



How to read: Lectio divina in an English Benedictine monastery

R.D.G. Irvine

To cite this article: R.D.G. Irvine (2010) How to read: Lectio divina in an English Benedictine monastery, *Culture and Religion*, 11:4, 395-411, DOI: [10.1080/14755610.2010.527614](https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2010.527614)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2010.527614>



Published online: 20 Nov 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 292



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

How to read: *Lectio divina* in an English Benedictine monastery

R.D.G. Irvine*

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, UK

This paper provides an ethnographic account of reading in a contemporary English Benedictine monastery. It focuses on *lectio divina*, a particular tradition which has been described as a ‘slow, contemplative praying of scripture’. The use of this method is contextualised historically and compared with other approaches to scripture reading. This paper argues that *lectio divina* aims to transform the relationship between the reader and text by changing the method through which we approach the written word. Learning how to read is related to the ongoing process of learning how to listen, and it is argued that this relational approach to reading emerges from the social life of the monastery.

Scripture reading as an area of ethnographic enquiry

Drawing on fieldwork in a Catholic monastery in England,¹ I wish to offer an ethnographic account of how people might learn to read in a particular way. More specifically, I wish to describe a technique of sacred reading, *lectio divina*, and the institutional setting for this form of reading.

Recent ethnographies have provided us with a vivid picture of the ways in which Christians read and engage with scripture. Much of this work focuses on Protestantism in the USA. Crapanzano (2000) has offered a critical perspective on literalism in American fundamentalist Bible reading, while Malley (2004) and Bielo (2009) have demonstrated the close relationship between text and action in American Evangelical life. Malley’s emphasis is on how Evangelical Christians find relevance in the word of God and are able to link what they are reading with the circumstances that they find themselves in; similarly, Bielo (2009, 50) explains that ‘the most widespread form of interpretive activity that American Evangelicals perform is an ongoing attempt to apply biblical texts to their everyday lives’. Outside of the American context, Keller (2004, 2007) has described the joy of intellectual engagement with scripture among Seventh-Day Adventists in Madagascar.

I hope to add to this emerging picture by offering an ethnography of reading in a Catholic monastic setting. One of my goals is to explore contrasts and connections between the method of *lectio divina* and other ways of reading. In particular, I am interested in engagement with the Bible as the search for a response, rather than the attempt to excavate the objective meaning of a text. While a similar idea of becoming ‘convicted by the word’ has been described by Bielo (2009, 79) and Luhrmann (2004, 575), I suggest that there are important

*Email: rdgi2@cam.ac.uk

contrasts in the way in which *lectio* seeks to move beyond the written word (and indeed, as I will illustrate, these contrasts may make *lectio divina* an object of suspicion for at least some Evangelicals). In particular, I am interested in way that reading is constituted as an act of *listening* and the forms of relationship that this may generate.

Robbins (2001) has called for an ‘ethnography of listening’ which will help us to explore that which is obscured by a focus on speech and action. Writing about the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea and their ‘struggle’ with modern speaker-centred ideas about language, he suggests that the modern Protestant emphasis upon the intentionality of speech and action contrasts with the ‘listener orientation’ (Robbins 2001, 906) of the Urapmin. So, it is the role of God as listener that the Urapmin emphasise in their prayer, and to be a Christian involves ‘listening’ to ‘God’s talk’. Elsewhere, a particularly evocative description of the role of listening in social life comes from Hirschkind (2001), who has explored processes of sensory engagement with tape-recorded sermons among Muslims in Egypt. He describes how oratory ‘recruits the body of the listener’ (Hirschkind 2001, 637) and sees the act of attentive listening as a means of ethical formation. Learning to listen was a ‘means by which a range of Islamic virtues could be sedimented in their characters, enabling them to live more piously and avoid moral transgressions’ (2001, 627). Hirschkind stresses that this attentive listening is understood as more than mere hearing; it is a process of active engagement, rather than simply passive reception, through which the listeners foster a new relationship between themselves and God. It is this process of attentive listening that interests me, and which I wish to explore further. *Lectio divina* is part of a wider setting in which monks learn to listen, and this becomes the context for a dialogical relationship with scripture.

A community of readers

The monastic community is a community of readers. Reading is built into the space of the monastery, made visible by the lectern in the refectory, where the monks eat, the two lecterns which stand between the choir stalls in the Abbey church, one at the west end of the stalls and one at the east end, and strikingly, by the monastery’s library, an octagonal concrete and glass form dominating views of the Abbey as you approach from the east. Books are not only the objects of individual study, but are at the heart of the community’s shared experience. The monks read, or listen to books being read, throughout the day.

