

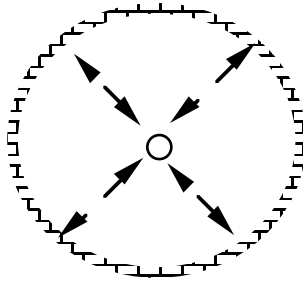
## CHAPTER TWO

### Religious Experience, Inspiration and Revelation

Since the Bible is treasured as an inspired expression of the revelation of God within the religious experience of the community, it is important to begin our study by reflecting on what we mean by ‘religious experience’, ‘inspiration’, and ‘revelation’.

#### Religious experience

According to some etymologists, the word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin word *ligo* meaning ‘to bind/gather’, and the prefix *re* meaning ‘again’ or ‘back’. Religion, according to this etymology, is that which ‘binds back’. The accompanying diagram might help in illustrating this.



The outer circle represents the surface of our often broken and distracted lives. The centre represents our ‘heart’ – the centre of our true selves. We know what it means to be out of touch with our own centre or with the people and the world around us. The connection that we have with reality is often superficial and distracted. We feel dissipated, dragged in many directions at once, lost and confused. This experience is expressed in the Greek word *hamartia*, the most common word used for ‘sin’ in the Bible. Literally it means ‘missing the mark’. None of us is a stranger to the experience of living on the surface, wanting to relate honestly to someone but not knowing how to do it, wanting to get in touch with our own feelings and desires and real self, but not managing to do so. ‘Missing the mark’ is part of our experience of being human.

And the centre? At the centre of our own being, and at the centre of the world around us is the one we call ‘God’. We are speaking of something essentially mysterious. The word ‘God’ (and the German equivalent ‘Gott’) comes from the Indo-European root ‘ghu’ meaning ‘called’ or ‘calling’, with the suffix ‘to’ meaning ‘the one’. ‘God’ (ghu-to) means ‘the one called/calling’. We give the name ‘God’ to the one to whom we call in wonder, gratitude, despair, hope, sorrow and joy from the heart of our human experience. We give the name ‘God’ to the one whom we experience calling us at the centre of our being and from the heart of our world. Teilhard de Chardin speaks of God as being the ‘heart’ and the ‘beyond’ of everything. It is hard to avoid being dragged to the spinning surface of our lives. It is hard to avoid distraction and sin. There are moments, however, precious moments, when we are in touch with our real selves and with the world around us in a way that ‘connects’ with our profound yearnings. At such moments we are connected to God. Such experiences are religious. They are the essence of what we call prayer.

In his poem 'A Letter to John Dryden', the Australian poet, James McAuley, prays:

Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,  
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives  
Among us, men who walk within the fire  
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.  
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land:  
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand  
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense  
Of questioning, they do not know from whence.  
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,  
It works unseen like radium in the dark.

A 'religious experience' is any experience which brings us back to the centre; any experience which takes us back from being distracted and 'missing the mark' and re-connects us to reality, and so to God. It may be the chance smile of a child. It may be a significant encounter with someone we love. It may be a sudden awareness of how we are hurting someone. We rightly call such experiences 'religious' because they 'connect' us, binding us back to reality in such a way that we experience a partial resolution in our quest to know and a partial communion with the Reality that is attracting us and promising to take us beyond our present limits.

Our most basic desire is for love. We want to belong, to be at home in the world. This yearning comes from our centre and reaches out to the One who gives meaning to all that is. This yearning is partly satisfied whenever we come to know and be in love with anything or anyone. The One ultimately attracting us, however, is the one we name 'God'. Saint Augustine writes in his spiritual autobiography:

You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.

– The Confessions, 1,1

I suggest that all experiences that are truly 'religious' consist in an engagement in one way or another of this primary longing for love. The longing is experienced as being fulfilled in a significant way in what is commonly referred to as the sense of the presence of God. More commonly it is experienced as an aching emptiness when we focus on the sense of the absence of the One for whom we long but who remains beyond our direct experience. It goes without saying that the kind of emotion that we experience as an accompaniment to religious experience varies with temperament and with social environment and expectations.

In his *Confessions*, composed in 397AD, Augustine tells of his search for meaning, a search that found him in his middle thirties still deeply dissatisfied. One evening he was sitting in a garden. He heard a child's voice crying 'tolle! lege!' (Latin for 'pick it up! read it!'). Children were playing a game in which one would write something on a piece of paper and the other would pick it up and do what it said – something like the game of postman's knock we played as children. Augustine heard the cry, but what he experienced was a profound desire to pick up another piece of writing: the letters of Paul. . His mother had given him a copy that he had left unopened on his desk.

He took it up, opened it at random, and his eyes lighted on the following words from the Letter to the Romans: 'The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 13:12-14). The words held out to him a promise of light, and invited him to find in Jesus the answer to his urgent longing. It was a religious experience that found expression in the following prayer:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new. Late have I loved you!  
For you were within me and I outside; and I sought you outside  
And in my ugliness I fell upon the lovely things you have made.  
You were with me but I was not with you. I was kept from you by those things,  
Yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all.  
You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness.  
You sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness.  
You breathed fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and now pant for you.  
I tasted you and now hunger and thirst for you.  
You touched me and I have burned for your peace.

– *The Confessions*, 10.27

Notice how Augustine's prayer speaks of the five senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch: senses that begin our connection with the world that opens us to God. We might compare this openness to what we experience on a still day in which there is no perceptible movement of air. Yet we look at the poplar tree and notice that its small shiny leaves are quivering. We know that there is a movement of air though we do not directly feel it. In a similar way, we look into the eyes of a baby and experience something of the wonder of God. We hear someone say to us 'I love you' and we experience a love that goes beyond us both into the mystery we call God. We hear a child's voice crying 'pick it up! read it!' and we hear the call of God. The surging tide responds to the attraction of the moon. So it is that our hearts are being drawn to God. We experience the swell, even though we may not know to whom we are being drawn.

