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Speaking into the Ear: Fecund Truth's Virgin Medium

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Abstract

Contrary to the widespread view of myth as falsehood, its hermeneutic interpretation has long been seen as providing insight for life's conundrums. Peters' (1999) juxtaposition of perfect angelic exchanges of meaning with flawed human discourse opens up fresh approaches for examining communication's complexities. Religious thought has dealt intriguingly with the 'media problem' posed by angels and mortals' incommensurable difference. Muslim philosophy posits a subtle faculty of the creative imagination / active intellect as a pristine mediator between them. This article explores reparative potential for disinformation's chaos-inducing harm in our time through an intertextual study of old Jewish, Christian and Muslim narratives, in which speaking and hearing's relationship with truth is a core value. Scriptural discourses about the discerning mode of the Virgin Mary and the Prophet Muhammad's respective receptions of the Word offer understanding for engagement with our turbulent mediascape and underline the always current value of such symbolic narratives.

Keywords

Speech, hearing, medium, myth, hermeneutics, truth

Introduction

Hearing was a primary sense for perceiving the world and a major source of knowledge construction for most of human history. However, its importance has been diminished in the last few centuries. Leigh Eric Schmidt notes that the Enlightenment reduced the aural sense's epistemic status as it linked rationality more closely to vision: "Marked as a spiritual, emotional, and superstitious sense, the ear posed a potential danger to the clearsightedness of reason" (2000: 7). Suspicion of aurality forced a repositioning and

disciplining of acoustic Christian devotions. This view seems to continue in our times and may explain why Sound Studies have remained ‘emerging’ for a long time (Sterne, 2012: 3) as Visual Studies have been rising in prominence. The present article considers orality and aurality to be of central significance and examines them in the contexts of myth and hermeneutics—sources of knowledge that have also been marginalized but which provide considerable perception into the human condition.

Myth is synonymous with falsehood in common parlance but its narratives, contrarily, tell profound truths about life. One of its primary functions is to be didactic, teaching by means of analogy. It relates society’s fundamental problems and conundrums in symbolic and dramatic fashion, inducing perceptions that are unreachable through rational thought. Manifested in literature, art and music, myth’s symbolic and metaphoric language constructs knowledge that is distinct from that of numbers, facts, and empirical observations. It is embedded deeply not only in the religious but also the secular mind (Ellul, 1965). Only a slender thread of scholarship on myth has run through the tapestry of communication research even though “myths about the struggle for Good, of the need for heroes to lead us forward [...] [constitute] the narrative underpinnings of TV programmes, blockbuster movies, advertisements and commercials, and virtually anything that gets ‘media air time’” (Marcel Danesi, quoted in Berger, 2013: 2). John Durham Peters’ (1999) erudite examination of communication’s spiritualist tradition validates the study of myth and religion to understand better the endemic problem of miscommunication.

Hermeneutics, one of the oldest theoretical and methodological disciplines affiliated with communication, has been applied for millennia as a mode for interpretation and understanding. Initially limited to the exegesis of scripture, it has also been extended to other scholarly domains such as law and history and has given rise to areas of study like semiotics (Grondin, 1994). It serves to analyze the layers of meanings embedded in texts, images, and sounds. Philosophical debates on hermeneutics have raged for centuries and in more recent times have involved the likes of Dewey, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Habermas, Gadamer, and Ricœur (Peters, 1999). This article leans towards what Kearney (1986) calls Ricœur’s “hermeneutics of affirmation”, which directs analysis towards human emancipation while being cognizant of the tendency

to instrumentalize myth to maintain the *status quo* and assert domination (as expressed in Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx's "hermeneutics of suspicion").

Hermeneutics is concerned with the permanent spirit of language [...] not as some decorative excess or effusion of subjectivity, but as the creative capacity of language to open up new worlds. Poetic and mythic symbols (for example) do not just express nostalgia for some forgotten world. They constitute a disclosure of unprecedented worlds, an opening on to other possible meanings which transcend the established limits of our actual world [...] and (function as) a re-creation of language (Ricœur, quoted in Kearney, 1986: 117).

Even though myth is generally rooted in the past, it holds wisdom for the present. Hermeneutic analysis elicits meanings of symbols and makes available their import for contemporary thought.