The role of books in the daily life of the monastery becomes clear as we see how reading becomes the central focus during mealtimes. The monks sit silently while they eat their meals in the refectory. This condition of silence is striking: food sharing might be seen as an ideal setting for conversation, with such talk considered an ingredient of the meal as important as the food itself in its capacity to create and maintain social relationships. Commensality is clearly central to the life of the monastery, yet the community is brought together in the act of sharing food without any accompanying exchange of words. Instead, the monks share

a common focus: they listen to a common text. Having entered the refectory in silence, the monks remain standing behind their seats until the Abbot enters and rings the bell on his table. The monks chant a Latin grace before the meal, at the conclusion of which the monk who has been appointed reader for that day asks the Abbot to give a blessing. At this point all sit, while the reader reads the Gospel for the day. At supper, the necrology of saints is also read out, giving brief lives of the saints whose anniversaries fall on the coming day. Only after this is the food served, while the reader, now seated at the lectern, begins to read aloud from a book chosen by the Abbot or Prior. The books to be read are not necessarily of an overtly 'religious' character; although some selections, such as Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, are clearly chosen on the basis that they represent the teaching of the Church, this is not always the case. The current Abbot of the monastery is an historian; hence, there is a particular bias towards historical books at mealtimes. Books are read continuously over the course of months, with the reader picking up each day where he had left off the last time. As a result, these books became part of the everyday life of the monastery, creating a focal point during the meal and generating remarks and conversations outside of mealtimes.

The act of reading is also central to the ritual life of the community. Each day consists of a series of points of prayer: the liturgical round involves *Vigils* at 6 am, *Lauds* at 7:10 am, Community Mass at 8:35 am, Midday Prayer at 12:30 pm, *Vespers* at 5:45 pm and *Compline* at 8 pm. This is repeated throughout the week (with some variation on Sunday), so that each day follows a familiar pattern in which the monks return to the Abbey church throughout the day, each day. Within this daily liturgical cycle, the community shares the experience of reading holy texts, and, significantly, this act of reading is an act of listening. They read and chant the psalms morning, noon and night, sitting with their open Psalters in front of them, alternately listening to a verse being chanted and then chanting the next verse themselves in response – over the course of every two weeks, all 150 psalms are chanted in this way. In addition, the monks hear the assigned scripture readings at each service, and at the end of each day, before Compline, the monks hear the Abbot read to them from the *Rule* of St Benedict, the text upon which the government of the monastery is based.

So, the act of reading is at the heart of the life of the institution, and this act of reading is closely associated with the act of listening. My goal in this paper is partly to account for the social life of reading. I follow Boyarin (1989) in seeking to show the 'continued, creative role' of religious texts in social life. His ethnographic account of reading in a Yeshiva in Manhattan demonstrates the 'mutual dependence' of the voices *in* the text and the voices *around* the text. His approach draws our attention to the centrality of dialogue in the act of reading: the text is a pretext for dialogue, and it is also something that emerges *through* dialogue. So, we see the everyday interpersonal interactions that characterise the class; conversation, banter, jokes about the text, anecdotes from life drawn into the text, and Boyarin suggests that in this way, we see the written word appropriated

into the lives of the group and the meaning of the text constructed through these shared experiences. For this reason, the text should not be treated as a monolithic, unchanging entity impacting on the life of its reader. 'Tradition is not a thing but a process' (Boyarin 1989, 413), and the sacred text is not a fixed object, but a participant in an ongoing dialogue. The argument that I will set out here is that this dialogic approach to reading, seen throughout the life of the religious community, also shapes the nature of reading as an individual activity.

Reading – even *personal* reading – is a social process. This is demonstrated not only through the significance of shared familiarity with a set of texts but also, as Livingston (1995) has pointed out, through the learned nature of hermeneutic techniques and conventions.

Reading is neither in the text nor in the reader. It consists of social phenomena, known through its achievements which lie between the text and the reader's eye, in the reader's implementation of society's ways of reading, in reading what a text says. (Livingston 1995, 16)

Livingston attempts to provide an account of the culture of professional readers. Through drawing on examples of criticism, he demonstrates the techniques of literary analysis and suggests that the construction of a community of *professional* readers relies on the idea that it is appropriate to apply a set of learned and routinised skills. These skills enable the professional reader not only to read texts also but, to *show how a text might be read*, and this is 'a situation of inquiry which the readings, together, help generate and sustain. The readings reflect a culture in which it is appropriate to analyze reading in this way' (1995, 109). So, literary analysis relies on the ability to seize on and expand upon a set of clues to contextualise and reorder the text; it also relies upon the understanding that this is something worth doing. Both the hermeneutic ability and the understanding that such activity is appropriate are, for Livingston, evidence of the culturally meditated nature of reading activity.