God is revealing himself to every human being at every moment of our existence. God is constantly inspiring all of us to take the next step of love in this present moment. If only we were still enough from the distractions to be in tune with our deepest self where the Spirit of God is moving. Think of all the many ways in which God reveals himself to us daily: through the weather, through our state of health, through the chance encounters that happen in the street, through the calls upon our love, our energy and our time. God is there at the heart of every experience. Every breath we breathe is inspired, for it is the breath that God breathed into Adam when he formed him from the dust of the earth (see Genesis 2:7). It is the kiss of God, the gift of life constantly holding us in existence. The attraction to reality that keeps drawing us into knowledge and love is an attraction to God.

Religious experience, on the level of community, draws us to gather to celebrate the meaning and the mystery of life in reverent openness to the One who is its source. On the personal level it happens when our experiences, our insights, our judgments, and our responses connect with the centre of who we are.

Religious experience invites us to be attentive to every experience, including that deepest dimension of experience, the dimension of the ‘sacred’. Religious experience invites us as we seek meaning to remain open to mystery. It invites us to settle for nothing less than our heart’s desire. While we enjoy to a limited degree the satisfaction of our longing that comes when we are in love, religious experience invites us to remain attentive to that which draws us through and beyond everything. Religious experience invites us to refuse to cut short our longing or to limit ourselves to what we can comprehend. Religious experience opens us to a response that is unconditional and without bounds.

As we have already noted, religious experience is a matter of the ‘heart’. The Latin Version of Isaiah 46:8 includes the words ‘*ad cor*’ (‘to the heart’), and reads: ‘Return to your heart, you sinners’. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Augustine quotes this verse and writes:

Return to the heart! Why are you running away from yourselves?  
Why are you getting lost, outside yourselves, entering on deserted ways?  
You are wandering aimlessly. Come back! To where?  
To the Lord! It is quick! Return immediately to your heart!  
Exiled from your own self you wander outside.  
You fail to know yourself, you who want to know the source of your existence.  
Come back! Return to the heart. ...  
See there what you can learn about God, for the image of God is there.  
In your heart dwells Christ. In your heart you are being renewed after God’s image.

– Tract 18.10.1

A person who acknowledges religious experience, knows that reality is not meaningless. Every time we come to know any truth, however limited, our quest for the fullness of truth is vindicated. Every time we experience love, however limited, the quest of our heart for the One who loves us unconditionally and unreservedly is vindicated as a response to the attraction of some thing (some One) real.

Because God remains transcendent (‘God is ‘beyond’ all created being – of this more later), our primary religious experience will be one of longing for what is absent. At times this will be experienced, in the words of the mystics, as a dark night of the soul. But because God is immanent (God is at the ‘heart’ of all created being), we sometimes experience what Ignatius of Loyola calls a ‘consolation without cause’ that breaks in upon us.

This wide range of religious experiences is affirmed by the sacred scriptures of all the major religions of the world in whatever way they conceive the ultimately Real to be ( see John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion* [Macmillan, 1989]). It is affirmed by the Vedas and the Upanishads, the sayings of K’ung-fu-tzu (Confucius) and Lao Tzu and of Gautama the Buddha, the oracles of the Hebrew prophets, the Christian Testament and the Moslem Qur’an. It is of this experience that the mystics of all cultures speak, as do the poets and artists of our world.

There are as many examples of religious experience as there are people who have longed for love. These experiences have found expression in inspired music, inspired painting and inspired poetry.

Most of all they have found expression in inspired action – the ordinary inspired action of loving that every mother and father, every aunt and uncle, every teacher and nurse knows in his or her daily life. Every time we are genuinely in contact with religious experience and express it truthfully, we give expression, however imperfectly, to the reality of God.

In the history of humankind, people have always looked towards those whose lives have been particularly free from the distractions that lead to sin and whose religious sensitivity led them to an attractive wisdom. Every people has its saints, its wise and holy men and women who have been especially sensitive to the inspiration of the Spirit of God, and who have responded creatively and often heroically to this inspiration, living lives that have mediated God in a wonderful way to others. They have been a ‘word of God’ to their contemporaries, connecting them in a remarkable way with life and so with God.

Some religions concentrate on the revelation of the Transcendent God that is mediated through nature and history (the ‘numinous’ dimension of religious experience). Such religions have high regard for the prophetic for they treasure the words received from those who are judged to have been especially sensitive to the divine presence. Obedience and submission to God’s will are of central importance. Notable examples of such religions are Judaism and Islam. Other religions concentrate on the revelation of the Transcendent God that is mediated through the movements of a person’s mind and heart (the ‘mystical’ dimension of religious experience). In these religions inner enlightenment and transformation are given a high priority. We see this in some forms of Buddhism.

