

# SACRED TEXTS AND MYSTIC MEANING: AN INQUIRY INTO CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND THE INTERPRETIVE USE OF THE BIBLE

## ABSTRACT

This article endeavours merely to highlight four areas in the increasingly fertile and enriching field of Christian Spirituality which may demand some further scrutiny by scholars: (i) the observation of the 'open' and 'live' quality of classic sacred texts; (ii) the attention owed to the informing worldviews of both authors and readers; (iii) the specific use of language and modes of exegesis employed in the Christian spiritual quest, and (iv) the issue of the highly personal and narrative nature of Christian spirituality and how it may be monitored.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sacred books invoke wars. The *causae bellorum* reside in the claims by those who brandish a particular holy text that it alone possesses the singular and defining "truth" about the nature of human existence in its ultimate and conclusive sense. Thus, such adherents, in subscribing to the tenets of a singular deposit of sacred wisdom, maintain that the definitive answers to the fundamental questions about the purpose of creative inception, and the meaning of the threshold crossings of birth and death, reside in their holy book. And, moreover, if these particular writings do provide the incontrovertible narrative veracity about such profound matters, then it is affirmed that it is incumbent upon all humanity to subscribe to that unique, original, and unsurpassed *corpus* of eternity bearing and relevance.

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Such an exclusive and exclusionary declaration engenders warfare, but it is a war that is fought on two fronts. On the one hand, the battle-lines are drawn between those who believe in the “truths” of a particular sacred writ and those who do not. The enemy, which is identified as the infidels, the indifferent, the agnostics, or the atheists, lie – both in the locative and mendacious senses – beyond the trenches of those who are “of the faith”. The minds and the hearts of those recalcitrant dissenters require changing and converting, a task incumbent upon the professing community, and, in their endeavour, coercive violence is not shunned. Indeed, sacred books invoke bloody wars. On the other hand, the conflict is one of civil strife. Here, within the community that subscribes to the same holy writ, offensives are launched when, and inevitably, rival claims arise, as factions demand hegemony over the readings and interpretations of that same sacred book, and the various groupings appropriate the text, and arrogate to themselves the right to pronounce authoritatively upon its teaching. Such internal dissonance and civil disharmony may simmer almost indefinitely, as they do within some ecclesiastical communities, or they may result in accusations of heterodoxy, in schism and ostracism, in inquisitions and judgements of apostasy, and, indeed, as history has witnessed, in the rack and the fiery stake. Consequently, the accused may be barred from the divine rituals in which they too have been participating, and denied access to the holy sites, which they too have been claiming as their own; or even, in more extreme circumstances, dislodged from their homes and expelled from their communities.

## 2. THE SACRED CLASSIC

But it may be claimed that contested sacred texts, whether they are the Hebrew Scriptures, the Qur’an, the New Testament, the Upanishads, the Theravada Pali Canon, all belong to the status of ‘the classic’, and classic texts never tire of speaking. They speak into futures unrecognized in their inaugural moments, and they also speak of futures, which witnesses to their imaginative openness. They resist closure and definitive readings. Within themselves, classic texts already repel hermetically sealed interpretations. The classic corpus invites readers; and yet the classic itself reads and writes its guests. Those who are watchful companions of, and attentive visitors to, a classic, discover that the classic is addressing them, and, simultaneously, is challenging them and also telling their story. Thus, those who may have entered the arena of the classic as intermittent attenders and occasional readers are transmuted into more diligent conversational partners with the classic. Such a confrontation with a text that speaks ‘truths’ about the human condition into futurities from out of its own, often distant, past, engenders the realization that the classic sacred text is open and indeterminate and ‘live’. Classic texts invite dialogue. To force

closure upon, and, indeed, to restrict a questioning criticism of, the classic is to deny its very status (see, *inter alia*, Calvino 1999; Coetzee 2001 & 2007; Steiner 1997 & 2003; Tracy 1981).<sup>1</sup>

But precisely because classic texts, and, quite specifically, classic *sacred* texts, inform, and, more usually, map, in an exacting manner, human existence as a meaningful enterprise in its ultimate sense, to impose foreclosure upon that text and pronounce definitively upon its principles and protocols is neither unnatural nor uncommon (see Chidester 1988). Indeed, the construction of human meaning involves a careful, detailed, and even delicate act of self-examination and negotiation, in the intellectual and rational, emotional and affective human dimensions, and one that is undertaken within a material context, in an endeavour to seek a worthy and propiety authenticity. Therefore, summarily to challenge, or to fracture, a carefully constructed worldview of another may be an act of unseemly arrogance.

Nevertheless, the very demand for the canonical restriction of sacred writ, which is the very corpus through which life-worlds are negotiated and established, and, as a consequence, the probable ossification of that text, itself engenders an *agôn* about contextual and interpretive boundaries. And in such an arena of antagonisms, war is waged against both the external and internal enemies of the variously prescribed, dogmatic, and ordered interpretations of the classic holy texts.

However, if a text achieves the status of 'classic,' its definition implies that it remains a reservoir of perennial disclosure to any visitor and, no less significantly, to its own adherents. Although the 'utterances' of the classic may appear to be repetitive, if the text is to be proclaimed as, and claims for itself the seal of, the classic, it is always, at the very least, gently modifying, but also may be forthright and combative. The ever-unfolding tradition of commentary, and of the lineage of teachers and guides who continue to quarry the ancient, yet ever-contemporary, deposits of sacred wisdom, evince the lack of the obturation of sacred texts. But this lack of closure is both their liberating challenge, and also their burdensome cost. They hold out the gift of providing new answers to old questions and old answers to new questions in

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1 Coetzee (2001:19) states that "the function of criticism is defined by the classic: criticism is that which is duty-bound to interrogate the classic. Thus the fear that the classic will not survive the de-centring acts of criticism may be turned on its head: rather than being a foe of the classic, criticism, and indeed criticism of the most sceptical kind, may be what the classic uses to define itself and ensure its survival".

