

A  
NEUROLOGICAL/THEOLOGICAL  
APPROACH TO MEDITATIVE  
READING OF THE CHRISTIAN  
SCRIPTURES

ROBERT W H WALKER

A thesis submitted to

The University of Gloucestershire

in accordance with the requirements of the degree

of

Master of Arts by Research

in the Faculty of Arts and Technology

August 2017

## ABSTRACT

Lectio divina is effective as a transformative practice because it is an encounter between a reader, properly regarded as embodied, and scripture, which is an instantiation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The mode of perception is that of the spiritual senses.

Studies of lectio divina generally focus on practical advice on how to do it, and recommending its benefits. What has received relatively little attention is how it functions as a transformative practice.

Recent advances in neuroscience give an increasingly detailed picture of brain activity in practitioners of spiritual disciplines, including lectio divina. This highlights that lectio divina, while being an activity that seeks to engage with the divine, should at the same time also properly be seen as an embodied practice.

The notion of scripture as an instantiation of the incarnation of Christ is found in the works of Augustine, and has been taken up by Hans Urs von Balthasar in his theological aesthetics. Balthasar also works with the doctrine of the spiritual senses, by which humankind is divinely enabled to perceive the divine “shining through” the material, in this case, the words of scripture. The spiritual senses are

therefore key to communication between the human reader and Christ.

This thesis combines neuroscience and theology to argue that lectio divina has transformative capacity because it is an encounter between an embodied reader and Christ, embodied in the scriptures. This has implications for a fuller understanding of lectio divina as a devotional practice, and as an essential precursor to wider theological thought.

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed Robert WH Walker

Date August 2017

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Slow, meditative reading of scripture is a well-known, long-established practice within many traditions of Christianity. The Latin term *lectio divina* (“divine” or “godly” reading) came to be used of this practice, and will be used throughout this study. St. Benedict, often regarded as the founder of Western monasticism, made *lectio divina* a key part of the monk’s daily practice. At times *lectio divina* has been seen as a discipline that can more easily be practised by those in the cloister, but recent interest in appropriating old spiritual disciplines into modern life has seized upon *lectio divina* as a highly valuable activity for all Christians, not only the professionally religious. Protestant writers sometimes avoid the use of the term *lectio divina*, but still describe and encourage the practice as essential to growth as a Christian disciple, while Catholic writers use the term freely. One writer describes the practice in this way: “*Lectio divina* is ... letting our Divine Friend speak to us through his inspired and inspiring Word. And ... it includes our response to that Word, to his communication to us through that Word. *Lectio* is meeting with a friend, a very special Friend who is God; listening to Him, really listening; and responding, in intimate prayer and in the way that we take that Word with us and let it shape our lives.”<sup>1</sup> Another Catholic writer describes *lectio divina*: “This involves taking a sacred text, usually but not exclusively the Bible, and reading it with the conviction that God is addressing you through this text. Just as prayer involves speaking to God as ‘you’, so *lectio divina* involves God speaking to the reader as ‘you’.”<sup>2</sup> A Protestant missionary

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2006), 61.

society offers the following definition on its website, where it has a section devoted to the practice: “Lectio Divina invites you to savour and mull over God's words quietly, slowly and intently. It gives you the space to respond to what you feel God is saying and helps you build a vital bridge between your encounters with God and everyday life with its joys, humdrum and challenges”.<sup>3</sup>

Some common themes emerge from these definitions: because the reader is expecting to hear from God through what is read, there is a dynamic quality to the reading, and there is also intimacy - the Word addresses the reader personally. There is also a response from the reader: rather than a word being read and “registered”, the word that is read becomes a word that is “heard”, that requires a reply. Responding actively to words heard leads to a changed life.

To further sharpen an understanding of lectio divina, it bears stating what it is not: it is not primarily close analysis of scripture, using such approaches as textual criticism, philology and literary criticism, which are often used to enhance understanding of biblical passages. Lectio divina savours a word or phrase, and ruminates upon it until it provides illumination, rather than being concerned to gain intellectual mastery over it: the emphasis is not so much on mastering a text to be able to give a discursive account of it, as allowing the text (and the divine inspirer of the text) to “master” the reader, thereby bringing change in the reader’s life. While lectio divina is not firstly an intellectually discursive mode of reading, many practitioners would argue that it can certainly be blended with

---

<sup>3</sup> No author. No pages. Cited 18 July 2017. Online: <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/lectio-divina/>

insights from biblical scholarship, to give an enriched understanding of a passage being read.

From what has been said so far, certain assumptions are made by those who practice *lectio divina*, which need to be made clear at the outset. First, the nature of scripture: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness ...” (2 Tim 3:16, NIV). “God-breathed” translates θεόπνευστος, which the ESV translates as “breathed out by God”. The words of scripture are divinely inspired; mention of the breath is a reminder of God speaking, at Creation, and thereafter. The written words of scripture have the nature of utterance spoken from God’s mouth. Secondly, the resurrection of Christ and his presence in the world and in his people by the Holy Spirit is assumed; there is therefore a qualitative difference between scripture and other writings, however ancient or venerated. Scripture bears witness to Jesus Christ, who is alive, though presently invisible, and active. Since the Cross, the God of Creation, who in an earlier dispensation confined his presence to a certain location, has been omnipresent. Scripture has an ability to transcend its original limitations of time, place and culture, and even of language; any believer should therefore expect to be addressed by God, when reading scripture. Finally, through scripture God speaks personally to everyone, from the newest believer, who might lack any familiarity with the Bible, to the most learned biblical scholar: the requirement for hearing is not intellect but an open heart.

The goal of *lectio divina* is to bring about transformation in the life of the reader. It therefore falls within the category of the Christian spiritual disciplines. Writers consider the spiritual disciplines from different perspectives, including engagement vis-à-

vis abstinence,<sup>4</sup> and their inward or outward or corporate character,<sup>5</sup> by which reckoning lectio divina is a discipline of engagement, having a character that is largely inward. By repeated, intentional exposure to words of scripture, the reader through lectio divina is “disciplined” by living words which shape life. Discipleship, following a master as an apprentice, and learning through observation, imitation, often failure, then success, under the master’s eye and continuing instruction, is the hallmark of a follower of Christ. Inspired words of scripture have the capacity to bring about growth, progress and increasing Christlikeness in the reader’s life.

Many treatments of the topic of lectio divina deal with the benefits it confers, and give practical advice on how to engage in the discipline, including help with what passages to read, length of time to spend reading, and places and times conducive to reading. There are far fewer studies available of how lectio divina works as a practice that promotes transformation. The problem that the present study seeks to address is: What happens during lectio divina? Or, put differently, How are words written in times and circumstances different from our own able to effect transformation in a contemporary reader?

Two possible ways of determining and evaluating events occurring during lectio divina are provided by widely differing disciplines: neuroscientists using imaging technologies can detect activities in the brains of people practising lectio divina. Studies of

---

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 158.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980).



this kind have led to a theory that experiences of “the holy” encountered in this kind of reading lie along a continuum beginning with aesthetic experiences. Neurological studies point overwhelmingly to the embodied nature of such practices as *lectio divina*.

Regarding the embodied nature of *lectio divina*, there are insights to be gained from theology, both regarding the nature of humankind, and that of scripture. Theological anthropology focuses on what it is to be human: the theology of *imago Dei*, humankind made in God’s image, has a bearing on how a reader of Scripture should be regarded. Christian attitudes to the body range from distrust, hostility and suspicion (especially of the female body) to the more positive.<sup>6</sup> Despite much hostility to the body in Christian thinking and practice, the very fact of the incarnation demonstrates that God does not despise human flesh. There is ample evidence of a high view of the body from the time of the earliest Church Fathers: for Tertullian (c. 160 – c. post 220), *caro salutis est cardo*, “the flesh is the pivot of salvation”; according to Origen (c. 185 – c. 254) “the whole human person would not have been saved unless the Lord had taken upon him the whole human person”.<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that a feminist position would question whether scriptural interpretation and theological anthropology can properly be understood to apply equally to male and female practitioners of *lectio divina*. It has been argued that a patriarchal ideology underlies the influential understanding of the interaction between the

---

<sup>6</sup> For more on attitudes to the female body, see below, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*, 8; Origen, *Dialogue with Heraclides*, quoted in Kallistos Ware, “‘My helper and my enemy’: the body in Greek Christianity”. Pages 90-110 in *Religion and the Body*. Edited by Sarah Coakley. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 93.

numinous and the subject posited by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*<sup>8</sup> and other works.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding the nature of scripture itself, Augustine (354-430) regards scripture as an instantiation of the incarnation of Christ, and treats scripture and Christ in somewhat similar ways. This idea has been revived as fruitful by modern theologians, including the Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar also uses the “spiritual senses”<sup>10</sup> to explain how embodied human beings can communicate with a living and active but non-corporeal God. Finally, the Protestant Karl Barth’s meditations on the nature of the word of God have implications for how *lectio divina* is viewed.

This thesis combines approaches from both neuroscience and theology, to consider *lectio divina* as essentially an embodied practice. Broadly speaking, neuroscientists observing brain activities in their subjects have been less interested in the subjective reports of what is experienced than in finding measurable data, such as what part of the brain “fires up” during certain stages. At the same time, for those who practise *lectio divina*, physiological changes occurring in the brain are likely to be of secondary importance to the ongoing process of personal transformation.

---

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational* (trans. John W Harvey; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923).

<sup>9</sup> See further Melissa Raphael, “Feminism, Constructivism and Numinous Experience,” *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 511-526.

<sup>10</sup> The term “spiritual senses” as used here, and frequently in Chapter Four, refers to human capacities to sense spiritual realities. It must also be borne in mind that the spiritual reading of *Scripture* involves three kinds of second-order interpretation, according to which words signify things which signify other things, e.g. wood in the Old Testament usually but not always signifies the cross of Christ, such as the wood carried by Isaac for his sacrifice, or the wood of the ark. These two categories overlap in operation but need to be distinguished carefully.

A relatively recent melding of insights from neuroscience and theology, named “neurotheology”, has sought to see these as two facets of a single activity, inclusion of both of which leads to a fuller picture: what it leads to in the case of the neuroscience is the realisation that spiritual practice of lectio divina is a fully embodied one, despite subjective experiences that may suggest things happening outside of the body. For the person practising lectio divina, the focus of attention is on listening and responding to words spoken by God, which bring transformation; the physical correlates in the brain are likely to be of less immediate interest, but these nevertheless underline that lectio divina is an embodied practice.

Chapter Two begins with a short personal account of an example of lectio divina, with some reflections, and goes on to survey some of the relevant literature and offers a brief historical overview of the subject. Attention is paid to two medieval treatises which deal with reading scripture, Hugh of St. Victor’s *Didascalicon*, and the frequently referenced *Ladder of Monks* by the Carthusian Guigo II. This Chapter concludes with some comments from modern authors on the use of lectio divina.

Chapter Three, after some preliminary discussion of the mixed methodology used in this thesis, deals with the evidence of neuroscience, starting with the pioneer work done by two neuroscientists, Eugene D’Aquili and Andrew Newberg, into the brain activities of people involved in spiritual practices, including sacred reading. Newberg’s *Neurotheology* is surveyed, then the work of Joel Green, who writes as a Christian theologian fully conversant with the field of neuroscience. Chapter Four deals with theology

relevant to the embodied nature of humankind, to the view of scripture as a form of incarnation, theological aesthetics and the spiritual senses (see footnote 9 on p. 10), as presented in the work of von Balthasar. The Chapter ends with some contrasting and complementary views of the nature of scripture found in the work of Karl Barth.

Chapter Five applies neuroscience and theology, to assert that lectio divina has transformative power because it is an encounter between an embodied reader, and Christ, embodied in scripture, and that this communication takes place through the working of the spiritual senses, made alive through the operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the person reading Scripture.

## CHAPTER TWO: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT AND REFLECTION ON LECTIO DIVINA, AND A CRITICAL SURVEY OF EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

### A Personal Account

Lectio divina is slow, ruminative reading of a holy text, usually scripture, aimed not so much at adding to the store of knowledge about the contents of the Bible, as at transforming the life of the reader. During this process, the reader may experience a heightened sense of God's presence, though this is a bonus, welcomed when it happens, but by no means to be considered essential. Lectio divina has its roots in earlier traditions of reading: whereas modern readers in western-influenced cultures often scan large volumes of text online, in the press, books or other media, earlier ages had restricted access to written material. Scripture might be heard in a liturgical setting, or the fortunate few might have a copy of part of the Bible that could be read alone or in a group.

It is worthwhile to make the effort to imagine the impact of this kind of reading before the advent of easily available printed books. When monasticism began in the early centuries after the founding of the church, Biblical texts were read aloud (reading silently did not become widespread until the tenth century). St. Benedict (c. 480 – c. 550) prescribed texts to be read in his Rule.<sup>11</sup> For men and women living this way of life, a book containing scriptural writings was “a window on the world and God. The book was a vineyard or a garden where one could go to gather wisdom”.<sup>12</sup> The Rule provided for the word of God to be heard during the singing of Psalms in choir, during meal times and also alone. As the monastic reader read, he or she gained not logical arguments, but a sacred narrative that led to

---

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Studzinski, OSB, *Reading to Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

wisdom. This has been called by George Steiner reading in the classical mould and he comments, “Where we read truly, where the experience is to be that of meaning, we do so as if the text ... *incarnates* (the notion is grounded in the sacramental) *a real presence of significant being*.”<sup>13</sup> The history read in the Scriptures became the reader’s history as the sacred narrative encompassed and gave meaning to the reader’s life.<sup>14</sup>

To a later age, accustomed to summoning up copious quantities of text at a touch from a keyboard, the comparative scarcity of the written word in earlier times now appears detrimental; yet it is conceivable that limited access to the written word made it all the more appreciated. The leisurely pace of reading adopted in *lectio divina* enables a greater degree of assimilation and appropriation of a text than in modern Western styles of reading. ‘Good’ reading in the West often equates to the ability to read quickly, and thereby read large quantities of text; in contrast, *lectio divina* goes deep, absorbing a text until it becomes embodied in the reader.

The essence of *lectio divina* is the creation of conditions in which the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, speak directly and personally to the reader. In this section therefore I will step away from the academic convention of objective writing in the third person, to share something of my first attraction to *lectio divina*, and continued practice of it. In this kind of reading, the text of scripture is not an object to be dissected and analysed: rather, the reader is

---

<sup>13</sup> Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 15-16, quoting George Steiner, “Real Presences”, in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1996. Italics are the author’s.

<sup>14</sup> Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 11-22.

often aware of becoming the object of knowledge, while at the same time deepening in the knowledge of a personal God.

Like many Christians, I was encouraged to read the Bible after my conversion. Again, probably like many Christians, I was given little assistance in doing this, because generally being literate is assumed to be a sufficient qualification. Reading a psalm at one sitting was quite an easy task, while reading an entire book of the Bible, say a gospel, was daunting, with many allusions to Old Testament books, which were obscure to someone with no prior knowledge of the Bible. Later, I was encouraged to try reading scripture listening for a word or phrase that “came off the page” to me, and treat that as God speaking to me. This proved useful at times, although this way of reading still carried quite an element of reading for information – what is the word, or thought or impression that I need today, to sustain, guide or challenge me? It also carried some anxiety with it: what if nothing has jumped off the page today? Have I been a poor reader, or has sin marred my ability to listen properly? Very occasionally, not intentionally, but involuntarily, I might allow my mind, which was busily “searching the scriptures”, to come to a place of rest, and “be in the moment”. That felt good, though I had no sanction or encouragement from the tradition of Christianity that I belonged to, to think that silence was likely to be beneficial or even wholesome.

Much later still, I came across a tradition of reading scripture at a far slower pace than I had ever attempted, with space to be silent and receptive while reading: finally, I had received confirmation that what I had slipped into by myself, without specific teaching, was something practised by generations of Christians.

Recently I meditated on the first four verses of Genesis, the opening words of the Bible, a fundamental piece of scripture for understanding the role of God in creation, and humankind's part in it. I must have read these verses, or heard them read, hundreds of times. I have also studied Genesis in an academic setting. This time as I read, I was impressed firstly by a parallelism that I had never noticed before, between "darkness was over the face of the deep", and "the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters". "Deep" and "waters" are two ways of saying the same thing: darkness and the Spirit of God are therefore to be found in the same place. Darkness is not a natural environment in which to feel comfortable, either physically or spiritually, because of fear of the unknown, the risk of stumbling, and not being able to find one's way. Christians are accustomed to the truth that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all". (1 John 1:5) As I let these words implying that God is present in darkness percolate into my consciousness, I appropriated their truth that however dark or uncertain my own life might appear to be at times, God is able to pierce that darkness by speaking into it; indeed, darkness and uncertainty might be better preconditions for hearing a personal word from God than times when hearing God seems natural and effortless. The second point to strike me was the image of hovering, used of the Spirit of God. I was previously aware of this being an image with possibly feminine connotations, suggesting a mother bird watching her young, to nurture and protect them. I was particularly struck this time though by the fact that God's Spirit was depicted as hovering even before speaking. God's creation of everything by his creative word is alluded to throughout scripture, for example in the opening of John's gospel, echoing the first words of Genesis: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1) – "In the beginning God created the heavens and the



earth” (Gen 1:1). My knowledge of the parallel passage in John’s gospel had previously led me to overlook the possible force of the hovering done by the Spirit of God in Genesis. A bird of any size, let alone the Spirit (or wind, or breath, also covered by the Hebrew) of God, creates a down draught beneath it, stirring up what is below. God’s Spirit was hovering even before he spoke words that brought the universe into being; God’s Spirit, it can be presumed, hovers nurturingly and protectively over us, and me personally, before he speaks a word to me. Furthermore, could I cultivate a similar spirit of “hovering” – attentive waiting – before speaking myself?

### Reflections

These are some of the thoughts that came to me as I meditated over just four verses, over about three or four mornings. They came as I sat comfortably, mainly in silence, and ruminated over a comparatively small number of words. Sometimes they even came back to me as I was going about the day’s business. The total experience was a blend of different elements: firstly, attentive reading, trying to take in the words as if for the first time, which can be challenging with a particularly familiar text. Another element was being prepared to let images come into my mind, and trusting that they were in some sense inspired. This does require discernment – it would not be reasonable to expect that every thought or image floating into one’s mind is necessarily going to be by divine inspiration. Personal theology therefore plays a part too: a theology that is open to the idea of God speaking in the immediate present, in whatever way he chooses, here has the advantage over a theology that is adamant that the time for God speaking in such a way passed with the last apostles. Scripture was the controller of the experience: the focus was always on the actual words of Genesis. Knowledge of

other parts of the Bible, here the opening of John's gospel, further enriched my appreciation of the Genesis passage, simultaneously revealing one of my usually unspoken but deeply-held assumptions, that Scripture is fundamentally a unity, and that its parts, though composed by different authors, for different situations, reasons and readers, and written in different language and places, still hang together. Also in play were my memories of sermons or background reading, or seeing television documentaries, about the behaviour of hovering birds. Lastly, my appreciation of the passage was also enhanced by knowing that the Hebrew רוּחַ (*ruah*, breath, wind, spirit) covers several meanings. Therefore, despite my determination to be as open to the text as possible, and not put in anything that was not there, in the act of reading I was not passive, but an active recipient. Another person reading the same passage would doubtless have had a completely different experience, dependent on life experience, knowledge of other texts (both biblical and in commentaries), and so on.

## Conclusion

I expect that if I were to look up these verses in a commentary on Genesis, or other works of biblical scholarship, I might find many of the thoughts that came to me reflected there in different ways. However, previous experience has convinced me that receiving revelation by ruminating on a text of scripture allows a text to go much deeper, and bring about change in the way I relate to God, and to other people. No matter how excellent the commentator or exegete, the words of scripture need to be assimilated personally by the reader: *lectio divina* is tested way of letting that happen.

### General remarks on the reading process

The reader is a unique, embodied being, of extreme complexity, influenced by an infinite number of variables. Age, social background, gender, ethnicity, level of education, familiarity with reading as a process, familiarity with the text being read, are just a few factors worth considering. To take just a few of the above factors, the age of a reader can have an influence on reading: a less experienced reader may be less adept at reading fluently, but might gain over others in terms of being impacted more readily by what is read. Conversely, an older reader will have a much larger stock both of life experience and other reading to draw on and to make comparisons. A reader's societal background has a huge impact on what is taken in from reading, including from scripture.<sup>15</sup>

On gender, it has been argued persuasively that there is "a clear causal connection between the religious ... structure one brings to experience and the nature of one's actual religious experience".<sup>16</sup> Feminism would add to this that patriarchal power structures oppress women in terms of class, race and religion, and that therefore the experience of a woman practising *lectio divina* of any given passage of scripture might be significantly different (and thereby detrimental), compared with that of a male meditating on the same passage.<sup>17</sup> The possibility that the perceived immediacy of relationship in *lectio divina* between reader and text is not necessarily as unmediated as it might at first appear is a salutary challenge provided by this feminist critique.

