

# The psychology of prophecy in early Christianity

Prophetism and religious altered states of consciousness

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## INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM(S)

Earliest Christianity was, at least to some extent, a prophetic community.<sup>1</sup> That the Pauline communities, and probably a much larger slice of early Christianity regarded enthusiastic or ecstatic experiences (prophetism, glossolalia, etc.) as appropriate, or even normal aspects of Christian life and worship is rarely doubted. This can be established from *1 Corinthians* and *Revelation*, at least, and from *Acts*, in as much as it is regarded as historical.<sup>2</sup> References to contemporary prophecy also surface in other Pauline texts,<sup>3</sup> and there appears to be a formula for testing prophets in *1 John* 4.2f.

There may, however, be two fundamental problems with this portrait of earliest Christianity. The first centers around the problem of homogeneity in the first century Church and the second reflects our inability to definitively know how early Christian prophecy functioned psychologically, socially or even theologically. That the community lacked homogeneity is footnoted only by those who assert that apostolic orthodoxy was easily recognizable

<sup>1</sup> I will attempt to define the terms used for prophetic experience below (see pages 31**Error! Bookmark not defined.**). The reader is also referred to appendix I.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, the reliability of *Acts* as a source of historical facts is independent of the question of whether it is a reliable portrait of the social world of the early Church. My inclination is to read it as a reasonable characterization of one or two streams of early Christian community life.

<sup>3</sup> Appearing in lists in *Rom.* 12.8, *Eph.* 3.5; 4.11, and *1 Thess.* 5.20. Specific prophecies in *2 Cor.* 12.9 (probably in reference to himself), *Rom* 11.25f, *Gal.* 5.21, *1 Thess.* 3.4; 4.2–6; 5.15–17, *2 Thess.* 3.6; 10; 12, and *1 Tim.* 4.14... Since we are talking about the community, and not the person of Paul, and particularly since it is merely a backdrop to the focus of this study, I will make no effort to discern differences between proto- and deutero-Pauline texts. The fact that these references span both types simply demonstrates that the phenomenon was not short-lived.

among the various theological positions available. Most scholars make no such assertion,<sup>4</sup> although it is hardly important to this study.

While the evidence clearly suggests that several of the varieties growing out of the Jesus movement were prophetically active,<sup>5</sup> there is little reason to suppose that they *all* were. Even among related communities, those associated with Paul for example, we would be hard-pressed to argue that prophetic activity functioned in all assemblies in the same way. It is entirely likely that prophetism in the Diaspora was more influenced by analogous activities in surrounding pagan culture, although we have no references to confirm or deny this.<sup>6</sup> It may also be meaningful that there are few references to contemporary prophecy in the *New Testament* outside of the Pauline and Johannine literature (reading *Acts* as a product of the Pauline world).<sup>7</sup>

It is also unclear how important prophecy was to the life of the community. Paul seems to upbraid the Corinthians for elevating glossolalia over prophecy in *1 Cor.* 12ff, and elsewhere he says that the Gospel, as preached to them by him, takes precedence over even a message of an “angel from heaven” (*Gal.* 1.8). Prophecies in the community should not be “quenched” or “despised,”

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<sup>4</sup> There are, of course, exceptions, notably among conservative scholars. See, for example, Wayne Grudem (2000).

<sup>5</sup> That is, they had active prophets in their communities.

<sup>6</sup> Discussions surrounding the problematic passage in *1 Cor.* 11.3–16 may reveal an exception to this statement, if we follow some approaches to interpretation. This appears to be the argument, at any rate, made by Luke Timothy Johnson (1998).

<sup>7</sup> *Matt.* 7.22 comes to mind, although it is obviously somewhat negative regarding pneumatics:

Πολλοὶ ἐροῦσίν μοι ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ, Κύριε κύριε, οὐ τῷ σῷ ὀνόματι ἐπροφητεύσαμεν, καὶ τῷ σῷ ὀνόματι δαιμόνια ἐξεβάλομεν, καὶ τῷ σῷ ὀνόματι δυνάμεις πολλὰς ἐποιήσαμεν (eds. Aland, et al.).

but need to be “tested” and “judged” (esp. by other prophets—*1 Cor.* 14.29, *1 Thess.* 5.19ff<sup>8</sup>).<sup>9</sup>

If the earliest communities were not homogeneous, there is little reason to expect their daughter communities in the second and third centuries to be otherwise. That lack of expectation does not seem to be disappointed, but prophetism appears to continue in Proto-orthodox circles well into the second century, and may have been even more common in some ‘heretical’ Christian communities. Over the next couple of centuries, though, it slowly went into decline. Scholars generally accept that, with the exception of its well know survival in the New Prophecy (Montanist) movement, it had largely died out by the middle of the third century.<sup>10</sup>

What we do not fully understand on this last point is why. The most common explanation given for this waning focuses on the solidification of the institutional structures of the Church and the need for doctrinal stability descending from that hierarchy. Prophecy, in particular, became a problem when it potentially conflicted

<sup>8</sup> Note here that “abstain from every form of evil” may be a reference to the contents of the prophecy.

