

# Conversing with the Saints as they converse with Scripture

## In conversation with Brian Brock's *Singing the Ethos of God*<sup>1</sup>

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### RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, l'auteur considère la deuxième partie de l'ouvrage de Brock et examine divers aspects du concept de tradition théologique. Dans une tradition, les accords sont plus intéressants et fondamentaux que les désaccords. On peut se rattacher à une tradition et la présenter à d'autres. La notion de communion des saints permet de retrouver la portée éthique de l'exégèse chrétienne. Il ne s'agit pas là de l'appel à la communauté devenu populaire dans le débat sur l'Écriture et l'éthique depuis le milieu des années 80. Il s'agit plutôt de considérer l'Église comme engendrée par la Parole. L'autorité scripturaire se définit en fonction de sa capacité à produire la vie : cette définition est dépendante d'une pneumatologie développée. L'autorité de l'Écriture apparaît comme un phénomène qui se produit entre l'Écriture et ses lecteurs. Lorsque la communauté reconnaît l'efficacité des livres bibliques qu'elle lit comme Écriture, elle lui reconnaît le pouvoir de façonner la vie de ses membres en fonction du contenu des textes. Cette approche pneumatologique de l'autorité de l'Écriture combinée à la prise en compte de la communion des saints conduit à une critique sévère des conceptions populaires de l'histoire comme d'une séquence d'époques séparant les croyants d'aujourd'hui des saints d'autrefois. Ceci demande qu'on veuille bien méditer l'Écriture en y consacrant du temps. On peut

alors se demander si la quête moderne de méthodes exégétiques objectives, de procédures interprétatives stables et solides, n'est pas au fond due au fait que nous n'avons pas le temps de nous exposer patiemment à l'Écriture. Il faut préserver le caractère étranger de l'Écriture. S'ils méconnaissent l'apport des chrétiens d'autres temps, s'ils ne le laissent pas corriger leur vision des choses, les exégètes contemporains restent prisonniers des schémas de pensée de leur époque, à la fois dans leurs habitudes interprétatives et dans toute autre activité intellectuelle ou pratique. Les exégètes chrétiens d'aujourd'hui doivent non seulement lire l'exégèse des saints, mais, pour s'ouvrir à l'œuvre de transformation divine en eux, apprendre à entendre la voix particulière de ceux-ci comme de guides dans la lecture de l'Écriture. S'il peut y avoir un principe à suivre pour favoriser cela, le voici : ne risque jamais de jugement moral, ne construit jamais d'argument et n'utilise pas la Bible d'une manière qui ne laisse pas de place au Saint-Esprit.

Brock n'aborde pas les Psaumes en offrant son propre apport interprétatif, mais il les étudie, en quelque sorte, « en train d'opérer » : il considère de quelle manière les pères les ont lu et prié et observe ainsi les Psaumes à l'œuvre pour façonner l'intellect, les émotions et la volition de ceux qui avaient l'habitude de chanter l'ethos de Dieu.

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### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In Reaktion auf den zweiten Teil von *Singing the Ethos of God* analysiert dieser Artikel mehrere Aspekte des Konzeptes einer „theologischen Tradition“. In einer Tradition ist Übereinstimmung aufregender und fundamentaler als Dissens. Man kann Teil einer Tradition werden und andere darin einführen. Das Konzept der *sanctorum communio* bringt die ethische Dimension christlicher Exegese neu ans Licht. Dieses Konzept ist von der „Wende zur Gemeinschaft“ zu unterscheiden, die in der Debatte um

Schrift und Ethik seit der Mitte der 1980er Jahre beliebt geworden ist. Das Konzept schlägt ein Verständnis von der Kirche als *creatura verbi* vor, einem Geschöpf des Wortes. Die Autorität der Schrift wird in Bezug auf ihre Kraft definiert, etwas zu erzeugen und ins Leben zu rufen, eine aktive Definition, die auf einer entwickelten Pneumatologie beruht. Die Autorität der Schrift wird als Phänomen zwischen der Schrift und ihren Lesern definiert. Wenn die Gemeinschaft die Kraft der biblischen Bücher an-erkennt, die sie als Schrift liest, dann schreibt sie ihr die Kraft zu, dem Leben der Gemeinschaft auf genau die



Weise Gestalt zu geben, auf die sie in den Texten portraitiert wird. Das Zusammenziehen dieser pneumatologisch organisierten Darstellung der Autorität der Schrift und der Rolle der Gemeinschaft der Heiligen in ihr erzeugt eine scharfe Kritik beliebter Konzeptionen von Geschichte als einer Abfolge von Epochen, die heutige Gläubige von den Heiligen distanziert, die ihnen vorausgegangen sind. Diese Kritik ruft auch eine Bereitschaft hervor, über der Schrift zu „meditieren“, ihr Zeit zu geben. Dies wirft die Frage auf, ob der wahre Grund für die moderne Suche nach objektiven exegetischen Methoden, nach sicheren und stabilen Interpretationsabläufen, auf der Befürchtung beruht, dass wir keine Zeit für die geduldige Auslegung der Schrift haben. Diese Schachzüge sind dazu gedacht, die Fremdheit der Schrift zu bewahren, also den Tendenzen des Menschen entgegenzuwirken, der Fremdheit des Wortes zu entkommen. Ohne die Herausforderung und mögliche Korrektur durch Christen aus anderen Generationen bleiben heutige Exegeten Gefangene der Schemata ihrer eigenen Zeit, in ihren interpretativen Gewohnheiten genau so wie bei jeder anderen