the freedom of an unrestricted inquiry, and, in this practice, they charge their interlocutors to confront themselves anew.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. THE ACT OF WRITING, READING, AND INTERPRETING

The two testaments commonly referred to as the “Old” and the “New” constitute the sacred classic for Christians. The notion that the purposes of God are unfolded progressively in an evolving revelation that culminates in the later and shortest of any of the holy *corpora* has led to the exaltation of the latter collection of writings over the former. Although this may controvert “the conviction, in some Christian churches at least, of the equal authority [of] all parts of Scripture” (Lombaard 2003:441), it may be asserted that, for Christians, the Second Testament justifiable may receive comparatively more attention than the First Testament, owing to its accounts of the life and death of Jesus, who is claimed to be the Messiah. But this is not to gainsay that, with regard to the vexing issue of the ‘spiritual use’ of the Bible, the Old Testament may provide a more profound resource, and even, possibly, a deeper well of learning, than the New Testament (Lombaard 2006). However, the issue of whether it does so or not, as well as the manner in which both Testaments may facilitate and enhance the spiritual quest, is a matter of reading intent and interpretive perspective.

The forthright claims of authoritative and singular readings of sacred texts are contradicted by the contextual milieux both of their authors and of their readers. An eloquent dramatic analogy, proposed by Ford (2002:75), is instructive:

In interpreting Scripture ... we are involved in a multiple performance. There is first the performance to which the text witnesses. That may invite us to imagine people, events, relationships or practices, whether historical or fictional ... [But] ... [t]he biblical text itself is a new communicative performance which embraces fresh elements but still can only act as an indicator of the full richness to which it testifies. This very under-determination of the text opens the way for generation after generation of interpretation in many modes, from commentary

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2 Tracy (1987:83-84) observed that “[w]hen not domesticated as sacred canopies for the status quo nor wasted by their own self-contradictory grasps at power, the religions live by resisting. The chief resistance of religions is to more of the same. Through their knowledge of sin and ignorance, the religions can resist all refusals to face the radical plurality and ambiguity of any tradition, including their own”.

and liturgy to drama, ethics and systematic theology. These are new performances.

More specifically, it may be advanced that both authors and readers view their environs through perspectival grids, and they participate in their environment as 'gridded' individuals, as persons inscribed upon by their own – partly idiosyncratic and partly communal – worldviews. Such worldviews comprise foundational information about being human, and which, whether unexamined or examined, accepted or modified, is employed to forge meaning and purpose, both at a personal and at a corporate level. In the quest for comprehensive inclusiveness, worldviews, and not only religious ones, include stories which provide the most adequate answers possible to the fundamental questions about the causative and teleological aspects of human existence, and the consequent import and intent of current tellurian enterprises and activities. These answers are employed in intellectual practices, they inform ethical practices, they prescribe social relations, and they are presented in symbolic forms, and consequently, they generate answers which, in their fidelity to the contextual milieu which gave rise to them, conform to the interrogations which were put to them (see Wright 1992:123ff. & *passim*).<sup>3</sup> It is from within the framing presence of such a symbolic and enactive worldview perspective that perception occurs, and what is perceived is recounted in a variety of symbolic, verbal, active, and intellectual ways from within those constraints. As a consequence, the stories are then 'retold' in the manner and activity of a life lived, and, in this process, the accounts also are qualified to a greater or lesser extent by the new 'teller' and his or her actions, which causes a modulation of the story as it responds to the recensions and additions of the latest 'narrator', and these adjustments ensure that the story remains valid.

Therefore, both what the knower may desire to know, and what the knower comes to know, are structured by prior informative worldview factors, which construct the knower and shape what is viewed, but each subsequent knower also shapes the known in a persistently 'live' worldview, and, subsequently,

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3 The terms "foundational information" and "fundamental questions" is employed because the "information" may provide a narrative about the ultimate meaninglessness of existence, rather than its meaningfulness. That narrative, nevertheless, may also explain, or attempt to explain, the reasons for existence, or, at least, reasons for continuing to participate in the human arena, and, in that process, provide possible answers to fundamental human questions, and to demonstrate the manner in which those answers may be symbolically celebrated and ethically enacted. Whilst theology seeks a reply to its inquiry about ultimate human issues by invoking the sacred, the 'secular theologies' of Marxism, Existentialism, various forms of Humanism, and schools of Psychology and Sociology, respond by turning away from sacred forms, and rather construct their worldviews with reference to secular, temporal, and human capacities and limitations.

lives it out in a particular and modified way.<sup>4</sup> When such a framework of “critical realism”, as Wright (1992:34-36) would call it, is employed in the approach to sacred texts, the reality of the object of the inquirer is not denied. However, whatever knowledge the inquirer may accrue is neither without the worldview impediment of that very seeker of knowledge, nor without the worldview impediment of the initial and, *toujours déjà*, perspectival recounting and representation of the object of knowledge.

Such an understanding of the ‘worlds of knowledge’ and the ‘worlds of the inquirers’ rejects the naive, oft-repeated, and almost egotistical statement that the Bible is read “from within the context of a life and a community of believers that lives in the here and now” (Perrin 2007:280). It is an assertion as much championed by liberation theology as by an emotive expressionism present in Christian Spirituality – the supremacy of “our condition” or of “my story” – and it evinces self-absorption and a spiritual immaturity. As Lovibond (2002:143) points out with regard to the cognate act of forging an ethical self, initial reactions of indignation, even visceral expressions of anger, require the subsequent explanations for one’s reactions both to oneself and to others. And a constituent part of that subsequent act of accountability is to place one’s reaction within the responses of the tradition in which one stands, including the responses as documented in the foundational works of that tradition. Therefore, as much as the “here and now” is of significance, it is imperative to ask about “the context of a life and a community of believers that live[d]” in the there and then.