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). Ekblad, a prison chaplain, gains insights into reading scripture with the marginalized (often of Central American origin), which would usually not be apparent to wealthy, well-educated members of the establishment.

<sup>16</sup> Raphael, "Feminism, Constructivism and Numinous Experience," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 511-526. P. 511, quoting Steven Katz.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.

Ethnicity is often tied up with societal background, but can influence whether a reader perceives himself or herself as on the margin or in the centre of a narrative. There are other more transient factors which can vary in a reader, such as mood, overall health or fatigue: though their influence may be intangible, they need to be considered. Even the most accomplished reader will struggle to get much from reading when feeling depressed, unwell or tired.

Stating the variable factors and influences on a reader in the style of the preceding paragraphs aligns with what has been termed a “contextualist” view of mysticism, the field within which *lectio divina* can be included. Contextualism reacts against William James’ definition of mysticism, which is termed “perennialist” (or “experientialist”), because the experiential content of the mystical experience is deemed to be constant, uninfluenced by outside, transient factors. Taking the effect of external factors into account acknowledges the fact that *lectio divina*, the practice under discussion, is an embodied one. The close relationship between a person’s religious and cultural formation and their personal experience is uncontested among Christian authors on mysticism.<sup>18</sup> (Taken to its extreme, however, contextualism can see mysticism as so completely dependent on social and cultural factors that it has no room for the independent reality of God in its world view.<sup>19</sup>)

The modern availability of written material, particularly in the West, often persuades a view of a reader as a consumer of material, or information; this is reinforced by the massive expansion of the

---

<sup>18</sup> Dom David Foster, *Contemplative Prayer: A New Framework* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

internet, with written material scanned on screen rather than being printed. The modern reader often conceives of the page or the screen as a plate inking the mind, and the mind as (another) screen, onto which the text is projected, and from which it can fade. For earlier readers not accustomed to reading silently, but voicing words aloud, the act of reading was actively felt as an embodied process, involving not only the mind, but also the organs of speech and hearing. In contrast, a modern reader accustomed mostly to reading silently to gain access to information, is far more likely to regard reading as a cerebral affair; reading aloud is done by children or those who are not adept at reading, as performance for entertainment, or perhaps for those who are not able to read for themselves.

#### A survey of existing scholarship on lectio divina

Books on lectio divina tend to focus on advocating and describing the practice, either for those who are already interested in engagement, and wish to deepen their knowledge, or to draw those with no prior knowledge into a life-enhancing discipline.<sup>20</sup> There is somewhat of a dearth of scholarly treatments of the subject at book length, the outstanding exception being a work by a Benedictine monk and professor at the Catholic University of America.<sup>21</sup> This book was discovered at a relatively late stage of the present study, but has been engaged with as much as possible, because while it covers historical movements within lectio divina in great detail, it differs from the approach taken here in that although it acknowledges

---

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005); M. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Studzinski, OSB, *Reading to Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009).

lectio divina as being an embodied practice, it does not make use of the insights of neuroscience to provide a more rounded picture. Neither does it acknowledge as much as it could the embodied nature of lectio divina, or trace the implications of seeing lectio divina as an embodied practice. Shorter treatments are to be found within books about Christian discipleship,<sup>22</sup> and there are also studies of medieval texts on the subject.<sup>23</sup> Christian spirituality covers a very wide spectrum. James Houston<sup>24</sup> and Sandra Schneiders<sup>25</sup> have dedicated articles to biblical spirituality, that will be included in this survey.

Surveys of lectio divina typically consider the genesis of the practice, different reading styles, influential figures, broad historical movements and key texts.

### **The origin of lectio divina**

“A Christian art of reading is rooted in Judaism.”<sup>26</sup> The centrality of the word of God, portrayed throughout the Old Testament, is not only carried through to the New, but becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus, as the opening words of John’s Gospel, echoing the first verse of Genesis, make clear. Creation is depicted in Genesis as a response to the life-bringing words spoken by God himself. God’s

---

<sup>22</sup> E.g. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980); Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> James Houston, “Toward a Biblical Spirituality,” in *The Act of Bible Reading: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Elmer Dyck; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, “Biblical Spirituality: Text and Transformation,” in *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Studzinski, *ibid.*, 22.

words are seen to shape the life and behaviour of his people: Moses read the law from God's mouth to the people, as Joshua and King Josiah were to do later.<sup>27</sup> Numerous passages of scripture attest the importance of paying attention to God's words: a king was to write his own copy of Torah, which he was to read daily, "to fear Yahweh his God by keeping all the words of this Law and observing these laws".<sup>28</sup> The Psalm that opens the entire psalter depicts the benefits of a life spent absorbing the Torah, attended by fruitfulness and stability.

After the destruction of the second Temple in AD 70, Torah assumed even greater importance in the synagogue, which became the focus of worship; this is depicted in the New Testament, when Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah in the local synagogue (Luke 4:16-30).<sup>29</sup> Thus, intense devotion to Torah was contemporaneous with the rise of Christianity, and the latter came to adopt the same assiduous attention to the words of scripture shown by the Jews. This attitude was modelled in scripture itself, such as in Ps 119:97, 103: "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. How sweet are your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

The word meditated upon was also memorized, so that it could be incorporated into the believer's life.<sup>30</sup> Studzinski comments, "Christianity, emerging within a Jewish milieu, shares this devotion to the Word fully enfleshed in Jesus Christ".<sup>31</sup> A further point of similarity between Christianity and its Judaic roots is the dynamic

---

<sup>27</sup> Houston, *ibid.*, 148.

<sup>28</sup> Deut. 17:20.

<sup>29</sup> Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

aspect of the written text that was pored over: it was attended to with a listening ear, as God was expected to speak from the text to the heart, guiding life.<sup>32</sup>

Early Christian disciples continued to read the Hebrew scriptures, but also shared, presumably initially in oral form, stories and recollections about Jesus that eventually were collected and written down, to form the gospels. Such texts came to be read when disciples gathered together, along the lines of readings in synagogues.<sup>33</sup> At some stage, Christians who could read would have been able to read privately, although for many contact with scripture would have been by way of public readings.

From the outset, *lectio divina* was not a male preserve, but was practised by both men and women. Pachomius (c. 290 – 346) guided his sister in founding a monastery for women, where, as in the monastery he had already founded for men, the main rule was centred on the Scriptures.<sup>34</sup> The earliest known Christian woman who was a scholar-reader was Juliana, who lived in the early third century and is mentioned by both Eusebius and Palladius. Juliana associated with the finest biblical scholars of her day and benefited from the friendship of Origen, whom she sheltered during persecution. Macrina (c. 327 – 380), sister of Gregory of Nyssa, was depicted by him in his *Life of Saint Macrina* as being immersed in scripture reading since childhood: reading and meditation were central to her other brother Basil's monastic rules, and it has been suggested that Macrina may have contributed to these. In early

---

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-7.

<sup>34</sup> Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 108, quoting Susanna Elm, "*Virgins of God*": *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 287-93.



fourth century Rome there were groups of noblewomen engaged in reading and studying Scripture; one such group, founded by Marcella, included Paula and her daughter Eustochium. Jerome, after travels in the East during which he acquired a knowledge of Greek, Syriac and Hebrew, lived as an ascetic in the Syrian desert, and assimilated Origen's way of reading Scripture while in Antioch and Constantinople, returning to Rome in 382. Jerome connected with the Roman women who were already deeply committed to Scripture reading and it is evident that he held them in high esteem: twelve of his extant commentaries on scripture are dedicated to women and over a fifth of his extant letters are addressed to women. A letter to Eustochium includes recommendations on prayer and reading, including an exhortation to read as much as possible, and to get up two or three times during the night to go over those parts of scripture already committed to memory. Leaving Rome after the death of his patron Pope Damasus in 384, Jerome travelled to the Holy Land, where he settled in Bethlehem, founding with Paula two monasteries, one each for men and women, where life was centred on the Word of God. "At dawn, at the third, sixth, and ninth hours, at evening, and at midnight they recited the Psalter each in turn. No sister was allowed to be ignorant of the psalms, but all had every day to learn a certain portion of the holy Scriptures."<sup>35</sup> While Jerome could be as misogynistic as his male contemporaries, he encouraged women's involvement with the Scriptures and clearly regarded himself as benefiting from women's questions about and insight into scriptural texts. In a preface to his commentary on Isaiah, Jerome remarks, "In the service of Christ the difference of sexes does not matter, but the difference of minds does."<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Jerome, Letter 108.20, *Lettres* 5, ed. Labourt, 185.

<sup>36</sup> *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera: Opera Exegetica* 2A, CCSL 73A:466. For this paragraph, use has been made of Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 61-74, "Women Scholar-Readers".

As an instance of the continuation of importance given to scripture reading among religious women, one can cite the Carmelite Order, founded at the start of the thirteenth century, following a rule given by St. Albert of Jerusalem. After being driven out of the Holy Land, the Order came to Europe, where from 1452 women formed proper monasteries and became official members of the Order. St. Teresa of Avila joined the Order in 1535. Throughout its eight hundred years, Carmelite spirituality has placed a very strong emphasis on meditating on Scripture. St. Albert's Rule stipulates that Carmelites are to ponder the law of the Lord day and night, the 'law' being the Word of God both in the Scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Today, both men and women wishing to pursue this ancient discipline need to make it a priority in lives with many competing demands. The challenge may be all the greater for women, who are often expected to spend a higher proportion of their time than men in domestic duties.

### The role of Origen: Scripture as incarnation

Studies of *lectio divina* agree in according great importance to Origen in the development of the practice. Origen (185-234) is the first author to give a detailed Christian approach to the reading of sacred texts.<sup>38</sup> He understood scripture as sacrament: the scriptures "were the locus for an encounter between God and humans. Indeed, he believed the Word, the Logos, was incarnate in the scriptures and

---

<sup>37</sup> No author, "Scripture and Lectio Divina," n.p. [cited 11 February 2019]. Online: <http://www.carmelite.org/carmelite-spirituality/scripture-lectio-divina>.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

could there touch readers and hearers”.<sup>39</sup> Origen declared that Jesus’ flesh and blood were the scriptures, “eating which we have Christ; the words becoming his bones, the flesh becoming the meaning from the texts, following which meaning, as it were, we see in a mirror dimly the things which are to come”.<sup>40</sup> Seeing scripture as a form of incarnation is a feature of several of the Church Fathers; Studzinski comments, “a real presence of the Logos is found in the Scriptures just as in the Eucharist and in the church”.<sup>41</sup> The same view of scripture has been recently revived, and will be commented on in due course.

For the modern reader accustomed to thinking of the reading process as mainly a utilitarian process of gathering information, the idea of a personal encounter while reading is novel or shocking. This might seem a very lofty, “spiritualized” conception of reading, bearing little resemblance to “normal” reading. The history of reading in antiquity tells a different story: a brief excursus away from Origen at this point will make this clearer.

*A secular parallel for a view of reading as an embodied encounter*

In commenting on the composition of John’s Gospel, Houston makes some highly illuminating remarks on the reasons for writing and reading in antiquity. “When John wrote, the only reason for reading was to acquire exposure to the classics, because such exposure produced exemplary human beings.”<sup>42</sup> Such exemplary human beings had had their personalities shaped by ethical and aesthetic

---

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Origen, *Treatise on the Passover and Dialogue with Heraclides*, trans. Robert J. Daly, ACW 54 (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Studzinski, *ibid.*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> Houston, “Toward a Biblical Spirituality”, 153.

disciplines. “The purpose of books was to produce persons; any other purpose was vaguely ridiculous.”<sup>43</sup> Such an attitude to reading formed part of what has been called “the Civilisation of the Paideia”. According to Peter Brown,<sup>44</sup> the exemplar is characteristic of late antiquity, and was to be found in persons, rather than general entities. In antiquity, paideia was personal – one went to follow a master to be formed and educated, rather than to learn in an institution. Classics were made to make people into “classics”. In his study of Greek paideia, Jaeger commented, “literature is paideia in so far as it contains the highest norms of human life, which have taken on their lasting and most impressive form”.<sup>45</sup> Houston goes on to make the point that John’s gospel should be read in the classical context, in which he presents positive exemplars (with Jesus as the Exemplar par excellence) to be imitated, and negative exemplars, whose examples were to be avoided.<sup>46</sup>

Seeing the production of a written text as a way of granting access to a master or teacher who shapes life “demystifies” the idea of reading as personal encounter, which happens only in a spiritual, ethereal, or “other-worldly” way. A written text in antiquity gave access to the mind of a teacher who might be absent in space or time, or both; how much more so then did it do the same for Christians, for whom the resurrected Christ was a living reality. Having made his point about the classical attitude to reading, Houston concludes: “being transformed by the personal presence of Christ in all the scriptures is what ‘exemplary reading’ is all about ...

---

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>44</sup> Peter R.L. Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man,” in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 103-52, quoted in Houston, 154.

<sup>45</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge, Belknap Press: 1961), 92.

<sup>46</sup> Houston, “Toward a Biblical Spirituality”, 154.

What was read was expected to be expressed in a radical change of life, demeanour and behaviour".<sup>47</sup>

### Origen on scripture as sacrament

After the preceding excursus, to pursue the idea of literature as mediating presence, a return will now be made to Origen's role as a reader. For Origen, the literal sense of scripture is a sacrament which mediates God's presence: in his "exemplarist" world view, perceptible realities are images of divine mysteries, the scriptures a store of symbols that connect the reader or the hearer to the mysteries.<sup>48</sup> Origen maintained that the aim in reading the scriptures was to reach the deeper meaning or spiritual sense,<sup>49</sup> which emerges when we are in tune with biblical symbolism.<sup>50</sup>

### The role of allegory

There were at least two sources from which Origen drew for his use of allegory for understanding the spiritual meaning of a passage. One was prevalent in Alexandria, where he grew up, as a means of interpreting Homer and other classical literature, as well as being used by Philo, to interpret the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>51</sup> There was also the witness of the writings of the New Testament itself, where Paul uses allegory in Galatians 4 and 1 Corinthians 10, to interpret the Old Testament. Such precedent gives Origen sanction to use allegory as an interpretive tool.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>48</sup> Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 31.

<sup>49</sup> See note 9, above: the spiritual reading of Scripture is being referred to.

<sup>50</sup> Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 31-2.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 33 and MacCulloch, *Silence*, 90.

<sup>52</sup> Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 34.

## Origen's interpretive keys

Studzinski depicts Origen using four principles for scriptural interpretation, which were to prove highly influential, not least upon Augustine, in the history of scripture reading.

First, Christ is an interpretive key: revelation is primarily about the person of Christ; all the scriptures speak of Christ (for which Origen appeals to John 5:39, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have life; and it is they that bear witness of me".)<sup>53</sup>

Second, the unity of the scriptures: Origen says he learned this from a Jewish teacher, who compared scripture to a house with many locked rooms, with a key by each door, belonging to another room. By comparing keys, one could find the one to unlock the room (i.e. text) one wanted to get into.<sup>54</sup>

The third key was the usefulness of the scriptures: they were written for our benefit (Origen drew this from 1 Cor 10:11, "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come".) Origen's erudition as a textual scholar was placed at the service of the pastoral dimension of scripture.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-7.

The final interpretive key was the movement from the sensible to the spiritual, from the letter to the spirit, from the temporal to the eternal. For Origen, if a reader happened to come across a piece of scripture by chance and immediately claimed to understand it fully, he or she must be mistaken. Many passages required a spiritual reading, and have in fact been placed in scripture to draw the reader to inquire more closely into their meaning, which requires a humility and dependence on the Spirit.<sup>56</sup>

The above principles, which come so automatically to a seasoned reader of scripture as to be imperceptible, lie behind the whole activity of *lectio divina*.

### **Reading as discipline**

Origen predates by centuries modern advocates of *lectio divina* who urge persistence in the task: he often likens reading scripture to Isaac's digging out of blocked up wells. Jesus was the new Isaac, who dug out the wells of the Law, and his servants are the writers of the gospels, Peter, Paul and other authors of New Testament books. Every person has a "well of living water" within them, the image of God, that needs to be cleaned out, because it has been stopped by the Philistines, as in Isaac's time: these new Philistines are hostile powers.<sup>57</sup> Drawing further on Old Testament references to wells, Origen recommends coming daily to the word of God, just as

---

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-8.

<sup>57</sup> The reference to supernatural hostility towards unbelievers, seen e.g. in 2 Cor 4:4 ("In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God") is not particularly picked up on by modern advocates of *lectio divina*.

Rebecca needed to draw water daily from the well (Gen 24.) As Studzinski points out, "... Origen intends that reading, contact with the deeper meaning of the Scriptures, brings about the transformation of the readers"<sup>58</sup> and this happens through regular, intentional contact with the words of scripture. It is clear from Studzinski's analysis of Origen's approach to scripture that for him scripture plays an active role, confirming the idea that scripture mediates presence. Scripture reading transforms a reader from a sinful state to perfection; in prayerful contact with divinely inspired words, the reader is healed and taught at the same time; the words of scripture mediate the saving activity of the word.<sup>59</sup> All these are activities of a word that has its own dynamic, that incarnates the presence of God himself.

### **The heritage of Origen**

Origen's exhortation and modelling of scripture reading was to prove highly influential. Christian reading of scripture grew out of the Jewish tradition of Torah reading, with Origen providing a method of appropriating the sacred texts into a Christian context. He showed how the words of scripture had the power both to challenge and to change the reader, and with his advocacy reading scripture became the mark of the dedicated believer.<sup>60</sup>

Over time however, Origen's use of allegory as an interpretive tool was to be challenged and rejected, and his whole

---

<sup>58</sup>Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 40.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-8.



approach to the appropriation of scripture as a transformative instrument was set aside.

### **The desert tradition of reading**

The movement that began in the deserts of Egypt and later spread to other remote parts of the Middle East is often referred to as the Desert Fathers, although it also included women. This movement had a distinctive attitude to scripture, which was formative in the history of *lectio divina*. The Desert Fathers had a culture of reading that combined the oral with a deep respect for the written scriptures.<sup>61</sup> They had developed a practice of meditation, which involved repeating words of scripture until they were committed to memory. Anthony, Pachomius and Amoun are credited with founding the main types of monasticism in Egypt, all of which were influenced by Origen's teaching.<sup>62</sup> One of the distinctive features of desert monasticism was what has been called the "desert hermeneutic"<sup>63</sup> – the quest to understand the scriptures through living them out, experientially. A typical instance is recorded by Athanasius, in his *Life of Anthony*: hearing the words "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven" (Matt. 19:21), Anthony instantly took the words as addressed directly to himself, and went and acted accordingly. The stories recorded of the Desert Fathers and Mothers illustrate the profound respect that they had for the written words of scripture: very often scripture and comment upon it are so interwoven in the sayings of this group that it is "almost impossible

---

<sup>61</sup> Houston, "Toward a Biblical Spirituality", 156.

<sup>62</sup> Columba Stewart, OSB, "Monasticism" in *The Early Christian World* (ed. Philip F. Esler; London: Routledge, 2017), 307-26.

<sup>63</sup> An expression used by Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

to say when the quotation ends and the comments begin”.<sup>64</sup> This indicates a “thorough assimilation into the heart rather than a visual and mental use of the text”.<sup>65</sup>

The desert attitude to the Word of God differs crucially from that found predominantly in cultures where the written word is widespread. Words were regarded as revelatory events, demanding a response from the hearer: God was perceived as always speaking to humankind. Many stories of the Desert fathers relate an elder (*abba* or *amma*) being asked by a disciple for a “word”, which might be a scripture or an insight given to the elder for the occasion, to bring guidance or encouragement.

In other words, the Desert Fathers embodied the scriptural text, which was read with devotion, acted upon, memorized and assimilated into the reader’s life. The Desert tradition preserves a stage between a predominantly oral culture and one in which the written words of scripture were of the utmost importance. As monasticism in the desert spread, it has been suggested, “the Word [i.e. the written words of scripture] was seized on as a more accessible alternative to the charismatic authority of the holy man”.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Benedicta Ward, “Spiritual Direction in the Desert Fathers”, *The Way* 24 (1984), 64-5.

<sup>65</sup> Houston, “Biblical Spirituality”, 156.

<sup>66</sup> Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 118, quoted in Houston, “Biblical Spirituality”, 159.

## Augustine

The ideas of Augustine (354-430) were also highly influential with regard to scripture reading. As he owed the final step of his conversion, in the famous episode in the garden,<sup>67</sup> to the text of scripture, he was naturally very aware of the power of the written word.<sup>68</sup> He had already experienced a similar power, before his conversion, through reading Cicero's *Hortensius*.<sup>69</sup> Before his conversion, two factors led to Augustine's commitment to reading scripture for spiritual growth: his relationship with Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, and his encounter with Neoplatonic thought. Augustine was particularly influenced by Ambrose's insistence in his sermons that it was necessary to go beyond the material, literal meaning of a passage, to penetrate to the spiritual meaning.<sup>70</sup> He came to see that it was possible to build "a new self", through reading scriptural texts and assimilating their message. Furthermore, Ambrose showed Augustine by example the value of meditating silently on a passage of scripture: a famous scene in the *Confessions* depicts Ambrose reading not aloud (the more common mode of reading in antiquity), but to himself.<sup>71</sup> As he read Neoplatonist texts, Augustine began to see his need for a mediator, Christ, and he came to have a sharpened appreciation of the incarnation, and the historical Christ. This in turn was to shape how he would come to see the relationship between believers and scripture: "Augustine came

---

<sup>67</sup> Augustine, *Conf.*, VIII, 12.