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## ABSTRACT

Responding to the second part of *Singing the Ethos of God*, this paper analyses several aspects of the concept of a 'theological tradition'. In a tradition agreement is more exciting and fundamental than disagreement, is something that we can become part of, and can introduce others into. The concept of the *sanctorum communio* recovers the ethical reach of Christian exegesis. This is to be distinguished from the 'turn to community' that has become popular in the scripture and ethics debate since the mid-1980s. It suggests an understanding of the church as *creatura verbi*, a creature of the Word. Scriptural authority is defined in terms of its power to author and bring to life, an active definition resting on a developed pneumatology. The authority of Scripture is described as a phenomenon in between Scripture and its readers. When the community re-cognises the power of the biblical books which they read as Scripture, they acknowledge it as having the power to give shape to their own lives in the very way it is portrayed in the texts. Drawing together this pneumatologically organised account of scriptural authority and the role of the communion of saints within it generates a sharp critique of popular conceptions of history as a sequence of epochs distancing contemporary believers from the saints who have gone before. It also calls forth a willingness to 'meditate' on Scripture, to give it time. This raises the ques-

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## 1. Tradition as agreement enacted

What can be expected of a paper commenting on a book<sup>2</sup> in which one does not find much to disagree with? If, after all, we assume that it is *criti-*

intellektuellen oder praktischen Aktivität. Heutige Exegeten müssen nicht nur die Exegese der Heiligen lesen, sondern – um göttliche Transformation willkommen zu heißen – sie müssen auch lernen, ihre unverwechselbaren Stimmen als Zeitgenossen und Führer beim Lesen der Schrift zu hören. Wenn es irgendeine Leitidee für so eine Leseweise gibt, dann lautet sie: Versuche niemals ein moralisches Urteil, baue niemals eine Argumentation auf oder verwende niemals die Bibel für die Zwecke dieser Argumentation auf eine Weise, die dem Heiligen Geist keinen Raum lässt.

Der Artikel schlägt vor, dass folgender methodologisch entscheidender Schachzug diese Betonungen trägt: Brock beginnt mit den Psalmen, aber er tut das nicht, indem er seine eigene interpretative Sicht anbietet, sondern indem er sie quasi „in Aktion“ studiert: Er beobachtet die Wege, auf denen die Väter die Psalmen im Gebet lasen, als Gelegenheit, die Psalmen in Aktion zu beobachten, wie sie den intellektuellen, emotionalen und willensmäßigen Horizont derjenigen formten, die im Singen des Ethos Gottes geübt waren.

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tion of whether the real reason for the modern quest for objective exegetical methods, for safe and stable procedures of interpretation, rests on a worry that we do not have time for patient exposure to Scripture. These moves are intended to preserve the strangeness of Scripture, to thwart human tendencies to escape the strangeness of the Word. Without the challenge and possible correction by Christians through the generations, contemporary exegetes remain prisoners of the schemata of their age, in their interpretative habits as much as in any other intellectual or practical activity. Contemporary Christian exegetes must not only read the exegesis of the saints, but in order to invite divine transformation, must learn to hear their distinctive voices as contemporaries and guides in reading Scripture. If there is any guiding idea for such reading, it is: never attempt a moral judgement, mount an argument, or use the Bible for the purpose of the former, in a way that does not leave space for the Holy Spirit.

The paper suggests that a methodologically decisive move sustains these emphases. Brock begins with the Psalms, yet does so not by offering his own interpretative take but rather studies them, as it were, 'in operation': watching the way in which the fathers prayerfully read them as an opportunity to watch the Psalms in operation, as they shaped the intellectual, emotional and volitional horizon of those who became adept in singing the ethos of God.

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*cism* that delights and entertains, should we not also assume that an exercise such as this would be tedious at best? This assumption would, however, miss a crucial insight that Brian Brock offers us in



his *Singing the Ethos of God*: the whole project is, after all, driven by the conviction that what really is exciting is not disagreement but agreement. More demanding and more interesting than dwelling on disagreement is to find out how it can be that individuals, people and generations, for all their differences, find themselves in agreement on things that really matter. To believe agreement is more exciting and fundamental than disagreement is just another way of saying that there is such a thing as tradition, a form of agreement we wish to be part of.

*Singing the Ethos of God* defines 'tradition' precisely in such terms: 'I understand tradition as an enacted form of agreement' (100). As such enacted agreement sustained over time, Brock hastens to add, tradition is also what makes those moments of disagreement that occur within its stream both possible and productive. But the emphasis remains on agreement: 'Tradition is a form of agreement into which we introduce people' (100) – and ourselves, as I think we should hasten to add, since we can only issue an invitation to enter a tradition from within.