When both life-worlds are perceived to be wider, more complex and detailed, constructions of both known and recoverable information, as well as unknown and unknowable informative factors, then the singular horizon of the texts of both the author and the reader multiplies. And even if the inquirer approaches the text with a specific question, the multi-faceted structural grid through which the perceptive vision operates, already solicits and destabilizes such a singularity, as much as it does so within an ‘answering text’ itself. Moreover, when the lineage of commentary lengthens to the extent that it does within the great religious traditions as much as for students of classical civilizations, the initial hermeneutical endeavour to read and interpret a text demands a variety of tools, which, within Christianity, is the province of the biblical, philological, historical-critical, systematic and doctrinal, ethical and practical theological areas of scholarship. In his lectures on hermeneutics, Schleiermacher (1987:167) discussed the range of skill required, as well as the detailed nature of task, so that even

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4 Placing this within the textual reading practice, it may be averred that “the texts enlarge reader-horizons to form new horizons” (Thiselton 1992:618).

[b]efore the art of hermeneutics can be practised, the interpreter must put himself both objectively and subjectively in the position of the author.

1. On the objective side this requires knowing the language as the author knew it. But this is a more specific task than putting oneself in the position of the original reader, for they, too, had to identify with the author. On the subjective side this requires knowing the inner and outer aspects of the author's life.

2. These two sides can be completed only in the interpretation itself. For only from a person's writings can one learn his vocabulary, and so, too, his character and his circumstances.

But this intrusive penetration into the world of the text and into the life-world of an author means, inevitably, that, as Schleiermacher (1987:167) tellingly notes, "the task is infinite, because in a statement we want to trace a past and future which stretch into infinity". That 'past infinity' must be recognized, together with the realization that the subsequent hermeneutical endeavour to "understand the text from the perspective of the life of a current reader" (Perrin 2007:198), must acknowledge the scale and reach of that "life", both in what is purposefully and distinctly present at the point of the current inquiry, as well as what, at that moment, is part of the absent-presence of that "life".

Some ten years after beginning his lectures on hermeneutics in Berlin in 1819, and from which the above citations come, Schleiermacher (1987:170), with his characteristic *hauteur*, in an "Academy Address" in 1829, stated that

the hermeneutical task [is not] restricted to a foreign language ... Who could move in the company of exceptionally gifted persons without endeavouring to hear 'between' their words, just as we read between the lines of original and tightly written books? Who does not try in a meaningful conversation, which may in certain respects be an important act, to lift out its main points, to try to grasp its internal coherence, to pursue all its subtle intimations further?

These remarks may be employed not simply to insist upon the complex, agonistic, said and unsaid – and 'unsaid-saids' – conscious and unconscious nature of verbal pronouncements and textual inscriptions, and hence the skill required to quarry them;<sup>5</sup> but also may serve to highlight the 'struggle' nature of

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5 Williams (2008:134-135; & *passim*) emphasises the degree of uncertainty, and, as a result, the semantic slippage, present in what is said and heard by the characters in the novels of Dostoyevsky. He also records an exchange between the author and his future biographer, Nicolai Strakhov, in Florence in 1862, where Dostoyevsky counters Strakhov's assertion that meaning in language is subject to the same test

textual, and, indeed, verbal statements, in which an internal textual and verbal warfare is waged upon any ‘errant voices,’ in order to control their influence, and, possibly even, to silence them (cf. Mosala 1989; Punt 2007). In addition, language purposefully may be coded through the selection of vocabulary, the utilization of semantic field-play, and through the deployment of diverse syntactic placements for emphasis – more readily available in inflected languages – and, furthermore, verbal utterances may be accompanied by gestural and sonic qualities which suggest and amplify meaning.

Therefore, when it is acknowledged that access to the sacred deposit of biblical wisdom is not immediate or direct, and that meaning cannot be read off the surface of a text, but, rather, is circumscribed, both consciously and unconsciously, by the worldviews of the participants, observers, and recorders, and also by the worldviews of the readers, interpreters, and secondary narrators; when it is acknowledged that an ‘event’ in the text is, in its initial occurrence, *toujours déjà*, irrecoverable, or, to advert to Ford (2002), the text witnesses to last night’s performance at the theatre; and when it is acknowledged that the adequacy of the act of reading and interpretation is dependent upon certain refined technical skills, then the two opposing extremes of reading strategies, which assert either that there is no text at all<sup>6</sup> or that the text discloses inerrant, obvious, and easily recoverable truths,<sup>7</sup> are set aside.

With reference to the Bible and Christian Spirituality, the frequent charge that the appreciation of the multivalency of meaning, of the presence of suppressed and concealed meaning, and of a range of possible alternative meanings reside in the Holy Scriptures is a neoteric, crypto-atheist plot, which is designed to continue the marginalization of the importance of the Bible in the post-Enlightenment era, and that the conviction that the biblical meaning and

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as a statement in mathematics by asserting that what may be heard as an illogical statement required interpretive work.

- 6 See, for example, Fish, S. *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- 7 A former Leeds University professor of theology and, later, a bishop of Durham, David Jenkins (2002:57), who, upon his appointment to the See of Durham and during his subsequent occupation of the See, was embroiled in controversy over some of his pronouncements about the Resurrection and the Virgin Birth, writes that “[t]ime and again well-educated people, skilled in their professions and disciplines, seem to suppose that their Christian faith can live and operate under entirely different standards of intellect and judgement from those applied in their secular lives ... [and that] ... biblical texts, narratives and statements of faith can only be treated as if they were as basically literal as elementary formulas in a scientific manual – and if they are not, then the only alternative is necessarily that they are ‘pious frauds,’ deliberately composed to deceive”.



message is immutable and constant is the ancient and venerable foundation upon which the Church Fathers and the greatest of Christian thinkers especially of the earlier centuries have relied, and one which the current zealous evangelical and fundamentalist readers and interpreters are recovering with a disconcerting robustness, requires dispelling. The ecclesiastical historian, Edward Norman<sup>8</sup> (2007:24), acutely has observed that

[i]t is now generally assumed, as part of modern intellectual culture, that the Bible was always interpreted literally until scientific knowledge and historical relativism began to dispel its authority. Then people of reason, and biblical scholars themselves, began to subject the sacred texts to the same kind of critical analysis as other repositories of traditional knowledge received in the Age of Enlightenment. In fact, a 'fundamentalist' reading of the Bible, and the concept of verbal inerrancy, are largely modern fruit: a fruit, indeed, of mass literacy and populist choice ... [since] ... the Bible texts were interpreted allegorically, not only by Philo and Origen and the Alexandrian school of the second and third centuries, but by probably a significant majority of Jewish and Christian scholars until the end of the Middle Ages.