Every genuine religious movement must include both the numinous and the mystical. In genuine Christianity these elements are blended in an especially beautiful and harmonious way. Authentic Christianity does not neglect or consider as illusory either the inner spirit or the outer word. For Christians, God remains transcendent, so we need to be attentive to the way in which God is revealed to us in the world, and especially in Jesus, whom Christians see as God’s ‘Word-made-flesh’. As in Judaism and Islam, obedience is basic. The Christian, however, is also invited to enjoy the wonderful indwelling of God revealed in Jesus and experienced as we are drawn by grace to share in his intimate communion with God. As in Buddhism, enlightenment, inner transformation and communion are essential dimension of religious living. We find both these elements in the opening words of John’s First Letter:

Something which has existed since the beginning,  
that we have heard and have seen with our own eyes;  
that we have watched and touched with our hands:  
the word who is life - this is our subject.  
That life was made visible: we saw it and we are giving our testimony,  
telling you of the eternal life which was with the Father and has been seen by us.  
What we have seen and heard we are telling you  
so that you too may be in union with us,  
as we are in union with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

– 1John 1:1-4

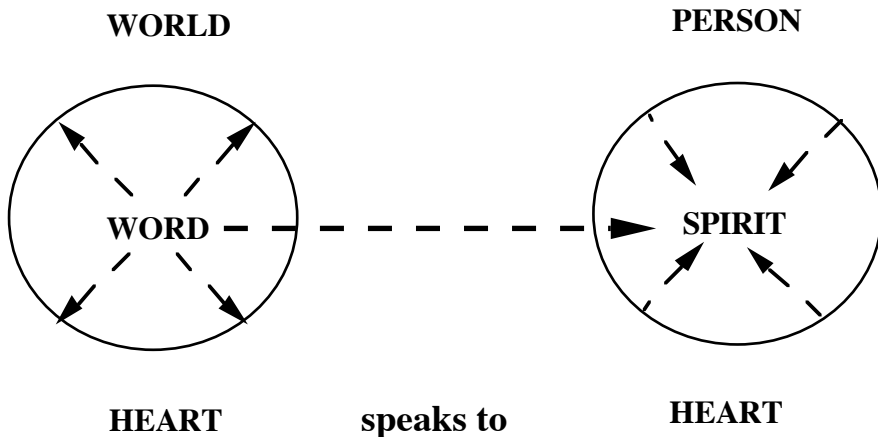
## Inspiration and Revelation

We used a simple diagram at the beginning of this chapter to illustrate the fact that a religious experience is an experience that connects us to the heart. The following diagram is a refinement of the earlier one. It attempts to illustrate the two focal points of religious experience: the centre of the outer object (the ‘world’) that is being experienced, and the centre of the person who is having the experience.

The movement of God experienced in our heart (our ‘spirit’) is traditionally spoken of as divine ‘inspiration’, the inspiration that comes from ‘the love of God which has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us’(Romans 5:5). When we speak or act under the inspiration of God our words and our actions become a ‘word’ from God to others. When others speak or act under the inspiration of God their words and their actions become a ‘word’ of God to us.

When we speak of revelation it is important to remember that it is we who change, not God. Rather than thinking of God determining to reveal God’s Self to us humans at different periods of history we would do well to examine revelation from the perspective of human experience: the various ways in which people grasp something of God through insights into beings that exist because they are sustained in being by God and because they participate in some way in the being of God and in response to God’s personal communication. It is God who reveals God’s Self, not from the outside by intervention, but from within our longing and searching of which God is the Source.

‘Revelation’ happens when the inner ‘spirit’ and the outer ‘word’ come together, when ‘heart speaks to heart’.



A contemporary Scripture scholar and a contemporary systematic theologian speak of revelation in the following terms: ‘It is the interface of poetic imagination and public events which leads to revelatory disclosure’(Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation* 1983, 138 n.29). ‘The creative transformation of man’s consciousness by God is identical with the divine act of self-revelation (M. Schmaus *Dogma 1 God in Revelation*’(London, Sheed & Ward 1968, 24).

## **Our experience of God is necessarily mediated**

Before we proceed, it is important to make a clarification. Religious experience is not an immediate (un-mediated) experience of God. God communicates directly and personally with each one of us in the most intimate and mysterious ways, but we experience God only in and through our experience of the communication. We experience a movement of heart or mind. We experience it as gift, and through faith we know that the giver of the gift is God, the source of all grace. God, however, is transcendent, and remains beyond everything that we directly experience. These apparently simple statements are of the utmost importance. Failure to recognise their truth continues to lead to the most serious religious aberrations.

The author of the fourth gospel is making this point when he declares: ‘No one has ever seen God’ (John 1:18; see also 1John 4:20).

Saint Gregory of Nyssa, one of the founders of Eastern monasticism (4th century), writes:

The teaching that Scripture gives us is, I think, the following: the person who wants to see God will do so in the very fact of always following God. The contemplation of God’s face is an endless walking towards God ... There is only one way to grasp the power that transcends all intelligence: not to stop, but to keep always searching beyond what has already been grasped.

– *In Canticum Canticorum*, Hom 2,801

Saint Augustine (end of the 4th century) writes:

If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God. If you were able to understand, then you would understand something other than God. If you were able to understand even partially, then you have deceived yourself with your own thoughts.

– *Sermo 52*, vi, 16

John of the Cross, the great master of mystical prayer, writes:

However elevated God’s communications and the experiences of God’s presence are, and however sublime a person’s knowledge of God may be, these are not God essentially, nor are they comparable to God, because, indeed, God is still hidden to the soul.

– *Spiritual Canticle* 1,3

Since God is inaccessible, be careful not to concern yourself with all that your faculties can comprehend and your senses feel, so that you do not become satisfied with less and lose the lightness of soul suitable for going to God.

– *Sayings of Light and Love*

We experience movements of thought and feeling within our hearts that engage our yearning for communion with the One for whom we long, the One whom we believe is their source. The point we are making here is that it is our thoughts and feelings that we are directly experiencing. We are experiencing God only in and through them.

We experience people and events around us that speak to us of God and engage our yearning for communion with God; but it is actual, limited people and events that we directly experience. We experience God only in and through them.

