

Authority and religious experience

Lawrence S. Cunningham

Introduction

KILIAN MCDONNELL RECENTLY OBSERVED that the use of 'experience' has been problematic in modern Catholic theology both because it is notoriously difficult to give precision to the term and, in the wake of the modernist crisis and the reaction against modernism in Catholic circles, experience was seen as a code word for mere psychological impulses or subjective states of mind described at the expense of doctrinal clarity.¹ That visceral reaction against experience is now very much on the wane. A contemporary Catholic theology, it is commonly argued, that does not account for the witness of experience risks becoming abstract, ahistorical and bloodless. The contemporary efforts to heal the breach between theology and spirituality may be seen as a serious attempt to re-establish religious experience as a category for creating a more comprehensive, more nuanced, theology.

Religious experience, however, is a complex phenomenon. One can speak of the experience of religious awe, peace, love and religious desire, but one can also speak of locutions, visions, ecstasies and other such charismatic manifestations. These latter experiences may foster love of God and neighbour but they have also been the occasion for schism, bitterness and self-destruction. When we speak of religious experience in the Christian tradition we must ask, of necessity, about the relationship of such experience to the authority embedded in the believing community and its representative authorities. It is upon the relationship between religious experience and ecclesial authority that these reflections will focus.

Religious experience as a problem

Ways of authenticating religious experience are many. The exercise of these ways, however, clearly demands a range of skills involving prudence, justice and, finally, to use the traditional language, discernment and discretion. The classic sources in spirituality are more than clear on this point. In *The living flame of love* St John of the Cross describes three 'blind men' who can lead astray those who seek a deeper contemplative relationship with God. One source of

blindness is, naturally, satanic suggestions coming from the Tempter. A second source of blindness comes from the person himself or, as John would say, the soul which misunderstands the movements of grace coming from God.

The third blind man, however, upon whom John devotes most of his energies, is the bad spiritual director or, to use John's word, the spiritual teacher (*maestro espiritual*). Such teachers or guides (John also uses the term *guia*) do incalculable harm to people because such bad directors speak from authority of position and not from any personal experience. It is necessary to recall that John wrote *The living flame of love* for a woman and women were very much under the authority of directors and confessors who not infrequently lacked the skill, piety and experience to give such direction.

John himself, in the prologue to this treatise, stipulates that what he writes is subject to the judgement of the Church 'by whose rule (*regla*) no one errs, depending on holy scripture . . .'² This criterion is, of course, the historic rule of faith (*regula fidei*). John concludes his opening remarks by saying that what he says in this treatise is as far from reality as a painting is from the object depicted. Nonetheless, he avers that 'I shall venture to declare what I know'.

What John writes at length about bad spiritual teachers in *The living flame of love* (1585) he stated more succinctly six years earlier in the prologue to *The ascent of Mount Carmel* (begun 1579). John there devotes a few paragraphs to spiritual directors who are a severe obstacle or cause of harm because they simply do not understand the 'dark path' of love. They mistake this dark path as melancholia or read the lack of consolation as coming from sin. As a remedy they insist on frequent general confessions, thus, John says bitinglly, inflicting 'another crucifixion' on people. Such amateurs judge people not to be praying when they are, or tolerate or encourage pious exercises which lead people nowhere.

John's opening remarks in *The ascent of Mount Carmel* and his extensive reflections in *The living flame of love* set out in capsule fashion a perennial and long-remarked issue in Christian literature, namely, the tension that may exist when there is a conflict between personal religious experience and the judgements, perceptions or interventions coming from 'authoritative' persons in the ecclesial community which may or may not be helpful. In fact, and it would be otiose to provide examples, the tradition teaches us that many people have unjustly suffered from authority or received bad advice or misunderstanding. Opposition and, even, persecution of people of

great sanctity is a leitmotif that runs through much of Christian hagiography. What is true of individuals is, of course, also true of the suppression of communities, movements and other organized religious forces within the Church.

