

*Hearing Things*, by Leigh Eric Schmidt

Reviewed by [Catherine A. Brekus](#) in the [March 14, 2001](#) issue

Whatever happened to the talkative God of the Bible?" asks Barbara Brown Taylor. Or as Lily Tomlin put it, "Why is it that when we talk to God we are said to be praying, and when God talks to us we're said to be schizophrenic"?

In this marvelous tour through America's religious history, Leigh Eric Schmidt, a historian at Princeton University, traces our suspicion of "hearing things" back to the 18th-century Enlightenment. "The senses, their management and augmentation, became a crucial proving ground in the making of modernity," Schmidt explains, "and the spiritual sensorium of Christianity was caught up in these perceptual projects, hearing especially."

Rejecting the popular belief in heavenly voices and angelic communications, natural philosophers (including John Locke and Francis Bacon) tried to control and discipline the ear. In Schmidt's words, "Enlightenment philosophes sought a quieter heaven--no ethereal, revelatory voices; no divine speech apart from the mechanism of nature." By the 19th century, many people equated "hearing things" not with divine inspiration, but with mental illness.

Since scholars have often told the story of modern Western religion as one of profound "hearing loss," parts of Schmidt's book sound familiar. What makes it intriguing is his refusal to echo this narrative of "disenchantment." The 19th century did not mark the triumph of a more rational form of Christianity. On the one hand, large numbers of magicians, ventriloquists and other entertainers attracted large crowds by debunking cherished Christian myths. For example, John Rannie, one of the most popular, demonstrated how the biblical witch of Endor had duped Samuel through a ventriloquist trick.

On the other hand, thousands of evangelical Christians, spiritualists and Swedenborgians continued to affirm that they had literally heard God's voice. Ironically, they sometimes appropriated new, rational technologies in order to prove the existence of the supernatural. For example, the spiritualists invented a "psychophone" that could supposedly transmit spiritual voices.

Schmidt has uncovered a fascinating part of America's religious landscape that few historians have ever seen before. He introduces us to Louisa Ogden, a Swedenborgian who believed in communicating with spirits; Walford Bodie, known as the "Man with Twelve Voices," who accused spiritualist mediums of ventriloquism; and William Frederick Pinchbeck, who built an "acoustic temple" to prove that ancient pagan oracles had been a fraud. We also learn about a stunning variety of acoustic technologies that were designed to discipline the ear, including stethoscopes, speaking trumpets and acoustic tubes. Rarely has the Enlightenment seemed so enthralling, odd or entertaining.

Though there is much to praise in this fascinating, witty book, Schmidt leaves some crucial questions unanswered. First, while he tells the stories of a wide variety of characters, he does not pay enough attention to differences of religious denomination, race, class or gender. According to his narrative, the people who claimed to "hear things" were more influenced by their "Christian spiritual traditions" than by their "social location." The book gives small clues that "hearing voices" may have become associated with people who were marginalized in 19th-century culture, especially women, African Americans, Native Americans, Mormons and Catholics.

Even though Schmidt promises not to indulge "in that favorite postmodern sport of Enlightenment trashing," his sympathies are clear. Despite his best efforts to present a balanced portrait of the "snarled fates of the Enlightenment and Christianity," he clearly laments the modern distrust of popular devotion and mysticism. While he describes 19th-century evangelicals as devout believers who longed to hear the voice of God, he portrays natural philosophers and "rational entertainers" in far less positive terms.

Ironically, he turns the Enlightenment rhetoric of suspicion against the most ardent supporters of the Enlightenment. Unlike earlier historians, who saw these men as valiant warriors in the search for truth, Schmidt implies that they were motivated by their desire for discipline, control and power. By insisting that people who "heard voices" were deluded or insane, they tried to replace the popular faith in divine voices with the cold "truth" of God's absence. In his conclusion, Schmidt suggests that the Enlightenment fascination with "auditory hallucinations" and "unreliable words" is responsible for the "midnight of absence" that "haunts much of religious studies and the humanities generally."

While both Christians and scholars of religion may sympathize with Schmidt's ambivalence, he leaves his readers with a profound problem. As he admits, he owes

his vocation to the philosophers who defended the freedom to "study religion on historical and cultural terms." Since he regrets their skepticism, it is not clear how much of their thought we should continue to honor as our own. Is it possible to reconcile a belief in divine revelation with Enlightenment rationality? And if not, what does that mean for both churches and universities? While it might not be fair to expect an historian to answer such a profoundly theological question, it looms over many pages of his book.