<sup>9</sup> The theological place of prophecy in the community is important in recent scholarly discussions about the gospel sayings of Jesus. The suggestion has been made that some could actually have their origin in the oracles of early Christian prophets, speaking with the voice of the Lord. I will return to this later (below p. 98).

<sup>10</sup> This statement can only be made with confidence about those communities that are usually termed ‘catholic’ or ‘Proto-orthodox.’ We do not know to what extent this type of charismatic activity might have been present in some Gnostic or Jewish Christian expressions. We do know that there are historical pockets of overtly prophetic activity throughout Christian history, and, because ‘prophecy’ is a term that often eludes exact definition, it is possible to argue that it continues unabated, recast as inspired biblical interpretation or the like. Also, it is important to note that some forms of the prophetic (oracular dreams and visions, for example) have been a perennial part of the Christian world throughout its history. Exactly what is in decline in this period will need to be addressed after we have discussed the varieties of prophetic phenomena (below, pp. 31ff).

with official positions taken by the church authorities. Both the *Didache* and *Hermas* clearly reflect a tightening of controls on itinerant charismatics.<sup>11</sup>

There are plenty of reasons to affirm this largely Weberian analysis, but it is important to remember that most communities that make use of intermediaries have managed to do so without threatening their fundamental belief structures. What would appear similar—tensions between community teachers and ruling authorities—sometimes resulted in the marginalization of the particular teacher (in the case of Origen, waiting until well after he was dead), but never in a community wide rejection of the didactic ministry. While recognizing that tension between charisma of the spirit and charisma of office may have played a rôle, I suspect there must have been more at play.

Besides the centralization of power, there are a cluster of co-morbid movements afoot in this period which may have had some connection with the decline of congregational prophecy: escalating asceticism, increased or emerging liturgical structuralism, solidifying

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<sup>11</sup> Other charismata did not share the same fate. Healing, for example, remains a part of Christian tradition throughout its history, and glossolalia, which may have faded from common practice long before prophecy, has enjoyed periodic renaissances, without notable resistance from the ecclesiastical authorities. Modern Pentecostalism, not well received in mainstream Protestant circles, is an exception. Its rejection in those circles may have reflected social or even racial prejudices, although the tension did not immediately disappear with the emergence of the higher class—and whiter—Charismatic movement. I am not aware, however, of modern attacks on these contemporary pneumatics that cite race or social makeup as part of their criticism. This study will occasionally address charismata other than prophetism, if they appear to aid in our understanding of prophetic experience, and it will occasionally step outside the bounds of early Christianity, but the primary focus will be limited to prophecy in the first three centuries (esp. the second).

gynephobia,<sup>12</sup> and a profound fear of deviation<sup>13</sup> come immediately to mind. Any of these, with the possible exception of asceticism,<sup>14</sup> could have encouraged a distrust of pneumatic messengers.<sup>15</sup>

A recurring focus of this study will be an analysis of the psychological categories and social location of prophetic activity wherever we find instances. The goal here is to construct a map of where and how such activity took place. We will also be interested in how seriously the various communities took these messages (did they change their behavior in response?). Unfortunately, the avail-

<sup>12</sup> This term, in my opinion, better describes the flavor of 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian (men's) attitudes toward women than the more commonly used 'misogyny.' It is not a hate so much as a fear—perhaps even a fear of self—that is a play, for the most part, in the rejection of sexuality and its embodiment in the feminine.

<sup>13</sup> I will sometimes distinguish, for sake of clarity, between heterodoxy and heresy. Heterodoxy is deviation from community beliefs and standards which, however, does not result in expulsion. Heresy is deviation sufficient to require expulsion. In the period under examination, for the Proto-orthodox at least, heterodoxy appears to be a very narrow category.

<sup>14</sup> Asceticism would probably have the opposite effect, since bodily deprivation is one of the better established methods of inducing parasensory and ecstatic experiences.

<sup>15</sup> A red flag may have gone up on my inclusion of gynephobia as a potential source of early cessationism. There is, however, evidence that women may have been disproportionately represented in the early Christian prophetic community. There were, at least, a high percentage of women prophets among the Montanists, and perhaps among more heretical groups of the second and third centuries as well. In general, unless forbidden by community standards, women appear to be somewhat more likely to develop intermediary skills. There may be psychological or neurological reasons for this, but we will have to know more about the psychology of pneumatic experience before that can be evaluated. I. M. Lewis argues that members of socio-economically lower groups, or decentralized members (which would often include women), of societies in which intermediary activity is allowed may use such skills—consciously or unconsciously—to elevate their own social status (2003).

able tools force us to be largely phenomenological. It is to be hoped that in the future our understanding of the neurological foundations of the types of altered experiences that lie behind prophetism will allow us to better understand this type of activity in the early Christian communities.