How does one respond in those instances of conflict? One traditional answer has been to demand submission to the judgement of ecclesiastical authority in a spirit of 'holy obedience' or as an exercise in surrender of the will or as an act of spiritual detachment. We know, from the vantage point of history, that some people have been refined by such abnegation, but equally we know many instances where such demands have hurt people or caused harm to the community or resulted in real damage both to individuals and communities. A colleague of mine once remarked that the gospel tag line 'Be ye perfect . . .' has probably been more misused in religious orders than any other verse in the Bible in order to have a scriptural club to hammer people into subservience.

We can affirm that in the history of the Church people with deviant spiritual visions have suffered terribly because of their experiences and the implications drawn from the experiences by those who wield power in the Church. One need only think of Priscillian in the fourth century, the spiritual Franciscans in the fourteenth or an individual like the Beguine, Marguerite Porète. Less drastic but very real suspicions were levelled at figures like Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola, and John of the Cross.

We should, however, see these suspicions in some kind of historical context, not to excuse but to understand. This is especially true in the case of ecstasies of various stripes. Before one lends credence to the most recent stigmatic or visionary, for instance, it seems legitimate to inquire whether we are dealing with a pathology or a deception. Even those who themselves were subject to some church suspicions counsel against too much credulity about such claims. John of the Cross, in *The ascent of Mount Carmel*, for instance, cautions against locutions and interior visions or revelations on the grounds that they may well be a distraction or a temptation which leads one to abandon the path of seeking union with God in love.³

There have been innumerable instances in the distant and recent past when persons passionately attached to their own religious insights and perceptions have inflicted havoc on themselves, their immediate circle and the larger society in which they lived. Our mass media regularly report on self-styled gurus, religious 'leaders',

and *soi-disant* prophets who have used their unchecked religious authority to subjugate and abuse those who look upon them as the sole source of religious guidance for belief and practice.

Criteria for discernment

How, then, do we test the spirit? What, specifically, are the criteria by which as Christians we can sense what is and what is not authentic in religious experience? How much deviance from a supposed 'orthodoxy' is tolerable when making such discriminations?

The first and most obvious thing to say is that from the Christian perspective individuals, in their own naked autonomy, cannot be the sole judge of the reliability of their religious experience. The reason is quite obvious: such autonomy provides no check against delusion or misinterpretation. Cassian, in the second of his *Conferences*, tells the story of a desert ascetic named Hero who would not join the other desert-dwellers for the common Easter meal after the liturgical synaxis on the grounds that such participation would damage his reputation for austerity and asceticism. This delusion eventually led to his death by his own hand. Cassian writes that Hero did not follow the traditional wisdom of the elders and, by acting as his own spiritual guide, fell into folly and disaster. Hero cut himself off from the traditional sources of discernment. By refusing to eat the common meal he, in effect, excommunicated himself.⁴

If persons should not trust their own spiritual experience(s) in total autonomy it necessarily follows that somehow, in their experiences, they need to operate from within the accumulated wisdom of the believing community. This fact, however, encompasses the problems that we have alluded to above since it has been from within the community (however broadly or narrowly we define it) that the tensions between individual experience and communal authority have been so painful. This tension, of course, is hardly new. St Paul's attempt to mediate between the charismatic claims of some in the Corinthian community and the community at large is at the heart of the fourteenth chapter of his first letter to that church.

The critical question, in fact, is how one negotiates between the collective wisdom of the community reflected in its authority and the experience of the individual who feels moved by God. In this respect we need not exaggerate such tensions. Steven Katz has argued against the tendency to see the mystic only as an idiosyncratic loner at odds with his or her community when, in fact, such a person might well be a support for the community. Katz points out

that the Christian mystical tradition, both kataphatic and apophatic, can best be understood as an attempt to experience the normative text of Christianity which is the Bible. Mystics reflect in their experience a 'knowledge of acquaintance' which in the community is 'knowledge of description'. Katz writes:

... in those more usual instances in which mystics give a radical exegesis *not* of scripture, but of experience – arguing that they have *directly experienced* what scripture describes or prescribes (whichever text they hold to be scripture) – their assertions and reports are meant by them and understood by the larger community to which they belong and in the midst of which these proclamations are made, as *confirmations* of the inherited authoritative traditions of scriptural interpretations and not as heretical assertions that threaten the pillars of the regnant orthodoxy.⁵

When we consider believers within the community we best think of them as participants in the long tradition of hearing the gospel, breaking the eucharistic bread, and reflecting the Good News in their own life and for the sake of others. In that light – the Christian as part of the pilgrim people of God – certain criteria and tests emerge from the very fact that they are in the community and not solitary figures outside it. Thus, Katz, in the citation above, argues, rightly, that the community recognizes experience as something compatible with, or an advance upon, what the community affirms as part of its tradition.