This paper focuses on *lectio divina* as a particular hermeneutic tradition practised within the monastery. My argument is that *lectio divina* emerges from a monastic culture in which one learns to read a text in a particular way, and in which it is deemed appropriate to approach texts in this way. The term *lectio divina* can be translated as divine reading or sacred reading, although in practice the Latin form (or the abbreviation *lectio*) was used around the monastery; this was in order to indicate a particular style of reading, rather than just the act of 'sitting with an improving book'. It is this style of reading which I will now describe.

How to read

I had become familiar with *lectio divina* before I started my fieldwork at the monastery. This technique is something that monastic communities will often share through public talks, retreats for lay people and books and articles in the Catholic press. It can, therefore, be considered a product for export, something monks are keen to present publicly, and so it was something that I was expecting

to learn more about. I did not have to wait long. During my first week of fieldwork, the monastery hosted a day of recollection for lay people of the diocese. The guestmaster, who was leading the day of recollection, handed out a photocopied page from the Bible (*Jerusalem Bible* translation): a short passage from the Prophet Isaiah 61:1–6. He asked us to read through it slowly, allowing ample time for this before explaining to us the method of *lectio divina*, which he described as the ‘slow, contemplative praying of scripture, through which God talks with a still small voice’.²

The process, we were told, consists of four ‘moments’ or stages. The first moment is *lectio* (reading): this involves reading through a short passage, usually a few verses from the Bible, slowly. Then, when you reach the end of the passage, read through it again and again, several times, each time slowly, reading each word to yourself, ‘hearing each word in your mind as though you were reading aloud’. Next, the reader ‘comes to rest’ on a particular word or phrase in the passage; having read the passage through several times, the reader finds ‘a particular resonance’ in a part of the text, ‘a word or a phrase maybe that seems to speak to you in particular’. Having settled on this word or phrase, you repeat it again and again in your mind, ‘considering what it means to you, allowing it to interact with your own hopes and memories’; this is the second ‘moment’ known as *meditatio* (meditation). This leads into *oratio* (prayer), a ‘conversation with God’ in which you speak through prayer in response to what scripture has said to you during *meditatio*. Finally, beyond these prayers there is *contemplatio* (contemplation), which was described as ‘simply being in the presence of God’, resting without having to think or say anything. After this description and explanation of the four moments of *lectio divina*, we were given time to return to the text to read it and pray with it again, while the guestmaster prepared to celebrate Mass for the group.

As I said, I knew that *lectio* was a practice which English Benedictines were keen to share with lay people through retreats and so on; indeed, one member of the community has written a practical book for beginners on the subject (Foster 2005). I was therefore keen to learn from the monks how it was practised in their own lives. The constitutions of the English Benedictine Congregation prescribe that the monks should practise at least one half-hour of *lectio divina* a day, and of course, in addition to the time specifically set aside for this, the monks take up *lectio* at other times of the day. The monks would generally return to their rooms at these times, although one would occasionally see members of the community sitting in the Abbey church with a book, reading it for a time before putting it down in their lap or on the seat next to them and looking up in prayer. It is worth noting at this stage that *lectio divina* is not entirely restricted to scripture reading: monks referred to *lectio* with other texts, including writings of the Church fathers, and in one case, a monk described how he had taken Pope Benedict XVI’s recent encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* for his *lectio*. However, as the primary sense in which *lectio* was explained to me was with regard to reading the Bible, and this

was also the main way in which I was directed to attempt *lectio* myself, this focus on scriptural reading shapes the description I provide here.

After a number of informal teatime conversations about *lectio*, the novice master, whose responsibility it was to teach the practice to monks as part of their formation, offered to meet with me to provide some further guidance. His own practice, and that which he taught, was guided by the 'four-stage' model outlined above, which is derived from the work of a twelfth-century Carthusian monk, Guigo II. Guigo II's book *The monk's ladder* describes the four rungs of the ladder by which God's lovers ascend to God: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation, each of which leads into the next. The importance of *lectio* as part of the Benedictine life comes from the *Rule* of St Benedict, Chapter 48 of which prescribes set times for the monks to engage in sacred reading; however, the device used most often to explain the process of *lectio*, and to emphasise reading as a means of prayer, was the four-stage model taken from Guigo II.