This article studies myth with the purpose of gleaning temporally and culturally universal significance that speaks to two core, practical, and inter-related challenges of life: the quest for better communication and the engagement with truth. Symbolism about the relationship between speech, hearing and truth is examined in the Jewish Bible, the New Testament, the *Protoevangelium of James*, the Qur'an and other religio-cultural sources. Mustapha Akyol's (2017) intertextual scrutiny of Christian and Muslim sources to approach the life of Jesus offers an instructive model for scrutinizing Abrahamic narratives. The scriptures overlap and complement each other in filling some of the gaps in narratives. Their intertextual readings yield a fuller picture, providing fresh perceptions into the symbolic discourses. The present work also takes a cue from Peters' (1999) study of Christian theology and extends his ambit to draw from certain Muslim philosophers' understandings of communication. Ibn Arabi's concept of creative imagination (Corbin, 1969) opens up new ways to explore notions of the ideal medium and the undistorted passage of messages. Excavation of buried Christian ideas about the Virgin's conception through the ear and its hermeneutic analysis by Nasir-i Khusraw (1949) stimulate novel ways of thinking about the transmission of truthful content, its disciplined reception, and its reparative potential for our troubled times.

Angels and Humans

Notwithstanding enormous technical advances, the unadulterated transmission of human thought remains an elusive goal. Language and media are crude bearers of meaning because they inexorably distort information. This “pathos of breakdown” (Peters, 1999: 1) frustrates interaction between people and leads to conflict. Philosophers have struggled with the problem for millennia and, to this day, much of “drama, art, cinema, and literature examines the impossibility of communication between people” (ibid: 2). Religion does, however, offer the ideal of perfect understanding; it has also contributed significantly to key communication concepts such as speech, truth-telling, interpretation, meaning, writing, the book, and medium.

St. Aquinas, the prominent thirteenth century Italian Scholastic philosopher also known as ‘Doctor Angelicus’, held that angels are able to comprehend each other’s meanings without material language (Peters, 1999). Some of the earliest ideas about such disembodied spiritual creatures had appeared in 6th century BCE in the ancient Persian religion founded by Zoroaster (Barr, 1985). Other faiths with origins in the Middle East are also characterized by beliefs in similar beings. Several passages in the Jewish Bible describe interactions of people, usually prophets, with angels. Gabriel’s presence in Christianity and Islam is pivotal. Several categories of angels with specific functions were developed, but the most prominent task was delivering God’s messages.

Though traditions of angelology are diverse, both orthodox and esoteric, ranging across such traditions as Christian Gnosticism, Sufism, and Kabbalah, angels present a model of communication as it should be. They provide us a lasting vision of the ideal speech situation, one without distortion or interference. Angels—a term that comes from the Greek *angelos*, messenger—are unhindered by distance, are exempt from the supposed limitations of embodiment, and effortlessly couple the psychological and physical, the signified and the signifier, the divine and the human. They are pure bodies of meaning (Peters, 1999: 74-75).

These creatures came to be idealized as beings unburdened by the human corporeality that impedes the transmission and reception of thought.

Religious narratives tell of great occasions when heavenly beings engaged with humans. The imagined efficacy of some of these conversations provides a sharp relief to the foibles of people-to-people interactions. A receding grayscale image of the Annunciation by Rogier van der Weyden (see [Wikimedia Commons, 2021](#)) graces the inside title page of Peters' *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (1999). The fifteenth-century European painting is a classic Middle Ages rendering of the archangel Gabriel (Jibril in the Qur'an) announcing to the Virgin Mary (Maryam) that she would conceive and become the mother of Jesus (Isa) (Luke 1:26; Qur'an, 19:19). Supernatural beings in various cultures' myths pronounce powerful and fecund words that transform persons and things. However, the abiding significance of such speech usually does not lie in its wondrous manifestations but in what its symbolism teaches people about upholding goodness as they confront the human condition's limitations (Campbell, 1972). In this, believers hold ancient scripture to bear symbolism that provides wisdom and guidance for daily life, even under the vastly changed conditions of the contemporary world. This has called for a hermeneutics addressing the mediation, reception and understanding of divine speech.

