed and unchangeable minds, use of pressure tactics, unwillingness to follow the Quaker practice of "using as few words as possible and as many as are necessary," and unwillingness to experience the transforming effect of a "covered" meeting.²⁸⁵ Loring deplores modern tendencies to minimize silence, and eloquently describes the inappropriateness of importing secular models, like management techniques or personal support groups, into Meeting.²⁸⁶ An open forum is vulnerable to domination by its most needy but least mature members. Another feature is the length of time taken to make decisions, ruefully attested by much Quaker folklore. This, however, is not an entirely negative feature. Mace suggests the difficult practice of donating "holy time" or "Quaker time" as a useful spiritual discipline in a busy world.²⁸⁷

Questions Arising

Quakers assume that religious knowledge is unambiguously grounded in experience. The religious or mystical sense believed to be inherent in every human simply needs to be accessed and expressed. It finds expression in the fluidity with which Quaker "theology" (a term they mistrust) is articulated. For example, arguing that "it is all too easy to be distracted by words, and the spirit of what Quakers do is eminently

²⁸⁴ The Clerk's role is researched in detail by Mace, *God and Decision-Making: A Quaker Approach* ch.4.

²⁸⁵ Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, x.

²⁸⁶ Loring, *Listening Spirituality Vol II*, p.103.

²⁸⁷ Mace, *God and Decision-Making: A Quaker Approach*, 317.

accessible to all”, Leonard Joy transliterates communal discernment into collective intelligence, inner leadings as speaking one’s own truth, and finding God’s leading as aiming as to serve the common good.²⁸⁸ Quakers in silent worship:

“... aim to centre themselves in that of God within, or in the case of universalist Quakers, in the sense of loving kindness to and identity with all creation; or in the case of Buddhist Quakers, in the compassionate, non-attached no-self.... what they all have in common is that they are putting their egos in place to serve the task, rather than using the task to serve their egos.”²⁸⁹

Pluralism is celebrated and the possibility of competing truth claims barely relevant, since belief is marginalised.²⁹⁰ Although “all must feel that their legitimate interests will be heard and protected”, it is unclear who determines which interests are legitimate, or what standard would adjudicate conflicting beliefs.²⁹¹ Authority is vested in experience, and theological pluralism is masked by the sacralisation of silence and a common behavioural creed. For example, in decision-making, Universalists understand Quaker practice as radical democracy (finding a universally acceptable solution) rather than seeking God. The religious disagree, querying:

“...substitution of equal political power for the Quaker fundamental insight that God can speak in anyone. It’s easy to fall into this trap.... but the person who sees our method as “pure democracy” has missed its root principle. At root we are involved in an exercise of obedience, of denial of self-will, of seeking Truth in contradistinction to our own personal or group interest.”²⁹²

Though Quakers deny the importance of this, a unity which privileges pragmatism over reason or belief is open to critique. Quaker experientialism can be accused of dis-integrating the intellect and spiritual experience in a way that psychology and a more holistic theology would challenge by insisting that faith and reason are co-related. The complex relationships between the cognitive and the affective, reason and faith, are discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

²⁸⁸ Joy, “Collective Intelligence and Quaker Practice,” 2.

²⁸⁹ Joy, 2.

²⁹⁰ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers* ch.7. This major sociological study researches in detail how conflicting belief systems are accommodated in British Quakerism.

²⁹¹ Joy, “Collective Intelligence and Quaker Practice,” 2.

²⁹² Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, 80.

One significant consequence of experientialism is the polysemy of crucial Quaker terms, like “Spirit”. Despite continual references to “gathering the spirit” or being “Spirit-led”, an extensive review of Quaker literature yields no definition of the term, nor is the lack of definition typically noted.²⁹³ It may be the human spirit or God’s spirit or both; it has no negative connotations, and its leadings are never questioned. The Holy Spirit may be specified, then used interchangeably with spirit (capitalized or not, at random).²⁹⁴ Belief is left to the individual. The same ambiguity applies to Word, Truth, and even the central concept of Presence in gatherings. Christian Quakers maintain their traditional understanding of the sacramental Real Presence as Christ himself, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst”²⁹⁵ Other Quakers prefer more metaphysical concepts of Presence. Even more potentially divisive is the phrase “will of God” which implies God as a real entity of a kind compatible with having a will.²⁹⁶ Non-Christian Quakers often quote Fox’s phrase suggesting that God may be “essential goodness”; however, this impersonal concept barely coheres with “will” or “guidance”.²⁹⁷ For Mace, it needs “a more poetic approach.... to accept that this is metaphor at work, and allow it to take up to a deeper layer of understanding.”²⁹⁸ Eccles resolves this by suggesting:

“God is a Spirit, not a Mind, an all-pervasive creative force at work in the universe ... [and] our spiritual awareness means that God, this creative force, “the ground of our being”, acts through us and indeed anything of value that we do is a reflection of this creative force.”²⁹⁹

This is a challenging theological disjunction with Christianity’s Trinitarian understanding of these terms, upheld by Christian Quakers. Does their heterogeneous terminology describe the same phenomenon, or reference a different reality? Finally,

²⁹³ See Bibliography.

²⁹⁴ For example, in Loring, *Listening Spirituality Vol II*.

²⁹⁵ Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted - Quaker Decision-Making Process as a Factor of Spiritual Discernment,” 3, quoting Matt 18:20. In 19th century Quakerism one of only two permissible pictures in Meeting Houses was James Doyle Penrose’s “The Presence in the Midst”, of Christ present amid a group of praying Quakers.

²⁹⁶ Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers* p.xxix.

²⁹⁷ Quoted in Mace, *God and Decision-Making: A Quaker Approach* location 149.

²⁹⁸ Mace, location 217.

²⁹⁹ Peter J. Eccles, *The Presence in the Midst: Swarthmore Lecture 2009* (London: Quaker Books, 2009), 52–53.

ambiguity over “Light” has special epistemological significance – is the Inner Light the light of reason, revelation, both synonymously, or both interchangeably? Rediehs compellingly elucidates the problem, and concludes by describing Quaker epistemology as an expanded experiential empiricism.³⁰⁰ An illuminating non-Quaker insight on the problem comes from Soskice’s work on religious language and metaphor. She distinguishes between a realist (or critical realist) assumption that religious language has a real referent, and the idealist assumption that language depicts human experience or knowledge but has no other referent in reality.³⁰¹ The question of truth in religious language is only a problem for realist accounts of Christianity.³⁰² This distinction illuminates the philosophical assumptions underlying the Quaker’s polysemic use of key terms.

A further adjunct of Quaker experientialism is their optimism about human ontology and its unmediated access to the God within. Following Fox, early Quakers differed from Calvinists in holding that the Inward Light of Christ was universally available, including to non-Christians. Fox took a dualistic view of human nature: it has nothing inherently good, but has the possibility of divine revelation.³⁰³ Modern Quakers rarely refer to “sin”, and its corollaries (disordered desires or selfish agendas) are optimistically assumed to be easily conquerable by adopting Quaker habits. Joy, quoted above, never indicates that overcoming the ego might be at all difficult: even for those “at an early stage of values development”, “hidden agendas become easy to name and call into question” and the ego is free to serve the task.³⁰⁴ Further, although Quaker ideology recognizes forgiveness and peace as necessary for unity, they regard reconciliation as being humanly achievable. Few Quakers would articulate the need for reconciliation with God, or a possible link between the two; their analogue may be a move beyond conflict to connect with silence as the ground of being.

³⁰⁰ Laura Rediehs, “A Distinctive Quaker Theory of Knowledge: An Expanded Experiential Empiricism,” *Quaker Studies (Liverpool University Press / Journals)* 21, no. 1 (June 2016): 67–94, <https://doi.org/10.3828/Quaker.2016.21.1.6>.

³⁰¹ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1985), 97–99.

³⁰² Soskice, 106.

³⁰³ This is the position outlined in the earliest systematic statement of Quaker belief, Robert Barclay’s *Apology* (1676). Barclay is often accused of accommodating early Quaker mysticism to a Protestant theology: in fact, he accurately reflects Fox’s own thought. Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, 35–37.

³⁰⁴ Joy, “Collective Intelligence and Quaker Practice,” 2.

Quaker privileging of “intuitive religious knowledge” over reason or creed has always problematised establishing authoritative criteria for discernment.³⁰⁵ For Fox, revelation arising from unmediated access to God must be self-authenticating, as no human reasoning can verify it. This seriously challenged the early Friends, as self-authenticating revelation played to the fantasies of the eccentric. Fox’s belief that the Holy Spirit was “the touchstone and judge by which.... to try all doctrines, religions and opinions, and to end all controversies” quickly proved naïve.³⁰⁶ His insistence that Scripture must be interpreted by the Holy Spirit’s affective revelations provided an inadequate hermeneutic. One accepted test was the fruit of any decision, and Fox devised his own list similar to the Biblical “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-27). However these were best identified retrospectively, and could be interpreted very subjectively. Unadorned speech was also tried, but this could be counterfeit. Eventually, all personal leadings had to be submitted to Meeting for authentication. Thus, the corporate assumed authority over individuals, and larger meetings over smaller, and institution was required to authenticate Spirit in a reversal which threatened the taproot of the movement. The sense of Meeting still determines authenticity for today’s Quakers, though seriously challenged by post-modern individualism. Religious Quakers include study of Scripture in discernment; for others, *Quaker Faith and Practice* carries more weight. Ultimately, however: “.... authentic discernment of Christ’s leading may finally be measured by the larger community of mature believers. We may rest in that confidence.”³⁰⁷ Community is the crucial indicator for discernment, as both a prerequisite and a by-product.

The sacralisation of silence both facilitates and hinders Quaker worship. Friends minimize words, and frequently find difficulty in articulating their discernment of the divine. Both the strengths and weaknesses of silence are beautifully illustrated when two elderly Quakers express how they understood God. The first said:

“I guess I really don’t know. I know what I think. Thee and I have been worshipping together for almost 50 years. I don’t know what thee thinks about God. I don’t think we’ve ever talked about it.” The second replied: “I

³⁰⁵ Rediehs, “A Distinctive Quaker Theory of Knowledge,” 78.

³⁰⁶ Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, 26.

³⁰⁷ Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted - Quaker Decision-Making Process as a Factor of Spiritual Discernment,” 20.

really don't think it matters much, either. If thee shares the experience in the worship, it doesn't matter much how thee puts it into words."³⁰⁸

Jesuits and Quakers: A Comparison

Jesuit and Quaker communal discernment practices share obvious similarities. Both identify the discerning community's need for an explicit existential understanding of its identity and *raison d'être*, a touchstone to which its attention may be regularly recalled. For the Quakers this is silence; for the Jesuits, "the scope of our vocation" and the consoling experience of *sentir*. Without communal identity, genuine communal discernment is impossible. This indicates that the link between identity and vocation previously noted for individuals (chapter 2) transposes to communities: a general sense of who we are and what we should be is the crucial context in which particular decisions are embedded. Further, Jesuits and Quakers both align discernment with worship: one finds God's will by finding God. Focusing attention on seeking God, both individually and communally in dynamic tension, is therefore another shared prerequisite. Finally, they adopt the same posture towards each other as fellow seekers whose contributions are potentially disclosive of divine wisdom. Group harmony is both a vital prerequisite for discernment, and a confirmation of it.

Consequently, many observable phenomena are analogous. Both incorporate adequate properly informed advice, from all necessary sources, at an early stage. Silence features prominently for both, punctuating simple and concise vocal contributions. Each speaker describes her own experience or insight rather than her conviction or truth claim; and is heard with respectful attention, without being subjected to persuasion. Blockages to discernment, like disordered desires, personal agendas, and improper speech, are remarkably similar.

However, these apparent similarities mask considerable ideological differences. The Jesuits operate from a homogenous studied and articulated theological basis. Ironically, this apparent rigidity permits flexibility to accommodate (and even foster) variations in speech and practice. Due to different anthropological presuppositions, Jesuits place much greater stress than Quakers on the need for intensive personal

³⁰⁸ Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, 81.

preparation in prayer and repentance to achieve indifference. While Quakers value personal maturity, their praxis assumes that silent worship and discernment are accessible to anyone with minimum practice, regardless of belief system. The foundational experience is usually held to be “divine” but that is undefined, compared with the Jesuits whose Trinitarian terminology is relatively unambiguous. This divergence extends to what constitutes the final group decision. Quakers require unity, or “concord”: “.... not an identity of view such that every participant ends up on the same note. Instead, they remain on different notes but blend them as the pianist blends complementary notes into a chord.”³⁰⁹ Jesuits vote, and can proceed amicably with variant conclusions. Commitment at the ideological core permits openness at the practical edges.³¹⁰

Other differences are specifically theological. Without denying God’s ultimate mystery, Jesuits share a belief in a Trinitarian God, a Christological focus, and a developed pneumatology. Their individually customised prayer practices share recognizable features which, when articulated in the community’s shared lexicon, form a locus for discernment. While criteria for authenticity can never be infallible, the Jesuits also utilise external referents in Scripture, tradition and Church to correlate with individual interior movements. Though both privilege discernment in community (including coherence with their respective traditions), Jesuits ultimately submit to the magisterium, bringing the word in human experience into dialogue with Scripture, tradition and church. The Jesuits also evidence a degree of confidence founded in the character of God, greater than the Quaker’s humble “I hope so”.

The Quaker’s lack of articulated theology and refusal to articulate basic concepts of God or Spirit is a significant area of dissonance. Quakers marginalise the need for belief and its articulation, while the Jesuit emphasis on academic theological study indicates the opposite. This question raises crucial issues around how belief affects experience; how attention to a personal God who responds attentively to us differs from attention to a metaphysical concept; how “God’s will” in its eschatological Kingdom context differs from guidance by principles; and finally the role of words and

³⁰⁹ Sheeran SJ, 64.

³¹⁰ The origins of this modern phrase are obscure.

metaphors in reality depiction, particularly those designating titles for the divine. These themes are further discussed in chapter 5.

Jesuits, Quakers and Church Assessment

How might this study of communal discernment fruitfully dialogue with churches' experience of discernment at assessment conferences? Assessment conferences should first be compared with the above essential features of communal discernment to determine congruence, before specific areas of potential transferability can be explored.

Fundamentally, one might question the extent to which assessment processes are communal discernment at all. With the “voices” of written reports and references included, participants are mainly church members but they constitute at best a temporary community.³¹¹ At Assessment Conferences, the VAs form teams drawn from the wider groups of assessors. Most know each other in varying degrees, and they may bond deeply. Though teams have facilitators, parity is assumed and each voice is respected in rich and genuinely communal discussions incorporating the voices present in the paperwork. These are the locus of making decisions which are subsequently referred to the wider church community for validation. I find these a valid and usually effective mode of community: however, they are temporary, transient and task-oriented. They differ from Jesuit or Quaker communities, who are committed to mutual ongoing formation of which each individual decision-making is a component part. Ignatian (and Quaker) insights may be applicable to other kinds of community with modifications, as I hope to demonstrate below (chapter 9). I suggest that Jesuits and Quakers experience more intensely the same dynamic as other communities, with the significant difference that group harmony is legitimately a stronger priority for them than accurate decision-making in a single instance.

Another important question is whether admitting applicants to ministry requires discernment, or can be determined by human wisdom alone: “whether we’re looking for new light from God to be given to man, or a new decision about something already there.”³¹² While assessment of skills is a rational exercise, evaluating their spiritual

³¹¹ If the “voice” of external referees is included, not everyone will be part of the church.

³¹² Orsy SJ, “Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment,” 154.

significance for the applicant's vocation is a task for discernment: church processes rightly incorporate both elements. An individual's call from God may be deemed revelatory and therefore disclosed by discernment: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). In addition, an individual's felt sense of ministry "call" requires the wider church's validation, necessitating a communal process.

Jesuits and Quakers both regard the necessity for a shared grasp of the community's existential identity as essential. This is unarticulated but assumed at assessment conferences. Implicitly, God's leading is sought for decisions in the best interests of the applicants and the Church, despite the VA's personal preferences or theological convictions. More importantly, assessment processes could learn much from the Jesuit practice of identifying their interior movements both individually and communally, discerning which are of God, and communally evaluating them as one among other vital data for discernment. This includes the nuanced difference between God's leading and psychological relief at achieving a harmonious decision, which is difficult to achieve without an external referent such as Scripture or ecclesial tradition. To acknowledge this spiritual dimension of the community's identity is difficult in systems which privilege the externally rational over internally affective movements. Ignatian communal discernment is particularly effective in balancing both in an ecclesial context.

Having established that assessment systems are to some extent identifiable with Jesuit and Quaker communal discernment, transferable praxis may be considered. Most easily transferable is the pattern of discussion, avoiding the divisive polarization of debates: considering each possible outcome sequentially, speaking in turn, uninterrupted listening. This sound practical wisdom is adoptable for many ecclesial meetings, not just assessment conferences. However, the reductionist assumption that this is merely a technique must be avoided. The model emerges from the theological conviction that each participant is potentially a source of divine wisdom; therefore each positions himself to hear what is of God in the other - with the implication that both of them bring an insight but not an answer. I suggest that this is deceptively difficult, and demands mature self-awareness and interior freedom.

This recalls the above discussion on who can participate in communal discernment, with its divergent theological opinions on the ease with which people overcome their own inner disorder to reliably recognize God. For Jesuits, the spiritual and prayerful formation of the participants is non-negotiable; systemic considerations are entirely secondary. “Discernment at its deepest level supposes the habit of contemplation that cannot be acquired over a few weekends, intense though they may be.... It is of some importance that discernment be made in a prayerful framework; it is of greater importance that those who discern should be prayerful persons.”³¹³ Quakers may not disagree with this, but would leave “prayer” undefined and would assume that adopting Quaker methodology is adequate. ESDAC, and other modern universalist adaptations of Ignatian spirituality, hold a similarly positive anthropology. Assessment systems encounter the same challenge. While spiritual discernment is part of the acknowledged task, a significant number of VAs is required to staff each process (about 450 for the Church of England). It is therefore unsurprising that churches, though desiring qualities of personal maturity, compensate for any lack by external systemic and “secular” means. For example, “indifference” is maximized by forbidding VAs to assess anyone known to them, and “freedom” by separating them from the consequences of their decisions. Where training is given, assessors increase their self-awareness by reflexively considering how their inevitable biases might distort fair judgment. Pragmatic considerations favour processes in which anyone can participate, regardless of spiritual maturity.

By contrast, for the Jesuits freedom, indifference, and mutual trust are the fruit of deliberate spiritual exercise to form them as adequate instruments to hear God. This seems more congruent with the aim of spiritual discernment than its secular corollaries, and the absence of this named and acknowledged spiritual dimension may contribute to the VA’s unease with articulating their experience as discernment. The VA’s interviews suggest, without proving, that the focus of their preparatory prayer is more for the applicants than for themselves, and greater awareness of their own inner obstacles to genuine communal discernment would be a valuable insight. This indicates that ecclesial processes should not assume that anyone can assess, and that while good systemic practice is essential, care should be taken that process does not

³¹³ Orsy SJ, 178.

supplant prayer. An increasing awareness of the required spiritual exercises should be part of VA's ongoing formation.

One associated feature of this for Jesuit and Quaker communal discernment is the role of intuition, and potential transferability to assessment conferences is problematic. For them, forming an accurate intuition (*sentir*, or reading the spirit of the Meeting) is a charism not only for the current decision but also for growth in spiritual maturity. Assessment processes tend to categorise intuitive knowledge alongside personal preference. It is rarely articulated, usually suspected, and sits uneasily in the system. Assessors with little spiritual maturity or awareness of their own inner life may use these processes adequately, though with less acuity.

Considering the Ignatian model of spiritual conversation as distinct from interview could further enhance the conscious practice of assessment processes as a spiritual exercise. Where the assessment purpose is to gain information, interview questions work well and may form part of assessment. By contrast, spiritual conversation is a model specifically designed for discernment. The more reflective style, punctuated by silence and conscious attunement to God, provides a context in which people can articulate their spiritual experience. Here, however, the practical challenges for transferability are considerable. It is arguable whether a conference (and an Assessor) charged with ultimately deciding an applicant's call can provide the necessary non-judgmental environment for spiritual conversation – or whether a nervous applicant, conscious of being evaluated, could participate freely. It may nevertheless be beneficial to induct VAs into the gentle art of moving applicants toward more revealing responses, including the vocabulary for articulating affective movements and a comfort with silence. Chapter 9 discusses the required paradigm shift away from the model of interview leading to written report.

Finally, I suggest that the Quaker understanding of unity, and their nuanced opportunities for dissent without division, provides valuable wisdom for systems with too easy recourse to the polarising vote. The potential benefits in many ecclesial contexts are obvious. However, assessment conferences carry the unusual challenge of making a binary decision within a limited time frame – neither compromise nor delay is possible. Communal discernment models might easily seem better adapted for

longer term and more nuanced decisions. For example, assessors may be almost united in their assessment of a marginal applicant, but divided over whether she is a marginal “yes” or a marginal “no”. Here the minority view usually concedes to the majority, but this is hard to envisage without either a vote, or an impracticably lengthy discussion. Further, it has been noted that communal discernment inherently privileges decisions that contribute to group harmony, sometimes at the expense of the optimal decision. In temporary communities of VAs, responsible for authenticating someone’s life vocation, the best decision must prevail. This is far from saying that nothing can be learned from communal discernment; however, the Jesuit model which incorporates voting would be preferred.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the practices of two established communal discernment models: the Jesuit and the Quaker, using the definition of communal discernment as “a process undertaken by a community, as a community, for the purpose of judging what God is calling that community to do.”³¹⁴ The Jesuit and Quaker systems were found to have many common phenomenological features. Both stress the need for a stable community with a shared and explicit existential basis, and the need for practical data-gathering. They locate discernment in the context of worship: finding God’s will begins with finding God. Based on the belief that each member’s contribution should be valued as potentially disclosive of the divine, participants are encouraged to bring their unique wisdom and are listened to attentively. Processes facilitate discussion but not debate, and vocal contributions are balanced by silence or time for personal prayer. A final decision may be tentative or delayed, and group harmony is a high priority.

These observable similarities mask profound philosophical and theological divergence. For the Quakers, homogenous practice in worship and lifestyle is centrally important because doctrine is heterogeneous and rarely discussed. Key terms are used polysemously, suggesting a resistance to clearly defined truth claims. There are clear distinction between Christian Quakers and Friends with other ideologies, and between those who experience the Presence in Meeting as a religious phenomenon and those who do not. Ultimate authority is vested in the community and in faith that its

³¹⁴ Toner SJ, “A Method for Communal Discernment of God’s Will,” 124–25.

collective wisdom is sound, and decisions must therefore be unanimous without voting. By contrast, Jesuit practice arises from an explicitly taught, traditional and coherent Christian theology. As a result, homogenous practice is less important and details may vary significantly. Terminology is fairly uniform, enabling inner spiritual experiences to be clearly articulated. Dissonance within the group may be regarded as creative, and decisions are made by majority vote. Ultimate authority lies with the magisterium; however, the Jesuit certainty of a right outcome is rooted in their belief in the faithful character of God who will not lead them astray.

The relevance of these communal discernment models to the ecclesial practice of vocational discernment has begun to be explored. Assessment conferences are considered to be a valid (if modified) form of Quaker or Jesuit communal discernment, though the VA communities are temporary, transient and oriented to one task. They share an existential identity and common purpose in finding what is God's leading for both the applicants and the church. Much good practice from the Jesuits and Quakers is transferable: locating all discernment in the context of worship; valuing all contributions as potentially disclosive of the divine; interspersing discussion with prayerful silence; and disciplined vocal contributions. Both these systems exemplify ways of systemically recognizing and validating the role of intuition alongside other evidence. There are also pragmatic challenges in applying insights from communal discernment to ecclesial discernment processes, particularly divergent views on the degree of spiritual maturity needed in large numbers of Assessors.

The previous two chapters have closely examined the spiritual dimension of the experience of knowing God's leading in discernment, both individually and corporately, highlighting the dialectical and sometimes conflicting roles of data collection and intellectual analysis on the one hand, and attention to affect and intuition on the other. The next chapter will seek insight on how knowledge is constructed and discernment is made by a neuro-scientific view of how the brain processes information.

Chapter 5. “Knowing more than we can tell”: brain lateralization and human perception.³¹⁵

Previous chapters have shown how tacit knowledge, insight received by a sense or intuition not immediately accessible to a conscious cognitive process, is difficult to define and comprehend, and even more difficult to trust. People struggle to know where it comes from, how to articulate it, and above all, whether pre-rational subjective experience can form a reliable basis for making important judgments. This question is particularly troubling for VAs in discerning a call from God to ministry. When asked, “What convinces you that a call is genuine?”, VAs acknowledge the importance of quantifiable criteria; they also frequently refer to a compelling “sense”, “gut feeling” or “intuition”. Some features of the VA’s experience – attentiveness, struggles with language, somatic signals, epistemological uncertainty, and their potential spiritual significance – create a troubling dissonance for them, and require further attention in dialogue with scientific as well as theological voices.

A wider lens, encompassing both rational criteria and “gut feeling” and more, is found in Iain McGilchrist’s influential treatise on brain lateralization, *The Master and his Emissary*. McGilchrist’s work relates to the concerns of this research in three broad areas: how the brain apprehends the world (experience, attention and knowledge); the role of language; and creativity as revelation (creation without cognition). After examining these, the extent to which McGilchrist’s insights match the VA’s experience can be evaluated to determine his relationship to their experience.

McGilchrist: Introducing “The Master and his Emissary”.

Iain McGilchrist is a polymath: an Oxford Fellow in English literature who became a consultant psychiatrist specializing in neuro-imaging. Written over 20 years, this book presents the fruits of both studies, alongside comprehensive reading in philosophy and history. He aims to explore the mind’s relationship to the world, and “to understand the structure of the world that the brain has in part created”.³¹⁶ Based on the brain’s

³¹⁵ Polyani, *The Tacit Dimension*, 4.

³¹⁶ Iain McGilchrist, “Brain Hemisphere Differences Deserve More Thought,” *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 343, no. 7822 (2011): 1.

two hemispheres, McGilchrist hypothesises that modern Western history demonstrates a trajectory of increasing social imbalance towards the hegemony of the brain's left hemisphere, resulting in his dystopian view of our contemporary society. In a literary conceit to mimic the subject matter, the book is structured in two halves: first, a neuro-philosophical account of how the brain perceives reality; then its practical outworking in the recent history of Western civilization.

The Master and his Emissary has been reviewed in journals across many disciplines, including general medicine, interdisciplinary history, brain laterality, analytical psychology, and psychiatry.³¹⁷ It has been widely discussed in diverse interviews and academic forums, from medicine to poetry.³¹⁸ Critical reviews of the first half are consistently excellent: McGilchrist demonstrates his mastery of neuropsychiatry with a wealth of clinical and experimental evidence on every page, supported by astonishingly comprehensive references.³¹⁹ The second half similarly impresses most reviewers with its remarkable breadth of knowledge – though by exposing himself across such a broad field of enquiry, criticism is inevitable. A few question whether his thesis really supports his very sweeping conclusions, and whether such a broad declensionist view of cultural history is unduly strained.³²⁰ McGilchrist himself acknowledges the over-simplification of his historical account; however, one historian typically concludes: “his

³¹⁷ These including McGilchrist, “Brain Hemisphere Differences Deserve More Thought.” Lesley J. Rogers, “The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World,” *Laterality: Asymmetries of Body, Brain and Cognition* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 125–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1357650X.2010.505413>. James Willis, “A Tale of Two Hemispheres,” *British Journal of General Practice* 60, no. 572 (March 1, 2010): 226, <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp10X483779>. Carson, “The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World, by Iain McGilchrist,” *British Journal of Psychiatry*, n.d. Jacob Freedman, “The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 168, no. 6 (June 1, 2011): 655–56, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2011.11010053>.

³¹⁸ Ange Mlinko and Iain McGilchrist, “This Is Your Brain On Poetry,” *Poetry* 197, no. 1 (2010): 37–49.

³¹⁹ The hard copy's lengthy bibliography is merely the remnant of radical editing, and the full version is only available online.

[62.31.128/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Bibliography_The_Master_and_his_Emissary.pdf](https://doi.org/10.128/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Bibliography_The_Master_and_his_Emissary.pdf)

³²⁰ For example, Randolph Roth, “Review of Master and His Emissary,” ed. Iain McGilchrist, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 41, no. 4 (2011): 619–20., Beverley Southgate, “The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World,” *Rethinking History* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 445–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2011.586865>. Bob Trubshaw, “The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World,” *Time and Mind* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 119–21, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175169711X12900033260682>.

illumination – and warning – is much to be welcomed.”³²¹ His treatment of Wittgenstein is criticized on minor points for, ironically, underestimating Wittgenstein’s support for McGilchrist’s view.³²² A Jungian critique intriguingly suggests parallels between McGilchrist’s right hemisphere mode and Jung’s “feminine”, offering systole and diastole as an alternative to McGilchrist’s narrative of betrayal.³²³ One psychoanalyst assesses the implications of McGilchrist’s model for clinical benefit.³²⁴

His most trenchant critic is A.C. Grayling, who challenges McGilchrist for building too much on the “slender” state of neurophysiological knowledge, and for describing a left hemisphere-dominated world without a corresponding view of what right-hemisphere dominance would entail – which, argues Grayling, might be equally troubling.³²⁵ Other reviewers overwhelmingly find the detail of his neurophysiological evidence convincing.³²⁶ This raises a crucial point which Grayling apparently fails to grasp – that McGilchrist is content for his thesis to be seen as “just” a metaphor which may have some literal truth – since he has a high regard for metaphor as a descriptor of reality.³²⁷ While I concur with those who find McGilchrist’s historical analysis broadly convincing, this research engages mainly with the almost undisputed first half of his book.

While teaching English literature, McGilchrist became uncomfortably aware of how easily the literary critical and analytical tools of his trade could eviscerate the texts by

³²¹ Southgate, “The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World,” 449.

³²² Rupert Read, “Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010),” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2012): 119–24, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-011-9235-x>.

³²³ Michael Cullinan, “The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World by McGilchrist, Iain,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 57, no. 3 (2012): 390–91, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5922.2012.01977_1.x.

³²⁴ George Hagman, “Book Review: *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World*,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 61, no. 4 (2013): 859–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003065113493662>.

³²⁵ “A C Grayling - In Two Minds,” *Literary Review*, accessed October 2, 2017, <https://literaryreview.co.uk/in-two-minds>.

³²⁶ For example, Willis, “A Tale of Two Hemispheres.”

³²⁷ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 462.

denying precisely the “meaning” (spirit, affective impact, or beauty), which was their *raison d’être*. This sense of a dichotomy between analytical reason and other less definable modes of apprehension, and the threat of the first to the second, prompted his research into brain lateralisation. His fundamental thesis rejects outright the crude over-simplification that the brain’s left hemisphere processes the practical and language, and the right the emotional and pictures: both hemispheres process everything. However, they perceive the same information in different, almost opposite ways: different not in what they do, but how they do it.

To illustrate, he draws from Nietzsche’s titular story of the master and his emissary.³²⁸ A benevolent master delegates the detailed administration of a distant part of his kingdom to a talented emissary who is better qualified than him for the role. The master cannot, and need not, attend to the details which are the emissary’s specialism. The emissary must, however, revert to the master so that detailed information can be assimilated into the whole for evaluation of its meaning. Dysfunction results when the proud emissary forgets his subordinate position and acts as though he is in charge. This illustrates the left hemisphere’s conflicted relationship with the right (the conflict is not reciprocal); and explains, for McGilchrist, much of what ails contemporary society and the human condition generally:

“It appears essential for full human functioning that the right hemisphere places itself in vulnerability to the left. The right hemisphere, the one that believes but does not know, has to depend on the left hemisphere, that knows but does not believe. It is as though a power that has an infinite, and therefore intrinsically uncertain, potential Being needs nonetheless to submit to be delimited – needs stasis, certainty, fixity – in order to Be. The greater purpose demands the submission. The Master needs to trust, to believe in, his emissary, knowing all the while that that trust may be abused. The emissary knows, but knows wrongly, that he is invulnerable. If the relationship holds, they are invincible, but if it is abused it is not only the Master who suffers but both of them, since the emissary owes his existence to he Master.”³²⁹

³²⁸ McGilchrist, 14.

³²⁹ McGilchrist, 428.

Three areas of McGilchrist's study are particularly relevant for this research – how the brain constructs knowledge; the role of language; and the process by which new insights come to being.

Epistemology: A Dialectical Model of Attentiveness

McGilchrist posits that two different modes of experience are rooted in the bi-hemispheric structure of the brain, and are engaged in a power struggle. The left hemisphere attends to fragments of information in isolation; the right to entities as a whole. The importance of this vital distinction cannot be over-stated - it is core to how we know the world and ourselves. The kind of attention we pay actually alters the world, with which we are engaged in reciprocal dialogue – therefore, attention is fundamentally important. He succinctly captures this in a memorable illustration.³³⁰ The brains of birds also have two hemispheres (as do most creatures). Feeding birds have two distinct attentive fields: the finely-detailed task of extracting seed from its husk; and the view to the horizon to identify predators. A different hemisphere performs each mode of perception, with the first task (left hemisphere) being unaware of the second (right hemisphere) though the second is aware of the first.

The right hemisphere attends to whole entities, seeking connections with the Other and wider meaning, and evaluating parts in the context of the whole. It is connected with mystery and humbly aware of its own limitations. Socially, it deals with the corporate and communal, and it makes decisions based on principle. Linguistically, it hears the rhythm of words, connotative meanings, humour, tone and inflection. Epistemologically, it knows implicitly though it does understand how the left hemisphere knows. The right hemisphere therefore knows things based on experience, which “presences to” us whole and immediately.³³¹ It codes for specific, individual phenomenological encounters and sensory information from the body, understood in the context of the whole of what it encounters. Each life situation is unique: “we never step into the same river twice.”³³² The right hemisphere welcomes new knowledge, which arrives there first. It expects the unexpected and is comfortable with uncertainty

³³⁰ McGilchrist, 26.

³³¹ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 50. His use of “presences” is from Heidegger, indicating a more immediate and alive experience than the conventional “is present to.”

³³² Quoting Heidegger. McGilchrist, 174.

and mystery, being humbly conscious of its own limitations. It appreciates art, music and poetry, and incorporates the brain's capacity for wonder, awe and worship. In McGilchrist's view, the right hemisphere mode of knowledge is immediately connected with the real. The motivation behind its attention is an intention to connect with whatever Other it finds, in a relationship of care and concern.

The left hemisphere functions as its counterpart in each respect. It attends to detail and breaks things into disconnected component parts. It cannot see beyond itself, and believes its own knowledge to be all-encompassing. Socially, it is individualistic, and it makes decisions based on utility. Linguistically, it decodes the denotative meaning of words, reading texts with scientific precision. Epistemologically, it knows explicitly and it does not understand how the right hemisphere knows. The left hemisphere therefore knows things in terms of principles and theories. It extracts these from the raw experience presented to the right hemisphere, including the body's sensory experience, and re-presents them in coded form (usually, denotative language and diagrammatic images). In this process it abstracts things from the contextual situation of their reality, enabling us to generalize, quantify, and tabulate our data. The left hemisphere privileges clarity and certainty, and cannot attend to what it does not understand. Consequently, it takes a reductionist view of the arts, nature and religion, seeing them only in utilitarian terms. McGilchrist describes the knowledge provided by the left hemisphere as a re-presentation of reality. Its knowledge is always purposeful, intending to grasp its object for use. The left hemisphere is motivated by control and power.

McGilchrist repeatedly emphasises that both hemispheres are necessary. Without the right hemisphere we would be robotic creatures, performing our daily tasks with little concept of their meaning and significance. Without the left, we would be slow to master the basic repeated functions which form the habitus of our daily lives. Normally, we use both simultaneously and they interact seamlessly in a continuous lateral movement. From their joint functioning arise imagination and reason, which McGilchrist regards as the two most precious products of the brain's bi-hemispheric structure.³³³ However, they constitute different epistemological modes: intuitive or

³³³ McGilchrist, 7.

personal knowledge, and rationality or factual knowledge.³³⁴ This would be straightforward were it not for the power struggle, as the left hemisphere continually tries to wrest control from its proper domain in the right, which alone sees the whole picture. Epistemologically, this is evident where scientific, evidence-based knowledge attributes to itself greater authoritative certainty than it can possibly have, and is therefore privileged over less tangible – but arguably more profound – forms of knowing. Direct experiences of love, beauty, awe, and creativity are under-valued in favour of data that is measurable and therefore controllable: “The operation was successful (but the patient died).”³³⁵ More seriously, McGilchrist tackles the frequent popular assertion that belief in God is incompatible with modern rationality: science has disproved God. Without personally subscribing to any faith perspective, he asserts that such a statement “takes science into realms where it has no purchase on reality” by fundamentally misapprehending its nature and limits.³³⁶ The scientific method excludes questions of teleology: “Science is a methodology of knowing and God is a somewhat to be known.... a methodology and an entity can’t conflict.”³³⁷ The claim of left-hemisphere modes of knowledge to nullify right-hemisphere perceptions is characteristically over-assertive. McGilchrist argues, evidenced from 500 years of Western history, that this has destructive consequences.

McGilchrist’s work on how the human brain constructs knowledge echoes in important respects Michael Polanyi’s seminal theories of tacit knowing, established decades previously.³³⁸ To establish how “we know more than we can say”, Polanyi recognised that the human brain attends first to the whole, and is consciously unaware of the parts which comprise it. For example, in human physiognomy we can recognize one face among thousands, but when questioned we will not “know” the colour of the eyes or shape of the nose.³³⁹ He believes:

³³⁴ McGilchrist, 94–96. McGilchrist points out that this is clear in several languages which have different words for knowledge, for example the French *savoir* and *connaître*.

³³⁵ E-book, “The divided brain and the search for meaning”, location 320 of 476

³³⁶ Unpublished talk to clergy in the Diocese of Norwich, September 2017. Quoted with permission.

³³⁷ Unpublished talk to clergy in the Diocese of Norwich, September 2017. Quoted with permission.

³³⁸ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*; Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*.

³³⁹ Here Polanyi, like McGilchrist, draws (not uncritically) from Gestalt psychology. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 6.

...that all thought components of which we are subsidiarily unaware in the focal point of our thinking, and that all thought dwells in its subsidiaries, as if they were parts of our body. Hence thinking is not only necessarily intentional...it is also necessarily fraught with the roots that it embodies. It has a *from-to* structure”³⁴⁰.

The similarity of “from-to” with McGilchrist’s theory of brain lateralization is clear. Polanyi also believes that all knowledge has two terms, which can be distinguished by the kind of attentiveness they utilise. We attend *from* the first term, proximal knowledge, which is information absorbed or intuited by our minds and bodies – the component parts of knowledge, of which we are phenomenologically unaware. The second term is what we attend *to* - distal knowledge, the conscious object of our attention. Proximal knowledge is the knowledge of which we cannot tell: because it is not the focus of our attention, we are only subsidiarily aware of it. The body is crucially important, as the ultimate instrument of all knowing. By definition it is always known subsidiarily as we can never experience our own bodies as an object.³⁴¹ Polanyi explains how meaning is constructed between the two terms by analogy with a person using a probe. Placed in the hand, a new instrument is experienced as a thing in itself; however, with increasing expertise the probe functions as an extension of the body, and attention shifts to focus on the messages received from what it is probing.³⁴² Thus, meaningless feelings become meaningful ones.³⁴³ Polanyi believes that we interiorize theories, values and practices until they become the proximal terms of our tacit knowing, and come to constitute the vital integrating principles for all new knowledge.³⁴⁴ The highest forms of integrated knowledge result from indwelling and empathy: “It is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand

³⁴⁰ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, Introduction.