<sup>68</sup> MacCulloch, *Silence*, 89-90.

<sup>69</sup> *Aug. Conf.*, III, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 79-80.

<sup>71</sup> *Aug. Conf.* VI.3.

to see that Christians would begin with a physical self enmeshed in history yet searching for the spiritual and move to find and inscribe the Word in their fleshly existence ... 'anyone's body can in principle become the "text" on which the story of the incarnation is written'.<sup>72</sup> Here is another essential element in the practice of *lectio divina*: not only is scripture itself an instantiation of the incarnation, as already noted, but the reader of scripture is to be regarded as fully incarnated too. This is worth stating, given the modern attitude towards reading, which can easily be regarded as a cerebral affair only, the mind scanning for information that is of interest, ignoring or rejecting everything else. Reading as practised by the Church fathers and later involved the whole body.

MacCulloch agrees that Neoplatonism was very influential in Augustine's development, and comments that given this philosophical background, he was wary of Aristotle's high view of reason or Logos; further, because of Augustine's low view of human possibilities after the Fall, he was also wary of the route in Neoplatonism towards union with God, *theosis*. Humankind's rescue lay in the "fragile and imperfect medium" of language, which gave clues to divine realities beyond.<sup>73</sup> Augustine's view of both scripture (which he at first disdained for the unpolished style in which many parts appeared to be written) and of the body were to grow in parallel, and to be highly influential in his thinking.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 70.

<sup>73</sup> MacCulloch, *Silence*, 90.

<sup>74</sup> Ben Quash, "The De-sublimations of Christian Art", in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/ben-quash-the-de-sublimations-of-christian-art-r1140522>, accessed 11 August 2016.

## Augustine and lectio divina

Even the most casual read through the *Confessions* shows the whole work as Augustine responding to God as encountered in scripture. Augustine demonstrates an ascent to wisdom through the reading of scripture, beginning with the fear of God, and a search for his will. In time, as the scriptures are assimilated, unhealthy attachments to temporal things are revealed and repented of, and this purification leads to an increased love for God, one's neighbours, and one's enemies. The final reward is the wisdom, peace and tranquillity enjoyed by the reader.<sup>75</sup>

Augustine adopted Origen's use of allegory to interpret scripture, and used it throughout his biblical commentaries. Augustine's use of it encouraged monks and nuns to do the same. For Augustine, bible reading was not merely acquiring information on a literal level, but engaging the text on a spiritual level. "For a thousand years, this was how the West read its Bible."<sup>76</sup>

## Medieval developments

*St. Benedict c. 480 – c. 550*

The Rule of St. Benedict prescribes over three hours a day for lectio divina. The best time of day was devoted to the practice, while on Sunday, apart from common regular activities, the whole day was spent in such reading.<sup>77</sup> The epithet "divina" was appropriate, it has been suggested, because the text was Holy Scripture, the word of God; because the manner of reading was prayerful and ruminative;

---

<sup>75</sup> Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 89.

<sup>76</sup> MacCulloch, *Silence*, 91.

<sup>77</sup> *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Chaps. VIII-XVIII deals in detail with passages to be read when monks gather together at the set hours of the day. <http://www.osb.org/rb/text/rbefjo3.html>, accessed 14 August 2017.

because the purpose of such reading was spiritual growth, a transformed life.<sup>78</sup> These characteristics of *lectio divina* were in keeping with the pattern of Benedict's own life: Pope Gregory the Great described Benedict in his biography as "*scienter nescius et sapienter indoctus*", i.e. "knowingly ignorant and wisely unlearned".<sup>79</sup> As Augustine, for all his great erudition, had seen that scripture had a vital part to play in personal transformation, so Benedict insisted that familiarity with the text was not mere intellectual mastery of the contents of scripture, but allowing oneself to be shaped and transformed by it.

### *Monastic reading*

Reading in this period inherited practices from antiquity. Firstly, the spoken aspect: reading, "*lectio*", was done out loud, a practice that has been termed "*acoustical reading*".<sup>80</sup> Put differently, reading was done with the lips, with the ears listening for the words spoken: *lectio* was an activity that required engagement of the whole body and mind.<sup>81</sup> Proof that reading was normally done out loud comes from the Rule of St. Benedict itself, which lays down that monks should read without disturbing others, implying that reading normally would do so. In addition, monks who were ill were allowed not to read, implying that some physical exertion was presupposed.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Houston, "Biblical Spirituality", 159.

<sup>79</sup> Gregory the Great, *The Dialogues*, Book 2: Life of Benedict. <http://www.osb.org/gen/greg/tocalt.html>, accessed 3 May 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 19.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 20.

Secondly, the role of meditation on the word: reading scripture was to be an unpressured experience, carried out with a “receptive and pondering attitude toward the word and life”.<sup>83</sup> Memorisation and meditation were key in handling the word being read. Benedict uses the word *meditatio* for the type of reading being done: this covers a wider range of meaning than the English “meditation”.<sup>84</sup> *Meditatio* denoted thinking and reflection, often with a nuance of affinity with the practical or moral order; thinking of a thing, with intent towards doing it, and prefiguring something in the mind. The word was used of physical exercise, sports, military life, the school world, and moral practices. Behind the word lay the idea that to practise a thing by thinking of it was to fix it in the memory, to learn it.<sup>85</sup> Christian usage took over all the connotations of *meditatio* from its classical usage, but used them mainly of the text of scripture.<sup>86</sup> *Meditatio* is used to translate the Hebrew הָגָה, (*hāgāh*) when it means “fundamentally, to learn the Torah and the words of the Sages, while pronouncing them usually in a low tone, in reciting them to oneself, in murmuring them with the mouth”.<sup>87</sup> The intent was to say the sacred words in order to retain them: “both the audible reading and the exercise of memory and reflection which it precedes are involved. ... to express what one is thinking and to repeat it enables one to imprint it on one’s mind”.<sup>88</sup> Studzinski

---

<sup>83</sup> Studzinski, *ibid.*, 124.

<sup>84</sup> E.g. *Rule of St. Benedict VIII: Hiemis tempore, id est a kalendas novembres usque in Pascha, iuxta considerationem rationis, octava hora noctis surgendum est, ut modice amplius de media nocte pausetur et iam digesti surgant. Quod vero restat post Vigilias a fratribus qui psalterii vel lectionum aliquid indigent, meditationi inserviat.* “In the winter time, that is from the Calends of November until Easter, they shall rise at what is calculated to be the eighth hour of the night, so that they may sleep somewhat longer than half the night and rise with their rest completed. And the time that remains after the Night Office should be spent in study [the traditional translation of *meditatio*] by those who need a better knowledge of the Psalter or the lessons.” <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/benedict.html>, accessed 14 August 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 20.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>87</sup> Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 21.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

similarly notes that in the practice of *lectio divina* set out by Benedict, meditation and repetition are inseparable; it is the repetition that “inscribes the text in the body and the soul”.<sup>89</sup> Leclercq comments that in the Christian and rabbinical traditions, one always meditates on a text; because that text is God’s word, *meditatio* needs to complement *lectio divina*. For the ancients, to read a text is to meditate upon it and learn it by heart, in the fullest sense of the expression: with the mouth, which fixes it; with intelligence that understands its meaning; with the will, which desires to put it into practice.<sup>90</sup>

#### *Further comments on monastic reading*

Writing six centuries after St. Benedict, Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096 – 1141), a Canon Regular of St. Augustine, wrote a treatise on the art of reading, called the *Didascalicon*. The work was written when the Christian art of reading was in transition from being primarily an object of read aloud repetition and meditation, to “an optically organized text for logical thinkers”.<sup>91</sup> The *Didascalicon* is the subject of a close study by Ivan Illich, who provides a translation of the text, and a detailed commentary. His chapter on monastic reading highlights several of the strands already noted in *lectio divina* as advocated by St. Benedict in his rule.

The reading taught by Hugh is a monastic activity.<sup>92</sup> Reading comprises *cogitatio*, conceptual analysis, and *meditatio*, which Illich

---

<sup>89</sup> Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 124.

<sup>90</sup> Leclercq, *ibid.*, 21-2.

<sup>91</sup> Illich, *Vineyard of the Text*, 2.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. On this, Studzinski comments that *lectio divina* was confined to monasteries, for lack of access to scriptures in vernacular languages, outside the cloister: Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 126.



translates, for reasons that can be seen to operate in the paragraphs above, as “incorporation”. Hugh had written: “The beginning of learning lies in reading, but its consummation lies in meditation”. Illich comments that “learning” (*doctrina*) here connotes a personal realization, rather than an apprehension of dogma or policy.<sup>93</sup> “Hugh’s meditation is an intensive reading activity and not some passive quietist plunge into feelings. This activity is described by analogy to body movements ... Reading is experienced by Hugh as a bodily motor activity.” Illich’s next comments on the bodily nature of reading are so vital that they are quoted here at length:

In a tradition of one and a half millennia, the sounding pages are echoed by the resonance of the moving lips and tongue. The reader’s ears pay attention, and strain to catch what the reader’s mouth gives forth. In this manner the sequence of letters translates directly into body movements and patterns nerve impulses. The lines are a sound track picked up by the mouth and voiced by the reader for his own ear. By reading, the page is literally embodied, incorporated.

The modern reader conceives of the page as a plate that inks the mind, and of the mind as a screen onto which the page is projected and from which, at a flip, it can fade. For the monastic reader, whom Hugh addresses, reading is a much less phantasmagoric and much more carnal activity: the reader understands the lines by moving to their beat, remembers them by recapturing their rhythm, and thinks of them in terms of putting them into his mouth and chewing. No wonder that pre-university monasteries are described to

---

<sup>93</sup> Illich, *ibid.*, 52.

us in various sources as the dwelling places of mumblers and munchers.<sup>94</sup>

The image of eating and being nourished by the words of God has abundant scriptural precedent, e.g. Isa 55:1-3; Ezek 2:8-3:3; Rev 10:8-11. St. Bernard says of reading the Song of Songs, “Enjoying their sweetness, I chew them over and over, my internal organs are replenished, my insides are fattened up, and all my bones break out in praise”.<sup>95</sup> Illich sums up: “For an ocular reader, the testimony of the past can be shocking: such a reader cannot share the experience created by the reverberation of oral reading in all the senses”.<sup>96</sup>

Illich finds further evidence of the monastic attitude to reading in the Latin words that Hugh and those in his tradition used. *Pagina*, a page, was also a row of four vines joined together by their trellis: the act of reading was then for Hugh an activity of harvesting fruit, that is the words that were read out. *Legere*, to read, came from a root meaning to bundle together, harvest, collect, while the related word *lignum*, branches and twigs gathered together for firewood, implies that reading for monks was an activity of picking up the letters of the alphabet, and combining them into syllables.<sup>97</sup>

### *Lectio as a way of life*

Illich repeats his point that for the monk, reading engaged the whole body, but adds that reading was not compartmentalized as one

---

<sup>94</sup> Illich, *Vineyard of the Text*, 54.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 57, quoting “Sermo 16”, *Sermones in Cantica Canticozum*, Patrologia Latina, 183, 849C.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-8.

activity, but rather a way of life, which went on whatever else the monk was doing. Outside the hours when the monk was actually reading alone, or hearing scripture when assembled with the other members of the monastery, the monk was repeating to himself words from texts he had memorized by frequent repetition. In this way, he would fulfil St. Benedict's injunction *ora et labora*, pray and toil.<sup>98</sup> Illich attributes the monastic commitment to uninterrupted reading as being of "Jewish, rabbinical origin ... the desire to live with the book is also a part of Jewish mysticism".<sup>99</sup> The process by which the written text of scripture became part of each monk's biography is typically Jewish, rather than Greek: no book of Greek or Roman antiquity played as central a part as did scripture for the Jews. "The book was swallowed and digested through the careful attention paid to the psychomotor nerve impulses which accompany the sentences being learned."<sup>100</sup> Illich compares this with the way in which pupils of Koranic and Jewish scripture still learn today, with rhythmic movements of the upper body, which can recall the movements of the speech organs associated with them. He quotes from the work of Marcel Jousse, a French Jesuit established in Beirut, who spent his life studying the embodiment of Semitic sayings. Jousse coined the word *corporage*, to designate the psychomotor techniques of fixing a spoken sequence of words in the flesh.<sup>101</sup>

### *Hugh's conception of lectio*

Illich draws attention to the spirit in which Hugh says that *lectio divina* ought to be done. Hugh uses the Latin word *vacare*, "a

---

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 59. See above, on the origin of *lectio divina*, for other comments on the topic.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>101</sup> Jousse published very little, though he began to synthesize his thoughts in *L'Anthropologie du geste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

crucially important technical term used for the definition of the Christian monk”.<sup>102</sup> Both the verb and the related noun, *vacatio*, connote freedom, exemption or immunity, in a tradition stretching back to Rufinus, who defined a monk as *solus soli Deo vacans*, “in solitude making himself free for God alone”.<sup>103</sup> *Vacare* is used by Christian authors to denote the freedom which a Christian uses of his or her own volition, to engage in a life that is aligned with God. Augustine had used the term *otium* in a similar sense, when he founded a small community in North Africa, with the purpose of being “deified by leisure (*otium*)”.<sup>104</sup> Illich points out that Hugh, in the same way, urges practitioners of lectio divina to devote themselves to such leisure: “Meditative reading brings the soul to rest.”<sup>105</sup>

Two points could be made here. Modern practitioners of lectio might initially recoil from so close an association with a lifestyle that seems closer to the cloister than the life experienced by most people. However, though those outside the closed orders of the religious may have less time to devote to such reading, the point that Hugh makes, drawing upon his tradition, remains valid – that it is the intentionality of such reading that is crucial. Secondly, Hugh claims, as do many authors on the same subject, that one of the motives and rewards for engaging in lectio divina is its pleasantness: *otium* “... takes the soul away from the noise of earthly business and makes it have, even in this life, a kind of foretaste of the sweetness of eternal quiet”.<sup>106</sup> This aspect of lectio divina is stressed by many authors, ancient and modern, but is implicitly challenged by the

---

<sup>102</sup> Illich, *Vineyard of the Text*, 61.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 63, quoting *Didascalicon*, III, 10.

author of a recent work of systematic theology, where apophatic theology, contemplation on the word of God, and a “naked waiting” before God are held to be vital to the enterprise of engaging in theology.<sup>107</sup> This will be noted in a later chapter.

Illich concludes that for Hugh lectio and *meditatio* were two aspects of the *otium* in which the monk engaged himself: lectio, the more strenuous, was the beginning, *meditatio*, more leisurely and discursive, was the consummation. “For Hugh, there is only one kind of reading that is worthwhile, lectio divina. This places him at the end of one thousand years during which lectio and *otio vacare* had defined each other”. This concluding remark, echoed by MacCulloch on Augustine’s impact on lectio divina (quoted above), underlines the longevity of the practice, and contrasts with the shorter period in which the post-Enlightenment historical-critical method has prevailed.<sup>108</sup>

*Guigo II (died c. 1188 or 1193)*

MacCulloch comments that during the medieval period the Benedictine model of monasticism came to be regarded as over-elaborate: Cistercians reacted with simplicity, and even more so the Carthusians, who set a high value on silence. During the same period, Eastern modes of spirituality were introduced by the translation and commentary on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius by John Scotus Eriugena (c. 815 – c. 877). This was a “synthesis of Pseudo-Dionysius’ negative theology with Augustine’s reflection on the constitution of

---

<sup>107</sup> Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 19.

<sup>108</sup> Houston, “Biblical Spirituality”, 163.

humanity as a mirror of the divine”.<sup>109</sup> Under this influence, the *lectio divina* advocated by Augustine developed into a contemplative monastic tradition of reading scripture which was much closer to *theosis* than Augustine himself would have wanted.<sup>110</sup>

At this point it will be relevant to consider a treatise on spirituality by the Carthusian Guigo II. This work is often referred to in works on *lectio divina*, but seldom analysed in detail.<sup>111</sup> This key text was written not long after Hugh of St. Victor wrote the *Didascalicon*. MacCulloch points out how Guigo drew on the work of his predecessors, as was common in this period: the overall scheme of the treatise is an ascent from reading to meditation to prayer to contemplation – this was borrowed from Hugh. The central theme of a ladder came from a work of the same name, by the eponymous John Climacus (c. 570 – c. 659). Climacus himself had used the work of the traveller and scholar Evagrius, who differentiated between meditation and contemplation.<sup>112</sup>

### The Ladder of Monks (*Scala Claustralium*)

In his first chapter, Guigo writes of the spiritual work that God’s servants should do: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. These are suitable both for those in cloisters and for “God’s lovers”, i.e. those not in religious orders (although, as pointed out above, the lack of availability of the scriptures in vernacular languages would

---

<sup>109</sup> MacCulloch, *Silence*, 96.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>111</sup> E.g. MacCulloch, *Silence*, 100-1; Sandra M. Schneiders, “Biblical Spirituality.” *Interpretation* (2002), 139-140. Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 166-72 (where, in contrast, a full description and analysis is offered).

<sup>112</sup> MacCulloch, *ibid.*, 100.

have restricted scripture reading to those with a knowledge of the biblical languages). Guigo begins:

This is the ladder Jacob saw, in Genesis, that stood on the earth and reached into heaven, on which he saw heavenly angels ascending and descending, with God leaning upon the ladder. From the ascending and descending of the angels is understood that the heavenly angels delight us with much spiritual comforting and carry our prayers up to our Lord in heaven, where he sits on high, and bring back down from him the desire of our hearts, as is proved by Daniel. By God's supporting the ladder is understood that he is always ready to help all who by these four rungs of this ladder will climb wisely, not fearing nor doubting that such a ladder will really help us.<sup>113</sup>

Rather than referring to his predecessors, Guigo takes the starting point of his structure from scripture (Gen 28:10-19). The picture of God supporting the ladder adds a pleasantly domesticated touch, recalling a workman assisting a colleague.<sup>114</sup>

Guigo next defines the rungs of the ladder:

“Reading, Lesson, [*lectio*] is busily looking on Holy Scripture with all one's will and wit.” In contrast with modern expositions of *lectio divina*, which often urge reading slowly, without the need to

---

<sup>113</sup> Guigo II, “The Ladder of Four Rungs”. Cited 14 May 2017. No pages. Online: <http://www.umilta.net/ladder.html>. Chap. 1. All subsequent quotations are taken from this version.

<sup>114</sup> He uses similarly bold language in Chapter 6, where he likens God to a taverner, who whispers to his customers that he has a particularly fine claret for them to try. MacCulloch describes Guigo's language as “a good deal more edgy” than that of Hugh, MacCulloch, *Silence*, 100.

understand everything, Guigo says the intellect needs to be fully engaged.

“Meditation [*meditatio*] is a studious insearching with the mind to know what was before concealed through desiring proper skill.” Guigo further encourages the reader to engage mentally with the text.

“Prayer [*oratio*] is a devout desiring of the heart to get what is good and avoid what is evil”: at this stage, the reader is required to engage morally with the text, and make judgments.

“Contemplation [*contemplatio*] is the lifting up of the heart to God tasting somewhat of the heavenly sweetness and savour”: Guigo emphasizes the pleasantness of the experience, as Hugh of St. Victor had done in his treatise.

Guigo sums this up pithily: “Reading seeks, meditation finds, prayer asks, contemplation feels. ... 'Seek and you shall find: knock and the door will be opened for you'.<sup>115</sup> That means also, seek through reading, and you will find holy meditation in your thinking; and knock through praying, and the doors shall be opened to you to enter through heavenly contemplation to feel what you desire.”

To illustrate the difference between the stages, Guigo uses first an analogy of eating: “Reading puts as it were whole food into your mouth; meditation chews it and breaks it down; prayer finds its

---

<sup>115</sup> Matt 7:7.



savour; contemplation is the sweetness that so delights and strengthens,” then another: “Reading is like the bark, the shell; meditation like the pith, the nut; prayer is in the desiring, asking; and contemplation is in the delight of the great sweetness.”

At the end of this chapter, Guigo says the first rung is for beginners, but that all four are mutually interdependent, so that for example it is profitless to see what one ought to do in meditation, without praying for God’s grace to be able to do it.

The Second Chapter treats of how the rungs are closely joined together: “reading without meditation is idle, meditation without prayer is without effect, but prayer with devotion wins contemplation. To win to the high ladder of contemplation without prayer, would be miraculous.” Believers should not expect God to intervene miraculously in their lives, as he did for St. Paul, but apply themselves to read scripture and pray for God’s mercy. Guigo here shows the high regard he held for scripture’s role in transforming lives.