St. Augustine, a fourth-fifth century Church Father whom Peters considers to be "a fountainhead of the concept of communication and a key figure in the history of linguistic theory" (1999: 67), wrote about angelic speech prior to Aquinas. This North African philosopher's ideas were shaped by a view of the outer and inner realities of words (Augustine, 1978). He held that divine messages have to possess the materiality of sound in order to be heard by mortals; however, this physicality of the communications obscures their inner truth. Religious thought views such truth as transcending space and time: it is the "real, essential Reality, in short, essence of being, the origin of origins, that beyond which nothing is thinkable" (Corbin, 1969: 167). The Church Father believed that although inner meanings bearing truth are not materially apparent, people are intuitively drawn to them because it speaks to their spirit (Augustine, 1978).

Creative Imagination / Active Intellect

The Abrahamic traditions of Jews, Christians and Muslims normatively conceptualize a transcendent God who is far beyond the sensory reach of worshippers. How then

does communication between them take place? Augustine sees this as a “media problem” (Peters, 1999: 71) relating to the means of discourse between heaven and earth. Abrahamic and some other religious beliefs hold that humanity apprehends divinity through theophanies, epiphanies, and revelations.

Examining the work of medieval Sufi philosophers such as Ibn Arabi, Qaysari, and Suhrawardi, Corbin described their view of the faculty of creative imagination (*qummat al-khayal*) as “an intermediary, a mediatrix” (Corbin, 1969: 217), through which interactions between the divine and the human occur. Muslim neoplatonists referred to it as active intelligence (*aql mustafad*) (Rahman, 1958). This is human consciousness’s subtle faculty that provides for the perfect mode of communication that is otherwise only possible for God and angels.

Here all the essential realities of being are manifested in real Images; when a thing manifested to senses or the intellect calls for a hermeneutics because it carried a meaning which transcends the simple datum and makes that thing a symbol, this symbolic truth implies a perception on the plane of the Creative Imagination. The wisdom which is concerned with such meanings, which makes things over as symbols and has as its field the intermediate world of subsisting Images, is a wisdom of light, typified in the person of Joseph, the exemplary interpreter of visions (Corbin, 1969: 190).

Joseph (Yusuf) son of Jacob (Yakub) (Genesis, 41:25-32; Qur’an, 12:46-49), is cited as an example *par excellence* of the hermeneutist with the wisdom and capability to interpret the profound meanings of the true symbols manifested in the creative imagination / active intelligence. The ‘imagination’ here is not the mental source of ordinary thought or that of illusions and fantasies. It is the spiritual faculty which enables the comprehension of the ‘real images’ bearing the absolute truth that, in the terrestrial world, suffers distortion and relativization.

Muslim scholars have engaged rigorously with this topic over time; however, the limited scope of this paper allows for only brief references to them. Sufi, Shia, and Neoplatonist discourses about the creative imagination / active intellect are not normatively shared by Sunni orthodoxy but, on the other hand, have been “transmitted

through the Latin Middle Ages all the way into European [Western] modernity” (Bottici, 2014: 55). Although they are overshadowed by the positivist tenor of dominant Western philosophies, including those in the study of communication, their themes run in various areas of contemporary scholarship including Jungian psychology (Hillman, 1972) and the cultural analysis of politics (Bottici, 2014).

Speech’s Fecundity

Ancient concepts about the power of speech are residually extant in present-day secular society. Continual streams of fictional writing and media productions featuring magical incantations enchant mass audiences. Words spoken by those engaged in the supernatural are thought to bless and heal or, contrarily, to curse and kill. The religious believe prescribed phraseologies of communal prayers to have potency. They view saints, prophets and other holy figures performing miracles by reciting sacred phrases. “Words in such a context are words of power or dynamic forces” (Frye, 1990: 6). Scriptures are considered to hold God’s potent speech. Even though celestial beings do not actually have to talk and hear to be understood by each other, they are anthropomorphically characterized with these faculties. God and angels are often conceptualized as speaking to humans without actually speaking—imparting inner meanings without physical communication. Speech in this sense is a metaphor of non-verbal, spiritual conversation. Its means and medium is the creative imagination / active intellect, through which heavenly and earthly interlocutors interact, according to certain medieval Muslim philosophers (see Chittick, 1994; Corbin, 1995; Rahman, 1958).