We read the words written by the actual historical people who were moved to write under the inspiration of God's Spirit, but it is their limited words that we directly experience. We experience God only in and through them. This is an essential insight that should guide us in reading the inspired writings of the Bible.

The inner movements of our soul and the outer realities of the world engage our yearning for God because they disclose something of the truth, they reveal something of the beauty, and they participate in something of the goodness of God; but while they participate in God, God always transcends them.

'God' is the name we give to that which we want to know and which we come to know in part whenever we know anything. 'God' is the name we give to that with which we want to be-in-love, and which we enjoy in part whenever we are in communion with anything. But God always transcends any knowledge or communion we have. What we come to know and love directly and immediately is a world that is made intelligible and lovable by God, and a self that yearns for union with and knowledge of this God, a self that we experiencing responding to God's mysterious presence and action.

Because religious experience connects us to One who is longed for but who remains beyond our knowledge, it is an experience of 'mystery'. Everything we do come to know and love supports our trust that the desire that impels us, and that is essential to our whole being as we experience it, is a desire for what is real. We can be confident therefore that what we call 'God' exists, but we cannot expect to conceive God adequately or define the infinite. If we forget this, we find ourselves calling God something that is less than God. It is right to associate God with the experiences that awaken our religious desire: the spring, the mountain, the grove, the person, the cult, the proposition expressing distilled wisdom, the inspired word contained in sacred Scripture. It is wrong to limit God to any of these.

There is need for constant correction and purification of our concepts of God. Christian tradition does this by focusing on the person and the life of Jesus, drawing on the experience of his contemporaries, who found in him a perfect human expression of God. Their experience has been re-affirmed by the countless millions of those since who have looked to him and committed themselves to live as his disciples. They have found him to be indeed the 'Way' (see John 14:6): the way to connect with their deepest yearnings, and the way to connect with God. Reflection on the person, life and significance of Jesus has been for Christians the richest source for their reflections on the meaning of God, and so for their reflections on the meaning of human experience. We find this expressed in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* issued by the Second Vatican Council in 1965:

The most intimate truth which revelation gives us about God and human salvation shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation.

– DV n.2



God taught them to look for the promised saviour. And so, throughout the ages, he prepared the way for the Gospel.

– DV n.3

Jesus Christ completed and perfected revelation.

– DV n. 4

When we speak of ‘inspiration’ and ‘revelation’, we need to remember that neither of these cut across or by-pass God’s transcendence; neither of them speak of unmediated experience of God. God is free. We are in no position to place limits on what God might choose to do. But there are limits to what we can do, and one limit is that we are capable of experiencing the transcendent and immanent mystery we call ‘God’ only in a mediated way. Therefore we understand inspiration incorrectly if we imagine that mediation is moved aside giving us direct access to the infinite God. We understand revelation incorrectly if we imagine that we see God directly. God remains transcendent, for everyone. The experience of God is mediated, to everyone. In our mortal human condition no one can have a direct, unmediated experience of the always and necessarily transcendent God.

Hence the traditional wisdom that tells us of the need for discernment. There are criteria, however subtle, that can be used to check our impressions, and we would be foolish to so rely on our own judgment that we thought we could by-pass spiritual direction, or go it alone without keeping in touch with both the spiritual wisdom of the past and a living community of faith in the present. After all, the God we are speaking of is moving everyone, not just us, and we have a lot to learn from the wisdom of others, living and dead.

God is constantly revealing Himself to each one of us, and constantly inspiring us through the world around us and through the movements experienced within. However, neither the revelation nor the inspiration can happen unless we are open to it. Inspiration happens every time we are moved by reality to know, to love, and to respond truthfully, lovingly and creatively. Our response to this constant and mysterious and richly varied inspiration from the self-revealing God finds expression in many ways. We speak of inspired thoughts, inspired writing, inspired art, inspired action.

God, being free, can reveal himself to people in whatever way God chooses. God, being transcendent, the revelation remains mysterious. The veil hiding God is not over God but over us. When we do receive the mediated revelation of God, the veil is partly lifted. When this happens, we experience in the people and world around us, and in the movements of our own mind and heart, some limited satisfaction of our longing to know and to be in love. For then God, the source and goal of our being, the One from whom we come, in whom we exist, and for whom we long, is imperfectly, but really, revealed to us.

The history of revelation is the history of human response to the mystery of God’s Word and God’s Spirit. There are no limits to God’s desire to reveal God’s Self to us and to draw us into intimate communion in the divine life. The inexhaustible depth of the divine mystery, however, and the inherent limitations of every historical manifestation of the divine, plus the always and necessarily imperfect comprehension on the part of the human mind and heart to receive divine manifestation and enlightenment, mean that our grasp of God is never complete.

This is one good reason for inter-religious dialogue. Others have responded to the revelation of God's Word and the inspiration of God's Spirit in ways that can enrich and help purify our response. Revelation occurs with the coming together of the free divine initiative ('grace'), and the human insight into and response to this initiative. Revelation occurs when we realise and embrace reality as graced, when we recognise that 'the earth is filled with the glory of God'(Isaiah 6:3).

It is important to distinguish between religious meaning and religious value, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the ways in which this meaning and this value find expression. Our longing to know and to be-in-love without restriction impels us to transcend ourselves to engage in an endless journey of imperfect and mediated encounters with the divine. These encounters bring us some imperfect but real knowledge of God in God's relations with us. We give expression to this knowledge or communion in simple ways. We do it whenever we genuinely love; we do it with a nod, a smile, a kiss. We do it through the medium of art, using symbols. We can attempt to express what we experience in the specialised language of metaphysics. The inspired authors of the Older Testament gave expression to revelation (that is to say, to what they saw of God through their religious experience) in the writings that are preserved in the Bible.