We can stipulate some of these criteria in the form of some self-directed questions:

Does my experience as a Christian bring insight and reality to the Word of God as it is preached in the tradition? Theologians like Nicholas Lash and Frances Young have written wisely on the performative character (Katz's 'knowledge of acquaintance') of the Bible which invites us to put into practice what we perceive in our encounter with the text.⁶ It need not be that every person's experiences as a Christian advance our understanding of the Word of God but, at a very minimum, it ought to exemplify its truth and, also, deepen one's own personal appropriation of God's revelation in Christ.

Second, does experience help one grow as a person both for that person's own sake and for the sake of others – is it, in short, a maturing experience – or, conversely, is one driven to self-absorp-

tion, alienation, self-satisfaction, and isolation from others? One of the benefits of the modern attention to psychology in relation to the spiritual life has been an increasing sophistication in distinguishing religious experience from psychological aberrations that are unhealthy or destructive.

There is a further point. Unhealthy preoccupation with one's own personal experience and its satisfactions is the great temptation of the solitary seeker, since it is easy to reduce such experience to a constant search for personal gratification or a species of addiction in which one seeks for the frisson of 'spiritual' experience. Love and attention to others and to God is a hedge against such spiritual selfishness. Meister Eckhart once said that if one were rapt into the third heaven in contemplation and a sick brother needed attention, it would be the more perfect thing to leave off prayer and take that sick person a bowl of soup.

It should further be noted that John of the Cross's detailed analysis of the dark night is precisely a careful study of a leaving-off of personal consolation in order to purify oneself for love in union. All of the traditional vocabulary of detachment, forgetfulness, kenosis and so on, properly understood, is to move the self from the self towards the Other and to others.

The fruits of the Spirit

We can then further inquire: does my religious experience lead me further towards those gifts which Paul tells us are the 'fruits' of the Spirit?

Michael Buckley has made some shrewd observations on this subject.⁷ He notes that there are three levels at which we can discern the Spirit in our lives: first, the judgement by which we discern between vice and sin; second, the ability to embrace the paschal mystery of Christ. The first stage is aversion and the second is conversion. The third stage, then, is enjoyment of those gifts of the Spirit such as peace, joy and so on, which are the marks of maturity. Buckley then warns that we should not confuse those levels since, by doing so, a 'monster can emerge'. For example, I may not argue that in my faithlessness or adultery or prideful dissension I find joy or peace. The threefold discernment of the Spirit proceeds organically: aversion from sin; conversion to the mystery of Christ; a deepening sense of living in and for God. In this latter stage we have a sense of living in God. Again, Eckhart:

The one who has God essentially present to her grasps God divinely and to her God shines in all things; for everything tastes of God and God forms himself for such a person out of all things. God always shines out in her . . .⁸

This process of testing one's religious experience(s) in the light of the tradition of the Christian community is admittedly a complex issue. There are so many variations to consider. How might we judge the authenticity of a dramatic conversion experience that calls to a new path in life. (Should we judge? Under what circumstances?) Should the church authorities intervene when someone alleges visions which encourage crowds, 'messages' and so on? What is the relationship between individual religious experience and the 'will' of superiors?

Broadening the criteria

Obviously, the criteria set out earlier are broad guidelines for judgement even though the application of the criteria to particularities often muddies the discernment process. To those we have outlined (fidelity to the Word of God; fruits of the Spirit) we could add the following which have been articulated by a recent author⁹ who writes of discernment in a church context:

- Inner authority and peace which is distinct from any dogmatic rigidity. It is an inner peace potentially open to correction.
- Communal harmony. We believe that the Holy Spirit prompts us to harmony and to reconciliation. Rogers does point out, however, that this criterion should not shade away possible divisions as one resists the 'tyranny of the majority' in a truly authentic fashion.
- Enhancement rather than the extinction of life. Insights that disempower or diminish creativity or wound the psyche or create forms of dysfunctionality must stand under the judgement of insights that strengthen selfhood, wholeness and health.
- Integrity in the discernment process. The action of a person or a community that discourages or impedes the process of discernment is suspect: 'When a group or individual has refused to consider alternatives, failed to heed advice, avoided issues of faith, and suppressed deep emotions, their decisions are suspect'.