The first thing that the novice master explained to me was the difficulty that many experienced when first attempting to practise *lectio*. 'For many of us, especially those who are used to what you might call scholarly reading, *lectio* can be hard to achieve, it's not a kind of reading we're used to'. In particular, attempting to slow down the pace of reading can be a struggle, and even more so for people used to speed reading, or scanning a text to find a particularly useful bit of information: as Masson (1983) has explained, these strategies involve very different patterns of eye movement to slow and careful reading, and when we are speed reading, parts of the text may be ignored altogether. When the novice master was introduced to *lectio*, before he had entered the monastery, he was a student at university and was immediately aware of the distance between the kind of reading techniques he had to master in order to get his assignments done, and the 'slow, prayerful, deliberate' reading he was encountering through *lectio divina*, a process he likened to 'chewing the cud'. As a result, he experienced a sense of resistance, which he suggests has also been the case with many he has taught. He needed to *make an effort* to read slowly. 'For many, repetition of the text is useful; slow, then slower, then slower . . . and to remember that you don't have to get to the end. That can be very hard, too.' Reading, then, was a skill that needed to be learned.

There could be resistance, too, at the stage of *meditatio*. 'You have to recognise that we are not talking about exegesis, or Bible study in the sense that's often taken to mean'. An Anglican priest, staying as a guest at the monastery, had asked the novice master about *lectio* after hearing it discussed; having received a description, he asked 'So it's Bible study, then?', and was told no, that the aim of *lectio* was your own personal reaction to the text, not an interpretation of the text. As was explained to me, 'you're not trying to mine the text for meaning, as though you were writing an essay, but you're looking for the way God speaks through the text. The text is a catalyst, it's a way of getting to prayer.' Again, for those used to analysing and critically assessing a text as they go, this could be difficult. 'As you read the text, you are listening not just to it, but also to yourself, looking for a resonance, a part that strikes you'; later he used the term 'echo'

to describe this sense of having found something in the text. Settling on this 'echo' and the response to it could be difficult. Sometimes, used to reading through books in one or two sittings, we might experience restlessness and a wish to move on. I asked about this restlessness: 'like you want to move on in order to get to the point?' to which he responded 'right, but in *lectio* the personal response we're talking about, that personal response is the point', and it is this response that opens out into prayer and contemplation.

One member of the community, formerly a teacher in the monastery's school, but now retired, offered me the following description, within which the aural experience of *lectio* is a key theme:

It's like tuning a radio. Does that make sense? Yes? No? Maybe? So when I start off, I'm searching for the signal, and it might not sound like anything, but slowly and gradually I'm able to tune in. And then when you get a signal, it's there, loud and clear. But it's this gradual process of searching.

This led me to ask, do you mean tuning into God or tuning into yourself?

Well, both I'm thinking. Yes, I am searching myself, I'm searching myself for that resonance. But it's also trying to listen to God. God is speaking to me, to where I am right now, and I suppose what we would say is that God's there, he's speaking those words on the page, but a lot of the time they're flying past me. But as you move slowly through the text, you realise that it's not just a voice out there, it's a voice speaking to me, directly. Do you know John Henry Newman's³ motto, '*Cor ad cor loquitur*'? 'Heart speaks to heart'? Well, it's like that.

Another monk, who worked as a parish priest, also drew on the imagery of the heart as he connected *lectio* with liturgical practice

How I sometimes explain it is, you know before the Gospel you make a sign of the cross on your forehead, on your lips, and on your heart? I think that demonstrates perfectly what we're seeking. You engage with the text with your mind, you're pondering it. It's on your lips, you're speaking it over to yourself. My lips will often move as I read, in fact. And then you feel the word growing in your heart.

I asked what he meant by 'growing in your heart'.

I hope we're not going to be deconstructionist about this! Let me see. It's something simple in experience but doesn't translate well to words. Let me put it this way. When you're reading something, you can read it very superficially. *Lectio* is about going beyond that, it's not just, 'oh, that's nice' and then put it away. This is more than that. You are letting it enter you, you are opening yourself to it and yes, you can become very, very moved by it. I've not personally been reduced to tears, but it's definitely something that results in a change within you. Afterwards I will walk around with a warmth, and when I return to that text, that warmth is still there.

