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Review: G. O'Collins, *Inspiration. Towards a Christian Interpretation of Biblical Inspiration*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, pp. 222

Two years after the *Revelation. Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ* book was published, Gerald O'Collins offers the reader yet another interesting position. This time, the former professor of systematic and fundamental theology at the Gregorian University is dealing with inspiration, an issue that remains in the obvious – through in need to be clarified – relationship with the previous area of research. The Australian theologian reminds us in his opening preface that the authoritative role of the Bible for the faith and life of Christians is linked to the fact that God has engaged in a unique way in the creation of the inspired books. Interestingly enough, scholars marginalize or even ignore the question of biblical inspiration (indeed, the list of literature given by the author in which the reader expects in vain to have this issue addressed is impressive). Therefore, the work of the Jesuit aims at making up for the lack of an adequate scholarly study.

Already in the foreword the author stresses that a better insight into inspiration can be expected not from abstract considerations, but from a study of the history of the inspiring influence of Scripture. The Bible itself provides a limited knowledge of the Divine causality involved in its creation, while more information would be provided by the inspirational effect; more visible is the mysterious inspiration of the Holy Spirit resulting in the creation of the inspired books and their inspiring properties. In the epilogue O'Collins emphasizes that his work sought primarily to distinguish (but not to separate) the biblical inspiration as an impulse of the Holy Spirit to write holy texts, divine self-revelation as a source material for inspired testimonies, and the biblical truth as a consequence of inspiration. The value of this publication would be

determined by distinguishing between the inspiration as the cause, i.e. the activity of the Holy Spirit, and the inspiration as the effects or results of that activity. Instead of focusing on the limited knowledge of how inspiration as a cause works, the focus is on the fragmented history of the influence of biblical texts. It is not so much about reception history which emphasizes the subjective element of reception as about *Wirkungsgeschichte*, effective history or a history of effects which indicates the objective inspiring power of the Spirit acting through biblical texts.

Between this framework, which is marked by the preface and the epilogue, the reader is offered ten chapters. The first one is preceded by a table of contents and a list of abbreviations. Due to the lack of contemporary studies on inspiration, the Australian theologian refers to older literature in the first chapter entitled *The Inspiration of the Bible: Two Accounts*. The dialogue with Protestant and Catholic theologians – Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Raymond F. Collins (b. 1935) – enables the identification of more important topics for further study of biblical inspiration. Especially the latter indicates the direction in which this publication under review is organized. O’Collins points out five principles that should shape scholarly elaborations on inspiration. “First, revelation precedes and extends beyond biblical inspiration. Hence revelation and inspiration should not be identified” (p. 17). This means that the examination of inspiration must be subordinated to the concept of revelation. Secondly, inspired Scripture bears witness to the words and events of revelation, but it can also bear witness to other matters rather loosely related to revelation. Thirdly, the formation of inspired Scripture ends with the end of the apostolic era: in other words, the gift of biblical inspiration was only appropriate for foundational revelation. Fourthly, it is emphasized that although the Spirit is the primary author, still the Bible, which is the Word of God, is also the fruit of true human creation. And finally, “the activity of the Spirit also ensures that the inspired Scriptures have remained inspiring – in the proclamation and public worship of the Church and in the individual lives of men and women” (p. 18).

In the second chapter – *Four Old Testament Books as Inspired and Inspiring* – the Jesuit, convinced that an authentic study of inspiration must be firmly anchored in the Scriptures themselves, deals with several books of the Old Testament. In them, he seeks above all what we know about the human side of the composition of the Bible books, without considering why the vision of inspiration should remain detached from reality. The process of creating Old Testament books shows that the Holy Spirit influenced everyone involved. An interesting case for researching the nature of inspiration is the Book of Syrach. Its author, besides being inspired by the Holy Spirit (which he did not seem

to be aware of), was also, as he himself admits, influenced by many factors (studying, travelling, human experiences). In turn, we learn from the books of the prophets that the Advocates of the Divine Word were mostly inspired not to write, but to speak and to act.