The final rule stated above demands a bit of emphasis. Both time and some kind of true process are necessary in discerning individual religious experience or making prudential judgements on the part of

the community, when the prompting of experience seems to urge change of direction or new ways of doing things or living the gospel. Time is required to avoid snap judgements based on stereotypes or simple prejudices, while some kind of fair process should emerge, if only from a sense of justice and fair play.

The authors of the rather vast literature on spiritual direction, discretion, or the use of church authority are all agreed on one point, namely, that it is a rare gift for a person to possess the degree of prophetic discernment acute enough to judge the future with absolute assurance. For that reason alone, patience and the sometimes agonizing process of listening and discussion are virtues that must accompany prudence and discretion (*diakrisis*). This patient form of discernment is all the more necessary in contemporary culture where instant communications, a culture of litigation and a taste for the confrontational are a reality.

The question of dissent

A final point. It has been relatively easy for the Church to adjudicate the authenticity of, say, purported apparitions by investigation and patient watchfulness. Church authority, especially Roman authority, has been less successful in its relationship with perceived deviations in matters doctrinal and moral. Part of the problem is that within the past decades theology has become much more public (or made public because of controversy and the appetite of the mass media and its audience for conflict) while the older models of suppression (rooted in the anti-modernist mechanisms) have still been operative. Norms coming from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, outlining a more conciliatory method of entering into dialogue with theologians, are a step towards a more mature way of discerning how the thought of a theologian does or does not stand in conformity with the *regula fidei*. These new norms coming from the CDF, of course, also imply a demand for theologians to demonstrate a sense of the tradition, to be aware of their audience, and to proceed with a gospel spirit.

Such a dialogical exchange on matters of spirituality and theology is not only important for the life of the Church but crucial if we are truly serious about the larger perspective of ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. Such patience is not incompatible with speaking the truth. There are times when the Church and/or its members must judge that certain opinions, experiences and movements are immoral or outside the boundaries of the gospel, and they must say so. Not

speaking in such instances is as wrong as misusing authority in making aggressive moves against real or perceived deviance. Again, the compressed authority of the Church must find a voice in the face of clearly idiosyncratic use (or patent misuse) of Christian language to put forward dehumanizing positions in the name of religious ideology.

Discernment and the subsequent use of authority is clearly more of an art than a science. Discernment requires not only patience in listening but a sapiential discrimination in judging when it is time to speak and when it is time to keep one's counsel. Without discernment, the use of authority is abusive. On this point, and as a coda to this essay, I would like to recount an incident described by Edward Schillebeeckx in his memoirs (*I am a happy theologian*). The late Cardinal Feltin came to a celebration for the seventieth birthday of the Dominican, Marie Dominique Chenu. Chenu had been silenced and removed from his teaching position under pressure from the Vatican. Feltin praised Chenu for his obedience to authority. Chenu responded with the honesty that characterized him and his life. It was not obedience (that 'somewhat mediocre moral value', as he described it) that motivated him; rather it 'was the faith I had in the Word of God, compared with which clashes and passing incidents are nothing. It is because of the faith I had in God and in the church.' It is hard to think of a more honest and Christian way of describing how one should view religious faith as one stands before authority.

A test case

I should like to end these reflections with a true incident that happened recently on the west coast of Florida where I was raised. About two years ago someone driving up the notoriously crowded eight-lane highway (US#19) noticed that a large stain about three storeys high on the mirrored and tinted glass of an office complex had a shape to it which (the observer decided) had a striking resemblance to the Madonna and Child. He reported this to the local newspaper, which brought out some curious onlookers. Within a month or so after this initial report, crowds of people began to assemble in the parking lot to watch the sight against the reflected light of adjacent buildings. By the time we visited the area to see our families, over a thousand people an evening were gathering in the parking area. The local police department and deputies of the county's sheriff office had to park patrol cars at the highway inter-

section (there are eight lanes of heavy traffic at most times) to watch people trying to get across the road. Groups were now forming to say the rosary; some people were selling devotional pamphlets; and a few folks were collecting monies for 'charitable' purposes.