I shall inquire into the nature of this agreement that we call 'tradition' below and content myself at this point with the preliminary conclusion that whatever the reader may find wanting in my response to Brock's book will have to be my fault, not a result of the predictable boredom that allegedly comes with too much agreement. Given my stated points of agreement with Brock and the complexity of his text, I will do little more than comment upon what I find particularly exciting in the text and those insights that strike me as particularly productive for further development. I will do so mainly by focusing on the book's sections on Augustine and Luther, which certainly constitute the heart of the book – not only in terms of the respective weight and length of the material, but also in terms of where they direct the reader's awareness and interest. The chapters on the exegetical praxis of Augustine and Luther are framed by chapters that analyse the relative poverty of our contemporary 'Bible-and-ethics' debate and the corresponding praxis it ensues, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by a concluding chapter that attempts some first steps in applying the lessons learnt from the richer praxis of the fathers. But the lessons themselves are mainly found in the chapters under the heading 'Listening to the saints encountering the ethos of Scripture'.

## 2. Journeying into the strange new world of the Bible

A first observation that impresses itself on the reader about the way the chapters work together as a whole – and rather successfully in my opinion – is this: The first part not only gives a useful survey of various attempts to come to terms with the 'Bible-and-ethics' problem, including pointers as to where precisely the shortcomings of each individual approach are; its particular value lies in going beyond the common 'survey' standard by revealing the hidden commonalities of these approaches. Central to the mainstream approaches that Brock reviews is not this or that individual shortcoming, but a shared sense of estrangement from Scripture that these approaches in various ways all try to 'fix'.

Brock's own suggestion, however – the lesson he thinks we need to learn from the two church fathers he interrogates – is precisely that we *must abstain from flying from the strangeness of the Word*. According to Brock, we must abstain from any attempt to overcome this strangeness, whether by building hermeneutical bridges, by reducing the scope of the Bible's authority (as liberal accounts tend to) or by simply ignoring the estrangement altogether (as biblicist accounts tend to). Rather, as the fathers and Luther in particular understood so well, we need to accept the 'foreignness' of Scripture as the genuine working space of the Holy Spirit to eventually lure us into its strange new world. This strange new world is a scriptural cosmos where those addressed are saved through and transformed by a *verbum alienum* – a word that reaches them from outside of themselves, a message that they could not have invented or told themselves: 'From their [the fathers'] Psalm exegesis we learn that the foreignness of the Bible, properly understood, is the foreignness of life in the Spirit within which faith awakens to discover itself' (xix).

Central to the problem of the estrangement of our moral discourses from Scripture is, as I understand Brock, that it is essentially an estrangement of the heart. We may liken the problem to a marriage in emotionally barren times. While there still exist forms of co-existence, of communication and intercourse, with the connection of souls being lost, all such other forms are bound to become brittle eventually. The problem of the estrangement of the souls cannot remain and be kept external to these other spheres of engagement – at least not for very long.



One instructive case in point regarding the 'relationship' between the Scriptures and their readers is presented in Augustine's *Confessions*, in which the great African narrates, as Brock puts it, his 'journey into Scripture' (x): in it, the famous auto-biographer tells the tale of his conversion as one fundamentally of moral rather than intellectual estrangement. Although Augustine describes his personal discovery with a strong prerogative on the moral aspect, we should not too quickly assume that the intellectual and moral dimensions are necessarily in competition here. Estrangement is always as complex as the relationship itself. Although it might well make itself felt in a particularly painful way in one peculiar respect (such as the moral one), we should not infer from this that, in principle, we can understand (intellectually) another person without positioning ourselves properly (morally) towards the other.

Losing soul connection means to become estranged in all other respects also: intellectual, emotional, moral. In characterising what happened in and through Augustine's conversion, Brock perceptively puts this same intrinsic connection in positive terms: 'This God-given delight in God led him [Augustine] with ever-increased joy to Scripture, especially the Psalms, and his praying of the Psalms kindled a genuine love for God that put to flight his untruth, deceit, and vanity' (x).

In other words, what Augustine found himself gifted with in his newly-found delight in Scripture was at the same time the overcoming of his intellectual, volitional and moral estrangement from it. To have put one's heart aright needs to come first, but this is not a prioritising of the emotional over other human faculties. In biblical terms, the 'heart' is not itself a human faculty (as represented by a single organ), but rather represents the 'positioned-ness', the orientation of all human faculties as it is given in any human being.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Authority 'in between': beyond the communitarian turn

The prominence of the example of Augustine's biographical 'journeying into Scripture' in Brock's book indicates that *Singing the Ethos of God* is not advocating a 'communitarian' model of Scripture and ethics in which the mode of reading is determined mainly or exclusively by the habits of the readers' community. As Brock reminds us, in becoming a Christian, Augustine had to learn to rid himself of the habits of reading the Bible which

he had learnt in his Manichean community, such as contempt for the Old Testament and other modes of highly selective and idiosyncratic reading. 'He now saw how communities can blind us to Scripture, making it inaccessible' (x).