In the next chapter O'Collins analyses the inspiring influence of Old Testament books on the authors of the New Testament and on Jesus Himself: hence the title of this part of the book: *The New Testament as Inspired by the Old Testament*. The theologian documents the use of the Old in the New Testament on the example of St Matthew and St Paul along with the author of the Book of Revelation. For all of them, the Old Testament has an inalienable role in expressing and interpreting the central mysteries of the Christian faith. It is significant that only the author of the Apocalypse „is conscious of being inspired and of his God-given, prophetic authority (Rev 10:11; 22:9). Revelation ends with a solemn warning against altering the text (Rev. 22:18-19). Divine authority stands squarely behind the whole message” (pp. 59–60). The information contained in 2Pt 1:20-21 indicates that the Holy Spirit moved people, not taking away their freedom, but including the human will as a secondary cause of ‘prophecy’ (broadly understood as all scriptural texts of the Old Testament). In turn, the statements in 2Tm 3:16-17 emphasize the usefulness of all Scripture. For the Apostle Paul they are more than that: they help to form his thought and equip him with an apostolic ministry when he interprets it in the light of Christ’s event. Also the vision of Jesus’ identity and mission turns out to be ‘inspired’ by the Scripture. O'Collins mentions here as examples the parable of the vineyard; the use of the term “Son of Man;” Christ’s prayer (especially the Psalms); the comparison of prophets to martyrs; the reformulation of the commandment of love (the innovation of combining a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal relationship with the neighbour – to be distinguished but not separated – and the broadening of the definition of neighbour). The theologian devotes relatively much space to the expression “Son of Man,” which is the self-description of Jesus taken from the inspired books and creatively transformed by the Incarnate.

In chapter four – *The Reception and Inspiring History of the Scriptures* – the author takes a look at the history of Christianity and explores the inspiring influence of Scripture. “Often described as the ‘reception of the Bible,’ this scriptural impact may also be better characterized as the ‘inspiring history of the Bible’” (p. 61). In this story “all Christians inhabit the ‘history of effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*)’ caused by biblical inspiration” (p. 63). O'Collins starts with the liturgy for which the Bible is the heart. The impact on the celebration of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist is highlighted. Then the role of inspired books in the liturgy of the hours, church chants and theatrical

performances (*drama*) is discussed. Also “preaching or proclaiming the Word of God involves or should constantly involve the powerful presence of the Scriptures” (p. 71). Scripture, of course, also influences the personal prayer of Christians; especially the Lord’s Prayer is of great importance here (the Jesuit quotes as an example the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola). The sacred texts also played a decisive role in the formation of Christian doctrine and in theological development. As an illustration, O’Collins recalls the influence of the Apostle Paul; the following are mentioned as examples: Pelagius’ debate with Augustine, Martin Luther’s interpretation, And Karl Barth’s emphasis on revelation as a fundamental category of theological thinking. Mention is made of the influence of the Scriptures on literature and art. At the end of the chapter the theologian also discusses the misuse of the Bible, which must neither undermine the importance of the inspired books nor obscure their positive use:

Preachers, church officials, artists, political leaders, and other Christians have repeatedly misappropriated and misinterpreted the Scriptures in all manner of bad causes. But *abusus non tollit usum* (abuse does not take away use), or, as we might put it, diseased and destructive abuse does not rule out a healthy and life-giving use of the Bible (p. 89).

The purpose of the fifth chapter entitled *Revelation, Tradition and Inspiration* is to examine the relationship or to show the interconnections, but also to identify the difference between revelation, tradition and inspiration. It is intended by the author to be a preparation for deeper characteristics of the inspiration itself. O’Collins emphasizes that revelation primarily refers to “personal self-manifestation of God, the divine Truth (upper case and in the singular), who invites and enables the human response of faith” (p. 89), and only secondarily “revelation also encompasses the communication of hitherto unknown truths (lower case and in the plural) about God, human beings and the created universe.” A distinction should also be made between foundational, dependent and final revelation: “the New Testament presents the divine self-revelation as something that has happened (past or ‘foundational’), that is happening (present and experiential), and that will happen (future and in hope)” (p. 93). Some members of the apostolic community, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote down the history of the foundation’s tradition. The tradition not only precedes but also goes beyond the inspired books: “Tradition transmits, interprets, and applies the inspired texts, but it also hands on much more besides – in the vital and varied ways of worshipping, living, and believing of the whole community” (p. 94). So we are dealing with the following

sequence: revelation – tradition – inspired Scripture. The Jesuit tries to express the complex relationship between them in several ways. There is a difference between revelation as a living reality and Scripture as testimony about it: “The scriptural witness remains distinct from the experience of revelation itself, just as a written record differs from any reality we live through.” (p. 96). Similarly, tradition does not coincide with revelation – it can transmit revealed truths (propositional revelation), but it does not convey the personal experience of God’s self-revelation. The tradition evokes, interprets and offers means to experience revelation, but remains different from it.