The monotheist Abrahamic faiths view the Almighty as having supremely powerful speech. Genesis tells of God’s ability to create instantaneously and magisterially with a brief utterance: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (1:3). The Qur’an has omnipotent divinity create by merely saying one word: “be”:

He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in truth. In that day when He said: ‘Be!’ and it was. His word is the Truth [...] (Qur’an, 6:73).

It is noteworthy that in presenting God as all-powerful Abrahamic scriptures specifically refer to speech as the means of creating. The succinct formulation “‘be!’ and it was” (*kun fa yakun*) appears eight different times in the Qur’an to refer to God’s unique mode of making. A vital characteristic of this supreme power, as stated in the above verse, is that “His word is the Truth”. The creative capacity of God’s utterance is characterized by its absolute verity.

Religious thought’s anthropomorphic attribution of speech to celestial beings also extends to the exhalation of breath in the act of speaking. “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth” (Psalms, 33:6). The first human (and by extension all of humanity) was also given life by God’s breath. Genesis’s symbolic account says, “the Lord formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (2:7) and the Qur’an says that Adam was given life when God “breathed into him of My Spirit” (15:29). The terms *nafesh* and *ruah* in the Hebrew Bible and *nafs* and *ruh* in the Qur’an (as well as *pneuma* in Greek) relate variously to soul / spirit as well as to breath (Baert, 2011; Dastagir, 2018). There are many references in mythic narratives around the world about (usually male) deities creating and giving life with their breath, and some even fertilizing women by blowing air at them (Jones, 1974).

A heterosexual link is made between the mouth and procreation. The “very numerous ethnological and mythological instances which reveal the close psychological connection between tongue and penis and between speech and sexual power” (Flugel, 1925) appear to point to the mind’s deep-seated notions about such parallels. Saliva is transformed into semen in this symbolic framework. The “idea of spitting, in particular, is one of the commonest symbolisms in folk-lore for the male act (hence, for instance, the expression ‘the very spit of his father’)” (Jones, 1974: 273). This seems consonant with the dual definitions of the verb ‘ejaculate’: to eject semen and to utter vehemently. Meanings of other English words such as conversation and intercourse also straddle notions of communication and sex. Similar affiliations in terminology with respect to thought would include conception and to know someone. Whereas certain aspects of quotidian language in various cultures are allusions to eroticism, as Freud discussed, some religious narratives and symbols referencing sex point to spiritual interactions between humans and divinity (Sikes, 2019). This metaphoric /

symbolic network of meanings becomes pertinent in the discussion below about the emission of the Word from Gabriel's mouth and the Virgin's reception and conception through the ear.

When Heaven Speaks to Earth

Religious and mythic lore narrate what are viewed as the wondrous occasions of theophany when deity is manifested in a form that is apprehendable by humans. These are great events that are often meant to provide learnings about believers' duties. The privileged individuals whom scriptures describe as having received such communications are usually spiritually elevated persons such as prophets. However, it is extremely rare in the Abrahamic tradition that God speaks directly with persons. The Hebrew Bible mentions only two people to whom it happened: Adam (Genesis, 2:16) and Moses (Musa) (Exodus, 20:1-26). This act's distinctness appears to be specifically referenced in Exodus and in the Qur'an; the latter states, "Allah spoke *directly* unto Moses" [emphasis inserted] (4:164). However, the theophany granted to Moses is only aural, not ocular. God tells him, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exodus, 33:20).

Alternatively, God communicates through inspiration: "We inspire thee [Muhammad] as We inspired Noah (Nuh) and the prophets after him, as we inspired Abraham (Ibrahim) and Ishmael (Ismail) and Isaac (Ishaq) and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job (Ayyub) and Jonah (Yunus) and Aaron (Harun) and Solomon (Sulayman), and we imparted unto David (Dawood) the psalms" (Qur'an, 4:163). According to the New Testament, the Holy Spirit prophesied "through the mouth of David" (Acts, 1:16) and it spoke the truth through Isaiah (Acts, 1:25-27). The Qur'an mentions unnamed angels' communications to Zechariah (3:39-41) and Mary (3:42). Gabriel is related as carrying God's word to Daniel (Danyal) (Daniel, 8:16-26), Joseph (Matthew, 1:20-22), Zechariah (Luke, 1:11-19), and Mary (Luke, 1:26-38; Qur'an, 3:42-48). Muslims believe their holy book to comprise the verbatim revelations that the archangel delivered from God to Muhammad over a period of 22 years. It is noteworthy that the Qur'an uses the same word, *wahy*, for God's commands to angels (8:12) as for Gabriel's speech to Muhammad (53:4), indicating two similar series of communications.