In *lectio*, Bible reading was not a search for the objective meaning of the words on the page, but an individual act of prayer, in which 'two people can get two separate things from the same "word of God" and still be both actually hearing God'. For this reason, it was suggested to me by the novice master that not everyone was receptive to *lectio* as a practice; 'not all have the mindset for it'. So, the task of reading takes on a different complexion with different goals, as is clearly

illustrated if we contrast *lectio* as a style of reading with Bible study involving the ‘grammatico-historical method’, particularly as described in Crapanzano’s account of American fundamentalists. When they work through a text, they are searching for God’s word to them, but there is a deliberate effort to ensure that the work of discovering meaning works towards a truth *independent* of the reader. ‘There is but one true interpretation’ (2000, 67), and for the fundamentalists Crapanzano describes, seeking this true interpretation involves working on the ‘plain’, ‘ordinary’, ‘common sense’ value of words (2000, 64). This means taking the approach that ‘One should assume a literal interpretation unless there is some indication in the text to do otherwise’ (2000, 65); here, we are told that the ‘literal’ reading is opposed to the ‘allegorical’ reading, and those who attempt to read scripture as though it means something other than that which it appears to say are subject to suspicion. They are looking for God’s intention in the text, and there is an acute sense of the *danger* of reading unintended meaning into a text. This is made clear in the words of a South California seminary student:

God had spoken to Adam and Eve in clear propositional truth. But the created being the serpent, who was indwelt by Satan himself at that point, came and spoke and caused Eve to question the word of the Creator, the revelation of the Creator. He caused her not to trust the word of God but rather to rely on her own judgement. (Crapanzano 2000, 29–30)

Little wonder, then, that *lectio divina* can itself be treated as an object of suspicion.

The Evangelical Protestant Brian Flynn, for example, criticises *lectio divina* as a form of ‘sacred divination’ in which the Word of God is used as a way of listening to what you want to hear from your own imagination, rather than what God wants to say (Flynn 2005). His critique is interesting, as it directly attacks the perceived subjectivity of *lectio divina* as a search for mystical experience, and contrasts this with the search for independent and objective meaning in scripture.

The purpose [of *lectio divina*] is not to contemplate the meaning of a Bible verse by thinking about it but is rather meant to gain an experience from it. There is a difference between reading the Word and understanding its meaning versus a method of focusing on a single word to gain a mystical experience. (Flynn 2005, 135)

It is worth noting that the idea of hearing God speak through scripture has been highlighted by Luhrmann (2004, 525) as an important part of the contemporary Evangelical Protestant search for intimacy with God, and Flynn does stress that he has no problem with the claim that God speaks through his Word: ‘I experience that when I read or meditate on the Bible’ (Flynn 2005, 135). However, he clearly has concerns about the method used to reach this experience, and its decontextualisation from the search for objective meaning. ‘By taking passages of Scripture, which have an intended meaning, and breaking them down into smaller, separate segments, often for the purpose of chanting over and over, the true meaning of the passages are lost’ (Flynn 2005, 136–37). Flynn is writing with a particular goal in mind: he is concerned that ‘new age’ practices – a category in which he includes *lectio*, alongside other practices such as Transcendental

Meditation, Yoga and Reiki healing – are infiltrating Christian churches. Nevertheless, in arguing that Bible reading should be focussed on the objective search for the meaning intended by God, and that *lectio* is dangerous in failing to do that, he highlights an important distinction between different methods of reading and the outcomes expected from these different methods.

Reading as study and reading as prayer

Returning to the context of the monastery, the contrast that the monks themselves make between ‘Bible study’ and *lectio divina* is worth exploring further. Why was the novice master so quick to say ‘no’ when it was suggested that they were one and the same? Describing Bible reading in a different tradition, Eva Keller tells us that ‘the Malagasy members of the Adventist Church use the Bible very much like a schoolbook, writing references and notes in it, circling or otherwise marking specific passages’ (2004, 94). Keller insists that if we are to understand what is happening here, we must understand that the goal of this Bible study is ‘intellectual satisfaction’ (2004, 90). ‘Bible study is both the joy of intellectual engagement and, at the same time, the joy of discovery and understanding’ (2004, 107).

Those who come to the monastery approaching the Bible in this way, looking on it as an object for study, can have difficulty learning to read in a ‘prayerful way’, where the goal is not to gather information from the text but to understand God speaking to you personally *through* the text. As the monks introduced retreatants and others to *lectio*, they encountered people whose habits of reading made it hard to understand the purpose or goal of what they were being taught. Sometimes, I was told, ‘an academic constitution can act as a barrier between a person and *lectio*’.

