

Book Review

How do you know it's God? The Theology and Practice of Discerning a Call to Ministry

Lynn McChlery

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The concept of vocation and the lived experience of discernment have often been overlooked by theologians. This is surprising as to speak of 'the call of God' is to implicitly touch on powerful and emotive theological themes around providence, prayer, identity, and purpose. Lynn McChlery's work recognises the complexity of vocation, while offering a detailed, constructive, and welcome contribution to theological exploration of this topic. Her focus is on how those tasked with assessing candidates for ordained ministry approach vocational discernment. She highlights that the challenge for assessors is to figure out whether a particular individual is called by God to ordained ministry and comments that discerning God's call with any certainty is 'difficult enough to do for oneself, and impossibly difficult [to do] for others' (p. 3). This decision to explore the theological and practical ramifications of the responsibility to discern on behalf of others and on behalf of the wider church community allows McChlery to bring theological, scientific, and experiential depth to her interdisciplinary analysis of the role of intuition (also described as 'spiritual sense' or 'gut feel') in making such decisions.

The book is structured in three sections with Part 1 and Part 2 presented as an opportunity to listen in turn to experience and to the theological tradition. The final section, Part 3, brings experience and theology together to consider the ramifications for the development of our understanding and practice of vocational discernment. This structure is successful in allowing each source to be considered separately and in depth, before asking how together they advance theory and practice; however, at times it leaves the reader struggling to locate the more detailed exploration within the wider argument. The absence of a methodology chapter may contribute to this occasional sense of disorientation. I suspect this chapter was omitted in the process of editing a doctoral thesis into book form as McChlery mentions her decision to adopt 'a methodology of pastoral theology as attention' (p. 201), although this approach is not fully explained or explored in the book.



Part 1 is entitled 'Listening to Experience' and comprises five chapters each exploring different practical approaches to discernment. The first two chapters present McClery's qualitative research observing four denominational selection conferences discerning whether candidates are called to ordained ministry and interviews with assessors. She notes that the design of each conference reflects the differing theological and ecclesiological commitments of the respective denominations, but that 'all denominations explicitly differentiate between call and competence' (p. 19). While a call to ordained ministry is seen as essential across the different traditions, McClery also notes that there is a 'universal vagueness about defining call' (p. 19) and, subsequently, it is rarely made explicit how calling is to be assessed. This places considerable responsibility on the Vocations Assessors as they seek to discern whether an individual is called to ordained ministry and McClery explores the possibilities and limitations of a range of practical resources available to them in making this judgement, including interviews, report writing, group tasks, and psychologist assessments. She concludes Chapter 1 by describing an incident she observed during her attendance at a selection conference in which a Vocations Assessor expressed reservations about a candidate but struggled to articulate the reasons for their intuitive sense that differed from the other forms of assessment and eventually acquiesced to the majority opinion. This incident highlights the need for a strong account of the particular role that intuition can and should play in vocational discernment alongside the other forms of assessment which are regularly used in selection conferences.

Chapter 2 further explores discernment in selection conferences through interviews with Vocations Assessors about their experiences. McClery explores how the Vocations Assessors see their task as one which necessitates 'attentive listening' (p. 28-30) both to the candidate and to God, with this being difficult when there is insufficient time and pressure to make a decision. Assessors also queried what it means to hear an 'authentic call' and McClery notes differences between different church traditions about how such a call would be embodied and expressed by candidates. Vocations Assessors further reflected on their experience of God's presence in discernment and on the importance of making decisions in community through discussion and consensus. Throughout her reflection on these themes, McClery identifies the centrality of intuition to the Vocations Assessors' discernment and recognises the questions that this raises about how calling is to be identified and how the outcome of a selection conference is articulated and justified. Together the first two chapters highlight the need for further resourcing of these central issues in vocational discernment.

Part 1 continues in Chapters 3 and 4 by exploring the experience of individual and communal discernment in Ignatian spirituality and the Jesuit tradition. In Chapter 4, the discussion around communal discernment is further developed through comparison with the distinctive decision-making practices of the Quakers. These chapters are particularly helpful in outlining the theological and practical challenges of discerning God's guidance individually and communally through deliberate and systematic processes of prayer,

conversation, and intuition. McChlery notes the unique composition of selection conferences as a temporary community formed for a defined purpose and working towards a firm decision within a limited timeframe and recognises that this influences the form of discernment practices they can adopt.