Physical senses are not engaged as human and angel meet in the creative imagination's in-between 'imaginal world' (*mundus imaginalis / alam al-mithal*): "a world as ontologically real as the world of the senses and the world of the intellect, a world that requires a faculty of perception belonging to it, a faculty that is a cognitive function, a *noetic* value, as fully real as the faculties of sensory perception or intellectual intuition" (italics in the original; Corbin, 1995: 9). In this view, the imaginal world is where the apprehension of true symbols occurs; it has a reality and (non-physical) tangibility that underpins true communication, of which fallible human to human interchange is only a shadow.

Islamic tradition holds that Muhammad first received revelation from Gabriel during a solitary retreat as he was immersed in meditation (Lings, 1983). The opening word was "*iqra*" (Qur'an, 96:1), which has the dual meaning of recite and read (comparable to the Latin *recito*). The latter was startled and asked the angel for clarification. In eventually accepting the instruction, the prophet initiated the reception of revelation that lasted until his death (Lings, 1983). He verbalized the spiritual messages that he received. The imperative verb "*iqra*" has the same root as the noun "Qur'an" that translates as "Recitation". Its 114 chapters are held as the linguistic manifestation of divine revelation to Muhammad.

Abrahamic tradition sees God's Word (*Logos / Kalima*) as a metonym for language (Frye, 1990), a faculty that, in nature, is unique to humans. The Islamic revelation appears to indicate that God was the source of speech when "He taught Adam all the names" (Qur'an 2:31). Divine discourse was expressed in the Qur'an in the seventh century's Arabic speech. The revelation's linguistic signifiers are viewed as true symbols in being the Word of God that bears inner truth. Muhammad and his companions memorized and wrote down the series of revelations, which were compiled as a book following the prophet's demise. Since "the great theophany of Islam is the Quran" (Schuon, 1976: 43), its phraseology is sacred and immutable for Muslims. They set great store in its precise articulation. Although the Qur'an has been rendered into numerous other languages, the original is considered to be untranslatable as no translation, no matter how rigorous, would replicate the specific 'text' received through divine inspiration (Pickthall, 1977)—the link with its divine source would be broken and the truth of the revelation's inner meanings would be lost.

Muslim theologians have compared Muhammad's recitation of the Qur'an to Mary's delivery of Jesus.

The Word of God in Islam is the Quran: in Christianity it is Christ. The vehicle of the Divine Message in Christianity is the Virgin Mary; in Islam it is the soul of the Prophet (Nasr, 1966: 43).

Similar to the New Testament, the Qur'an calls Jesus "a Word [*Kalima*] from Allah" (3:39; also see 3:45 and 4:171). The stories of Mary and Muhammad in Christian and Muslim sources have structural and sequential similarities. Both persons engaged in intensive spiritual purification before being asked to receive the Word, both were surprised by the appearance of Gabriel and showed initial reluctance in receiving his offering, and both eventually accepted the respectively difficult mission as devotion to God. Mary and Muhammad mediated the Word in their distinct ways by communing in a discerning manner with the archangel. Discernment is viewed Christian and Islamic thought as a way to align with the truth as represented by Jesus (Kunz, 2011) and the Qur'an (Schuon, 1976); another name of the Qur'an is *Al-Furqan*, translated as the Discernment.

Conception through the Ear

A primary belief of Christianity is that the virginal Mary gave birth to Jesus Son of God. Virgin birth is not completely unusual in humanity's mythological narratives (Campbell, 1972; Jones, 1974). However, the story of Mary has particular significance because the world's two largest religious communities, Christians and Muslims, believe it to hold truth. The Word that passed from heaven to earth produced the Christ child, a key figure in Christian and Islamic historiography. (Whereas Muslims treat Jesus reverentially as a major prophet, they do not hold to Christian belief in his divinity.) Not only did the Immaculate Conception overcome human incapacity for perfect communication but it also surpassed 'usual' notions of angelic speech. God spoke to Mary through Gabriel and this conversation would have enormous material consequences.