The Inspired Scriptures: Formation, Content, and Five Characteristics is the title of the sixth chapter in which the author examines the relationship between revelation and inspiration. O’Collins proposes to begin by considering the formation of the Bible and then reflect on its contents in relation to revelation. Once again the difference between revelation as a living interpersonal event and the written testimony of this in the Bible is emphasized (p. 102: “The Scriptures differ then from revelation in the way that written texts differ from something that happens between persons”). In the history of Bible composing it is also necessary to distinguish and even separate the gift of divine revelation from the special impulse leading to the creation of the inspired Scriptures. God’s self-communication concerns every believer, and the charism of inspiration was given only to those who contributed to the holy texts. God’s self-revelation functioned throughout the apostolic era, and the gift of inspiration only in a certain period in the history of the hagiographer. On the question of biblical inspiration, the Australian proposes the following term:

a special impulse from the Holy Spirit, given during the long history of the chosen people and the much shorter apostolic age, to set down in writing both experiences of the divine self-revelation and other things which are not necessarily closely tied to revelation. This distinguishes biblical inspiration from prophetic inspiration, a God-given impulse to speak (and act symbolically) in certain ways (p. 108).

When asked what form this special impulse of inspiration from the Holy Spirit took, the theologian proposes a five-point characteristic of inspiration; it is rather an attempt to define what is not to be expected from inspiration. First of all, inspiration must not be equated, as it was done, with a theory of verbal dictation that would reduce the participation of the human author to the role of a stenographer of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, inspired authors would write in various, but definitely not in all literary genres; it is therefore difficult

to expect their works to meet, for example, historical standards expected today. Thirdly, the theologian emphasizes the general principle that the action of the Holy Spirit does not elevate the inspired authors' literary style: "The special impulse from the Holy Spirit did not miraculously raise (but rather respected) the writing talents of those who received it" (p. 114). The same is true for the criterion of spiritual influence (fourth characteristic): inspiration does not guarantee a high religious influence on the reader.

A striking and enduring spiritual impact is not necessarily the result of some text having been written under the influence of biblical inspiration, nor is limited spiritual impact an index that a text could not have been inspired by the Holy Spirit (p. 114).

Fifthly, there was a remark about the uneven degree of inspiration enjoyed by hagiographers; just like other charisms (e.g. of prophecy or apostolate), the gift of inspiration is not monolithically the same: actually there are similarities and differences that allow us to speak of the analogy of inspiration (p. 117).

For no apparent reason the list of inspiration properties is continued in a separate chapter *Five More Characteristics of Biblical Inspiration*. Again, most of the talk here is about what inspiration does not entail. First, the charism of inspiration does not require inspired authors to be aware of the special divine influence with which they collaborated in the creation of sacred texts. Secondly, because of the need to take into account the contribution of many people to the composition of the inspired writings, it is more appropriate to speak of impulses (plural) rather than a single impulse (singular) coming from the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, the difference between biblical authors and contemporary writers should be highlighted. The former usually remain anonymous, they build on the tradition and experience of other believers and create works that serve the faith community (religious purpose). The latter write in their own name and articulate personal experiences and are often appreciated for their artistic skills and ability to express human experience (non-religious purpose).

The professor of theology makes a caveat – as if to justify his previous negative characteristics – that it is impossible to understand the dynamics of biblical inspiration that makes biblical texts the Word of God in human words because it belongs to the unexplained mystery of Christ, God and man. In my opinion, this does not justify a leap from Christology immediately to ecclesiology: "Nevertheless, we can offer a positive, if limited, summary of inspiration's function in founding the Church" (p. 126). The fourth characteristic of inspiration therefore emphasises that the creation of a community of the Church also includes the creation of Scripture, and God as the film director of events also

remains the author of the Bible. The fifth – in this chapter and the tenth in the whole book – mark of inspiration is linked by O’Collins’ to the Inspiring Quality of the Inspired Bible. God can communicate through the Scriptures His revelation, and the inspired books have proved inspiring, as discussed in previous chapters. The Australian even claims that this ability to inspire is the most important characteristic of inspiration.