The Third Chapter speaks in more detail of the first two rungs, reading and meditation. Even the worldly, he says, practise these things, but with no resultant godliness. Followers of the spiritual way Guigo is describing should seek the God-given wisdom of 1 Cor 2:7-9: “This knowledge is taught by nothing but grace that comes from above. To this wisdom we must open not the ear but the heart.” Guigo cites the case of a simple old woman who may not even know how to say the Lord’s Prayer or the Creed, but whose prayers are nevertheless heard, because of her piety. By adding this

qualification, Guigo gives *meditatio* a Christian dimension, which it would not otherwise have.

The Fourth Chapter deals with the third and fourth rungs, prayer and contemplation. The one searching for godly wisdom realizes his or her inadequacy to attain the goal by relying on human strength and intelligence, and needs to pray:

Lord, you will not be seen, but by those who are clean of heart. I have done what is in me to do, read and thought deeply and searched what it is and in what manner I might best come to this cleanness that I might somewhat know you. Lord, I have sought and thought with all my poor heart; and, Lord, in my meditation the fire of desire kindles to know you, not only the bitter bark without, in feeling and tasting in my soul. ...

Guigo reassures the fervent practitioner that God will answer such a prayer even before it can be completed.

Guigo here shows his hand as a practitioner of what he is teaching, with a pastoral care for those that he knows are inevitably going to counter difficulties along the way. This is not a dry, theoretical treatise. Studzinski comments that a shift in the concept of *oratio*, prayer, is also detectable in Guigo's work: previously, prayer had been the spontaneous response of the reader to inspiration gained in reading, whereas Guigo sees prayer as being directed at obtaining the grace of contemplation, as well as serving less as petition, and more as a "welling up of devotion".<sup>116</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 169.

Contemplation is “the apex of the lectio process”,<sup>117</sup> of which Guigo comments: “In this exalted contemplation all carnal motions are so conquered and drawn out of the soul that in no way is the flesh opposed to the spirit, and [the person] becomes, as it were, wholly spiritual”. This needs to be read carefully, with regard to Pauline usage of “flesh” and “spirit”. Guigo is not saying that a reader who attains to contemplation becomes in some way disembodied, but that through ascending from lectio up the rungs to contemplation the reader is able to reject alignment with the flesh, that element in the human that is opposed to God, and embraces the spiritual, that which is aligned with God’s life, made possible, post-Resurrection, by the indwelling spirit of God.

The Fifth Chapter reveals a similar side to Guigo: he reassures the practitioner that although the sense of God’s presence may sometimes be withdrawn, it is for his or her good, to circumvent the presumption that one has attained to anything by one’s own merit, or mastery of a technique. Referring to the story of Jacob in Genesis, he recalls how the mysterious stranger who came to wrestle with him by the river Jabbok withdrew when daylight came (Gen 32:23-32). “...do not fear that he has forsaken you, though he is gone for a little while, for he does all this to keep you and only for your good. This coming and this parting is gain to you, and know well that through this you gain greatly ...”

Chapter Six tells of the joys that await the faithful practitioner of this way. God is like an inn-keeper offering such a delicious wine to his favoured customers that they sell everything they have to go on drinking. “Therefore, when God sends any ghostly liking to your

---

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

soul, think that God speaks to you, and whispers in your ear, and says: 'Have now this little, and taste how sweet I am. But if you will fully feel what you often have tasted, run after me and follow the savour of my ointments'."

Guigo's language is particularly striking in this passage, as already noted. The change of the biblical "pearl of great price" to a fine wine is striking, as is the quotation from Song 1:3, put in the mouth of God, the inn-keeper. It reveals Guigo as completely soaked in words of scripture, as was remarked upon in the case of the Desert Fathers, in whose sayings it is often difficult to distinguish where quotations of scripture begin and end.

The Seventh Chapter says that those who wish to partake of the pleasures of contemplation must emulate Jacob, who became Israel after his encounter at Peniel (Gen 32). The limp that Israel was left with represents the withering away of fleshly desires and other vices. The one who practises *lectio divina* must live a holy life, knowing that God's eye is always upon him or her.

In the final Eighth Chapter, Guigo warns that those who have experienced the delights of very close intimacy with God in contemplation are all the more in danger of a fall. After outlining those dangers, Guigo urges practitioners to throw themselves on God's grace, for his help in avoiding sin.

## Modern adoption of Guigo's teaching

The *Ladder of Monks* came to be highly regarded in western circles as a succinct and useful guide to reading for spiritual nourishment. After long periods in which first grammatical interpretation was regarded as the proper way to interpret scripture,<sup>118</sup> then the historical-critical method,<sup>119</sup> more recently there has been a revival of interest in *lectio divina*. Schneiders provides a summary of the *Ladder* in her survey of Biblical Spirituality.<sup>120</sup> She uses Guigo's text to provide a viable and practical guide to *lectio divina* for a modern person, noting that it has been similarly used by others such as Basil Pennington. She notes that the division of the process into four steps is an artificial analysis of what is in fact an integrated form, in which the steps move in and out of each other. *Lectio*, she explains, is a slow reading and re-reading of a biblical text that often results in a text being memorized. Passing on from internalizing the text by memory, one meditates on its meaning. She suggests that this stage could in the modern context include the use of commentaries, or reading the passage in the context of the liturgy, which might supply parallels that throw light on the passage under consideration. The purpose of such meditation is to understand the text for oneself, in one's own life and experience. Because the text has been engaged with experientially, prayer results in response to the word. In the final stage, prayer may "reach that degree of interiority and union with God that the great masters of the spiritual life have called

---

<sup>118</sup> Houston, "Biblical Spirituality", 161. This began in the late Middle Ages. According to Wyclif, scriptural interpretation should be founded on the logic and structure of the Bible itself; no "mere exercise of *lectio divina* or recitation of authorities" could substitute this.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>120</sup> Barbara M. Schneiders, "Biblical Spirituality", *Interpretation* (2002), 139-140.

contemplation (*contemplatio*)".<sup>121</sup> Her final comment is that lectio divina is a form of biblical spirituality that can transform a person into the image of Christ, over time.

Another recent author to mention lectio divina is Christopher Jamison, who wrote to show how Benedictine spirituality can be of relevance to modern life.<sup>122</sup> He lists three features that make lectio divina distinctive: the text should be seen "as a gift to be received, not a problem to be dissected".<sup>123</sup> In other words, the text is not something to be mastered, but rather the text should be allowed to question the reader. Jamison does not state this expressly, but the ability of a text to question a reader hints at or implies the capability of scripture to act as an instantiation of Christ, as mentioned above. The second feature is that reading needs to be done slowly, with much repetition, so that content is grasped in stages, with openness to seeing more with successive readings.<sup>124</sup> Finally, such reading needs to be approached in a prayerful state, asking for God to speak through the text. Reading can then evolve into meditation, then prayer, then contemplation. By keeping in mind a phrase from what has been read, "prayerful reading becomes prayerful living".<sup>125</sup> Much as Guigo interwove practical advice into his treatise, which showed his pastoral concern for practitioners, Jamison has observations born from experience: he warns that though there may be high points during silence and prayer, the acid test of lectio divina is revealed in daily living, in one's reaction to circumstances and other people, and desire to live with integrity. Further, by perseverance in the practice,

---

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 140. She adds that she is using contemplation in the sense of "imageless and wordless union with God in the Spirit".

<sup>122</sup> Christopher Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006).

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-5.

<sup>125</sup> Jamison, *Sanctuary*, 65.

what is heard in silence and solitude can also be heard in the busyness of life.<sup>126</sup>

Jamison is at variance with Guigo's treatise when he points out that in contrast to the promises of many modern movements, relaxation and tranquillity are "wholly absent from the Christian monastic tradition. The contemplative tradition of monasticism offers the demanding work of constant prayer and promises the Word of God".<sup>127</sup> In this, Jamison is closer both to biblical witness and to believers' experience.

Meditative Bible reading is frequently recommended as a wholesome spiritual discipline in mainstream Protestant churches, if not necessarily by the term *lectio divina*. It received Papal sanction in an address by Benedict XVI, who recommended it as

the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer [which] brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart. If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church – I am convinced of it – a new spiritual springtime.<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-8.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>128</sup> Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in the International Congress organized to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation "Dei Verbum", online, accessed 16 May 2017, no pages. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20050916\\_40-dei-verbum.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050916_40-dei-verbum.html).

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY (1): NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL

#### Preliminary remarks on the use of mixed methodology

An eminent scholar of Christian spirituality observes that the formal object of this discipline is a focus on experience: it neither seeks to deduce from revelation what Christian spirituality ought to be, nor to prescribe its form, but to understand it as it occurs. Given such a focus, it is natural to use many methods to study it.<sup>129</sup> Two layers of discipline are proposed, “constitutive” and “problematic”: the first comprises scripture and the history of Christianity, which supply the positive data of Christian experience, its norm and hermeneutical context. The second layer, of problematic disciplines, is called into play by the area under research, and integrated as necessary according to the phenomenon under investigation.<sup>130</sup> Schneiders concludes that Christian spirituality is “a typically postmodern discipline that is interdisciplinary in its formulation of research projects and in the methodologies it adopts for prosecuting those projects”.<sup>131</sup>

The present analysis of what happens during lectio divina falls within the terms of reference Schneiders proposes. The first method to be examined here is neurophysiological research into the brain activities of practitioners of this kind of reading. Early scholarship in this field was carried out by two psychiatrists, Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew Newberg. After d’Aquili’s death Newberg continued the work, and published *Principles of Neurotheology* as a foundation for a new discipline that aims to “to understand the relationship specifically

---

<sup>129</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline”, *JSSCS* 6 (1998): 2.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 10



between the brain and theology, and more broadly between the mind and religion".<sup>132</sup> Earlier research carried out by d'Aquili and Newberg led to their proposal of a theory of an "aesthetic-religious" continuum of experiences, with some interesting implications for spiritual reading. This will be described first, followed by an appraisal of Newberg's *Principles of Neurotheology*.

D'Aquili and Newberg propose that an analysis of the neuropsychology underlying aesthetic and religious experiences allows for the development of a theory of an aesthetic-religious continuum, pertaining to the variety of creative and spiritual experiences available to human beings. They also propose that such a theory can lead to increased understanding of the neurological mechanism that underlies both positive and negative aesthetics. According to the authors of this theory, seeing a range of human experiences, from simple aesthetic ones to profound spiritual and unitary states achieved during meditation, as belonging to a spectrum can throw light on what is happening during experiences that might otherwise be regarded as widely different: in fact, certain parts of the brain may be functioning in similar ways.

### The aesthetic basis of the theory

D'Aquili and Newberg cite Nietzsche's use of the Greek model of aesthetics, which distinguished between positive aesthetics, termed "Apollonian", characterized by beauty and light, wholeness and harmony, and marked by a sense of joy or elation, or at least pleasantness; and negative, or "Dionysian" aesthetics, of which the

---

<sup>132</sup> Andrew B. Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), 1.

characteristics are fragmentation and death. The latter aesthetic is marked by sadness and melancholy, or even hopelessness, futility and terror. Medieval scholars followed the Greek classification of aesthetics, and listed the characteristics of the positive as wholeness (*integritas*), harmony (*consonantia partium*) and radiance of form (*claritas formae*), with the latter apparently referring to the emotional impact of a work. Medieval scholarship devoted less attention to Dionysian aesthetics, but characterized these mainly by distinguishing them as the opposite of the Apollonian, with the exception of the first, which they termed wholeness in fragmentation (*integritas in fragmentatio*), because a work of art or text remains a whole, despite displaying fragmentation. Historically, there has been stronger interest in Apollonian aesthetics, but in the last century, with the weakening in the West of traditional religion, the existential sense of a futile, hopeless world has led to the domination of Dionysian aesthetics.<sup>133</sup>

### The neuropsychology of the aesthetic-religious continuum

D'Aquili and Newberg's earlier research distinguished nine primary epistemic or knowing states, six relating to the world of multiple discrete reality, three to "Absolute Unitary Being" (AUB). The latter they define as a state which usually arises from profound meditation, in which there is no perception or awareness of discrete beings, nor of space or time, and in which the dichotomy between self and others is obliterated. Their analysis of the neuropsychology of religious states focuses on the primary epistemic states that deal with multiple discrete reality. Three of these are inherently unstable, being often associated with the use of drugs, psychosis or dementia,

---

<sup>133</sup> Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, "The Neuropsychology of Aesthetic, Spiritual and Mystical States," *Zygon* (2000), 40-41.

and are not treated. The remaining three are stable, and described as: neutral, or “baseline reality”; multiple discrete reality suffused with positive affect; and multiple discrete reality suffused with negative affect. Baseline reality comprises everyday perceptions and behaviours, and would be regarded by many as the only valid epistemic state. The other two stable perceptions of discrete reality are also primary, differing from the first only in the affective valence, i.e. whether positive or negative. The second stable state, with positive affect, involves the same discrete entities and regularities as the baseline state, but with an elated sense of well-being and joy; the universe is perceived as fundamentally good, with all parts related, and the one who is in this state feels a sense of purpose. This feeling may defy logic, being independent of circumstances, and it might appear suddenly and unexpectedly, as in a conversion. The third stable state, of negative affective valence, can also be termed *Weltschmerz*: this carries a sense of exquisite sadness and futility, and of the smallness of humans in the universe. This can also be experienced very suddenly, as with the second state, and underlies much existentialist thought, especially French.<sup>134</sup>

D’Aquili and Newberg suggest that the primary states here described constitute a spectrum or continuum of unitary states, “in which the sense of unity increasingly transcends the sense of diversity”.<sup>135</sup> The sense of wholeness (*integritas*, as termed by medieval scholars) is greater than that of the diversity of the parts. In earlier research, the two scholars postulated that what happens in the brain in such states is that the posterior superior parietal lobule (PSPL) and certain parts of the inferior parietal lobe, especially on the non-dominant side, are involved in imposing greater unity over

---

<sup>134</sup> D’Aquili, “Neuropsychology,” 41-43.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

diversity. “Thus, as one moves along the unitary continuum with progressively greater experience of unity over diversity, one moves out of the realm of aesthetics and into a realm that more properly would be described as religious experience.”<sup>136</sup> They describe the sequence thus: one goes from an experience of numinosity or religious awe, to “Cosmic consciousness” (to use the title of Richard M. Bucke’s work), and then into various trance states in which the boundaries between entities are progressively blurred, until one reaches the state of AUB. This also is a primary epistemic state: when suffused with positive affect it is interpreted (after the fact) as God, or *unio mystica*; with negative affect it is interpreted non-personally as the Void, or nirvana, of Buddhism. D’Aquili and Newberg also postulate that moving up the continuum is at least partially due to progressive deafferentation of (or blocking neural input to) the PSPL, and possibly adjacent areas of the brain, with total deafferentation resulting in the total unitary experience of AUB. Their hypothesis of the role played by progressive deafferentation described above was confirmed by single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) conducted on accomplished Tibetan Buddhist meditators focusing on a visualized image.<sup>137</sup> D’Aquili and Newberg also conducted research on a group of Franciscan nuns, whose meditation focused on a phrase from scripture, or prayer. Similar activity was observed in the brains of the second group, with the difference that there was activation in the inferior parietal region, associated with the use of language in the exercise.<sup>138</sup> While conceding that more work needs

---

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>137</sup> Andrew Newberg et al., “The Measurement of Regional Cerebral Blood Flow During the Complex Cognitive Task of Meditation: A Preliminary Spect Study,” *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* 106 (2001): 113-22. Quoted in István Csachesz, “Filled with New Wine? Religious Experience and Social Dynamics in the Corinthian Church,” in *Experientia: Linking Text and Experience* (ed. Colleen Shantz and Rodney A. Werline; Vol. 2; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 75-6.

<sup>138</sup> Andrew Newberg et al., “Cerebral Blood Flow During Meditative Prayer: Preliminary Findings and Methodological Issues,” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 97 (2003): 625-30. Quoted in Csachesz, “Filled with New Wine?”, 76.

to be done in this area, the authors conclude that the evidence is suggestive that “positive or Apollonian aesthetics represents the beginning of the Aesthetic-Religious Continuum along which spiritual and mystical experiences are placed, culminating either in the experience of God, or of the Buddhist Void”.<sup>139</sup>

#### Other characteristics of spiritual and mystical states

In describing their theory of the aesthetic-religious continuum up to this point, d’Aquili and Newberg have focused on the increasing sense of unity as one moves along the spectrum. They propose that there are other characteristics to be observed, although of lesser importance than the progressive unitary sense. Firstly, there is a sense of transcendence, or unworldliness. There is also a progressive incorporation of the sense of the observing self, which is held to be essential in spiritual-mystical states, although not in aesthetic ones: “The whole point of most spiritual-mystical experiences is for the self to have a sense of being fundamentally and essentially related to some aspect of whatever ultimate reality might be.”<sup>140</sup> As one moves along the continuum into AUB, the self apparently expands to become the whole of reality, without individual content, as in the observation by the Hindu philosopher Shankara that *atman* (soul) and *Brahman* (god) are one. D’Aquili and Newberg observe that Christian theologians are careful to preserve the ontological independence of the soul. Lastly, there is an intense and progressive certainty when moving along the continuum, of the objective reality of mystical experiences. As an example of this they cite the common near-death experience: almost all who have had such an experience, even those who previously would have had no inclination to believe

---

<sup>139</sup> D’Aquili, “Neuropsychology,” 44.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

in different states of consciousness, are certain of the objective reality of their experience, and, they add, “the certainty of the objective reality of mystical experiences at the upper end of the aesthetic-religious continuum is just as great and possibly greater than the certainty of the reality of the near-death experience.”<sup>141</sup>

### The Aesthetic-Religious Continuum Theory

There are several ways in which this theory holds attraction for analysing the activity of scriptural reading. Perhaps the foremost is the fact that it takes account of the feelings of an altered state of consciousness that can occur while reading scripture, often described as “words coming off the page”, a shift from reading in which the reader is the subject of attention, seeking to gain understanding, to a mode in which the reader feels rather that she or he is the object of attention, the one to whom the words being read are addressed directly, as opposed to reading to gain information alone. The mind is engaged, but the mode of thinking is not primarily intellectual, in the sense of mastering a text to analyse its contents, either to add to one’s personal store of knowledge, or to pass teaching on to others.<sup>142</sup> At such times, the mind can seem extraordinarily clear, becoming aware of nuances in a passage that might have been read many times before, but now speaking to one’s own situation with accuracy and clarity. Further characteristics of this kind of reading experience are (or can be) an overwhelming

---

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>142</sup> It has been observed that one of the themes to emerge from current neurotheological research is the recognition of distinct modes of human cognition, already seen in the classical and medieval distinction between *intellectus* and *scientia*. Furthermore, many phenomena observed in religious practice are seen to be most closely associated with the right, “non-dominant” hemisphere of the brain. Andrew Pinsent, “Neurotheology,” in *Handbook of Neuroethics* (ed. J. Clausen and N. Levy; Dordrecht: Springer Reference, 2015), 1527-1533.

sense of peace, and being loved and accepted as one is, without criticism or fault.

One of the most telling criticisms of the use made by d'Aquili and Newberg of Nietzsche's Greek model of aesthetics is that Nietzsche's own position has been over-simplified. This has been described as "Dionysian Classicism", advocating the aesthetic position of the Classical school in Germany, led by J. Winckelmann, to campaign against Romanticism. Nietzsche adopted and enhanced Goethe's view of Romanticism as illness and Classicism as health.<sup>143</sup> Nietzsche identified an instinctual, wild, "Dionysian" energy within pre-Socratic Greek culture as a force that was essentially creative and healthy, and lamented how this energy was overshadowed by "Apollonian" forces of logical order and sobriety. According to Nietzsche, since the time of Socrates European culture has remained one-sidedly Apollonian, repressed, scientific, and relatively unhealthy.<sup>144</sup> Nietzsche embodied tensions within the Classical/Romantic debate and made a unique contribution to it by resurrecting the mythopoetic powers of Dionysus.<sup>145</sup>

### *Principles of Neurotheology*

Andrew Newberg has continued to publish prolifically in the field of study examining phenomena during activities which can be broadly described as religious or spiritual. In 2010 he published *Principles of Neurotheology*, which aimed to lay a foundation for a new discipline, which looks at the intersection of religious and theological ideas with science. As this book develops ideas in the papers reviewed above, it

---

<sup>143</sup> Adrian Del Caro. "Dionysian Classicism, or Nietzsche's Appropriation of an Aesthetic Norm." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 589-605.

<sup>144</sup> Robert Wicks, "Nietzsche's Life and Works," n.p. [cited 15 Feb. 2019]. Online: <https://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-life-works/>.

<sup>145</sup> Del Caro, "Dionysian Classicism", 596.

will also be analysed in what follows, for its possible impact on approaches to reading of scripture.