### **The Older Testament is inspired**

Looking for the inspired word in the Scriptures is like looking for wild flowers in the bush. The authors were people of their time and their writings express many of the limited viewpoints of their contemporaries, many of their false assumptions, many of their mistakes and errors. But in their writings we can find the flowers of inspired insight that disclose something of the mystery of the always transcendent God. It is important to attempt to clarify what we mean when we say that the texts are 'inspired by God', for our understanding of inspiration will surely affect the way we read the texts, if not consciously then certainly unconsciously. We begin with four preliminary considerations.

The first is the importance of recognising that revelation and inspiration are not restricted to the biblical texts and their authors. As Paul says: God 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'(1Timothy 2:4). Jesus assures us that God wants everyone to 'have life and have it abundantly'(John 10:10). It follows that God must constantly be revealing himself to everyone, and inspiring everyone to respond to grace in the most liberating and creative way, special to each person. Pope John-Paul II expresses this simply in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer* when he writes:

Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart.

– MD n.29

Of course, it is one thing for God to reveal himself. It is another for a person to recognise and respond to the revelation. When Jesus expresses his delight that God has revealed himself to 'little children'(Matthew 11:25), he is not saying that God is not revealing himself to others. Rather, he is delighting in the fact that there are those who are open to receive and welcome the revelation: those who are 'poor in spirit'(Matthew 5:5), 'humble'(Matthew 18:4), 'meek and humble of heart', like himself (Matthew 11:29).

When we inquire about inspiration in the Older Testament we are not looking for something (inspiration) that is found only in the Bible. Rather, we are looking for what makes the inspiration and revelation that we find in the Bible so special.

Secondly, while it is true that the claim that the texts are inspired and reveal God is not subject to any scientific proof, it is also true that it is not an arbitrary claim. It is based on experience, for the texts have been found to be inspiring, and have helped people live beautiful and truthful lives by any standards that we might reasonably apply. People have continued to experience a special link between these texts and their experience of God. In the final analysis, the claim is an expression of how a community understands itself. Jesus' words apply here: 'You will know them by their fruits'(Matthew 7:16), as does his invitation: 'Come and see'(John 1:39). The Older Testament continues to inspire people to live holy lives.

Thirdly, we note two statements from the Newer Testament on the subject of inspiration. One is from Paul who writes to Timothy: 'All scripture, inspired by God, is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness'(2Timothy 3:16). Paul is speaking of the 'Old Testament' (see 2Corinthians 3:14), and he is encouraging Timothy to draw inspiration from the sacred scriptures, for they are useful in living a life that is faithful to God, and useful also in teaching others.

The second statement is from Peter who states that 'no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God'(2Peter 1:21). Philo, a Jewish writer of the first century, makes the same point: 'A prophet has no utterance of his own. All his utterances come from elsewhere. They echo the voice of Another'(Who is the Heir, 259). We have an example of this in Jeremiah, who tells us that he is tired of the rejection he experiences when he relays to the people what comes to him in his prayer. Yet he has to speak, for, as he says: 'within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot'(Jeremiah 20:9). Jeremiah is conscious of speaking out of his communion with YHWH\* – something the false prophets failed to do (see Jeremiah 23:22). The concept of inspiration applies to the spoken prophetic word. It is applied also to the written text. We are told: 'Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of YHWH that he had spoken to him'(Jeremiah 36:4). Peter's statement and the above texts give us some insight into certain experiences of individual prophets and into some of the material found in the prophetic scrolls. However, there is no justification for generalising and seeing the prophetic experience as a model for inspiration throughout the Bible. Much of the Bible does not claim to be the words of prophets.

Fourthly, it is clear that Jesus has profound respect for the sacred scriptures, which for him and his contemporaries meant the texts of the Older Testament. He states that 'Scripture cannot be deprived of its validity'(John 10:35), and he warns against failing to obey it (see Matthew 5:19).

\*spelt thus throughout to highlight the fact that it is a proper name, and in deference to Jewish practice of not pronouncing the divine name or writing it in its pronounceable form. When they read YHWH, they bow their head and say the word 'adonāy ('Lord').

This does not mean, however, that Jesus or his disciples judged the Older Testament to be the last word from God on any issue. Quite the contrary. Jesus' disciples saw him as the fulfilment of God's promises to them, such that all previous expressions of God's revelation had to give way before the revelation offered in Jesus. Jesus did say: 'Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished' (Matthew 5:18). But he also said that now that the law is 'accomplished', now that it has reached its goal, all that is imperfect must give way: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you ...' (Matthew 5:21ff).

Paul, too, shared Jesus' love and respect for the Older Testament and for the Jewish faith. He reminds the Christian community in Rome that they are 'branches', and that Judaism is their 'root':

If the root is holy, then the branches also are holy. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.

– Romans 11:16-18

Having made these preliminary points, let us now try to understand what it is we are claiming when we say with Paul that 'all scripture is inspired by God' (2 Timothy 3:16). Firstly, we are not claiming that inspiration means that God dictated the words that the inspired authors wrote. As noted above there were times when the prophets experienced something close to this. We read in Jeremiah, for example: 'YHWH put out his hand and touched my mouth; and YHWH said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9). On another occasion Jeremiah was told: 'Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you' (Jeremiah 36:2). However, even then, the words written by Jeremiah were Hebrew words with their own necessary limitations. If God is going to inspire someone to speak the truth, God must choose a real, and therefore limited, human being. There are no others from whom to choose. Furthermore, what the prophet had to say was directed to real people with their own real limitations of language, culture and experience.