With particular reference to approaching the Bible as a deposit of spiritual wisdom, Norman's (2007:24) conclusion is apt:

Allegory is now so out of fashion as an interpretive tool that it has virtually passed from the scene ... but it is well to remember that such a method accepted the diversity inseparable from human agency in the composition of texts, and allowed a single verbal construction to convey multiple meanings – a correct pointer to the complexity of things.

"Theological adequacy", as Turner (1995:24) states, "requires the maximization of our discourses about God", which, it may be claimed, are discourses about being human. And the multivalent complexity of being human within worldviews that seek ultimacy is evident less in the singular and monochromatic nature of the questions posed and the answers proffered, than in the diverse and polychromatic nature of the interrogations and the subsequent responses.

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8 Edward Norman (b. 1938), ecclesiastical historian, former Dean of Peterhouse College, Cambridge, Canon Chancellor of York Minster, and Professor of History at the University of York.

#### 4. CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND THE BIBLE: AN EARLIER 'POSTMODERN' TRADITION?

McGrath (1999:83) adverts to the four-fold manner of reading and interpreting the Bible, which, he asserts, was “systematically developed during the later Middle Ages”. In his reference to the latter three modes – allegorical, tropological, and anagogical – as “spiritual” (the first being ‘historical’), McGrath (1999) discloses the wide ambit of his understanding of Spirituality. But, by amplifying McGrath’s (1999) claim, the allegorical method may also include or augment the didactic and doctrinal spheres of theology – the uncovering of meaning for purposes of instruction and the establishment of doctrine – and may incorporate the liturgy as well, because it enacts a more historical and ‘literal’ reading of the text through symbolic rites and rituals. Furthermore, the tropological reading may accommodate the area of morality and ethics, since it concerns the *tropos*, the manner, way of conduct, and the ethical formation of the character of a believer, which requires both reflection and practice (Kretzschmar 2000 & 2008). Of these three modes of textual inquiry, it is the anagogical reading that may refer more exclusively to the specific act of the ‘lifting up’ of the mind and the soul to the divine in the spiritual quest to “know God”.<sup>9</sup> These different approaches, as McGrath (1999:83) rightly asserts, were ‘systematic developments’ of a later period, but this later supplementation must not obscure the structured and layered tradition of reading and textual quarrying of the Bible, which have a long history.

As Norman (2007) noted above, and as Louth (1981) more carefully investigates, the multiple readings of sacred Scripture within Christianity return to Philo (20 BCE – 50 CE), within the Jewish tradition, and then, more pivotally, to Origen (c. 185 – 254 CE), within the Christian tradition itself. Philo’s search to know God *in se*, a particular aspect of searching that, one may contend, is ‘spiritual’, takes the three-fold route of conversion, self-knowledge, and, in the manner in which Louth (1981:26) suggests it, culminates in an almost ‘hopeless hope’ of reaching God.<sup>10</sup> Pertinent to the importance of Scripture is Philo’s decisive appropriation of the two senses of *ho logos*. *Ho logos* is both *vox* or *oratio*, the word, utterance, or speech as the expression of thought, and also *ratio*, reason, inward deliberation or the act of reasoning. For Philo, God is both divine reason, and a ‘speaking’ God, whose communication particularly is evident in the sacred texts. As a consequence of this addition, of asserting

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9 Thus, it may be more appropriate to speak of the “spiritual senses of allegory”, since it impacted upon the more systematic theological enterprises as well as tropology (see Burrows 2005:101).

10 This is not to suggest that God is not reached, but rather that, like the later Christian mystics, the final stages of penetrating the divine are marked by passivity and divine giftedness.

the significance of the verbal utterance of the inward thought, the search for God decisively involves the diligent meditation upon the scriptural writings: "The Word is the soul's food, as it [the soul] seeks God in and for Himself" (Louth 1981:29). Scripture is like the manna that fed the Israelites in the desert, and in partaking of this food, so the nature of God is disclosed to the one who 'reads, marks, learns, and inwardly digests' the sacred texts (to use the words of a collect from the Book of Common Prayer Book). The influence of Philo upon Origen is via Clement (c. 150 – 215 CE), who employed Philo's notion of allegory as a key to the spiritual meaning of the text, and who, in turn, instructed Origen, who himself developed a clearer theoretical understanding of biblical interpretation, and who added a third dimension – the moral – to the existing historical and spiritual dimensions of biblical reading, and inaugurated a method of the attentive meditation upon Scripture, which prevailed until the high Middle Ages (Kourie 2009:238-239; Schneiders 1985:10-11). For Origen, the biblical text is "the repository of all wisdom and all truth ... [and] ... he sees his engagement with Scripture as an engagement with God" (Louth 1981:54 & 71). He employs the journey of the Jewish pilgrim people as an optic for interpreting and establishing Christian transformation through the death and resurrection of Christ (McIntosh 2005:455).