In the story, God sent Gabriel with tidings of the Virgin's coming pregnancy.

“How will this be”, Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin”.

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke, 34-35).

Mary and her family appear prominently in the Islamic revelation, which also narrates the mysterious occurrence. The Qur’anic description of the Annunciation and related events (19:16-21; 21:19; 66:12) resonate with the apocryphal gospel called the *Protoevangelium of James* (Akyol, 2017); both have details that are not present in the New Testament.

Speech acts underlie the Annunciation’s symbolic structure. Gabriel, the messenger of God, brought news of the child to whom Mary would give birth. She was troubled both by the appearance of the stranger, who had “the likeness of a man” (Qur’an, 19:17), and his astonishing announcement. Gabriel persuaded her that she had “found favour with God” (Luke, 1:30) and she consented with discernment to receiving the Word (John, 1:14; Qur’an, 3:38). Unlike the endemic problem of misunderstanding in human dialogue, this angel-human exchange—even though it starts with fear on the part of Mary—led to perfect comprehension with majestic effect. Three communicative acts comprise this narrative: God’s command to Gabriel, the conversation between Gabriel and Mary, and Mary’s reception of the Word. The Annunciation was an invitation for Mary’s participation in the creative imagination / active intelligence (Corbin, 1969), upon which she became the human medium for “the Word made flesh” (John, 1:14). Unlike other worldly mediations, the *Logos / Kalima* did not undergo degradation in this perfect communication between heaven and earth.

Christian and Muslim theologians have discussed the Virgin Birth for centuries. How did the Holy Spirit enter Mary’s body? Was virginal conception possible? Vast Christological and Mariological literatures grapple with these questions. However, a thesis that is almost unknown in the present but was prevalent in Antiquity and the Middle Ages is the *conceptio per aurem* (conception through the ear). It states that divine essence entered Mary through the right ear. This is not the only instance in which religious narrative has offered such a story; for example, “the legend of Chigemouni, the Mongolian Saviour, [...] chose the most perfect virgin on earth, Mahaenna or

Maya, and impregnated her by penetrating into her right ear during sleep” (Jones, 1974: 272-273). However, medieval Christian and Muslim commentators have posited that Mary’s *conceptio per aurem* was not physical but spiritual (Salvador-Gonzalez, 2016; Khusraw; 1949).

In Luke, this act is described as “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (1:35). The root of the Latin term *spiritus* (spirit) is related to breath. Putting a fine point on this sentence in the Gospel, two verses in different parts of the Qur’an say, “We breathed into her something of Our Spirit [*rub*]” (21:91; 66:12). The relationship between breath, speech and creation has been discussed above. According to the *conceptio per aurem* thesis, God’s Word was breathed / spoken into Mary’s ear and it was upon hearing it that she conceived.

The idea of the Word is vital in the Annunciation. Scripture presents it as an essence of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John, 1:1). Mary finally says in her interaction with Gabriel, “Let it be done to me according to Your Word” (Luke, 1:38). The sixth-century *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* relates:

Just [as] the Virgin pronounced these words with entire humility, the Word of God entered into her through the ear, and the intimate nature of her body, with all her senses, was sanctified and purified as the gold in the crucible. She was converted into a holy temple, immaculate, mansion of the divine Word. And at the same time the Virgin’s pregnancy began (Quoted in Salvador-Gonzalez, 2016: 114).

God’s potent, spiritual Word fecundated in the instant that Mary heard it. Upon entering her, the “Word became flesh [...] full of grace and truth” (John, 1:14). Christ on earth was God’s embodied truth.

The first known reference to the idea of *conceptio per aurem* is that of the fourth-century saint, Ephrem the Syrian (Salvador-Gonzalez, 2016). Christian theologians after the sixth century adopted symbolic subtlety in referring to Mary’s ear not as a ‘reproductive duct’ but as the “acoustic channel by which the Virgin received in immaterial form the message (the Word) of God the Father” (ibid: 111). The prevalence of the *conceptio per*

aurem thesis was demonstrated liturgically in the twelfth-century hymn *Septem gaudia Mariae* and in a series of European paintings in the late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Salvador-Gonzalez, 2016; Baert, 2011). However, the sixteenth century Council of Trent banned further mention of the idea and it almost completely disappeared.