The model of an individual prophet speaking out of his inspired prayer is of little help when we ask about inspiration in regard to most of the books of the Bible. The material was preserved, cherished, copied, handed on and updated, generation after generation. People continued to search for what the living God wished to communicate to them through the inspired texts. Inspiration has to include a providence guiding this long process and the earnest debate, dialogue and soul-searching that went into the production of the texts that have been preserved for us.

We might wish it were otherwise. We might wish that the truths inspired by God in the sacred scriptures connected us immediately to God in such a way as to give the reader a share in God's absolute truth. For then we would not have to undertake the task of finding out what it was that the inspired authors were actually saying, or how they were understood by their contemporaries, or why their words were treasured, copied and handed on. We cannot, however, avoid this task, for the inspired texts guided people to live their lives in their real world. They did not remove them (and they do not remove us) from it.

The biblical authors were faithful to the writings that they inherited, for they saw them as an inspired expression of the presence and action of YHWH in their history. They pored over them, wanting to discover the will of YHWH. They reflected on the meaning of past events for them and for their contemporaries. They also reinterpreted the tradition that had been handed down to them in the light of their contemporary experience and presented the text in ways that shed light on what was happening to them.

We must learn from them, so that when we read these texts, we, too, are open to God's Spirit inspiring us to see the implications of the sacred text for ourselves and for our world. Surely inspiration must be speaking about the presence of God's Spirit guiding people in their lives and in their teaching, including those who composed the final text and those who welcomed it as a true (though, of course, necessarily limited) expression of their faith convictions. For, in the final analysis, it is the community of believers that recognises the texts as inspired, because it is the community that continues to find them inspiring. We might think of Beethoven being 'inspired' to compose the music. At times we might find a particular conductor 'inspired' in the way he can bring the best out of the orchestra and translate the wonder of the score in a striking way. Finally if no one finds the music or the performance inspiring, it is unlikely to long survive. Those responsible for the texts that we experience as inspired wanted their contemporaries to listen to the past so as to listen to the ways – at times the surprising new ways – that God was inspiring them to live now. The texts are religious texts intended to encourage fidelity and prayer. Saint Augustine insists that all the scriptures are there to provoke love – and we could add gratitude, repentance, praise and joy.

God's inspiration is everywhere. God's grace bears its marvellous fruit wherever people are attentive to this inspiration and let it guide them. What is special to the texts of the sacred scriptures is that the people of Israel (not just individual Israelites) considered them to give expression to God's action among them and so to their faith. Disciples of Jesus continued to see the sacred writings of the Older Testament in this way in so far as these writings reached their fulfilment in Jesus. To say that the writings of the Older Testament are inspired is to accept that there was indeed a special divine providence guiding the people of Israel, and that this providence encompassed the writings which the community accepted as giving a genuine understanding of God's action in their history. As the Second Vatican Council states, we can be confident that these texts express 'without error that truth which God willed to be put down in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation' (Dei Verbum, 11). Before all else the Bible is a truthful, though imperfect, statement of God's faithful love, and how we need to respond to this love.

The community considers these texts foundational, and continues to experience God's inspiration through them. If we are to be open to the movements of God's Spirit as we read these texts, if we are to read these texts in the spirit in which they were written and preserved, and be guided in our response to God's will in the changing circumstances of our lives, we must do all we can to understand what the texts aimed to say and why they were preserved and handed down to us.

While doing all we can to read the texts of the Older Testament within their own context, it remains important that the texts be read from within the faith community to which they belong. For Christians, this means to read the texts in the light of Jesus, the one in whom God's word was made flesh, and in our reading to be guided by his Spirit. Yet even here, this is not enough. Even with the help of Jesus walking with them the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not understand the meaning of the scriptures till they encountered Jesus 'in the breaking of bread' (Luke 24:35). It is at the Eucharist, when Jesus' disciples assemble, that the texts have their proper place, just as they were read when the people of Israel assembled in the temple or the synagogue to remember and to celebrate their faith.

Those who claim that the sacred scriptures are inspired are not claiming that they are free from error in areas that are not central to the witness that they give of God's action in the history of Israel and of how the people ought to respond. It is essential also to recognise that even in this their central thrust, they are human documents and, as a careful reading of the texts shows, they are not free from mistaken assumptions that were part of their time and their culture. However, with all these necessary limitations, they continue to inspire, for in their precise beauty they reveal God. To say that these texts are inspired is to say that God was guiding his people, and that this guidance includes a special providence in guiding the writings in which their history is expressed. In much the same way Christians trust that the Spirit of Jesus is with us guiding us to the fullness of truth (see John 16:13; Matthew 28:20). The authority of scripture lies in the power these texts have to transform people's lives.

Among the many writings cherished by Christians as being inspired expressions of genuine religious experience, the collection of writings known as the Bible has a special place. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith issued by the First Vatican Council (1870) we read: 'Having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures have God for their author' (Denzinger 3006). The Second Vatican Council asserts what Christians have always believed: that the sacred Scriptures of the Older Testament give us inspired expressions of religious experience:

Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Holy Mother Church, relying on the belief of the apostles, holds that the books of both the Old Testament and the New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the church herself.

– Vatican II, 1965 *Dei Verbum* 3,11

Through Moses, with the race of Israel, God acquired a people for himself, and to them he revealed himself in words and deeds as the one, true, living God, so that Israel might experience the ways of God with people'.