Chapter 5 makes a conscious move away from focusing on discernment as a Christian spiritual practice to engage with the work of Iain McGilchrist in *The Master and his Emissary* on the science of brain lateralization in making judgements and decisions. As an Oxford fellow in English literature who later trained as a psychiatrist with a specialism in neuro-imaging, McGilchrist brings a philosophical and scientific perspective to the subject of discernment. His work focuses on the two hemispheres of the brain – the right and the left hemispheres. The right hemisphere perceives the world as a lively sensory encounter and interprets knowledge within a broad picture guided by principle and community. Whereas, the left hemisphere of the brain focuses on detail and the component elements of the world, prioritising the individual's needs above those of others, and has a strong preference for certainty, clarity, and evidence. McGilchrist considers that both hemispheres of the brain work together in making accurate decisions, but that contemporary 'Western society [...] is dominated by the left hemisphere's worldview [and] privileges thought that is re-presented in forms that can be controlled and tabulated for utilitarian purpose' (p. 113). McChlery explores the themes in McGilchrist's work as they relate to decision-making and vocational discernment. She outlines how Vocations Assessors often appear to wrestle with balancing the need to attend to objective criteria with the more subjective nature of their intuition and suggests that this is reflective of McGilchrist's identification of the challenge of integrating the left and right hemispheres of the brain. This implies that the processes employed at selection conferences, with their requirement to reach justifiable decisions and to record those judgements in written reports, may be reductionist rather than holistic in their approach and would benefit from consciously drawing on wider epistemological sources in forming judgements on candidates' calling.

In Part 2, McChlery turns her attention to theological sources on the subject of the human ability to discern God's activity in the world through the differing epistemological approaches of John Henry Newman and Karl Barth.

Chapter 6 focuses on how Newman explored the question of 'how do people of faith have certitude in knowledge about God?' Although this chapter has much of interest as it explores the potential and limits of imagination, conscience, wisdom and community in assenting to Christian belief, it is only much later in the book when McChlery discusses Newman in conversation with other sources in Part 3 that it becomes apparent how this detailed presentation of Newman's epistemology contributes to the central theme of vocational discernment. Meanwhile, Chapter 7 focuses on Barth's epistemological approach and relates this directly to his presentation of vocation in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3. As might be expected, Barth is unsympathetic to an anthropological focus on individual calling or personal certitude in discerning vocation. McChlery identifies three themes in his approach

to the topic of vocation: it is 'Christocentric, communal and providential' (p. 166). In this manner, Barth 'focuses away from the individual Christian, towards their place in God's teleological purposes' (p. 166). It is impossible in this short review to do justice to the nuance and scope of McChlery's handling of these two chapters focusing on the epistemological approaches of Newman and Barth. She is masterly in her consideration of the detail and depth of their differing perspectives and, although these chapters are the least engaging of the book, it is in the third and final section that their potential contribution becomes apparent.

Part 3 draws together the strands which have developed through the earlier chapters and offers a constructive theological vision for intuition in Chapter 8, before considering the pragmatic implications for vocational discernment in Chapter 9. Drawing on earlier chapters on Ignatius, McGilchrist, Newman and Barth, McChlery concludes that Christians are able to rely on intuition as a source of knowledge and that it is possible for this ability to be developed or honed 'as our innate (right-hemisphere) capacity for tacit knowledge is tuned by spiritual disciplines to resonate with God's spirit and becomes intuitive' (p. 192-193). This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for those with a responsibility for assessment during selection conferences. McChlery recognises the requirement to justify and verify decisions made in these contexts and acknowledges the potential for instinctive judgements to be influenced by unhealthy transference, unconscious bias, or group dynamics. However, she urges that the contribution of intuition in vocational discernment must not be overlooked in favour of measurable criteria and elements which can be observed, recorded, and justified. While the practical implications will need to be identified by denominations taking into account the differing theological and ecclesiological commitments shaping their discernment processes, McChlery offers some helpful principles for the design of selection conferences. These include consideration of the physical space, the length and structure of interviews, the observation of group exercises, and the training of Vocations Assessors.

I am grateful for the thorough and thoughtful work that McChlery presents in *How Do I Know It's God*. My own research focuses on the experiences of candidates as they discern a call to ordained ministry and on how they interpret the formal processes of discernment theologically. McChlery acknowledges that attending to candidates' experiences would further develop the research she has presented here regarding how those tasked with assessing calling approach the task. I anticipate developing some of the themes she highlights, particularly her engagement with McGilchrist's work as brain lateralization relates to vocational discernment and with her assessment of the important role that language and articulation play in assessing a call to ministry.

In framing the sections of the book as exercises in listening and conversation, McChlery has enabled lived experience to be heard and resourced by a range of Christian traditions, neurological science, and theological epistemologies. While the origins of this book as a doctoral thesis mean that the style of writing and presentation of material will probably be

too dense for a wide readership, those who are involved in vocational discernment will find it prompts reflection on what it means to prayerfully attend to intuition as a means by which God's call can be discerned. As there are few theological texts which so carefully and constructively contribute to this aspect of the Church's life and ministry, I whole-heartedly recommend this book to those who wish to be stretched and challenged in the task of vocational discernment.