The next chapter entitled *The Truth and ‘Canonization’ of the Scriptures* focuses on the consequences of inspiration, on the biblical truth and the ‘canonization’ of the inspired books. The author of this publication prefers to use the positive and biblical term “truth” over inerrancy. The main purpose of the inspired writings is to give a salutary testimony of the truth about God and about people (I). Biblical truth must not be reduced to its intellectual dimension (propositional truth) (II). The aspects of biblical truth that are related to its interpersonal character should be emphasized (III). The progressive nature of biblical truth must be taken into account (IV). From a progressive understanding of biblical truth it follows that we must also speak of “canonical truth” found in the Bible as a whole (V). The truth of the Bible is primarily in the person of Christ (VI). The biblical truth must be lived – it is experienced in action (VII).

The canon is defined by O’Collins as a closed list of holy books (finally confirmed by the Council of Trent), considered by the Church to be inspired by God and enjoying normative value for Christian faith, worship and practice. The criteria used by the Church to establish canonicity were: apostolicity (“canonicity implies apostolicity” – p. 144) related to the origin of a given book from the period of Foundational Revelation; orthodox teaching, i.e., the theological criterion verifying compliance with *regula fidei*; Catholicity, i.e., constant and widespread use, especially in public worship. Then the author gives several reasons for the closed nature of the canon. He also stresses that the canon enjoys a *de jure* authority that is proper only to it, which must be seen in connection with faithfulness to Christ as the Redeemer and the Savior and with the action of the Holy Spirit who guides the inspired authors in a special way (the Bible “shares in the authority of Christ and his Holy Spirit” – p. 148).

Three ‘Intentions’ are Respect, chapter nine – O’Collins begins it by saying that we need a vision of biblical inspiration based on the Word of God expressed in human words, which turn out to be inspired when they are read, interpreted, preached, and applied in life. “No text, not even an inspired text, can speak for itself; it always needs interpreting” (p. 150). The Holy Spirit who gives the charism of inspiration to hagiographers is the same Spirit who enlightens the eyes of the heart during reading. However, understanding and interpreting inspired books also involves human action. The Australian theologian believes that an integral

interpretation requires the consideration not only of the author's intention (*intentio auctoris*) but also of the reader's intention (*intentio legentis*) and the intention of the text itself (*intentio textus ipsius*). This part of the text aims at

upholding the claims of (a) the *intentio auctoris* against those who flatly ignore the intentions of the original authors, of (b) the *intentio textus* against those who deny the control that the texts should exercise over readers, and of (c) the *intentio legentis* against those who play down subjectively and allege an illusory, 'scientific' objectivity (p. 164).

In the last chapter of the book (*Ten Principles for Theologians Interpreting the Scriptures*), O'Collins gives an interesting list of principles to guide theological approaches to Scripture. The purpose of this chapter is to help theologians to avoid misinterpretations of the Bible and to make the proper transition from inspired books to systematic theology. In a way that is still a bit far-fetched, the author claims that "like a golden thread, Christocentrism binds together all these ten principles" (p. 193).

The first principle, the principle of faithful hearing, instructs theologians to become listeners of the word sensitive to the meaning discovered in the text, in obedient openness without imposing their own interpretations or their little "orthodoxy." The principle of active hearing, the second principle complementing the first, recommends that the reader should respond actively to the text that he interprets; it is not about pure receptivity, which will be expressed later in the repetition of biblical phrases, but about their fresh assimilation and creative use by 'answerable' interpreters. The third rule – the principle of the community and its creed – indicates the need to read the texts in a living community of faith and in continuity with the creed of the undivided Church. The fourth rule – the principle of biblical convergence – underlines the need to search for a diversified dimension of scriptural testimonies on a particular theological issue so as not to lose the unity of the Bible on the one hand, and to base the theological search on as much data as possible on the other. The fifth rule – the principle of contemporary consensus – the application of which permeates O'Collins's entire legacy consists in taking into account the contemporary consensus of respected scholars (or at least most of them). In sixth place the principle of metathemes and metanarratives is mentioned. Theological success will consist in incorporating and combining themes that permeate the entire Bible, such as creation, covenant, sin (especially idolatry), mercy, liberation, *exodus*. "These metathemes and metanarratives make the Bible into one cumulative story" (p. 179). In this way the Bible interprets itself,