This activity developed spontaneously. The city and county authorities were irritated because of unanticipated expenditures for police overtime pay. The occupants of the building were bemused. Local Protestant fundamentalists were charging that the whole thing was a sham and the Catholic diocese, I think, was sure there was nothing supernatural about it. The crowds, made up both of the curious and the pious, continued to grow. Someone, for unclear motives, tried to deface the image. In time, however, the crowds diminished. When I drove past there a year after the event, the crowds had dissipated. The only evidence I could see that anyone still paid attention to the matter were a few straggling bouquets left beside a lamppost by a devout diehard.

The US#19 highway apparition seems to have died in obedience to the principle articulated by Rabbi Gamaliel that if the experience is a human one it will fail, but if it is from God it cannot be overthrown (Acts 5: 38-39). The United States, for some reason, has been bombarded with such stories of apparitions in recent years (Our Lady appearing on everything from billboards, tacos and doors of caravans), but, after a flurry of excitement, the event becomes a non-event. These religious phenomena seem to have a short shelf-life. Church authorities have wisely kept quiet and let events take their course.

The only instances I know of where church authority has actively spoken or acted are in those cases where supposed seers have become cult figures or where exploitation of people has reached scandalous proportions (selling tickets for entrance to apparition sites, etc.) or become the object of mockery in the popular press. One could hardly fault a local bishop for acting, since the debasement of religion is so patent in those instances. The handling of such apparitions also provides a clue to right action with respect to seers, stigmatics, mystics etc. If they become incapable of dialogue or sources of authoritarian impulses then it seems that the local church has the right to say that their activities or their teachings should be viewed with great caution. Such people have every civil right in the world to do what they do, but they should not do it in the name of the Church. To act otherwise would be an abdication of spiritual discretion. In the case of such individuals, in fact, the need

for intervention may be clearer if there are sure indications that such persons are exercising unhealthy control over persons within their ambit.

Most possible tensions between religious experience and church authority, to be sure, are less dramatic than investigations of alleged apparitions or the charismatic manifestations of stigmata or ecstasy. They involve, rather, the points of friction created by those whose experiences seem to upset the good order of the community (of the diocese or order or monastery or parish). In those cases, the balance between the freedom of the Christian and the unity of the community must be weighed in balance, utilizing some of the principles stated above. They are the hardest cases, since almost always it is only subsequent history that tells us whether those in authority or those who felt the constraints of that authority were in the right.

Lawrence S. Cunningham is professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, USA. His most recent book, with Keith Egan, is *Christian spirituality: themes from the tradition* (Paulist).

NOTES

1 Kilian McDonnell, 'Spirit and experience in Bernard of Clairvaux', *Theological Studies* 58/1 (1997), pp 3-18.

2 *The living flame of love* in *The collected works of Saint John of the Cross*, edited by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: ICS, 1979), p 577.

3 In Book II, 18-19 in *Collected works*, pp 160-169.

4 I have reflected more fully on this story in 'Cassian's hero and discernment' in *Finding God in all things*, ed Michael Himes and Stephen Pope (New York: Crossroad/Herder, 1996), pp 231-243.

5 'The conservative character of mysticism' in *Mysticism and religious traditions*, ed Steven Katz (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1983), p 21.

6 Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986); Frances Young, *Virtuoso theology* (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim, 1990).

7 'Discernment of spirits' in *New dictionary of Catholic spirituality*, ed Michael Downey (Collegeville MN: Liturgical/Glazier, 1993), pp 274-81.

8 'Counsels on discernment' in *Meister Eckhart: the essential sermons*, ed Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist, 1981), p 253.

9 Frank Rogers Jr, 'Discernment' in *Practicing our faith*, ed Dorothy Bass (San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997), pp 105-118.