³⁴¹ It is worth noting that McGilchrist disagrees that the body cannot be experienced as an object. For him, this is another difference between the left and right hemispheres. The left sees the body as an object; for the right, it is the ground of all our experience. From personal correspondence, November 2018.

³⁴² Here, Polanyi’s theory is borne out by extensive modern research into intuitive expertise, which demonstrates how skills become “second nature” and, therefore, inaccessible to conscious cognition. See, for example, Kahneman and Klein, “Conditions for Intuitive Expertise”; Tversky and Kahneman, “Extensional versus Intuitive Reasoning: The Conjunction Fallacy in Probability Judgment.” Steven A. Sloman, “The Empirical Case for Two Systems of Reasoning,” *Psychological Bulletin* 119, no. 1 (January 1996): 3–22, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.119.1.3>.

³⁴³ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 13.

³⁴⁴ Polanyi, 17.

their joint meaning.”³⁴⁵ Such understanding cannot emerge from the lower forms logically, but transpire by an act of imagination. “Unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters...their meaning is effaced, and our conception of the entity is destroyed.”³⁴⁶ In summary, he agrees with McGilchrist that so-called impersonal or “objective” knowledge cannot be achieved with certainty in any realm, including science. Tacit knowledge is intrinsic to all knowledge. Polanyi concurs with St Augustine: *crede, ut intelligas*, “believe so that you may understand.”³⁴⁷ Again, for Polanyi this is not a theological quest but an epistemological principle: all understanding must follow from an *a priori* commitment to belief in something.

Language

“Knowing more than we can tell” raises fundamental questions about the nature and limits of language itself, and what it can or cannot disclose. McGilchrist sees language, like everything else, as the province of both hemispheres, and as a perfect illustration of how they function differently.³⁴⁸ The left hemisphere has a much more extensive descriptive vocabulary, enabling greater verbal clarity and precision than the right, which registers tone and possible sub-text. The right sees language in context, and gathers the speaker’s possible intention accordingly. For example, “It’s hot in here” would be decoded by the left hemisphere as meteorological data, but might be inferred by the right as a suggestion to open a window. Language therefore has disclosive potential beyond its (deceptively straightforward) denotative function. McGilchrist sees all language as inherently metaphorical: it re-presents direct experience in the sign or symbol of words. In any kind of representation, something of the reality of what is represented is left behind by the analogy, and cannot be spoken. This is fundamentally important for his thought, since it is equally as true of “scientific” description of material phenomena as it is of metaphysics or literature. McGilchrist loves words: his frequent excursions into etymology and poetry, alongside exacting medical descriptions, betray his fascination to even the casual reader. However, it is vital to grasp that he regards metaphor not as one among other literary devices, but as capturing the essential nature of language and beyond that, of all cognitive assimilation. The coda to *The Master and his Emissary* concludes that his whole theory

³⁴⁵ Polanyi, 18.

³⁴⁶ Polanyi, 18.

³⁴⁷ Polanyi, 61.

³⁴⁸ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 94–126.

“seems like a metaphor that might have some literal truth. But if it turns out to be just a metaphor, I will be content. I have a high regard for metaphor. It is how we come to understand the world.”³⁴⁹

As an important consequence, this undermines the notion that science possesses a kind of truth that is more certain than other kinds. McGilchrist attacks this modern myth as a prime example of the left hemisphere’s delusion of superiority over the right.³⁵⁰ He believes that science achieves a real kind of certainty, but like all certainty, that works only within its own circumscribed context.³⁵¹ Everything expressed in language, or in any other sign, is inherently uncertain and can never definitively denote truth. It is, however, possible for it to be “untrue” by deliberately concealing reality, a capacity unique to humans. In language as in all things, we are co-creators of a reality which exists beyond us, but which our brains actively participate in bringing into being.

The relationship of language to thought is much disputed in philosophy. Is language only for communication, or is it necessary for thinking – in other words, why do we have it at all? McGilchrist demonstrates that thinking is pre-verbal, from compelling evidence that prehistoric humans, pre-linguistic children and some contemporary tribes think without words.³⁵² Intriguingly, he also challenges the supposition that language’s primary purpose is to communicate information. Drawing on both neurological and anthropological sources, he shows convincingly that human language is prefigured and predated by the differentiated sound-production found in music. Over time, this became increasingly emotionally sophisticated as a means of “social grooming”.³⁵³ Language emerged from this, he believes, with the primary purpose of communicating emotion, and thereby building social cohesion. This is supported by language’s fundamentally embodied character. Babies learn to speak by closely observing and imitating the facial movements and sounds of another person – by empathic imitation.

³⁴⁹ McGilchrist, 462.

³⁵⁰ Iain McGilchrist, “Where Do We Go for Truth?” (Address to Diocese of Norwich clergy, unpublished, September 2017). Quoted with permission.

³⁵¹ From personal correspondence, November 2018.

³⁵² McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 106–10.

³⁵³ McGilchrist, 106.

Language, therefore, does not bring forth the cognitive landscape we inhabit, but helps us to map it, separating and delimiting, describing and labeling. All its descriptions are re-presentations, beginning with something known, then building on that with something else that is known:

“Thus we have the illusion of something being brought into being by being put together. All language is inevitably like this: it substitutes the experienced ambiguity and uncertainty of the original encounter with something in the process of coming into being, a sequence of apparently fixed, certain pieces of *information*....it is no more a way of re-enabling the experience than living beings are made by stitching together the limbs.”³⁵⁴

Nor is this “bringing to being” a value-free process. Western society, which McGilchrist believes is dominated by the left hemisphere’s worldview, privileges thought that is re-presented in forms which can be controlled and tabulated for utilitarian purposes. What cannot be expressed in words or explained by reason is considered dubious.³⁵⁵ It is characteristic of left-hemisphere dominance that tacit forms of knowledge are discarded. Non-explicit meaning and non-verbal communication are hard to grasp, and ambiguity is not tolerated in our society.³⁵⁶ This is seen as virtuous, a sign of maturity: “We’ve fallen for the left hemisphere’s propaganda - that what it does is more *highly evolved* than what the right hemisphere does.”³⁵⁷ McGilchrist argues that this is not something more evolved competing with something more primitive, or intellect versus emotion, but two modes of being each with both cognitive and emotional aspects, working in a highly advanced and complex way.

McGilchrist therefore stands against any fundamentalism that reifies words or sacred texts. He bitingly critiques the Protestant Reformation for attacking holiness and replacing ritual, art and beauty with concepts and words. Words acquired the status of things, “signifiers that refer only to themselves”; metaphor was reduced to adornment; and the body “rejected in favour of “an invisible, discarnate realm of the mind.”³⁵⁸ The

³⁵⁴ McGilchrist, 231. (*italics original*).

³⁵⁵ McGilchrist, 229.

³⁵⁶ McGilchrist, 433.

³⁵⁷ McGilchrist, 437.

³⁵⁸ McGilchrist, 318-19.

perfect function of words in religion, he believes, is to become transparent in their power to indicate and generate experience of something beyond themselves. He believes the apophatic pursuit of prayer and spiritual experience (the “*via negativa*”) to be the reliable route to spiritual experience and growth, subsuming the known (represented information) in pursuit of the unknown (ambiguous experience). Such transparency, he believes, is more difficult for words than for art or music, which more readily lose their self-consciousness - though poetry, song and metaphor move towards the ideal.

McGilchrist is cited approvingly by Rowan Williams in “The Edge of Words”, his treatise on the nature and limits of language particularly in relation to God.³⁵⁹ Williams echoes McGilchrist’s conviction that all language is metaphorical – or, in Williams’ terms, that words are not merely “indices” (dyadically related, like smoke and fire) but are symbols (triadically determined in the interplay of sign, signifier and signified). “Thus a word takes on the “feel”, the associations of what it points to, even though it is not a thing lying to hand that we use to symbolize another thing because it intrinsically reminds us of that thing.”³⁶⁰ Here, Williams’ description of how words convey reality recalls Polanyi’s illustration of how the probe functions. A proper theory of language must wrestle with at least two difficult questions: participation, how one thing can inhabit another; and inter-subjectivity, the community’s role in establishing meaning.³⁶¹ Williams explores the intractable difficulties of language in revealing what we might prefer to be hidden, and veiling what we seek to reveal, and illustrates how the resulting crisis pushes new perceptions into being:

“Faced with the drama that shows me the most extreme cases of my incapacity to invade another’s life and sort it out, I am brought back to the need to listen and to puzzle over my neighbor’s address to me and my relation to him or her. More or less remotely, we are put back in touch with “nature’ or even with Being, I would say, if I knew how.”³⁶²

³⁵⁹ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014), 27.

³⁶⁰ Williams, 52 Here, Williams is citing the work of the American pragmatist philosopher C.S. Pierce (1839-1914).

³⁶¹ Williams, 56.

³⁶² Williams, 58.

The struggle at the edge of words indicates the mystery of the Other, both human and, potentially, divine. Williams is (not unexpectedly) more inclined than McGilchrist to name as God the pattern of intelligible life which is mirrored in the finite universe and shared by human beings aware of their incompleteness.³⁶³ While never claiming a foundationalist argument for God's existence, Williams indicates that questions arising from the limitations of language are "what we might expect to encounter if the universe were as the believer claims."³⁶⁴ Again like McGilchrist, he believes that the test of authentic representation of God in language is its ability to result in "some sort of dispossession, some deepened capacity for reflective stillness. *Every true sacred sign effaces itself.*"³⁶⁵ His description of the interplay between speech and silence is analogous with McGilchrist's pattern of brain lateralization, where silence is a function of the right hemisphere:

"It is not a question of silence or speech, but rather that the transfiguring energy given in silence is expanded and integrated by making us attempt interpretation through speech, while in the same moment insights that arise from speech deepen and expand again into the silence."³⁶⁶

The edge of words, for Williams, is never a descent (or ascent) into empty silence. The words or rituals that frame silence suggest its meaning, and it reveals to us "how to go on" (a phrase he quotes repeatedly) in continuing the conversation with the reality we encounter – the *telos* of all communication.³⁶⁷ He affirms, with McGilchrist, that while falsehood is possible, grasping ultimate truth with certainty is not – what matters is the journey of pursuit, and inhabiting the fruitful if uncertain "between-ness" or lateral movement of striving for truth.³⁶⁸

Creativity and Mimesis

McGilchrist believes that it is in our creativity that we encounter most nearly what Christians describe as God. Here, his thinking arises from the nature of the corpus callosum – the band connecting the two hemispheres, which one would expect to facilitate communication. Puzzlingly, he notes that it became thinner, not thicker, as

³⁶³ Williams, 172.

³⁶⁴ Williams, 180.

³⁶⁵ Williams, 175. (italics original).

³⁶⁶ Williams, 178.

³⁶⁷ For example, Williams, 71.

³⁶⁸ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 460–61.

evolution progressed. Even more counter-intuitively, it seems to function as a neurological inhibitor, preventing rather than enabling full interaction between the hemispheres. It works by deciding what to block – an essentially negative function, which nevertheless has a positive shaping impact. This clearly indicates that the two hemispheres do not synchronise in a bland kind of integration, but inhabit a creatively dialectical tension. From this and other research, McGilchrist deduces that our creativity is in effect a process of negation, of inhibiting or removing material to discover, liberate and even enhance an underlying reality – as a sculptor chips away to form a statue, or as boulders and landscape shape water into a river.³⁶⁹ “Life comes to us” mediated firstly and primarily through the right hemisphere,³⁷⁰ and:

“Nothing in us, actively or positively, makes things live – all we can do is permit or not permit life, which already exists.... The left hemisphere thinks creation must be the result of something positive it does. It *makes* things, as it *makes* things happen, and it thinks it gives life to them.... it is like a cat pushing a dead mouse.”³⁷¹

McGilchrist draws on a Hegelian dialectical paradigm to describe how brain lateralization achieves true creativity. Beginning in the right hemisphere, some intuitions or experiences pass into the left hemisphere for formal analysis. The left-hemisphere mode should then re-integrate with the right hemisphere in a process of *Aufhebung*, meaning “lifting up” or subsumed into a subsequent stage.³⁷² The original remains preserved in, and is transformed by, a higher level in the process (in Hegel’s illustration, like a bud coming to flower). The stages are incompatible because one supplants the other, but both remain part of same organic unity. So, what begins in the right hemisphere threatens to be lost in the left’s unique contribution, unless it is offered back to the right for transformation. This same underlying pattern operates in our intuitions of goodness, beauty, truth, art, or the development of a religious sense. It is even the basis of apparently self-contained reason, which seems to be a left hemisphere process. Its basic premise, the value of reason itself, cannot be rationally deduced but ultimately must be intuited:

³⁶⁹ McGilchrist, 197.

³⁷⁰ McGilchrist, 230.

³⁷¹ McGilchrist, 230.

³⁷² Hegel in *Phenomenology of Mind*, quoted in McGilchrist, 204. Michael Polanyi describes a very similar process as “emergence”, and specifically links it with tacit knowing. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 88.

“... a progress from an intuitive apprehension of whatever it may be, via a more formal process of enrichment through conscious, detailed analytic understanding, to an new, enhanced intuitive understanding of this whole, now transformed by this process that it has undergone.”³⁷³

Dis-covering (or uncovering) our creative spirit is an act of negation, of saying “no” to what conceals, and encountering the world imaginatively to inhabit the liminal space where the mind is open to what is yet unseen. Here McGilchrist affirms Marion Milner’s experience in “On Not Being able to Paint,” which perfectly prefigures his theory 60 years in advance.³⁷⁴ Milner, an artist and psychoanalyst, describes the difficult process of discovering her creativity by negation; by letting go of the need to control her art in order to liberate her inherent creative power. Long before modern neurological insights into brain structure, she compares art resulting from consciously willed effort with work produced by “the spontaneous ordering forces”, and the reciprocity between them: a creative “dreaminess that was the result of restraining conscious intention.”³⁷⁵ In that process, she is fascinated to discover that her subconscious self “knows” more than her analytical mind can process – and the insights yielded when her psychoanalytical reasoning probes this information. Like McGilchrist, she concludes that creativity is in fact a co-creation, liberating and shaping a pre-existent inner life force which cannot be generated by human effort, but by the powerfully creative act of saying No.

If this is how the new takes shape in creating things or ideas, how are we ourselves formed or changed? Again paradoxically, McGilchrist stresses the role of imitation in forming human individuality. From babyhood, we learn by imitation: we acquire skills, for example, by inhabiting modes of behavior that we see in others rather than by reading instructions. For McGilchrist, imitation is therefore “the meta-skill that enables all other skills.”³⁷⁶ It is closely linked to attentiveness – in imitation, we attend so closely to something or someone that we capture its essence. It is also linked to imagination. “Imitation is imagination’s most powerful path into whatever is Other

³⁷³ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 206.

³⁷⁴ Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Routledge, 2010 (London: Heinemann, 1950).

³⁷⁵ Milner, 83–84.

³⁷⁶ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 253.

than ourselves. Our capacity for mimesis is our ability to transform what we perceive into something we directly experience.”³⁷⁷ In other words, by imitating something we choose to internalize it so that it forms us in the same way that a real-life experience does when it presents to the right hemisphere. However, this imaginative inhabiting of the Other does not make us identical copies. In mimesis, an experience is shared intersubjectively rather than copied mechanically; therefore it ultimately enhances our individuality. McGilchrist acknowledges the power of imaginative mimesis deliberately adopted as a strategy in Christian spiritual formation, and warns that “we need to be careful what we imagine, since that is what we are and will become.”³⁷⁸

These theories are borne out in anthropological and psychological research by Tanya Lührmann on one Christian community.³⁷⁹ From an agnostic standpoint, she aims to explain to unbelievers how people learn to experience God as real, and in the process provides valuable insights into how the mind perceives reality. Imagination, play and pretence are crucial. Though her subjects never use this term, they are asked to pretend that God is present and talking back, by mentally treating God as an imaginary friend. Lührmann quotes C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*: “Let us pretend in order to make the pretence into a reality.”³⁸⁰ Far from being an elaborate exercise in self-deception, Lührmann compares this with research into the function of play in determining reality for children. A child’s loved toy is a transitional object invested with what is emotionally real in relationships, especially when the loved person is absent. More than a symbol, the toy is real to the child – but not real in the way a person is real.³⁸¹ For Lührmann, this illuminates the sense of liminality in her subject’s experience of God. One participant:

“...had become able to integrate her cognitive capacity to recognize God’s presence in specific moments – her capacity to interpret God’s response to her through circumstances, Bible reading, identifying events and thoughts

³⁷⁷ McGilchrist, 248.

³⁷⁸ McGilchrist, 250–51.

³⁷⁹ T. M. (Tanya M.) Lührmann, *When God Talks Back : Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, 1st Vintage books ed. (New York: New York : Vintage Books, 2012).

³⁸⁰ Lührmann, 73.

³⁸¹ Lührmann, 87–88.

and sensations as from God – into an internal imaginative representation of him as a person.”³⁸²

Crucially, however, “the play claim that God is an imaginary companion is also a real claim about the nature of the world, a claim about the objective reality of the Holy Spirit and God’s supernatural presence. It is play but not play.... the place where the distinction between belief and make-believe breaks down.”³⁸³ Play does not exclude the external truth claim, but strengthens it.³⁸⁴

Luhrmann also researches in fascinating detail the effect of attention and imagination on prayer practices. Her subjects’ unanimous experience was that the more they prayed, the more intense prayer became, and they became increasingly adept at concentrating all their attention on the prayer experience. Internal sensations strengthened and their vividness increased, whether visual, aural or impressionistic. Luhrmann terms this “inner sense cultivation – the deliberate, repeated use of inner visual representation and other inner sensory experience with interaction, interweaving and sensory enhancement.”³⁸⁵ She finds it classically experienced in the Ignatian spiritual exercises, and explains in detail how they achieve this effect.³⁸⁶ The main point is that all her subjects in the Vineyard church independently described an emerging category of apprehension, intermediate between thought and sensory perception. “Things that aren’t there and I know they’re not there but they’re not just in my mind.”³⁸⁷ Luhrmann concludes that concentrating the imagination in prayer powerfully affects how the mind perceives reality. Its main technique is intense attentiveness to mental imagery and other inner sensory experience. Her extensive testing using the Telegen Absorption Scale evidences that people who find it easy to concentrate intensely in everyday life are measurably more adept in these prayer practices.³⁸⁸ Skilled prayer practitioners sometimes experience “sensory over-rides” –

³⁸² Luhrmann, 98.

³⁸³ Luhrmann, 100.

³⁸⁴ Luhrmann is very careful to distinguish between “reality” and what people perceive. The latter, not the former, depends upon what they attend to. However, she is also carefully agnostic about what constitutes ultimate reality, and about whether that might be determinable.

³⁸⁵ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back : Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, 184.

³⁸⁶ Luhrmann, 172–84.

³⁸⁷ Luhrmann, 153.

³⁸⁸ Luhrmann, 195.

experiences similar to hallucinations where the non-material is convincingly experienced as reality.³⁸⁹ “Definitely, definitely. You know beyond a shadow of a doubt that someone is there with you.”³⁹⁰ This indicates a change in reality monitoring – the psychological term for determining whether an experience is externally real, or mentally constructed.

She concludes that all human cognition comprises a disposition to see ambiguous reality in a particular way. Like McGilchrist, she believes:

“This is the story of the uncertainty of our senses, and the complexity of our minds and world. There is so little we know, so much we take on trust. In a way more fundamental than we dare to appreciate, we each must make our own judgments about what is truly real.”³⁹¹

Vocational Assessors and “Knowing more than they can tell”.

This research began by exploring the VA’s experience of trying to discern the authentic call of God in applicants for ministry – how do you know it’s God? They wrestle with complex questions around the epistemological status and the spiritual significance of their experiences, and the inadequacy of language to describe them. Research by McGilchrist and others in this chapter – Polanyi, Williams, Milner and Luhrmann - illuminates many of their concerns. Generally, it is striking how often the VAs describe two opposite, complementary but sometimes conflicting aspects of their experience in dialectical tension: “double listening” to applicants and to God; their gut intuition and reason; subjectivity and objectivity; “just knowing” and tangible evidence. These are broadly analogous with McGilchrist’s description of the left and right hemispheres, including the assumed superiority of the left – for example, where it is considered axiomatic that evidence-based criteria provide more reliable and sophisticated knowledge than intuition. One VA was troubled by what “a matrix of intuition” (SM) might be, despite being convinced of its importance – in other words, it must be accessible to analysis. Where systems must communicate and justify decisions to other parties, reducing encounter to information, the fragmented epistemological data easily

³⁸⁹ Luhrmann, 216.

³⁹⁰ Luhrmann, 149.

³⁹¹ Luhrmann, 325.

communicated in this manner is most highly valued as being measurable, controllable, and defensible against interrogation. The knowledge yielded by the VA's bodies was unexamined – they were surprised to be questioned about this, and only one had thought about it before. In Polanyi's terms, this proximal knowledge is implicit because conscious attention is focused on the distal term – the applicant. Also, VAs lack confidence in the “subjective” knowledge yielded by intuition, and they themselves believe it to be validated where “objective” reasons can be found. McGilchrist, Polanyi and Williams seriously challenge the axiom that “scientific” knowledge is solidly based and intrinsically certain. All knowledge has a tacit component, and we must be comfortable with uncertainty. This accurately illustrates McGilchrist's theory of the unwarranted hegemony of the left hemisphere. His ideal paradigm of brain lateralization provides an excellent model for the VA's task - never removing the necessary role of evidence-based criteria as detailed attentiveness to the reality before them, but insisting that words do not have the last word. The VAs know more than they can tell.

The applicants also know more than they can tell, and both VAs and applicants are communicating pre-verbal thoughts and experiences. McGilchrist's claim that language is prefigured by music, and aims primarily to communicate emotion and shape community, highlights the VA's use of words like “resonate”, “attunement” and “antennae” or, in one memorable phrase, “listening for the base notes.... finding the reason behind the reason.”³⁹² Some describe this in specifically theological terms as sharing the same Holy Spirit; more often, it is an indescribable experience of intersubjectivity. Here, silence is as important as words. In the interviews, VAs paused more often, and used more non-verbal gestures, when asked to articulate their inner experience. They almost unanimously named the importance of quiet space, prayer and liturgy in assessment conferences, and many identified the need for more of this. These silences, framed and signified by the surrounding liturgy (as Williams describes), are a primary locus of the VA's sense of God's presence in assessment systems.

It is also striking that the VAs identify the ability to pay attention – to applicants and to God – as the most important personal quality of a good VA. This echoes both

³⁹² McChlery, “How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?” 32.

McGilchrist's and Luhrmann's research on attention as key to determining how reality is perceived. When asked how increasing experience affected their ability to discern, the VAs replied that greater familiarity with the process enabled them to become less self-conscious and more authentic, shifting the focus of their attention away from themselves: "more familiarity with the process.... frees you to be you and to bring what you as a person bring". (BE). Internalising these procedural "tools" enables their very selves to be used, like Polanyi's probe, to read messages from the applicants. The VA who described an authentic applicant as "someone I can trust with my spiritual life" (LT) was explicitly using himself as an indicator. Similarly, words can function as a probe when used to facilitate empathic understanding of the other, and not for grasping, controlling or measuring. VAs need to consider how the lexicon and register of the formal report relates to the skills of spiritual conversation, which includes attending to the applicants' silences and body language. This "incapacity to invade another's life to sort it out" brings us back to the mystery of the Other and, as Williams says above, "puts us in touch with Being itself, if we know how". This question is particularly relevant for interviews. Acquiring knowledge of the other as a person requires nuanced tools for the job, and requires the VAs themselves to be confident enough to present themselves as authentic people. As a VA once said:

"We come from the mystery of existence and the mystery of individuality. My understanding of what's going on in my own head is faulty. Understanding [*the applicant's*] head is even more mysterious, and what's passing between him/her and me is also a mystery.... hope is the main thing we've got."³⁹³

In McGilchrist's work, this "spiritual" dimension emerges most directly in the area of creativity. "Life comes to us", and this irrepressible inner force or spark, accessed intuitively, has some similarities with the VA's resonance with God's spirit or call within the applicants.³⁹⁴ There is often a theological assumption of divine communication as being embedded: "If it's there, I'll see it" (DN) rather than something that can be constructed – though the church's validation of it is constructed by consistent and coherent evidence. The work of discernment is dis-covering and

³⁹³ From research for McChlery, "How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?" Used with permission.

³⁹⁴ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 230.

affirming the passion which is core to this person's identity - named by the VAs as the single most defining feature of an authentic call from God, presumably because it is very difficult to convincingly fake. For many applicants and VAs, the assessment process itself is the final stage in the communal process of chipping away extraneous matter to reveal the shape of the individual vocation. Realisation will sometimes be apophatic - knowing when it's not there - and sometimes in the revelatory "aha" moment. McGilchrist's description of philosophy applies aptly to vocational assessment systems, as experienced both by applicants and by VAs:

"Philosophy shares this trajectory - it begins in wonder, intuition, ambiguity, puzzlement and uncertainty; it progresses through being unpacked, inspected from all angles and wrestled into linearity by the left hemisphere; but its endpoint is to see that the very business of language and linearity must themselves be transcended, and once more left behind."³⁹⁵

The danger with assessment systems is where they do not complete the trajectory, but reduce themselves to the quantifiable as having the last word. The last word should, perhaps, not be a word at all.

Conclusion

Research by McGilchrist and others on brain lateralization and "knowing more than we can tell" illuminates many of the challenges of VAs in their interwoven task of discernment and assessment. Their awareness of a "sense" at work which relates uneasily to the rationally-defined aspects of their task can be understood as the operation of the right hemisphere in an essentially left-hemisphere system - which all systems inherently must be. Their difficulty in naming and articulating this coheres with the inherent difficulty of capturing implicit knowledge and pre-verbal thought in words; and the role of silence, psychosomatic signals and non-verbal communication need to be acknowledged. Their assumption that "objective" fact-based knowledge carries greater certainty than tacit knowledge is an important area where research suggests otherwise, and their discomfort with the uncertainty of personal knowledge might be alleviated. In denominations which rely heavily on written reports, the deep reflection required to wrestle pre-verbal experiences into words can be affirmed as a

³⁹⁵ McGilchrist, 178.

positive exercise, tempered with the humble awareness that the kind of spiritual interaction being described can never be reduced to a report.

Valuable insights are given by the VAs themselves to enhance their practice. Attention to the Other is vitally important, including a degree of self-emptying in order to be fully present to applicants in empathic identification. They require the dialectical balance between confidence that what is there will be revealed, and awareness of ongoing mystery. In Williams' words, what emerges will always be "knowing how to go on" in the next step of the conversational journey – which is, in fact, the *telos* of assessment conferences.

Thus far, the science of brain lateralization and its epistemological implications is of immense benefit; however, it leaves important issues which theology would want to debate. The approach taken here is rooted in the assumption that God's voice can be truly heard by deduction from human experience. There is a legitimate question as to how far knowledge of God, the ultimate Other, is the same kind of knowledge as knowledge of anything else. Further, from this chapter one would also wish to probe how far the deist belief in the Other is comparable with the Christian belief in the God who is present and revealed in Jesus Christ.³⁹⁶ Christians understand God to have a "voice" and a character, and to speak with revelatory authority – indeed, some theologians insist that God can only be known in this way. This fundamental question of theological epistemology requires to be addressed. We will turn to John Henry Newman for a theological exploration of the view that knowledge of God coheres with other knowledge (chapter 6), before exploring Karl Barth's contrary view that God is heard with certainty through the revealed Word (chapter 7). A further question for theology arises around spiritual formation. If attentive imagination has the power to shape not only what we see but also who we are, might it be possible for Christians to intentionally align themselves with God by imitating Christ, in order to cultivate an accurately discerning spirit? As we have seen, this resonates with Ignatian insights, and will be further discussed in chapter 8.

³⁹⁶ For clarification, I make no claim that McGilchrist is personally a deist – only that his frequent use of the capitalized term "Other" opens that possibility to his readers.

Chapter 6. Discernment in Newman

Previous chapters have examined the VA's experience and challenges in seeking to know and verify whether a sense of call is authentically from God, and insights from McGilchrist and others into how this knowledge is cognitively processed. These chapters turn to theology's contribution in the specific domain of how religious knowledge is formed, and how a believer gains certitude in matters of faith. This question was the focal theme of John Henry Newman's lifelong work on faith and reason.³⁹⁷ The growth and development of his thinking from his early ideas is well documented and will not be addressed here. Instead, I will focus on the later *University Sermons* and on his magisterial work *Essays on a Grammar of Assent*, which together represent his mature thought on the subject.³⁹⁸ Similarly, detailed consideration of the context of Newman's dialogue with his contemporary Froude, his post-critical philosophical stance in engagement with Locke and Whatley, and his fertile literary relationship with Coleridge and the Romantics, are regrettably beyond the scope of this study.³⁹⁹ This chapter will examine how Newman addresses his central question: How do people of faith have certitude in knowledge about God? Related to this, he considers the nature of epistemological certainty and how it can be verified, including its translation into established theological or creedal statements which carry magisterial authority.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁷ John Henry Newman (1801-90) was a prominent Anglican clergyman and a leader in the Oxford Movement, which sought to reconnect the Anglican church with its Catholic roots. He famously converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845 and became a priest. His greatest work, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, was published in 1870, and he became a Cardinal in 1879.

³⁹⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979); John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826-1843*, ed. Paul A. Boer Sr (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012).

³⁹⁹ For a full discussion on Newman's philosophical relationship to Locke and Whatley, see William R. Fey, *Faith and Doubt: The Unfolding of Newman's Thought on Certainty* (Shepherdstown, W.Va: Shepherdstown, W.Va: Patmos Press, 1976); For his literary associations, see John Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: "In Aid of a Grammar of Assent"* (Oxford: New York: Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

⁴⁰⁰ Newman uses the terms "certainty" and "certitude" interchangeably.

Newman and the *Grammar of Assent*

Newman's stated aim in the *Grammar of Assent* is to prove that a person has as real rational grounds for belief in God as for belief in anything else. This was a reaction against his many contemporaries who questioned whether complete certainty was possible about anything, and held doubt as sacred as belief.⁴⁰¹ *Contra* the prevailing intellectual climate of his time, he finds it axiomatic that ordinary human experience is the prime source of epistemological insight; therefore his philosophical basis is phenomenological rather than theoretical. Newman cites the commonplace observation that holding a belief does not first depend on successfully explaining it. Scientific proof of Christianity isn't "the popular, practical, personal evidence on which a given individual believes in it" – that comes from a different mode of knowing.⁴⁰² He begins by observing *a posteriori* how faith is formed in real human experience, and by inductive reasoning seeks to explain how that occurs – he does not begin with an epistemological hypothesis from which he reasons deductively. An important aspect of his observation is his description of the "illative sense", the culmination of many years of study.

Translated into Newman's somewhat idiosyncratic terminology, this philosophical foundation means that we let assent (faith) teach us the grammar (rules or reasoning). In *The Idea of a University* Newman advocated teaching grammar because it inculcates "the idea of science, method, order, principle and system, of rule and exception, of richness and harmony" which are essential prerequisites for developing "the largest and truest philosophical views."⁴⁰³ By the "grammar of assent" he therefore means the principles and conditions which structure the content of *any* belief. The "any" is notable, because this epistemological matrix is independent of the subject content – Newman asserts that scientific pursuit of truth in secular matters and theological pursuit of religious truth are constructed according to the same grammar. He

⁴⁰¹ Newman's correspondence with William Froude forms an excellent commentary on this. Fey, *Faith and Doubt: The Unfolding of Newman's Thought on Certainty*, 128–34.

⁴⁰² From "Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman", quoted in Lash's Introduction to Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 5.

⁴⁰³ Quoted in Martin X. Moleski, *Personal Catholicism: The Theological Epistemologies of John Henry Newman and Michael Polanyi* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University America, 2000), 15.

addresses the question of how we hold a faith conviction within the larger epistemological context of how one reaches a conviction in any kind of knowledge: how “we know that we know”.⁴⁰⁴

How is knowledge constructed?

In all of life, not just in religion, Newman asserts that “If children, if the poor, if the busy can have true faith yet cannot weigh evidence, evidence is not the simple foundation on which faith is built.”⁴⁰⁵ Far from drawing the obvious conclusion that faith is non-rational, however, Newman argues for the rationality of simple faith because he refuses to acknowledge any such concept as a uniquely “religious” mode of apprehending truth. There are two modes of assent, he says, but they are not divided into religious and secular. Rather, both operate across all domains of human comprehension.

The first mode of knowledge is “personal” or “real” assent, which is formed in the same way for any subject; where the subject is God, the conviction is “religious”.⁴⁰⁶ Real assent is rooted firmly in concrete experiences. It is particular, embracing each instance’s unique details; yet it encompasses them whole and directly, without dissemination into categories or abstractions. Real knowledge encompasses its attendant emotional energy. Consequently, this knowing carries the kind of conviction that inspires people to wonder, grounds a volitional response, and motivates concrete action. This kind of assent is always personal. It cannot be otherwise, according to Newman, since the sense of certitude resides in the mind of the knower and not in the proposition itself: “It follows that what to one intellect is proof is not so to another, and that the certainty of a proposition does properly consist in the certainty of the mind which contemplates it.”⁴⁰⁷ The same phenomenon which one person finds convincing may not persuade another. Real assent is the kind of belief or faith which engages mind, heart and will; motivates action; and ultimately forms a person’s character.

⁴⁰⁴ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 145.

⁴⁰⁵ From “Newman’s University Sermons”, Quoted in Introduction to Newman, 5.

⁴⁰⁶ Newman, 76–86.

⁴⁰⁷ Newman, 233.

Its counterpart is “scientific” or “notional” assent, which is founded on other principles, again in any subject.⁴⁰⁸ Where the subject is God, the knowledge is theological – Newman describes theology as the science of religion: “Theology... always is notional, as being scientific; religion, as being personal, should be real.”⁴⁰⁹ Notional assent is the essential faculty by which we reason according to mutually recognised, abstract theories or criteria. It is the cognitive assimilation of a concept, which builds understanding. This faculty allows us to assess probabilities and articulate the cause of our certainty, and then to communicate that information in a way that informs others and allows for engagement in debate. Newman could never justifiably be accused of fideism. He considers the task of rational assessment to be an essential component of real assent in any domain of knowledge, in order to guard against error or flights of fancy.

Newman’s work is sometimes misunderstood as an inherently contradictory or even incoherent attempt to reconcile the paradox of intellect versus emotion.⁴¹⁰ This is an oversimplification: he sees knowledge holistically. Merrigan suggests that the heuristic key to understanding Newman is to grasp his model of a polar balance between real and notional apprehension as opposite but mutually regulating principles.⁴¹¹ As Newman says:

“Each use of propositions has its own excellence and serviceableness, and each has its own imperfection. To apprehend notionally is to have breadth of mind, but to be shallow; to apprehend really is to be deep, but to be narrow-minded. The latter is the conservative principle of knowledge, and the former the principle of its advancement. Without the apprehension of

⁴⁰⁸ Newman, 52–76.

⁴⁰⁹ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, [1st ed. reprinted] / with an introduction by Nicholas Lash. (Notre Dame, Ind: Notre Dame, Ind, 1979), 62.

⁴¹⁰ For example by Floyd Medford, “Knowledge and Belief: Contexts of Newman’s Epistemology”, Quoted in Terrence Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts: The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman*, Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs (Louvain: Louvain : Peeters Press, 1991), 190–92.

⁴¹¹ Merrigan, 9–19. The same term is sometimes termed “dialectic”, but I concur with Merrigan in preferring “polarity”. It better expresses the concept that each position is intrinsically “charged”, each both attracting and repelling the other. It also seems apt to reflect Coleridge’s concept of polarity as a way of conceptualizing necessary and inseparable opposites. Coleridge’s core polarity – a force that coheres (centripetal) and a force that disperses (centrifugal) also merits comparison with McGilchrist’s right and left hemispheres. Finally, “polarity” does not imply only two partners, as “dialectic” does. In fact, I will argue below that Newman sometimes has three polarities. See Barfield, “What Coleridge Thought”, (1971).

notions, we should ever pace around one small circle of knowledge; without a firm hold upon things, we shall waste ourselves in vague speculation. However, real apprehension has the precedence, as being the scope and end and test of the notional....”⁴¹²

Grasping this polarity between real and notional epistemological modes as Newman’s foundational antecedent paradigm greatly illuminates the other frequent dualities in his terminology, and guards the reader against becoming lost in his paradoxes. As previously noted, he distinguishes between Religion: a whole life shaped and enlivened by faith and characterized by worship, prayer and formation of Christian character; and Theology: the rational construction of concepts and beliefs, which are an essential constituent part of religion but not the whole. “Theology.... deals with notional apprehension; religion with imaginative.”⁴¹³ This is analogous with his distinction between faith, which is the implicit and creative power; and reason, which is explicit and critical. He offers a similar distinction between apprehension (believing or grasping *how* something is) and comprehension (understanding *what or why* it is); or believing *in* and believing *that*. A further example is the distinction between natural religion and revealed religion, the former being a preparatory state of mind for the “higher state of belief” of the latter.⁴¹⁴ Interestingly, it is *attention* to natural religion which feeds both the desire and expectation for revelation: “... when our attention is roused, then the more steadily we dwell upon it, the more probable does it seem that a revelation has or will be given to us.”⁴¹⁵

Though much of his terminology is particular to Newman, other influences are clear. He is drawing deeply on older Christian scholasticism, for example Aquinas’ distinction between ratio, the reasoning faculty, and *intellectus*: “a certain intimate knowing...[which] penetrates as far as the essence of a thing, its objective interest being...what a thing really is.”⁴¹⁶ Lash notes the even older Biblical similarity with the

⁴¹² Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 47.

⁴¹³ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, [1st ed. reprinted]/with an introduction by Nicholas Lash. (Notre Dame, Ind: Notre Dame, Ind, 1979), 108.

⁴¹⁴ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 321.

⁴¹⁵ Newman, 328.

⁴¹⁶ *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae 8.1:de dono intellectus.

paradoxical relationship between “faith” and “sight” in the Fourth Gospel.⁴¹⁷ Coulson summarises Newman’s position here: “Thus, to have correct beliefs must be distinguished from knowing or holding the truth. What we hold, we hold – in the primary sense – not as propositions, but *doxologically*, that is in the prayer of praise, memory and hope – from which doctrinal or metaphysical forms are but inferences.”⁴¹⁸

The same fundamental dualism underlies the structure of the *Grammar of Assent*. Part 1 is a general phenomenological analysis of belief and understanding (Assent and Apprehension), which is then applied to religion. In Part 2, a similar analysis of belief and certitude (Assent and Inference) is again finally applied to religion. The contrast between faith and reason is not between belief and unbelief, but between two modes of rationality held in polar tension – or alternatively, between different stages of our cognitive assimilation of the same phenomenon. It is the thing believed, not the act of believing, that is peculiar to religion. Thus Newman believes that certitude is possible in matters of faith: having as real an apprehension of, and assent to, an object of faith as to a material object. Again this is grounded in observing ordinary life experience, where the human mind often assents absolutely on reasons which, taken separately, are but probabilities. He argues, furthermore, that “scientific” knowledge rests not on solid or objective foundations, but on antecedent assumptions (“first principles”) which it cannot furnish for itself. You can believe what you cannot understand (Part 1); you can also believe what you cannot absolutely prove (Part 2).