and theologians receive both patterns of divine activity and the continuity and discontinuity in the realization of God's plan that are worth considering. This is what rule seven entitled the principle of discontinuity within continuity says. As the eighth one, in connection with the previous one, O'Collins mentions the principle of eschatological provisionality. From the very future-oriented nature of God's self-revelation it follows that both the first-order language (the Bible) and the second-order language (theology) are only a partial vision (cf. 1 Cor 13:12). The ninth principle of philosophical assistance draws attention to the role of philosophy in theological reflection. Philosophy allows for a sharp and clear formulation of the issue, helps to develop a method and organize the material studied, and allows for the formulation of a concept carried by the pre-philosophical biblical texts. Philosophical hermeneutics must also be taken into account while interpreting the inspired books. The last one on the list was the principle of inculturation encouraging bold inculturation and reflective enrichment by different cultures. "There is one Christ and one Bible, but there are many cultures" (p. 188). Inculturation presupposes the belief that the Word is already in some way present in every human culture through the Holy Spirit, and that the Bible, of which Christ is the centre, is the book of all cultures. In turn, the inculturated dialogue will probably shed new light also on Scripture.

This publication also includes an appendix entitled: *Critiquing the Sensational*. Although I generally appreciate such 'bonuses,' I was not quite convinced by O'Collins of the need to put this part in the book. It seems that it would be better if the appendix's content were included in chapter ten, since it is intended by the professional theologian to answer the question of how theologians and exegetes should respond to sensation-seeking writers (e.g. Reza Aslan and his *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*) who refer to the Bible without seeing inspired texts in it and ignoring mainstream scholars (principle 10 above).

The book contains a select bibliography – three pages of literature, which the author probably views as the most important for the issue addressed in the book; an index of names, in which, what an omission!, there is no place for Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI); and an index of biblical references, occupying almost eight pages.

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The concept adopted and known from other Gerald O'Collins's publications should perhaps be called systematization by differentiation. Such differentiation has their advantages, but also disadvantages: it systematises the material reliably, but is far from being systematic theology. The reader is puzzled by this escape from theology, especially there where the author stands at the threshold of

a mystery, but refrains from looking inside (e.g. when it comes to the mystery of the relationship of inspiration to the mystery of the Incarnation – pp. 125–126). A fundamental theologian will also find fault with the text: he can read the “good news” about what he cannot expect from inspiration, and thus it is only indirectly suggested to him what apology one should expect (or rather: to give up). Surely, the reader receives a well-arranged content within the framework of the consecutive points, which, however, require thorough theological deepening. Those interested in further exploration of the subject are referred to the literature in numerous footnotes. They often include previous positions by our author. It is not a sign of scholarly integrity that the author fails to admit that the entire parts of the book under discussion are a repetition of already published works, especially *Revelation* (even real-life examples are repeated unchanged – cf. p. 102), but also *Rethinking fundamental theology. Toward a New Fundamental Theology*, Oxford 2011.

Let us point out the remaining weaknesses of the book. First, the incomprehensible lack of reference to *Verbum Domini* (or, more broadly, to Joseph Ratzinger’s legacy), in which the Holy Father expected the issue of inspiration and truth to be deepened (no. 19). If the author of the reviewed position was not a respected professor of theology, one would have to consider it discrediting to write about the interpretation of the Bible without referring to the principles given in the exhortation, or to refer to the limits of the historical-critical method without mentioning the battle fought in this matter by Joseph Ratzinger; this should probably be seen as a conscious anti-Ratzinger decision, which would need to be justified. Second, the characteristics of inspiration prove to be primarily negative, and therefore not sufficiently elaborated on. Then there comes this unbearable manner of repeatedly emphasizing the author’s theses, which have already been put forward in earlier publications (e.g., the ubiquitous references to the need to take into account the inspiring influence of the Bible; the repetition that inspired Scripture bears witness not only to revelation, but also to matters loosely related to it; or that the prophets were inspired not to write, but to speak and act). Fourth, at times, the reader has the impression that O’Collins simply rewrites the material developed somewhere else, and does not offer anything new (cf. e.g. p. 49, where he refrains from offering evidence precisely in those cases which he cannot ‘copy’ from himself). And fifth, the Australian theologian is probably given to an overly polemical tone, as if the rank of his discoveries depended on the listing of disputable statements of e.g. the Pontifical Biblical Commission (cf. e.g. pp. 106–107). Sixth, I would mention minor editorial errors: some references for no reason whatsoever are in the main text instead of in a footnote (cf. e.g. p. 174); there are also too many repetitions that could be eliminated.