The Medium's Purity

The Annunciation's discourse underlines the link between communication and the personal status of the interlocutor. It makes a point about the worthiness of Mary to be the Word's medium. Whereas the New Testament refers to this issue in a cursory manner, its scriptural elaboration seems to appear in the *Protoevangelium of James* and the Qur'an. Both provide a 'pregospel' that narrates Mary's own birth and childhood. Her mother Anna (Hannah) was thankful for conceiving and she dedicated her child to God. The pregospel's emphasis is on Mary's unique purity. Anna, according to the *Protoevangelium*, "made a sanctuary in her bed-chamber, and allowed nothing common or unclean to pass through her [Mary]" (Akyol, 2017: 109). She also beseeched God to protect her child from Satan's influence (Qur'an, 2:36).

Then, at the age of three, Mary is dedicated by her parents to "the Temple of the Lord", to live and worship there as a kind of nun, and Zechariah [Zakariya, who later fathered Yahya i.e. John the Baptist] becomes her caretaker. But Mary has heavenly caretakers, too, who provide her with miraculous nourishment. The *Protoevangelium* notes [...]: "Mary was in the temple of the Lord as if she were a dove that dwelt there, and she received food from the hand of an angel" (Akyol, 2017: 109).

These sources suggest that the Virgin had come under heavenly protection and care long before the Annunciation. The goal of the particular mode of her upbringing was to foster spiritual purity. According to the Qur'an, God made her grow in goodness (3:37) and she is called "truthful" (*siddiqah*) (5:75). Angels said to her: "Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above (all) the women of creation" (3:42). All this suggested that she had been carefully prepared to be the perfect medium for the sacred Word. Only the completely immaculate person could have this unique status. The dominant interpretations of Mary's virginity have been about its physical nature; however, what emerges is an emphasis on her spiritual

chasteness. Discourses about the Virgin, in this context, are read within the above-discussed symbolic framework in which the sexual is a metaphor for the spiritual.

Chastity is linked directly to communicative (specifically, aural) purity in some Marian narratives. The eleventh century Ismaili Muslim philosopher Nasir-i Khusraw (1949) interpreted Mary's virginity in terms of what she permitted herself to hear. Ismailis are a branch of Shia Islam that gives particular emphasis to esoteric hermeneutics (*tawil*) (Corbin, 1969; Karim, 2015). Whereas Muslims generally agree that Qur'anic verses have surface, exoteric (*zahir*) and inner, esoteric (*batin*) meanings, the Shia and Sufis tend to hold the latter to be of greater significance. Anagogic interpretations of scripture are also conducted in other religious traditions, for example by Jewish Kabbalists and Christian Gnostics. Even Augustine, a Church Father, favoured hermeneutics that acknowledged that in "the interior lies the truth" (Peters, 1999: 71).

Writing within the thesis of aural conception, Khusraw offered a *tawil* of what he held to be the Annunciation's inner meaning:

This is as God says (xxi, 91) in the story of Mary, peace be upon her! "The daughter of 'Imran who guarded her sexual organs, and We breathed into her of Our Spirit". This means that Maryam did not turn her ears to the devils (*Iblisan*) with their speeches. This is because the sexual organ is like the ear, [...] "She guarded her sexual organ" means that she did not turn her ear to those who only teach the *zahir*, formal side of the religion (*zahir-sukhaniyan*), disregarding the esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*) (1949: 29).

Mary was virginal, in Khusraw's reading, in the sense that her listening privileged the inner purity of truth. Sexual chastity is hermeneutically interpreted as a metaphor for spiritual chastity. Mary's disciplined listening was not compromised by the din of exoteric distractions. For Sufis, she was 'the woman unspoiled by worldly concern' (Schimmel, 1975: 35): chaste upbringing and discerned devotion to truthfulness had made her "the pure receptacle of the divine spirit" (*ibid*).