Some of this uncertainty about *lectio* could be found within the community. One of the junior monks, talking about *lectio* with some of the guests at the monastery over tea, shared his concerns about the ‘risk of idolatry’;

I don’t want to end up worshipping the text, I want to worship God. It’s one thing to be learning from the Bible and that’s helping you to know God. It’s quite another thing to become completely caught up in some kind of obsession with words on a page, rather than the living God. Isn’t it meant to be the fundamentalists who are obsessed with the text?

More broadly, the distinction drawn above between *lectio* and reading for study was not as clear-cut among the monks as the descriptions above might suggest. During one conversation in the carpentry workshop, after one of the monks asked how my study of *lectio* was getting on, I took the opportunity to ask him whether he felt there was a real difference between *lectio* and other types of reading. His answer was emphatic: yes, there was a difference, because *lectio divina* was not *just* reading; it was prayer. You might read something in order to find out new information, or to broaden your mind, or for pleasure, but during *lectio*, you were reading in order to pray, in order to encounter God; reading was the setting for that encounter, and anything else was secondary to that. Nevertheless, he explained, not all of the community understood *lectio divina* in the same way:

some of the monks just considered spiritual reading to mean 'sitting and working through an improving book'.

What accounts for this difference in approach within the community? In order to understand this, we need to be aware of changes in the way in which *lectio divina* has been understood, learned and taught. I had spoken to the novice master in order to get a better sense of the role of *lectio* in a monk's education. He explained that he felt it essential to introduce new members of the community to *lectio* 'almost immediately', because learning to read in a new way was an important part of monastic formation. For some it could be a difficult task, and it should not be treated as an afterthought. I asked him what his own experiences were when he was in the novitiate: had he been taught *lectio* as part of his monastic formation? He had encountered *lectio* at university before entering the monastery in the 1970s. The requirement that the monks should practise *lectio divina* was introduced to the interim constitution of the English Benedictine Congregation while he was a novice; however, when he asked his novice master for guidance, he found that his novice master knew nothing of *lectio* to teach him. In order to better understand the situation at that time, I was directed to the book *Consider your call* (Rees et al. 1978), which contains a chapter on *lectio*. *Consider your call* was published in 1978, and was the product of a Commission of monks and nuns from throughout the Congregation who attempted to explore the key principles of their monastic life in the light of the Second Vatican Council, and its call for religious congregations to 'renew themselves'.⁴ This commission was chaired by Daniel Rees, a monk of the monastery. The discussion of *lectio* is interesting for the way it attempts to piece together the different ways of thinking found within the Congregation at the time. We see that

Lectio divina may be defined as a 'slow meditative reading in search of a personal contact with God rather than mastery of an area of knowledge'. But spiritual reading today is often regarded as an activity whose chief value lies outside itself, in its usefulness to some other monastic occupation; it might, for example, provide material or an intelligent direction for prayer or for the apostolate' (Rees et al. 1978, 267)

So, there is a recognition that the goal of reading for prayer had to some extent been displaced by the goal of reading as a means to access information, and there is a sense that the reading which St Benedict instructs his monks to attend to daily in the *Rule* was not for the purposes of 'satisfaction of an avid curiosity for knowledge' (Rees et al. 1978, 268), but was considered 'nourishment' for the monks' faith.

There is some discussion in *Consider your call* of how to go about renewing the practice of *lectio* within the monasteries at a time when 'for many of us preparations for the academic and pastoral work which has taken the place of manual labour in our lives cannot often be easily distinguished from what we call spiritual reading' (1978, 270). However, the suggestions that more assistance could be offered in the study of scripture, by ensuring that better academic resources were at the monks' disposal, and bringing 'studies and spiritual

reading . . . into closer relation with one another so that ecclesiastical education could become more spiritual and spiritual reading more theological' does little to suggest how the technique of reading with slow attentiveness as a means of prayer could be developed in monastic life. Interestingly, there is no reference to Guigo II and the model used in his *The monk's ladder*; even though at the time it was this model that was being increasingly picked up in the monastery as a way of approaching reading anew as a means of prayer. I was told that the message about this approach to *lectio* was disseminated particularly through the teaching of American Trappists (Cistercians of the Strict Observance) who were 'evangelical' about this approach to *lectio* and 'drove the lectio movement' during this time, leading to individual members of the community learning about it and incorporating it into their own practice.