We can comfortably put this insight in the language of Reformation theology: To understand the church as *creatura verbi*, a creature of the Word, and not the other way round – the word as a creature of the church – marks a profound difference from the 'turn to community' that has become popular in the 'Scripture and Ethics' debate since the mid 1980s, when the insight was hailed that the authority of the Bible cannot be one 'in and of the book itself', that is in abstraction from the believing community. While this was certainly a valid point to make, the movement that Brock labels 'communitarian ethics' often lacked theological resources to distance itself from more far-reaching claims as they were associated with post-modern aesthetics of perception. To the degree in which the perspective of the latter was adopted, the turn to community appeared to suggest that the believing community itself was to 'bestow' authority on the book which it took to be normative. The language of 'bestowal' or 'ascription' in regards to the peculiar authority of Scripture nourished the mistaken assumption that it could ever be the church's resolution or decision to accept the Bible as authority and thereby establish it in the first place.

However, even the process of so-called 'canonisation' was, in fact, not a decision made by any ecclesiastical authority as regards which individual books should go into the canon, but merely a process of public recognition of the number of scriptural writings that had long proven authoritative for the congregations of the ecumenical Church.

A communitarian model (at least when not chastened pneumatologically), on the other hand, would not only underestimate the degree to which communities are susceptible to corruption in their habits of interpreting,<sup>4</sup> but also profoundly misunderstand the nature of scriptural authority. While certainly not independent of the respective communities of believers, the authority of Holy Scripture cannot be said to be a mere function of the collective will of those communities; and while scriptural authority is not immediately given with any inert qualities of the text (its inerrancy or lack of inner contradictions, or any other such *affectio scripturae*), it is not separable from the text either. The authority of Scripture is best described as a phenomenon *in between* – between the book and



its readers. Not belonging to either of them exclusively, scriptural authority is what *happens* within the engagement of one with the other: when the community re-cognizes the power of the biblical books which they read as Scripture, as the power to give shape to their own lives in the very way it is portrayed in the texts.

'Authority', a word derived from the Latin *authoritas*, literally means authorship, the power to originate and bring to life. And it is wholly appropriate to understand the authority of Scripture accordingly: as the power to 'author' the life-stories of those who read it perceptively and obediently, so as to enable them eventually to live their lives individually and communally as 'Performing the Scriptures'.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Doxologies and anti-doxologies

But what, then, does it mean to read Scripture appropriately? That is, how are we to read Scripture in a way which does not undermine but rather reflects a proper understanding of its authority? The answer that *Singing the Ethos of God* suggests is this: to read Scripture in a congenial fashion means to do so as a form of praise or 'doxological exegesis' which is archetypically demonstrated in the communal chanting of the Psalter. Praise is in itself already morally qualified, as Brock draws from reading Luther in particular, in that praising God inevitably implies the acknowledgement of our sinfulness and neediness, as well as a repenting of and abstaining from the anti-doxologies that abound at any given time in history and constantly tempt us into singing another sort of song: either denouncing God's bountiful creation as the worst of all possible worlds and making our praise dependent on a give-and-take-rationale, or perverting the thanks owed to the Creator by saying *ego feci*: world, history, human excellence – all my own work (210-232).<sup>6</sup>

Since the Psalms are prime amongst divine offers to assist human beings to abstain from enforced anti-doxologies and their fatal moral consequences, *Singing the Ethos of God*, along with the fathers, identifies the Psalter as the best possible place to begin. In a methodologically decisive move, Brock begins with the Psalms, yet does so not by offering his own interpretative take, but rather studies them, as it were, 'in operation': watching the way in which the fathers prayerfully read them as an opportunity to watch the psalms in operation, as they shaped the intellectual, emotional and voli-

tional horizon of those who became adept in singing the ethos of God:

It is a study in Christian moral theology that I have undertaken by way of an analysis of the practices of the Christian exegetical tradition.... The contemporary academic Bible-and-ethics discussion remains largely determined by the question of *how* Scripture might be understood as a moral guide, preparing for exegesis rather than engaging in it. In so doing, such treatments rarely glimpse the possibility that exegesis might be a form of praise (xix-xv).

Spiritual instruction inevitably means learning by unlearning – adopting new things by renouncing old ones. What then, according to Brock, are the attitudes, opinions and prejudices that need to be overcome and unlearned? Prime amongst them is what he calls the 'modern obsession with method' (xiii), as it is characterised by a belief in summarising, objectivity and control. Since the Scriptures refuse to be summarised, objectified and put under interpretative control, the challenge at hand is to 'to give up the attempt to fit the Bible into a pre-conceived moral universe' (xii).

As remedy for the impoverishment that has come to be associated with the reign of modern exegesis and its new canon that has been organised around a number of historical critical methods, Brock suggests the following:

To combat the modern obsession with method, I approach this exegetical tradition as an ineradicably social 'acoustic space', within which one learns practical skills of handling and appropriating Scripture (xiii).