Thus, Origen does more than merely focus the mind of the seeker upon Sacred Writ. In addition, he both maps and structures the journey of the seeker in a manner that remains prevalent throughout the tradition of endeavouring to draw close to God. Origen observes that the Bible does not reveal the mystery of God in a uniform *fiat* of disclosure, and because the Song of Songs is the acme and goal of the spiritual life, a journey must be undertaken, in order to reach the destination. Thus, the Song of Songs becomes the seventh song that the spiritual pilgrim is to sing, after having journeyed from Egypt (Exodus), through the desert (Numbers) to the banks of the Jordan (Deuteronomy), through the time of Joshua (Judges), David (Samuel), until reaching Isaiah's prophetic pronouncements (Isaiah). Allied to this seven-fold scriptural map is the three-fold structure of the experience and conversion of the soul who undertakes the journey – the ascent, in the emergence from Egypt, the rigorous discipline of moulding the self, in the desert and through the wilderness, with the occasional consolations of manna and water, and concluding in the joyful union at the summit of love – a model, it will not be unnoticed, which has been appropriated by the tradition of the major spiritual writers. At the final stage of the journey, having passed through the disciplinary practices, the pilgrim comes to know God. But this is a passive knowing, since, for Origen, as, indeed, for later writers, and especially foreshadowing the Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross,

[k]nowing God is being known by God ... knowing God means divinization, *theopoiesis*. Knowing God is having the image of God,

which we are, reformed after the likeness: the image is perfected so that we are like God (Louth 1981:73).

But, very early in the history of the Christian faith, this tradition was visited by immensely careful and perspicacious thinkers and practitioners (Chase 2005). The ‘linguistic turn’ of the twentieth century, the realization in the 1930s by I.A.Richards that metaphor is less a figurative trope than the very currency of communication itself (Descamp 2007), and the pressing examination of an assumed correspondence theory of meaning between utterance or signifier and referent or signified undertaken by the scholars of Structuralism and Deconstruction (*inter alia*, Derrida 1967, 1972a & b), were issues not without relevance to those close to the inceptive moments of documenting a detailed strategy in the search for God. If, to return to Philo (Howells 2005:118) and to Origen, and also to Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399), darkness is a negative obstruction to reaching the light of God, for Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 – c. 395), it is the opposite. He labels the darkness of God as “luminous”, since it marks a vision that extends beyond seeing, because it comprises a penetration into that which, ultimately, is beyond knowing.<sup>11</sup> And yet, crucially, this is not an abandonment of the intellect, but, rather, it is the experience of an involuntary restraint being imposed upon the intellect, and, just as looking into the light renders one blind, that at the heart of light is utter blackness, the intellectual vision is darkened because it is attempting to overreach itself, to apprehend that which it cannot procure, that which it cannot describe, certainly not define, in any restrictive and readily representable manner. Words and their meanings are pressed to their limit, and, in that postmodern sense, they begin to turn back upon themselves. This is language at its most self-reflexive, because it is language at its most engaged, its most precise, its most exact, and yet that about which it wishes to speak is not an object amongst other objects in the universe, and so it is language that is catalectic, is wanting, and must fail, undermine, and overturn its own most precise descriptions, and, ultimately, must fall silent.

Perhaps, as a weak analogy, it is similar to being confronted by a graphic, dense, and multi-layered art work, such as Picasso’s *Guernica*, (1937) – a protest at the German bombing of the Basque capital, and a painting which is mythological, emotional, and conceptual, and which both challenges the intellect to grasp its message, and yet also silences the intellect in its very act of contemplation – or Graham Sutherland’s *Crucifixion* (1946) – which draws upon the central panel of the Isenheim altarpiece of Grünewald (1509 – 1515), which itself is embedded in the efforts by the monks at the Monastery of St Anthony, for whom it was painted, to ease the suffering of those affected by

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11 For similar expressions by Gregory of Nazianzus, Thomas Aquinas, and John of the Cross, see Borchert (1994:18-21).

a devastating plague, but which also seeks to represent human suffering as brutal as the photographs of the corpses and victims of the Nazi death camps could display to the artist. The intellect reaches out in understanding, and yet each response it generates is itself revisited and, concomitantly, visited anew in nuance, in modification, in challenge, and in continual transformation of any and every explanation offered. Perhaps of more significance – although, to say the least, the point is arguable – such confrontations almost seem to empty experience itself. In the presence of their directness and their surplus of meaning, they may possibly numb the sensory, emotional self.

One of Gregory's successors to, and systematisers of, this apophatic, this negative, way, of an admission of the perennial duty of, but also of the limit to, intellectual engagement, was a pilgrim who so penetrated the manner in which sacred texts were read and appropriated that his legacy, like that of the most piercing of thinkers, has generated a field of diverse, and sometimes, opposing interpretations. Pseudo-Dionysius, most probably, was an anonymous Syrian author of the late fifth to early sixth centuries, who was familiar with Greek (Rorem 1985:133; Turner 1995:12). Denys, as he may be called, pursues God by negating one image of the divine after the other, which is what, he claims, the biblical writers were doing in their representations of God. In this manner, he embarks upon an ecstatic journey, but not in the sense of occupying a state of psychological mania and utter bewilderment; rather, this is the purposeful intellectual activity of surpassing image upon image, of approaching an inexorably encroaching darkness, which, simultaneously, is an inexorably increasing light (McIntosh 1998:46). Denys, when reading the Scriptures, makes the same obvious, and yet oft-forgotten, point that Norman (2007:24) does above. In *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Rorem (1985:135) notes that Denys realized that “[n]o one can read in the Bible that the celestial beings look like oxen or lions without formulating some method for interpreting such absurdities”. But Denys also realized that, when dealing with God, even the movement from allegory – from discovering the symbolic significance of the material images – to the spiritual anagogical “upliftment” of the soul does not mark the end of his most pressing inquiry. In the latter stage of the quest for God, there are two processes, that of negation and that of abandonment. The first involves

the scriptural device of praising the deity by presenting it in utterly dissimilar revelations. He is described as invisible, infinite, ungraspable, and other things which show not what He is but what in fact He is not ... [But] ... [t]he second way of talking about Him seems to me much more appropriate, for ... God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of His incomprehensibility and ineffable

transcendence and invisibility (*The Celestial Hierarchy*, 2, 140D.41 – 141A.3, cited by Rorem 1985:135).