This historical contextualisation leads me to suggest that the rediscovery of *lectio divina* as part of monastic practice might be fruitfully examined in the light of the changes brought by the Second Vatican Council;⁵ it was, after all, the consideration of how the monastic life might be renewed which leads to the questioning of the role of reading in the monastery that we can see above. I asked several of the monks what lay behind its revival; many pointed directly to documents of the Council by way of explanation. As one monk explained to me,

Perfectae Caritatis [the decree on the adaptation and renewal of religious life] calls for us to return to the sources, to return to the sources of Christian life, and of our particular ways of living the religious life. Well, *lectio* is a double return to the sources if you like. It's a return to the Bible, so the source of revelation, it's paying close attention to what the Bible says. And it's also a return to a deeply monastic tradition, something that is in the *Rule* and is part of our Benedictine and monastic heritage.

So, *lectio* comes to be seen as particularly appropriate in the context of monastic renewal. Another monk pointed to *Dei Verbum*, the constitution on Divine Revelation,⁶ which urges a greater access and attention to scripture from all of the faithful, and more diligence in study and reading of scripture by the clergy; 'I think that call to a new awareness of scripture laid the way for the rediscovery . . . of *lectio divina*. It is a call to be inspired by scripture, which is what *lectio* does.' A very similar argument has been made by the Abbot of another English Benedictine monastery in a paper exploring the Council's impact on the spirituality of the English Benedictine Congregation. He states that '*Dei Verbum* is the foundation of the Council . . . For monastics, the principal implication was that it provided the soil in which the *lectio divina* revival could happen' (Jamison 2007). So we can see the current practice of *lectio divina* as emerging in the context of a renewed attention to scripture; but significantly *lectio* responds in a particular way to this call to read the word. Christopher Butler, a former Abbot of the monastery who took part in the Second Vatican Council, and is acknowledged as a key contributor to *Dei Verbum*,⁷ has stressed that *Dei Verbum* attempted to bring to the foreground the *personal aspect* of revelation as encountered through scripture.

God does not simply increase men's store of speculative knowledge; he addresses them as his friends and 'holds converse with them' . . . In communication between

friends or lovers the personal element is always present, and it is often preponderant. Often the truth that my friend imparts to me, like the gift he gives me, is less valuable for its intrinsic content than for its source; and it brings me into an act of communion with this source, my friend. (Butler 1967, 27)

As an anthropologist, I find an obvious ‘echo’ in this appeal to the idea of the gift. As Mauss (1954, 10) has written in relation to Maori gift exchange, ‘To give something is to give a part of oneself . . . to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence. Receiving a gift brings us into contact not only with the thing being given but also with the person doing the giving, and a gift exchange is a means of forming relationships. So, if Butler speaks of reading scripture as though he was receiving a gift from a friend, it is because he can see the act of reading as the establishment of a relationship. It is this relational approach to reading that *lectio divina* seeks to cultivate.

Reading as listening

Bielo (2009) has shown how the process of engagement with scripture reflects a particular understanding about the nature of Biblical language. Bible study provides an ideological frame through which readers are able to engage with the text; it is a setting in which the reader asks, ‘am I doing what I understand the Bible to be saying? Is my life in conflict with scripture? . . . Is scripture challenging my life of faith and daily habits? Is it affirming them?’ (Bielo 2009, 60). This model of textual authority emerges from a community of practice which places a strong emphasis on the absolute authority of Scripture (2009, 52); that which is in the Bible is “‘the Truth”, “inerrant”, “unswerving”” and ‘Anything accepted as true based on human wisdom can ultimately be confirmed by the Bible. And if not, its veracity should be doubted’ (2009, 53). What is interesting about this ideology of textual authority is that it is strongly epistemological in its emphasis. The Bible is a source of knowledge about God, his plan for us and the world we inhabit. Engagement with the Bible is a process of drawing on the knowledge presented and using this knowledge to evaluate and guide your journey as a Christian. While Bielo (2009, 49) is keen to stress that literalism is not a ‘direct channel’ to Evangelical hermeneutic practice – the key work carried out in Bible study is the work of application – he does recognise the key importance of literalism as a marker of identity, and he agrees with Crapanzano (2000) that ‘claims of literalism embed fundamental assumptions about the nature and function of language’. Key here is the emphasis on language’s capacity to make propositional statements about the world: here is an identity claim which ‘focuses on the referential or semantic dimension of language – more specifically on the word – rather than on its rhetorical or pragmatic dimensions’ (Crapanzano 2000, 2). The Bible studies discussed by Bielo are collective engagements with a text that embed belief within a particular ideology of reading: engagement with a text involves searching for propositional knowledge and applying it.