### Definition

Newberg begins by defining the discipline: “‘Neurotheology’ is a unique field of scholarship and investigation that seeks to understand the relationship specifically between the brain and theology, and more broadly between the mind and religion.”<sup>146</sup> The relationship between the mind and spirituality has been known about for thousands of years: Newberg quotes a passage from the Taittiriya Upanishad, demonstrating the role of both body and brain in achieving enlightenment, to support this assertion.<sup>147</sup>

Neurotheology as a discipline requires openness from both the scientific and spiritual/religious communities to the perspectives of the other discipline, while preserving the essential elements of both: the former can contribute clear definitions, measure and methodologies, while the more subjective spiritual side can contribute the notion of meaning and purpose in life, an adherence to doctrinal processes, and theological rigour. Neurotheology aims to contribute by enriching the understanding of both science and religion; this calls for respect for both disciplines simultaneously, rather than favouring one at the expense of the other.

### Historical overview

In his survey of the historical foundations of neurotheology, Newberg notes that Eastern religions from an early stage show interest in psychological states, such as the Buddhist four seals of

---

<sup>146</sup> Newberg, *Neurotheology*, 1.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



belief – *dukkha*, suffering, a universal aspect of the human condition; *anatta*, “no-self”, the idea that there are no separately existing selves in the universe, but all are interconnected; *annicca*, the impermanence of e.g. success and achievements; *nirvana*, release, surrendering attachment to a false sense of self.<sup>148</sup>

In contrast with explicit Eastern interest in states and activities of the mind and consciousness, Newberg notes that “Western conceptions of religion” show little interest in mental or physiological processes. Despite its origin in the Middle East, Newberg classifies Christianity in the latter category. He notes, however, that there is a deep interest in the human psyche, shown for example in the Genesis account of the creation of human beings with certain intellectual and psychological qualities.<sup>149</sup> He notes that the Commandments and covenants are based on an understanding of human behaviour and morality, but that after the advent of Christianity the focus shifted to other aspects of the psyche, “including issues pertaining to love, devotion, forgiveness, and redemption”.

Newberg notes that there is an important connection between the mind that allows human beings to be human, and the spirit or soul that allows them to connect to a higher, divine realm of existence.<sup>150</sup> He adds that the “rudimentary, and in many ways, highly accurate intuitive analysis of the human being and the human mind clearly demonstrate that psychology and religion were some day going to be integrated in a more profound way”.<sup>151</sup> Newberg

---

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>150</sup> *Neurotheology*, 7.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

concludes his review of the historical foundations of neurotheology by noting that after Kant, who argued that all the universe, spiritual and non-spiritual, could be understood through a human, rational approach, separated from sensorial experience, there has been a gradual move away from doctrinal descriptions of religion towards a more “cognitive, visceral, or intuitive one”, beginning with Schleiermacher.<sup>152</sup> William James was particularly interested in how human beings experience the spiritual. From the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars were interested in the phenomenology of religion on its own terms, e.g. Rudolf Otto analysed religion in terms of an awareness of the “sacred” and the “holy”. He defined the essence of religious awareness as awe, a mixture of fear and fascination before the divine, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.<sup>153</sup> Mircea Eliade refined and reworked Otto’s concept of the sacred to include experiences outside the range of encounters with God or any god. Newberg notes that Paul Tillich begins his *Systematic Theology* with a discussion of a definition of religion as relating to “ultimate concerns”.<sup>154</sup>

With this historical overview, which the author would concede is brief and inexhaustive, Newberg describes the arc of the field of study, as far as is relevant to a consideration of Christian sacred reading, as moving away from a doctrinal basis to an interest in the neurology of religious activities. The general tenor of studies in this field has been to see similar activities across different religions as being capable of being analysed using the same categories.

---

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>153</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational* (trans. John W Harvey; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), especially Chapters 4-6, for Otto’s analysis of ‘*Tremendum*’ and Fascination.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

## The interaction between science and religion

Newberg draws on Ian Barbour's analysis of possible categories of interaction between science and religion, to suggest four main models, which can have many permutations.<sup>155</sup> These begin with "conflict", according to which only one of the two, science or religion, can give an accurate picture of the world; then "mutual independence", according to which the two operate in different domains, called "non-overlapping magisterials" by Stephen J. Gould. In this view, the two domains are not mutually exclusive, but about separate dimensions of human existence. Both areas are preserved intact, but no dialogue is fostered between them. "Dialogue" tackles questions faced in both science and religion, such as the Big Bang, and the reason for the existence of the universe. The last model, "integration", where the two areas unite to help explain each other and the world, is the way adopted by Newberg himself.

Newberg believes that neurotheology needs to draw on both modern scientific methods and existing theological debates, acknowledging that theology has far advanced recently beyond "the more dogmatic perspectives of the past". At the same time, neurotheology needs to take advantage of current advances in studying the brain.<sup>156</sup> The foundational goals of neurotheology are to improve understanding of the human mind and brain; to improve understanding of religion and theology; to improve the human condition, especially regarding health and well-being, as well as in

---

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, quoting Ian G. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1990).

<sup>156</sup> Newberg, *Neurotheology*, 17.

the context of religion and spirituality.<sup>157</sup> Clearly, neurotheology is a bold attempt to cross academic boundaries, to link disciplines that have until fairly recently in western scholarship been compartmentalized. Newberg points out that such a step is in some ways a move back towards the unified way of approaching faith and science seen for example in the building of the pyramids or Stonehenge, in which knowledge of astronomy and engineering was used to express beliefs.<sup>158</sup>

### Treatment of spiritual practices

Newberg's chapter "Physiological and Phenomenological<sup>159</sup> Correlates of Spiritual Practices" has direct relevance to the reading of scripture. He states his opening principle that "both phenomenological and physiological information are required for the full understanding of any religious experience or practice".<sup>160</sup> Newberg anticipates the reactions of the religious and scientific communities: the religious will object that only the phenomenological elements are necessary, while what is happening biologically is essentially meaningless: "The religious beliefs, doctrines, and experiences of an individual or group are all that is needed to understand these phenomena." On the other hand, a scientist might counter that since everything comes down to biology, phenomenology is irrelevant.<sup>161</sup> A neurotheological approach, Newberg argues, walks the line between the two disciplines, seeing both biology and phenomenology as important: the biology to

---

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>159</sup> At this point, Newberg uses this word not in the narrower sense of the philosophy associated with Husserl, but of what is happening from the point of view of the practitioner of a spiritual practice.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, Principle XXVIII.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

interpret and make use of religious experiences, while the religious experience leads to a deeper understanding of the human person.

Newberg claims that in attempting to understand a spiritual practice both the phenomenological and biological elements are necessary, each one alone being insufficient to “provide the total information that is necessary to understand fully who we are as human beings”.<sup>162</sup> He appeals to the interest shown in the Bible in relating accounts of religious experiences, including Moses’ encounter with God’s presence on Mount Sinai, and Paul’s conversion on the way to Damascus. Amassing such accounts, which can vary from the vague to the elaborate, makes it possible to build a “phenomenological database” of such experiences.<sup>163</sup>

#### Categorization of spiritual experiences

Newberg considers general methods for attaining spiritual experiences, noting broad categories of group or individual practices.<sup>164</sup> Although *lectio divina* can be, and often is, practised in groups, in this study it is particularly being considered as an individual activity, which Newberg concedes is easier to study. *Lectio divina* could be considered alongside meditation and prayer in Newberg’s categorization. Despite the wide variety of practices, two basic categories can be identified: “passive meditation”, in which the practitioner simply aims to clear the mind of all thoughts, and “active meditation”, in which the practitioner focuses attention on an object, image, phrase or word. The aim of the former is to reach a state characterized by a sense of the absence of space, time and

---

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>164</sup> Newberg, *Neurotheology*, 155.

thought; such a state is experienced as fully integrated, so there is no sense of a self and other. The latter category, the active, is more widely used, being associated with prayer practices, and is “designed to lead to a subjective experience of absorption with the object of focus”.<sup>165</sup> On the basis of this categorization, lectio divina would be accounted as an active meditation, as it focuses on reading a passage of scripture.

### **Concluding comments on Newberg’s work**

The work of Newberg, conducted initially with d’Aquili, and later alone, offers concrete evidence for brain activity in practitioners of lectio divina. Newberg’s later work provides a link between the fields of neuroscience and theology, which is extremely valuable. Despite his intent of paying equal attention to the two different fields, at certain points his moves into theology are not as securely based as they could be: for example, he assumes that “mysticism” as a phenomenon has characteristics that are common across multiple religions. This ignores the central role of incarnation in Christianity, which makes it very different from e.g. Buddhism.<sup>166</sup> Another example of the same attitude is the emphasis on the positive aspect of spiritual experiences, which presumably comes from focusing on the “Apollonian aesthetic” underlying the aesthetic-religious continuum theory. There are however many experiences in the lives of Christians, not to mention those of other faiths, in which a sense of positive well-being may not be prominent, but rather conviction of sin, mental or physical suffering, guilt or humiliation.<sup>167</sup> In

---

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-7.

<sup>166</sup> For example, Newberg can write of mystics having “the compelling sense that they have risen above the material existence of their body, and have spiritually united with the divine or absolute” – *Principles of Neurotheology*, 151.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

discussing the church in Corinth, “... Paul’s palette of religious experience is hardly exhausted by blissful union with Christ ... [in] particular, it is obvious that members of the church in Corinth did not simply share the experience of a kind of mystical union”. Meditating on Scripture does not inevitably lead to pleasant experiences: Teresa of Ávila wrote, “How do you think St. Paul went through such immense labours? We learn from his conduct the fruits of genuine visions and contemplation which come from our Lord and not from our own imagination, or the devil’s fraud. Do you suppose that St. Paul hid himself to enjoy these spiritual consolations at leisure and did nothing else?”<sup>168</sup> Similarly, the meditation on the biblical Song of Songs by St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, while deeply moving and beautiful, issued from profound identification with the sufferings of Christ.

Despite Newberg’s intent to be even-handed towards both scientific and spiritual/religious communities, the charge can be made that his definition of neurotheology focuses on studying the neuroscientific correlates of religious experience, while classic works of theology such as Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae* focus rather on the complex consequences of religious experiences in the world.<sup>169</sup> Newberg’s evident interest in handling religious matters in terms of experience is reminiscent of Buddhist treatment of such matters.<sup>170</sup>

---

<sup>168</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*. Chapter IV, 7. Ed. Benedict Zimmerman. Online version: The Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/teresa/castle2.html>, accessed Jan. 2015.

<sup>169</sup> Pinsent, “Neurotheology,” 1529.

<sup>170</sup> See for example Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (London and Bedford: Gordon Fraser, 1959), and Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2009).

This thesis posits that the neuroscientific insights provided by the pioneer work of Newberg and others should be welcomed as providing evidence for the thoroughly embodied nature of *lectio divina*.<sup>171</sup> As an example of this, the work of a Christian scholar at home in the fields of neuroscience and theology will now be examined.

### Neuroscientific evidence for embodiment

Joel Green writes:

The essential characteristic of a cognitive approach is its nonnegotiable [*sic*] emphasis on embodiment ... its irreducible emphasis on somatic existence as the basis and means of human existence, including religious experience and the exercise of the mind. ... Embodiment extends also to human experience of God – or, more generally, to religious experience or experience of the divine.<sup>172</sup>

Green clarifies that cognitive science does not attempt to explain God as an expression of embodied cognitive functions, but it is because the capacities that enable human beings to experience God are embodied that they can be studied by means of the cognitive sciences.

---

<sup>171</sup> Embodied persons, it has been observed, are central to revealed theology, the “ordered study of what has purportedly been divinely revealed about God’s relations to human beings and the universe”; furthermore, neuroscience provides new means of exploring the significance of the embodied human person. Pinsent, “Neurotheology,” 1528.

<sup>172</sup> Joel B. Green. *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 19.



In making some general remarks about the overall application of cognitive science to religion, Green tackles the problem of defining a “religious experience” by saying that the only way to determine whether an experience is religious is to interpret it as such, acknowledging that the claim is necessarily circular because an experience will be categorized as religious only within communities that admit the possibility of interacting with God or with gods. “Different communities will interpret the same phenomenon differently.”<sup>173</sup>

Green makes the further point that particularly under the influence of William James, religious experience is often interpreted as being an entirely interior event, often of an unusual nature. Such a view could be held of events recorded in scripture only anachronistically: both in antiquity and in many contemporary societies, religion affects the whole of life, and the modern separation of sacred and secular is out of place.<sup>174</sup>

His last general point is that despite the difficulties encountered in studying events from a neurobiological perspective, due to modern advances in neuroscience, contributions have been made to understanding embodiment and embodied religious experience.<sup>175</sup>

---

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

## Neural transformation in response to environmental factors

Green cites research carried out on London taxi drivers, who are required to memorize a large quantity of information about the layout of the city.<sup>176</sup> Controlled experiments have shown that day-to-day activities can bring about changes in the morphology of the brain. This has interesting implications for considering the practice of lectio divina: it is quite plausible to assume that just as the hippocampus (the part of the brain responsible for spatial memory) is enlarged and enhanced with regular use by taxi drivers, so there could be areas of the brain associated with reading that are exercised and strengthened during lectio divina. The key point being brought home by Green, drawing on neurological research, is that of the embodied nature of human life. Also noteworthy is the fact that he is drawing on research being produced from across the field of cognitive science to adduce the importance of embodiedness, rather than exclusively from his Christian view point.

Recent studies of the effectiveness of behavioural therapy in patients suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) have demonstrated an observable reduction in obsessive tendencies, as well as a decrease in metabolic activities in the parts of the brain associated with the disorder.<sup>177</sup> These studies and others cited by Green show that therapeutic interventions can result in physiological changes in the brain. This also has implications for understanding the effects of lectio divina.

---

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

Green also notes that meditative practices have recently been studied, with particular interest in associated neurological changes. Practising mindfulness meditation for half-an-hour a day results in increased hippocampal volume (the area associated with learning and memory) and decreased density in the amygdala (the area associated with anxiety and stress response).<sup>178</sup> Such research demonstrates the role of practices like meditation in bringing about neural change, and, given that meditation on a text is a key part of *lectio divina*, has implications for understanding scripture reading as an embodied practice.

### Out of body experiences

In his treatment of the narrative of Luke-Acts, Green discusses out of body experiences, with significant implications for Newberg's understanding of the aesthetic-religious continuum. Brain scans reveal that the temporal-parietal junction plays a key role in the sense of being spatially situated within one's own body, which is a key element of selfhood.<sup>179</sup> He concludes: "out-of-body experiences are generated in our bodies, by our brains. Far from proving that there is an ethereal self that can separate itself from our material bodies, out-of-body experiences demonstrate rather the wonderful complexity of our brains as they situate us in time and space in ways that we mostly take for granted."<sup>180</sup> At this point, Green quotes research done by Newberg, d'Aquili and others, cited above, demonstrating the role of different parts of the brain during

---

<sup>178</sup> Green, *Conversion and Cognition*, 31, quoting Britta K. Hölzel et al., "Mindfulness Practice Leads to Increases in Regional Brain Gray Matter Density." *Psychiatric Research: Neuroimaging* 191, no. 1 (2011): 36-43.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

religious, spiritual and mystical experiences. Again, he concludes with two central tenets: “human experience, even religious experience, is fully embodied; to identify the neural correlates of religious experience is not to explain that experience fully but only to demonstrate that it is an embodied experience”.<sup>181</sup>

### The act of learning

The last thing to be noted here from Green’s application of neuroscience to theological matters is his attention paid to the “remoulding” of the brain that is constantly happening during an individual’s life. Such learning

is the product especially of interpersonal experiences, which directly shape the ongoing development of the brain’s structure and function. ... we are always in the process of becoming, and this ‘becoming’ is encoded in our brains by means of synaptic activity as both nature and nurture yield the same effect, namely, sculpting the brain (and thus shaping the mind) in ways that form and reform the developing self.<sup>182</sup>

Lectio divina can be seen precisely as an “interpersonal” practice, i.e. between the reader and God. Green’s description of the brain, based on demonstrated neurological changes, implies that lectio divina, as a means of life-long learning, produces physiological changes in the brain, that in turn shape the personality. This calls to mind St. Paul’s exhortation to his readers in Rome: “Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind. This is the only way

---

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do.” (Rom 12:2, JB). A further feature of our brains is the tendency for them to use the same neural pathways, so that our inferences about life become biased by our expectations. Over time, the brain can become “enslaved” to patterns created, resulting in enforced patterns of behaviour that are harmful to the self and to one’s community.<sup>183</sup> An antidote to such patterns is “reflective thinking, mindful learning, and mindful awareness – that is, a reconfiguration of neuronal processes through conditional learning”.<sup>184</sup> Here is another description, in neurocognitive terms, of what is likely to be happening during *lectio divina*.

### **Conclusion: the contribution of neurological research to understanding *lectio divina***

Green’s work has been used and quoted at length, to supply the fuller appreciation of the role of embodiment that has been seen to be lacking from Newberg’s work.<sup>185</sup> Neuroscience provides convincing evidence that, contrary to certain experiences that can sometimes accompany *lectio divina*, which might suggest that something is taking place that is outside the body, the brain activity observed during *lectio divina* is that of an embodied person. This has the effect of demystifying a practice that might otherwise seem

---

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>185</sup> Newberg however is aware of the importance of the embodied: in an interview published online, he says that if asked whether there is a spiritual spot or part of the brain, he would reply that “if there is a spiritual part of ourselves, it is the whole brain and body, because there are very integrated and complex processes involved in spiritual practices and experiences.” Andrew Newberg, “The Neurotheology Link: An Intersection between Spirituality and Health”: 13-17. Cited 18 April 2017. Online: <https://andrewnewberg.squarespace.com/s/the-neurotheology-link.pdf>.

otherworldly and disconnected from everyday reality. The following chapter complements the neuroscientific view of embodied brain activity by beginning with the theology of the human constitution, before turning to scripture as a form of embodiment.

## CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY (2): THEOLOGICAL

### Theological Anthropology: *imago Dei*

Lectio divina is a spiritual practice conducted by an embodied reader. This section therefore begins with Christian views of embodiment, from the field of theological anthropology. A key idea appears in Gen 1:26: “God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (JB). This is often termed the *imago Dei*. The precise import of what it means for humankind to be created in God’s image has been debated in great depth. There is consensus over some elements: the Hebrew words used in Genesis, *צֶלֶם* (*tselem*, image) and *דְמוּת* (*d<sup>e</sup>mût*, likeness) and the Greek *εἰκών* (*eikōn*, image) all imply resemblance of some kind; *צֶלֶם* and *דְמוּת* are synonymous; the image of God includes all persons, not a chosen few; sin has affected the image in some way; in the New Testament, image is a Christological concept – while it is clear from the Old Testament passages that everyone is made in God’s image, and this tradition is continued in the New Testament, the focus is now on Jesus Christ, as the true *εἰκών* of God; lastly, the image of God has a teleological nature, which is to say that the image is not static, but developing towards a goal.<sup>186</sup> To say that the image of God has a teleological nature is to imply that image bearing is the goal towards which humankind is created to move. This is clearest in Orthodox theology, which regards Adam and Eve as created to grow towards the image of Christ. If the image of God is understood in this way, lectio divina can be seen as a practical means

---

<sup>186</sup> Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 16-17.

of cooperating with God, to encourage and foster growth into the likeness of God.