This is a move which observes the extremes of the “self-subversive” nature of Denys’s language (Turner 1995:21-22), of reaching a moment of “silent speech” and “speechless silence” which then passes “into that darkness which is beyond intellect ... [in which] ... we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing” (*The Mystical Theology*, 3, 1033B.28 – 30; cited by Rorem 1985:143). And reaching this conclusion does not belong simply to an “archaic” and “pseudonymous” mystical atavism. The influential twentieth-century theological thinker, David Tracy (1981:385), remains aware that

thinking can become thanking, that silence does become, even for an Aquinas when he would ‘write no more,’ the final form of speech possible to any authentic thinker.

But nor is this state one of an experience of God; rather it is beyond any sensation of God, and, more importantly, the journey itself is not undertaken in order to cultivate any inner emotive, mystical pleasures.

It has been argued often and, for the most part, convincingly that the rupture between the spiritual quest and the theological enterprise is reflected in the translations and changing conceptualizations of Paul’s term *pneumatikos* (1Cor 2: 14-15), and then decisively inaugurated with the establishment of the Schools during the High Middle Ages (see, *inter alia*, Schneiders 1986; 2005; Sheldrake 1995; 1998; McIntosh 1998, Perrin 2007). Henceforth, spirituality became the province of the cloister, and theology the property of the embryonic academy. It is claimed that, up until that point, no such division existed within the Church. An intellectual argument was prayed, meditated upon, and foreclosed in contemplation. A theological dispute was suspended when the bell rang for Vespers. And although the singing of the Common Office may not solve the dispute, at the very least, it would place it in the context of a communal life, by rechanneling and refocusing the energy, and by highlighting both the chief work and the final purpose of the Christian. And those activities of personal and corporate spiritual prayer and worship

calls [the discipline of] theology [itself] to an honesty about the difficulty of understanding what is unfathomable ... [and to acknowledge] ... an openness to what is never a puzzle to be solved, but always a mystery to be lived (McIntosh 1998:15).

In this respect, it is not insignificant that in the Archbishop of Canterbury’s recent book, entitled, *Tokens of Trust* (2007), which is sub-titled, “an introduction to Christian belief” (emphasis added), and is a work for the newly initiated in

the faith, he is reluctant to specify the attributes of, or to offer too explicit and unreserved an instruction about, God, which more usually is the case in such basic catechetical teaching. Rather, he admits that

[w]e shall never get to know God as God knows God, and our human words will always fall immeasurably short of his reality ... (Williams 2007:9).<sup>12</sup>

The reminder of that failure and human inadequacy is shared by Denys, who engages with God as “light”, an affirmation which is then denied by stating that God is “darkness”, which itself must be negated, so that “God is a brilliant darkness”, a statement which, rightly because one is speaking about Being beyond being, does not settle the other two statements, as though it were a conclusion to a syllogism, but rather disrupts them and reverses them, and makes a subversive and disordered assertion (Turner 1995:22). Denys’s context, as indeed that of Rowan Williams’, is that of the liturgical community, in which the divine mysteries are revealed and presented to the faithful through a prior act of commitment and participation,<sup>13</sup> but with the realization that every revelation is itself, as Karl Barth noted, “an unveiling of God by means of a veiling” (McIntosh 1998:52), and every affirmative presentation of the nature and activity of God is, simultaneously, a negating absence of dogmatic certainty and positive definition of the Divine.

## 5. THE PERSONAL DIMENSION OF THE SPIRITUAL QUEST AND THE BIBLE

But even if the Christian community, and particularly its liturgical rites, provide the arena in which the spiritual quest is both undertaken and chartered, the personal aspect of the search for God cannot be ignored. This individual dimension, one suggests, is not simply an outgrowth of Scholasticism, and a consequent and late development owing to the Renaissance and its fascination with the human rather than the divine form, or the result of the later Enlightenment proclamation of our human self-reliance and maturity; rather, one may claim that the location of the spiritual quest always is undertaken in the liminal space between the individual and the institution, in the challenges

12 As Chase (2005:455) notes, Denys states in *The Mystical Theology* that “there is no speaking of it [the divine reality] ... we make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it”.

13 In this respect, the work of the German Benedictine monk, Anselm Stolz, also appropriates an “ecclesial and sacramental understanding of mysticism found in Eastern Orthodox Christianity and proposed in modern times by such authors as Vladimir Lossky” (see McGinn 1991:281-282). It is not insignificant that Williams wrote his Oxford University doctorate on the theology of Lossky (Shortt 2008:78).

that each of those brings to the other, and in the forging of a personal self in that dialectical exchange.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, earlier, one attempted to qualify, at least modestly, the relative consensus amongst scholars that a division had emerged between the spiritual and scholarly realms of the theological endeavour with the rise of scholastic theological inquiry, and that the subsequent confidence in the human subject had engendered the “privatization” of the search for God, in anticipation of suggesting that this “inward turn” is an essential part of the spiritual journey. Thus, whilst one may cite the periods of withdrawal, testing, and prayer in the life of Jesus from the Gospels as evidence of the personal aspect of communicating with God, the groups of Christian believers, who were living in small, village, ascetical communities in the third century of the Common Era, by the end of that century, had propelled

the practice of *anachoresis*, or withdrawal from society into the desert, a separation that involved both an external geographical shift of momentous nature and a new kind of exploration of the inner geography of the soul (McGinn 1991:133).

This inner engagement included a rigorously solitary component, and its practitioners spawned a great corpus of wisdom in the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers and in the later accounts of their lives. But nor was the division between the contemplative and the theologian simply a result of an increasingly independent scholarship undertaken in a setting devoid of liturgical and monastic influence. In a highly revealing text from the mid-400s, from Diadochus of Photike, it is stated that

[t]he theologian whose soul is penetrated and enkindled by the very words of God advances, in time, into the regions of serenity (*apatheia*) ... The contemplative (*gnostikos*), strengthened by powerful experience, is raised above the passions. But the theologian tastes something of the experience of the contemplative, provided he is humble; and the contemplative will little by little know something of the power of speculation, if he keeps the discerning part of the soul free from error. But the two gifts are rarely found to the same degree in the same person, so that each may wonder at the other’s abundance, and thus

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14 Giordan (2007) states that “the theological concept of spirituality has always pointed to the borders between the individual and institution, between the freedom to believe on the one hand and the legitimate control of belief on the other ... [and that] ... this complex and often painful bargaining process always took place in the space and within the limits of institution ...”



humility may increase in each, together with zeal for righteousness  
(cited by McIntosh 1998:33).

