



## Reviews

**A THEOLOGY OF THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE: REVELATION-INSPIRATION-CANON** by Denis Farkasfalvy, O. Cist., *Catholic University of America Press*, Washington, D.C., 2018, pp. xii + 239, \$34.95, pbk

This book is simultaneously excellent and rather frustrating, fascinating and puzzling, even at times infuriating, but nevertheless a must-read for anyone seeking to engage with the Bible as sacred scripture. Denis Farkasfalvy, born in Hungary but for many years Abbot of Our Lady of Dallas, was from 2002 to 2013 a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and the book is manifestly the product of many years of profound contemplation, at once academic and prayerful, upon the nature of scripture and in particular the question of what it means to speak of God as the ‘author’ of the biblical books. It is, however, equally manifestly the product of years of frustration and irritation at what Farkasfalvy sees, probably rightly, as linguistic and theological incompetence and political chicanery in the PBC, and indeed at the Second Vatican Council.

What the author has sought to do is place the questions of the divine authorship of scripture and biblical inerrancy, and of the relationship of the two Testaments with one another, within the historical context, by narrating the history – very much *his* history – of the way in which these questions have been dealt with in the twentieth century, from the Neo-Scholasticism of the early years, through *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Pius XII, 1943) and Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum*, to Benedict XVI’s *Verbum Domini* (2010). The student interested in the politics of such matters will find interesting and amusing nuggets of ecclesiastical and academic history within these pages, and will be left in no doubt as to whom Farkasfalvy holds responsible for what he clearly thinks is a catastrophic failure on the part of the institutions of the Church clearly to enunciate an authentically Catholic theology of scripture both before and after the Council. (For those who are interested, the principal villains are the PBC itself, both pre- and post-conciliar, and the ‘Neo-Scholastics’ typified by Augustin Bea SJ; the heroes are Rahner, de Lubac, Vatican II despite itself, St Thomas Aquinas and Benedict XVI.)

It is unfortunate, however, that the author’s deep, and perfectly proper and understandable, personal concern with this failure seems to have caused him to lose the thread of his argument through large parts of the book. I found myself being very clear about what Farkasfalvy thinks is the *wrong* understanding of biblical inspiration, far less clear about what he thought was right; the structure of the book is opaque, the titles

of the chapters offering very little clue as to where the argument is going. For example, the final substantive chapter before the conclusion is called ‘Christ: the ultimate meaning of the Christian Bible’, but is in fact almost entirely a historical chapter about the emergence of a Christian canon in the eras of Marcion, Irenaeus and Tertullian. It does not give a theological account, as one might have expected, of the way in which all scripture, Old and New Testament alike, speaks of Christ and is to be interpreted in the light of Christ as the definitive revelation of God. Other chapters, however, make it perfectly clear that Farkasfalvy does indeed assert this most firmly: the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation is the model for an authentic understanding of inspiration, and ‘the incarnational model affirms that the Bible’s ultimate meaning is the mystery of Christ, the Logos, as the single speech-act of God . . .’ (p. 71). The two major Christological heresies of Nestorianism and Monophysitism are analogous to two major misunderstandings of scripture, each bringing ‘the danger of collapsing scripture into a one-layer reality: either by identifying it with the literal meaning, identified with the human authors’ historically verifiable intent (the Nestorian option) or with the spiritual meaning that transmits divine meaning without true human mediation (the Monophysite approach)’ (p. 70).

The fundamental error, in Farkasfalvy’s view, that has led so many Catholic biblical scholars into a theological cul-de-sac, is a misunderstanding of the double authorship of scripture. Yes, it is true that every book of the Bible has a human author, and indeed Farkasfalvy is perfectly happy to allow a whole chain of human agency from oral tradition through source documents, redaction and compilation, but all of them under the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit in such a way as to render the texts of scripture inspired, and therefore objectively different from any other ancient texts; and at the same time of course we must speak of God as the divine *Auctor* of the scriptures. However, this word ‘*Auctor*’, if translated ‘author’, may give the impression that God is a *literary* author. ‘As long as God is considered the literary author of the biblical text, all human deficiencies will be attributed in some sense to God’ (p. 219). To put it another way, God and the human authors are seen as operating on the same level, co-workers just as if two human beings had jointly authored a book or article. We end up with two problems: how to understand the meaning of ‘inspired’ – and Farkasfalvy is insistent that it is the Bible, not its human authors, to which that epithet is properly applied – and what to make of passages in the scripture which are clearly far from inerrant, whether factually or morally.

I was about to write that the limited space does not allow me to deal with Farkasfalvy’s solution to these difficulties, but the truth is that the space available did not apparently allow Farkasfalvy properly to work out and enunciate his solutions. Clearly he believes that the right approach to biblical inspiration and divine authorship is to be found in the fathers, especially Origen, and also in the mediaevals, notably St

Bernard. He is also very enthusiastic about the ‘canon critical’ approach of Brevard Childs, but this leads him to spend two chapters outlining the development of the canon instead of telling us what canon criticism is or how to do it. We are left at the end little clearer than we were at the beginning about what is to be done – we must read the scriptures in the light of Christ, and see every word of the Bible as bearing witness to him as the once-for-all, but also continually unfolding, revelation of God. But what does this look like in practice for the exegete or the theologian? I am no surer now than I was when I started, but at least I am a lot clearer about what not to say, at least if I wish to avoid the contempt of Farkasfalvy.

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**THE SUFI AND THE FRIAR: A MYSTICAL ENCOUNTER OF TWO MEN OF GOD IN THE ABODE OF ISLAM** by Minlib Dallh, *State University of New York Press, Albany, 2017, pp. xi + 201, \$20.95, pbk*

The encounter between the Dominicans and the world of Islam is of long-standing, taking place from soon after the foundation of the Order in 1216 until today. The engagement of Dominicans with the Muslim world has attracted significant research interest. One should note the work of Jean-Marie Mérigoux OP on Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (1243-1320) especially his critical edition in *Memorie Domenicane* (1986) of *Contra legem Sarracenorum* – which stands as one of the most significant works for Christian accounting for the religious identity of Islam. The scholarly review *Mémoire dominicaine* dedicated two special issue to the subject ‘Les Dominicains et les mondes musulmans’ (2001) and Jean Jacques Pérennès OP ‘L’Orient des Prêcheurs. Brève histoire de l’Ordre dominicain dans le monde musulman’ (2016). Indeed Pérennès has written a series of studies on various Dominican figures in the modern Middle East and North Africa - *Pierre Claverie, un Algérien par alliance* (2000); *Georges Anawati, un chrétien égyptien devant le mystère de l’islam* (2008); *Le père Antonin Jaussen, op (1871-1962), Une passion pour l’Orient musulman* (2014); *Passion Kaboul, le père Serge de Beaurecueil*, (2014). Dominique Avon records, in a monumental account, the Dominican Order’s continuing commitment to the study of Islam in *Les frères prêcheurs en Orient. Les dominicains du Caire (années 1910-années 1960)* (2005). Cyprian Rice OP (1889-1966) of the English Province made an early contribution, still highly-regarded, to the study of Persian mysticism in 1964. In fact, in this fine study by Minlib Dallh OP, *The Sufi and the Friar*, dedicated to Serge de Laugier de Beaurecueil OP (1917-2005) and his scholarly friendship with the eleventh-century Ḥanbalī Sufi master Khwāja ‘Abdullāh Anṣārī