Part 1 of the *Grammar of Assent* addresses the phenomenon of believing what one cannot understand. The structure (or grammar) of personal knowledge of God in Christ shares common features with the structure of common-sense knowledge of empirical reality as established in scientific studies. It is “engaged, experiential, pre-reflexive, imaginative”.⁴¹⁹ Newman expands the normal definition of rationality: “We are conscious of the objects of external nature, and we reflect and act upon them, and this consciousness, reflection and action we call rationality.”⁴²⁰ He does not restrict it to the mind’s linear logical capacities, as is often the case in common parlance. For him, rationality incorporates all our awareness of phenomena and any mental activity

⁴¹⁷ Introduction to Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 10.

⁴¹⁸ Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: “In Aid of a Grammar of Assent,”* 39.

⁴¹⁹ Introduction to Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 13.

⁴²⁰ Newman, 272.

including imagination, creativity and judgment. This to some extent, but not entirely, elucidates his unusual description of faith as “rational”. It also explains some of his reader’s common difficulties with the *Grammar*: his use of many terms is polysemic, and his definition of reason cannot be fully distinguished from faith. For Newman, assent and understanding together encompass the action of the whole mind.

In Part 2 Newman illustrates how certitude is possible in concrete matters which cannot be proved, and addresses the problem of verification. We attain certitude through a combination of probabilities from many directions, and then we close the gap. He likens the process of acquiring proof to a movement whereby “a regular polygon, inscribed in a circle, its sides being continually diminished, tends to become that circle.... A proof is the limit of converging probabilities.”⁴²¹ How is the gap reduced? Newman the rationalist avoids any suggestion of a leap of faith: “Newman never leapt anywhere in his life.”⁴²² Rather, he considers the process as analogous to the constant expansion of the polygon into the circle: we grow, rather than leap, into conviction. Newman comments tellingly on diminishing the gap:

“I think it is *wisdom* which tells us when to discard the logical imperfection and assent to the conclusion which ought to be drawn [but which cannot quite be proved or demonstrated].... but I am arguing against the principle that wisdom is a higher sort of logic.”⁴²³

We therefore move to consider the role of wisdom and other capacities by which knowledge is acquired.

How is knowledge gained? Imagination, Conscience and the Illative Sense

Given his understanding of the grammar of assent, Newman’s concept of how knowledge is gained and experienced is necessarily broader than merely acquiring information. For Newman, human knowing in the fullest sense utilizes three faculties alongside the intellectual: imagination, conscience, and wisdom or the “illative sense”.

⁴²¹ Newman, 253–54.

⁴²² Introduction to Newman, 17.

⁴²³ From “Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman”, Quoted in Introduction to Newman, 8.

The theme of imagination has architectonic significance in Newman, though he never precisely defines it and there is a sense even in his later work that his thinking here is still in process. A vital clue to his concept of imagination is found in early drafts of the *Grammar of Assent*, where “notional” assent was originally the counterpart to “imaginative” assent – later, he changed “imaginative” to “real”.⁴²⁴ Throughout the *Grammar* his interchangeable use of “imaginative” and “real” sounds counter-intuitive to our contemporary ears, and alerts us to his distinctive semantics. Imagination, for Newman, encompasses much more than the mind’s ability to visualize things, though he frequently uses visual metaphors for mental perception. Nor does he conceive it as an inventive power *per se*. Rather, it is “our entire faculty of knowing the concrete.”⁴²⁵ Merrigan usefully distinguishes its two complementary functions for Newman: the realizing imagination, which operates on an abstract concept to render it in a concrete material image; and the prehending imagination, which synthesizes multiple chaotic impressions into a single coherent concept.⁴²⁶ These are dual functions of the same imagination, the former in its notional mode and the latter in its real mode. Particularly the latter is in evidence when the imagination focuses on Christ. Having “the image of the Incarnate Son in our hearts” involves holding together the “distinct notions that Christ is both human and divine.”⁴²⁷ Imagination is the capacity of the real to hold in creative tension what is irreconcilable by reason alone.

In order to fully understand his concept of imagination, it helps to turn from Newman the theologian or philosopher and focus instead on Newman the poet, among his Romantic contemporaries. Coleridge best articulated their shared concept of imagination, distinguishing it from reason, feeling or any distinct mental faculty. He describes it as the creative facility which brings the whole soul of man into activity: it “dissolves, diffuses, and dissipates, in order to re-create.”⁴²⁸ In the *Apologia*, Newman similarly describes imagination as “the whole man moving, and logic as but the paper record of it”.⁴²⁹ More than negatively suspending our disbelief (in the famous

⁴²⁴ John Coulson, “Faith and Imagination,” *The Furrow* 34, no. 9 (1983): 82.

⁴²⁵ Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts: The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman*, 51.

⁴²⁶ Merrigan, 57–65.

⁴²⁷ Merrigan, 63.

⁴²⁸ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Quoted in Coulson, *Faith and Imagination*, 7.

⁴²⁹ Newman, *Apologia*, Quoted in Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: “In Aid of a Grammar of Assent,”* 58.

Coleridgean phrase), imagination positively predisposes us to believe in what it realizes. It actively draws us to see the world differently, with a renewed and enlarged sense of reality. It thus commends an engaged assent which Newman describes as “energetic”, by contrast with the “languid” assent to conclusions from the intellect alone.⁴³⁰

It was Newman’s fundamental conviction that religious belief originates in the imagination (thus defined), and that the world and the power of sin overcomes us by distorting our imagination and rendering the orthodox Christian vision unreal to us. “The world overcomes us, not merely by appealing to our reason or exciting our passions, but by imposing on our imagination.”⁴³¹ The lost ancient connection between Christian faith and the imagination must be restored. Without this connection, religion is eviscerated into demythologized notions and articles of belief. Belief must first be credible to the imagination, as people are impelled to worship and action by what moves them imaginatively – by real, as distinct from notional, assent. Here, Newman acclaims the potential of imagination to be deployed to good effect in providing an alternative to the worldly vision in a Christian focal image – that of Christ, found in the Church: “Catholicism appeals to the imagination.”⁴³² He also refers to truth revealed in Scripture as correctly forming the Christian imagination.⁴³³

How we can hold a belief that we cannot adequately explain? Newman answers his own question is, in essence, by appealing to imagination: “Certitude does not come under the reasoning faculty, but under the imagination.”⁴³⁴ Epistemological conviction emerges from a gradual convergence of different probabilities which induce belief rather than proving it. However, what is discerned imaginatively is unstable until it is verified. Imagination, like faith, seeks understanding to provide it with substance and authenticate it. Far from being a flight of fancy, the full force of an appeal to

⁴³⁰ From an early manuscript of the *Grammar of Assent*, quoted in Coulson, *Faith and Imagination*, 83.

⁴³¹ Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826-1843*, 130.

⁴³² Quoted in Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts: The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman*, 61.

⁴³³ Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826-1843*, 131-34.

⁴³⁴ Unpublished material, Quoted in Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: “In Aid of a Grammar of Assent,”* 59.

imagination requires a complex range of verifications which Newman seeks, with characteristic intellectual rigour, to establish (as discussed below). However, Coulson notes that one should not underestimate in Newman “the extent to which our real and imaginative assents have already committed us to their authentication.”⁴³⁵ Faith, once established, seeks verification; it is not easily disposed to be contradicted. Again, this would hold across all domains of knowledge as well as religious faith.⁴³⁶

As well as through imagination, real knowledge is also gained and experienced via the conscience, which Newman regards as an intrinsic communication of God to us.⁴³⁷

Describing an infant, he argues:

“... until we account for the knowledge which an infant has of his mother or his nurse, what reason have we to take exception at the doctrine, as strange and difficult, that in the dictate of conscience, without previous experiences or analogical reasoning, he is able gradually to perceive the voice, or the echoes of the voice, of a Master, living, personal and sovereign?”⁴³⁸

This is not a special revelation to believers: Newman believes that conscience is an anthropological phenomenon inherent in all human beings. It is “the testimony that there is a right and a wrong, and a sanction to that testimony conveyed in the feelings which attend on right or wrong conduct,” for example guilt or joy.⁴³⁹ Conscience brings the sense of a particular judgment (whether prohibitive or hortatory) on the quality of an action, and it is verified by feelings. These emotions reliably indicate the character of the invisible Being whom we encounter in our conscience: “Supernatural and divine”, “a Judge: holy, just powerful, all-seeing”, “one to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims we fear.”⁴⁴⁰ Newman considers it self-evident that only a real and intelligent being could arouse in us the feelings attendant

⁴³⁵ Coulson, *Faith and Imagination*, 146.

⁴³⁶ This insight is supported by modern psychological research into belief perseverance, self-fulfilling prophecy, and confirmation bias. For a brief introduction, see Myers, *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils*, 115–19.

⁴³⁷ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979 chapters 5 and 10.

⁴³⁸ Newman, 102.

⁴³⁹ Newman, 98.

⁴⁴⁰ Newman, 101–3.

on conscience. Among other modes of apprehension, conscience is therefore most intimately connected with God: it is “the echo of God’s voice in us”.⁴⁴¹

Newman is perfectly aware that he cannot rationally prove his belief that conscience is anthropologically intrinsic to humanity, let alone that its source is a transcendent Being. Consonant with his whole methodology, “he seeks to prove by persuasion, rather than to persuade by proof.”⁴⁴² Again, he roots his conviction in observed experience, and thus regards it as a “first principle”. Every person has these principles furnished by Nature, he asserts, and every process of reasoning can ultimately be traced back to them.⁴⁴³ Against the obvious logical fallacy of assuming as a first principle something that requires proof, Newman asserts the essentially personal nature of real assent in any domain of knowledge:

“I cannot think, reflect or judge about my being without starting from the very point which I aim at concluding. My ideas are all assumptions, and I am ever moving in a circle. I cannot avoid being sufficient for myself, for I cannot make myself anything else, and to change me is to destroy me...My only business is to ascertain what I am, in order to put it to use.”⁴⁴⁴

This does not absolve us of responsibility for our assumptions: they should be tested by logic, and may be proved false. However, against the evidentialists Newman asserts that all thought, including scientific methodology, rests on antecedent assumptions which are incapable of proof. While the evidence of the senses is foundational in the empirical sciences, in religion Newman believes conscience to be the most generally understood and experienced mode of communication between God and humanity. This raises challenging questions for its authority and how its dictates can be verified, which are discussed below.

While imagination and conscience are clearly distinct, the third and most complex of Newman’s non-rational epistemological faculties encompasses them both and transcends them. Newman often refers to “wisdom”, but the *Grammar* culminates by introducing his synonymous term for the faculty of discerning and judging: the

⁴⁴¹ Newman, 102.

⁴⁴² Lash’s introduction to Newman, 12.

⁴⁴³ Newman, 290–97.

⁴⁴⁴ Newman, 272–73.

“illative sense.”⁴⁴⁵ This crystallises his thought about informal reasoning as it had developed over three decades. The term itself (from the Latin root *latus*, meaning “inference”) would have been less oblique to his contemporaries than it is today. The illative sense denotes the power by which the mind generates and evaluates inferences in order to determine meaning or reach sapiential judgments. Moleski proposes as modern synonym “the power of insight” or “rational intuition,” or “the conscience of the intellect.... which guards the integrity of its own reasoning processes.”⁴⁴⁶ It is the means by which the intellect reaches intuitively appropriate judgments: in a letter to a friend, Newman described it as “a grand word for a common thing.”⁴⁴⁷ Newman stresses that he intends the word “sense” as in “good sense” or “common sense”, i.e. as a cognitive more than an affective faculty.⁴⁴⁸ (Elsewhere, he says “I have no faith in sensations.”⁴⁴⁹) He holds the illative sense as the controlling and determining principle which guides the mind in matters of conduct. It is specific and practical: ethical systems provide generalities, but “the authoritative oracle.... is seated in the mind of the individual”.⁴⁵⁰ Newman adduces multiple examples of situations where experts agree on the facts but differ on their meaning, because the illative sense ultimately governs a person’s final conviction of truth.⁴⁵¹

As different forms of wisdom are required for different tasks – someone may be a good judge in music, for example, but not in medicine – Newman rejects the assumption that logic should be the instrument for determining every kind of truth. It is far better suited to some subjects than to others.⁴⁵² The illative sense is that “subtle and elastic logic of thought” which is required to supplement the logic of language in every matter.⁴⁵³ It is little helped by logic, though logic is necessary on other grounds – for example, to communicate concepts between people. Ultimately, the illative sense is

⁴⁴⁵ Newman, chap. 9.

⁴⁴⁶ Moleski, *Personal Catholicism*, 2.

⁴⁴⁷ “Letter to Charles Meynell”, 1869, Quoted in Moleski, 1.

⁴⁴⁸ From “Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman”, Quoted in Introduction to Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 17.

⁴⁴⁹ From “Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman”, Quoted in Introduction to Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 6.

⁴⁵⁰ Newman, 278.

⁴⁵¹ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 279–80.

⁴⁵² Newman, 280.

⁴⁵³ Newman, 281.

“an intellectual instrument far too subtle and spiritual to be scientific.”⁴⁵⁴ While not specifically aligning it with the divine as he does with conscience, Newman does hint that:

“... there is something deeper in our differences than the accident of external circumstances, and we need the interposition of a Power, greater than human teaching and human argument, to make our beliefs true and our minds one.”⁴⁵⁵

The illative sense as the medium of this unifying and discerning power is, Newman suggests, synonymous with Aristotle’s wisdom. For Aristotle, *Phronesis* originates in nature, and Newman holds the same positive anthropology that is optimistic about humanity’s intrinsic ability to connect with God (as previously exemplified by conscience). However, wisdom must be informed and matured by experience and practice. Its *telos* is the formation of character: “Thus it is, and not by science, that he perfects the virtues of justice, self-command, magnanimity, generosity, gentleness and all others. *Phronesis* is the regulating principle of every one of them.”⁴⁵⁶ Spiritual discernment is not a matter of groundless intuition, or of a single revelatory experience, though both are important. Ultimately, it is a gradual personal formation of the mind of Christ, informed holistically by the illative sense.

As with all knowledge for Newman, this echoes its secular counterparts. One secular example of the illative sense in operation, contemporaneous with Newman and a source of his philosophy, occurs in Sir Joshua Reynolds’ views in “Discourses on Painting and the Fine Arts.” Here Reynolds discusses the formation of a habitual and honed faculty of artistic judgment, which emerges from a person’s whole experience of life. This quality of perception is almost inexplicable on purely rational grounds, being drawn from innumerable barely-remembered specific instances. Reynolds merits quoting at length:

“There is.... a sagacity which is far from being contrary to right reason, and is superior to any occasional exercise of that faculty; which supersedes it, and does not wait for the slow process of deduction but goes at once, by what appears a kind of intuition, to the conclusion. A man endowed with

⁴⁵⁴ Newman, 285.

⁴⁵⁵ Newman, 293.

⁴⁵⁶ Newman, 279.

this faculty feels and acknowledges the truth, though it is not always in his power, perhaps, to give a reason for it.... This impression is the result of the accumulated experience of our whole life.... and ought to prevail over that reason which, however powerfully exerted on any particular occasion, will probably comprehend but a partial view of the subject.”⁴⁵⁷

Such secular examples known to Newman illustrate how the illative sense operates across all domains: it is the elastic extension beyond logical thought into the realm of sapiential discernment, incorporating reason but transcending it. In the religious domain, its ultimate fulfillment is to form the mind of Christ in believers. The fact that intuitive perception is not entirely explicable by reason makes it inherently humble: it acknowledges its limitations and embraces what it does not know. Though the capacity to find God in all things is fundamental to discernment for Newman, he highlights the particular roles of habitual prayer, the sacraments and worship in shaping the Christian’s spiritual sensibilities – the illative sense as it relates to God. The habitually praying person “is no longer what he was before.... gradually, imperceptibly to himself, he has imbibed a new set of ideas and become imbued with fresh principles. ...prayer is the instrument of divine fellowship and divine training.”⁴⁵⁸

Newman’s style: How is knowledge described?

If knowledge resides in the dynamic liminal space between evidentialism and fideism, and belief in order to gain assent must first be credible to the imagination, what language is adequate to describe it? Both as poet and as a theologian, Newman passionately opposed any attempts to demythologize religion, or to reduce its complexities to unambiguous so-called facts or truths. Rather, he regarded myth and metaphor as the language of the whole reality which encompasses both poles of rationality and imagination. The beauty of liturgical language was a major factor in attracting Newman away from low-church evangelicalism towards Catholicism. Literary style was a defining feature of the Oxford Movement, and later influenced

⁴⁵⁷ Quoted in McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth : The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge*,

175.

⁴⁵⁸ McIntosh, 176.

Newman's selection of a Roman Catholic order – he eschewed the Vincentians for “not giving to theology and literature that place in their system which we wished.”⁴⁵⁹

Newman's own literary style and methodology in his sermons and books – how he articulates knowledge – is remarkably coherent with his epistemology. Coulson's excellent study of the similarities between imaginative assent in literature and religion traces Newman's stylistic roots to Bishop Lancelot Andrewes.⁴⁶⁰ Andrewes' sermons, according to T. S. Eliot, amassed his points obliquely and gradually, by analogy, to “terminate in the ecstasy of assent.”⁴⁶¹ Similarly, Newman's style is not unsystematic but neither is it linear - one reason why the *Grammar* in particular is often found challenging to read. He proceeds by adding one image and thought to another by analogy, juxtaposing and echoing and modifying to gradually build a rich and complex text, rather as one would compose a symphony. This literary style is perfectly apposite to exemplify his belief that a revelation of truth must be uncovered from what is there, rather than being sought in a new metaphysical idea or explanation. It allows him as author to be located within his own investigation as an engaged participant, rather than seeking an Archimedean vantage point (which Newman would have considered intrinsically futile in any epistemological endeavor).

Newman's literary style also compares with Shakespeare's multiple imagery in his plays, and with Scripture; for example, in Jesus' parables, or the apostle Paul's various metaphors for the Church.⁴⁶² In each, multiple analogies are yoked together despite being different and in some respects contradictory. This creative association of terms allows feeling and thought to be juxtaposed in a single whole, without requiring reductionist and simplistic divisions into affective and cognitive dimensions. Newman has no fear of paradox; rather, he embraces it. Writing of Scripture, he says: “It is a property of depth to lead a writer into verbal contradictions, and it is a property of simplicity not to care to avoid them.”⁴⁶³ Words have both their uses and their constraints, and there is a level of complexity at which any apparent coherence reaches

⁴⁵⁹ “Newman the Oratorian”, Quoted in Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: “In Aid of a Grammar of Assent,”* 35.

⁴⁶⁰ Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: “In Aid of a Grammar of Assent.”*

⁴⁶¹ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, Quoted in Coulson, 22.

⁴⁶² Coulson, 20.

⁴⁶³ Newman, “Discussions and Arguments”, Quoted in Coulson, 63.

its limit. Metaphor and analogy are the only satisfactory ways to render intelligible an ambiguous and paradoxical truth which is unquestionably real, but also beyond being captured in any single image. The unifying principle is reality itself; reality being understood as the whole entity indicated by the inter-related metaphors within which each finds its meaning. Each metaphor in some way embodies the reality, but in other ways is inadequate. Multiple analogies mutually modify each other, and form a safeguard against any one of them being considered sufficient. Newman describes this process as “saying and unsaying to positive result”,⁴⁶⁴ or “building by opposite strokes”.⁴⁶⁵ Nor is he suggesting that a finite number of analogies will forever and definitively embody a phenomenon, though they can convey the reader to the point of certitude. The nature of metaphor, as with real religion, is to be a living text, always holding the reader open to further depth of insight and possibilities of experience arising from what has already been revealed. Such new insights can only be accurately discerned by an imaginative response to what is already known.

As always with Newman, one pole of his thought is quickly modified by another. If verbal contradiction is unavoidable, this does not mean incoherence of thought; nor does the weight given to metaphor allow free rein to random flights of fancy. Though literal and propositional theological statements never have the last word, they have a vital place. They are necessary to determine that propositions about the sacred mysteries are not inherently contradictory (for example, a square circle) and therefore intrinsically impossible.⁴⁶⁶ There is a world of difference between something that cannot be said, and something that cannot be true. Newman firmly distinguished between dogma discerned as reality, and dogma held intellectually as truth.⁴⁶⁷ Generally speaking, the former is expressed poetically in Scripture, liturgy and doxology. The latter is expressed propositionally in the Creeds, which translate the metaphorical density of the Scriptures into logical form for analysis and argument. This reflects his belief that religious propositions are true in different ways. Thus belief, which is rooted in imagination, issues in reliable inferences which converge and

⁴⁶⁴ Newman, "Theological Papers", Quoted in Coulson, 63.

⁴⁶⁵ Newman, "Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine", Quoted in Coulson, "Faith and Imagination," 64.

⁴⁶⁶ Newman, "Treatises of St Athanasius", Quoted in Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: "In Aid of a Grammar of Assent,"* 64.

⁴⁶⁷ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 75.

accumulate to authenticate our imaginative assents, making us certain of what we cannot prove: so that we know that we know.

Newman's literary and rhetorical style yields not the iron bar of proof, but the certainty of a rope interwoven from many strands of accumulated probability (see below). By relying on the irreducible character of metaphor and analogy, it coheres with its subject - the grammar of assent. His purpose is less to inform the reader than to provoke her to the appropriate performative response. With regard to verbalizing faith, that response may well be silence: "All men have a reason, but not all men can give a reason."⁴⁶⁸ The fact that for many people, their faith conviction can be sincerely held but cannot be explained or articulated does not deny its authenticity, and silence may be a valid response.

How is knowledge verified?

If real knowledge is best described analogically in a structure of inter-related metaphors, the appropriate forms of verification must be similarly complex. No single mode of proof suffices for all cases. This is vital for Newman's argument that faith has as rational a basis as any other kind of knowledge: looking for the wrong form of verification leads to a mistaken denial of faith.

"A man who said, I cannot trust a cable, I must have an iron bar" would *in certain given cases* be irrational and unreasonable: so too is a man who says I must have a rigid demonstration, not a moral demonstration, of religious truth."⁴⁶⁹ (italics original).

Precisely what, therefore, constitutes appropriate evidence in epistemological claims about the divine? In chapter 6 of the *Grammar*, Newman states bluntly that there are no absolute tests which would establish truths about God beyond dispute – to insist on these is to misunderstand the subject matter. However, throughout his work he identifies the strands that wind themselves into a cable strong enough to support certitude. One main strand is the kind of "proof" available for certainty in material subjects; another is the inward witness of faith and love in believers' lives; and a third

⁴⁶⁸ Coulson, *Religion and Imagination*: "In Aid of a Grammar of Assent," 57.

⁴⁶⁹ Newman, "Letters xxi" 46, Quoted in Coulson, *Religion and Imagination*: "In Aid of a Grammar of Assent," 58.

is the church. All contribute to the inner certitude of the illative sense and the imagination.

Newman never denies the role of evidence and logical testing as proof - where something is inherently illogical, it cannot be true. Though logic cannot create faith, it is invaluable in critiquing it, including questioning its first principles. Logic, therefore, has a more negative than positive function. In his study of faith and doubt in Newman, Fey points out that Newman distinguishes between two different kinds of evidence. One is rational and “grasped by means of the things which lie about it.” The other is felt to be true by its very nature: “In intuition, the light is the proposition itself”⁴⁷⁰. Evidence relates to the former, and sheds little light on the latter. Again, this reflects the underlying dualism of real (intuitive) and notional (rational) knowledge.

A second important strand of verification is the inward authentication of conscience and the illative sense in believers. Newman believes that love is an important verification of truth; so is the inner affirmation of conscience. Overarching all of these is the illative sense, the ultimate self-authenticating criterion. It is “is a rule to itself, and appeals to no judgment beyond its own.”⁴⁷¹ Newman does not resolve how these relate to ecclesial authority, and makes conflicting statements.⁴⁷² In his “Letter to the Duke of Norfolk”, he emphasizes the believer’s intellect and rights of conscience over obedience to the Pope. In the *Apologia*, his major work on conscience, he concludes that in practice it should yield to papal authority. Since he regards both conscience and the deposit of faith in the church as communicating God directly to people, presumably he judges that they should not significantly conflict. However, such a hope does not resolve the tension in Newman between internal and external verification.

Inward authentication is outwardly manifest in the church, which Newman regards as crucial to the verification of faith both theologically and practically. Theologically, he believes that the Roman Catholic Church is the embodiment of revelation, and that “Theology is commensurate with Revelation, and revelation is the initial and essential

⁴⁷⁰ Fey, *Faith and Doubt : The Unfolding of Newman’s Thought on Certainty*, 173.

⁴⁷¹ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 283.

⁴⁷² Cyril O’Regan, “John Henry Newman”, in William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology* (Oxford, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: OUP Oxford, 2017), 516.

idea of Christianity.”⁴⁷³ Practically, the church is the community within which faith is lived and demonstrated; a visible incarnate sign of God’s presence in the world. It is the inherent life of God which ultimately verifies the Church’s authenticity: Newman once commented, “I believe I was the first writer who made *life* the mark of the true Church.”⁴⁷⁴ Christianity is no dead letter but is proved in the living of it: “Revelation was not given to satisfy doubts, but to make us better men.”⁴⁷⁵

Given these rather indeterminate proofs of authenticity, Newman wrestled deeply with the idea of papal infallibility, or any extrinsic source authoritative enough to over-rule inner certitude. He believed that the deposit of faith entrusted to the Catholic Church is complete. No new revelations on matters of core doctrine are to be sought; only wisdom on how it is to be applied. The Church’s doctrinal role is to provide a safeguard against basic theological error, and nothing more. Again, logic or notional assent has a subsidiary and mainly negative function. Infallibility operates in the church as believers hear the authoritative testimonies of their predecessors in faith, including the testimony of the Scriptures and Creeds – the voices of those they trust. Coulson suggests that infallibility operates on a similar principle to the expansion of the polygon into the circle: an individual grows into increasing harmony with the Church in its doctrine and people: “the polygon of oneself expands in to the circle of a world unseen.”⁴⁷⁶ By providing a community of faith as the context for devout lives of worship, prayer and faithful action, the Church makes God plausible to both reason and imagination. Newman therefore judges the Reformation harshly for challenging the church, as “accordingly, revealed religion was in great measure stripped of its proof” (or, in modern terms, its means of empirical verification).⁴⁷⁷ Beyond the Church’s general role in authenticating knowledge of God, Newman contributes more about the internal process by which the Church communally discerns specific concepts as disclosive of the divine, as discussed below.

⁴⁷³ Quoted in Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts : The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman*, 242.

⁴⁷⁴ “Letters, xi”, 101, Quoted in Coulson, *Religion and Imagination : “In Aid of a Grammar of Assent,”* 60.

⁴⁷⁵ “Newman’s Parochial and Plain Sermons”, Quoted in Coulson, 77.

⁴⁷⁶ Coulson, 70.

⁴⁷⁷ Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826-1843*, 82.

There are no absolute tests to produce certainty that faith is real or that God has spoken. Rather, for Newman, proof is constructed in the same way as faith itself, on the architectural model of the arch:

“Now, is not the proof of Religion of *this* kind? I liken it to the mechanism of some triumph of skill, tower or spire, geometrical staircase or vaulted roof, where “*Ars est celare artum*”, where all display of strength is carefully avoided, and the weight is ingeniously thrown in a variety of directions, upon supports which are distinct from, or independent of each other.”⁴⁷⁸

This yields the level of epistemological certainty required for faith. He points out that “we speak of *having* knowledge, and *feeling* certain.”⁴⁷⁹ The certitude that involves both reason and imagination leaves room for questioning and growth to strengthen notional assent (having knowledge), but not for doubt which would undermine the real or personal assent which alone makes faith possible (feeling certain). Ultimately, faith is ambiguous and empirically unverifiable. “Faith is firm assent to the word of God obscurely revealed.”⁴⁸⁰

Communal Discernment in Newman

Newman was ahead of his time in understanding knowledge as contextual and personal. Without negating the intellect, his emphasis on individual illation raised understandable accusations of subjectivism and relativism, and the reasonable question of how communities can assess truth claims based on individual insight. How can the subjective become objective, and how do communities judge or verify the validity of personal convictions?

Newman acknowledged the difficulty of gaining epistemic access to the processes by which convictions are formed – without these, they cannot be evidenced or validated. A “common measure” is required: recognised and verifiable criteria which make a presumptive mode of reasoning secure. He never systematically addressed the question of communal judgment, but frequently implied the importance of communal

⁴⁷⁸ Newman, Letters xix, Quoted in Coulson, *Religion and Imagination : “In Aid of a Grammar of Assent,”* 56.

⁴⁷⁹ Unpublished material by Newman, Quoted in Coulson, 58.

⁴⁸⁰ Unpublished material by Newman, Quoted in Coulson, 78.

practice; for example, the role of love in verifying truth,⁴⁸¹ and ratifying conscience by the common experience of all people.⁴⁸² However, none of these constitutes an adequate common measure. The strongest possibility would be reason or logic, which is adducible by external criteria and facilitates discussion. However, Newman is frustratedly aware that an individual's logical position is grounded in antecedent probabilities, which makes argument futile with anyone not predisposed to be convinced: "How can formal logic achieve its purpose if it only leads us back to first principles, about which there is interminable controversy?"⁴⁸³ Logic alone cannot provide a common measure.

Newman's most developed response to this conundrum applies to church communities, and is located in his ecclesiology. Merrigan demonstrates that "the same basic polar structure discernible in Newman's vision of how the illative sense operates in the individual is present in his vision of the process of dogmatic definition in the church."⁴⁸⁴ The church's ultimate real identity, Newman believes, lies in embodying the fact of God's revelation. Newman describes this as a kind of primordial sense perception, "the *consensus fidelium*.... a sort of instinct, or *Phronema*, deep in the bosom of the mystical body of Christ...an intuitive spiritual perception in scripturally informed and deeply religious minds."⁴⁸⁵ This is generally agreed to be identical to *Phronesis* or the illative sense, transposed to a corporate context.⁴⁸⁶

From this initial real apprehension in the church's experience arises the formal inference which expresses it notionally, i.e. theology. Newman explicates at length theology's complex relationship with faith, best conceptualized as a reciprocal polarity:

"The dialectical movement between the magisterium and the baptized faithful.... occurs, of course, at the level of grace, and the process can be described in terms of the original unity that is the Holy Spirit. All dialectical movement attempts to recapture the original unity from which it

⁴⁸¹ Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826-1843* Sermon 12: "Love, the Safeguard of Faith against Superstition."

⁴⁸² Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 304.

⁴⁸³ Newman, 216.

⁴⁸⁴ Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts: The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman*, 229.

⁴⁸⁵ Merrigan, 235.

⁴⁸⁶ Merrigan, 235.

arose. Thus faith is externalized into words (i.e. Newman's principle of dogma), and the words are assimilated, under the action of the Holy Spirit, so that there is proper understanding (internalization) of what had been externalized. The faith of the church returns to itself in more articulated form, but not as a stranger."⁴⁸⁷

Thus Newman's ecclesiology is again expressed in further pairs of polar terms within the basic paradigm of real and notional: devotional instinct and doctrine; laity and clergy; passive and active infallibility, all employing the same lateral movement and finally incorporated into the former (real apprehension), which is prior both temporally and in importance.

Here is Newman's firmest articulation of how truth is communally discerned and affirmed. Though the deposit of faith is always present in the (Roman Catholic) church, it is most reliably apprehended by those formed to spiritual maturity by habitual engagement with the means of grace: Scripture, the sacraments, and worship. These nurture the laity's innate theological knowledge. This is the *sensus fidelium*, the genuine *locus theologicus* from which issues the Church's theological work and magisterial role, and to which they return as their ultimate verification.⁴⁸⁸ Equally and reciprocally, the faithful will embrace the authentic teaching and authority of the church. The laity is passively infallible and the magisterium is actively infallible; when they cohere in the unity of the Spirit, they demonstrate infallibly the illative sense in their communal judgment. "The church teaching and the church taught are put together as the twofold testimony, illustrating each other, and never to be divided."⁴⁸⁹ Thus the *phronema*, the active instinct for truth embedded in the believing community is the infallible judge in religious matters.

Newman scholar Frederick Aquino contributes his own intriguing development of Newman's thinking on communal judgment, one which does not require an ecclesial context.⁴⁹⁰ Aquino extracts Newman's undeveloped indications of the importance of community, and integrates them with modern insights into virtue theory and social

⁴⁸⁷ Miller, Newman on Church, Quoted in Merrigan, 239.

⁴⁸⁸ Merrigan, 236.

⁴⁸⁹ Merrigan, 237.

⁴⁹⁰ Frederick D. Aquino, *Communities of Informed Judgment: Newman's Illative Sense and Accounts of Rationality* (Washington, D. C: Catholic University America Pr, 2004).

epistemology to demonstrate how groups mature in knowledge and experience into communities of informed judgment or “extended illation”. He believes that the problem of community instantiation of the illative sense can be transposed to the problem of trusting a belief-forming process, and outlines how communities reach a “grammar of consent” on reliable theological judgments which support, verify and articulate their communal faith and thus facilitate inter-community discussion.⁴⁹¹

Aquino finds in Newman four essential elements for the formation of communal judgment, and describes how they cohere. Of first importance are praiseworthy dispositions: “We come to knowledge of God and other religious truths only if our affections are rightly ordered... [it] requires that we be the right sorts of persons.”⁴⁹² Examples of this would include love and humility, virtues which can only be formed in community. People must first belong in order to behave, and to believe. Secondly, Aquino cites modalities of reason, including natural, formal and informal inference. Communities of informed judgment acknowledge their complementary co-existence and practice all of them, with members sharing the cognitive load. Aquino particularly associates the illative sense with informal inference, or fast and frugal heuristics.⁴⁹³ Next is the importance of evidence. The community must determine what constitutes valid evidence, how it is assessed, and who is best qualified to assess it – this is related to praiseworthy dispositions, creating a potentially vicious circle of epistemic relativism. Finally comes wisdom, which Aquino describes as the illative sense in mature form: “right reasoning in judgment”.⁴⁹⁴ The community is crucial in forming this, by providing exemplars of informed judgment. Aquino notes modern research by Klein into recognition-primed decision-making as part of intuitive expertise, and explicitly associates this with wisdom: “Though people of informed judgment operate from an extensive basis of knowledge and wisdom, the distinguishing mark is recognizing patterns, connecting ideas, and seeing the big picture.”⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹¹ Aquino, 97.

⁴⁹² Aquino, 125, quoting William J. Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous*, p.190.

⁴⁹³ Aquino, 129.

⁴⁹⁴ Aquino, 139.

⁴⁹⁵ Aquino 2004, 144. I am less convinced than Aquino that the illative sense coheres with intuitive expertise, or that spiritual wisdom can so easily be reduced to pattern recognition. Further research is required here.

Aquino's emphasis on reaching corporate theological judgment (which is, in my view, only one aspect of spiritual discernment) tends more towards belief than religion – a key Newmanian distinction which he arguably underestimates. In the process, he risks reducing the illative sense to collective rule-based reasoning in a process of social evidentialism. With that significant reservation, his study usefully enriches the processes of communal discernment discussed in chapter 4.

Summary: Discernment in Newman

By complexifying the concept of belief which was in his time (and often still is) reduced to rationalism, Newman demonstrates how spiritual certainty is intellectually viable, or at least as viable as certainty about anything else. He shows how knowledge is constructed in a dynamic polar tension between real or whole volitional assent, and notional or logical assent, in the same epistemological paradigm across all domains of knowledge. Real assent is gained and experienced by the conscience and the imagination, which together cohere with the faculty of sapiential judgment which Newman calls the illative sense. Constructing a lexicon to describe this rich phenomenon requires similarly complex linguistic forms, often analogy and metaphor, though a humble awareness of divine mystery acknowledges that these are never adequate and allows space for “a raid on the inarticulate”.⁴⁹⁶ Real assent cannot be empirically verified, though it must be informed by reason. Rather, its ultimate verification resides in the lived experience of Christians growing in Christ's likeness, within the Church.

Newman's foundational assumption is described by Lash as an “inclusive strategy... which treats knowing, doing and feeling (or ideas, institutions and emotions), as integral constitutive elements of human experience”.⁴⁹⁷ This is a fundamentally different concept of religious knowing from that of his contemporaries, who often identified the essence of religious knowledge with a feeling or emotion in contrast to thought or organizational structures.⁴⁹⁸ For Newman, spiritual integrity and maturity are “the fragile fruit of dialectical interplay between the forces and factors represented

⁴⁹⁶ T S Eliot, *Four Quartets*, East Coker, part 5.

⁴⁹⁷ Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*, 133.

⁴⁹⁸ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*.

by the three corners of the triangle”.⁴⁹⁹ A triangular (or Trinitarian) model of thought is first found in Newman in the 1840’s, and by the time he wrote the *Grammar*, this paradigm enabled him to consider the dialectical relationships between personal experience (Religion), intellectual enquiry (Theology), and fellowship with others in the institution (Church and society). All three are pillars of the architectural arch, modifying the danger of corruption if any one of them was left unrestrained. However, Newman clearly privileges Religion, or real assent, as the primary locus of contemplative practice and receptivity to the ultimate mystery of God. Achieving the necessary stability, balance and integrity of the three elements is impossible by human effort, only by God’s grace.

Since knowledge of the divine is both rational and imaginative, Newman embraces both apophatic and cataphatic forms of knowing.⁵⁰⁰ In any sign, and for religion particularly in Church and the sacraments, the content is comprehended cataphatically but the meaning and vision is “the transforming action and movement in pursuit of its ever-receding divine surplus of meaning.”⁵⁰¹ McIntosh links Lash’s triangular model with Newman’s own process of growth in maturity. He suggests that for Newman, formation proceeds in an interwoven Trinitarian matrix as Christians participate in Christ in the physical aspects of the Church’s life as His body; learn the truth of God in the Scriptures and doctrines; and in so doing are transformed by the Holy Spirit’s power.⁵⁰² While Newman argues that faith is reasonable, it cannot be reduced to linear rationality. Far better, he asserts that by an ongoing and costly process of engagement, Christians can form a discerning spirit, incorporating practical and specific judgment with spiritual illumination and openness to God’s mystery. The conclusion of our illative reflections is out of sight, not because it is incoherent or mystical, but because “the mind embraces more than it can master”.⁵⁰³

⁴⁹⁹ Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*, 134.

⁵⁰⁰ McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth : The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge*, 176.

⁵⁰¹ Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*, 177.

⁵⁰² McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth : The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge*, 178.

⁵⁰³ Newman’s “Letters” 2:311, Quoted in Fey, *Faith and Doubt : The Unfolding of Newman’s Thought on Certainty*, 154.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Newman outlines the construction of knowledge on the paradigm of a polarity between real and notional assent. As well as reason's vital contribution, total apprehension also draws on three other contributors: the imagination (capaciously defined in Newman), conscience, and the illative sense. This latter encompasses the others to form a spiritual and practical wisdom which carries its own conviction and volitional energy. It is the seat of religious conviction, while also having secular iterations. Knowledge is constructed by accumulated analogies, always checked by reason but not limited by it. The illative sense is the primary and self-authenticating mode of knowledge, both for individuals and, more problematically, for the church.