Another communicative nuance appears in examining more closely the portrayal of Mary's protection against improper speech. She is described in the Qur'an as being in a solitary spiritual retreat just prior to the Annunciation (19:16-17), as if unknowingly

being in final preparation for the destined event. Having secluded herself from human contact and conversation, she was shaken at seeing and hearing a man. Declaring singular attention to God, she stated: “I seek refuge in the Beneficent One from thee” (19:18; also see Luke, 1:29). This moment is depicted in paintings such as the fourteenth century Simone Martini’s “Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus” ([Wikimedia Commons, 2020](#)), which shows Mary turning away as if to protect herself from Gabriel. As is typical in most Christian paintings of her, she is portrayed here with the head draped by a garment that functions like a nun’s habit (and a Muslim hijab) in also covering the ears (Jones, 1974). This seems symbolic of the care that the Virgin took in discerning what penetrated these naturally exposed and open organs (unlike the eyes that can be closed) and in protecting their chastity. The fourth-century St. Zeno of Verona contrasted Mary’s disciplined listening with how “the devil caused the death when violating Eve by sliding down her ear through persuasion” (Salvador-Gonzalez, 2016: 106). The Virgin was devoted only to the greater truth, but the latter (in Jewish and Christian traditions) was careless in allowing herself to listen to information that ended her (and humanity’s) paradisiacal existence. Communication appears here as a weighty matter that can produce a magnificent outcome when treated with diligence; on the other hand, undisciplined use of the senses can cause devastation.

Conclusion

The story of the Immaculate Conception has captivated imaginations for generations. Close intertextual scrutiny of its accounts in ancient materials has the potential of uncovering their profound relevance to contemporary social, political, and philosophical struggles. This article’s hermeneutic analysis shows that the event’s symbolism imparts meanings that extend far beyond the narratives’ overt aspects. At least one universal element that is relevant to contemporary public life emerges, namely, the importance of protecting the verity of communication. In an age when many have turned from ostensibly valuing truth to embracing chaos-producing post-truth (Grossberg, 2018), some of humanity’s cardinal sources offer longstanding wisdom and fresh perspectives for repairing society. Illuminating realizations arise

from myth's dramatic play of absolutes that other epistemic modes and methods do not enable.

The *conceptio per aurem* thesis provides for a close study into the communicative aspects of the iconic story. Mary's supreme aural discipline in safeguarding herself from corrupted discourse made her uniquely worthy to receive the supreme Word. This symbolic account serves to valorize speech and hearing as precious gifts and to highlight their proper function as vehicles for truth. It encourages us to consider two distinct notions in the link between orality, aurality and thought: 1) corrupted speech – undisciplined hearing – conception of flawed ideas and 2) truthful speech – listening with discernment – conception of sound ideas.

However, the endeavour to discipline the senses, which has a long history in human discourses, stands on contested ground. God commanded Adam and Eve not to taste the forbidden fruit. The father of young Gautama (Buddha) sought to prevent him from seeing the world's harsh realities. Religious and secular authorities have legislated the covering of bodies to control the gaze. Censorship ratings regulate children's exposure to media content.

The senses, their management and augmentation, became a crucial proving ground in the making of modernity, and the spiritual sensorium of Christianity was caught up in those perceptual projects, hearing especially. The new sensory disciplines, refinements, and pleasures cultivated during the Enlightenment and its aftermath were steeped in their own forms of sensuality and repression. Practices of listening revealed those conflicts with particular intensity: What were people allowed to hear? What ecstasies permitted, what voices denied, what sounds entertained, what diseases invented, what angels invoked or silenced? (Schmidt, 2000: viii).

Such questions have gained greater relevance in the context of our time's vast, expanding, and cacophonous mediascape that, among other things, has produced intense mistrust about the reliability of information. Long promoted as a basic principle in religion, truth is similarly valued by secular modernity. But the politically driven denial of its very existence risks societal breakdown. It is not an onerous

expectation in contemporary contexts that persons exercise discernment and discipline in speaking, listening, and thinking in order to ensure the effective functioning of social systems.

Peters (1999) favours approaches to communication that are pragmatic and simultaneously responsive to the wisdom of the ages. This brief article has largely dwelt on truth in an absolute sense to explore the revalorization of the concept's essential core as a necessary basis and precursor for engaging practically with the human condition's limits and relativism. Absolute truth remains humanly unattainable, but recognition of its vital importance serves to identify it as an ideal in the direction of which to strive. In a world where corruption and miscommunication are inescapable, the "hermeneutics of affirmation focus [...] on the horizon of aspiration opened up by [...] symbols" (Kearney, 1986: 116). Mortals do not possess the perfect speech of angels, but they should not desist from enriching their communications with the goodness of truth.

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