Objections made to seeing the image purely in structural terms, such as humans having capacities that reflect God in some way, e.g. rational thought or moral agency, include lack of exegetical support, and a failure to take account of the bodily element of the passage in Gen 1:26-8, which seems to assume whole, embodied persons imaging God, rather than emphasizing innate capacities.<sup>187</sup>

There is currently more support for a view of image as having more to do with function, with something that humankind does, rather than innate qualities. There are parallels from Ancient Near Eastern culture for the image of God: in Egypt, the king was the actual incarnation of the god, while in Mesopotamia, the king was regarded as a divinely appointed and empowered representative. In both cases, the king was a divine representative, appointed to exercise dominion.<sup>188</sup> This view presupposes that the composer and the reader of the Genesis narrative were familiar with the background to the *imago Dei* concept, which seems quite plausible if a post-exilic date is accepted for the composition. There would then be a strongly polemic element in the text: rather than just the king being God's representative exercising dominion over the earth, every single person is declared to be such a representative. The effect is to democratize an attribute that was originally a royal prerogative. Objections made to such a view are that there is an over-reliance on extra-biblical support for understanding the concept, and that there may be too great a focus on the Gen 1:26-8 context to determine the

---

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-21.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*



meaning of *imago Dei*; it risks obscuring its meaning in other passages, and in the New Testament, where the concept is re-orientated.<sup>189</sup>

The last broad category proposed for understanding the *imago Dei* is that humankind is fundamentally created for relationship, with God, other humans and creation. For this view, appeal is made to the use of the divine plural in the Genesis narrative, and the juxtaposition of male and female roles. Objections to this view have centred on the perceived lack of exegetical support, and even the accusation that modern conceptual categories are being read anachronistically into the text.<sup>190</sup>

The current state of opinion on the *imago Dei* has been summed up as biblical scholars arguing for a primarily functional understanding, while theologians argue for a relational approach.<sup>191</sup> A proposed way through is to see the image of God as bringing together three elements: the task of humans is to make manifest God's presence in creation; God creates and constitutes humans as personal beings, through whom he manifests himself personally in creation; God is continually revealing himself in and through covenantal relationships with his people, first Israel, then the church. The first element goes back to the idea of the image found in the ancient Near East: just as the image of a king was not a mere symbol, but a manifestation of the king's presence, to conceive of humans as being in God's image implies that they carry the authority and dominion of the one whose image they are. In this context humans are instructed to "be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it"

---

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-4.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

(Gen 1:28, JB): the presence of divine power in the image is expressed in rule (not, it emerges from other contexts, in unthinking dominion, but in thoughtful stewardship). In the second element, just as God manifests himself as personal presence in the creation accounts, and throughout scripture, by creating humankind in his image, he makes humans personal beings that can relate to each other and to creation in the same personal way. Humanity needed to be both male and female to manifest God's presence completely. Lastly, God continues to show his personal presence to humankind through his relationships with Israel and the church: this is the covenantal aspect of the image of God.<sup>192</sup>

Debate over the precise nature of the *imago Dei* will doubtless persist, but there seems to be agreement that it stands at the centre of any adequate understanding of the nature of humankind. Implications of the view proposed above of the image include the fact that human persons are relational beings, always already involved in several key relationships; theologically, we are called into being by being addressed by God; we are surrounded and to some extent constituted by relationships. Secondly, humans are responsible beings, not only constituted as personal beings by divine address, but given the opportunity and responsibility to respond: God's summons makes a moral demand. Finally, human beings are embodied: the *imago Dei* does not apply only to inner or "spiritual" qualities of a human being, but to the whole person, including the body. "Indeed, it would seem that it is only as embodied beings that we can function as God's representatives in a physical world, and many will argue that it is only as embodied beings that humans can

---

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-7.

stand in vital relationships with each other. Any anthropology that neglects the embodied reality of human life ...must be rejected".<sup>193</sup>

### The Contested Role of the Body

Since it is the embodied nature of lectio divina that is consistently seen to be an essential element of this practice, it is of the utmost importance to appreciate the positive role of the body in Christian theology. A study of the attitude to the body in Greek Christianity draws attention to the ambivalence often found: the body is at one and the same time an occasion of temptation, a hindrance to a spiritual life, but also inherently good, as part of God's good creation.<sup>194</sup> Greek Christianity inherits both the Hebraic view of the body, which is holistic, and the Hellenic, particularly Platonist view, which makes a strong division between soul and body. In the Old Testament, body and soul are regarded as a unity.<sup>195</sup> Plato held that the soul was the "real" person, and within the soul the highest aspect, the intellectual part, possesses immortality; the body and its impulses are not evil, but need to be controlled. "The true person is to be envisaged as an intellect or mind, temporarily imprisoned in a material body and aspiring to freedom; the body is a tomb".<sup>196</sup> After Plato, Aristotle was less "separatist" in his view of the relation between soul and body; the Stoics' view was unitary; later Platonism was pessimistic in relation to the body, while Philo called the body "evil by nature".<sup>197</sup>

---

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>194</sup> Kallistos Ware, "My helper and my enemy': the body in Greek Christianity," in *Religion and the Body* (ed. Sarah Coakley; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 90-110.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 92; the final clause summed up in the expression σῶμα σῆμα.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

There was a complex relationship between Hellenism and Judaism after the conquests of Alexander in the fourth century B.C., and Greek thought on the relationship between soul and body was more varied than a reading of Plato or first century Neoplatonists would suggest.<sup>198</sup> One should therefore be wary of drawing a rigid dichotomy between “monistic” Hebrew thought and “dualistic” Greek thought: since the New Testament was composed against a varied background of ideas about the body, it is misleading to allege that a body-soul dualism was predominant.

New Testament writers continue the unitary view of the Old Testament: the spiritual value of the body is emphasized by Jesus’ taking on human flesh; the body has a central role in the salvation story. Paul shows the same holistic approach. He draws a distinction between flesh and spirit (σάρξ and πνεῦμα), not between body and soul (σῶμα and ψυχή), as Plato had done. It appears that for Paul, flesh is all humanity, soul and body, separated from and in rebellion against God, while spirit, rather than being ethereal, is body and soul, human personhood taken together, living in harmony with God.<sup>199</sup> Although often misunderstood, Paul is positive towards the body, which can be described as a living sacrifice to God, or a temple of the Holy Spirit, while Christian bodies are members of Christ.<sup>200</sup> The Church Fathers show the same attitude: “the flesh is the pivot of salvation”;<sup>201</sup> “the whole human person would not have been saved unless the Lord had taken upon him the whole human person”<sup>202</sup>.

---

<sup>198</sup> Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (London: Paternoster, 2008), 51.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>201</sup> Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*, 8.

<sup>202</sup> Origen, *Dialogue with Heraclides*. Elsewhere, Origen is less positive regarding the body: humans were originally created as intellects alone, without bodies, which were given to heal the soul and restore it: Ware, *ibid.*, 97.

There has often been a contradiction within Christian thinking between disparagement of the body as a source of temptation and theological descriptions of body and soul being inseparably united. Contempt for the body found in some devotional works is fundamentally inconsistent with Christian doctrines of creation, the Incarnation of Christ and the resurrection of the body. Christian authors easily slip into a dualism where the body is alienated from the self and becomes the target of stern discipline, or even abuse, while Christian doctrines should at least in theory provide an affirmation of human bodies and the natural world.<sup>203</sup>

While it can be claimed that classical orthodox theology has a high position for the human body, there are many attitudes that must be acknowledged as being highly hostile to the female body. As one commentator has noted, "Assumptions of male superiority in the patriarchal communities of the Christian West have made it difficult for Christians to envision equal relationships. ...since the most influential Christian authors were men ... male perspectives on body and sexuality are necessarily and inevitably represented in their writings."<sup>204</sup> Feminist theologians including Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly have been highly critical of the central role of asceticism in Christianity, where it rests on the identification, from a male perspective, of sexuality with woman, woman with the body, the body with sin, and sin with death.<sup>205</sup>

---

<sup>203</sup> Margaret Mead. *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 95-6.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

## Scripture as a form of incarnation: Augustine

Augustine's thinking about scripture is tightly bound up with his thoughts on language in general, and beauty, and shows the influence of his initial career as an orator. Influenced by Neoplatonist philosophy, earlier in his writings, he sees language as merely a sign that indicates a truth and reality separate from it; language is an obscure, cloudy means of communication. "Language... forms a veil over man's prelapsarian, silent, intuitive, inner conception of truth."<sup>206</sup> At this stage, Augustine sees language as the outward expression of something conceived inwardly in contemplation, and therefore inherently inferior, as a move away from pure intellectual vision.<sup>207</sup> For Augustine, the move from intuitive contemplation to time-bound, successive words spoken aloud is a fall; he prefers inner words, illumination and teaching to outward speech.<sup>208</sup>

Later, Augustine came to see scripture as an incarnation of the Word of God, taking the analogy of how human speech, uttered aloud, produces thought in the hearer of the words: in the same way, God's creative word, which originated in God, was uttered, and remains in God, also bears fruit in the receptor of that word:

You now, as I think, understand how the word perhaps is used here, in case any weigher of words and poiser of syllables, as if to show his knowledge of Latin, finds fault with a word which

---

<sup>206</sup> Carol Harrison. *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 54.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

the Word of God spoke; and by blaming the Word of God, remain not eloquent, but mute. For who is there that speaks as does the Word which was in the beginning with God? Do not consider these words as we use them, and from these wish to measure that Word which is God. You hear the Word indeed, and despise it; hear God and fear Him: "In the beginning was the Word." You refer to the usage of your conversation, and say within yourself, "What is a word? What mighty thing is a word? It sounds and passes away; after beating the air, it strikes the ear and is no more". Hear further: "The Word was with God," remained, did not by sounding pass away. Perhaps you still despise it: "The Word was God." With yourself, O man, a word in your heart is a different thing from sound; but the word that is with you, in order to pass to me, requires sound for a vehicle as it were. It takes to itself sound, mounts it as a vehicle, runs through the air, comes to me and yet does not leave you. But the sound, in order to come to me, left you and yet did not stay with me. Now has the word that was in your heart also passed away with the passing sound? You spoke your thought; and, that the thought which was hid with you might come to me, you did sound syllables; the sound of the syllables conveyed your thought to my ear; through my ear your thought descended into my heart, the intermediate sound flew away: but that word which took to itself sound was with you before you did sound it, and is with me, because you did sound it, without quitting you. Consider this, you nice weigher of sounds, whoever you be. You despise the Word of God, you who comprehend not the word of man.<sup>209</sup>

---

<sup>209</sup> St. Augustine, *Tractatus in Johannem*, 37.4. *Homilies on the Gospel of John; Homilies on the First Epistle of John; Soliloquies*. CCEL, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1, Vol. 7. Ed. Philip Schaff [cited 6 July 2017]. Online: <https://www.ccel.org/print/schaff/npnf107/i>. (Language modernized.)

A similar thought is to be found in a passage from *De Trinitate*:

Accordingly, the word that sounds outwardly is the sign of the word that gives light inwardly; which latter has the greater claim to be called a word. For that which is uttered with the mouth of the flesh, is the articulate sound of a word; and is itself also called a word, on account of that to make which outwardly apparent it is itself assumed. For our word is so made in some way into an articulate sound of the body, by assuming that articulate sound by which it may be manifested to men's senses, as the Word of God was made flesh, by assuming that flesh in which itself also might be manifested to men's senses. And as our word becomes an articulate sound, yet is not changed into one; so the Word of God became flesh, but far be it from us to say He was changed into flesh. For both that word of ours became an articulate sound, and that other Word became flesh, by assuming it, not by consuming itself so as to be changed into it. And therefore whoever desires to arrive at any likeness, be it of what sort it may, of the Word of God, however in many respects unlike, must not regard the word of ours that sounds in the ears, either when it is uttered in an articulate sound or when it is silently thought.<sup>210</sup>

Here one of the ideas is that just as a human word needs to be articulated, given a "fleshly" vehicle as it were, to communicate itself to another human being, so the Word of God needed to assume flesh in order to communicate with humankind. In both of the passages quoted above, when discussing human words

---

<sup>210</sup> St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Haddan [cited 6 July 2017]. Online: <http://www.logoslibrary.org/augustine/trinity/1511.html>.



Augustine considers the word as something spoken in the first instance. This may reflect the prominence of the spoken over the written word in the age in which he was writing. Augustine was content to make the connection with Word of God made flesh. A much later writer, from a very different theological background, fought against the fleshly connection: the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, influenced by the Miaphysite writings of Pseudo-Dionysius,<sup>211</sup> regarded the fact that language was bodily in origin as a barrier to knowing God, who is transcendent, and to be known only by the *via negativa*, which sees God's nature as primarily divine, totally transcendent, and beyond the reach of human understanding. For the *Cloud* author, far from language being a way of understanding God, it is a barrier between the soul and God, and makes the work of writing about contemplation even more difficult: "of the work that belongs to God alone I dare not take it upon me to speak with my blabbering fleshly tongue".<sup>212</sup> This digression to a much later work, written in very different circumstances and under the influence of an entirely different theology, highlights Augustine's views of scripture as thoroughly incarnational. He had separated himself from the earlier philosophical streams by which he had been influenced, Manichaeism and Neoplatonism, to "show a progressive turn towards the body".<sup>213</sup>

Augustine's mature meditation on the nature of scripture has been summed up in the following way: "Scripture is a revelation of Christ in a unique way, in that it shares his functions: it too is a Word of God, it too provides a veil to truth which would otherwise blind man, an eyesalve to heal his damaged sight, a shade of authority in

---

<sup>211</sup> MacCulloch, *Silence*, 86-9.

<sup>212</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. A.C. Spearing (London: Penguin Books, 2001), chapter 26.

<sup>213</sup> Quash, "The De-sublimations of Christian Art", cited in section on Methodology.

which the truth might be glimpsed, a lamp to lead man to it. It is a medicine which cures man, food and drink for his soul.”<sup>214</sup> All the foregoing pictures are gleaned from Augustine’s scattered references to scripture. Most of them are quite concrete in their reference, establishing scripture in temporal reality, rather than relegating it to some ethereal, super-spiritual realm.

Further evidence of Augustine’s positive assessment of the temporal realm is to be found, it has been suggested, in two of his major doctrines.<sup>215</sup> Creation *ex nihilo* implies that God himself creates matter, and in as far as something exists, it possesses form or beauty; conversely, when there is a turn away from the source of existence, that form becomes ugly. “The material realm and its beauty are therefore inseparably related and both derive from, and most importantly, reveal their transcendent Creator”.<sup>216</sup> According to Augustine’s view of the Fall, humankind no longer has the intuitive grasp of truth within that it once had, but now needs temporal revelation from God to “re-form” (restore the beauty, *forma*) that they once had. With Augustine’s change of attitude to the created realm, this became a possibility. The most effective revelations are those in which God is perceived as beautiful, because they attract human attention. This will be seen to have great importance for Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics.

Augustine’s most important insight relating to the centrality of scripture has been framed in this way:

the truth must be exteriorized, it must incarnate itself in order to convey its content to the mind of another. For the same

---

<sup>214</sup> Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 211.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

reason God must incarnate himself in his Word to reveal himself to man, because man has fallen and no longer enjoys access to the truth within, in his mind. The communication of truth through language, and God's revelation of himself to man, coincide in the language of Scripture – the exegesis of which Augustine often has cause to reflect upon.<sup>217</sup>

Augustine's attitude to the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, and the words of scripture shows a blurring of what the modern mind might consider to be the usual boundaries between the person of God incarnate, and writings recognized as inspired by the Church. For him, both are "instantiations"<sup>218</sup> of the incarnation. Viewing scripture in this way, it becomes possible to see *lectio divina* as communication between two embodied entities: the reader, it has been argued above, is to be conceived holistically as an embodied being, and the inspired words of sacred text, which is the embodiment of Christ, the Word of God made flesh.

For Augustine, there is a direct relation between a sign, such as a word, and what it signifies. To move from a sign to the thing signified, a methodology other than the rational dissection of words is required. "In the interpretation of signs, man's intuition, imagination, and sensitivity, his capacity for faith in that which is hidden, mysterious, ambiguous and obscure is called for".<sup>219</sup> Scripture "demands and inspires an approach which is more characteristic of the artist than the philosopher: it must be read in

---

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> The word used by Quash, in "The De-sublimations of Christian Art".

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

faith, and its spiritual meaning desired and sought for in hope and love.”<sup>220</sup>

Augustine views scripture as Christocentric, and the role of language, especially Scripture, as “significatory, symbolical and image-bearing”, a *sacramentum* or *signum* of divine truth (where sacrament means a visible representation and bearer of spiritual reality and truth).<sup>221</sup> Augustine compares scripture with the descent of the incarnate word, Jesus, to lift humankind up to their source.<sup>222</sup> For Augustine, scripture

is treated as sacramental, as inspiring man’s desire and love, as demanding of him an intuitive, imaginative, symbolic, image-making apprehension of God’s Word, expressed in a manner which is more characteristic of a poet than a philosopher, since it is no longer an abstract word, theory, or truth, but is embodied in Scripture, Creation, history, the incarnate ....<sup>223</sup>

Augustine uses and interprets Scripture in a way that is inseparable from his attitude to the temporal revelation of God in Christ, and it stands in the centre of his theology as much as the Incarnation of Jesus: “the one is a continuation of the other”.<sup>224</sup>

For Augustine, truth must be incarnated, to convey its content to the mind of another. God must therefore incarnate himself in his Word to reveal himself to man, because man no longer has access to

---

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-6.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

the truth within, in his mind. “The communication of truth through language, and God’s revelation of Himself to man, coincide in the language of Scripture – the exegesis of which Augustine often has cause to reflect upon.”<sup>225</sup>

Augustine moved away from the philosophical position with which he had grown up, to adopt an attitude to Scripture that was centred on the Incarnation. Just as God had taken on human flesh to be able to communicate with humankind, scripture (rightly approached) has the quality of being another kind of incarnation that continues to seek to communicate truths to humankind. The flesh of Jesus was human flesh: one could have walked past without realizing this was the Son of God, because there was nothing about him to attract the gaze, as Isaiah had prophesied.<sup>226</sup> For Augustine, the highly sophisticated former orator, Scripture too initially had nothing special to commend it, yet he came to be won over by its apparent simplicity, hiding profundity, which attracts readers to discover the truth by its literary artistry.<sup>227</sup>

---

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>226</sup> Isaiah 53:2.

<sup>227</sup> Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, pp. 92-3. This point is also made in a study of the sublime in Christian art: Augustine’s writings show a progressive turn towards the body, and an increasingly positive evaluation of creation, the body of Christ, and the body of scripture, all of which are related. Augustine came to see scripture “as a sort of extension of the incarnation itself”. Christian revelation becomes incarnate again, in scripture’s witness to Christ. Ben Quash, “The De-sublimations of Christian Art”, in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, n.p. Cited 11 August 2016. Online: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/ben-quash-the-de-sublimations-of-christian-art-r1140522>.

## The spiritual senses in Augustine

Another feature of Augustine's theology with a bearing on *lectio divina* is the doctrine of the spiritual senses. As pointed out above,<sup>228</sup> "spiritual senses" in this context refers to human capacities to sense spiritual realities, to be distinguished from the spiritual reading of Scripture. This will be briefly described, before turning in detail to Augustine's treatment of it. Just as there are five corporeal senses that discern entities in the material world, there is a corresponding set of five spiritual senses that perceive spiritual entities in an "extra-corporeal register".<sup>229</sup> The doctrine takes its origin from copious biblical uses of sensory language to describe human experience of the divine. The doctrine is not without its difficulties: there is no consensus on the existence of a set of senses corresponding to the physical ones, and it would appear to breach expectations of divine transcendence and immateriality.<sup>230</sup> Responses have included the complete denial of all claims to divine revelation, and the acceptance of such revelation, without definition of the exact cognitive mechanism. Other authors, including Balthasar, accept the idea of spiritual perception.<sup>231</sup>

As with his views on the incarnation, Augustine's approach to the spiritual senses has to be pieced together from scattered references throughout his works. According to Augustine, humankind possesses spiritual senses as well as bodily ones, which can perceive God and his activity in the world; both sets of senses are part of embodied human existence, both in this life and the next.

---

<sup>228</sup> See footnote 9, p.10.

<sup>229</sup> Mark McInroy, *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Splendour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>230</sup> Ed. Gavrilyuk and Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses*, 1.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

The spiritual senses enable embodied humans to know God in the world, in an immediate and intimate way. The corporeal senses, of which vision is chief, are involved in an intentional process when they function: in distinction from modern views, the soul is not regarded by Augustine as the passive recipient of objects bombarding it. The bodily senses act as mediators between the external world and the soul. Because Augustine believes the spiritual senses act analogously to the bodily ones, these features of the corporeal senses are of interest.<sup>232</sup>

For Augustine, it is the inner self alone that can know God. As the *homo exterior* uses corporeal senses to know the world, the corresponding *homo interior* has senses for perceiving God and his presence in the world. In Augustine's earlier writings, vision dominates discussion of the inner sensory life, while later his thinking on the topic expands to cover all five senses in the inner life, and he articulates a perceptual model that can be described as spiritual sensation, inner senses that can directly perceive God and his presence in the world. He bases this upon biblical texts that describe sensory experience of God. As a practical example of spiritual sensation, Augustine gives an illustration of discerning between two slaves, one of whom is handsome but dishonest, the other ugly but upright in his dealings. In discerning between the two men, both sets of eyes, corporeal and spiritual, are used to make an assessment, but it is the inner "eyes of the heart" that discern the qualities of justice and beauty in the outwardly ugly slave. Augustine argues that we need the spiritual senses to know God, "who by nature remains entirely beyond apprehension by the corporeal

---

<sup>232</sup> Lootens, Matthew R. "Augustine". *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*. (Edited by Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 56-9.

senses". The soul's quest for God is mediated not through the bodily senses or language, but through the spiritual senses. It is only by the latter senses that God, justice and beauty can be known. Augustine implies that there is a moral dimension to the functioning of the spiritual senses: those who are not able to see spiritually either cannot do so because they choose not to, or because those faculties have been dulled by sin. This state can however be reversed: "the moment of conversion and the advent of grace is a kind of sensory overload that heals the dysfunction of the inner senses and redirects sensory desire completely to God".<sup>233</sup>

To sum up Augustine's view of the spiritual senses, he believes that humans have both corporeal and spiritual senses, but that true happiness comes when the spiritual senses are completely directed to God, which happens fully only in the resurrection. Only the grace of God can activate and heal the spiritual senses to be effective in this life. His treatment of the spiritual senses preserves the immateriality of God, but at the same time guarantees that perceptual life is regarded as an essential aspect of human existence in this life and in the resurrection.<sup>234</sup> It will be seen in the last chapter that the spiritual senses play a vital part in *lectio divina*.