Given its nature, real apprehension may only be verbalised in metaphor and poetic imagery. Even here, no single image suffices and the most profound mysteries will elude coherent articulation entirely. "All men have a reason, but not all men can give a reason".⁵⁰⁴ The verification of knowledge, unlike its grammar, is domain-specific. Logical reasoning demands the iron bar of proof; real assent accumulates strands of supporting evidence into a cable of sufficient strength to support certitude. In communal discernment, knowledge depends fundamentally on the *Phronema* which is the communal iteration of the illative sense. It grows in and depends on the Church, in a dualistic interplay of factors similar to that between real and notional assent.

Newman adds an invaluable dimension to this study. He seriously challenges any assumption that seemingly objective or criterion-based referencing is epistemologically more reliable than knowledge which comes from affective or intuitive sources. He demonstrates that though both are constructed similarly, they require different modes of proof. Newman would offer robust support for the idea that intuitive knowledge (or real apprehension) is verifiable, in terms appropriate to its context. Mature spiritual judgment, however, relies on the faculty of the illative sense which is itself the gradual product of maturing Christian character by worship, prayer

⁵⁰⁴ Coulson, *Religion and Imagination* : "In Aid of a Grammar of Assent," 57.

and the sacraments. Spirituality, theology and church cohere to enable the mature Christian community to be certain of their faith, and to know God's leading in particular matters of discernment.

Chapter 7. Discernment in Barth

How would someone reliably discern a genuine call from God to a particular vocation, according to Karl Barth?⁵⁰⁵ And how would that call be affirmed and validated by the Church? These are awkward questions to address to Barth because they rest on presuppositions he would stridently deny, since they are framed in an anthropocentric matrix (how do we hear God?) rather than theocentrically (how does God speak?). Even a casual reading of Barth reveals his antipathy to such questions. It is axiomatic to his theological position that any possibility of gaining knowledge of God by human reason, or of discerning God's revelation by human criteria, is fundamentally incompatible with God's transcendent being. God can be apprehended only by divine self-disclosure. However, Barth did acknowledge that questions about knowledge of God are "legitimate and meaningful.... as questions of church proclamation and therefore also of dogmatics – objects of its formal and material task."⁵⁰⁶ To re-frame the research questions from a Barthian perspective requires uncovering the heart of Barth's theological epistemology: his doctrine of the knowledge of God, and how humans participate in the revelation of God's Word.⁵⁰⁷ It also requires examining his theology of vocation, to determine his understanding of vocational call. After considering these, this chapter will explore in detail the aspect of Barth's epistemology which is most problematic for this research - the nature of human participation in response to divine revelation. Barth is often accused of entirely negating the human element in his emphasis on revelation: I will suggest that a more nuanced reading is preferable. The conclusion will consider how Barth would address the challenge of determining an authentic vocational call from God in church assessment conferences.

⁵⁰⁵ Karl Barth (1918-1968) was a Swiss pastor and theologian who pioneered a revolutionary turn away from the natural theology prevalent in his time, towards a radically theocentric and Christocentric concept of a God knowable only by divine revelation by Word and Spirit. He was a key contributor to the Barmen Declaration of 1934, and his magisterial work *Church Dogmatics* was published in stages from 1932 to 1967.

⁵⁰⁶ Quoted in Paul Nimmo, "Barth", in Abraham and Aquino, *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, 524.

⁵⁰⁷ "Word" is capitalized throughout this chapter, reflecting Barth's distinctive emphasis on its importance.

The corpus of Barth's work is notoriously vast, eclipsed only by the volume of secondary scholarship it continues to generate, and this chapter must be highly selective. Barth outlines his distinctive theological approach in the prolegomena to *Church Dogmatics*, which offers a comprehensive doctrine of the Word of God.⁵⁰⁸ Volume I of his 14-volume work outlines his foundational doctrine of God's revelation in his Word. In Volume II/1, *The Doctrine of God*, Barth presents the foundation for Knowledge of God, which is the heart of his theological epistemology. Thereafter, volume III/4 discusses Vocation as part of the Doctrine of Reconciliation; and volume IV/3 addresses the same theme under the Doctrine of Creation. This chapter will be largely restricted to these primary texts, bearing in mind that even one sentence in Barth can form a microcosm of his whole theology, and since his methodology is dynamically circular, "It is better to read a small portion and understand it well than to read a large part superficially."⁵⁰⁹ In secondary literature, Bruce McCormack's extensive work on Barth's epistemology is an invaluable resource,⁵¹⁰ as are Clifford Anderson,⁵¹¹ and Colin Gunton.⁵¹² Paul Nimmo contributes with clarity on both Barth's theological epistemology and his theology of vocation.⁵¹³ Alan Torrance explores the theme of human participation in the knowledge of God in Barth,⁵¹⁴ and Tony Clark builds on Torrance by illuminating Barth's epistemology and its relationship with Polanyi's work on tacit knowledge.⁵¹⁵

⁵⁰⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 1*, Digital Karl Barth Library (Edinburgh: Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975).

⁵⁰⁹ Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology*, Reprint edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2010), 39.

⁵¹⁰ Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); Bruce L. McCormack, "Revelation and History in Transfoundationalist Perspective: Karl Barth's Theological Epistemology in Conversation with a Schleiermacherian Tradition," *The Journal of Religion* 78, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 18–37, <https://doi.org/10.1086/490121>.

⁵¹¹ Clifford Anderson, "A Pragmatic Reading of Karl Barth's Theological Epistemology," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 22, no. 3 (2001): 241–69.

⁵¹² Colin E Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians: Selected Essays 1972-1995* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

⁵¹³ Paul T. Nimmo, *Barth: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Guides for the Perplexed (Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2017); Paul T. Nimmo, "Barth on Vocation," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, Forthcoming).

⁵¹⁴ Alan J Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation: With Special Reference to Volume One of Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

⁵¹⁵ Tony Clark, *Divine Revelation and Human Practice: Responsive and Imaginative Participation* (Wipf & Stock Pub, 2008).

Barth's Theological Epistemology

Barth's radically theocentric neo-orthodox or dialectical theology was formed in the early 1900s in reaction against the prevailing liberal Protestantism of his era.⁵¹⁶ Fundamentally, he came to believe that God only gives Himself to be known to humans by revealing Himself through His Word, by the Holy Spirit. Philosophical speculation about our potential knowledge of God or its possible mode - how humans might come to know God - is not only redundant but disobedient: revelation has already occurred at God's instigation, and continues in ongoing events of encounter as God sovereignly chooses. For Barth, God is therefore firmly knowable, not by abstract metaphysical speculation but only *a posteriori* by close attention to where revelation has occurred. Paradoxically, although God is knowable with certainty based on revelation, humans can never be certain that we possess knowledge of God on a fixed and unchanging basis. That certainty would limit God's freedom by reducing knowledge of God to a static construct, accessible by reason. Rather, Barth says, "When we try to find the content of divine Spirit in the consciousness of man, are we not like the man who wanted to scoop out in a sieve the reflection of the beautiful silvery moon found in a pond?"⁵¹⁷ We can acknowledge God's revelation but can never possess it; it is always God's free and sovereign action.

Barth's highly particular position can be grasped only when its epistemological basis is understood. His axiomatic principle is that every kind of knowledge must be appropriate to its particular subject matter. Where the subject is God, knowledge cannot be like any other knowledge because God is not like any other subject. Barth's dialectical theology stresses God's transcendence as expressed in Scripture: God is the existential context of human life, "the One in whom we live and move and have our being."⁵¹⁸ Consequently, it is both absurd and presumptuous to posit the existence of an Archimedean point extrinsic to God, a critical distance from which humans can objectively perceive the divine. Similarly, neither can we find a rational justification for faith that is epistemologically more basic than the faith it seeks to justify. Barth

⁵¹⁶ Barth's personal and theological biography has been very extensively documented. See, for example, John Webster, *Karl Barth*, 2nd Revised ed. edition (London ; New York: Continuum, 2004); Busch, *The Great Passion*; McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*.

⁵¹⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 1*, 216.

⁵¹⁸ Acts 17:28, my quote.

therefore rejects both realism, which distances the subject from the object (or knower from the known); and foundationalism, which seeks external criteria on which knowledge must be justified.⁵¹⁹ We apprehend God only within the limits of our creatureliness, only in response to God's prior being. Thus understood, the oft-remarked circularity inherent in Barth's epistemology (indeed, his whole theology) is not accidental, but essential to its subject matter: "The only way to develop knowledge of God ...is from within that knowledge itself."⁵²⁰ Or, as Barth expresses it, "The circle of our freedom.... is also the circle of our captivity."⁵²¹ This also explains why knowledge of God is necessarily *a posteriori*. There are no prior grounds on which we can apprehend knowledge of God before it happens. We can only "look back from the knowledge of God and.... ask about the presuppositions and conditions on the basis of which it comes about that God is known."⁵²²

From this foundational principle, Barth asserts that the primary and only absolute form of knowledge is God's knowledge of Himself, expressed within the Trinity – described as the primary objectivity of God.⁵²³ God's self-knowledge and self-communication do not require to communicate with humankind, but do so freely as an act of grace. God's resulting communication is not primarily the imparting of cognitive information, but the giving of God's self to be knowable to humankind. Clearly this is essentially relational knowledge – but a unique kind of relationship appropriate to God as its object. The kind of knowledge is faith. Its mode is revelation, in events where humans are encountered and transformed by the Trinitarian God. The paradigm for exploring knowledge of God is therefore always Trinitarian, and the structure of Barth's theology – as illustrated in *Church Dogmatics* – follows this pattern, circling each topic of debate to examine it sequentially through the lens of Father, Son and Spirit. Since God's knowledge of Himself is both the *terminus a Quo* and the *terminus ad Quem* of theological epistemology, the pattern of revelation is also

⁵¹⁹ McCormack coins the term "transfoundationalist" to capture Barth's unique position. McCormack, "Revelation and History in Transfoundationalist Perspective: Karl Barth's Theological Epistemology in Conversation with a Schleiermacherian Tradition."

⁵²⁰ Paul Nimmo, "Karl Barth", in Abraham and Aquino, *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, 529.

⁵²¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 2*, Digital Karl Barth Library (Edinburgh: Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 535.

⁵²² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol 2, The Doctrine of God. Part 1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 63.

⁵²³ Barth, 16.

understood as cyclical: originating in God, then passing through the Spirit-filled human subject to return to God.⁵²⁴

How does divine revelation reach human beings in such a way that it becomes, for us, authentic knowledge of God? The answer, for Barth, is characteristically Christological. Barth believes that God uses objects to mediate knowledge of Himself— this is the secondary objectivity of God.⁵²⁵ The objective revelation of God is subjectively appropriated by humans through the indirect and veiled presence of God in material phenomena (objects, words, and sometimes people), which convey God to us. God may use any mediating object as He sovereignly wills. These objects are not God-like: they remain entirely discrete phenomena, both veiling and unveiling God's presence. The prototype is the human form of Christ: the only unambiguous locus of divine revelation, in whom the human and the divine perfectly cohere. Thus the Incarnation is the quintessential paradigm for Barth's epistemology. Christ incarnate was fully God and fully human - not half one and half the other but both simultaneously. The template of God's revelation in Christ is repeated analogously in God's revelation through other lesser objects. On the one hand, someone might possibly see only the object and not the divine content - which is veiled. On the other, one might encounter God in and through the object in such a way that the object is temporarily transcended (for example, in Christ's transfiguration) - God is unveiled. Revelation can never be partial, because God can never be less than himself. However, the concept of veiling and unveiling means that humans can never possess or control the revelatory process. Veiling and unveiling do not alternate in time, nor do they follow any logical pattern which might be discernable by the rules of mathematics or philosophy. Again, this would limit God and make knowledge of God accessible to unassisted reason. Revelation progresses towards an ultimate unveiling: its *telos* is union with God in the manner appropriate to His creatures. Never, even in the eschaton, will created beings participate in the full knowledge of God which is internal to the Trinity. The fundamental dialectic between God and humankind is permanent. Throughout all of revelation God remains simultaneously both clear and certain, and hidden and mysterious; retaining power over His own self-disclosure.

⁵²⁴ Barth, 215.

⁵²⁵ Barth, 16.

The prototype of Christ as the incarnate revelation of God has two important corollaries for Barth's epistemology. The first is the concept of the Word of God and Jesus as the Word made flesh (John 1:13). Barth takes seriously the Scriptural description (John 1:1) of the Word as synonymous with God: Church Dogmatics begins not with God but with the Word of God. While revelation can never be static, the verbal record of its witnesses is potentially the locus of further revelation. The foundational example is Scripture. Barth never accedes to the Biblicist notion that every word of the Bible is literally God's Word – that would deify the human writers, and (again) limit God within a fixed human schema. Nor does he suggest that God's Word can be reconstructed from the text – we need to hear it speak to us. *Deus Dixit*: only God speaks of God.⁵²⁶ Nevertheless, Barth regards the words of Scripture as singularly privileged objects for mediating God's Word, and conformity to Scripture as indicating faithful speech about God. Derived from that, verbal proclamation in preaching and testimony is a prime (though never infallible) mode of mediation: "Proclamation is the human speech in and by which God speaks like a King through the mouth of His herald."⁵²⁷ The Word of God preached and the Word of God written may, by the Holy Spirit, become the Word of God revealed. As with the incarnational model described above, someone may hear the human words of Scripture without any accompanying event – in which case, it is not the Word of God. When the Word of God is authentically heard, it has transforming power – the hearer is changed or made new. She "is drawn.... into the sphere of the real power of [Christ's] Lordship" that encompasses all human existence.⁵²⁸

If the incarnate Christ is the Word of God made flesh, and the words of Scripture are the primary corollary of this, the second corollary is the Church as the physical Body of Christ in the world. These two are asymmetrical: the Church is bound to the Word of God as the Word of God is not bound to the Church. As with Scripture, the Church is the visible locus of revelation – never fixed or infallible, always veiling and unveiling, but still uniquely disclosive of God. However, the Church does not mediate God to humanity. Rather, again in a Christological paradigm, God's deity must include God's

⁵²⁶ David M Whitford, "Deus Dixit: The Power of the Word of God in Luther and Barth," *Theological Journal of Emanuel University of Oradea* 6, no. 1 (2008).

⁵²⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 1*, 52.

⁵²⁸ Barth, 153.

turning to humanity – a view Barth fully expounds rather late in his theology.⁵²⁹ Barth's vision of the Church's identity as the Body of Christ is majestic in its historical and theological scope. This leads him to privilege the importance of the historical theologians and Creeds as witnesses to past revelation, and therefore to be honoured as theological sources. For Barth both Church and theology are, like John the Baptist, a pointing hand, never creating God's presence but always indicating it.⁵³⁰ The Church embodies Christ's mission to the world, charged with the responsibility to proclaim past revelation of Christ in living, Spirit-inspired preaching which by the grace of God becomes present revelation. The Church is also called to witness in its conduct to the reality of its new life arising from its encounter with Christ: Word, ethics and revelation are inseparable. An individual's call to discipleship and dynamic participation in God's mission is only located within the church: we are claimed as His witnesses, and called to the vocation of proclaiming renewal and reconciliation.

Thus understood, Barth's epistemology assumes a particular anthropology. The believing human subject always holds a position of subsequence: never the giver or initiator, always the receiver and responder. Nothing intrinsic to humankind can deduce, initiate, or control the apprehension of God. Barth was vehemently opposed to any form of natural theology. For him, the *imago Dei* in humankind was not merely distorted by the Fall, it was obliterated. This rests on his understanding of the *imago Dei* as a relational, rather than a structural or functional, capacity: where the relationship with God is broken, the image is destroyed.⁵³¹ People are therefore naturally closed to, and at enmity with God: even our capacity to receive God is gifted by the Spirit. The sole locus of our receptivity is our indwelling in Christ, who is the true *eikon* of God. There is no *analogia entis* between humans and God. However, Barth did not deny the effectiveness of analogy – without this, no experience of God would be either possible or describable.⁵³² The only possible analogy is the *analogia fidei* by which God takes our human words, thoughts and responses and directs them to a true apprehension of Him. Intriguingly, for Barth knowledge of God must

⁵²⁹ Barth, *The Humanity of God*.

⁵³⁰ This Biblical motif, with an accompanying picture, shaped Barth's thinking from his earliest days. Busch, *The Great Passion*, 6.

⁵³¹ Barth's view has been heavily criticized here as being exegetically unfounded, eg by James Barr. See Marc (Marc Allen) Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Guides for the Perplexed (New York: New York, 2010), 26.

⁵³² Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol 2, The Doctrine of God. Part 1*, 225.

therefore always be experiential, immediate and particular – located in events, both current and historical. This necessitates a role for human experience. God can never be known theoretically, and Barth often quoted the saying, *Latet periculum in generalibus* (“danger lurks in generalities”) which seduce us into the illusion of knowing God.⁵³³ Real knowledge of God is grounded in specific revelation. However, this never yields to pietistic individualism - the locus of revelation in Christ and the prime importance of the Word in Scripture anchors Barth’s theology firmly to the Bible and tradition.

Barth’s epistemology has many consequences for the research question, three of which have vital importance. Firstly, if we do not know God as we know other things, what is the relationship of knowledge of God (often understood as faith or theology) to other human knowledge (crudely, reason or science)? I will postpone discussion of this until chapter 8, where Barth’s view will be considered in dialogue with Newman and others. Secondly, how do humans participate in and respond to revelation – is there a place for human experience? Finally, given that God may use anything as a medium of disclosure, how are we to discern when a genuine revelation of God has occurred? These complex areas require to be explored.

Human Experience in Barth’s Epistemology

“When revelation takes place, it never does so by our insight and skill, but in the freedom of God to be free for us and to free us from ourselves; that is to say, to let His light shine on our darkness, which as such does not comprehend His light. In this miracle, which we can only acknowledge as having occurred, which we can only receive from the hand of God as it takes place by His hand, His Kingdom comes for us, and this world passes for us.”⁵³⁴

Thus described, Barth’s concept of revelation raises legitimate questions about whether human response or participation plays any part other than acknowledgment. Barth’s dialectical theology has historically been criticised for emphasising God’s transcendence to the almost total exclusion of the role of active human participants in revelation. As early as 1929, in Gore’s Gifford lectures, Barth was accused of having “overlooked that the voice of God from without or above must correspond with His

⁵³³ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 69.

⁵³⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 2*, 65.

voice from within the heart of man in his conscience and reason.”⁵³⁵ Or, as Garvie commented, “Barthian theology provides God with a great key, but not with a keyhole in man.”⁵³⁶ While this may be hyperbolic, it remains undeniable that the place of the participating individual is problematically understated in Barth. More recently, Thiemann writes of Barth’s Epistle to the Romans, “A position which stresses both God’s sovereign transcendence and his knowability is hard pressed to give an account of how we can come to know such a God...Human subjectivity becomes nothing more than the vessel through which God knows himself.”⁵³⁷ Finally, Moltmann’s influential critique posits Barth as offering a false alternative between divine revelation and human experience of the Holy Spirit.⁵³⁸ It seems that Barth’s God takes the initiative and sets the agenda but doesn’t answer our questions or consider our feelings: God never responds to us. The question of a personal vocation (or any other call) is marginalised, and human experience of God has no role.

I propose to argue, as others have done in more recent scholarship, that these criticisms are over-stated. There are significant indicators in Barth that we are more than just acknowledgers. It is important to remember Barth’s historical context, in which natural theology closely identified God with humanity, and his primary motivation of breaking this connection. Smith comments perceptively: “Had the “Wholly Other” been a doctrine of God, rather than a device for placing theology in the right position before God, Barth could not have looked back on his Romans.... with so much approval.”⁵³⁹ Barth’s stress on God’s otherness does not preclude human participation in revelation. *Prima facie*, even a sympathetic reading of Barth’s (limited) descriptions of human participation indicates something more. Still greater clarity appears when we move away from his explicit statements to consider some logical implications of his theological epistemology described above - event, indwelling, faith, speech, and community. A final step is to leave Barth’s espoused theology altogether to consider his operant theology - how he himself works with revelation in practice.

⁵³⁵ Gore’s Gifford Lectures, Quoted in S. W. (Stephen Whitefield) Sykes, *Karl Barth : Studies of His Theological Method* (Oxford: Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1979), 5.

⁵³⁶ A. E. Garvie, Quoted in Sykes, 5.

⁵³⁷ Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology* 1985, Quoted in Clark, *Divine Revelation and Human Practice*, 40.

⁵³⁸ Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, Quoted in Clark, 40.

⁵³⁹ Smith, “The Argument to the Other”, Quoted in Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians : Selected Essays 1972-1995*, 58.

Statements about human experience

Barth's direct descriptions of human participation are scant. In *Church Dogmatics II/1* he addresses the question of the veracity of human knowledge of God, asking how we participate in the truth of God's revelation.⁵⁴⁰ Our acknowledgment is firstly to respond with thanks. We have faith that because insight has not come from ourselves but has been imposed upon us extrinsically by a transcendent God, "It is sufficient to incite us to take this work in hand, to expel from us the fear of our own insufficiency, to prevent us from wearying in its performance, to maintain our courage in all humility."⁵⁴¹ Thankfulness clearly has tangible phenomenal effects. Characteristically, Barth immediately stresses that this does not constitute "good works"; nevertheless, human participation is more active than mere acknowledgment suggests. He proceeds to suggest that thankful acknowledgment implies sacrifice, which:

"... rules our thinking and speaking. It claims an affirmation here, a negation there. It establishes connections here, distinctions there. It reveals relationship here, and does not reveal them there. It brings into relief specific distinctive possibilities of view and concept, and the specific words which correspond to them, suppressing other words and possibilities...All this takes place in the sphere of our humanity. In all this we are not passive but active. It has all been put in our hands. But this does not mean that it is given over to us.... it is expected that the work of our hands will be accomplished as a responsibility towards.... the object of our gratitude."⁵⁴²

This lengthy description affords an acknowledgment, unusual in Barth, that revelation influences human judgment, speech, actions and ideas. It implies the exercise of God's Spirit in wise discernment, and in articulating that faithfully and accurately. Barth describes further affective phenomenological effects of participating in the knowledge of God: wondering awe, and joyfulness.⁵⁴³ These arise when our thinking and language, taken up and adopted by God, enables us to successfully use these gifts for God's purposes in the world. Here, there is a positive relationship between the actions of the human subject and their object in God: "one in which there exists a real fellowship between the knower and his knowing.... and the known."⁵⁴⁴ Barth never fails to stress

⁵⁴⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol 2, The Doctrine of God. Part 1*, 215.

⁵⁴¹ Barth, 216.

⁵⁴² Barth, 219.

⁵⁴³ Barth, 223.

⁵⁴⁴ Barth, 224.

that the source of this is not human cognition of God, but God's self-revelation. However, he is affirming the necessity of experience, not in opposition to revelation but as participation in it. Although human response is consistently framed in the context of acknowledgment, acknowledgment is far more than a passive nod of the head. It draws us into a total, intentional and active response to God.

Implications for Human Experience

Though Barth specifically indicates that acknowledgement entails active participation, this is an undeniably minor theme. Further evidence could be found, but it would be hermeneutically indefensible to trawl Barth's writings for isolated statements which, shorn of their context, magnify a theme he strived continually to minimise. However, further indirect evidence of the importance of human participation arises unavoidably as a logical consequence of four key themes in his theological epistemology mentioned above: knowledge of God as a transformational event; our indwelling in Christ; the community of the Church; and human and divine words.

As previously noted, for Barth God's revelation is essentially an event. Knowledge of God cannot be deduced theoretically or discovered second-hand via a deposit of humanly transmitted information: the dynamic life of the Trinity communicates itself with immediacy in revelatory encounters. And "danger lurks in generalities" such as translating this into metaphysical terms, or describing it as a supernatural experience.⁵⁴⁵ God intervenes in real human life, immediately and particularly, to specific people. In a rare reference to the importance of identity, Barth says: "Participation.... does not signify an abolition of our identity with ourselves. It is a frightful misunderstanding to try to interpret it along the lines of a possession or trance. There are such states, but only when the consciousness of identity is removed."⁵⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly given their nature, revelatory events are intrinsically life-transforming – their result is that people are made new. It is hard to consider that Barth is not describing here something that assumes real human engagement, though as the responder, not as the initiator. Participation in the knowledge of God is a phenomenological reality. "We may quietly regard the will and the conscience and feeling and all other possible anthropological centres as possibilities of human self-

⁵⁴⁵ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 69.

⁵⁴⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 2*, 266.

determination, and then understand them in their totality as determined by the Word of God which affects the whole man.”⁵⁴⁷

That self-determination is the result of our indwelling in Christ. In order to know God, we must be where God makes himself known, and for Barth, that is in Christ. He regards it as anthropologically foundational that we dwell in Him, on the Pauline principle that “our life is hid with Christ in God.”⁵⁴⁸ This raises the vast question of how humanity participates in Christ, and only the epistemological dimensions can be touched upon here. The nature of our knowledge of God reflects our identity as God’s elect, inhabiting a covenant relationship with Him in Christ. Without losing the separation of God from humanity, Barth’s understanding of indwelling maintains the distance between them but locates this within a relationship of acquaintance. This may be conceptualized in a visual metaphor. Indwelling suggests that the relationship of subject and object (God and humanity, knower and known) is not two separate circles, one located above the other with a vast space between, crossed by a single arrow from God to humanity. Although Barth believes that revelatory events come from the transcendent God extrinsic to ourselves, the metaphor of “above” is misleading here. A more accurate visual depiction would be that of concentric circles, with the outer circle (Christ) enclosing the inner circle of the human subject. Many arrows bridge the space from the outer circle to the inner: the known is encompassed within the knower.

This has profound epistemological implications. Thiemann tracks the trajectory of Barth’s thinking here from its early articulation in the *Commentary on Epistle to the Romans*, in which he emphasised God’s transcendence and implied an epistemology of distance between two separated entities with the Holy Spirit bridging the gap.⁵⁴⁹ Barth’s subsequent reading of Anslem transformed his thinking, as he realized the full epistemological significance of *fides quare[m] intellectum* and adopted it as his guiding principle. Knowledge of God, for Barth, is a personal relationship between knower and known, before it is understanding of propositions. Knowledge derived by faith through personal participation is the prior condition on which any subsequent reasoned

⁵⁴⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 1*, 202.

⁵⁴⁸ Colossians 3:3

⁵⁴⁹ Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*, Quoted in Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians: Selected Essays 1972-1995*, 57.

knowledge is based. “He wills to be ours, and He wills that we should be His. He wills to belong to us and He wills that we should belong to Him...His attitude and action is always that he seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us.”⁵⁵⁰ Our indwelling in Christ is the locus of our participation in the Trinity. Jesus’ disciples were both outside and inside His relationship with the Father: “[I pray] that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us.”⁵⁵¹ It is hard to conceive that this does not involve active human participation, though yet again Barth defends this against implicit Pelagianism. It is a gift of God’s grace.

The knowledge of God which comes to us as an event, and reaches us as we dwell in Christ, is knowledge situated in community. Barth believes that we are both objectively part of the community of the Trinity; and subjectively part of the Body of Christ, the church community. Given that his majestic vision of the Church encompasses the whole people of God throughout the ages, he esteems the Church’s Creeds and Confessions as second in authority only to the Scriptures. Again, this has importance consequences for his epistemology. Reacting against contemporary thought, Barth rejects Cartesian individualism and Kantian metaphysics to formulate a radically communal concept of how knowledge is formed. Christian theology is the theology of a community. Even “academic” theology, for Barth, exists to serve the proclamation of the Church. This helps his defenders to counter the frequent charge of arbitrariness leveled at him: the thought and practice of a whole community extended through time and space provides a useful corrective to individual idiosyncrasies (though it should be noted that Barth himself would never use this as justification). Another justifiable implication, again not made by Barth himself, is to stress that knowledge of God in the church is fundamentally participatory.⁵⁵² Jesus called his disciples to learn in community, more by mimesis than by pedagogy – they learned together inductively as apprentices to the master by immersion in his lifestyle. Teaching was not always didactic, and knowledge did not have to be explicit. Similarly, the sacraments and rituals inaugurated by Christ for the Church require active and intimate corporeal participation in communal settings. Baptism marks entry into ecclesial fellowship; the Eucharist is a community called to share a meal. No

⁵⁵⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol 2, The Doctrine of God. Part 1*, 274.

⁵⁵¹ John 17:31

⁵⁵² I am indebted to Tony Clark for this insight. Clark, *Divine Revelation and Human Practice*, 171–96.

clearly formulated theological explanation is given for either. Again, as a logical implication of Barth's stress on community, it seems misconceived to accuse him of negating human participation in the knowledge of God. "Jesus is inexplicable except in terms of participation in a way of life that causes people to see things differently."⁵⁵³

Finally, humans participate in the knowledge of God affectively, physically and noetically by constructing speech in response to God's speech. This is particularly pertinent when we proclaim the Word of God in witness and preaching. These are vast themes in Barth and again, a complete study is beyond the scope of this research. One might suggest that the human subject is so overtaken by the Holy Spirit as to entirely over-ride his human identity, and reduce him to a receptacle. Nothing in Barth suggest this; rather the opposite: "For Barth... human knowledge of God is not the conditioned reflex of the automaton. It is the free personal action in relation, deriving from an indwelling in Christ and taking the form of thanksgiving, awe, and the ordered employment of human concepts."⁵⁵⁴ Hence, the priority Barth gives to human words in witness, testimony and preaching logically implies the human subject intimately engaged in the process. The Word of God encounters her in a revelatory event: taking the received Word, she ponders and weighs it against the Word previously revealed in Scripture and creeds, probably in dialogue with others. From this she constructs a sermon or testimony in words coherent with God's Word, and with her own breath and voice she speaks them to the community. Our words are part of us: the suggestion that human words by grace can mediate the Word of God is breathtaking. Any suggestion of minimal active human participation is not credible.

It follows that, although Barth's direct references to human experiential participation are scant, the implications of his doctrine of revelation as event, our indwelling in Christ, life in community, and human words flowing from the Word of God all strongly indicate active and total human participation. Speaking of the Word of God, but applicable generally (I suggest) to knowledge of God, Barth writes:

"There can be no objection in principle to describing this event as an "experience" and even as a "religious experience." The quarrel is not with the term nor with the true and important thing the term might finally

⁵⁵³ Clark, 179.

⁵⁵⁴ Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians : Selected Essays 1972-1995*, 59.

denote, namely, the supremely real and determinative entry of the Word of God into the reality of man. But the term is burdened – this is why we avoid it – with the underlying idea that man generally is capable of religious experience or that this capability has the critical significance of a norm.”⁵⁵⁵

Here is the clearest indication that Barth’s antipathy to acknowledging human experience is not because he negates its existence or even minimises its importance. Rather, he is emphasizing his rejection of experience as a source of revelation. Barth does not place revelation and experience in opposition, but regards experience as a necessary component of revelation initiated and actualized by the Holy Spirit. The critique of Thiemann and others that “human subjectivity becomes nothing more than the vessel through which God knows himself” cannot be sustained.⁵⁵⁶

Human Experience in practice

A final perspective on how Barth sees how human knowledge is formulated in response to God’s revelation arises from his own operant practice in dealing with God’s Word in Scripture. Scholars often ponder how Barth regarded his own theological work in the light of revelation from God – he could never have imagined that he was simply making his own deductions.⁵⁵⁷ Gunton intriguingly suggests that even Barth’s literary style reflects his commitment to revelation: “.... concept is piled upon concept in an attempt to allow the truth, beauty and goodness of God to take form in rational human language.”⁵⁵⁸ It is tempting to add that that concept of veiling and unveiling must be operant here: not every reader finds Barth’s style illuminating.

Tony Clark suggests another approach.⁵⁵⁹ He shows that Barth exemplifies his understanding of human participation in revelation in his process of producing the Confessions of the church, specifically in the Barmen declaration. Though Barth never directly tackles the theoretical question of how to write and authenticate a Confession – that would be antithetical to his principles - Clark extracts from Barth’s discussion of

⁵⁵⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 1*, 193.

⁵⁵⁶ Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology* 1985, Quoted in Clark, *Divine Revelation and Human Practice*, 40.

⁵⁵⁷ For example, Paul Nimmo, “Karl Barth”, in Abraham and Aquino, *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, 533–34.

⁵⁵⁸ Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians: Selected Essays 1972-1995*, 64.

⁵⁵⁹ Clark, *Divine Revelation and Human Practice*, 151–70.

the Confession's formulation (Church Dogmatics I/2) a detailed account of his methodology and underlying rationale.

Barth defines the Confessions as a responsible acknowledgment of God's Word; an "expression of an insight given to the Church" of which it must give a reasoned account to the world "through those who can and must speak in its name."⁵⁶⁰ "A Church Confession is a formulation and proclamation of the insight which the Church has been given in a certain direction into the revelation attested by Scripture, reached on the basis of common deliberation and decision."⁵⁶¹ The Confessions are rooted in Scripture, but never in the form of a scholastic academic exegesis. They arise from the presuppositions that Scripture is both the witness to past revelation and the promise of future revelation, which together invigorate our present faith that God will speak through it today. Reading Scripture to formulate a Confession is a communal activity – Barth says that "no one has ever read the Bible only with his own eyes, and no one ever should."⁵⁶² In discerning the precise content of the Confession, Barth highlights the importance of particularity. We can only know anything as inhabitants of a particular time, place and set of circumstances – such creaturely limitations are inescapable. "It is the Word and will of God, and not creaturely powers and forces which have imposed upon these Confessions their different limits."⁵⁶³ Far from invalidating knowledge of God, however, the particularity of our calling both enables and limits our reception of the Word of God. "This limitation [is] a mark of the particular humanity of the Confession [which] consists in the freedom, the joy of responsibility, the certainty and the love in which it has always taken place, in spite of the limits of those who make it."⁵⁶⁴ One frequent contextual feature is conflict. Confessions often arise historically in times of change, where an existing concept of truth is perceived to be inadequate and unity is threatened. Theological understanding must be more precisely formulated against error, in order to restore unity. Beyond the above-noted "common deliberation and decision", though, Barth offers no detailed formulation of how to discern what the content of the Confession will be, and such reticence, though frustrating, is consistent with his theological convictions.

⁵⁶⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 2*, 622.

⁵⁶¹ Barth, 620.

⁵⁶² Barth, 649.

⁵⁶³ Barth, 635.

⁵⁶⁴ Barth, 634.

The precise role of human agents in formulating the Confession is important to grasp. Barth is adamant that neither the writers' academic theological expertise, nor their Biblical exegesis, nor even their faith creates the Confession – any authentic word from God can only arise from revelation. “The situation that demands confession is not so much one in which the Church discerns a truth but one in which the truth finds the Church.”⁵⁶⁵ However, Barth acknowledges that such human expertise is an indispensable tool for formulating it. Other human skills, such as the ability to articulate the Confession in appropriate language, are similarly categorised. Barth also mentions that the writers take a risk in bringing a Confession to the church – the risk that even with the Scriptural witness in their favour, the Church will be deaf and regard them as heretics or innovators. “The courage to accept the risk involved is at least one test of the genuineness of their enterprise.”⁵⁶⁶ All is motivated by an underlying sense of divine compulsion: “We can confess only what we must confess. Theological work of a theoretical or practical kind is not the instrument of this compulsion.”⁵⁶⁷

Establishing the Confession's authenticity is important – the Confessions have the highest human authority under Scripture, and their adoption has weighty consequences for the unity of the church. Each new Confession will be formulated in the light of its predecessors, honouring the wisdom of the longitudinal church community. Previous Confessions, although authoritative for their time, are never infallible and may be reinterpreted in the light of new circumstances. They are temporal human signs only: “If they are to act as signs.... there is a constant need of that continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and to its members which is always taking place in new acts.”⁵⁶⁸ The new Confession, if adopted by the Church, should have the effect of humbling, strengthening and encouraging them in their living witness to the Word of God. Preaching and instruction will cohere with it; and it will voice part of the Church's pattern of worship and congregational life.⁵⁶⁹ *A posteriori*, this attests its effectiveness as a sign of revealed truth. If it is, the

⁵⁶⁵ Clark, *Divine Revelation and Human Practice*, 156.

⁵⁶⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 2*, 623.

⁵⁶⁷ Barth, 624.

⁵⁶⁸ Barth, 513.

⁵⁶⁹ Barth, 629.

community should embrace it with the joyful conviction that through this Confession, the truth has found them (not vice versa). Where the majority of the Church can affirm it, it should be adopted. Barth does not regard as determinative the process by which the Church decides whether to adopt it – a Confession “may be open to question on formal grounds”.⁵⁷⁰ Clark points out that the Council of Nicaea adopted its creed amid disorder and violence, as Barth would have known!⁵⁷¹ The final word, as the first, is that the Confession conforms to Scripture. The Church confesses today the same God to whom Scripture bears witness. No external criteria can be appealed to for verification. We must trust “that the action of God in the founding and maintaining of His church, with which we have to do in the inspiration of the Bible, is objective enough to emerge victorious from all the inbreaks and outbreaks of man’s subjectivity.”⁵⁷² Finally, the adopted confession must be made as public as possible, and then commands obedience. It is incorporated in the tradition both explicitly and implicitly, influential through hymnody and liturgy as well as in explicit didactic forms. It becomes, like every church confession, “A stage on a road which as such can be relativized and succeeded by a further stage in the form of an altered confession. Therefore, respect for its authority had necessarily to be conjoined with a basic readiness to envisage a possible alteration...”⁵⁷³

In summary, the critique that Barth’s doctrine of revelation leaves little room for human participation beyond “acknowledgement” cannot be sustained – or at the very least, “acknowledgment” must be comprehensively redefined to embrace the total reorientation of human life. Though Barth makes few explicit statements about the human experience of response to God, his theology logically implies its necessity. In particular, his own methodology when formulating (in community with others) a Confession of the church is a deeply illuminating exemplar of how God’s revelation is attested to in a material formulation by human hands, adopted by ecclesial decision, and experienced by the Church as disclosive of God. The implications for other kinds of discernment, including the discernment of a vocational call, are potentially extensive. Before considering these, it is necessary to examine Barth’s theology of vocational call in order to determine whether and how analogies can be established.

⁵⁷⁰ Barth, 638.

⁵⁷¹ Clark, *Divine Revelation and Human Practice*, 163.

⁵⁷² Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 2*, 534.

⁵⁷³ Barth, 659.

Barth's Vocational Theology

How might participation in the knowledge of God be understood and experienced as specific individual guidance in everyday matters, particularly in the realm of vocation? Barth's vocational theology exemplifies his more general epistemology. He re-frames the typically anthropocentric concerns of vocational theology – what is God's plan for me, and how do I know his call? – within a radically theocentric matrix, asking instead: "Who is the God of the plan, and how does He call His people?" Barth's highly particular vocational theology must therefore first be understood in its own terms, before its significance for other questions can be determined.

Barth explores vocation in Church Dogmatics IV/3 under The Doctrine of Reconciliation. The first three parts of this volume describe Barth's soteriology, Part 1 on Justification and Part 2 on Sanctification. He describes God's "Yes" to humankind by divinely turning towards us in Jesus Christ, who firstly established a verdict in our favour, despite our sin. All of humanity, including unbelievers, is objectively justified in Him. Barth then describes the corresponding turning of humanity to God, again despite our sin: the ongoing process of sanctification by which we participate in Christ. Only those who acknowledge their justification are able to recognize their sanctification, and come under the active direction of the Holy Spirit. Sanctification is related to the call to discipleship: to obey God's commands (ethics); and to obey a person, Jesus Christ. It is the constant movement of "the content and character of the whole act of [our] life" towards our purpose and goal – or vocation.⁵⁷⁴ Vocation is therefore conceived as the final stage in the tripartite movement of God's reconciliation with humankind, in which the Christian is "set and instituted in actual fellowship with Jesus Christ, namely, in the service of His prophecy...and therefore in the service of God and his fellow men."⁵⁷⁵ Vocation, in Barth's view, has an eternal foundation in justification, by which we become Christians. It is an ongoing process of sanctification by which, as whole persons, we are summoned to grow in our new life and become witnesses to what God has done. Furthermore, it moves eternally towards the *telos* of our full and final reconciliation with God in union with Christ, in a dynamic process of making real what Christ has already achieved.

