

Lynn McChlery, *How Do You Know it's God? Discerning a Vocation to Ministry in Churches* (London, SCM Press, 2021), pp. 272. ISBN 978-0334060383
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'How do you know it's God?' is a question I have asked many candidates for ordained ministry, as they have sought to find words to express an inner sense or conviction that this is God's calling for them. For some, it comes as a result of nudges that have persisted over long years, which they now feel unable to ignore. For others it's been a dream, or someone else's encouragement or insight, that has landed them in a discernment process as their own sense of call is brought into conversation with, and determination by, an ecclesial discernment relating to its authenticity. It's also a question I've asked myself as I listen, trying to attend to a call that may fit within agreed selection criteria but almost always also exceeds them.

Lynn McChlery has been involved in vocational discernment in the Church of Scotland for many years, and it was her sense that 'a spiritual exercise was being reduced to a bureaucratic process' (p. 231) that prompted her PhD research, which forms the basis for this book. She begins with ethnographic research, drawing on observation of selection processes in the Church of Scotland, Church of England, the Methodist Church and the Scottish Baptist Union. This reveals a variety of approaches to discernment in which the theological and ecclesiological presuppositions of the different traditions play a role, which is often unarticulated by those involved: the ability of a candidate to push back against assertive interrogation can be interpreted as important evidence of a call's authenticity in the Baptist tradition, for example, whereas it may be more likely to be interpreted as a lack of humility in an Anglican setting. This led me to wonder about the ways in which our expectations and processes require a candidate to learn a way of narrating their call and a vocabulary for it, such that it can be heard and responded to by those charged with discernment. Also, to what extent is the call changed in the process of interpretation? This is beyond the scope of McChlery's study but overlaps significantly with her concern that the Churches' discernment processes should not rely solely on assessment by supposedly objective criteria.

Interviews with vocational assessors reveal a dissatisfaction with such criteria and their associated processes – a sense that they are sometimes missing the point and do not attend enough to the reality of the person and the calling which the assessor is encountering. The interviews reveal a common understanding that there is a type of knowledge that goes beyond the criteria – intuition, or gut feeling, or a somatic recognition of a real call. But alongside this common understanding is mistrust: assessors do not know what to do with this sort of knowledge, or how to interpret or vocalize it; indeed, whether to trust it could be from God.

The rest of McChlery's book is devoted to answering the question for assessors of whether this sort of knowledge in discernment could be of God. Drawing helpfully on Ignatian practices of discernment, both individual and corporate, she begins to develop a vocabulary and framework for discerning and using this sort of knowledge – the *sentir*, or sense or intuition of God in particular circumstances. She is (rightly in my view) wary of borrowing from the Ignatian tradition in a way that assumes discernment is a technique

that can be learned, after a weekend's training, or that it can be practised independently of a praying community. Her conviction, however, from her engagement with this tradition, that Ignatius is 'primarily concerned with forming discerning people who may then know the mind of Christ in specific instances' (p. 76) is an important prompt for the Churches to reflect more deeply on whom it is entrusting with the task of discernment.

McChlery also investigates the Quaker tradition of discernment to learn more of what it could contribute to a developing vocabulary and practice of vocational discernment for the Churches. Her contrasting of silence with the wordiness of so many ecclesial discernment frameworks resonated with my own desire for space and silence amid over-busy timetables for Church of England discernment panels, and of the importance of the prayer that punctuates them.

The importance of attention to God, to the candidates, to the other assessors and to oneself is developed first in a chapter on brain lateralization and human perception, in conversation with Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and his Emissary*. From this, McChlery argues that most discernment processes are biased in favour of the left hemisphere of the brain while neglecting the important knowledge that can come from the right. If 'attention is key to determining how reality is perceived' (p. 120) then drawing on tacit knowledge as well as evidence- or criteria-based knowledge is an important part of the assessors' task.

Chapters on theological epistemology in Newman and Barth seek to root intuitive or tacit knowledge firmly within the Christian tradition. In the case of Newman there is ready resonance in his illative sense – the faculty of wisdom, or of discerning and judging. It feels rather more forced in conversation with Barth, whose rejection of the *analogia entis* casts suspicion over any attempt by human beings to know God independently of God's revelation. McChlery has a good attempt at reading Barth's practice if not his words in a way that will support her thesis, but his more helpful contribution is perhaps in contributing to the humility that must be a necessary part of any discernment – the knowledge that we are fallen human beings whose judgement is impaired.

McChlery's book ends by drawing together her argument that tacit or intuitive knowledge should form part of the discernment process more explicitly, and that this is a sort of knowledge that can be trusted. She makes a persuasive case, and her concluding chapter on ways in which the process could be changed to incorporate it makes for instructive reading for all involved. More space in discernment processes for encounter, attention, reflection, and worship; a different mode of interview that favours the conversational; better attention to the selection and equipping of assessors; and mentoring by mature assessors of those newer to the task would all contribute to a richer and deeper discernment process, and enable all those involved to trust that it is a process genuinely seeking to discern if it is God calling, and to form people in the mind of Christ.

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