Not only is the division between two roles and two types of persons significant, but the theologian's penetrating mind is contrasted to the contemplative's stilling of the desires. These "two rigours", as it were, are distinguished, and it is also of note that the contemplative is not seeking "spiritual experience", but is endeavouring to move beyond the sensory. The one examines the words of the text, the other the internal speech of the self.

One may suggest that the Delphic inscription, "Know Thyself" is entirely apposite to the personal dimension of the spiritual task and endeavour. It is a principle by which Socrates lived, since he was aware that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology*, 38A) But, in contrast to the influence of Platonism in its various forms of development, and, in particular, the pressing influence of "Plotinus, the greatest of pagan mystics" (McGinn 1991:54), that questioning and examination of oneself in the act of living one's life receives psychological and anthropological shape, and takes a particular and personal, even inner, form within the Christian tradition, and particularly in the Western Church, following the unrivalled contribution of St Augustine. The realization of the unequivocally creaturely status of the human being was St Augustine's crisis point in his transition from a Platonic anthropology to a more Hebraic and, after ruminating upon the teaching of the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, a decidedly Christian one. His earlier *Cassiciacum* dialogues reflect the Christianized Platonic and Neo-Platonic tradition, which appropriates the faculty of reason as divine and views the soul as the divine within humanity. Here he follows Plotinus, in whom the scattered teachings and doctrines on mysticism, which Plato had documented, are "welded into a compact whole", and for whom

[t]he soul is immaterial and immortal, for it belongs to the world of real existence, and nothing that *is* can cease to be. The body is in the soul, rather than the soul in the body. The soul creates the body by imposing form on matter, which in itself is No-thing, pure in-determination, and next door to absolute non-existence (Inge 1913:91-92).

Thus,

[f]or Plotinus, there is a part of us that is never separated from the divine Mind. When we turn to it, we are *ipso facto* turning to God. For the mature Augustine, there is no such divine, immutable part of soul. Hence we can turn to the highest and best part of our self and still find nothing but our own solitary self. Consequently the soul following God is doing something other than following itself – a conclusion that could not be drawn from the *Cassiciacum* dialogues, where ... there is no

clear distinction between turning to the soul and turning to God (Cary 2000:114).

Therefore, after Nicaea, for St Augustine, what is creaturely is irremediably creaturely. But a theological paradox remains – dare one suggest that, until “we see ... face to face” (1Cor. 13:12), the finest theology must be paradoxical – and, consequently, for St Augustine,

[t]he project of locating God within the soul is still on ... This means something distinctive about the conceptual structure of Augustinian inwardness. We can be cut off from that which is most intimate to us, separated from the divine thing in our inmost soul (Cary 2000:114).

By necessity, such a realization of both the rupture from what is most inward and true, and also of the mortal transience of being human, engenders that vital human project, which is a “spirituality of self-making” (Turner 1995:72). And, for St Augustine, the turning of the triadic human self – the memory, the understanding, and the will – towards the Trinitarian divine being, is a dependent transformation, a conversion, which responds to the primary turn of God towards humanity (McIntosh 1998:220-221; Turner 1995:50ff.). Consequently, that concentrated act of constructing a human self through engagement with the Christian notion of the sacred, of reaching outward into a relationship with God, which, simultaneously, is a reaching inward to the power of love, which itself impels the very possibility of the enterprise in the first place, entails a specifically delimited type of pursuit in its encounter with the text that bears witness to the divine and to its human face.

Until recently within the academy, biblical criticism was dominated by the historical-critical method (Kourie 2009:236). The more robust scholars of this school were not reluctant to jettison those aspects of scripture that it perceived to be historically unreliable or “absurd”, unlike the ancient and anonymous Syrian monk, Denys, who perceived in those “absurdities” exegetical work to be done. Outside the academy, in the quest for certainty and an established and incontrovertible “truth” by which to live, biblical interpretive fundamentalism remains unchallenged, in which assent to the inerrancy of Scripture draws no distinctions between historical truth, symbolic meaning, instructive import, and spiritual guidance, unlike the interpreters of the Middle Ages, who distinguished between the historical, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical modes of biblical inquiry and appropriation.

Thus what is peculiar to Origen, as it is to Philo and Clement, and to St Augustine in the act of “self-making”, but also to Denys, in its logical extremity, and later to John of the Cross, is an awareness of the multivalency of Scripture, and that the individual nature of the spiritual quest involves a journey to “know oneself” by approaching Scripture neither as a text to be re-edited according

to one's enlightened sensibilities, nor as an hermetically sealed book of packaged wisdom, but as a corpus of writings that is "live", as a quarry of potential meanings, and as a "classic" with instructive import.

The worldviews of these our "ancient-contemporary" spiritual inquirers often were deeply imbued, *inter alia*, with the philosophical teaching of Middle and Neo-Platonism, of Stoicism, and of a Hellenized Judaism, which formed part of their life-worlds, and conditioned the questions which they asked and the readings which they pursued. Likewise, the life-world of the present seeker is neither less significant than that of other questioning readers throughout the tradition, nor, indeed, than that of the inaugural authorial worldviews themselves. But, as Kermode (1979:138 & 144) has observed with regard to the Gospel of Mark, an observation which was echoed earlier by Ford (2002),

it is far beyond us to reproduce the tacit understandings that existed between this dead writer and his audience. Those accords are lost. We cannot know the original generic set of Mark; and to read it against our own is to read it differently ... [and even if] ... [w]e glimpse the secrecy [of the Gospel of Mark] through the meshes of a text; this is divination, but what is divined is visible from our angle.