⁵⁷⁴ Church Dogmatics IV/2, 566, Quoted in Nimmo, *Barth: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 144.

⁵⁷⁵ Church Dogmatics IV/3 482, Nimmo, 145.

Three unusual features of Barth's thinking on vocation merit particular comment. They illustrate that the flow of his thought begins transcendently with the God who calls, as the context for any human concerns, rather than with the experience of humanity in its relationship to God. Firstly, as always, Barth is profoundly Christocentric. Vocation is not about finding God's plan, but about the God of the plan – and the plan is a person, Jesus Christ. All human vocation is in response to His call, and is an actualizing of what He has already done. There is therefore, for Barth, no hiddenness in God's plan – all is revealed in Christ. To pursue God's will as though it were a secret is misguided – secrecy implies an abstract or arbitrary God whose will is mysterious. "Behind God there is no inscrutable plan, abstract God, or undetermined *Logos* – for [Christ] is the electing God himself. The plan – in both object and subject – is a person."⁵⁷⁶

The second feature is consequential upon the first: for Barth, vocation is primarily communal and relational. God's first calling, both chronologically and ontically, is the universal summons to discipleship. Those called are the elect in Christ – visibly represented in the Church. And the Church's primary calling – vocation – is to witness to God's revelation in Christ by the proclamation of the Word of God attested to in Scripture. Any individual's vocation is located and fulfilled within the Church as the Body of Christ. Discerning personal vocation is always subordinate to the transcendent imperative, the prime summons to God alone, and it continues to develop as part of the discipleship journey.

Finally, individual vocation is circumscribed within God's activity in providence. Where he mentions it (primarily in *Church Dogmatics* III/4 under the Doctrine of Creation), Barth stresses that individual vocation is determined by the particular circumstances in which God has providentially located each person: "a whole array of particularities and thus also ... a whole range of limitations and restrictions which cannot belong to anyone else."⁵⁷⁷ Barth cites Bonhoeffer's definition of vocation as "the place of responsibility" where we respond to God in the particularity of our

⁵⁷⁶ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 116.

⁵⁷⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol 3: The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. A.T. Mackay et al, vol. III (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 597.

circumstances and our unique personal gifts and character.⁵⁷⁸ This particularity is not a limiting factor on God's will; rather, it is the means by which God shapes each of us as unique creatures and points us towards our role. However, one's specific calling cannot be deduced from these circumstances: "There is no humanly navigable path from the place of vocation to the event of vocation."⁵⁷⁹ God's sovereign freedom to call a person is not limited by any human factor. Such limitation would "bind man's obedience to a law that is different from the calling itself."⁵⁸⁰ No human circumstance could prevent a change in our calling, should God sovereignly choose to do this.

In all three central features of Barth's vocational thought – Christocentric, communal and providential – a person's vocation is determined by factors extrinsic to herself. In Barth's vision, vocation moves from the cosmic focus, in narrowing concentric circles, to surround the individual. From this condensed summary it is clear that Barth's perspective on vocation is very different from that of someone who asks, "What is God calling me to do?" He focuses away from the individual Christian, towards her place in God's teleological purposes. Nimmo suggests that "this decentring vector of activity serves for Barth as a more fundamentally determinative indicator of Christian existence than internal feeling or external holiness."⁵⁸¹ Although vocation is a real human phenomenon, Barth actively resists any focus except on the work of Jesus Christ. He explains in detail the nature of God, the nature of humankind, and the relationship between them. Beyond that, he utterly resists abstracting principles which could be applicable on the basis of casuistry.

This barely helps the individual who still must discern what to do with her life – or, in Barthian terms, to determine what specific vocation is her unique and particular response to God's universal calling to discipleship in Christ. Barth is untroubled by such an anthropocentric question. His focus on "who is the God of the plan?" may not provide an answer, but it should prevent anxiety that the answer will be revealed.⁵⁸² The shape of God's command will be clear. He does highlight the importance of prayer, describing it dialogically as invocation. We are called upon to call upon God in

⁵⁷⁸ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 119.

⁵⁷⁹ Nimmo, "Barth on Vocation."

⁵⁸⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III:645.

⁵⁸¹ Nimmo, "Barth on Vocation."

⁵⁸² Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 118.

prayer – invocation is commanded by God, and we respond in free obedience. Though God is always sovereign, this does not imply that humans are passive – for Barth, ongoing prayer cannot fail to issue in some corresponding work.⁵⁸³ Prayer is non-passive waiting, empowered expectation to receive the divine answer.

“ If he lets God speak to him in his witnesses, and if he prays that He Himself will make him an active hearer, he will always have enough awareness both outwardly and inwardly to be on the right way to the decision for this or that sphere of operation, to the vocation corresponding to his calling.”⁵⁸⁴

Pressed for a more specific response, Barth produces two questions: what are the needs of the world around me, and what are my specific gifts?⁵⁸⁵ Here, despite Barth’s robust critique of Luther, it is hard to differentiate their responses. Barth’s view is more dynamic than Luther’s and allows the potential for God’s call to sovereignly cut across one’s *Stand*. Arguably, he also gives a little more weight to individual gifts and dispositions, as constituting someone’s unique created identity. However, these ultimately remain merely that which orient someone towards her place in God’s salvation history. In his resistance to admitting anything determinative in humanity, Barth is left almost by default with a modification of Luther’s view that vocation is circumscribed by one’s life circumstances - with an additional challenge. Like any knowledge of God, vocation cannot be deduced from evidence, or held as a permanent possession – it is subject to change. No-one, therefore, can arrogantly presume to know with certainty what his vocation is, or will be. Like any knowledge of God, vocation is never static.

In his vocational theology, Barth is again vulnerable to the modern-day accusation of taking inadequate account of the individual’s inner life and felt sense of call. The theological link between the universal call of God and the particularity of the called individual is inadequately developed. For Barth,

⁵⁸³ Kuzmic, “Beruf and Berufung in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics: Toward a Subversive Klesiology,” 276.

⁵⁸⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol.3, The Doctrine of Creation*, New study ed., Doctrine of Creation (London: London : T & T Clark, 2009), 636.

⁵⁸⁵ Barth, 634–36.

“... the uniqueness of the human person is only the dependent clause that introduces the main sentence, namely, that in this way man is pointed directly towards the grace of the divine calling, he is oriented on the covenant which God has made with man, he is disposed for participation in salvation history...”⁵⁸⁶

Finally, Barth’s experience of his own vocation affords little insight. His ordination to ministry by his father, after a couple of summer placements in a church as a theology student, merits a mere sentence in Busch’s very detailed biography and was apparently incidental – his “calling” (though not thus described) to study theology was more unexpected and passionate, a “bold resolve.”⁵⁸⁷ Theologically, his mildly anti-sacerdotal Reformed ecclesiology holds a call to ministry as little different from any other call, implying that discerning a call to ministry may be no different from discerning any other call, and selection processes might be the same as for any secular occupation. One senses that Barth would tell ministry applicants that with prayerful focus on the God who calls, they will “just know” their vocation, and that he would be impatient with any undue angst or interior soul-searching about it. It will never be grasped by individual insight.

Discernment in Barth: How do you know it’s God?

“We cannot impress upon ourselves too strongly that in the language of the Bible, knowledge. ...does not mean the acquisition of neutral information, which can be expressed in statements, principles and systems, concerning a being which confronts man, nor does it mean entry into passive contemplation of a being which exists beyond the phenomenal world. What it really means is the process or history in which man, certainly observing and thinking, using his sense, intelligence and imagination, but also his will, action and heart, and therefore as a whole man becomes aware of another history...”⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁶ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 121.

⁵⁸⁷ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Text*, 2011th ed. (London: SCM Press, 1976), 46, 31.

⁵⁸⁸ Church Dogmatics IV/3 p.183, Quoted in Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians : Selected Essays 1972-1995*, 60.

This chapter opened by asking, “How would someone reliably discern a genuine vocational call from God, according to Barth? And how would that call be affirmed and validated by the Church?” We have seen that these questions resonate with Barth quite differently than with other theologians because of his highly particular epistemology, linked to his Reformed anti-sacerdotalism. Knowledge of God is a revelatory event mediated through material creation, in which the recipient encounters the Word of God in a life-changing way. Barth leaves the impression that this is unmistakable. Yet in order to acknowledge it, people must recognize it for what it is – therefore, it must have identifying characteristics. Also, his perspective does not allow consideration that it might be important for humans to reflect on how we learn – and that such reflection may deepen our engagement with God.⁵⁸⁹ Revelation must be appropriated and lived out in the Church, therefore its translation into lived experience, with accompanying discernment and decisions, is a necessity. These are genuine lacunae in Barth’s theology, though it is difficult to say whether they are a deliberate omission, or merely incidental to his prime focus, or something he mistakenly regards as unimportant. Barth is adamant that revelation cannot be judged by human experience – there are no external criteria or indicators by which God can be proved. Yet God may choose to mediate His revelation through anything at will. So how is revelation to be appropriated in practice?

As stated at the outset, in asking Barth this question there is a sense that we are reading him against the grain. The question is framed in an anthropocentric paradigm which he chose to strenuously oppose, and that caveat must underscore any conclusions. It is very tempting to extract from Barth his few direct comments on how revelation appears from the perspective of the human subject, and the implications for human behavior of his doctrines, and misuse these to address a question he never asked and may have declined to answer. This temptation must be resisted, in favour of developing an understanding of his epistemology which will facilitate re-framing the questions in his own terms.

⁵⁸⁹ Rowan Williams finds Barth's absence of verifiability problematic theologically – he believes that revelation always includes learning about learning. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Oxford, 2000), 139.

Colin Gunton has described Barth's achievement as "... plucked from the intellectual air by an act of intuitive genius".⁵⁹⁰ *Prima facie*, "intuitive" is the last word one would associate with Barth, and Gunton may want to heavily qualify this description. Yet it may be an oddly apposite description of Barth's epistemology. For him, knowledge of God is essentially relational: indwelling "in Christ" places the phenomenal as foundational to the propositional, faith as prior to understanding, and real events as more reliable sources than abstractions from them. As Busch comments: "[Christ] is not a statement from which principles can be deduced. He is the one who is alive, one whom our knowledge can only *follow*, openly and nimbly."⁵⁹¹ It will be instructive in chapter 8 to consider Barth's thinking in dialogue with McGilchrist and other theorists of tacit knowledge, with Newman's description of the illative sense, and Ignatius' interiority.

For the present, we return to the considerable challenge of how discernment operates in practice for Barth. Although there are no criteria, the location of knowledge of God in Christ requires it to be consonant with the Word of God as witnessed to in Scripture, and to be attested by the Church as the Body of Christ. Moreover, it is located *a posteriori*. Though these general principles are vital, their practical utility in specific situations is very limited. For this, the extended example of Barth's own handling of revelation in formulating a Church Confession offers real insight. It has rich potential analogies with how individuals and churches might responsibly acknowledge the conviction that God has encountered them, and how that might be transmitted and formalised into a discerned and authenticated call.

This analogy might be extended, with caveats, to an individual's sense of a call to ministry. As with establishing a new Confession, the situation arises from a sense of being encountered from outwith oneself. The context typically includes conflict or restlessness, where the *status quo* is no longer satisfactory – a new kind of insight is required and sought. There is often a sense of inescapable compulsion. The event of encounter reaches someone who is consciously dwelling in Christ, and has a relational quality– it is experienced as arising from the call to discipleship, a genuine response to a transcendent reality. It is wrestled out amid the real-life limitations of the

⁵⁹⁰ Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians: Selected Essays 1972-1995*, 53.

⁵⁹¹ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 31.

individual's particular circumstances, gifts and opportunities. Most people will seek consonance with Scripture and their church tradition. The process is (or soon becomes) communal, engaging with the Church in both formal and informal consultation. Other people's theological and discernment skills may be a vital component, but are not themselves fundamentally disclosive of the divine. There is usually a courageous risk of faith involved, based on a sense of exigency. Reaching a final decision involves the affirmation of the whole Church, which is amalgamated (in a minor way) into the Church's own identity. The decision is not infallible and will be subject to further modification as changing circumstances indicate: however, for the present it is regarded as reliably indicating an authentic Word from God, and must be acted upon.

There are necessary caveats to suggesting an analogy between forming a Confession and vocational discernment. A Confession is a doctrinal statement, requiring the "science" of theological work to be brought to bear upon the Church's current situation by the methodology of academic study. It is subsequently authoritative for the church. A call to ministry is neither doctrinal nor authoritative, and the raw material on which it works is the human individual. Barth would see them as fundamentally different, and would doubtless regard the analogy as presumptuously elevating human concerns to the status of the divine. The element of discernment in writing a Confession – determining communally, in the light of Scripture, prayer and current events, what is God's Word for this situation – is notably something he omits to discuss. It may be his considered opinion that this is unimportant, or it may result from his determination that nothing intrinsic to humanity should be soteriologically significant. In either case, the human dimension constitutes a genuine lacuna in his thinking which one might responsibly seek to fill.

I would accept the analogy as a valid paradigm for how God's revelation becomes church practice, despite the caveats. This suggests that my theology of vocation differs from Barth's, and includes the necessity for discernment. A contemporary theology of vocation is asking different questions from Barth's, with greater concern for interior convictions. I would agree with Barth that a genuine call is fundamentally unmistakable *a posteriori* to someone who is open to receive it. However, the experience of people who wrestle over time to discover their call suggests that more

than this requires to be said during the process. Moreover, people who present to the Church the unshakable conviction that they “just know” they are called may convey a degree of arrogance which is counter-indicative on other grounds. The Church requires to responsibly evaluate these claims, and may even humbly expect God’s revelation to it as the Body of Christ.

Barth remains resolutely confident that God is known, and therefore knowable, in the church. He would therefore offer an unquestionable assurance that to the faithful Christian, the answer will be given; and understanding of revelation implies that it is intrinsically unmistakable. Prayer always gives enough light, and God is always open to speak to us. Barth is positive: one imagines that he would be inclined to say that if someone thinks they’re called, they are probably right, and being willing to take the risk is itself a sign of sincere conviction. However, nothing is unambiguously authentic except Christ himself. Ultimately, what is of God will fit the template of Him. It will always be dynamic, always of grace, apprehended by faith.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to address non-Barthian questions about discerning individual vocation from a Barthian perspective. It has outlined Barth’s general theological epistemology, noting his axiomatic principle that knowledge of God differs from any other knowledge and must be unveiled by revelation rather than deduced from reason. The circularity inherent in this approach is defensible both hermeneutically and theologically: in both cases, it is rooted in the nature of God as Trinity. The fundamental paradigm for revelation is the incarnation of Christ in human flesh, in whom all humanity dwells. Addressing the criticism that Barth negates the role of human experience in knowledge of God, it has been argued that this is overstated. Barth’s explicit statements, the implications of his theology, and his practical work in constructing the Barmen Declaration all demonstrate the necessity of total human engagement in appropriating God’s revelation, though this remains underdeveloped in Barth. Barth’s theology of vocation also problematically understates individual participation. While he notes particularity in circumstances, he allows no place for inner promptings or preferences. Barth gives vital general principles for acknowledging vocation *a posteriori*, and a profound reassurance that light will be

given, but no practical guidelines. I have noted significant analogies between the practice of formulating a Confession of the Church and discerning a vocation to ministry: while Barth would be unlikely to find these necessary or convincing, they nevertheless provide useful utilitarian insights. Barth's theological epistemology emphasizes indwelling, and might even be described as tacit or intuitive. It is firmly rooted in real, phenomenal and relational faith rather than in abstract, conceptual reason; and this provides fertile ground for dialogue with McGilchrist, Newman, Ignatius and others.

Chapter 8. Intuitive knowledge and Discernment

This research began by asking, “How might Vocational Assessors, in ways consistent with their communities’ theological convictions, better go about the task of discerning whether to accept candidates for ordained ministry in the Christian Church as called by God?” It was established that the VAs saw their core discernment task as discovering in applicants a sense of passionate life, however expressed, in their Christian faith and call to ministry – one which also fulfills their own coherent identity. This life energy is discerned primarily through the VA’s attentive listening: to applicants, to each other and to God. The data revealed that in the process they are also, less consciously, listening to themselves in their own tacit or intuitive knowledge. They describe an affective and “spiritual” inner movement when something they encounter in an applicant resonates affirmatively with their own sense of God’s presence. Both individually and collectively this was experienced as problematic, particularly where facets of it conflict with the external systemic requirements of criteria and reports. The nature and relative epistemological value of intuitive knowledge in relation to rational analysis is challenging to establish.

This chapter will argue that tacit or intuitive knowledge is a recognised phenomenon, accredited as valid by established scholars in the natural and social sciences, and some strands of Christian spirituality and theology.⁵⁹² It will then examine conflicting views of its role in a specifically theological epistemology. I will argue for its essential place, with significant modifications to reflect the unique character of God as subject. Finally, I will outline an understanding of how intuitive knowledge works specifically for Christians in discernment. To do this, I will engage the four conversation participants who have so far contributed their individual perspectives. To the first question of the place of intuition in how we know, Ignatius brings the voice of centuries-old Christian spirituality and McGilchrist the insights of modern neuroscience. The first section will

⁵⁹² Many scientists would have grave concerns about this, based on Enlightenment rationalism. Richard Dawkins is a leading exponent of the assumption that scientific rationalism forms a totalizing explanation for all phenomena, and anything currently mysterious to us is so because we have not yet found that explanation. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006).

engage them in a critical dialogue to establish where McGilchrist's theory illuminates Ignatius' practice and vice versa. The key question of whether Ignatius' active belief in God counteracts other similarities will also be evaluated. The second section will narrow the focus to how epistemological insights about intuition apply specifically to knowledge of God, particularly in discernment of a vocational call. For this we turn to the systematic theologians, Newman and Barth, who provide contrasting views.⁵⁹³ Finally, both dialogues will be drawn together to establish in detail how intuitive and rational knowledge cohere in the practice of forming, verifying and articulating a discernment of God's leading. The next chapter will apply these conclusions to the VA's specific context and concerns.

Intuitive knowledge and cognition: McGilchrist and Ignatius

Conflicting Perspectives

Establishing a dialogue between representatives of centuries-old Christian spirituality and modern science has considerable challenges. The two texts previously discussed could hardly differ more: the *Spiritual Exercises* are brief, terse directions for practice; *The Master and His Emissary* a dense and lengthy academic treatise. Separated by almost 500 years, their authors inhabit different cosmologies. Ignatius' topography of a universe comprised of above, middle and below is naïve by comparison with McGilchrist's modern physical and metaphysical presuppositions. Similarly, the concept of good and bad spirits, which are associated with identifiable external realities, translates to modern intellects as psychological or cultural phenomena or even "the burrito I had for lunch".⁵⁹⁴ Belief in the existence of the Christian God, whose absence would have been inconceivable to Ignatius, becomes in McGilchrist a carefully considered agnosticism, with a deity indicated (if at all) as the Other. This intentionally capacious phrase seems to refer primarily to other people, leaving open the possibility of a superior power, with or without personal characteristics.

⁵⁹³ The description "systematic theologians" would be unfamiliar to them both. Newman regarded himself as a churchman and scholar and was not, as previously noted, particularly systematic in his writing. Barth would have described himself as a dogmatic theologian. I use the modern term here to distinguish them from Ignatius, who never presented his practical and spiritual theology in an abstract doctrinal form.

⁵⁹⁴ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, 70.

McGilchrist does, however, speak of Life (or Being, sometimes capitalized) in a way that Christians might associate with the Spirit of God.⁵⁹⁵

From these different worldviews, Ignatius and McGilchrist ask different questions. Both have major preoccupations which are irrelevant to the other. Certain of God's all-pervasive presence, Ignatius asks how God can be found in all things, including in the movements of his own spirit. His central concerns about growth into spiritual freedom from disordered to ordered affections, and seeking accurate discernment, are foreign to McGilchrist. They assume a personal God to be known who has an absolute will to be sought, alongside a Devil to be resisted. McGilchrist's reading of the fundamental human dilemma is different. Noting with angst how the modern West's prevalent rationalism reduces our full humanity, he investigates how we have become existentially dissociated from any meta-narratives. He assumes that these exist, and can be sought and engaged with. However, he would not conceptualise the problem as losing God, nor would he see it as ultimately resolvable. He does not apply the paradigm of brain lateralization specifically to decision-making processes. Obviously, it is anachronistic to expect Ignatius to share his modern scientific worldview, or any anthropological conception of humanity independent of God.

Finally, Ignatius and McGilchrist pursue different ends. Ignatius' goal is iterated throughout: the greater glory of God, revealed in people who live as God's creatures after the pattern of Christ. McGilchrist's goal is to restore our intuitive connectedness with the world and each other, which he believes is currently our subordinate mode of being, to the status of Master. A thread of similarity links their different frameworks: both seek that human beings should fulfil their anthropological identity in responsive harmony with their physical, social and spiritual environment. However, they would define human flourishing very differently.

Perhaps their most basic point of divergence is that Ignatius' writings presuppose belief in a personal God, and McGilchrist's work does not. The difference could be perceived as semantic – God or the Other, which are two functionally similar entities in terms of human flourishing. While that view may be valid from an anthropological

⁵⁹⁵ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 197.

perspective, it would be reductionist as a totalizing explanation. There is a qualitative difference between awareness of and connectedness with an impersonal Other, and attentiveness to a Someone who is already reciprocally attending to you. This is explicit in a frequent Ignatian introductory prayer which orients the praying person by asking: how is God seeing me now? And how am I seeing God?⁵⁹⁶ Or, in McGilchrist's pithy phrase: "Science is a methodology of knowing and God is a somewhat to be known.... a methodology and an entity can't conflict."⁵⁹⁷ The question of the importance of believing in God forms an important background to our examination of Ignatius and McGilchrist's similarities.

Parallel Insights

Noting the differing perspectives, it is all the more striking that McGilchrist and Ignatius' responses to the question of how we know, and how our perception forms and changes us, conform so closely and are mutually illuminating. As McGilchrist is more theoretical and Ignatius more practical, this is most easily seen in how Ignatius' practice illustrates McGilchrist's theory.

Both conceive of knowledge as having two distinct modes: the whole, usually conceived as intuitive knowledge, and the parts: reason, or specific data. This is fundamental to McGilchrist's detailed neuroscientific study of brain lateralization. As chapter 5 noted, different modes of perception are located in the brain's bi-hemispheric structure. The right hemisphere perceives the world as a whole, while the left hemisphere disaggregates it into component parts. The right connects diverse phenomena and is open to the Other: epistemologically, its mode is intuitive. Its immediate apprehension of life is delegated to the left hemisphere to become explicit and detailed knowledge for theoretical analysis: epistemologically, its mode is reason. Both should synchronise in a dynamic lateral movement from right to left and back again, for re-incorporation into a new whole, enriched by comprehension of its component parts. The problem is the power struggle. The left hemisphere believes its own noetic framework to be the only one, therefore it seeks to grasp and control by its superior analytical power. Intuitive or personal knowledge should be served by rationality or abstract knowledge; the reality is frequently the opposite. For

⁵⁹⁶ Although commonly used in Ignatian circles, the source of this prayer is obscure.

⁵⁹⁷ Unpublished talk to clergy in the Diocese of Norwich, September 2017. Quoted with permission.

McGilchrist, this explains the scientific reductionism and depersonalization endemic in modern Western society. The left hemisphere is a good servant, but a bad master.

Ignatius' practical presuppositions about human knowledge, developed 500 years earlier, exemplify this principle in three areas. Firstly, his rules about communal discernment (in chapter 4) observe a firm distinction between data gathered from material facts, and the evidence of the inner movements of the spirit. Both have a crucial, but separate, place in discernment. Communal discernment is undertaken among people well versed in reading their own movements of consolation or desolation in relation to God, in a community dedicated to finding God's will. Translated to McGilchrist's framework, this illustrates the affective or intuitive dimension, tuned phenomenologically to Life as immediate individual experience. It is also tuned to the Other, both in human communities living in continuity with their ancient myths, and (potentially) to a greater power. Ignatian communal discernment begins formally with gathering all the relevant factual data. This is a discrete exercise undertaken according to its characteristic principles. For example, while questions for information are encouraged, opinions and feelings are inappropriate at this stage. In McGilchrist's paradigm, this is delegation to the left hemisphere for the examination of quantifiable, generalized and tabulated data. Ignatian communal discernment then moves to evaluate this data in a period of personal prayer and communal discussion, weighing its significance against perceived movements of the spirit and the habitus of the mind of Christ in the Gospels. In McGilchrist's terms, this is returning the Emissary's data to the Master for incorporation into the whole. This lateral cycle may be repeated in communal discernment as more data, including the evidence of growing *sentir*, is evaluated and a decision is reached. However, for Ignatius there is no power struggle. McGilchrist's "left hemisphere" data is subsumed, for Ignatius, into the greater communal, intuitive wisdom and both together are seen to reflect the mind and spirit of God. Importantly, material data is not seen as inferior or separate from God. It is one manifestation of the truth of God; the word of its Creator shown in material form.

A similar lateral dynamic operates in Ignatian contemplative prayer for individuals. The praying person disposed towards God reads the Gospel text perhaps several times - gathering data. The text is then taken to prayer, engaging it imaginatively in

intentional openness to the Holy Spirit. After each prayer session, Ignatius instructs his subjects to “reflect, in order to draw profit” – or, to submit the right-hemisphere affective prayer experience to left-hemisphere rational analysis.⁵⁹⁸ The fruit of this analysis – identifying precisely where and how the prayer experience has produced spiritual resonance or dissonance – forms the basis of the next prayer session, and this dialectical movement may be repeated as necessary. If asked, Ignatian practitioners would regard the prayer experience as the core phenomenon on which the reason reflects, implying that it is more epistemologically basic. However, the question of the relative status of the two modes in prayer does not arise in Ignatius – again, there is no power struggle. They are distinct but complementary dimensions of the same reality. A further element of personal prayer, which does not clearly fit the schema, is the role of the spiritual director. This initially seems to be a left-hemisphere rational analysis of the prayer experience; however, good spiritual direction “enters the heart with the head”, and can itself be a spiritual experience.⁵⁹⁹ Further, the communal aspect of immediate engagement with an Other suggests a right-hemisphere mode. While this element sits uneasily with McGilchrist’s dichotomy, I suggest that it does not negate it but provides a useful caution that the intuitive and the rational are not always easily distinguishable, particularly in interpersonal engagement.

Finally, McGilchrist’s theory of brain lateralisation is illustrated in Ignatius’ three modes of election (chapter 3). A first time election, where the subject has an immediate, unexamined and compelling sense of God’s will, is clearly a right hemisphere phenomenon. It may be complemented, but never contradicted, by left hemisphere analysis. The second time, which monitors movements of consolation and desolation, demonstrates both hemispheres working in the kind of dialectical synchronicity McGilchrist describes, much like the prayer experiences above. Ignatius also shows where this can go wrong, for example where rational verification is sought with excessive scrupulosity - a possible example of left-hemisphere dominance (chapter 3). Finally, the third time election where affective and volitional movements are absent would be, in McGilchrist’s terms, a mainly left hemisphere operation. Again this need not contradict the basic thesis that Ignatius illustrates McGilchrist’s principles. There are instances and phenomena for which the left hemisphere is ideally

⁵⁹⁸ For example, Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 82.

⁵⁹⁹ This commonly used phrase has obscure origins.

equipped to engage. As in McGilchrist, they do not merge in a bland kind of integration but each mode has its own integrity and cannot be evaluated in terms of the other. One does not negate or compete with the other, but should form an established pattern for interaction. Decisions made in the third mode of election remain, for Ignatius, subject to the global context of a world and community in which the holistic and affective are dominant.

Ignatius' and McGilchrist's different worldviews cohere in two other closely related practices: attention and imagination. As discussed in chapter 5, for McGilchrist the locus of attention defines the difference between the two hemispheres. Like the two distinct attentive fields of a feeding bird, the right hemisphere's eye scans the horizon for the global perspective while the left hemisphere's eye focuses its detailed attention on the current task. Focused attention actually alters the world: by it, we are co-creators of the reality we inhabit. What we attend to is what we become. This includes the importance of mimesis which is, paradoxically, the means by which we each achieve our unique individuality. This recalls Luhrmann's anthropological explication of the relationship between inner sense cultivation, attentiveness, and imagination or mental images (chapter 5). In affirming the importance of imagination and indwelling for "inner sense cultivation" she investigates Ignatian prayer and completes the *Spiritual Exercises*.⁶⁰⁰ She evidences how attentive prayer sharpens all the imaginative senses, and carries unexpected emotional power. For Ignatius, Christlikeness is formed by focused prayerful attentiveness to Christ, principally by imaginatively indwelling the Gospel narratives as a participant. They become our habitus, and form our perception of reality: the mind of Christ in us. Ignatius also teaches "inner sense cultivation" (in Luhrmann's phrase) as learning to identify certain affective movements with the spirit of God, based on a felt recognition of what characterizes God. God is experienced as a reality, and responded to as one would respond to a human person. McGilchrist and Luhrmann's scientific insights into attention and imagination provide a modern rationale suggesting how and why Ignatius' practice, centuries previously, is powerfully effective in achieving personal change.

⁶⁰⁰ Inner sense cultivation is a deliberate and sustained attempt to focus intensely on inner sensory experiences. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, 179.

McGilchrist, Ignatius and God

However, these analogies should not be exaggerated. A fundamental difference, noted above, is Ignatius' belief in a personal God. Rather than seeing intuition and reason anthropocentrically as physiological phenomena, he believes them to exemplify different aspects of God's creation, inspired and shaped by God's spirit. It is the human task to become more attuned to God's movements, in order to move them towards their teleological fulfilment – contemplation in action. This is a foreign worldview in McGilchrist's work. To what extent does belief in the Christian God negate the similarities noted so far? The nearest parallel is McGilchrist's discussion of Life and creativity. Life comes to us spontaneously via the right hemisphere and is shaped and formed by the creative power of negation: saying No to what conceals it. Attempting to make things live is "like pushing a dead mouse".⁶⁰¹ We can only recognize life where we encounter it, and sculpt it by negation. McGilchrist (and Marion Milner, chapter 5) suggest that it is by sitting lightly to our (left hemisphere) need for control that this intrinsic creative force emerges and flourishes. Ironically, the harder we grasp, the more we stifle what we seek. This relinquishment induces anxiety in minds shaped by our contemporary Western worldview, and requires an act of faith. Here, Ignatius' theology which locates all human effort within Divine grace believes that sincere effort ultimately cannot fail because of God's generous nature. This makes the abdication of control easier – and therefore, in Ignatian terms, facilitates seeing God in all things. The difference between an impersonal Life force and a personal God has significant implications for practice. The latter inspires a volitional and affective response of love and desire for the God who actively loves and desires us. It is hard to conceive of a secular counterpart.

Closely related to this is Ignatius' teaching that superficial disordered desires mask the true desires implanted in us by our Creator. The continuous habit of saying No to these allows the real desires implanted by the Creator to emerge – creation by negation is a positive, not a destructive act. Fulfilling this rightly ordered desire means engaging in worship and undertaking the lifelong discipline of spiritual exercises to form character and negate disordered desires. The affective basis in love, the volitional commitment to personal formation, the ethical evaluation of rightly and wrongly

⁶⁰¹ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 230.

ordered desires, and the *telos* of conformity to God's sovereign purposes, all have no real parallels in McGilchrist's writing. Though the means by which they occur are strikingly similar, the motivation towards worship and discipleship are distinctively Christian, as is the *telos* of the Kingdom of God and the glory of God.

This dialogue has established that, despite their different and often conflicting worldviews, Ignatius and McGilchrist can be understood to affirm each other in their understanding of the role of intuition (variously termed) in human apprehension. Neither explains the other away, but they are mutually validated and enriched. McGilchrist's voice offers a scientific rationale for Ignatian experience of God, refuting any reductionist charge that it is merely a subjective experience reserved for the religious. Rather, intuitive apprehension is a facet of all human perception. Ignatius also shows how spirituality exemplifies McGilchrist's principles, without adopting his presuppositions. Specifically, he expands McGilchrist's thesis into new territory by showing how intuition operates as a reliable component in a balanced decision-making process.

Intuition and theology: Newman and Barth

Newman and Barth

The previous section has argued for the epistemological validity of intuition in knowledge generally. I have noted, however, that Ignatius' Christian belief in God significantly alters praxis by defining the Other in personal terms. This makes a qualitative difference to the kind of attention paid – it arises from a passionate desire for God, and motivates transformative action. This has implications for a specifically theological epistemology. Ignatian spirituality presupposes the vital role of a discerning spirit in apprehending God. Some theologians, like Newman, would concur; others, like Barth, would vehemently oppose the suggestion that any anthropological capacity can discern God. I will argue that intuition remains epistemologically valid in the knowledge of God, but with important caveats determined by its unique subject matter. This conclusion is based on a critical correlation between Newman and Barth.

Barth's theology and Newman's clearly differ, though we should not overlook their considerable similarities. Fundamentally, both believe that God can be reliably known by humans in a relationship which precedes reason or creeds: personal relationship

prefigures propositional understanding. Faith is therefore epistemologically prior to reason, or any cognitive capacity, as a means of apprehending God. However, the relationship is not linear but is characterized by a dynamic cyclical interchange: from the apprehension of God, to humanity and back again. Barth emphasises the strongly incarnational view that all of this is “in Christ”. Without denying this dimension of a complex reality, Newman focuses more on the internal human movement from apprehension to reason. For both of them, the relationship carries life-giving and transformative energy, never simply theoretical but engaging the whole person in lifelong discipleship. Both are strongly Trinitarian, and employ a triadic matrix for their theology; Barth as fundamental to all his methodology, Newman in the balance between Faith, reason and church (or feeling, thinking and doing). However, though Newman’s orthodox Christology is beyond question, for Barth the centrality of Christ is distinctively important.

Other similarities are more apparent than real, as important elements of their theology understand the same concepts differently. For example, both regard faith as epistemologically basic for knowing God, and both cite Anselm’s definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding”. However, they understand “faith” differently. Newman believes that it pertains for all domains of knowledge: the grammar of assent is consistent throughout, and “faith” as a means of apprehension applies to all subjects - though the means of verification are domain-specific. For Barth, God’s uniquely transcendent being excludes any possibility that God can be known as other subjects are. Human attributes or effort can only mislead, and we depend entirely upon God’s self-authenticating revelation. Faith is the distinctive mode by which this is received, and is not applicable to other subjects. This is grounded in their differing understandings of revealed religion. For Newman, knowledge of God is predicated upon the belief generated by natural religion, and fed by attentiveness to it (chapter 6). Barth would entirely disagree.

A similar example is the church. Newman and Barth both hold it as fundamentally important, but have quite different ecclesiologies. For Newman it is the locus of the deposit of faith through the ages, with authoritative creeds, traditions and structures which check and balance individual spiritual experience – though he struggles to affirm the magisterium’s capacity to over-rule individual conviction based on the

illative sense. By contrast, Barth denies any possibility that the church contains a fixed deposit of faith accessible to Christians by unassisted reason. The Church's *telos* is to witness to the reality of God, preaching and proclaiming his message to the world in mission. The Creeds and sacraments are signs only, pointing hands (chapter 7) to the inaccessible reality beyond them. Individual leadings are determined as part of the Church's global vocation, and could never contradict it.

A final example is the superficial resemblance between Barth's veiling and unveiling, and Newman's metaphorical "saying and unsaying to positive effect" or "creation by opposite strokes".⁶⁰² While both attempt to communicate an ultimately inarticulable divine reality, they are not the same. Newman is attempting to discover a reality he believes is intrinsically present, discernible in nature for those with spiritual eyes to see. He is describing the cognitive and literary process by which that numinous reality might be apprehended. For Barth, any such process is at best fruitless and at worst, dangerously presumptive. Though he believes that God is omnipresent, the One we indwell as the ultimate ground of our being, only God can initiate his self-revelation. No human effort or skill can make any difference.

This final example indicates their fundamental theological divergence. For Newman, nature is fundamentally good: God can be found in all things, and can be known by the same faith-and-reason dialectical process as other subjects. Humans are anthropologically in God's image, and human experience is a valid starting point for the study of God. Sin surrounds us in our culture rather than being anthropologically basic, and can be overcome through growth in Christian maturity. For Barth, the function of reason is to reflect *a posteriori* on what has been revealed by God and received in faith. The essential polarity is not within human nature but between sin-bound creatures and the transcendent God, who cannot by any human capacity be apprehended in nature or understood by creeds. Human experience is never the *terminus a quo* of any theological endeavor - God is known either clearly and certainly by revelation, or not at all. The individual's role is to actively acknowledge what he receives as a gift of grace, and to respond wholeheartedly. Both individually and as the Church we do not find the truth; the truth finds us.

⁶⁰² See chapter 6; both are Quoted in Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: "In Aid of a Grammar of Assent,"* 63-64.

Intuition: Newman, Barth or both?

Drawing on Newman, and to some extent Barth, I propose to delineate an understanding of intuition as epistemologically valid for the knowledge of God, as part of the faith-and-reason dialectic for apprehension outlined by Newman. One reason for this is Newman's parallels with Ignatius and McGilchrist, which will be further discussed below. Otherwise, there are three main reasons for finding Newman's basic paradigm compelling.

The interplay of faith and reason, affect and intellect, outlined by Newman is theologically convincing. In particular, he presupposes that created beings have some inherent spiritual element of their anthropological identity as part of the *imago Dei*. For Newman, this spiritual capacity, however latent or imperfect, is inherent in humankind (for example, in the voice of conscience): the *imago Dei* suggests some form of *analogia entis*, however flawed. Newman's position assumes a more multi-faceted definition of the *imago Dei* than Barth's, incorporating structural, functional and representational elements as well as the relational.⁶⁰³ This further implies that the inherent, latent potential to connect with God remains present in humanity, though distorted by sin. Barth's argument that this capacity is not only distorted but obliterated by sin has wide-ranging anthropological implications, which may be difficult to sustain. It could imply that sin has altered humankind to the extent that we no longer bear God's image as personal beings or as recipients of his covenant. Phenomenologically, it questions how we explain any intrinsic human ability to apprehend qualities like beauty, love, or joy, which arguably indicate "spiritual" awareness. Barth acknowledges this natural capacity, but he denies it any soteriological significance. I would concur with that. However, one can say that intuitive spiritual perceptions cannot be salvific without denying them any epistemological value in knowing God for people who are turned towards God and intentionally seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance. This is not to minimize the effect of sin. Sin can distort these capacities to the point where they are not only useless for apprehending God but also deceptive, and to follow them is dangerously misleading (as seen in Ignatius' disordered desires). While I find Newman overly optimistic in assuming that humans can apprehend God with or without Christian faith, for

⁶⁰³ Cortez suggests that Barth's definition of the *imago Dei* is essentially relational, being rooted in the Trinity. This means that when the relationship is broken (by sin), the image is functionally obliterated. Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 25–26.

example through conscience, one need not adopt that view to find his basic epistemological paradigm of faith and reason convincing. Sin can be given significant weight in distorting human perception and rendering it unreliable, without negating the model by which perception works.