## Balthasar

Balthasar continues Augustine's ideas concerning the nature of scripture, and bases a major part of his theology on the spiritual senses, also found in Augustine. Christian theologians working in the field of aesthetics assert that the aesthetic is a core truth.

---

<sup>233</sup> Lootens, "Augustine", 59-69.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.



Theological aesthetics is an attempt to arrive at core principles by aesthetic means, by demonstrating the fundamental unity between aesthetic, cognitive and ethical principles.<sup>235</sup>

Balthasar's major trilogy comprises *The Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-drama* and *Theo-logic*, which revolve around the three transcendental qualities of the beautiful, the good and the true. Von Balthasar uses "transcendental" in the sense of universal, that is, transcending all categories. His starting point is that humans can grasp being by using their senses: we actually encounter being, helped by the senses, in and through particular concrete things. His philosophical position is therefore one of epistemological realism (our powers of knowing are reliable) and ontological realism (our powers of knowing give us access to things as they really are).<sup>236</sup> As a Christian, Balthasar would say that the ground and source of the being with which we come in contact via our senses is God: the "humble senses" give us access to ultimate reality. Thereby he puts the human subject in immediate relation with the truth that lies *outside* itself.

A famous passage from Balthasar's "A Résumé of my Thought" shows that he works against a background of a "participation metaphysic" used by St. Thomas Aquinas. As beings, we participate in and derive our being from God, who is ultimate being; we therefore participate also in his goodness.

---

<sup>235</sup> Oleg V. Bychkov and Jim Fodor, eds., *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*. (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), Introduction, i-viii.

<sup>236</sup> This and the next few paragraphs draw on Aidan Nichols. *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness and Truth*. (London, Darton, Longman and Todd: 2011), Chapter 1, "Key-word 'Being': Balthasar and the Transcendentals", 1-9.

## The transcendentals

Balthasar works with four transcendentals, not just three: i.e. the three listed above, plus unity: he does not write about unity explicitly, but it underlies the other three, and is revealed in the way in which beauty, goodness and truth are indivisibly one. Everything that exists, by virtue of its existence, shares in being and in the transcendental qualities of being, i.e. unity, truth, goodness and beauty. These qualities occur in different ways and to differing degrees in many things, and so “transcend” the normal categories by which we divide up the world. The transcendentals belong together in “an inseparable mutual co-inherence”, which is to say that they are interior to one another: whatever is “really” real is also truly good and beautiful and one.

## Epistemology

Balthasar states “the first prerequisite for understanding is to accept what is given just as it offers itself”.<sup>237</sup> A phenomenon provides its own objective evidence; objective evidence does not come from satisfying the personal needs of the one observing the phenomenon. In knowing, we receive more than we project, and we exist in relation to a world of things that make themselves known to us by their presence.

Balthasar aimed at a philosophy, and ultimately a theology, starting from the analogy of being (i.e. the comparison we make between created being and its uncreated source) – but this was not

---

<sup>237</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar. *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics. I. Seeing the Form* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1982), 469.

being in abstract, but he begins “from an analogy of being *as being is encountered concretely in the transcendentals*”.<sup>238</sup>

The foundation of von Balthasar’s project has been summarised in this way: the analogy between aesthetic experience and revelation is made possible through the Catholic doctrine of the “analogy of being” between created reality and God. This in turn is based on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas that aesthetic experience is always somehow revelatory: it reveals something about the hidden principles of reality. Being has the capacity to communicate its form, and humans have the capacity to perceive it. Perceiving the form of beauty is the first task of the theologian/aesthetician. “Von Balthasar does not set out to prove this anew, but goes to ancient and medieval texts to retrieve this foundational insight”.<sup>239</sup>

### The Spiritual Senses

We turn now to the doctrine of the spiritual senses in Balthasar: although influenced by Origen, Augustine, and other patristic and medieval authors, he does not simply take over the doctrine from them unaltered, but forges a new model of the doctrine, in dialogue with his contemporaries, including Karl Barth. His version has significant differences from earlier ones, which serve his own theological aesthetics.<sup>240</sup> Balthasar aimed to revive an objective revelatory claim for modern theology, and therefore opposed theologies influenced by Kant’s philosophy, with its interest in the subject. It has been suggested that therefore there has been greater interest in the object in Balthasar’s theology than in the subject,

---

<sup>238</sup> Nichols, *Key to Balthasar*, 9. Author’s italics.

<sup>239</sup> Bychkov and Fodor, *Theological Aesthetics*, i-viii.

<sup>240</sup> McInroy, *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses*, 2.

which has resulted in neglect of his ideas of the human subject.<sup>241</sup>

Balthasar regarded the doctrine of the spiritual senses as of crucial importance for his theology; not only were the spiritual senses essential for his own project, but according to Balthasar, spiritualized perception runs as a leitmotiv throughout Christian theology.<sup>242</sup>

The doctrine of the spiritual senses has a key role in Balthasar's theological aesthetics, acting as the anthropological correlate necessary to receive divine revelation. Balthasar himself terms this task as "seeing the form".<sup>243</sup> To understand the role of the spiritual senses, it is necessary to consider Balthasar's conception of his central categories of beauty and form. Beauty is not an aspect of surface appearance, but, as mentioned above, as a transcendental, permeates all of reality, as do truth and goodness. As we witness beauty, we encounter the depths of being, shining out to human beings. Beauty is not to be spiritualized, and taken separately from its material medium of expression, but, for Balthasar, "beauty is fundamentally conjoined with the concrete medium of its expression".<sup>244</sup> For Balthasar, because beauty is always concretely manifested, it must take a form (which he terms *Gestalt*): "only through form can the lightning-bolt of eternal beauty flash". Form reveals an unfathomable mystery, while also protecting and veiling it. "The content (*Gehalt*) does not lie behind the form (*Gestalt*), but within it."<sup>245</sup> Balthasar borrows the Thomistic categories of *species*

---

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>243</sup> Sarah Coakley and Paul L. Gavrilyuk, eds. *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 258.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, quoting Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil et al., 7 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982-9), Vol. 1, 151.

(or *forma*) and *lumen* (or *splendor*), which are not to be thought of as separate, which would be dualist: *species* and *lumen* in beauty are one.<sup>246</sup> In Balthasar's theology, the ultimate form or super-form (*Übergestalt*) is Christ, who has ultimate beauty, to which all worldly beauty is relative. Christ is not a mere pointer to the divine, not a sign, but the divine presence in the midst of creaturely reality. "The person of Jesus is the medium through which God is known".<sup>247</sup>

Form, according to Balthasar, has sensory and super-sensory dimensions, visible and invisible aspects. Sensory perception alone is inadequate: "a notion of form that exceeds the corporeal realm must be developed".<sup>248</sup> It is here that Balthasar appeals to the doctrine of the spiritual senses: as Christ appears to man in the midst of worldly reality, the site of the encounter between God and man is where the profane human senses become "spiritual": "Our senses, together with images and thoughts, must die with Christ and descend to the underworld in order then to rise unto the Father in an unspeakable manner that is both sensory and suprasensory".<sup>249</sup> The spiritual senses are therefore central in the meeting between human beings and God.

Thanks to his notion of the spiritual senses, Balthasar describes the scriptures in this way:

The scriptures are in no sense what they appear to earthly eyes to be – that is to say, a document which is hopelessly located in and tied to a particular stage in history, but rather a witness given to the church, ...his real and spiritual presence, to

---

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 271

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 272, quoting Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, Vol. 1, 24.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 272, quoting Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, Vol. 1, 425.

accompany it on its way through history, *a document which consequently possesses unconditionally the properties of a persistent actuality and accessibility*, a document which instructs and illumines, which gives powerful comfort. In it the spirit has the upper hand over the letter, the immediate intelligibility primacy over the need for interpretation; the Bible remains a word for the poor in spirit.<sup>250</sup>

Balthasar's doctrine of the spiritual senses, and his view of scripture as a form of incarnation, both seen earlier in Augustine, have a central role in the thesis here presented, that *lectio divina* is effective because it is communication between two embodied entities, the reader, and Christ, incarnate in the scriptures, with Christ being discerned spiritually. This will be spelled out more fully in the next chapter.

#### Karl Barth on the nature of scripture

Finally in this section on theology, some mention should be made of Karl Barth on the nature of scripture. Barth does not write expressly of scripture being an incarnation of the word of God, but he does describe it in dynamic terms, as a word that is alive, and always addressing mankind, so that his theology is relevant to a better understanding of *lectio divina*.

Barth holds contrasting poles in tension. He identifies revelation as God's self-revelation, made known in Jesus Christ. It is not humankind's place to start with conceptions of being, and seek

---

<sup>250</sup> Medard Kehl and Werner Löser, *The von Balthasar Reader* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark: 1982), 264), quoting Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Klarstellungen. Zur Prüfung der Geister* (trans. *Elucidations*, John Riches; London: SPCK, 1975), 74-6; author's italics.

to show how God's nature fits with these; rather, one starts with God's revelation of himself, which is allowed to shape human conceptions. God's essence is in existence: "the specific existence that reveals the divine essence is none other than God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ",<sup>251</sup> which is to say that the manner of divine existence is dynamic. This then leads to Barth's understanding of what scripture is: "God's action on man has become an event, and not therefore that man has grasped at the Bible but that the Bible has grasped at man. The Bible, then, becomes God's Word in this event, and in the statement that the Bible is God's Word the little word 'is' refers to its being in this becoming".<sup>252</sup> The unity of the totality of scripture is found in the name of Jesus Christ: what we know of the being of the Bible is christologically determined. A scholar of Barth sums up his position on scripture: "For Barth, the Bible is 'the Word of God' in that the Word [Jesus Christ] that God spoke once for all continues to address us in the word or testimony of the biblical writers".<sup>253</sup> The implications of Barth's view of scripture for lectio divina will be taken up in the next chapter.

---

<sup>251</sup> Harmon, Timothy G. *Being and the Bible: An Ontological Assessment of Holy Scripture*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Westminster Theological Centre. Cheltenham, June 25, 2015, 5.

<sup>252</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 1*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), 110, quoted in Harmon, *Being and the Bible*, 6.

<sup>253</sup> Francis Watson, "The Bible," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 61.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Part one: Lectio divina seen through the prism of neuroscience

As Newberg pointed out, a spiritual practice like lectio divina can be considered from both what he termed a phenomenological and a physiological point of view. A devoted practitioner of this kind of reading is more likely to regard the biological and neurological changes that occur as being of secondary importance, while the most important thing is what is experienced from the point of view of belief, both in the moment, and over a prolonged period of practice. Drawing on Newberg's ideas of neurotheology however, it is quite possible to see lectio divina also as a phenomenological and a physiological event; considering both aspects leads to an enriched picture. To take account of only one of the two aspects, belief and neurology, would lead to an unnecessarily impoverished view, whereas dealing with both has the benefit of taking a holistic view of knowledge, where faith and science are not pitted against each other, but provide complementary insights. This may recall the often-quoted illustration of the question about why the water is boiling: burning gas heating the water, and the desire to make tea are equally valid reasons.<sup>254</sup>

In an earlier section, an example of lectio divina, with some reflections, was provided. This was couched entirely in terms of the phenomenology of the event, as a means of gaining theological insight leading to personal transformation. The same event could also be considered in neurological terms, taking into consideration

---

<sup>254</sup> Often attributed to John Polkinghorne; quoted by Alister McGrath, "God, Science, and Faith: Richard Dawkins vs CS Lewis on the Meaning of Life" (paper presented at the annual University Cathedral Lecture, Cheltenham, UK, 13 June 2017), unpublished.



the reader/practitioner, the process (lectio divina) and the text (scripture).

Turning now to the process, and couching the activity in the terms first posited by d'Aquili and Newberg, before a reader engages in lectio divina, he or she is in that primary epistemic state termed neutral or baseline reality. The latter is the state of everyday perceptions, and would be regarded by many as the only valid epistemic state. When a reader engages in lectio divina, a step has been taken onto a continuum of experience that begins with what d'Aquili and Newberg term the "Apollonian" aesthetic, that is, one characterized by beauty and light, wholeness and harmony, and marked by a sense of joy, elation, or at least pleasantness. At this stage, the reader is following the recommended steps of lectio.<sup>255</sup> Physiologically, as lectio continues, another primary epistemic state has been entered, that of multiple discrete reality with positive affect. This state involves the same discrete entities and regularities as the primary epistemic state, but now with what is often experienced by practitioners of lectio divina as an elated sense of well-being. Research carried out on Tibetan meditators (focusing on an image) and Franciscan nuns (focusing on scripture or prayer) confirms that what is happening physiologically is progressive deafferentation of (or blocking neural input to) the posterior superior parietal lobule, certain parts of the inferior parietal lobe, especially on the non-dominant side, and possibly adjacent areas of the brain. It needs to be stressed that to state the events of lectio divina in this way is not to attempt to explain God away, as a bundle of embodied cognitive functions. It is a recognition of the fact that when engaging the mind in a certain way, there are definite,

---

<sup>255</sup> Known, primarily after Guigo II's treatise, *Ladder of Monks*, by the Latin terms *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*. See the section surveying the literature.

measurable consequences; describing lectio divina in these terms is to cast it in clearer light as an embodied activity.

To refer back to the example of lectio divina given at the beginning of this thesis, what neuroscience describes as the progressive deafferentation of the posterior superior parietal lobule, and other areas of the brain, was experienced personally as peaceful, pleasant interaction with the words of scripture as I pored over them, repeating them silently or quietly to myself, and letting them “speak” to me, allowing my imagination liberty to accept words and images that came into my consciousness.<sup>256</sup>

Something has been said of how neuroscience would interpret a single session of lectio divina, measurable as a sequence of events occurring in the brain. There is another aspect to be considered, that of the effects of the practice over time. Well-known research carried out on London taxi drivers’ ability to memorize large quantities of information about the geography of the city demonstrates that day-to-day activities bring about physical changes in the morphology of the brain.<sup>257</sup> In the case of taxi drivers, the changes occur in the hippocampus, responsible for spatial memory. It would be plausible to assume that regular practice of lectio divina would have a similarly measurable effect on the structure of the brain, leading to an increase in facility of engagement in the practice on the part of readers. From my experience, it is the case that it becomes easier to practice lectio divina if a regular, persistent regime of reading is followed. Seeing lectio divina as an embodied

---

<sup>256</sup> Cf. p. 72, where it is pointed out that not all experiences arising during lectio divina will be pleasant ones. On the occasion of the example cited in this thesis, it happened that the experience was a pleasant one.

<sup>257</sup> Referred to in the section on methodology.

practice is helpful to me as a practitioner, because recognizing that some of the sensations that may accompany scripture reading are ephemeral and dependent on brain activity means that I do not rely on the presence of such feelings to consider that a session of lectio divina has been “valid”. “Validity” comes when I feel myself addressed by God during lectio divina, independently of my feelings.

As further evidence of the effects of intentional mental practice on the brain, studies of the effectiveness of behavioural therapy in patients suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) have shown that such interventions can bring about physiological changes in the brain, reducing obsessive tendencies, and produce a decrease in metabolic activities in the parts of the brain associated with OCD. Further, it has been demonstrated that practising mindfulness meditation results in increased hippocampal volume, associated with learning and memory, and decreased density in the amygdala, the area associated with anxiety and stress.<sup>258</sup> Here again is compelling evidence that regular, intentional mental practices lead to definite changes in brain structure. To quote a personal example of lectio divina acting with therapeutic effect, in a time of considerable stress, over a period of three weeks, I meditated every morning on Psalm 121. Far from this being a boring, repetitive, mechanical process, the repeated, intentional exposure to the same short piece of scripture had the effect of providing an anchor in a rough sea.

Another aspect of lectio divina as practiced over time, and seen from a neurological approach, is its role in the remoulding of the brain that is known to happen over a person’s lifetime. This type

---

<sup>258</sup> Quoted in the section on methodology.

of learning is typically the product of interpersonal experiences, which are known to shape the development of brain structure and function. Synaptic activity has the effect of sculpting the brain, and shaping the mind, leading to changes in the self which is always developing. On the other hand, left unchallenged, the human brain tends to use the same neural pathways, so that inferences about life are biased by our expectations, and responses become routine rather than consciously thought out. Over time, the brain is “enslaved” to patterns of thought, resulting in behaviour that can be detrimental both to the individual and the community. *Lectio divina*, with its commitment to slow, meditative, open-minded reading, gives the possibility of reconfiguring old neural pathways so that real learning can occur. In the example of *lectio divina* given at the beginning of the section surveying the literature, reference was made to the impression produced by noticing a previously unseen parallelism in a passage of scripture. This was facilitated by the very slow, repetitive reading in *lectio divina*. As an event in the brain, this could be seen as a new neural pathway being made, in response to a new piece of information. *Lectio divina* can be regarded as a very useful tool at a Christian’s disposal in countering a common difficulty: the conflict between wanting to ingest as much as possible of the word of God, and the danger of overfamiliarity with the text, that persuades a reader there is nothing new to be learned. A common solution to this problem is to use different translations, which can be effective, but *lectio divina* offers a way of actually remodelling the brain, and learning something entirely new.

To sum up then, during *lectio divina* one might experience any of the following: peace, calm, love, acceptance; possibly, disquiet, arising from conviction of sin, or having long-held prejudices challenged; insight into the meaning of a text; insight into

how to apply the knowledge gained, in a practical situation; perspective on oneself, one's situation and problems; insight into the value and motives of others – what they mean, what their influence has been, whether positive or negative; perspective on God's leading, perhaps looking back over a period of time.

## Part two: Theological perspectives on lectio divina

The following sections now turn to theology, to apply the implications for lectio divina of the embodied nature of humankind, scripture as a form of embodiment, and how the spiritual senses act as the locus of communication between the reader and Christ, embodied in the scriptures.

### ***Imago Dei***

Humans were created to have relationships with each other and with their Creator. Language is the prime way in which this communication takes place: at the heart of lectio divina is the sense of being addressed by God, through the words of scripture.

Responsibility is a consequence of being God's representative "icon" in his creation: the words heard are not merely matters of passing interest, but demand a response from the hearer's whole being, and carry consequences both for the initial recipient of the word, as well as for those affected by the impact of that obedience or receptivity.

The New Testament statement: "Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matt 7:24), commends an obedience and receptivity to divine words. A similar thought is found in the Letter of James, who likens neglect of the word that has been heard to the action of someone looking at himself in a mirror, then

immediately forgetting what he saw. The one who is commended keeps gazing at the “perfect law of freedom”, and actively puts it into practice (Jas 1:22-5). Finally, it is part of being the *imago Dei* that humankind is embodied. It would therefore be an incomplete understanding of lectio divina to assume that it affects only the inner, unseen parts of the human personality, and not the whole body. (Ancient and medieval ways of reading, investigated in an earlier section, remind us that what is now in Western societies often assumed to be a mainly cerebral activity was in earlier times seen to involve the whole body, which participated with reading aloud, using the organs of speech and hearing, and even bodily movements, to help assimilation of the text.)

#### Augustine on the nature of scripture and the spiritual senses

In what precedes, it has become clear that Augustine regarded scripture as a kind of embodiment of Christ; furthermore, the *imago Dei* theological anthropology accords a high place to the human body. The thesis argued here is that lectio divina functions as communication between two embodied entities, with the spiritual senses enabling the reader to “see” Christ, embodied in scripture.

This idea is found in the work of Augustine, who writes of the inner (or spiritual) senses (capacities to sense spiritual realities) being able to perceive God and his presence in the world; the proper functioning of these senses is part of the restorative work of God in humanity.

## Balthasar and the spiritual senses

As noted earlier, Balthasar adopts and builds on Augustine's views of the spiritual senses. Considering scripture through the lens of Balthasar's doctrine of the spiritual senses, it is possible to think of it as form, which he terms *Gestalt*. This *Gestalt* manifests a mystery, while at the same time protecting it. The form of scripture has both sensory and super-sensory dimensions, called by Balthasar, after Aquinas, *species* (or *forma*) and *lumen* (or *splendor*); these however are not to be regarded as separate, but as one, thereby avoiding any charge of duality. The sensory dimensions include the words on the page, their syntactical arrangement, and the language in which the scripture is read (be it the original or a translation); this tends to be primarily a visual process, or might include the aural as well, if a passage is read aloud. The supersensory dimension of perceiving the beauty of God in the concrete form of the scripture is made supernaturally possible by God working in the perceiver, to open the spiritual eyes and other senses, to see beyond the words on the page, to discern God in the scripture. A scriptural correlate to this can be found in the exchange between Peter and Jesus, recounted as happening shortly before the Transfiguration. When Peter correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah, he was told "it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven" (Mat 16:16,7; JB).

In applying Balthasar's theory of the spiritual senses to the reading of scripture in this way, it is possible to go even further. For Balthasar, the ultimate form, *Übergestalt*, is Christ himself, in whom is ultimate beauty, the divine presence in the midst of creaturely reality. If scripture is regarded as an instantiation of the incarnation

of Christ, then the status of *Übergestalt* would appear to apply to scripture itself, and Balthasar's claim that "the person of Jesus is the medium through which God is known"<sup>259</sup> also applies to scripture, always with Balthasar's stand that it is spiritual perception that is at play.