And he suggests entering this space by 'watching the saints interpret Scripture. This approach is appropriate, as it proves to be in keeping with the tradition itself:

For millennia Israel and the church have not gathered around methodological agreement, of even a definitive translation or canon. They have translated, read, argued, and gathered for worship around a group of texts they called Scripture, which functioned to orient their praise of God and God's works (xiii).

Since by now the critical force of Brock's approach should have become obvious, it would seem useful to take a closer look at a number of familiar yet problematic attitudes, assumptions and prejudices that Brock's account challenges – explicitly or implicitly.



## 5. Which exegesis? Whose naïveté?

A first such prejudice would be to assume that pre-modern exegesis was naïve or even simplistic. Watching Brock as he is watching the fathers do their theological expositions of the Psalms is therapeutic in this regard, as it guides the reader into a world of bold and exciting theological discoveries that amply demonstrate how subtle and sophisticated pre-modern exegesis could be. Confronted with a surplus of theological insights on every page that draws on Augustine's and Luther's scriptural expositions, we are actually provoked into asking whether it is not our contemporary exegesis that represents a notable reduction of complexity: could it be that the striving for straightforward methods and safe methodological grounds reflects not only the desire for more objective, but also for less complex ways of reading?

Brock quotes Luther in a revealing and convicting statement (convicting us, that is, not Luther). Commenting on Psalm 1:2, 'Blessed is the man who meditates on the law day and night', Luther remarks:

We must take the utmost care that we do not quickly believe our own idea and that we must expound Scripture in all humility and reverence, because Scripture is the stone of offence and rock of scandal for those who are in a hurry. But Scripture turns that rock into pools of water for those who meditate on the law of the Lord (184).

The Hebrew term that is translated here by 'meditating' suggests a constant chewing, chanting and murmuring of what is read; hence Luther associates this practice with patience, which is further endorsed by the addition of 'night and day'. The problem for modern readers of this statement is, of course, that it would be hard to deny that if there was ever a generation of readers in a hurry, it must be ours. Would it, therefore, be wholly inappropriate to speculate that the real reason for our quest for objective methods, for safe and stable procedures of interpretation, is that we are notoriously in a hurry? That we (think we) do not have time for the sort of patient exposure to Scripture and its world that Luther and Augustine thought to be the condition *sine qua non* for our discovering and tapping the richness of Scriptural instruction?

## 6. Fathers or precursors? Against the belief in 'epochs'

A second belief to be abrogated when singing the ethos of God in the way Brock commends, is, I suggest, the belief in the idea of the *epoch*. This idea reckons with a sequence of 'ages' that we can explain by reference to their respective typical characteristics. Knowledge of such characteristics will, in turn, permit us to explain to ourselves individual authors or movements within any particular one such age on the basis of what we (think we) know of the respective epoch in general.

The difficulty with this idea is that it defies theological convention. To enter in a conversation with the saints, as Brock suggests and practices in *Singing the Ethos of God*, means to take seriously the notion of *communio sanctorum* as a communion that 'works' not only synchronically but also diachronically – not only contemporaneously within a given period but also across different periods of time. The creedal belief in the community of saints thus undermines the idea of history as a sequential series of 'ages' (antiquity, early, high and late middle ages, modernity, etc.). It undermines belief in epochs that are complete and rounded as each gives way to the respective next, thus allowing the previous epochs to be defined, explained and superseded by the respective next.

We can only believe *either* in epochs *or* in tradition, and those who confess the *communio sanctorum* certainly do the latter. Within a framework of history as an unfolding sequence of epochs, fathers such as Augustine or Luther could only be of interest as *precursors* – historical figures that can and need to be explained in order for us to better understand how we have come to be who we are. Under the auspices of an epochalist understanding of history, we may well study such figures of the past with respect or even affection, but such homage is effectively motivated by our desire to explain in order to understand, or more precisely, to explain *them* in order to understand *ourselves*. We think that if we can decipher the patterns, reasons and contexts, according to which they thought the way they thought, acted the way they acted, and read the Scripture the way they read it (applying their 'pre-modern hermeneutics'), we will be better placed to say who we are – as those who inherited, adopted or abandoned their ways in particular configurations.

In contrast to this attitude, what must confessing the *communio sanctorum* entail for our engage-



ment with those who lived and thought before us? Perceived as saints amongst saints, these 'figures of the past' are understood to form 'the cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12:1) – eminent brothers and sisters who can be interrogated with the expectation that they have something to tell us today. Fathers (and mothers) of the church do not have a past to be explained, but a voice to be listened to. Instead of being separated from us by a wide and ugly ditch of history, fathers and mothers in faith assume a moral, intellectual and affective equidistance to us which is the work of the Holy Spirit. Together with us, they form what Paul conceived as a communion of discernment (Romans 12:2) that spans all times. As Brock puts it: 'In this sense, [even] the disciples have no advantage: we are all contemporaries with Christ' (xix).