Secondly, Barth's contribution to questions about intuition is frustratingly limited. Contrary to some of his critics, and to some of his own statements, I have suggested in chapter 7 that both in theory and practice he does presume the existence of "a keyhole in man", and that implicitly (and occasionally explicitly) he acknowledges the role of human experience in apprehending God. His determination to maintain his singularly theocentric stance, while breathtaking in its scope and consistency, ultimately creates a genuine lacuna in his thinking: it leaves him unwilling to discuss the practicalities of human experience. Here, the historical context of Barth's determination to overturn natural theology unfortunately, and I believe unnecessarily, limits his work. One can only be certain that he does not believe intuitive knowledge to have any intrinsic soteriological value or epistemological credibility. He does not address, for example, whether revelation might include insight into how we gain knowledge; or whether intuition might be (or become) a mediating object for divine revelation. Consistency with his thought would demand that it could, as anything else potentially can – otherwise, divine freedom is limited. However, it could never do so reliably. One cannot be certain how he thinks revelation works in practice, only deduce that information as I have attempted to do (chapter 7). Any such attempt must be ultimately unsatisfactory and inconclusive, and this undermines confidence in his position.

Thirdly, Barth's holding together the opposites of veiling and unveiling, knowing with certainty by self-authenticating revelation and not knowing by other means, does not always conform to either the Biblical tradition or to common human experience. Though Barth does not insist that revelation be sudden, neither does he identify any interim position even though this is normal in both human experience and in Scripture. Often people "see through a glass darkly" or move progressively towards a more certain apprehension, especially in vocation.⁶⁰⁴ For example, in Ignatian terms, Barth seems to imply that all election must be a first time election, which Ignatius

⁶⁰⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:12

regards as rare – but again, this is an area in which Barth does not engage and would probably dismiss.

However, although I find the dialectical paradigm of faith-and-reason convincing, I would argue (*contra* Newman) that it requires significant modification when applied to God. Newman fails to address with adequate seriousness the implications of the uniqueness of God as the subject of our knowledge. If God is our context, “the One in whom we live and move and have our being”, our position in relation to God is uniquely subjective, and this has epistemological implications.⁶⁰⁵ It is even trickier to avoid the anthropocentric trap of assuming an Archimedean point from which we can externally evaluate God. I suggest four inter-related points on which Newman’s position needs to be strengthened or modified.

Firstly, we must take seriously our “fallen” nature. While I have argued for intuition as a valid mode of knowledge, it remains fundamentally flawed and any assumption that the heart knows infallibly must be seriously challenged. I disagree with Newman, for example, that conscience is “the remnant of God’s voice in us” (chapter 6). The ability to make ethical judgments, with its powerful accompanying “sense” of right and wrong, certainly implies that we have a moral capacity. However, the modern social sciences understand that the specific judgments made by the “voice” of conscience are formed by our childhood context, and demonstrably vary between individuals and across cultures. A serious anthropology of sin implies that intuition needs more than just balancing by reason. Our affective judgments are inherently unreliable not just because they are unreasonable but because they tend to be selfish or destructive. They only become reliable by incorporating intuition, along with reason, into an intentional process of formation in an entirely new noetic paradigm, the mind of Christ. Human attributes and effort cannot achieve this, but growing love and desire for Christ can dispose us towards change.

Secondly, this assumes the existence of an extrinsic source of authority for what is normative or good, beyond individual or even corporate human judgment. Newman points to the Creeds and traditions of the church; beyond these, Barth highlights Scripture as authoritative for all Christian traditions. The hermeneutics of such

⁶⁰⁵ Acts 17:28

“authoritative” sources will always be vexatious and will themselves be subject to continual revision according to Spirit-led and sin-infected wisdom. However, honouring external sources of revelation is necessary if the concept of God’s transcendence is to have practical consequences. Such authority also preserves space for any unexpected, prophetic, counter-cultural and even counter-intuitive knowledge of God. We judge ultimately not by what is intuitive, but by what is revelatory according to the sources we have (which may, of course, include intuition). Newman and Barth agree that Christ is the ultimate source, with divergent views of how that is appropriated.

The presence of externally authoritative sources further suggests that openness to the extrinsic Other - God - must be clear, intentional and relational. This adds a focal dimension to the natural openness advocated by McGilchrist, or the kind of aesthetic sensibility which for Newman is the secular version of the illative sense (chapter 6). It highlights the role of prayer and worship, in which Christians intentionally open themselves to the God of Scripture. Taken together, these imply a fourth element to strengthen Newman’s position: the necessity of a communal context to develop a discerning spirit. The Church in its creeds and confessions provides longitudinal continuity with the past and with the determinate end of God’s future intention, within which individual reasoned belief can be presently located and interpreted. Scripture reading offers a meta-narrative within which individual stories can find their identity in God’s story. Regular prayer and worship hold the space for intentional openness to God which connects the individual with the Other, assisted by music, art and ritual. Both Newman and Barth agree that for interaction with the divine, church is the inescapable context.

I therefore suggest that while Newman’s basic epistemological paradigm is sound, for Christians in the context of knowing God it should be adopted with a cautious humility. Given that our intuition is distorted by sin we should critique its intrinsic reliability, and intentionally seek conformity to the mind of Christ by discipleship. I concur with Barth that this cannot be achieved by Pelagian effort; nevertheless, I consider it possible that Christians can intentionally dispose themselves to receive God’s grace by exercising spiritual disciplines in the communal context of the Church.

Intuitive knowledge and Discernment

I have outlined intuition's legitimate role in constructing knowledge, based on Ignatius and McGilchrist, then suggested what might be its role in a specifically theological epistemology (*mutatis mutandi*) from Newman and Barth. It remains to engage the four conversation partners to reach a more fully developed conception of how intuitive knowledge operates practically in discerning God's will. By way of introduction, I will note where the two previous dialogues mutually cohere, and what is problematic. I will then show how intuitive knowledge operates in discernment by addressing three practical questions: how a discerning spirit is formed and nurtured, then how a sense of God's will can be verified, and finally how it is articulated.

The parallels between Newman's faith-and-reason dialectic and McGilchrist's pattern of brain lateralization are strikingly clear, even to the minor detail that both "A Grammar of Assent" and "The Master and his Emissary" are structured in two halves to mimic their subject matter. For readers of both, I find that McGilchrist's template clarifies much in Newman that tends towards obscurity, given his polysemic terminology and his metaphorical literary style. As noted in chapter 6, Newman's real apprehension matches the right hemisphere's function, which apprehends life holistically with all its particularity. This mode of apprehension carries life and emotional energy as the root of our volitional responses as well as our indefinable capacities for awe, worship, and connection with the divine. It incorporates mind, heart and will, forms character, and inspires action. Notional assent is the rational assimilation of a concept, by which it is dissembled, assessed, and communicated. It finds a parallel in the left hemisphere function, delegated from the right hemisphere for analysis, abstract theorizing and rote functions. It checks and balances the real, but should not control it. This fundamental polarity of opposite but mutually regulating principles is replicated in Newman's many other polarities, including faith and reason, and religion and theology. In all of them, he shares McGilchrist's priority that real (right-hemisphere) apprehension takes precedence, being "the scope and end and test of the notional."⁶⁰⁶ For McGilchrist this fulfils our humanity; for Newman it does so by giving God his rightful place. Again, an important difference arises in Newman's analysis of the place of sin in imaginative or

⁶⁰⁶ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 47.

real apprehension. He believes that our perceptions are distorted by sin in our culture, and require deliberate correction by focusing on the image of Christ.

Mapping Barth's theology on to McGilchrist's matrix is more complex. Given Barth's radically different presuppositions, it is striking how fully he regards knowledge of God as, in McGilchrist's terms, a right hemisphere phenomenon – particular, immediate, and relational to the Other. As has been argued in chapter 7, Barth understands knowledge of God as essentially experiential, encompassing volitional energy and transformative action. Although Barth is among the most systematic of all theologians, he strongly resists reducing knowledge of God to any abstract (or, for McGilchrist, “left-hemisphere”) system or theory, because *Latet periculum in generalibus*.⁶⁰⁷ He insists on what McGilchrist would call “right-hemisphere” dominance – for Barth, this is the place of faith.⁶⁰⁸ Latterly he even acknowledged the theological value of culture and the arts, which he personally enjoyed throughout his life.⁶⁰⁹ I suggest that Barth's relentlessly theocentric perspective can be read as apprehending with unusual seriousness the left hemisphere's inappropriate ambition to grasp, possess and control – in his terms, to adopt an anthropocentric position – and an absolute resolve to let God be God. Humans are not prohibited from taking what we receive in revelation and working it out – that is the task of theology and the Church. It is presumptuous, however, for us to take the initiative as agents, to regard our analysis as fixed, or to refuse to submit our conclusions to God's free sovereignty. God is the Master to whom created beings relates solely as Emissary. There is a problem, however, in McGilchrist's analysis that the right hemisphere is inherently open to the Other. *Contra* Newman, Barth would draw an impenetrable line between aesthetic sensibilities and the ability to connect with the divine. This is rooted in his negative anthropology. Nothing inherent in humanity is intrinsically right in relation to God.

There are also apparently irreconcilable differences between Barth and Ignatius. Barth would endorse Ignatius' emphasis on prayer and Scripture contemplation, echo his serious regard for sin, and applaud the central emphasis on Christ as the paradigm for Christian mimesis. He would certainly concur with Ignatius' diagnosis of disordered

⁶⁰⁷ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 69.

⁶⁰⁸ For clarity, I am not suggesting here that faith and the right hemisphere are synonymous, only that they inhabit the same epistemological domain.

⁶⁰⁹ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 54–55.

desires, but he would refuse to discuss, from a human perspective, how they might become rightly ordered. *Per contra*, he would wholly oppose Ignatius' methods. Employing imagination and contemplating inner affective movements cannot, for Barth, reliably disclose the divine. They are at best irrelevant and at worst wholly misleading, betraying a crucial misunderstanding of our nature in relation to God. Ignatius' disciplines to overcome sin would be similarly antithetical for Barth, seen as proud Pelagian efforts to gain what can only be only be received by God's grace. Again, I would draw the distinction between what is salvific and what is a means of sanctification (chapter 7). I would echo Newman and Ignatius in understanding spiritual disciplines as disposing oneself to be open to God's spirit.

As argued above, I find Barth convincing in his diagnosis of the problem of sin, but not to the extent of obliterating any remnant of God in humanity. Ignatius' description of disordered desires, which mask and distort the created desire for God, seems more theologically compelling though his proposed solutions in extremely disciplined effort have always been justifiably open to the charge of Pelagiansim. Though he repeatedly acknowledges the ultimate role of grace, in practice he never rests on it. Insights from modern behavioural psychology reveal some of his intense efforts towards behavioural change – like counting one's sinful thoughts and trying to reduce the number - as quaintly naïve.⁶¹⁰ More fundamentally he concurs with Newman in understanding re-ordering disordered desires through lifelong formation in discipleship to be part of a turning (*metanoia*) to God's grace rather than an effort to attain it. This seems a balanced position.

“Sentir” and the Illative Sense

Newman's description of the illative sense is vital for this study. As discussed in chapter 6, it is the informal reasoning by which we make sapiential judgments based on accurate inferences – in modern terms, intuitively wise insights or discernment. Far from being merely languid or dull rational judgments, however, it commands an energetic, real assent. Newman closely associates the illative sense with the formation of a mature and virtuous character, both being shaped by the indwelt habitus of prayer, worship and the sacraments. He also associates it with the imagination, both in its realizing function (which renders abstract ideas in concrete form), and its

⁶¹⁰ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 34.

prehending function (which synthesises multiple material images in a single coherent concept). Only the preheating function can fully apprehend Christ's image in our hearts, as both human and divine. This dual function of the imagination is analogous with McGilchrist's dual function of the brain, with the left hemisphere disaggregating phenomena into component parts, and the right seeing them whole.

It also begs comparison with Ignatius' *sentir*, which also develops as an important consequence of habitual attentive prayer: "a kind of "felt-knowledge", an affective, intuitive knowledge possessed through the reaction of human feelings to exterior and interior experience.... a total human experience of understanding with all of its emotional resonance."⁶¹¹ With characteristic lexical imprecision, Ignatius uses the term in several modes – including to *sentir* the will of God – effectively resisting precise definition.⁶¹² However, I have concluded above (chapter 3) that *sentir* does not denote an inherent latent ability; rather, it becomes "intuitive" by practice.⁶¹³ It is a learned response like many others, more "second nature" than "sixth sense". Here, ESDAC and other contemporary expressions of Ignatian spirituality significantly modify his thought by opening Ignatian practices to everyone regardless of their theological belief or spiritual practice.

There are marked similarities between *sentir* and the illative sense. Both form gradually, inextricably linked with maturing character. They incorporate reason and all cognitive data, but ultimately both become essentially intuitive. One common element in their development is the exercise of imagination. For Newman this incorporates the whole of our creative faculties, while Ignatius associates it with prayerful imaginative contemplation, usually of Scripture. Newman emphasises the life energy which inhabits the illative sense, commanding an intuitive volitional response in concrete action, which is coherent with Ignatius' examples of its use in communal discernment. Ignatius details the role of this sense in decision-making, which is not Newman's focus though again it is congruent with his thought. The comparison of Newman and Barth

⁶¹¹ "Ignatian Discernment," 56.

⁶¹² Edean, "The Ignatian Prayer of the Senses," 411.

⁶¹³ The association of intuition with pattern recognition is frequently held, though not undisputed, in psychological literature. See, for example, Kahneman and Klein, "Conditions for Intuitive Expertise"; Lisa M. Osbeck, "Conceptual Problems in the Development of a Psychological Notion of 'Intuition,'" *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 29, no. 3 (1999): 229–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5914.00100>.

above highlighted the distinctive feature that Newman applied the illative sense across all domains of knowledge. Ignatius' view must again be deduced from his practice. The incorporation of everyday material data in communal discernment, and the application of spiritual insight to the process as a whole, exemplifies his belief that God may be found in all things and suggests that he would agree with Newman. Finally, both *sentir* and the illative sense are self-authenticating: they carry a strong affective and volitional conviction. Given their differing theological contexts, the similarities between them are sufficient to conclude that they describe the same phenomenon, at least where the illative sense is applied to the knowledge of God. They are what we mean by "the feel of Christ" [which is] essential in seeking the mind of Christ if our discernment is not to be solipsistic".⁶¹⁴

Additionally, both have an important communal dimension. Ignatius details the role of individual *sentir* in communal discernment, from which his successors have posited "a kind of communal *sentir*", the shared spiritual conviction of the right course of action.⁶¹⁵ Newman never systematically addresses communal discernment of God's will. However, he references a communal sense perception, "the *consensus fidelium*.... a sort of instinct, or *Phronema*, deep in the body of Christ" which Newman scholars describe as the illative sense operant in a corporate context.⁶¹⁶ It is the real apprehension of God in the church, against which notional cognition - theology, clergy and the magisterium - are ultimately evaluated. In communal discernment, Newman and Ignatius have a further intriguing similarity. Both have modern successors who attempt to extract their principles and apply them to non-faith communities: ESDAC for Ignatius (chapter 4), and Aquino for Newman (chapter 6). In both cases, I would argue that the attempt runs aground on the challenge of establishing a shared *telos*, theological understanding, *unio animarum*, and experience of prayer, in the absence of a Christian framework. As seen in chapter 4, the Jesuits specifically identify each of these as essential for discerning God's will. Aspects of communal discernment can be productively translated to techniques applicable to secular contexts, but intentionally discerning God's will requires dependence on God.

⁶¹⁴ Leach, "Pastoral Theology as Attention," 29.

⁶¹⁵ Sr Avril O'Regan, informal interview, Jan 2018. Used with permission. This precise term is rare in Jesuit literature, perhaps because Ignatius never uses it as far as I can determine. However, it captures the sense of what they seek.

⁶¹⁶ Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts: The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman*, 235.

Despite variant terminology and theology, this recalls features of Quaker communal conviction. The profound experience of “covering” which characterizes some Quaker meetings is their touchstone, identified by religious Friends as self-evidently the Divine presence. It is “a vital discovery of divine Life revealing itself here and now, in and through a group of persons who are bent on communicating that Life.”⁶¹⁷ This seems a more affective, mystical and occasional occurrence than the Jesuit’s communal discernment of spirits: “... a process in which they perceive and weigh the movements which the spirits provoke in the group which is seeking the will of God.”⁶¹⁸ Both describe a shared “sense” and weight of conviction of the right decision. Despite the phenomenological similarities, the underlying theological divergence problematizes, in my view, any easy identification of Quaker “covering” with Christian discernment.

Taken together, these sources support the view that Christians can develop a wise and discerning spirit, conformed to the mind of Christ. This is more “second nature” than “sixth sense”; in other words, it is not a supernatural capacity latent in humankind. Rather, it forms as our innate (right hemisphere) capacity for tacit knowledge is tuned by spiritual disciplines to resonate with God’s spirit, and becomes intuitive. Both Newman and Ignatius acknowledge the importance of the imagination focused on Christ in continually forming an accurate responsiveness, against the world’s vision (for Newman) or disordered desires (for Ignatius). Though both acknowledge dependence on God, it is Barth’s robust disclaimer which cautions against Pelagiasism and emphasizes transformation as the gracious gift of God’s spirit. Though these viewpoints cannot be fully reconciled, I have suggested that in practice they are not incompatible: in spiritual disciplines we dispose ourselves to receive God’s gift. Barth would add that the will and ability to do this is itself a gift of God. It follows that a mature and discerning spirit is vital for finding God’s leading. That being so, it remains to examine whether and how discernment might be fostered, verified and articulated.

Fostering a Discerning Spirit

Can a discerning spirit be intentionally honed to enhance its reliability? Though such a question is beyond McGilchrist’s remit, it is useful to apply his research to a

⁶¹⁷ Rufus Jones, *Quakerism: A Spiritual Movement*, p. 87, Quoted in Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, 5.

⁶¹⁸ Letter from Arturo Sosa SJ, November 2017. See ESDAC website www.esdac.net

speculative response which indicates a scientific benchmark for comparison with other disciplines. A useful entry point here is McGilchrist's critique of the Protestant Reformation (in common with Newman). He deplores its reductionist negation of liturgy and the arts in favour of creeds and doctrines, believing that this robs Christianity of its spiritual power. This illustrates his conviction that we have a "spiritual" capacity for apprehending awe, wonder and worship, analogous with our capacity to appreciate artistic beauty. McGilchrist's whole thesis is that this is underdeveloped and devalued in our culture, consequently reducing our full humanity. This logically implies that our intuitive or spiritual capacity can be nurtured instead of neglected, just as we can acquire mature aesthetic sensibilities. McGilchrist applauds religion's capacity to foster this, while remaining agnostic about its attendant truth claims. He would support prayer, worship, and Bible reading (myth and communal tradition) as enhancing our capacity to connect with the real – but he would be reluctant to define the real as God, still less the personal Christian God.

The idea that spiritual apprehension can be intentionally enhanced is strongly supported by Luhrmann's previously noted study (chapter 5). Again without a faith perspective, she demonstrates how attentive and focused prayer shape our perception of reality. When interpreted through the hermeneutic of a believing community, this is experienced convincingly as God's presence. Luhrmann's vital contribution to this discussion is to destabilise an immediate identification of a "spiritual" experience with belief in God. She proves that such experiences are real and can be fostered, regardless of how they are interpreted. The raw data of our experience neither proves nor disproves God: our prior disposition to believe or not determines our experience. Experience is importantly relativized. It is not the basis of our understanding; rather, belief and experience mutually inform each other to co-create what we experience as reality.

In the context of Christian faith, Ignatius and Newman both assume that spiritual formation is an essential prerequisite for discerning God. For Ignatius, the disciplines of the Examen, imaginative contemplation and other exercises were specifically oriented to enhancing *sentir*. Both individually and communally, continual practice in the appropriate exercises is: "like running a race, or playing in an orchestra. If one

person has been lax individually, it'll show. If all have been lax, it can't be done."⁶¹⁹ Spiritual acuity is like physical fitness, or any other developed skill. Regular spiritual direction fosters the same capacity: it is more like going to the gym than seeing a doctor. Newman would entirely concur, though he emphasises regular participation in worship, the sacraments and prayer (which Ignatius assumed). He complements Ignatius by stressing the role of reason and creeds in spiritual development. He is similarly Christocentric, again echoing Ignatius in his goal of conformity to Christ by mimesis and indwelling. However, Newman differs from Ignatius on the important theological question of the inherent human capacity to discern God. Newman is optimistic that humans are intrinsically capable of connecting with God, even (though not fully or typically) beyond the confines of Christian belief.

To the question of fostering, enhancing or in any human way influencing an experience of God, Barth would offer a resounding *Nein!* Revelation resides entirely within God's free and gracious gift and is beyond human manipulation. No knowledge or revelation of God is possible outside of Christ and unaided by God's spirit – though the thorny question of whom he considers to be “in Christ” is disputed among Barth scholars. Barth would wholeheartedly endorse the practices others prescribe for Christian maturity - prayer, contemplation of Scripture, worship, and conformity to Christ in discipleship. However, he would resolutely oppose the underlying theological and epistemological assumption that knowledge of God is achievable by these or any means. It is Barth's recurring distinctive that he refuses to enter any discussion which may conceivably indicate such a possibility, so strongly does he negate it. Here, as noted in chapter 7, Barth is unhelpfully silenced by his very particular viewpoint. In fact neither Ignatius nor Newman believes that God is manipulable, only that one can (and should) dispose oneself to receive what God wants to give, in order to recognize and respond to it. This repeats the frustrating tension that Barth approves of the same spiritual disciplines, but with a different theological rationale; and refuses to discuss them for fear of misinterpretation. Here, though the underlying theologies are not reconciled, there may be potential for practical resolution. Prayer, worship, Bible reading and seeking conformity to Christ can be undertaken despite different underlying theologies.

⁶¹⁹ From a conversation with Piaras Jackson SJ. Used with permission.

Verifying a discernment of God's will

If knowledge is “justified true belief”, how can discernment incorporating intuitive knowledge be justified?⁶²⁰ If intuitive knowledge can be a reliable element in discernment, it must be verifiable as authentic in order to be distinguishable from “our burrito from lunch”⁶²¹ and become a sound basis for decision-making. This is challenging, as left-hemisphere quantifiable criteria are clearly inappropriate.

Newman and McGilchrist share the presupposition that knowledge appropriated intuitively (which Newman, in this context, further specifies as “faith”) is as certain as other kinds because the same epistemological paradigm applies across all domains. Both hold that certainty resides in the person, not in the proposition. For Newman, “Certitude does not come under the reasoning faculty, but under the imagination.”⁶²² McGilchrist’s more complex position is that certainty is context-specific – for example, science provides us with a real form of certainty, but only within its own circumscribed context, beyond which it no longer holds. This basic position is strongly supported by Polanyi’s work (chapter 5). Verification is therefore complex, and McGilchrist does not directly address the question. It would certainly incorporate both right and left hemisphere apprehension (as everything does), but would be reducible to neither. Given his belief that reality is something we co-create, I suggest that McGilchrist might regard justification as coherence among people that the reality indicated conforms to the principles governing its context. Beyond that he would be unwilling to go, and he would be agnostic about the existence of absolute or ultimate criteria.

Verifying knowledge of God was Newman’s focal subject. As real assent is reached by accumulating analogous metaphors, the structure of proof is correspondingly complex. Like McGilchrist he believes that verification is domain-specific, and Newman states that demanding an inappropriate form of confirmation can lead to a misleading denial of faith. He instances demanding the iron bar of proof, where only a moral demonstration is apposite. No absolute tests can prove God. As previously discussed (chapter 6), the strands which compose an evidentiary cable are reason or logic; the

⁶²⁰ This traditional definition of knowledge can be traced to Plato’s time, but was famously challenged by Gettier in 1963 and is now heavily debated.

⁶²¹ Luhmann, *When God Talks Back : Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, 70.

⁶²² Unpublished material by Newman, Quoted in Coulson, *Religion and Imagination : “In Aid of a Grammar of Assent,”* 59.

inner authentication of conscience and the illative sense; the witness of love and faith among believers; and the outward authority of the church. He makes the crucial point that someone's level of certainty arises from her predisposition to believe, not from the strength of the proposition - echoing Luhrmann's research (chapter 5). Confronted with the same evidence, people will vary in how convincing they find it. Newman observes: "We speak of having knowledge, and feeling certain"⁶²³. McGilchrist would agree that "feeling certain" is a right-hemisphere property, something apprehended rather than grasped. However, Newman needs more for faith to be verified in communal discernment. He believes that a common measure is necessary to make a presumptive mode of reasoning secure, and finds the shared evidence in "an intuitive spiritual perception in scripturally informed and deeply religious minds" - otherwise described as the illative sense.⁶²⁴

Ignatius approaches the question of verification from a complementary practical perspective. His exercitants become confident to name whether inner movements resonate with God's spirit or not, based on practice of the *Examen* and imaginative contemplation (chapter 3). They have a common lexicon to articulate it, a matrix by which to evaluate it, and (in spiritual direction) a forum in which to discuss it. This reduces concerns about subjectivity, unreliability, or being misled, and facilitates validating *sentir* as privileged among other data for discernment. Ignatius believes that certainty beyond reasonable doubt is possible, and he details how various data - consolation or desolation, intellectual evaluation, direct revelatory experiences - should be evaluated in each of the three times for election. For group decisions he demonstrates a process transposing this to a communal context. Verification therefore similarly utilizes a range of modes - inner peace and consolation, consonance with Christ in the Gospels, and serving God's greater glory. Finally, it rests with the magisterium. Ultimate certainty, however, is not rooted in personal affect or acute intellectual evaluation, but in God's character. While all possible human effort should be made, Ignatius believes that a loving God will never withhold sincerely sought guidance.

⁶²³ Unpublished material by Newman, Quoted in Coulson, 58.

⁶²⁴ Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts: The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman*, 235.

For Barth, revelation means that knowledge of God can only be self-authenticating. In practice it is therefore only reliably discernable *a posteriori*, by attending to its past manifestations. While he would value prayer, church and creeds, for him they have no evidential value because they cannot be epistemologically more basic than the faith they seek to justify. He would regard it as dangerously presumptuous for sin-blighted human affect to seek to verify or otherwise the truth of God – this is a basic error of natural theology. Even the creeds, secondary only to Scripture as God’s word to the church, are only authoritative for their time and may be transcended or modified in the light of future disclosures. The Church’s authority is esteemed even less: it is bound to the Word but not vice versa, being God’s servant, not his adjudicator. Finally, nothing external to itself can authenticate God’s revelation. Without disputing that a genuine divine revelation is recognizable *a posteriori*, Barth’s position offers only a little reluctant guidance to those for whom God’s will is not immediately evident.

Though Barth’s position is highly particular, Newman and Ignatius ultimately concur with him that certain knowledge of God depends not on any fallible human system but on God’s character. For them, confirmation can and should be sought in communal Christian unity, Scripture, tradition and creeds, external ecclesial authority, and inner peace and consolation. However, ultimately God honours a Christian’s sincere desire to find God’s will, prayerfully and responsibly undertaken. This factor confers an additional dimension of certainty beyond what is possible, or perhaps even desirable, in McGilchrist’s more agnostic worldview.

Taken together, these voices indicate that it is possible to know that we know, even if Barth will not define how this happens. Newman and Ignatius point to the witness of a discerning spirit, either individual or collective. This incorporates criterion-based evidence where appropriate and is verifiable, as far as humanly possible, by inner peace, consonance with Christ’s example in Scripture, external circumstances and ecclesial authority. The common measure is Christ himself. Ultimate certainty, however, rests on the faith that God is more willing to lead than we are to follow.

Articulating Intuitive knowledge

The relationship between thought and language is the vastly complex subject of extensive research. Ultimately, to speak of God is “a raid on the inarticulate”⁶²⁵. However, reporting is necessary in communal discernment, and even for individual decisions, articulating a felt leading (as in spiritual direction) can affirm its reality. However, the challenges are considerable.

McGilchrist and Newman both regard metaphor as the only literary form adequate for the challenge of wrestling tacit knowledge into words. As noted in chapter 5, McGilchrist finds language a function of both hemispheres: the left for denotative precision, the right for connotative suggestion. All language is inherently metaphorical, as it leaves behind something of the reality it re-presents: so, we always know more than we can say. Metaphor is therefore more than a literary device. It is the essence of all language, because it is fundamental to how all knowledge is constructed. McGilchrist’s research on the evolutionary origins of language indicates its primary purpose of building relationships by communicating emotion. This usefully highlights language’s capacity to convey more than data. The perfect function of words in religion, for McGilchrist, is to become transparent in their power to generate experience of the reality they re-present. This offers a healthy counterbalance to the reification of words, especially in sacred texts; however, denotative definition remains a necessary facet of communication.

Despite his contrasting 19th century literary and theological paradigm, Newman’s position is similar. Both are literary craftsmen: McGilchrist a scholar of literature, and Newman a poet and hymn-writer. Resisting any reduction of religion to flat and unambiguous so-called truths, Newman saw myth, metaphor and liturgy as the only literary forms capable of conveying the real – while retaining precise language as essential for creedal theology. This is exemplified in Newman’s style, which juxtaposes multiple analogies each mutually modifying the other, to apprehend a level of reality which ultimately transcends verbal coherence. Newman would not support a wordless spirituality, but an incarnational paradigm where the two realms of faith and reason co-operate.

⁶²⁵ T S Eliot, *Four Quartets*, East Coker, part 5.

Ignatius shares Newman's assumption that words cannot adequately convey the divine, but for him it has the opposite effect. We have noted his lexical imprecision, (chapter 3), assuming that his readers will grasp his meaning and that practice matters more than theoretical exactitude. Ignatius' main contribution here is the presupposition, embedded in his culture, that silence is vitally important. Prayer and contemplation are assumed to be silent, and time for it is intentionally prioritised in communal discernment. Ignatius exemplifies in practice the limitation of words.

Barth does not directly address the issue of verbalizing spiritual experience. His central concern is with Christ as the incarnate Word of God, with Scripture as its primary written corollary and preaching as its vocal incarnation. Again, he is an uneasy and perhaps unwilling participant in this conversation: verbalizing one's inner spiritual leanings is not an exercise he would find important. However, in writing the Barmen Declaration (and implicitly, his other theological volumes) he demonstrates the occasional need for God's revelation to be given faithful witness in verbal form. Particularly pertinent to this discussion is the potential for words to veil or unveil God's presence, as mediators of divine disclosure. Barth would deny that one literary form, such as metaphor, is inherently more disclosive of the divine than others – that would limit God's freedom. He would, however, regard Scripture as a privileged medium of revelation, because God has chosen it for this purpose. Words can unveil the divine primarily in preaching, where the living Spirit of God chooses to inhabit and inspire the messenger to convey to the listeners an immediate revelatory encounter with God.

All would broadly agree that it is possible to articulate an experience of the divine, if always with tentative humility. For McGilchrist and Newman, this rests on the capacity of language to convey more than information, and on the conversation partner's sensitivity to "read" connotative meanings, metaphorical allusions, silences, and body language which communicate the message's affective tone. A shared lexicon for such experiences, such as that possessed in a developed form by Ignatian practitioners, is immensely valuable. More generally, a shared habitus of worship, Scripture, and traditions immeasurably facilitate communication of shared meaning. Again, Barth contributes the perspective that words may unveil the divine should God sovereignly

choose. There is a necessary reductionism in verbally conveying any encounter with God; however, with appropriate attention to form and context as well as content, words may signify what is beyond themselves.

Conclusion

This chapter began by establishing intuitive knowledge as a recognised phenomenon both phenomenologically and epistemologically. Despite radically different existential presuppositions, Ignatius and McGilchrist both illustrate the basic dichotomy of connectedness with the whole, while delegating detailed attention to the parts. Both highlight the importance of imagination and attention in co-creating the reality they perceive; McGilchrist through aesthetic engagement with the arts and awareness of the Other, and Ignatius through prayer and (in Luhrmann's phrase), "inner sense cultivation".⁶²⁶ I have highlighted, however, that engagement with a personal God as the Other significantly affects how these are experienced. Before presuming Ignatius' and Newman's assumption that God can be known intuitively as other subjects can, I have assessed the robustly opposing view of Karl Barth. I conclude that while Newman and McGilchrist's basic epistemological matrix is sound, for the knowledge of God it should be adopted with the humble awareness that our intuition is intrinsically flawed. Still more specifically for the discernment of God's will, Newman and Ignatius each compellingly describe how intuitive attunement with God's wisdom can be fostered as part of Christian formation. I have argued that discernment is verifiable both by this sense and by rational evaluation, but that it ultimately rests on Christian belief in God's faithfulness. Finally, I have acknowledged the profound challenge of verbally articulating spiritual discernment. This may be possible where the limitations of words are sensitively acknowledged in metaphor, silence, somatic signals, and symbols, in the rich shared context of Christian worship and traditioned understanding. The final chapter will apply these conclusions to the VA's concerns.

⁶²⁶ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back : Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, 184.

Chapter 9. Discernment in Vocational Assessment

I participated in a recent assessor's training conference where three presenters each told their story of a call to ministry. Since this was a training exercise, it was initially unclear whether these were their own genuine stories, or a role-play. As their narratives progressed, the atmosphere in the room subtly changed. The assessors were listening with rapt attention, as though on holy ground, to ordinary stories which nevertheless carried an unmistakable quality of something beyond themselves. At the end, it was hardly necessary for the facilitator to ask whether they had heard an authentic indication of God's call: there was immediate, unanimous murmur of assent. At the time I suspected myself of exaggerating this incident, being over-sensitized to it because of my research. Then much later in the conference, in a very different context, another presenter referred the group back to this shared experience. Visibly hesitant and searching for words, he said, "Something happened there". Again, there was strong affirmation: the Assessors remembered it and knew exactly what he meant, though the Something remained undefined.

This research has disclosed that the VAs' task comprises four inter-related modes of attentive listening: to the applicants, to each other, to themselves individually, and to God. Deep questioning elicited the sensed recognition described above: an affective and "spiritual" inner movement when something they encounter in an applicant resonates affirmatively with their own sense of God, "more a feeling than an answer to a question" (BD). They evidenced uncertainty about describing it, identifying its source ("maybe it's just me"), and its reliability. Most had not identified or articulated it before, as this sense is not recognised in assessment systems where criteria-based referencing is epistemologically privileged.

Based on the methodology of pastoral theology as attention, this research has listened to selected conversation participants address this experience. From their conversation, I have outlined (in chapter 8) how the VA's intuitive sense seems congruent with a similar mode of knowledge sometimes recognised as epistemologically valid in the psychological sciences, theology, and Christian spirituality. It operates on a dialectical

model of attentiveness: to the whole, and to the parts. I have suggested that this intuitive sense can be matured into an increasingly reliable discerning spirit, sometimes known as *sentir* or the illative sense, by means of intentional spiritual exercises. This need not negate the anthropological importance of sin, which renders our natural intuition intrinsically flawed. With the humility appropriate to its unique subject matter, decisions about God's will (as defined in chapter 3) may be verifiable within a tradition's agreed discernment framework. It may then be verbally articulated, recognizing that in any such re-presentation we know more than we can tell.

This chapter will outline how the VA's identified concerns can be addressed in the light of the matrix of a dialectical model of attentiveness: as faith and reason, or real and notional apprehension. As noted in McGilchrist and Newman, this assumes a beginning in the intuitive or real mode, followed by a lateral movement to the rational or notional, and a final return to the intuitive to be encompassed in an enhanced whole. The model requires recognition of intuitive or tacit knowledge alongside the rational, and suggests how that might be intentionally nurtured in a Christian framework. Understanding their whole task in this new paradigm addresses the question of how, according to their theological convictions, the VAs might better discern whether ministry applicants are called by God. This provides the basis for recommending improved practice.

Part 1 uses this matrix to address how the VAs can know God's presence in discerning call. The first section addresses how discernment is formed, by attentive listening in the four identified dimensions: to the applicants, to the community, to themselves, and to God. More briefly, the second section of part 1 evaluates how that discernment can be verified communally; and the third section how it might be articulated. This artificial disaggregation for ease of analysis is admittedly unsatisfactory for what is an essentially organic phenomenon – for example, communal processes often form part of an initial discernment, and articulation may be helpful at any stage. Taken together, these indicate how one might listen to God. Part 2 of this chapter offers proposals towards improved practice.

Part 1: How do you know it's God?

Discernment as Attention

“I never know how I’m going to discern a call but when I hear a call I know I’ve heard it. And how on earth do you explain that, because you just know.” (DN)

The “just knowing” which lies at the heart of vocational assessment may be illimitable, but the essential tool for discovering it is overwhelmingly identified as the ability to be attentive – both to other people, and to God: “... an attentiveness that enables me to be fully present with somebody – and then discernment follows.” (LT). Attentive listening as their core task resonates with the insights of Simone Weil which inspired Leach’s research methodology. She finds that attention is the focal quality of prayer; therefore by close attention to anything, one perceives the presence of God in that thing and ultimately in all things.⁶²⁷ McGilchrist evidences neurologically how the focus of our attention determines our perception. Attention to the whole, or intuition, is the function of right hemisphere apprehension which, he argues, should be the dominant mode. Attention to the parts – specific individuals, questions and criteria – is delegated to left-hemisphere reason for coding and analysis. The lateral process by which these inter-relate illuminates the VA’s experience: “I go to my gut first, then look for the evidence” (SM). The problem is where the final movement back to intuition is either neglected, or reveals an uncomfortable dissonance.

For this research, it is striking that the VAs identified the primary importance of attentive listening in two broadly analogous dimensions – to the applicants, and to God. Attention to the applicants, though demanding, was easily defined. Communal listening was strongly indicated by the data (chapter 2), and also easily identifiable. They habitually focus attention on these interactions, and are reasonably confident to analyse them. Attention to God, which encompasses and transcends these, was predictably harder to define. Global attentiveness (the right hemisphere function) intrinsically resists reductive definitions, as the VA’s demonstrated in their lexical imprecision on the subject (chapter 2). However, as practicing Christians intentionally seeking to discern God’s will, they acknowledge and wrestle with this dimension. They customarily inhabit the realm of worship, prayer and silence, rendering themselves

⁶²⁷ Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 57–65.

intentionally open to God. According to the dialectical model of attentiveness, it is predictable that attention to themselves is vague and tentative. This is tacit knowledge, usually operating beneath the radar of their consciousness.

Attention to the applicants

Attention to the applicants superficially presents as a left hemisphere detailed operation – interviews, observing exercises, reading references. These are most readily identified as the nature of their task. More subtly, they also refer to “getting a sense of the applicant as a person” (BE) - a right hemisphere apprehension – but they are more uneasy about this less definable aspect, and deeply uncomfortable about making decisions based on it (as observed in the scenarios which conclude chapter 1). This research offers an understanding of this more intuitive listening.

In discerning vocation the VAs are listening for passion, and integrity or wholeness: what is deepest and most life-giving, and affirms the applicants’ whole identity. This research affirms these as positive indicators, noting the link between vocation and identity which is also found in Ignatian spirituality and in the theology of vocation (chapter 2). This quality is hard to define. McGilchrist might call it Life or Being, and Newman claims to have made Life the mark of the true Church.⁶²⁸ Newman might also call it the real, and Ignatius would associate it with consolation: what draws us closer to God. Identifying it is, for the VAs, a right-hemisphere experiential apprehension, supported by external evidence. Here the data strongly evidences transference (or mirroring) between the VAs and the applicants (chapter 2). The VAs sense in themselves what they seek in the applicants, for example energy or emotion, though only one explicitly made this link and they are only tacitly aware that they are doing so. Regarding integrity, they identify the need to see the real person in assessment, without which discernment is impossible. The data revealed that they also, subconsciously, become increasingly free to be their authentic selves with greater experience and maturity.