– *Dei Verbum* n.14

The Council also speaks of the relationship between the Older and Newer Testaments:

The books of the Old Testament, all of them caught up in the Gospel message, attain and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament, and, in their turn, shed light on it and explain it. – DV n.16

Because the people of the Older Testament did not know Jesus we cannot expect their writings to give expression to the revelation of God that is received through him. For disciples of Jesus, who experienced him as God's focal word, the writings that make up the Newer Testament form the climax of the Bible. The partial revelation of God found in the imperfect words of the Older Testament has to be checked against the revelation of God found in Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, a revelation received by Jesus' disciples who gave expression to this revelation, in a necessarily imperfect but authentic way, in the writings of the Newer Testament. The Pontifical Biblical Commission in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) writes:

The Church reads the Old Testament in the light of the paschal mystery – the death and resurrection – of Jesus Christ, who brings a radical newness and, with sovereign authority, gives a meaning to the Scriptures that is decisive and definitive (see *Dei Verbum* n. 4). This new determination of meaning has become an integral element of Christian faith.

– n. 54

As Christians it is our privilege to read these inspired words in the light of our experience of Jesus. A key principle from the beginning is to read the Older Testament through the eyes of Jesus and to pray to have his mind and heart and to be inspired by his Spirit as we read them. Only in this way can we be open to their deepest meaning while recognising their inherent limitations. We would do well to do the same with the writings of other religious cultures as well as with Christian writings that have emerged since the Newer Testament. If they contain expressions of genuine religious experience, we will be open to share this experience if we read them through Jesus' eyes, and in the light of the writings of the Newer Testament. God will reveal himself to you and to me in ways that are personal and unique, but never in ways that contradict the way God reveals himself in Jesus.

To be inspired through the Scriptures, we must read them with a profound sense of awe. For they are an expression of prayer and are for us an invitation into prayer. Isaiah has God say:

This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.

– Isaiah 66:2

Let us pray to share in the experience of Cornelius and his household when they heard God's word spoken through the apostle Peter. Peter assured the Christian community in Jerusalem:

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.

– Acts 11:15

## The Canon of the Older Testament

The declaration that a piece of writing belongs to the Bible (that is to say, to the canon of sacred Scripture) is a recognition that it is inspired, that it is foundational in the life of the faith-community, and that it belongs among those writings that are recognised as a standard against which all other writings must be compared. The word ‘canon’ comes from the Greek *kanôn* (Hebrew *qâneh*), a ‘rule’ or ‘measure’). Much of what was written by Jews prior to and after the time of Jesus has undoubtedly been lost because people did not take the trouble to preserve it. Other writings were preserved, but were not accepted into the general body of the religious community, or were rejected by it as lacking authenticity (see the *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vols 1 and 2 edited by James H. Charlesworth (DLT 1983,1985). The writings that make up the Older Testament of the Bible are those that people of faith accepted, reflected upon in their assemblies and continued to treasure. For this reason we have the community’s guarantee that these writings were judged to be truly inspired, because they were found to be truly inspiring and to give expression to this inspiration in ways that continued to reveal God. The texts that have been accepted as inspired are those that have been treasured in the community and used in its liturgy.

Public reading within the church gives them a ‘pulpit’ from which they can guide the lives of the people.

– *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ‘Canonicity’ §17, 1037

### **The revelation of God in the writings of the Older Testament is necessarily limited**

The experience of beauty and the many ways in which we give expression to it arise from defined, delineated and limited experiences. That moment on a bridge crossing the Nattai river. The people there with me. Everything grey in the fading light of dusk. The sudden rush of ducks disturbing the silence as they splash their wings against the water and head off into the gathering night. The cold with the anticipation of a fire and a pleasant night spent with friends. All this and much more makes that moment a treasured memory that sets it apart from other experiences which have since faded and are lost. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful.

An early morning in Port Moresby after an evening when the full moon had cast its spell over our companionship. A pure white flower had emerged overnight from a place where I would have least expected to see it – a cactus! The surprise, the contrast, the sheer beauty, has left a memory that will not fade – though the flower itself lasted only for a day. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful. It is always so. It is our limitations that make us special, that set us apart, and it is precisely in our limitations that beauty lies and is revealed.

It is the same with truth. There is a place for abstraction, for general principles, for learning wisdom that can guide one’s life. But every time we have an insight into the way things really are (as distinct from the way we are in the habit of thinking about things, or the way we would like things to be) it is by way of insight into a precise, delineated and necessarily limited experience. We gain insight into truth not in spite of our limitations, but in and through them. This is the way things are in the real world.



This is the way things were for those who composed the Bible. There is a danger that we could be so fascinated by the notion that what we are reading is inspired by God that we might imagine that the precise, delineated and defined parameters of ordinary human experience are not factors to be considered when reading this sacred text. There is a danger that we could think of the Bible as being dictated by God in such a way that the human limitations of the inspired writers and of the circumstances in which they wrote have no relevance to what we find in the text. We could read the Bible texts as though they came straight from God and share in God's transcendent truth, somehow unrelated to history or to human experience. We could read them as if they expressed some abstract and eternal truth that is equally relevant in every age and to every person, because it comes from God who is unchanging Truth, and whose words, therefore, transcend the limitations of time, place and language.

The Bible is not like that. It is a record of limited human insights inspired by God that real people have expressed to other real people in limited human words and in specific cultural and historical circumstances. There is beauty and truth in the Bible texts. To find this beauty and this truth (as distinct from imposing on the text our own preconceived notions) we will need to explore the historically conditioned and necessarily limited human experiences that gave rise to their inspired insights.