## 7. Reading against the schemata of our age

Speaking of the modern belief in 'ages' that defies a theological understanding and practice of 'conversing amongst the saints', it is ironic to note how Paul, in the same context of Romans 12, speaks of our being entrapped in the 'schemata' of 'this *aion*'. By 'this *aion*' Paul does not refer to the particular 'historical context' in which he and his readers lived and which might be obsolete today, but to *any* (past, present, and future) experience of contemporaneity and the short-sightedness and lack of critical distance that comes with our immersion in it.

Do not be conformed to this world time but be transformed by the renewing of your perception, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to every one among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think... because we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Rom 12:1-5, translation mine).

In this passage, Paul summons the community to a transformation which entails the abdication of the schemata of this world as a result of the renewal of the mind. This renewal of the mind is necessary, given the schematising power of the *aion*. The Greek is *mē syshēmatizesthe* – literally, 'do not be made one with the schemata of this *aion*'. Here the passive voice is no less in place than it is in the subsequent call to be transformed: let yourselves

be transformed.<sup>7</sup> The latter case is certainly a grammatical 'divine passive' – the transformation cannot be a mere 're-thinking' of things as resulting from an intensified effort by the human mind itself. A new mind can only be a gift, part and parcel of the *kainē ktisis*, God's creation of a new humanity, so that the imperative can only mean that it is necessary to watch out for God's activity of renewing. Yet, the initial call *mē syshēmatizesthe* has a passive voice too, which indicates, as James Dunn put it, the 'recognition of a power or force which moulds character and conduct and which "this age" exercises'.<sup>8</sup> Mainstream patterns of thought are so ubiquitous and powerful that we don't even recognize their influence; they have become a sort of second skin to us.

How, then, does the Spirit break through this second skin and help us un-learn the schemata of the age? The example that Paul himself gives in this context is related to the church as body of Christ. What the envisioned transformation is meant to overcome is 'disordered' thinking about the relationship of members to each other and to the whole body, and in particular *hyperphronein*, 'to think more highly of oneself'.

In terms of our relating to 'pre-modern' exegesis, we can now see how the need for transformation and liberation from the otherwise irresistible 'schemata' of our age, of which Paul speaks, is intrinsically linked with the affirmation and appreciation of previous generations and their reading of Scripture.

Luther seems to have been acutely aware of the hermeneutical implications that a Pauline ecclesiology would have that reckons with the church as a community of discernment which lives by the liberation that the gospel affords from the schemata of the *aion*:

I see some things that blessed Augustine did not see; on the other hand, I know that others will see many things that I do not see. What recourse do we have but to be of mutual help to one another and to forgive those who fall, since we ourselves have already fallen or are about to fall.<sup>9</sup>

We notice that Luther understands the communion of interpreters not only as mutually enriching but also as in need of mutual forgiving, even in an interpretative context, and that he perceives the situation of himself and his time as interpreters of Scripture as one of those who 'are about to fall'. Without the challenge and possible correc-



tion through the fathers and other generations, we remain prisoners of the schemata of our age – in our interpretative habits as much as in any other intellectual or practical aspect. This is why it is precisely the perceived ‘strangeness’ of Scripture and of past generations which is the key to help us distance ourselves from our own biases or epistemological and moral short-sightedness. If we ‘honour’ the saints by interrogating their witness with an open mind, exploring their different views and arguments, we are invited to take their oddness as an invitation to learn to see our own oddness – perhaps as for the first time. Conversing with them, then, means listening to their voices as addressing us today, instead of explaining away the potential challenge they might represent to us. To mark the contrast once again: the logic of epochs and precursors eradicates the otherness of the fathers. Their strangeness is not permitted to challenge us, as we only allow it to reveal the degree in which *they* were, as it were, challenged by pre-enlightened patterns of perception, superstition, christological supersessionism and other such instances of anachronistic pathology. In such a perspective, even when their difference from us is acknowledge and stressed, they remain eventually and essentially ‘us’, insofar as their being different is just another means of explaining us to ourselves in reassuring us of what we managed to leave behind.

## 8. Room for the Spirit: against pneumatological deism

To understand oneself, in contrast, as part of a living tradition which is conceived and kept alive as a coherent conversation across generations through the ages, is, of course, a bold claim that we need to understand as resting on a specific and quite demanding conviction. Tradition as a lively trans-generational conversation is only intelligible when based on the pneumatological conviction that it is the same Spirit who has driven their exegesis and life witness, who is calling us today. It is only this same Spirit who makes this conversation possible, meaningful and even imperative.

At this point, I would even suggest that it is such a pneumatological imperative that drives the whole Brock project. As the book amply demonstrates, we can learn many things from the fathers and their biblical witness. But if there is a sort of ‘methodological’ master rule that we can adopt from our engaging them, it will have to be this: never attempt a moral judgement, a mounting of

an argument, or, indeed, the use of the Bible for the purpose of the former, which does not leave space for the Holy Spirit. Any mode of reading the Bible or of coming to a conclusion or judgement in the context of Christian moral reasoning should therefore test itself as to whether it confronts or rather conforms with the motto *etsi spiritus sanctus non daretur* (‘as if the Holy Spirit was not given’).