In attending to the applicants, determining what practices disclose the real person therefore requires closer interrogation. Here, the importance of practical exercises in assessment is striking. These move beyond words, making the applicants less self-

⁶²⁸ “Letters” xi 101, Quoted in Coulson, *Religion and Imagination : “In Aid of a Grammar of Assent,”* 60.

consciousness and revealing personality traits which may, deliberately or accidentally, be obscured by words. This is supported by the finding that the Church of Scotland, which uses exercises more than other denominations, has a markedly lower acceptance rate (chapter 2). Accompanied by psychologists and assessors trained in the Task Emphasis Monitoring system, applicants are closely observed for their body language and interpersonal skills as well as their verbal contributions.⁶²⁹ This focused attention reveals aspects of their performance of which they are unconscious, and makes deception almost impossible. In the absence of other convincing explanations I have attributed the lower acceptance rate to these exercises. (chapter 1).⁶³⁰ This close attention to applicants reveals their true selves: “Attention is rewarded with reality.”⁶³¹

In Ignatian thought, vocation is not an ambition we create or strive towards, but the product of our authentic, created inner desires which are liberated as false desires are gradually eliminated.⁶³² This model of eliminating the negative echoes the experience of some VAs, who say they can more easily discern a lack of vocation by the absence of something. Applicants frequently recount that they tried to run away from a call to ministry by exploring alternatives, and only when none of those was satisfactory – when other possibilities were chiseled away – did the shape of what remained become compellingly clear. We often know what it isn’t before we know what it is. This resonates with McGilchrist and Milner’s insights on the creation by negation which

⁶²⁹ See Appendix 3. Interestingly, TEM was developed by psychologists in order to utilize the brain’s capacity for attentiveness. As one of them explained: “The reasons for using TEM are that our attention has limited capacity. We think we see everything out there all of the time. In fact we only see the things we have told our brain to pay attention to. So in TEM we break it down into three separate observational tasks (ideas, interpersonal, and flow) to make it easier for our brains to really attend to what we are seeing. Crucially, there needs to be a process of information exchange following the observation of the group discussion, in order to capture the full picture of each applicant's performance. It means the assessors work as a team and have to trust one another to gather the appropriate information from their own observational focus.” Two things are striking about this comment. One is that TEM is predicated on the dialectical template of attention to the whole, then to parts, then to the whole again. The second is the comment that we only see (or are consciously aware of) what we have told our brains to attend to. This illustrates why we underestimate the tacit knowledge our brains are acquiring and utilising while our conscious attention is elsewhere. Private correspondence with Peter Kaye, Senior Psychologist Assessor in the Church of Scotland, 2017. Used with permission.

⁶³⁰ The Church of Scotland has a remarkably low dropout rate for ministers during initial training, which seems a logical consequence of the lower acceptance rate, though further research would be required to verify this.

⁶³¹ Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), 27.

⁶³² See, for example, Alphonso, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning through the Spiritual Exercises*.

releases the inherent life spirit (chapter 5). This Life cannot be faked or manipulated – rather, it is stifled by attempts to control it. It emerges in co-operation with “the spontaneous ordering forces” when conscious intention is deliberately restrained from its assumed position of control.⁶³³ In practice, this phenomenon is described by Avril O’Regan (chapter 4) and is axiomatic in Ignatian retreats, where concentrated prayer is deliberately interspersed with times for physical exercise or artwork. After these “rest” periods, insights or revelations often arise spontaneously which conscious effort had failed to access.

Applied to the VA’s attention to applicants, this affirms their sense that assessment processes may try too hard to grasp something that essentially eludes them. Several VAs indicated the need for more time at conferences, not just for the practical tasks – though that is needed – but unstructured space for prayer and reflection. They implicitly associate attention to God with these spaces, and the pressure of time as counter-productive. If discernment may be disclosure more than deduction, such spaces are not merely desirable but essential. Again, one assessor’s frustration with systemic constraints summarises it neatly: “We’re just not getting it.... I wish I could just ask them what is their call. We could have a walk around here, or a coffee, and I could hear the story of their life.”⁶³⁴

One example of what may squeeze the life out of conferences is the noted tendency towards obsessively detailed documentation (chapter 2). Written records are a legitimate requirement of systems where multiple different voices must be heard through reports and references – though an excessive volume of paperwork may counteract proper listening. I suggest that it may also reflect the Assessor’s need to control events, a nervous lack of confidence that they will hear or see what is needed to evidence a written recommendation: “I need to know, I need to know” (DN, chapter 2). Note-taking provides the satisfying sense that they are doing something: in the nebulous task of discernment they are keen to nail something down, a left-hemisphere aspect of an essentially intuitive task. At an (arguably Barthian) extreme, the improper hegemony of the left hemisphere could be considered as idolatry for Christians, or at least a sign of insufficient faith - indicative of the creature’s need to assume

⁶³³ Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, 83–84.

⁶³⁴ From an informal conversation at an assessment conference.

inappropriate mastery, or an all-too-human reluctance to let God be God. “What we measure controls us”.⁶³⁵ The need to tabulate may be more obsessively dominant where the task at hand – listening to God – requires a difficult cognitive act of relinquishment. It may become impossible where this act is invalidated by the system. Barth’s refusal to depend on anything other than revelation by unveiling suggests a theological rationale for letting go as an act of faith: or, as one VA expressed it, the conviction that “if it’s there, I’ll see it” (DN).

Facilitating space for the real person to be disclosed is a feature of spiritual conversation, as distinct from interviews (chapter 4). This is core to Jesuit spiritual direction. Purposeful spiritual conversation is designed to elicit the participants’ current experience of how God seems to be speaking to her, including consideration of the attendant practicalities. Based on the discernment of spirits, both participants are attentive to what is drawing the applicant towards God. Spiritual conversation need not produce a defined outcome, though it should bring greater clarity. When used in formal Jesuit vocational discernment, both conversation partners submit a record of their sense of the meeting to the Superior as data for the final decision. With differing terminology, spiritual conversation also characterises Quaker Clearness Meetings, where one person shares his sense of God’s leading in a life decision and others probe, clarify, and explore its implications (chapter 4). All weigh the tentative decision without judging, and decide whether the community can affirm it. This sounds like a communal version of spiritual direction.

Spiritual conversation differs significantly from VA interviews. Interviews are time-limited (some severely so), and have a fairly structured agenda. Very short or panel interviews make deep listening to the applicant’s stories impossible. Trained VAs in longer interviews ask follow-up questions and listen for the bass notes, and many do so successfully. Even then, the tone of an interview, with an unfamiliar interviewer and the pressure to achieve an assessment outcome, all militate against the gentle, non-judgmental, exploratory tone of spiritual conversation. If assessment systems are to value the intuitive more highly, and applicants are to be offered a conducive

⁶³⁵ Justin Welby, *Dethroning Mammon: Making Money Serve Grace* (London: Bloomsbury Children’s, 2016), 35.

environment to share their inner lives more fully, some insights from spiritual conversation may nevertheless be transferable and this is discussed below.

Attention to each other

VAs are unanimous that their experience of discernment is communal. Asked where they experience God in the process, they name communal worship and prayer as a focal point– reminders that “all are together before God, in a horseshoe” (DG). In preparation, they form a prayer community even prior to the conference. Data analysis revealed that most participants spontaneously identified interaction between VAs as crucial for decision-making (chapter 2). It was striking to find no hint of negative tension or disharmony among the VAs in the ethnographic observations (and remarkably rarely in my own experience). VAs bond deeply at conferences. Perhaps because of the level of personal maturity needed for assessment, they welcome divergent views as evidence of varying insights, and are committed to gaining a global view of each applicant with which all can unite.

Despite the presupposition that discerning vocation must be communal on behalf of the wider Church, my data analysis revealed no conscious consideration of how communal discernment might intentionally differ from secular decision-making processes, nor any awareness of other communal discernment practices. These lacunae in their thinking about assessment processes can be usefully informed by comparison with the Jesuits and the Quakers.

Ecclesial assessment systems share basic similarities with Jesuit and Quaker communal discernment. For VAs, it is axiomatic that determining a call to ministry requires a spiritual discernment which includes, but transcends, rational deduction. All assessment systems prioritise the question of call, implying that it incorporates an element of divine disclosure: “looking for new light from God to be given to man, [as distinct from] a new decision about something already there, to be created by man.”⁶³⁶ Thereafter, all begin with data-gathering and prayerful individual engagement with the relevant material prior to the formal gathering. Formal meeting procedures vary contextually but all are framed by worship, on the tacit assumption that God’s leading is found by first finding God. Communal discussions welcome a positive exchange of

⁶³⁶ Orsy SJ, “Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment,” 154.

views as each brings a unique insight, valuing each individual contribution as potentially disclosing God's wisdom. The posture that one persuades others of one's own conviction is disapproved. Jesuit and Quaker processes are punctuated by pauses for reflective prayer, and several VAs would welcome more of this. The VA's requirement to grade and note against criteria at various stages throughout, while a distinctive feature, constitutes a formal example of the reflective pauses which characterise all processes. However, others are not unduly pressurized for time. The VA's initial analyses mirror the Jesuit and Quaker practice of making initial tentative decisions, which move towards validation by the whole group. Excepting the Quakers, that decision is finally subject to confirmation by the ecclesial authorities. For Quakers, the experience is self-authenticating.

Despite these similarities, there are significant differences. The VAs form a different kind of community than the Jesuits or Quakers. VA teams may be small, transient, and little known to each other. Importantly, this discernment is the group's sole purpose rather than a recurring feature of a community's ongoing life. Also, assessment conference decisions to affirm or disconfirm a call to ministry have highly particular features. They are binary, with no possible compromise. They are immediate, with no option to defer. Most require the decision's rationale to be referenced in written reports both to the applicant and to the ecclesial authorities. This makes group harmony a less legitimate goal for the VAs than it is for established communities. Given the important outcome for both applicants and the Church, making the optimal decision must take priority over the group's wellbeing. Taken together, these differences make intuitive judgments seem risky and inappropriate and the recourse to rational judgment seem regrettable but necessary. This was heard in one VA's resigned tone:

“Our intuition can't form any part of the evidence we offer in reports. We can't say this person ticked the boxes but in the end I don't think its right to accept him for public ministry because I receive him as this or that. It doesn't happen often but it does happen, and will happen again.” (TD).

The VAs are a small discerning group drawn from a wider ecclesial community, in the focal stage of a longitudinal process. They are not deciding for themselves, but on behalf of the church. Consequently, they must attend to other prior voices: the

applicants' congregations, supporting clergy, supervisors, mentors, and secular colleagues. This vital listening necessitates, in practice, engaging with a mass of paperwork and trying to infer, initially, a (right-hemisphere) "sense" of the real person from the (left-hemisphere) abstract data. Their own discernment is then passed in succession to the ecclesial authorities, who similarly must apprehend the reality from written evidence. This aspect of wider communal discernment, in organisations bound by law and procedures, requires clear and unambiguous communication. Authority figures who are removed from the applicant must rely on secondary data alone – a left-hemisphere reduction of a real encounter. Here, the Methodist and Baptist conferences have the advantage that the office-bearer who is present at the conference (though not directly assessing) communicates feedback personally to applicants. VAs need not write reports, only evidence their decisions in detailed notes. It remains understandable that the office-bearer charged with responsibility for communicating decisions to the ecclesial body is most concerned with gathering defensible material evidence (chapter 2). The challenge of articulation in suitable terms is further discussed below.

Despite the differences, comparisons with the Jesuits and Quakers can fruitfully inform the VA's practice, for example in reflecting on how the communal dimension influences decision-making. My ethnographic data reveals the inevitable influence of group dynamics in discussions (chapter 1). Only one VA was nervous about "group-speak", and few others mentioned the social dynamics of decision-making. I also evidenced that the VA's individual feedback to the assessor group is sometimes inaccurate. Some are not careful to separate their personal data analysis from the data itself; and the first person to speak in a group is influential. Awareness of the relevant social psychology may helpfully increase their reflexive awareness of group dynamics. Especially for larger VA groups, practices like intentionally including every voice, respectful listening in an attitude of listening for God, and a gentle moratorium on persuasive speech, could influence their practice.

Studying Jesuit and Quaker discernment processes might also enhance the VA's reflexive awareness of their own interactions as an intentionally spiritual practice of communal discernment. If employing intuitive knowledge is difficult for individuals, it is exponentially complexified for groups. None of the churches I researched had a

lexicon for this phenomenon. Although the VAs unanimously attested the vital role of communal affirmation, few described it in affective or phenomenological terms. One sometimes felt:

“... there are points on the team, I think at times there’s a line you cross and I don’t know what it is but sometimes I’ll catch X’s eye, or X’s eye, and there’s a moment when for me this person’s just crossed that line. It’s a bit like style or class, you don’t know what it is but you know when someone’s got it. You suddenly catch that little wry smile on someone’s face and you think yes, we’ve got it.” (QS)

In a Church of England BAP I observed the controlled excitement around the unveiling moment when individually written reports are shared aloud: “... there’s relief that we’re describing same person: Oh yes, that’s what I thought!” (DG). Church of Scotland VAs demonstrate something similar when collating the individual observations of exercises using TEM.⁶³⁷ However, there was no reflection on how this phenomenon translated to an experience of God. Implicitly, group affirmation seemed to be equated with God’s will.

This communal corroboration of an individual conviction of call is vital for VAs in affirming its authenticity. However, the VAs rarely related this explicitly to God, and seemed to regard it as a less explicitly spiritual experience than the Jesuits or Quakers would attest. Jesuit processes guard against conflating communal agreement with God’s affirmation, and grapple with the difficulty of translating individual discernment of spirits to a group context. This would be very challenging to transpose to a non-Ignatian group; however, the concept of a communal *sentir* and some of the practices advocated by ESDAC may be helpful. Suggestions are offered below.

Attention to themselves

This research affirms the key role of the VA’s reflexive self-awareness in discernment, drawing first on McGilchrist and Polanyi (chapter 5). Assessment conferences privilege left hemisphere rationality as epistemologically more reliable or advanced than intuition. “We’ve fallen for the left hemisphere’s propaganda that what is does it more

⁶³⁷ See Appendix 3.

highly evolved than what the right hemisphere does”.⁶³⁸ McGilchrist believes that even apparently self-sufficient left hemisphere systems are based on intuition. This echoes Polanyi’s denial that scientific knowledge is more reliable than other types: all knowledge is similarly structured, and ultimately based on belief. Both are realists, but not foundationalists. McGilchrist’s belief that there is a something beyond ourselves, and that we are co-creators of the world that we help to bring into being indicates a form of critical realism.⁶³⁹ We are always reaching towards an ultimate reality, which exists independently of us but which we can never fully grasp (or, reduce to left hemisphere comprehension). Responsibly seeking a solution to an illimitable problem, as the VAs do in discerning vocation, requires them to listen to themselves using the tacit dimension across all domains of knowledge. Polanyi merits quoting at length here, for his direct applicability to the VA’s context:

“I have shown how man [sic] can exercise responsible judgment when faced with a problem. His decisions in casting around for a solution are necessarily indeterminate, in the sense that the solution of an unsolved problem is indeterminate, but his decisions are also responsible in being subject to the obligation to seek the predetermined solution to his problem. I have said that this is the anticipation of a hidden reality, a commitment of the same kind as exemplified in the knowledge of scientific truth. Responsibility and truth are in fact but two aspects of such a commitment: the act of judgment is its personal pole, and the independent reality on which it bears is its external pole. Such a problem can only be known tacitly; our knowledge of it can be recognised as valid only by accepting the validity of tacit knowing.”⁶⁴⁰

The problem facing the VAs – discerning a call from God - is hard to determine, but they execute their search for that hidden reality with an eye to their responsibility to their churches. The tension between these external and internal poles is the crux of their challenging task. Though outside a specifically Christian framework, Polanyi and McGilchrist believe in an ultimately inaccessible reality which lies beyond the presenting phenomenon – reality is not merely our construct. Theologically, this is analogous with the Christian belief that God exists and has a will to be discovered.

⁶³⁸ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 437.

⁶³⁹ McGilchrist, 5.

⁶⁴⁰ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 87.

However, dis-covering it requires an act of personal judgment which incorporates reasoned cognition within tacit apprehension, as Newman and Ignatius (with different referents) would agree. Polanyi outlines how this commitment to an ultimately indeterminable outward reality is matched by an inward mode of knowledge which similarly transcends rational delimitation: tacit knowledge. This must therefore be acknowledged as valid epistemological phenomenon. To affirm its reliability, Polanyi explains how it forms and acts like a probe (chapter 5). Distal knowledge with practice comes to be experienced bodily, as proximal knowledge. This allows us to focus attention away from the probe itself to “read” the external objects it touches, enabling meaning to be created.

This illuminates the VA’s account of how their practice changes with experience (chapter 2). Procedural norms are internalized, freeing them to focus their attention fully on the applicants. It also suggests why they have only a subsidiary awareness of their somatic signals and other affective signs while assessing: these are the proximal terms which enable them to focus on the distal term. This is the knowledge which is more than we can tell, being fully accessible to consciousness only *a posteriori*. Polanyi also believes that integrated knowledge comes from indwelling and empathy: not by merely looking at things, but by imaginatively indwelling them to disclose their reality (chapter 5). This echoes the VA’s efforts to put themselves aside temporarily in order to empathically enter the applicant’s world – one even described it theologically as “kenosis” (BN). Moreover, it provides a philosophical rationale for what has been previously noted in Ignatius, McGilchrist and Luhmann: the power of imaginative indwelling to form what the mind perceives as reality, and to affect behaviour accordingly.

To all of this, Ignatius contributes that imaginatively indwelling the Gospels is a deliberate strategy for Christian mimesis - formation by the Holy Spirit towards Christ-likeness. In this process, the one praying becomes sensitized to what is authentically of God within himself – in modern terms, his “real” self. The VAs have noted the importance of being able to be their real selves in assessment, as a prerequisite to discerning what is authentic in the applicants (chapter 2). It is also intriguing to note the resonance between the VAs’ described affective movements when confirming or disconfirming a call (chapter 2), and Ignatius’ definitions of consolation and desolation

(chapter 3). An authentic sense of call for the VAs brings joy, energy or sometimes tears at “what I see of God in them” (BD), recalling Ignatius’ peace, joy and energy which “cause the soul to be inflamed with love for its Creator”.⁶⁴¹ The opposite of that “very strong positive energy...is DULL” (BD), echoing Ignatius’ “listless, tepid and unhappy”.⁶⁴² Critical awareness of these indications would enhance discernment of how the VAs’ affective responses correspond with genuine movements of God’s Spirit.

Taken together, this supports my proposal that the VAs are misguided in their uncertainty about listening to themselves. Not only is intuition epistemologically valid; for the knowledge of any indeterminate phenomenon (such as God), it is indispensable. Reflexivity would also enhance their praxis in recognising the element of transference between what they affirm in the applicants and what is happening in themselves. This individual and corporate phenomenon is neither to be denied nor diminished. It should be acknowledged, then properly examined, tested and incorporated as valid data in a mature discernment process. Questions about verification and articulation, which are especially challenging in this context, remain to be discussed.

Meanwhile, reflexivity as a Christian practice requires a considered theological grounding in an ontology that balances sin and grace. Some VAs trace their mistrust of intuition to their own spiritual vulnerability:

“... am I hearing this clearly? I have anxiety around misreading things, in my heart, is it this, is it that? I have to hold that to make sure that I’m not...
[deep breath] how do I know, I don’t want to be drawn by a spiritual presence that isn’t God, how do I discern the difference between the two?”
(LT).

This critical awareness of the nature and potential sources of one’s own inner leadings is a vital prerequisite for Ignatian discernment in external matters (chapter 3). Though intuition is epistemologically valid, the VAs are theologically justified in refusing to give credence to every “gut feeling”. For example, the question of the theological relationship between somatic signals and the spirit of God requires consideration. As previously noted, (chapter 5), Luhrmann’s research problematizes their immediate

⁶⁴¹ Ganss SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 122.

⁶⁴² Ganss SJ, 126.

identification. Intensely emotional prayer experiences of joy, tears, or tangible awareness of the divine are evidenced by mystics in many traditions, and Luhrmann convincingly demonstrates focal imaginative attention as a successful mind-altering technique. How these phenomenon relate to God as understood by Christians is a complex question. Our brains produce such effects regardless of the belief system employed to rationalize them, and they may carry a profound sense of experiential encounter with a transcendent Other. However, an uncritical assumption that one has therefore met with God is deeply problematic, and requires discernment. Luhrmann is right: affective experiences neither prove nor disprove any attendant truth claims. Rather, for Christians they indicate the vital importance of theologically credible spiritual formation practices for discernment, authenticated by the tradition.

A further related question engages the VA's tension between "gut feeling" and "hard evidence". This finds expression in one of Newman's many dichotomies, between Religion and theology. What he describes as Religion might today be termed "spirituality" – the whole experience of encountering God, in worship, music and silence as well as reason. The relationship between spirituality and theology touches wider issues in contemporary ecclesiology, which this research cannot fully explore.⁶⁴³ In accordance with the dialectical model of attentiveness, Newman suggests that "spirituality" incorporates theology, but has prior importance. Barth would add a strong reminder that spirituality cannot assume any innate ability to connect with God. Both can, I suggest, be accommodated within Ignatian practice. The resolution is not to negate "spiritual" experiences but to nurture them within an established tradition. Ignatian spirituality balances the depth of individual affective experience of God with the framework of Christian orthodoxy. The balance is held because the *Exercises* are explicitly rooted in the Jesus of the Gospels, who points to the Father by the Spirit at work in the praying person. For Ignatius, Scripture is the paradigm for prayer: it is the guide, not the servant. This scriptural and Christocentric position crosses denominational barriers, making the *Exercises* accessible to all Christians. It suggests that the Christ of the Gospels is the ultimate criterion, or common measure, of authentic discernment for Christians; and the correlative individual disposition as having the mind of Christ.

⁶⁴³ See, for example, Clare Watkins, "Practical Ecclesiology: What counts as Theology?" and Nicholas M Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God", both in Pete Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011).

The required theological grounding for reflexive listening must wrestle with conflicting views of the nature and effect of sin. I have argued (chapter 6) that Newman's view of human nature as intrinsically aware of the Divine is, from a Reformed perspective, over-optimistic. However, Barth's denial of any soteriological value for the human spirit need not negate its potential role in divine disclosure for practicing Christians who intentionally seek to live in harmony with the Holy Spirit. The VA's conflicted relationship with their intuition— they mistrust it, while suspecting that it speaks a deeper wisdom – is theologically justifiable on both counts. We are created in God's image with the potential to reflect that, but we are deeply flawed. Ignatian spirituality outlines a suitably balanced view. From the premise that humankind is fundamentally estranged from God, Ignatius begins with the need for deliberate conversion, followed by a lifetime discipline of conformity to Christ. His unique contribution is to elucidate how this is manifest in self-awareness of the movements of one's own spirit. I therefore suggest this approach as a reliable and theologically balanced Christian resource for the VAs in their task of discernment.

This introduces the focal concept that intuition can be intentionally developed to become increasingly consonant with God's spirit, while taking due cognizance of sin (chapter 8). Both the formation of *sentir* and its role in discernment speak directly to the VAs' concerns. The definition of *sentir* given above – felt-knowledge, affective, intuitive, arising spontaneously in response to phenomena, producing psychosomatic reactions, a total experience – describes the experience which the VAs recognise but struggle to name. Naming it, and offering a model for honing to become a reliable discernment tool, affirms its valid role in discernment processes.

Attention to God

For the VAs, listening to God in assessment emerges from the interplay of these other factors: attention to the applicants, to each other and to themselves, in the context of prayer and worship. Creating space for this involves an element of stepping back and letting go, believing that in the encounter between different voices, new disclosures will emerge which incorporate and transcend the originals. Some conceive this as something already there to be disclosed, and the discernment process as sensitively sifting possibilities to eliminate the negative. Others highlight something new to be revealed, a light from an external source unattainable by human effort. Most individual

assessors, and church traditions, privilege one position as its norm: I have noted how the Church of Scotland and Church of England tend towards the former position, and the Baptist and Pentecostal traditions the latter (chapter 1). The difference, however, is more of degree than of kind – all denominations incorporate elements of both. This is a valuable insight, as each position can be informed by the other. Those privileging the unexpected and supernatural in their call narratives might benefit from closer attention to their inner lives, while those who seek God in everyday events might remain alert for the unexpected and inexplicable.

Again, Ignatian practice illustrates that these are not mutually exclusive. Inner leadings are carefully prayed over and evaluated as a basis for turning from false desires or movements of the bad spirit, but the aim is to arrive at an insight which transcends logical deduction. This is also noted as a communal phenomenon. Both the ideal Quaker meeting for worship for business, and Ignatian communal discernment, have a worshipful sense of being “covered” by God’s Spirit. From the discussion issues a decision better than any considered prior to the meeting, which carries the quality of newness associated with revelation. Careful attention to observable phenomena to reveal their real meaning, and openness to revelation, cohere symbiotically as attentiveness to God.

For the VAs, this requires a relaxed but attentive posture in which they are able to be themselves in order to put themselves aside. Ironically, the harder they try to control, the more they stifle what they seek. This may mean the counter-cultural step of faith in putting aside the paperwork to simply attend. Attentiveness is to the applicants and other assessors, but also – perhaps *a posteriori* – to themselves: a reflexive awareness of their own affective reactions. These can only be evaluated as Christian discernment within a maturing spiritual sensitivity to what resonates with Christ in the Gospels. It also requires that discernment takes place in a properly balanced system where the affective and the cognitive each has its distinctively recognised role – and where intuitive apprehension is dominant. Adequate time and space are required in the system for properly attentive listening not only to the applicants and each other. Space is required for worship, prayer, silence, and reflective listening to oneself.

This practical study is supported by the conclusions of those who have deeply pondered attentiveness to God in relation to discernment. Simone Weil writes of the profound interconnection between real desire, attention, illumination and discernment:

“If there is real desire, if the thing desired is really light, the desire for light produces it. There is a real desire when there is an effort of attention.... Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no results, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul.... The useless effort made by the Cure d’Ars for long and painful years in his attempts to learn Latin bore fruit in the marvelous discernment that enabled him to see the very soul of his penitents behind their words and even their silences.”⁶⁴⁴

In another essay, Weil identifies the body as the fundamental locus of disclosure of the world as it really is.⁶⁴⁵ Discernment, though, is not inherent. She describes it as learning to read somatic signals among other data and distinguish what is important, just as an expert mariner reads the movements of the sea on a voyage where others simply experience them.

This example relates profoundly to the VA’s task of listening to God. However, more broadly, it points to the existence of a rich body of literature in the field of attention, discernment and vocation. Guided reading would enhance the VAs’ appreciation of their task.

Verification - How do you know that you know?

It is a frustrating feature of conference assessment that assessors cannot know whether they have made the right decision.⁶⁴⁶ The performance of accepted applicants lies far in the future, and even assessment of that would run aground on the complexity of defining what constitutes “success” in ministry. Accepted applicants who subsequently

⁶⁴⁴ Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 59.

⁶⁴⁵ Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 67–82.

⁶⁴⁶ It is extremely rare to encounter incidents such as that described in the first scenario at the end of chapter 1, where immediate feedback indicates a decision’s probable confirmation or disconfirmation. I would argue that this is a deficiency in data gathering, and the VAs should have been provided with this information in advance.

drop out may do so due to a wide range of contingent factors unforeseeable at assessment. Accurate discernment is not predictive. Where an applicant is initially refused then subsequently accepted, the first decision may still have been correct. For those not accepted, verification is simply impossible. Assessors therefore cannot build their proficiency on proven previous success, and even the most experienced cannot claim to be expert.⁶⁴⁷ When asked how they can be certain, one appositely replied: “When I hear their funeral tribute – and maybe not even then – Judgment Day!”⁶⁴⁸

Any possible verification therefore rests on a personal and communal conviction, experienced contemporaneously and subsequently, that God’s leading has been accurately followed at the conference. How can such an indeterminable spiritual sense be substantiated? “The man of reason gains certainty by distancing himself from that which is known. Even our own bodies become snares and mysteries to this wordless *cogito*.”⁶⁴⁹ The assumption that certainty is impossible on other grounds than disembodied reason, that what is known intuitively is inescapably subjective or “just me”, underlies the supposition of both the VAs and their systems that these are an impracticable source of wisdom for ecclesial discernment. Supposedly, one must distance oneself from what is known, even from one’s own body, to gain so-called objectivity. From this research, that assumption can be challenged.

An alternative view rests on the epistemological principle, best articulated by Newman, that the mode of verification must cohere with the subject matter (chapter 6). Although Newman believes that knowledge is constructed by the same grammar of assent across all epistemological domains, no single means of proof suffices for all. Some subjects require the iron bar of logic: this would pertain for observable phenomena, or for abstract theories. Logic would, however, be incompatible with the nature of faith, which is verifiable on other grounds. Religious knowledge is described analogically, by selecting and accumulating metaphors to culminate in assent.

⁶⁴⁷ This is why I do not consider the experience of the VAs to be comparable with building intuitive expertise in other fields such as musicianship or medicine, which are predicated on repeated, consistent, and instant feedback. Such intuition ultimately rests on pattern recognition, which is only tangentially the case in vocational assessment. Other kinds of intuitive expertise may, however, bear interesting comparison with the discernment of spirits in Ignatian spirituality.

⁶⁴⁸ McChlery, “How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?” 5.

⁶⁴⁹ Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 10.

Verification is similarly constructed, like strands interweaving to form a cable. Newman identifies the main strands as outer evidence and logic, the inward voice of conscience, and the illative sense, which is self-authenticating. He warns that seeking an incongruous mode of proof for real apprehension often leads people to deny faith, on philosophically inadequate grounds. Concurring with this, I consider that assessment systems should explore what constitutes appropriate verification for intuitive judgment, rather than assuming none to be possible.

This view is supported by Ignatian spirituality. As discussed in chapter 4, Ignatius saw the need for verification as integral to individual or communal discernment, in any mode. Like Newman, he does not isolate it to a single infallible source. It may either take the form of further *intelligencias*, or peaceful consolation, or both. It may be mediated through people, or encountered as God's direct revelation. Newman and Ignatius agree that where ecclesial verification is required, the magisterium of the Catholic Church is the outward embodiment of revelation. However, the status of ecclesial authority in relation to the illative sense is conflicted for Newman, and Ignatius' model is more developed.

The proposal that an intuitive sense of God's leading can be authenticated must take account of the highly particular context of church assessment systems. I would not advocate replicating either of the systems or criteria outlined above, though both would usefully inform the discussion. Rather, accepting the principle that substantiating intuitive knowledge requires a congruous mode of proof, assessment systems would have to explore new practice for their context. Practical suggestions are offered below.

As noted in chapter 7, Barth's position that revelation can only be self-authenticating raises problems for applying his theology in practice. All the theologians consulted, including Barth, concur that God has a will to be discerned and is actively committed to self-revelation. Confidence is possible on other grounds, but ultimate verification is rooted in God's characteristic faithfulness. VAs ultimately rely on the assumption that God's will prevails and may providentially overcome their sincere mistakes. Everything they do not know, including themselves, is known and held in God's control. Here,

Barth's overarching view of God's providence acts as the default position for those who differ from him on other grounds.

Articulation - How do you say that you know?

The difficulty of translating knowledge of God into words is attested by the VAs. They used a wide lexicon of approximate descriptors for this aspect of their experience, most of them very capacious: "a sense" or "in my gut". "Intuition" was the most frequent specific referent, and I have favoured it in this study while conscious of its limitations (see Introduction). An unsatisfactory attempt to analyse the exact frequency of lexical terms (Appendix 5) yielded the conclusion that this phenomenon is not accidentally but essentially illimitable. Across the varying descriptors used, it was frequently contrasted with reasoned evidence, as being required to affirm it. This indicates both the nature of the phenomenon as contrapuntal to reason, and its epistemological relationship with that mode: it may be more easily defined by its opposite. The interview data further indicated its resistance to articulation in the increased frequency of non-verbal somatic signals, and longer reflective silences.

Again, the dialectical model of attentiveness to the global and the particular illuminates this difficulty. I have argued that discerning call requires a primarily right hemisphere or intuitive epistemological mode, which resists reduction to left hemisphere definition. The right hemisphere can incorporate data from the left, but not vice versa. The resistance of intuitive knowledge to verbal definition is a defining feature of its difficulty to assess by externally referenced models. Both McGilchrist and Newman privilege metaphor as the only appropriate literary form to indicate intuitive knowledge, along with other artistic expressions such as liturgy and song. Silence is included as both the counterpoint to the spoken word, and as a medium which may speak its own language. Expressing this dimension of discernment in the denotative language of the left hemisphere is impossibly reductionist. The VAs are justified in being hesitant about articulation, and a greater understanding of the nature of language in this realm supports their frustration with recording call in the same format as other, more definable qualities. This element of their task cannot be captured in a report:

"It's very subjective.... in writing the report, the call section is where we're rooting around more to find something to justify the decision. Other issues

you can illustrate with detailed examples – you can't with call. It's hard to get evidence to justify. I think we should accept that it's inevitably subjective but we don't accept it – we're so evidence-based, there's a tension."⁶⁵⁰

Reports are a function of the left hemisphere: carefully scrutinized for clear and precise terminology, shorn of personal references or subjective opinion, they reduce encounter to information. Chapter 1 recorded some VAs' expressed frustration with the bureaucratic necessity to include some phrases verbatim, and the reassurance, "Don't worry if it's all a bit formulaic." Left hemisphere dominance also illuminates the noted phenomenon that VAs want, and may be expected, to make extensive notes on everything. Though this is explicitly for communication and to aid memory, I have suggested that it also engenders a sense of controlling the process. However, an excessive need to capture everything in words may block a wider attentiveness to non-verbal signals and hinder empathic engagement with the applicants.

The dialectical attentiveness paradigm does, of course, incorporate the vital role of denotative language, and assessment processes attest this. Words are essential to communicate the applicant's experience to others, both at conferences and for wider ecclesial verification. More than these systemic requirements, the need to articulate discernment can be advantageous. Two VAs experienced "wrestling it into words" (SM) as a positive exercise (chapter 2). This revealing term suggests engagement with a phenomenon with its own life energy, which actively resists reduction. Defining one's experience also helps the applicant - as in spiritual direction, the prompt to verbalise felt leanings is an invaluable tool for deepening reflexivity, sharpening the analytical processes and clarifying how you know something. Articulating spiritual experience in language, as part of the experience, is therefore a necessary cognitive shift which brings the left-hemisphere analytical faculties into creative and dynamic interplay with the whole.

Importantly, however, in this model articulation is understood as a stage in a larger process. The priority of the intuitive sense suggests vital roles for silence, reflection, song or liturgy in framing words. It may be important for applicants not to falsify

⁶⁵⁰ McChlery, "How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?" 4.

spiritual experiences by forcing them into words prematurely, but to allow what is germinating to do so in its own time, through a phase which feels uncomfortably uncertain and disordered. Applicants commonly struggle to elucidate a sense of call. Many discernment processes prior to final assessment patiently accompany them through this phase, perhaps with journaling or mentoring, thus honouring this formative stage of their journey. Assessment systems are, however, much less inclined to return the verbal, analysed experience back to the intuitive for incorporation into the whole – as illustrated in the closing scenarios of chapter 1. It has frequently been noted that rational analysis always triumphs. The right hemisphere needs the left hemisphere but should not be limited or restricted by it.

The danger lies in giving words the last word. A sense of God cannot be reduced to a written text, nor a call from God to an interview or report. However, in ecclesial assessment neither can the mystery of God be transposed to silence. The VAs need a fruitful model for integrating structured linguistic forms with nonverbal spiritual experiences, rather than a dichotomized sense that they are forcing together two innately incompatible modes – or worse, reducing the latter to the former. Ideally, a suitable metaphorical language to acknowledge spiritual experience in a form embraced by the whole community would interact in an approved pattern with denotative language for reports. We will always know more than we can tell, but we should carefully consider the fullest ways of telling.

Summary

Chapter 8 outlined the dialectical model of attention to the whole and to the parts, as expressed in different but complementary forms through voices from theology (Newman), spirituality (Ignatius), and the sciences (McGilchrist). In favouring the primacy of the former in disclosing the divine, it focuses on how intuition can be intentionally honed by spiritual exercises to become an increasingly reliable tool to register phenomena consonant with the Holy Spirit.

This chapter has applied those insights to the VA's challenges and concerns identified in the empirical research. I have outlined its application for discernment, in listening to the applicants for a sense of their identity and discovering adequate tools for that task. Excessive striving to grasp, for example in disproportionate paperwork or over-

structured interviews, only stifles what it seeks. Listening to other assessors requires the context of prayerful awareness of conferences as holy ground. Though assessment conferences have unique features which distinguish them from other forms of communal discernment, I have suggested how reflexive awareness of both the group dynamics and the spiritual focus of their task might fruitfully inform the VA's practice. My interview data indicates listening to themselves as the least examined element of their task. I have suggested how their confidence in this area might increase, by examining their own tacit knowledge and by intentionally honing their intuition to resonate with the spirit of Christ. Such knowledge can be substantiated in faith communities, but only in forms of proof coherent with their subject matter. Similarly, they may be articulated in appropriate forms – though requiring a lexicon and stylistic range which transcends the confines of a report. It remains to flesh out these theoretical insights in suggestions for enhanced practice.

In the interplay of all of these and beyond, we develop attentiveness to God. Discernment is ultimately based on what is revelatory, not necessarily on what is intuitive. It is not only possible but also necessary for VAs to form themselves to make that link more explicit, by focal attentiveness to prayer and contemplation of Christ. However, a Barthian theology of revelation consistently cautions that faith is ultimately in the God who reveals – in an incarnational pattern which incorporates, but transcends, human perceptions. Newman, Ignatius and the VAs agree that confidence ultimately rests in the character of God, veiled and unveiled in conference processes. Nevertheless, *contra* Barth:

“Let us suppose that affective responses do not, or do not always, mislead, and that describing the world as it appears to members of our kind is not inferior to an imagined value-neutral observation of an ideal science, but our best handle on the true, the good and the real. Let us suppose that our affections and even our animal responses, properly attended to, are not distractions but guides to what we are, and to the love of God.”⁶⁵¹

⁶⁵¹ Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 26.

Part 2: Proposals for Action

These proposals for action are intended to be generic rather than descriptive. Systemic differences between denominations have been well noted, and each would have to flesh them out for themselves. It is more important to grasp the principles – that discernment operates out of a dialectical epistemological movement between the intuitive and rational modes, and requires acknowledging the essential role of spiritually mature intuition - than to agree with the particular suggestions here. This is because specific operational changes rarely work unless they are embedded within a wider change of ethos (or, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast and structure for lunch”).⁶⁵² Here, “culture” is the operant ecclesiology and theology of discernment, often unexamined, which underpins denominational practice. Where the distinction between discernment of call and assessment for secular employment is not fully grasped, the paradigm of the latter will remain the default position. This exemplifies the wider issue of the Church’s unique nature as both a social and a spiritual entity: it is the Body of Christ, with all the incarnational complexity of God in human form.⁶⁵³ That ecclesiology undergirds my conviction that discerning a call to ministry cannot be fully undertaken by secular assessment processes. We need a cultural change in applying a discernment mindset to the whole church, not just to vocational assessment. That would mean a theologically informed review of practice in church meetings and decision-making processes at every level, consonant with our ecclesial identity as people led by God and not by human wisdom alone. The following recommendations may well be impracticable if the use of Spirit-formed intuition and communal discernment models are perceived as only a quirk of assessment conferences. Few will work at all unless wholeheartedly embraced by the conference gatekeepers and those to whom they are responsible.