Thus, the very notion of a single and eternally truthful textual meaning, which has been established through some singular and imposed divine worldview, is disassembled in the very act of inquiry. This aspectual inquiry, both in the sense that it emerges out of a particular and personal worldview, and also in the sense that every worldview *toujours déjà* is perspectival including that of the text, is not new. The notion that the "ancients" did not perceive "the complexity of things", in Norman's (2007:24) phrase, is, at least, questionable, as it is an indictment of those who continue to make it with a now rather dusty post-Enlightenment superiority.

The modest contention here is that, when dealing with Christian Spirituality and Holy Scripture, it is unhelpful not to delineate the kinds of readings which are made and the kinds of questions which are asked; and, significantly, the kinds of writings that are available and the kinds of answers that are presented. Our ancient, yet ever-present, interlocutors viewed Scripture through several lenses. Arguably, of some significance is their indictment, on the one hand, of viewing the message of Scripture as obviously apparent and readily intelligible, and, on the other hand, of discarding aspects of the Bible as senseless or ludicrous because they cannot be accommodated readily to the twenty-first century sense of our scholarly ability. To both of these parties, they put their venerable claim: exegetical work is required, in order to uncover the meanings beneath any seemingly obvious meaning, or, indeed, beneath any apparent meaninglessness. And the various schools of biblical criticism – historical,

form, redaction, narrative, doctrinal, liturgical, practical, and ethical – are not without their several parts to play in “the maximization of our theological discourses”, to recall Turner’s (1995:24) words, and in the promotion of more informed spiritual readings of sacred Scripture.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Given the spiritual task of “self-making”, the emphasis on the Bible as a personal narrative, as a story which a believer appropriates as his or her own story, is not without import to Christian Spirituality, and, in fact, it is a rather fashionable and contemporary way to view the spiritual journey. McGrath (1999:119-120) emphasizes the “identity-power” of narrative when he recounts listening to an American professor tell of his father taking him, when he was a boy, to a squaw of the Kiowa, and after spending the day listening to the story of the Kiowa people, he said: “When I left that house, I was a Kiowa”. But, one may suggest that, the American professor only “was a Kiowa” in the sense that he had been accepted as a member of the tribe and had received initial instruction. For “to become a Kiowa” would involve a lifetime’s journey, a process during which, like the Christian adherent, the narrative biography of the unfolding acts and purpose of a people and their God is appropriated, and that other story, or that story of an Other, becomes one’s own story: biography becomes autobiography. But this, in itself, is both a gift of, and a curse to, the *askesis*, the practice and discipline, of Christian Spirituality. As Lash (1986:99) acutely observes, the use of story-telling in

the attempt to ‘make sense’ of the world elides with dangerous ease into the attempt to make the world, in our imagination, conform to how we would have it be.

In order to avoid this elision, it is imperative that, when a personal story is told with reference to a foundational narrative like the biblical story, the diversity and complexity, the chromatic and stratified nature of the two Testaments compels the Christian as a spiritual seeker to defer to the expertise of the other “theological disciplines,” as Lombaard (2005:140, 147-148; 2006:925) rightly has noted. But it is also the case that our ancient interpreters and seekers, who were not remiss in noticing the complexity and the diversity present in the biblical corpus, undertook both their theological investigations and their personal journeys of “self-making” within the liturgical context of a worshipping community, and in the midst of the quotidian duties of the daily round:

For the early Christians right through Dionysius and Maximus [the Confessor, c. 580 – 662] mystical theology takes place in the setting of the community’s participation in Christ. It means the transformation of consciousness through the hard communal praxis of spiritual growth, in

mutual openness to the hidden presence of the divine in the ordinary struggles and rituals of ecclesial life (McIntosh 1998:62).

The significance of narratological inquiries of the Bible, and particularly of the gospels, and the formative quality of story are noted by Thiselton (1992: 568), who adverts to those scholars who

*stress the primordial character of narrative as an expression of human experience and, still more fundamentally, of human personhood and of individual and corporate identity (original emphasis).*

When Christian believers appropriate this approach in living and recounting their own stories, their identities are forged and their senses of themselves are created within the context of the corpus of biblical stories that map meaning and purpose. However, their own stories are narratives-in-the-making, and, in the act of constructing a self, they sketch their own charts, and they plot their own itineraries, but always with reference to another map drawn in the past, a “classic”, a deeply etched and detailed ground plan of the contours of the past; and, being a “classic”, that “old” chart also includes the futures of its past, of which it both knows and does not know. It may be suggested that to undertake the spiritual journey as a Christian, entails the drawing of a personal map, an autobiographical chart, in a narrative endeavour which always must advert to the tradition and to the learning of that tradition, and that it must do so with a corrigible humility, and with an awareness of the instructive correctives present in the scholarly exegetical and hermeneutical, biblical and theological disciplines. But if, when penetrating that personal “inwardness” of which St Augustine wrote, one legitimately may resist allowing oneself to deviate from pursuing one’s own personal by-ways of both enrichment and despair; nevertheless, one must also be ready to submit to being directed away from those personal by-ways that cover the tracks back to the tested reference-points, which it is the task of the scholars to systematize, codify, and constantly re-examine, if one’s own spirituality is to remain authentically Christian.

Scripture offers to the seeker a reservoir of spiritual riches. But, perhaps for the most part, it does so with its back to the reader, whose view is obscured, since one is set in the cleft of a rock and one’s eyes are shaded over. This vision is a partial vision, which engenders a requisite humility before God, a hesitance and reluctance to pronounce upon the ways of God, to define the nature of God, to state dogmatically the teaching of God. For this God is a shy God, whose face one is not permitted to see (Exodus 33:13-23).

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<i>Keywords</i>	<i>Trefwoorde</i>
Sacred classic	Heilig klassiek
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