The idea of leaving space for the Spirit may sound like a nice and pious suggestion, but it is actually rather critical if not polemical with respect to a number of (apparently) pious attitudes and dispositions. Biblicist modes of using the Bible, for example, do very well without the Spirit. While the Spirit is usually accounted for in such approaches, in that he is presumed to have been influential for the coming into being of the sacred text, such approaches nevertheless tend to assume that the divinely inspired and infallible text is now fully given into human hands, where it only needs to be accurately quoted, properly applied and obeyed. At this point, the Spirit may be invoked for a second time, as a sort of guarantor in the background that all goes well in the process; but – again – the process of application itself is easily assumed to be so waterproof, self-explanatory and mechanical that there is hardly any real breathing space left for the Spirit. However, this ‘pneumatological deism’, as I would call it, is rather widespread and by no means exclusive to biblicist accounts.

Other attempts to use the Bible – even from a rather opposite ideological quarter – are often no less deist in pneumatological respect. They seek to follow their own waterproof procedure of, say, deducing moral conclusions from a series of syllogistic operations based on moral maxims such as the categorical imperative. God’s living Spirit will, however, never be (caught up and domesticated) *in* the letter that we quote or *in* the procedure we follow. He remains forever external and free, quite in the way in which and in accordance with which the doctrinal tradition has spoken of the Spirit’s personal qualities: his freedom to address us via the external word, his own will in opposition to our will, his ways beyond our imagination, and so forth.

Any pneumatological deism that assumes the Spirit to be ‘part’ of an operation we perform, as a guarantee in the background or an invisible stable basis, is eventually rooted in a triumphalist understanding of our situation: the spirit with us, inside us<sup>10</sup> – a presumption that fuelled pious spiritualist movements over the centuries as well as versions



of liberal cultural Protestantism. Is it perhaps this (unrecognized) triumphalist misunderstanding of the Spirit that we think we 'have within us', always with us and behind us, that makes us believe in procedures – *ex opere operato* – and which is ultimately accountable for the 'obsession with method' that Brock takes as characteristic of our time?

## 9. The 'voices' of the saints and the 'voice' of Scripture

Brock's way of resisting such a triumphalist pneumatological deism is to reckon with the 'voice' of Scripture, just as he reckons with the voices of the saints. A living voice hits our ears and addresses us, instead of being addressed by us in the first place; its sense of direction and communicative prowess cannot be domesticated into the idea of a 'content' that we can mine, manage and master.<sup>11</sup> To reckon with the voice of Scripture is, of course, to reckon with the voice of God himself through the Spirit, the author of the Scriptures. The Hebrew Scriptures are paradigmatic for this understanding, as for Israel God and the Torah were inseparable. The Torah was not understood as a sort of propositional deposit that God left behind on a visit to the earth, but rather as the presence of God, as God-self in the actual turning to and addressing of his people. This is why the Psalms show the same unrestricted passion and love for the Torah as was due to God himself.<sup>12</sup>

In the process of his own exegesis of select psalms in the third part of the book ('Singing the Ethos of God'), Brock draws on insights that he gleaned from Augustine and Luther in the second part of the book ('Listening to the Saints Encountering the Ethos of Scripture'), but only in a rather *ad hoc* fashion – just as it suits him in any given moment. In the chapters that analyse the two fathers' exegesis of the Psalter, Brock made the attempt to highlight their characteristic moves in conceptual regard and identify certain 'methodological ground rules' (184). But he resists 'applying' these insights and rules in a methodically straightforward fashion when it comes to his own exegesis in the final part of the book. Rather than directly emulating the fathers' exegesis, Brock engages them in his own conversation with the biblical witness. He engages their conversing with Scripture in his own conversing with Scripture. This approach is, I take it, intended to make their voices heard in a way that is not guided by the interest to compare, judge, explain or otherwise accommodate their contribu-

tions, but rather to chime in with the larger conversation that is the Christian theological tradition.

Augustine, Luther and other representatives of the tradition, with whom we are familiar, are then invited to feed, as it were, our thoughts, insights and questions in a way that allows the exegete today to go on with her own work. The *ad hoc* character of our engaging their voices is, then, precisely a way of methodologically accounting for the freedom of the Spirit. Engaging the voices of the fathers *ad hoc* for our own exposition of Scripture has nothing to do with interpretative liberty or arbitrariness but with what Brock calls positioning ourselves within the acoustic realm of Scripture – a realm which is more than the text, as it is the text sung – a song that encompasses the voices and readings of previous generations together with our own.

But *what* needs to be heard in any given moment and historical circumstance – which insight of which author within the acoustic realm of Scripture is to be given prominence in our hearing – cannot be predetermined. It must be left to the very dynamic of the procedure: the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Our final observation is closely connected with these pneumatological considerations. There seems to be a strange inconsistency in Brock's use of metaphors in his describing of the nature of his project. On the one hand, he speaks of '*Listening to the Saints Encountering the Ethos of Scripture*' (Part II) and describes the exegetical tradition as a social acoustic space; on the other hand he suggests what he is doing is '*watching* the saints interpret Scripture'.<sup>13</sup> Although the difference between what we may say respectively by employing *either* aural *or* visual metaphors can be rather significant, I suspect this variance of language in describing the nature of his project is deliberate.