Regarding the reading of scripture in this way allows for the different experiences encountered: if scripture is approached exclusively at the sensory level of the words that are read or heard, the results remain on the same level, without bringing revelation; if however it is approached by a reader or listener supernaturally enabled in the supersensory dimension, it yields divine revelation. Balthasar shares with Augustine a view of scripture as an instantiation of the incarnation of Christ.<sup>260</sup> In the time of Christ's earthly incarnation it would have been possible to have spent time in his presence while being unaware of his divine identity, unless one had divine revelation, as Peter did. The same situation obtains in the case of scripture: without the ability to perceive the form of Christ in a supersensory way, the text of scripture is perceived only in the sensory dimension, that cannot bring divine revelation.

Lectio divina remains merely lectio if it is not approached with the "eyes of the heart" supernaturally opened to perceive the "form" of Christ. Even for an experienced practitioner, it requires persistence to gain insight from a passage of scripture that may not immediately seem to speak of Christ at all, or that may already be so

---

<sup>259</sup> Quoted in the earlier section on Methodology.

<sup>260</sup> "The scriptures are in no sense what they appear to earthly eyes to be ... but ... his real and spiritual presence, to accompany [the church] on its way through history, a document which consequently possesses unconditionally the properties of a persistent actuality and accessibility, a document which instructs and illumines, which gives powerful comfort." Quoted above, in the Methodology section.



familiar (as in the case of the opening verses of Genesis, chosen at the beginning of this study as an example) that it is hard to imagine how one can see anything new. From my personal experience, it may require many readings, perhaps of merely a few verses, before God speaks through a passage. Faith is required, to believe that God, whose word is alive and active, wants to speak through what is read: above, this was referred to as a “blurring of the boundaries” between God incarnate and the scriptures that attest to him.

### Karl Barth on the nature of scripture

Mention was made in an earlier section of Barth’s view of scripture. Some of the implications of this for lectio divina will now be considered. Barth writes of three forms of the Word of God: preached, written and revealed, which are without distinction of degree or value.<sup>261</sup> In all three, the Word of God is God’s speech to humankind, which applies and works in “God’s act on man, but it occurs in God’s way, which differs from all other occurrence, i.e. in the mystery of God”.<sup>262</sup> Barth considers the word of God primarily in the sense that God speaks,<sup>263</sup> which for him carries three implications: the spiritual nature of the Word, its personal quality, and its purposive character.

Barth is careful to admit that the Word of God has its physical aspects, in preaching, in the letter of Scripture, and in Jesus Christ himself, but insists that it is not primarily or pre-eminently corporeal;

---

<sup>261</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 1*, 88-120.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.* 132.

it primarily has the “simple spiritual power of truth”,<sup>264</sup> demanding from us a concentration on the spiritual sphere. Barth’s characterisation of the Word of God as a dynamic address to us in scripture recalls the notion of scripture as a form of embodiment, while reminding us that this word which comes through corporeal means is apprehended spiritually.<sup>265</sup>

Secondly, the fact that God speaks brings with it a personal quality, even at the same time as being objective reality. “What God speaks is never known or true anywhere in abstraction from God himself. It is known and true in and through the fact that He Himself says it, that He is present in person in and with what is said by Him.”<sup>266</sup> This arises from understanding the Word of God as revelation, as well as proclamation and scripture; God’s revelation is Jesus Christ, his Son. In John 1:1, God’s Son and his Word are equated. A word “heard” in *lectio divina* is not like a word of command overheard from the speech of a political leader; it is spoken to a specific person, at a particular time and set of circumstances, as a revelation from God revealed in Christ, who is personally present in the message, and its content.

Lastly, God’s speaking his word means that it has a “purposive” character, which can also be thought of as its pertinence, or character as address.<sup>267</sup> As Barth sees this, God does not need to speak to us, but does so out of his love for us: he always has something specific to say to everyone, that is applicable to that person alone. *Lectio divina* seen in this light is an intentional listening

---

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>265</sup> The Spirit is the mark of the people of God, Rom 8.

<sup>266</sup> Barth, *ibid.*, 137.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

for the word that God is always wanting to speak to us, that we could miss unless we prioritize listening as an activity of paramount importance. Barth draws out a number of points from the purposive character of God's word. The word that God addresses to us comes not from within ourselves, but from him: it makes a "genuine, irrevocable encounter".<sup>268</sup> The Word of God always tells us something fresh that we had never heard before from anyone. Practitioners of *lectio divina* are familiar with the sense of being addressed by God (and also familiar with the sensation of being confronted at times with silence). The Word God speaks has the capacity, as no human word can, to strike at the very heart of our being; it can do this as it comes from outside and above us.<sup>269</sup> An illustration of this capacity of God's word is found when the prophet Nathan visited David after his murderous affair with Bathsheba: David realized the enormity of his sin (2 Samuel 12). In a similar way, a word can hit its target with great accuracy in the course of *lectio divina*. It was noted in an earlier section that Guigo II, in his treatise *Ladder of Monks*, emphasized the sweetness to be found in the four steps of reading, prayer, meditation and contemplation. Barth's inclusion of the surgical accuracy of the Word of God, and its ability to bring highly uncomfortable revelation, in order ultimately to heal, is more realistic.

Another aspect of the purposiveness of the word of God is that it is a word that is necessary, to restore the original relationship between humankind and God: the fact that he speaks in this way shows his dissatisfaction with the status of our relationship with him, and his determination to re-establish the relationship. Such a word could not be a human word: "Only the One who has instituted the

---

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

relation can confirm and renew it when it is disrupted or destroyed".<sup>270</sup> Such a word is a word of reconciliation. In lectio divina one is listening to words that have the intention and power to restore us to the condition that God always intended for us. Lectio divina thereby has an important role in cooperating with God's grace, to see God's image in us restored, and reflecting him increasingly to his Creation.

The final aspect Barth mentions is that as a word of reconciliation, the Word of God is that Word by which God announces himself to man, i.e. promises himself as the content of man's future. "It is proper to God's Word ... to be also the full and authentic presence of the Speaker even if this be as the coming One".<sup>271</sup> Barth has already stated that God is present in person in and with what is said by Him, in the present; here he adds the notion that (presumably in a much fuller way) God's presence is our destination. Lectio divina is a foretaste of the future full presence of God.

#### A scriptural demonstration of lectio divina

The foregoing sections have integrated insights from neuroscience and theology into what happens during lectio divina, to provide an account of it as an encounter between an embodied reader, meeting Christ, embodied in the scriptures. With the encouragement of Augustine, who urged an approach "more characteristic of the artist than the philosopher", as quoted above, a passage from Luke's gospel can illustrate what happens during lectio divina.

---

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

In Luke's account, on the day that women visiting the tomb of Jesus were told by angels that he had risen from the dead, two disciples, one named Cleopas, head for the village of Emmaus, outside Jerusalem. As the disciples walk along, discussing the events of the last few days, Jesus joins them, but their eyes are kept from recognizing him: οἱ δὲ ὀφθαλμοὶ αὐτῶν ἐκρατοῦντο τοῦ μὴ ἐπιγνῶναι αὐτόν (24:16). At Jesus' question, the disciples explain what they were discussing: their "great prophet" had been handed over to the Romans to be crucified, thereby dashing their hopes of his setting Israel free. They also tell him of a puzzling claim from women that Jesus had been said to be alive, by angels, seen in a vision at the tomb.

Jesus upbraids the disciples for being "foolish and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets said." (24:25) Then he explains everything about himself in all the scriptures.

Jesus is prevailed upon to stay the night in the village of Emmaus. After reclining with them at the table, taking the bread, pronouncing a blessing, and breaking it, "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him": αὐτῶν δὲ διηνοίχθησαν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ἐπέγνωσαν αὐτόν (24:31). At this point Jesus vanishes from their sight.

The disciples comment on their heightened feelings as Jesus was talking to them on the road, and explaining (literally, "opening") the scriptures to them: ὡς διήνοιγεν ἡμῖν τὰς γραφάς (24:32). Eyes that were previously prevented from recognizing Jesus are now able

to see, because they have been opened: taking this as a “divine passive”, sight has been granted by God.

There are elements in this encounter that are congruent with an understanding of lectio divina. The disciples are struggling to make sense of what has been happening; without their realizing, Jesus becomes present to them; Jesus “opens up” the meaning of scriptures that were previously obscure. The revelation comes not as an instantaneous “download” of information, but over fellowship with the risen Jesus, sharing sustenance. Similarly, the revelation gained during lectio divina often does not come all at once, but in the form of a “dialogue” between reader and Christ. The revelation is an act of grace, unlooked for and unanticipated; Jesus appears, then disappears. Lectio divina too needs to be approached as an act of grace: there is, and could be, no formula for obtaining revelation from scripture, but dependence on God, and spiritual perception given as a gift are required. Eyes that were previously incapable of seeing Jesus are now opened to see both him, and into the meaning of scriptures that were impenetrable (reminiscent of Balthasar’s spiritual perception). Not every detail of the passage has an exact correlate in lectio divina: there are not always heightened feelings in an encounter with a passage of scripture, yet overall a picture emerges of the interflow of scripture, Jesus, and human understanding being enlarged to take in the divine.

### Lectio divina in contemporary theology

The place accorded to contemplative practices in a recent work of systematic theology by Sarah Coakley opens up a much wider view of lectio divina: far from being an optional extra for the mystically

inclined, she proposes that the contemplation resulting from prayerful reading of scripture is the essential precursor to genuine theological insight. On this understanding, theology is “always a recommendation for life”, and therefore an ascetical exercise, which demands bodily practice and transformation. Contemplation is “a simple form of dark, naked waiting before God”,<sup>272</sup> and becomes of vital importance to good theology. An objection to systematic theology, that it mistakenly turns God into an object of human knowledge, is countered by an appeal to “the apophatic dimensions of classic Christian thought”.<sup>273</sup> In concluding the methodological section of her study, Coakley notes that contemplation is given priority in sustaining the theological enterprise, “because it is the primary ascetical submission demanded by revelation, and the link to the source of life to which it continually returns”; such contemplation “pays radical attention to the Real which is open to all who seek to foster it”.<sup>274</sup> For Coakley, systematic theology needs to be founded “not in secular rationality, but in spiritual practices of attention that mysteriously challenge and expand the range of rationality, and simultaneously darken and break one’s hold on previous certainties”.<sup>275</sup>

Coakley would no doubt appeal to the early Fathers’ way of practising theology, which was intimately tied up with their contemplative practices. Whatever view is taken of the role of the apophatic in theology, Coakley’s insistence on the foundational importance of ascetic practices, including contemplation (closely

---

<sup>272</sup> Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18-19.

<sup>273</sup> Coakley, *Essay ‘On the Trinity’*, 42-4.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

linked historically with lectio divina) greatly broadens the scope of thinking about scriptural reading.



## CONCLUSION

This dissertation has argued for the thesis that lectio divina works as a transformative practice because there is an exchange between a reader, to be regarded properly as embodied, and the text of scripture, which embodies Christ. This exchange is made possible by a supernatural enabling of the spiritual senses, to perceive Christ. The distinctive contribution of this thesis has been its argumentation based on both neuroscience and theology, as the basis for seeing lectio divina as an embodied practice.

Historically, lectio divina owes its origins to the high place accorded in Judaism to words spoken by God. Christian reverence for words uttered by God is summed up in the identification of the second person of the Trinity as “the Word” (John 1:1): this Word took on human flesh and lived on earth. The thesis here proposed of how lectio divina works takes full account of the Word made flesh in Christ, and the words of scripture, which can be understood to incarnate Christ himself.

Neuroscience and theology offer contrasting and complementary ways of explaining what happens during lectio divina. Later work in neuroscience has pointed conclusively to spiritual practices, including lectio divina, being based firmly in the bodily dimension. Therefore, despite the sensations which can sometimes accompany certain spiritual practices, which have led some to suggest “rising above the material” level, neuroscience points to the fact that lectio divina should be regarded as a thoroughly body-based activity. Theologically, being embodied is part of being created in God’s image: therefore we are addressed in

lectio divina not only as intellects or disembodied souls, but as beings who respond with our bodies, with consequences in a material world. Remembering the “earthier” ways of reading in previous generations can help to prevent our own reading of scripture from being ungrounded.

This thesis draws on the theology of the spiritual senses, found in earlier writers, and taken up by Balthasar in his theological aesthetics. It is the spiritual senses that allow the practitioner of lectio divina to discern the form of Christ in what is read. Without this spiritual perception, there can be no communication between the embodied reader, and Christ, embodied in the scriptures.

Applying the insights of neuroscience to lectio divina, it is reasonable to assume that lasting changes in the brain are brought about by this practice, just as acquiring geospatial information can have a lasting influence on the hippocampus, or mental practices deliberately repeated over time have a beneficial effect on people suffering from e.g. obsessive-compulsive disorder. A further possible effect of long-term practice of lectio divina is its potential to create new neural pathways, which facilitate learning to respond in new ways to life’s challenges.

Lectio divina has transformative power in a practitioner’s life because it affects the whole human personality – body, soul and spirit – and not just the mind. The reader is thereby changed not just in mental outlook, but in the entire body, leaving measurable traces in the brain. Lectio divina needs to take proper account of the high place accorded to the body in classical, orthodox Christian

theology.<sup>276</sup> The thesis here proposed takes account of neuroscience and theology, to assert that lectio divina is a thoroughly embodied practice.

---

<sup>276</sup> Attention has been drawn above (p. 85) to some streams of Christian theology that have been hostile to female flesh.

## Bibliography

D'Aquili, Eugene, and Andrew B. Newberg. "The Neuropsychology of Aesthetic, Spiritual and Mystical States," *Zygon* (2000), 39-51.

---. "The Neuropsychological Basis of Religions, or Why God Won't Go Away," *Zygon* (1998), 187-201.

Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*. Translated by A.C. Spearing. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, 2003.

Balthasar, Hans Urs von. "A Résumé of My Thought," [http://ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/hub\\_resumethought\\_mar05.asp](http://ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/hub_resumethought_mar05.asp), accessed 29 Nov. 2014. (Originally published in *Communio* 15 (1988).

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics, Vol. 1. The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part One*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition.

Blackburn, Simon, "Richard Rorty". *Prospect Magazine*. Consulted online: <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/blackburn-richard-rorty-profile>, accessed 27/02/2016.

Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*. Translated by N. Plaice, S. Plaice, P. Knight. 2 vols. Massachusetts: MIT, 1987.

Buckley, Michael. "Atheism and Contemplation". *Theological Studies* 40 (1979), 680-699.

Burton-Christie, D. *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Bourguignon, Erika. "Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the Religious Uses of Altered States of Consciousness,"

[http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~jporter/02\\_Cross-Cultural.pdf](http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~jporter/02_Cross-Cultural.pdf), accessed 4 Jan. 2015.

Bychkov, Oleg V., and Jim Fodor, eds. *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008.

Coakley, Sarah, ed. *Religion and the Body*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Coakley, Sarah, and Paul L. Gavrilyuk, eds. *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Coakley, Sarah. *Powers and Submissions: Philosophy, Spirituality and Gender*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

Coakley, Sarah. *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Cortez, Marc. *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: T & T Clark, 2010.

Csachesz, István. "Filled with New Wine? Religious Experience and Social Dynamics in the Corinthian Church," *Experientia, Vol. 2: Linking Text and Experience*. Edited by Colleen Shantz and Rodney A. Werline. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012: 71-90.

Edwards, Mark J., "Origen", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/origen/>.

Foster, Dom David *Contemplative Prayer: A New Framework* London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Christian Growth*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980.

Gendler, Tamar, "Imagination", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/imagination/>.

Green, Joel B. *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible*. London: Paternoster, 2008.

Green, Joel B. *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015.

Guigo II. "The Ladder of Four Rungs". Cited 14 May 2017. No pages. Online: <http://www.umilta.net/ladder.html>.

Harrison, Carol. *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

Harrison, Carol. *The Art of Listening in the Early Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. [Introduction available as pdf download, accessed 07/03/2015]

Hills, David, "Metaphor", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/metaphor/>.

Houston, James M. "Toward a Biblical Spirituality." Pages 148-173 in *The Act of Bible Reading: A Multidisciplinary approach to Biblical Interpretation*. Edited by Elmer Dyck. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996.

Illich, Ivan. *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Jaeger, Werner. *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.

Kehl, Medard, and Werner Löser, *The von Balthasar Reader*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982.

Van der Horst, Pieter W. 'Silent Prayer in Antiquity'. *Numen* (1994): 1-25.

Jamison, Christopher. *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006.

Leclercq, Jean. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 3rd ed. New York: Fordham University Press, 1982.

Leithart, Peter J. *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009.

Louth, Andrew. "Mysticism." Pages 272-274 in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. Edited by Gordon S. Wakefield. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1983.

Lootens, Matthew R. "Augustine". *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*. Edited by Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pages 56-70.

Mead, Margaret. *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality*. New York: Crossroad, 1988.

McCulloch, Diarmaid. *Silence: A Christian History*. London: Penguin Books, 2013.

McInroy, Mark. "Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar". *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*. Edited by Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pages 257-274.

McInroy, Mark. *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Splendour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Merton, Thomas. *Contemplative Prayer*. London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1973.

Newberg, Andrew B. *Principles of Neurotheology*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010.

Newberg, Andrew B. "The Neuroscientific Study of Spiritual Practices." *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014): 215. PMC. Web. No pages. Cited 20 Nov. 2015. Online: <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00215/full>.

Newberg, Andrew B. "Dr Andrew Newberg on how meditation & spiritual practices empowers your brain." No pages. Cited 12 April 2017. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdtZPmF8uOE>.

Newberg, Andrew B. "Andrew Newberg: Three main changes in meditative brains." No pages. Cited 12 April 2017. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67YjAxagE7A>.

Newberg, Andrew. "The Neurotheology Link: An Intersection Between Spirituality and Health": 13-17. Cited 18 April 2017. Online: <https://andrewnewberg.squarespace.com/s/the-neurotheology-link.pdf>.

O'Keefe, John J. and R.R. Reno. *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. Translated by John W Harvey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923.

Palmer, Richard. "Postmodern Hermeneutics and the Act of Reading." *Notre Dame English Journal* 15, no. 3 (1983): 55-84.

Pennington, M. Basil. *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures*. New York: Crossroad, 1998.

Peterson, Eugene H. *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006.

Pinsent, Andrew. "Neurotheology." Pages 1527-1533 in *Handbook of Neuroethics*. Edited by J. Clausen and N. Levy. Dordrecht: Springer Reference, 2015.

Pinsent, Andrew. "Neurological Eudaimonia." Pages 1603-1617 in *Handbook of Neuroethics*. Edited by J. Clausen and N. Levy. Dordrecht: Springer Reference, 2015.



Quash, Ben. "The De-sublimations of Christian Art", in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/ben-quash-the-de-sublimations-of-christian-art-r1140522>, accessed 11 August 2016.

Raphael, Melissa. "Feminism, Constructivism and Numinous Experience." *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 511-526.

Räpple, Eva Maria. *The Metaphor of the City in the Apocalypse of John*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004.

Ricoeur, Paul. *The Rule of Metaphor*. Translated by R. Czerny, K. McLaughlin, J. Costello. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto, 1975.

Schneiders, Sandra M. "Biblical Spirituality: Text and Transformation." Pages 128-150 in *The Bible and Spirituality*. Edited by A.T. Lincoln, J.G. McConville and L.K. Pieteresen. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013.

Schneiders, Sandra M. "Biblical Spirituality." *Interpretation* (2002): 133-142.

Schneiders, Sandra M. "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline." *Journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality* 6 (1998): 1, 3-11.

Soskice, J.M. *Metaphor and Religious Language*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1985.

Studzinski, Raymond. *Reading to Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009.

Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*. Ed. Benedict Zimmerman. The Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/teresa/castle2.html>

Veling, Terry A. "Spiritual Practices of Reading and Writing: Listening to 'The Voice of the pages' and 'combining the letters'". *Religious Education*. 2 (2007): 206-222.

Ware, Kallistos. "'My helper and my enemy': the body in Greek Christianity". Pages 90-110 in *Religion and the Body*. Edited by Sarah Coakley. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Warnock, Mary. *Imagination*. London: Faber & Faber, 1976.

Donald S. Whitney. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. NavPress: Colorado Springs, 1991.

Wicks, Robert. "Nietzsche's Life and Works." No pages. Cited 15 February 2019. Online:  
<https://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-life-works/>.

Amos N. Wilder. *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976.

Wilkinson, Loren. "Hermeneutics & the Postmodern Reaction against 'Truth'". *The Act of Bible Reading: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Biblical Interpretation*. Edited by Elmer Dyck. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996. Pages 114-147.

Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. HarperCollins: New York, 1988.

Wilkin, Robert Louis. *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*. Yale University Press: New Haven & London, 2003.