The aim of the study of the Bible is to discover and express what it was that the inspired authors intended to say by their words, what their contemporaries understood from these writings, why people found these writings inspiring, and why they cherished them, preserved them, copied them and handed them on. The Older Testament is the fruit of centuries of reflection by people who were convinced that their God, YHWH, the Lord of creation and the Lord of history, had chosen them in love and had a special mission for them in the world. They believed that there was a special providence guiding their history. They kept reflecting on it to remember God's love and covenant with them, and to discern God's will, as well as to learn from their mistakes, and so become more sensitive, attentive and faithful. They cherished their traditions, including the reflections of those who went before them, but they knew that no words, however sacred, can comprehend the mystery that is God, and so they kept questioning, refining and adapting earlier insights in the light of newer revelation.

Since they believed that it was God himself who was communicating with his people through the events of their history, the authors readily prefaced their inspired insights with expressions such as 'YHWH said' – a way of stating that the words that followed expressed God's will as best they were able to discern it. They expected that God's will would be beyond their ability to comprehend fully, and so they approached the inspired texts expecting that there would be many hidden meanings to be discovered there. The Rabbis liked quoting Jeremiah: 'Is not my word like fire, says YHWH, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?' (Jeremiah 23:29). They liked to break open the word to see the sparks of light which issued from it, revealing the divine enlightenment hidden within. The more meanings they were able to discover, the better. They delighted in playing with the text as one might play with a prism, enjoying the hundred and one reflections and flashes of colour that delight the eye and enlighten the heart.

The texts expressed inspired insights into the presence and action of a living God in their history. No text could hold it all, and so the history of the development of the Older Testament is a history of prayerful debate, discussion and refinement, always in the light of historical experience.

This continued into the Newer Testament. Jesus' disciples reflected on the sacred texts in the light of the new revelation that they experienced in Jesus of Nazareth. They came to what they believed was a deeper understanding of God's intention in inspiring the scriptures – an understanding that was hidden prior to God's revelation in Jesus. When Paul, for example, comes to quote from the scriptures he does so with joy and with profound respect and gratitude for the word of God expressed there. But he reads with eyes enlightened by the love of the one whom he describes as 'loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). He came to see that the love of God revealed in the heart of Jesus embraces every person, for it is the love of God. Furthermore, he recognised this as the mission confided by God to Abraham and to Israel and he did his best to carry out that mission as a faithful Jew. He carried on the tradition of the inspired authors who went before him in recognising the limits of earlier insights and earlier expressions, limits that were brought to light by the presence and action of God in Jesus.

We must be clear about the limitations even of those treasured words found in the Bible. None by-passes mediation. None gives us direct access to God. In the words of the Vatican Council: 'The words of God expressed in human words are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like us' (*Dei Verbum* n.13).

Even when we look at Jesus we do not see God in God's transcendent being. We see God as God has chosen to be revealed in the limitations of the human. When we listen to the words of the Older Testament, we do not hear God communicating with us in some transcendent, super-human way that by-passes history and human experience. We hear God mediated through people who gave expression to their religious experience in words that have all the wonderful qualities of human language, but also its unavoidable limitations. It is precisely within the limited human condition of Jesus that the divine shines out so beautifully and so convincingly. The words of the Bible are the 'words of God' only in this mediated sense.

Raymond E. Brown, a leading Catholic Scripture scholar, quotes a Jewish Rabbi as stating that all that God 'said' to Moses on Mount Sinai is contained in the sound of the first consonant in the Hebrew alphabet, the glottal stop, Aleph. Brown goes on to say:

With this daring statement that the actual revelation to Israel consists only of the Aleph, Rabbi Mendel transformed the revelation on Mount Sinai into a mystical revelation, pregnant with final meaning, but without specific meaning ... It has to be translated into human language, and that is what Moses did. In this light every statement on which authority is grounded would become a human interpretation, however valid and exalted, of something that transcends it.

– “*And the Lord said: Biblical reflections on Scripture as the word of God*” in *Theological Studies* 42[1981], page 11, quoting G. Scholem *The Kabbala and its Symbolism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965, pages 29-31).

In the same article, Brown writes:

The Bible is the literary objectification of a faith that is a response to revelation' (page 9). He defines Scripture as 'divine revelation to which human beings have given expression in words.

– page 13

Another Catholic Scripture scholar, Raymond F. Collins writes:

Though canonised by long usage, 'word of God' should not be used of the Scriptures without further hermeneutical reflection ... A distance is to be maintained conceptually between the scriptural expression and the self-communication of God in itself ... Theologically it is less confusing to state that the Scriptures witness to the word of God.

– Article on *Inspiration* in the New Jerome Biblical Commentary (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990) page 1033, paragraph 69).

A Catholic theologian (M. Schmaus) writes

What we encounter in the Sacred Scriptures is first of all the objectivization of the belief in and understanding of Christ which was possessed by the Church or the local congregation. In other words it is the answer to the revelation of God. In this answer, however, the word of God itself is expressed, for this word has entered into the answer of the Church and is effective in it. On the other hand we must not forget that God's word, which enters into our human answer of faith, nevertheless always transcends it.

– *Dogma 1*, page 188

The Pontifical Biblical Commission in a document entitled '*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*' (1993) writes:

The exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding'.

– page 94

The Word of God finds expression in the work of human authors. The thought and the words belong at one and the same time both to God and to human beings, in such a way that the whole Bible comes at once from God and from the inspired human author. This does not mean, however, that God has given the historical conditioning of the message a value which is absolute'.

– page 113

Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language. Proper respect for inspired Scripture requires undertaking all the labours necessary to gain a thorough grasp of its meaning'.

– page 133

In Chapters Five and Six we will examine the 'labours' that Scripture scholars undertake 'to gain a thorough grasp of the meaning' of the sacred texts.