Whether intended or not by the author, I would like to offer the following constructive interpretation of the apparent inconsistency. What I think Brock is actually doing in this book is *watching* the saints interpret Scripture – and what he intends by doing the former is to *listen* to their voices as they address us today. *Watching* the saints in operation is a work that can and needs to be done in its own operative rigour and transparency: by way of analysing their typical or surprising moves and manoeuvres and by naming the interpretative principles that we can make out as underlying their exegetical practice. Like an apprentice who looks over the shoulder of his or her master, we may wish to try ourselves by emulating these moves, develop



the skills we observe with them, and so forth.

The master-apprentice model of learning by emulating is, however, not sufficient. *'Watching'* the saints interpret Scripture – describing their moves – can only be a preparing the way for the task of actually *'listening'* to the voices of the saints as they sing the ethos of God. And listening to the voices of the saints as they sing the ethos of God is, in turn, only a way of preparing us to listen to the voice of God himself in our own reading of the Bible as Scripture.

Characterising these multiple operative 'layers' in the trans-generational conversation that is the Christian tradition of Scriptural exposition may sound complicated, but part of the complication is owed to the distinctive purposes of practical and theoretical engagement. It is usually easier to engage in good practice than it is to describe it on a theoretical level. But more important than the practical – theoretical divide is the standard of mediation (as opposed to immediacy) that is pneumatologically required in our reading of Scripture, so that we (to use Luther's expression) always remain pupils of the Spirit.

The Spirit reserves much for Himself, so that we may always remain His pupils. There is much that He reveals only to lure us on, much the He gives only to stir us up. And, as Augustine has put it so clearly, if no human being has ever spoken in such a way that every one understood him in all particulars, how much more is it true that the Holy Spirit alone has an understanding of all His own words!... Our life is one of beginning and of growth, not one of consummation.<sup>14</sup>

In the light of this pneumatological qualification, what higher praise could be sung of a book than to praise its character as a genuine new beginning? *Singing the Ethos of God* is just such a book that marks a hopeful new beginning in the 'Bible-and-ethics' discourse which it describes; and it does so in a fashion that helps prepare the way for the new beginning which is promised those who join the journey of the fathers and the whole Christian tradition of learning to listen to God's living voice as it addresses us in our reading of Scripture.

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## Notes

- 1 This is an edited version of a paper presented at the Annual Book Colloquium of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE), Tyndale House, Cambridge, 3-4 September 2008.
- 2 Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God. On the place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). Page references in the text refer to this publication.
- 3 'The "heart" in the biblical sense is not the inner life, but the whole man in relation to God.' Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Enlarged edition, ed. by Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM, 1971) 346.
- 4 For an instructive example, see the analysis by Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones of the exegetical justification of the apartheid system through the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion. Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Biblical Foundations in Theology; London: SPCK, 1991) 96-109.
- 5 Nicholas Lash, 'Performing the Scriptures', in his *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986) 37-46.
- 6 On Luther's critical application of Aristotle's scheme of the four causes in the context of which the reformer characterizes sinful self-deception in terms of human usurpation of the original cause and final cause (*ego feci*), see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology. A Contemporary Interpretation*, transl. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 158-162.
- 7 For a fuller account of this see Bernd Wannenwetsch, 'Members of one another. Charis, ministry and representation. A politico-ecclesial reading of Romans 12' in *A royal priesthood. The use of the Bible ethically and politically*, ed. by Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplin a.o. (Carlisle & Grand Rapids: Paternoster & Zondervan, 2002) 196-220.
- 8 James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*. Word Biblical Commentary vol. 38B (Dallas: Word, 1988) 712, who opts for the passive rather than the middle voice.
- 9 Martin Luther, 'Psalm 1 and 2, from Works on the first twenty-two Psalms, 1519 to 1521: A composite translation', in *Luther's Works* vol. 14, *Selected Psalms III*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958) 285, quoted in Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God*, 170.
- 10 This notion is reminiscent of Luther's mistaken translation of *entos hymōn* in Lk 17: 21 ('the kingdom is inside of you – *inwendig in euch* – instead of 'in our midst' – in Jesus) which stimulated influential cultural Protestant programmes like the one of Ernst Troeltsch. On this see Bernd Wannenwetsch, 'Kritik der Innerlichkeit. Evangelische praxis pieta-



tis als gottesdienstliche Frömmigkeit', in *Management und Spiritualität*. EPD Dokumentation 44/45 (2008) 54-68.

- 11 See Bernd Wannenwetsch, "Take heed what ye hear": Listening as a moral, transcendental and transformative act', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 2009 (in press).
- 12 See Bernd Wannenwetsch, "Walking the torah":

explorer le champ moral a la lumière des commandements de Dieu' in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 82 (2008) 371-387.

- 13 Emphases mine.

- 14 Martin Luther, cf. note 9, 283-284, quoted and commented on in Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God*, 169.

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