Systemic factors: interviews, exercises, and verification.

For conferences to be places of encounter and disclosure, the setting should be appropriate. Retreat centres are a good environment, designed to enhance awareness of God’s presence: hotels are far from ideal. The Methodist emphasis on providing

⁶⁵² Contemporary quote usually attributed to the influential management consultant Peter Drucker, though the exact provenance is unclear.

⁶⁵³ For an introduction to this question, see Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*.

informal and hospitable space (chapter 1) is a good practice, as is providing worship space where possible. Metaphorical space, like time for walks or prayer, is usually plentiful for applicants but not for VAs, and this is a pressing need. I would suggest timetabling half an hour a day, ideally before major decision-making sessions. Rest, prayer and worship should be incorporated into the rhythm of the day. This time might be found without undue difficulty by trimming other practices. I would discourage the use of large assessor teams, which necessitate many written notes and much time for internal exchange of information. I would also question any practice which increases paperwork without adding important new information, or creates detailed records which nobody reads. A single global improvement would be for each assessor group to assess a maximum of four applicants.⁶⁵⁴ This would use time more efficiently for all, while paradoxically creating more relaxed space. Conferences should facilitate VAs to interact narrowly and deeply with a few applicants, rather than widely and superficially with many. The specialization of VAs in different areas seen at a BAP is one example of focal attention to one area.

Three specific systemic modifications are suggested. The first concerns interviews, aiming to make them more conversational vehicles of disclosure. Some insights can be imported from the spiritual conversation model (chapter 4). VAs should evidence a basic level of care and attentiveness to applicants by arriving demonstrably well prepared, which established trust. The goal of interviews is not to revisit information already present in the paperwork, but to hear the applicant explore her experience of God and ministry and her sense of call. That would include her response to past ministry experiences, her feelings about academic training, and her responses to lifestyle and identity changes associated with the calling. Hearing her own call narrative is the core element here, and other questions should be limited to what is unclear in the paperwork. The tone should be conversational rather than interrogative, with VAs alert to identify important clues to deepen the conversation. Re-branding these sessions “conversation with” rather than “interviews” may help.

In practice, this means that panel interviews and set questions should be relinquished in favour of hour-long, in-depth, semi-structured conversations. The room should be set up to facilitate conversation. Ideally these would be primarily with one assessor,

⁶⁵⁴ This would also minimise long and unproductive waiting times for applicants.

with a second listening, taking notes, and able to contribute his responses afterwards. Where only one assessor is available, digitally recording the session as a backup might be considered to minimise the need for note-taking.⁶⁵⁵ Set questions should be limited in favour of applicant-specific questions – or, a range of potentially helpful questions could be presented to VAs from which they select the most apposite for each applicant. Training should be given particularly to help them identify and deepen key disclosive moments in the conversation. This is a rather different skill than conventional interviewing. There is a legitimate question about what level of self-disclosure is appropriate from the applicants – this is not spiritual direction, and no-one should be pressurized towards an uncomfortable level of intimacy. Mature wisdom and gentleness are needed.

Secondly, I suggest the use of more observed group exercises. These are the only qualitative difference between what is assessed at earlier stages in each process, and final assessment. One possible reason for high pass rates may simply be that final assessment makes a quantitative, but not a qualitative, difference to previous assessment: it is adding volume, not value (chapter 1). Research on interviews finds them to be poor predictors of future performance.⁶⁵⁶ Exercises are much more revealing, and conferences should aim to maximise the VA's time spent attentively interacting with the applicants. Secular recruitment expertise might be sought on selecting exercises, as well as pastoral expertise on constructing scenarios for churches. For the maximum benefit, VAs can be trained in specific observation techniques, though tools like TEM require practice more than training. These are practical tools for focusing the VA's attention on the detail of the situation under analysis.

My third suggestion wrestles with the vexed question of what constitutes verification of intuitive knowledge. This is an operational issue, as systems would have to accommodate it. Confirmation ultimately requires time and evidence of each applicant's direction of travel post-decision, which conferences cannot provide. Further prayer, a sense of peace with the decision, and consonance across all the participant voices in the decision (including those on paper) are as much as

⁶⁵⁵ Possible objections to this include breaching data protection legislation, and the possibility that the applicants might feel self-conscious. I would argue that both apply equally to the practice of taking verbatim notes.

⁶⁵⁶ Myers, *Intuition : Its Powers and Perils*, 187–98.

conferences can reasonably offer. Where these are absent, time must be taken for the dissonance to be fully explored. It would be good practice to avoid making final decisions on the last day of the conference, to allow VAs to sleep (or not) on the outcome. An uneasy decision might look different in the morning.

A more fundamental question for verification is what constitutes valid evidence in ecclesial assessment. It is essential to challenge any assumption that only evidence which can be referenced is acceptable. There should be no barriers on data collection for decision-making, with an observed distinction between this and reference-based data for the report. Intuitive knowledge forms part of the former but not the latter, and this must also be understood by the governing body. This perfectly illustrates the tension between assessment and discernment: in reporting, VAs are struggling with the incompatibility of recording discernment in an essentially assessment mode. A proposed solution may be simpler than it sounds. Drawing on extant practice elsewhere, it could be stated that discernment of call cannot be appealed against - much as students cannot challenge a grade based on academic judgment, only on improperly conducted procedure. An open statement of this stance validates the legitimate role of intuitive judgment, and distinguishes it from its more definable counterpart. A genre other than factual reporting would be necessary to record the discernment process, and that is hard to conceive. Even the Jesuits, with a recognised framework for discerning spirits, conclude that this is impossible to reference externally.⁶⁵⁷

This consideration of how assessment decisions are verbally articulated in reports also affects how they are communicated elsewhere. Methodist and Baptist conferences have the advantage that feedback to applicants comes from the senior figure present at conferences. Most systems also offer personal feedback to applicants and this should be encouraged as facilitating much greater nuance. Written feedback is subject to the limitations identified above. Extending feedback to other modes would challenge the hegemony of the written report in some denominations, and this could significantly help their VAs to widen their focus of attention to the greater purpose. Articulation is a stage in the process, not the end result.

⁶⁵⁷ McChlery, "How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?" 9.

Finally, there is a potential systemic modification which I would resist. Despite its importance, call is not defined in any denomination; nor are criteria offered for its assessment other than the Church of England's loose indicators ("realistic, informed and obedient", chapter 1). This was sometimes pointed out by VAs: "I almost feel embarrassed to say something's intangible, and yet it's hugely significant. There's a sort of dissonance in there, you'd think if it's hugely important we should have six criteria to say what it is (*laughs*)" (QS). On the contrary, this research has highlighted the qualitative difference between phenomena which can be externally referenced and those which are essentially illimitable; and has argued that each should be apprehended and authenticated within its own domain. In my view, the absence of criteria for call respects this distinction. It implicitly attests that this element requires openness to mystery, and sensitivity to God's presence. Any irritation that it cannot be reduced to criteria is a healthy counterbalance to over-confidence, and a reminder of our creaturely limitations. A call from God requires discernment by "an intellectual instrument far too subtle and spiritual to be scientific", and cannot ultimately be reduced to technique.⁶⁵⁸

Vocational Assessor's personal development and training

This is a difficult area. This research has suggested that spiritual maturity and prayerfulness in those discerning is equally, if not more, important than procedures. However, assessment conferences need many volunteers, and pragmatism suggests taking anyone who is willing and has approximately the right qualities. However, fewer VAs would be needed without panels; and if conferences were less of "an exercise in macho stamina" (TD), each VA might do more. I would favour fewer VAs in each denomination, with each one selected in a process similar to that undergone by applicants. This has multiple advantages. It chooses those suitably gifted, and emphasises that discernment is no small task but one for which the church sets people apart. This sense of call is affirmed by the need for ongoing training, ideally annual. Denominations should invest resources in deepening their VA's aptitude for the role.

Basic skill training is required in listening, constructing open questions, and an appropriate posture for drawing out the applicants. VAs should have some reflexive

⁶⁵⁸ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1979, 285.

awareness of transference, of their own biases, and of how group dynamics operate in discussions. Training conferences can usefully include sharing their own call stories or faith journey, to identify how they discerned God's call. This builds fellowship, facilitates identifying their own call narrative compared with others, and helps them to empathically experience what they are asking of applicants. Finally, training could build the VA's theological understanding of their task through recommended reading on vocation and discernment. This may counter any tendency to locate a vague uncertainty about an applicant under "call" because it cannot be referenced elsewhere. An essay or book chapter could be distributed electronically to all participants for reading prior to training, and a short session scheduled to discuss it in groups. Obviously not all of this training would be covered immediately, and other practical components are necessary. However, a strategic training programme could, over a few years, mature the VAs as skilled and reflective practitioners. Larger groups might have two training streams, an introductory one and another for the more experienced.

Skills training, while vital, is much easier than forming the kind of spiritual sensitivity which has been presented as foundational for accurate discernment. Annual training might include induction in the practice of spiritual conversation, which explicitly requires attentive listening to God as well as to the applicant. This deepens sensitivity to how this happens. Training might also include open sharing about how the VAs prepare for conferences, in prayer and reading. Similarly, essential practice in reflexive self-awareness could include alertness to how they experience God's presence in the everyday, as well as in identifying the biases and other affective responses that influence their perception of applicants. Case studies and mock interviews are useful for this, which can be fun as well as requiring a degree of self-disclosure. This nurtures an ethos of openness among VAs, which transfers to assessment conferences. For example, it is good practice for a VA at a conference to share with fellow assessors any strong personal reaction to an applicant, whether positive or negative. These affective movements are disclosed as data for discernment, for others as well as him, allowing them to be incorporated in decision-making while mitigating personal bias.

This research has commended the benefits of Ignatian spirituality: however, this is challenging to integrate into assessment practice. I would favour spiritual direction in any recognised Christian tradition for both applicants and VAs, to deepen their

awareness and articulation of their life with God. This can never be compulsory, but can be presented as an attractive option. Even so, spiritual direction undertaken by individuals may not generate the common frame of reference ideally required for communal discernment (as for the Jesuits, for example). My previous research concluded with the impossibility, indeed the danger, of reducing Ignatian spirituality to a formula or doctrine of discernment.⁶⁵⁹ Learning Ignatian spirituality is like learning to play the piano: it is essentially experiential. Abstracting principles of discernment from their habitus in a life of prayer results in an “Ignatian lite” which will not work and violates the tradition’s integrity. It would be preferable for a few VAs to incorporate Ignatian retreats into their ongoing spiritual life and thus to continually inform the whole, than for everyone to do a weekend course then forget it. Spiritual maturity is formed by mimesis. A few influential VAs could exemplify their own deep life of prayer, a spiritual posture of attentive listening, and the discipline of letting go of the paperwork to allow what the Spirit is doing to become apparent. This could be formative in modeling good practice, as newcomers absorb an ethos (right hemisphere) as well as information (left hemisphere). Therefore, a final suggestion for development is that each denomination might identify mentor VAs, who both model their own good practice and offer space for others to discuss their experience.

Communal Discernment

This research is predicated on the assumption that the ethos and systemic features of ecclesial decision-making should reflect our distinctive identity as God’s people and our aim of discerning God’s will. Although VAs overwhelmingly identified the importance of their corporate role, none of them explicitly referenced their task as communal discernment (chapter 2). Naming this phenomenon, and awareness of other extant models, would be a valuable initial step from which examples of good practice can be appropriated. The prerequisite for worship and prayerful people has been well noted. The Jesuit and Quaker listening practices described in chapter 4, valuing every voice as potentially disclosive of God, is good practice and easily transferable. VAs could receive specific training in this, along with its theological basis. Conferences might observe as far as possible the rhythm of time for personal prayer and reflection interspersed with group sharing. The interpersonal tone might favour discussion rather than debate. Achieving a “sense” of the meeting which is consonant

⁶⁵⁹ McChlery, “How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?” 42.

with the spirit of God (or “communal *sentir*”) is already implicit in assessment conferences but again, naming this and making it more intentional would enhance their practice. This would be necessary to facilitate a more tricky discernment: the difference between communal agreement and the will of God, as exemplified by the Jesuits (chapter 4). It would be impractical to overload every VA with this level of insight. However, again, mature and experienced mentor VAs could absorb this additional area, along with more awareness of the social psychology of group dynamics in decision-making.

Existing current literature on ecclesial decision-making processes as spiritual practice is very sparse and has its limitations, especially for the specific context of assessment conferences.⁶⁶⁰ ESDAC specialize in making Ignatian principles of communal discernment accessible to groups of all faiths and none. In so doing, they make theological adaptations which will be problematic for some traditions.⁶⁶¹ They work with voluntary groups constituted for the purpose of deepening their spiritual experience, and accommodating the relaxed time for these exercises would be a struggle even at a training conference. Moreover, these are not decision-making groups and do not have to reach consensus. Their exercises may be more widely applicable to church discernment, and the examples of Jesuit and Quaker practice more adaptable for assessment conferences.

⁶⁶⁰ For example, Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2012); Johnson, Luke Timothy, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*.

⁶⁶¹ The ESDAC manual begins with the assumption that the Spirit is in everyone; therefore anyone can find God using these methods, regardless of faith. Explicitly, Jesus and God are overlooked in favour of the Spirit, as being more accessible to those without faith. Similar changes in vocabulary seriously distort, in my view, the Ignatian text and its meaning (compare, for example, compare their translation of the First principle and Foundation with Ignatius' original (p.9). This approach negates the first week of the *Exercises*, which assumes anthropology of sinful humanity which requires initial conversion. It also conflicts with the Jesuit view that only those already maturing in personal prayer can undertake communal discernment (chapter 4). That said, much of the manual is explicitly Christian – for example, Jesus is worshipped as Lord, without prior explanation. Both their Christology and their pneumatology are confusing, and their theological anthropology requires clarification. Their approach mirrors the Quaker's blend of natural theology, Deism and orthodox Christianity discussed above in chapter 4. It is only practicable because theology is never discussed.

Conclusion

Following from the application of theological, spiritual and scientific insights to the lived experience of the VAs, this section has outlined proposals for enhanced practice. These would require to be grounded in a robust ecclesiological framework of the importance of discernment in all church decision-making. Schedules would offer more space for individual reflection and worship in a less pressurized environment, facilitating the VAs' deeper encounters with fewer applicants. It is recommended that interview practices would favour a conversational model to facilitate disclosure, and would focus on the applicant's own narrative of their unfolding sense of call.

Observing group exercises would allow the VAs to be attentive to the applicants in action as well as words. All information would be permitted as data for discernment, though not all can be included in reports. This data would include the VA's own responses to the applicants, with sensitive reflection. The validity of a mature spiritual intuition as data for discernment would require to be recognised by the church's governing bodies. This would include recognising in reports that discernment cannot be challenged, as it belongs to a different category of apprehension than other factors.

Key to implementing these proposed actions would be the VA's selection for the job, and training in maturity as skilled and reflective practitioners. Specific training in spiritual conversation, group dynamics, and the theology of discernment and vocation have all been suggested. More important, but more difficult, are suggestions to enhance the VA's own formation of a discerning spirit. For this, I have suggested mentoring by mature VAs who engage in spiritual direction and can model good practice.

Conclusion

“Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, “If you will, you can become all flame.”⁶⁶²

Discernment, like any spiritual endeavour, has an easy habit of sliding comfortably into measurable and controllable categories for judgment which seem moderate, prudent and wise. Yet for seekers after God they leave a restlessness, a sense that something vital is not quite being achieved. To remedy this, one might well seek advice from a spiritual master: how can the conditions for discernment be refined? However, spiritual masters (like Jesus himself) have an annoying habit of not so much avoiding such questions, but re-framing them entirely. Abba Joseph is not remotely concerned with tweaking the criteria, but with a “radical availability to the fire of the Spirit... which cannot even be conceived within the categories of the conventional scheme of spiritual improvement.”⁶⁶³

Assessment conferences can be the locus of a restless frustration similar to Abba Lot’s. Some Vocational Assessors are content to resort to process, satisfied that following the criteria will produce the required result. Others evidence a deep inner dissatisfaction: “We’re just not getting it”; or the explosion of a senior Vocational Assessor in an unguarded moment against the “box-ticking mentality” of the process: “It’s demotivating.... I don’t even want to write these reports...we’re serving the church faithfully but we’re not growing the Kingdom” (chapter 1). It was my own early experience as a Vocational Assessor that trying to make a discernment using only the tools for assessment felt like trying to eat soup with a knife and fork: it was possible to do, but it was frustratingly difficult, and never guaranteed a good result. It was my

⁶⁶² *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Quoted in McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge*, 129.

⁶⁶³ McIntosh, 129.

(then unarticulated) sense that a spiritual exercise was being reduced to a bureaucratic process which prompted my own research in this field. Interestingly, it was Iain McGilchrist's similar irritation that the mechanics of literary criticism were eviscerating the texts of their meaning for his English Literature students which prompted him to leave his Oxford academic post for a wider quest to discover how meaning is apprehended, and how, in Newman's phrase, "the mind embraces more than it can master".⁶⁶⁴

This research began by listening to the voices of vocational assessors, in the context of assessment conferences (question 1, Methodology chapter). Both my ethnographic research and my interviews with the Vocational Assessors revealed the dichotomous sense that they are doing two things simultaneously: assessment by criteria, and discernment of God's call. The two are not in opposition, and often they cohere harmoniously. But they are different, with the former being much more thoroughly understood, resourced with tools, and relied upon. On the minority of occasions where they conflict, such as those noted in chapter 1, assessment criteria invariably triumph over their more nebulous counterpart.

Listening to modern research into how the brain constructs knowledge (question 2) offered the model of a dialectical structure of attentiveness both to explain this phenomenon, and to suggest how it might be addressed. I have taken McGilchrist's model of brain lateralization and have sought to demonstrate its essential coherence with theological understandings of faith and reason, the real and the notional, particularly as posited by Newman. I have demonstrated that a similar basic paradigm underlies the practice of Ignatian spirituality, where attention to one's inner spiritual movements in prayerful sensitivity to God's spirit forms the maturing *sentir* which is essential for sapiential judgment in external matters. I have also argued for this pattern's relevance to communal discernment at assessment conferences, suggesting procedural and conceptual tools consonant with the *telos* of discerning God's will.

The motif of attention as the key instrument to disclose this dimension of reality was initially adopted as a research methodology, following Jane Leach's "Pastoral Theology

⁶⁶⁴ Newman's "Letters" 2:311, Quoted in Fey, *Faith and Doubt : The Unfolding of Newman's Thought on Certainty*, 154.

as Attention.”⁶⁶⁵ Its appropriateness was confirmed when the VAs spontaneously identified attentive listening as their core task in discernment. Further, they defined this as multi-faceted: attention to the applicants, to each other and to God. The question of attention to themselves was complex, and yielded a conflicted response: they mistrusted their own intuitions, but sensed they spoke a deeper wisdom. This conflict was exacerbated by the systemic requirements of assessment conferences, which privilege the rational over the intuitive. It was further related to their own operant theologies of sin and grace, manifesting as a deep uncertainty about how far their intuitions were epistemologically reliable. This was addressed by listening to the voices of the theological tradition, in Ignatius, Newman and Barth (question 4). I have outlined how both their sense of the reality of their intuitive responses, and their reluctance to give them automatic credence, are justifiable theologically: we are created beings, but intrinsically flawed. Some of the implications of a fundamental theological divergence between Newman and Barth regarding the epistemological effect of sin have been discussed. While this has not been resolved in theory, I have suggested that the difference in practice is not insurmountable. The spiritual disciplines of prayer and Scripture reading, in the context of the Church’s unique eschatological role, are common to both despite divergent understandings. Their shared *telos* is clear: increasingly conformity to Christ.

The common view that intuition is deeply flawed by sin, whether anthropologically or culturally rooted, is a critical difficulty for the dialectical attentiveness model. The model seeks to reverse current epistemological priorities in order to regard intuitive or real knowledge, which I propose as vital for the apprehension of God, as the Master for discerning God’s will. For such a reversal to be credible, intuitive knowledge must be reliable. The resolution presented here is neither to negate the importance of intuition, nor to offer it uncritical assent. Rather, I have argued that an intentional process of spiritual formation can attune our intuitive faculties to the leadings of God’s spirit with increasing reliability, helping us to define “what we mean by “the feel of Christ” [which is] essential in seeking the mind of Christ if our discernment is not to be solipsistic.”⁶⁶⁶ Without this, resonance with the VA’s spirit cannot be trusted: “Resonance means little

⁶⁶⁵ Leach, “Pastoral Theology as Attention.”

⁶⁶⁶ Leach, 29.

if the tuning fork is bent.”⁶⁶⁷ One intentional process of intentionally increasing attunement to God’s spirit is meticulously described in Ignatian spiritual discernment. I have argued that this forms the “kind of dispositional understanding – an attentiveness – towards deeper participation in the life and practices of God in the world” which Leach endorses, and have suggested how this might be incorporated in ecclesial discernment systems.⁶⁶⁸ The fundamental matrix of Christian discernment and indicator of authentic calling is coherence with the mind of Christ. This is shown in the Gospels and experienced as a living reality by those who attune their lives in the habitus of prayer and discipleship. Those formed by the person of Christ in an ongoing habit of life will be informed by the mind of Christ in specific instances. An individual matter for discernment simply tunes the frequency with greater precision.

In summary, the key finding of this research is that Assessors sometimes experience an uncomfortable dissonance between their “gut feeling” or intuition about an applicant’s call, and the evidence-based criteria required to justify their conclusions. A new connection has been outlined between this phenomenon and the lateral structure of the brain as outlined by McGilchrist. His dialectical model of attentiveness has been demonstrated to be consonant with the presuppositions underlying Ignatius’ spiritual practice; and with Newman’s model of real and notional assent in theological epistemology. The model is significantly modified, though not invalidated, by Barth’s position on human sin and the necessity for God, as wholly Other, to disclose himself by revelation.

Any research has its regrettable but necessary limitations. I have not listened to the voices of the Bishops who make final vocational determinations in the Catholic Church and the Church of England, or to the ecclesial authorities in any denomination. This would be interesting, particularly where they decide to overturn the assessor’s recommendations. Neither have I attended to the applicants’ voices, except as heard by the Assessors. Since the research focuses on discerning vocation for others and not for oneself, this was deemed inessential. Studying their experience of being assessed and its relationship with their own sense of call would be fascinating, but would constitute a separate (and perhaps future) research project. Consulting other theologians

⁶⁶⁷ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 154.

⁶⁶⁸ Graham, “Is Practical Theology a Form of ‘Action Research?’” 150.

(particularly in Biblical studies), and other denominations, would have expanded the study. Much more work could also be undertaken on the psychology of attention, of decision-making, and group dynamics. All of these might in future fruitfully extend the scope of this research. I also note the generic limitations to any qualitative research – the small sample size, lack of metric data, and vulnerability to subjective bias. My own identity as a Christian believer, praying researcher, and Vocational Assessor in my denomination inevitably forms part of that bias. It would be possible to take a more agnostic view (like that of Luhrmann or McGilchrist), to reach conclusions which would explicate the data without necessitating belief in God. That perspective does, of course, incorporate its own intrinsic bias.

“I never know how I’m going to discern a call but when I hear a call I know I’ve heard it. And how on earth do you explain that, because you just know. I come back to our own reflection and our fellow assessors, encircled by prayer. It has to be grounded in God, we have to trust God” (DN). Having sought with humility to shed some light on how you “just know”, the final chapter ends by addressing how, in the light of this, churches might better discern whether someone is called by God to ordained ministry, and by suggesting recommendations for improved assessment practice (question 5). However, in accordance with the dialectical dynamic model of attentiveness presented here, it would be reductionist to conclude that systemic procedural changes can, *per se*, make God’s will more accessible to Vocational Assessors. “Discernment at its deepest level supposes the habit of contemplation that cannot be acquired over a few weekends.... It is of some importance that discernment be made in a prayerful framework; it is of greater importance that those who discern should be prayerful persons.”⁶⁶⁹ Those making the discernment, including assessment conference gatekeepers and those to whom they report, are more important than the procedural frameworks they inhabit. The formation of Christians to become more reliably attuned to the mind of Christ is a greater, far more challenging but ultimately more satisfactory outcome than providing enhanced criteria for assessment or greater systemic effectiveness. These are the servants, not the Master. In the end it is Barth, magisterially dismissive of all mere human criteria, who relentlessly keeps before us our position as dependent subjects on the God who chooses to unveil himself incarnationally. Caught up in those moments of revelation, we become “all flame.”

⁶⁶⁹ Orsy SJ, “Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment,” 178.

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Introduction

Tell me about a time when you feel you were called by God.

How did you know it was God's call?

1. What personal qualities would you say are important in a good assessor?
And what gifts and skills?
2. When you assess applicants, what convinces you that they have a genuine call?
3. When you are listening to someone describe a call to ministry, what are you listening for?
4. When someone's call strikes you as genuine, how would you describe what is happening in you?
Can you locate that in your body? Where?
5. How do you prepare spiritually for assessment?
6. Do you feel that "intuition" (or a synonymous term) plays a role in the discernment process? If so, how?
7. How has your assessment changed over the course of your experience?
8. When you are assessing someone, how do you experience God in that process?
9. What would you say assessors could do to help them better discern what God is saying?

Appendix 2: Frequency of Responses

Question 1.

Personal Qualities of a Vocational Assessor

discerning, spiritually attuned to listen to God – 14

listening and paying attention to applicants – 13

openness to difference and diversity – 8

self-knowledge and self-negation – 3

teamwork and valuing colleague's opinions - 3

able to probe and draw people out – 2

church experience – 2

life experience – 1

able to process information – 1

compassion – 1

being able to speak into the applicant's lives – 1

help them to be themselves - 1

Questions 2 and 3.

What convinces you that someone is called?

sense of spiritual life and passion (16)

integrity and identity (9)

external confirmation from people and circumstances (8)

desire to serve (6)

humility (6)

wrestling and testing (5)

spiritual connection with Assessors (4)

applicant's own conviction (3)

Question 4.

What's happening in you when you hear an authentic call?

joy or elation (7)

excitement (3)

tears (2)

sense a wordless change in communal atmosphere (2)

peace (1)

in your body?

relaxation (2)

gut - lower chest or stomach (positive or negative) (2)

sense of energy (positive or negative) (2)

tears (1)

heart (1)

ability to make eye contact (1)

Yes, but can't specify where (2)

Question 5.

How do you prepare spiritually for assessment?

prayer (10)

reading the paperwork (8)

giving time and energy (6)

getting a sense of the applicant (4)

nothing different, include this in daily prayers (2)

Question 6.

Do you feel that "intuition" (or other descriptor) plays a part?

it's the primary thing/I couldn't assess without it/hugely significant (4)

more important for some assessors than others (2)

about 30% (1)

more than in secular recruitment (1)

not really/no answer (1)

it's important but:

it needs to be confirmed by external criteria (7)

it needs to be confirmed by other assessors (4)

it can be mis-used (1)

it's difficult because:

I don't know if it comes from God (3)

we don't have a matrix to measure it (3)
it can't form part of the reports (2)
it's hard to define (2)
I don't know how much to trust it (1)
intuition is seen as female (1)

spontaneously defined themselves as intuitive people (4)

Question 7.

How has your assessment changed over the years?

Grown in confidence (6)
- More able to be myself (5)
- know the process better (4)

Deeper listener (2)
Danger of becoming blasé (2)

changed way I pray (1)
influenced by a memory bank of previous applicants (1)
No (1)

Answer only in terms of the process changing (2)

Question 8.

Where is God for you in the process?

collective prayer and worship times (6)

in every candidate (5)

communal experience with other VAs (4)

where you leave space for God (2)

God is the one we're answerable to (1)

no specific answer (2)

Question 9.

How can VAs improve our practice of discernment?

various operational changes to the system - 7
more training for VAs - 6
more space for listening in the process - 5

more time to do the work - 3

culture of discernment in church generally - 1

Thematic reading: Importance of Communal Discernment

13 out of 15 VAs identified this as being important without being prompted.

agreement is good for reassurance/confirmation - 6

in disagreement, will accept majority decision - 4

communal includes references - 4

communal includes their home church - 4

communal includes office-bearers already seen - 3

wary of group-speak, or undue influence - 3

importance of community of prayer - 3

God is in the community - 3

good to work with known people - 2

good to work with unknown people - 2

Appendix 3: Task Emphasis Method

The Task Emphasis Method (TEM) was devised by Psychologist Assessors in the Church of Scotland, who took a similar tool used in the Civil Service and adapted it specifically for use at Assessment Conferences. It was introduced in 2001 and has been in continual use ever since.

Senior Psychologist Assessor Peter Kaye explains: “The reasons for using TEM are that our attention has limited capacity. We think we see everything out there all of the time. In fact we only see the things we have told our brain to pay attention to. So in TEM we break it down into three separate observational tasks (ideas, interpersonal, and flow) to make it easier for our brains to really attend to what we are seeing. The aobservation of the group discussion, in order to capture the full picture of the applicant's performance. It means the assessors work as a team and have to trust one another to gather the appropriate information from their own observational focus.”⁶⁷⁰

When TEM was first introduced, assessors said they found the new method less demanding than the former practice of general observation, since each of them was not required to attend to as much as possible of all that went on in the discussion. After observations, each assessor felt more confident in presenting information on the specific aspect to which they had given their attention. They could remember other aspects as background, but knew that colleagues could be relied on for specific detail.

TEM is designed to be used by three Assessors, each of whom observes and notes one aspect of the applicants' engagement with the discussion. Taking notes on a single sheet divided into columns, one for each applicant, is standard practice but individuals may develop their own preferred notation system. It is useful for observing any group discussion, though it works particularly well where there is no appointed chairperson. Each Assessor observes all the applicants for Flow, Ideas or Interpersonal. Only a little basic training in the theory is needed; thereafter, practice is important.

FLOW

Flow records the number of contributions made by each applicant, in order, with an indication of length (short, medium or long). With practice, it is often possible to record the precise length of contributions using a stopwatch. The purpose is to show the pattern of where an applicant dominates the discussion, contributes erratically, or fades out. It also shows where two or more applicants respond repeatedly to each other, eliminating other group members.

IDEAS

This records the content of the discussion – what kind of contributions each applicant makes. Some examples are:

- * a question; either for information (indicating a lack of understanding), or an open question which facilitates discussion. It could be to the group or addressed to another applicant.
- * an idea, perhaps a new one, or one that expands upon another contribution, or simply a repeat.
- * a personal illustration or story which translates abstract ideas to concrete examples.

⁶⁷⁰ From personal correspondence. Used with permission.

- * short interjections of agreement and support – or the opposite.
- * irrelevant material, or disjointed or tangential contributions.
- * Giving information or advice.

This exercise indicates the quality of each applicant's contribution – whether they engage fruitfully with others by adding depth or originality; or whether they repeat, reduce and distract from the subject.

INTERPERSONAL

This records the applicants' nonverbal signals such as eye contact, body posture, gestures, facial expressions, and levels of energy. It also indicates their degree of engagement, and where that is focused – to the group, or to some individuals more than others. It may reveal attraction or antipathy between applicants, or other underlying traits such as nervousness, assertiveness or inclusivity. Recording body language attends to what a person reveals when he is not speaking and not the focus of the group's attention.

After the observation, it is critically important that the Assessors share their observations of each applicant in turn. This collated data provides a global, evidenced portrait of each applicant's performance, with each aspect illuminating the others. The data usually presents a coherent picture; however, conflicting elements can yield complex insights, or possibilities to be alert for in further exercises or interviews.

Appendix 4: A lexicon for “Intuition”.

This appendix records a thematic reading of eleven of the data transcripts in an attempt to determine a reasonably fixed lexicon for “intuition”, or however the VAs described that sense. As detailed in chapter 2, the attempt to gain semantic precision was abandoned in favour of the conclusion that the phenomenon is not accidentally but essentially indeterminable.

BD –

a light bulb moment sometimes x2
some of worst candidates are people who think it’s a job interview.
There is no way you can Questionualify that’s the right answer.
sense of joy
It’s a feeling, not answer to a question.
that feeling
I sense that God has walked in..

BE –

spiritually attuned
you have to be able to read and hear people as well as having an ear to promptings of
HS – double listening.x2
Hard to describe – spiritual weighing going on – inner weighing and listening.
Listening for voice of impulse, compulsion, conviction –
feel sense of God x2
my sense of person’s call
I’m sensing something else
instinct
what I sense
Intuition x 5
capacity to listen to God

BN –

I like mystery more than tight things
alarm bells go off in my head x2
not to let the flags flag
that alarm is still there you have to take that further and bring it to the surface.
I don’t know how else to express...
Internally you get peacefulness about it.
you feel something come over the room
VA who’s on the autistic spectrum and he doesn’t get any of these mood things, he
[body] hard to unpick from mental and spiritual, it’s all one.
this is women’s intuition, or we would call it emotional intelligence x2
these antennae
I don’t know what you call it – I know there is a something - prefer to call it emotional
intelligence –
they intuitively felt x2

DG –

feeling the prompt
from my gut, then
balance of Godly intuition and evidence
I know how I heard it in my head
felt/heard God say this would be a good thing to do
Not just "hearing but more being convinced in your spirit
gut reaction/ their gut reaction

hard to define intuition...thing about the big ears...imagine eardrums as thin film vibrating to what's around, also listening to God. Guess I'd hope to bring to panel every sense that I've got. So don't know where my intuition is, been Christiann 50 years, listening to God and my intuition I'd like to think they've got a bit merged. Maybe that's what unbelievers mean by intuition, using the body to listen to what's not physically present, if that's it....
my Myers Briggs...the one thing that was extreme was intuition.

DN₂ –

we joke at assessment about the voices are telling me but I've never heard somebody say that.

I never know how I'm going to discern a call but when I hear a call I know I've heard it. And how on earth do you explain that because you just know.

I feel it in myself, the weight going off my shoulders,

It depends where you believe intuition comes from. If all things come from God and go to God then yes, I do. I think intuition can be God's way of saying, this is it, but if it's from me, it's got no place. But if intuition is an answer to prayer, it has.

if from me I wouldn't feel that aha moment when I hear it – I don't think.,

I talk to school kids about conscience, inner voice makes you know if you're making right or wrong decision. Is intuition another way we know we've made a right and wrong decision when it's not a moral choice but a spiritual choice? So I strongly believe my conscience is God telling me X, that's not right. So is my intuition God's voice saying this is a spiritual decision, and here is the gut feeling telling me this is right?

CMPre –

it felt at that moment the right thing to do,
You sense God's presence in their lives. So that's a significant way I experience God.
sense of God speaking, x₃
you sense as the presence of God in them, you sense, see, hear that they're the real deal
mainly in my upper torso rather than feet or legs

KD –

something just stabbed me, I don't know, I felt physically sick & wanted to run out the room .
And all those feelings
there is something in your gut, it's in your heart but it's also in your gut.

there was a peace, and that was a symbol, a pattern, once I said yes there was a peace.
you pick up a sense, a spark, something happens in the conversation that you can see
God's hand in it
and it just lifts you , it lifts you.
hard to ask questions because the questions have been answered, it's wonderful.
have that gut feeling
gut can tell you something but that's why I like the process, it does work because gut
can get it wrong.

KS –

It's certainly an emotional thing but you do need to be careful. That's why there's
evidence based structure – though it seems almost pedestrian. Show how someone has
filled tick boxes & you think how can you judge someone's vocation on tick boxes? But
it protects you from the halo effect

but sense of whether people trust this person with their spiritual lives or not.

Gut feeling is preliminary conclusion, then I have to test it.

LT –

my sense right now [repeatedly]
feels [repeatedly]
gives many examples of feeling God's physical touch

I have anxiety around misreading things, in my heart, is it this is that, I have to hold
that to make sure that I'm not.... [deep breath] how do I know, I don't want to be
drawn by a spiritual presence that isn't God, how do I discern the difference between
the two.

One image – and it's so much more than an image, it's a whole experience,

there's a field that gets created when they talk about their relationship with God.
[resonance/betweenness].

our own attunement comes from deep practice ourselves

when we're in that space, just feeling the texture of the field (I'll call it that) that
operates between us – when we're talking, it has a different feel to it, a texture.

(long pause) it has peace in it, a deep connection – so there's something about a
knowing that takes place beyond two humans coming together, an intimacy that goes
beyond a conversation, and it extends beyond....beyond a transaction so it's a field, a
sphere that extends beyond.

So that's one thing , the nature of the field that I sense and feel.

Their language is often beyond themselves. So they don't come with a scripted story,
they're not well-versed in it, there's a new insight all the time

For me it's my heart that tells me, sometimes my heart just wants to explode out of my
rib cage, out of containment [*makes an exploding noise*].

God's light shining through

to maintain the level of deep listening, attunement,

if it's called intuition, if that's what you call it, that's the primary thing – I don't usually say it as strongly as that – but it's cumulative against the criteria as well. I don't know if that's absolutely right, its not only intuition, it's the threads that are being sown – woven actually – a pattern that's emerging.

It's coming from my body, am I really in tune with the subtle messages from my body – bit of gurgling going on, heart feels a bit warm, throat feels a bit closed – so that's another level of intuition I think.

something in the practice of soulfulness because it's so much more than mindfulness. Something around that practice in daily life, a discipline that enables me to be fully present with somebody – and then discernment follows.

SM –

mystery, strangeness, yet also presence of the Divine – something that just cut across ...different from anything I'd encountered up until then.

rings an alarm bell inside me.

I'm intuitive person, sometimes I'll feel an awkwardness before I know what it is. I'll listen to that inside myself to then tease it out. often then have to write it down...

the feeling response.

that's what it feels like, a gut response to untruth or something not quite right.

...that they are alert to the Holy Spirit. I try to cultivate that in my own spiritual life as well, try to be alert, one's own vocational journey is ongoing unfolding call through the whole of your life, wish there as more process of discernment in all areas.

...if I'm struggling with something, I can't express it, I keep testing within myself why I'm struggling here.

all that is part of being sensitive to the Holy Spirit, it's process, I'm a process theologian

I'm not sure what a matrix of intuition is.

Gut reaction yes, then the thinking part wants to justify that, intuition not alone, it's a tool to help you. Then look for evidence and build your proof about a person's qualities. Intuition is helpful tool....So yes I think it is important – but still trying to think of what a "metric" of intuition would be.

TD –

Felt drawn back into the life of God

I work perhaps more than I ought to on intuition and that's flip side of the coin, I have to interrogate my own intuitions and the way I do that is by looking at evidence in the paperwork and their written work when they get here. So...part of process of vocational discernment is being open to my own intuition being fallible.

I do worry that I use intuition more than I should, and if so I do think that's inappropriate.

I think God is present in the feelings that I have, God may well be requiring of me a rigorous interrogation of what I'm feeling so he's not present in sense of authenticating intuition, but in sense of wanting me to understand it better.

Our intuition can't form any part of evidence we offer in reports. We can't say this person ticked the boxes but in the end I don't think its right to accept him for public ministry because I receive him as this or that. It doesn't happen often but it does happen,

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