Malley (2004), in his study of Evangelical Christians in an American Baptist church, asks us to consider the search for relevance involved in Bible reading.

The Bible is read with the expectation that it says something which will resonate with the experience of the reader. Drawing on relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986), Malley suggests that Evangelicals are willing to devote a lot of energy to the process of reading the Bible following from the assumption of optimal relevance; that is, an audience expects that a message directed to them is worth the effort of understanding and is presented in such a way that it can be understood. The practice of Bible reading starts from this expectation: ‘The Bible need not say something evangelical readers necessarily like, but they believe it should be highly relevant to them, and they try reading it in different ways to see how it might be’ (Malley 2004, 106). Often the practice of reading the Bible ends when this expectation of relevance is met; ‘devotional reading is at least partly a goal-directed process that is terminated when its objective is achieved . . . When you suddenly see the importance of a passage for your life, God has spoken to you’ (2004, 107). *Lectio divina* can certainly be understood in this way. (Indeed, Malley remarks that ‘The practice of reading the Bible slowly and meditatively increases the chance of finding relevance in the text’ (2004, 154).) As we have seen, the text is approached with an expectation that some ‘echo’ will be found within it which speaks to the reader personally and read repeatedly in search of this echo. However, as we have seen above in the explanation of why *lectio* cannot be understood simply as Bible study, this echo is understood as a personal, subjective response to the text, not the discovery of the exegetical meaning of the words on the page.

If we consider once again the idea that the practice of *lectio* is like receiving a gift, what is significant about the gift is that it provides a means by which to establish or maintain a relationship. Consider, for example this account of how gift relationships are established among the Kabre in West Africa

we started by buying each other beer in the markets. I bought him some beer one day and then, later, he bought me back. And so we went, back and forth. Then, one day he came to me when he needed something . . . Now we loan fields back and forth all the time . . . Many men here in Kudwé found *ikpanture* [the friendship that can develop between two exchange partners] with men from other villages during the time of forced labor . . . The relationship often began with some small act – the help someone gave you lifting a rock from the road, their covering for you so you could slip into the bush . . . When we returned to the north, we continued the relationship. (Piot 1999, 57)

In these examples, the gift is the pretext for the establishment of a friendship, and it is willingly accepted because of the relationship it expresses; the emphasis is, therefore, on persons rather than on things (1999, 65). I would suggest that we should understand the search for relevance in scripture during *lectio divina* in the same way; what is being sought is the pretext for the establishment of a relationship, and this pretext is primarily valued because of its source and not its informational content. As a result, we must see the discovery of relevance in the text as the start, and not the end, of the process – it is the point at which reading opens into meditation and prayer.

How does this relational approach to reading emerge from the social life of the monastery? In order to understand this, I believe we need to look again at the kind of reading techniques which are employed in *lectio*. As I said above, I was told to read through the text ‘hearing each word in your mind as though you were reading aloud’; this idea that you should *listen* to the words you were reading, as though they were being spoken, was a recurring theme in the monks’ advice to me. One monk of the community has explored this in his practical guidebook to *lectio*: ‘Perhaps, the first step in learning to listen to the scriptures as the word of God is to think of ourselves, as it were, in the synagogue in Nazareth, listening to Jesus read them to us’ (Foster 2005, 21). I would say that the idea of reading as listening makes sense in the oral culture of a monastery. As I have described, in the life of the monastery, to read is to hear. The monks encounter the psalms verse by verse as they chant and listen alternately. Reading in the liturgy is reading aloud, or listening to someone reading aloud. Again at mealtimes, the monks hear books – sacred and secular in subject matter – read to them.

Ong (1982, 79) has suggested that one of the features of the written word is that it is context free, distanced from its originator. We see a similar case set out by Goody (1977, 44) (upon whom Ong draws) who has argued that in writing, ‘Speech is no longer tied to an ‘occasion’: it becomes timeless. Nor is it attached to a person; on paper it becomes more abstract, more depersonalised’. The reader does not have the opportunity to enter into discourse with an author in the same way as he can with the person who he hears speaking. In this vein, Ong speaks of the closure of the written (and even more so the printed) word: ‘By isolating thought on a written surface, detached from any interlocutor . . . writing presents utterance and thought as uninvolved with all else, somehow self-contained, complete’ (1982, 132). This is a necessary precondition, one might suggest, both for the kind of scriptural reading described by Crapanzano (2000), in which the text is understood as existing independently of any social relations – it exists as objective truth and should be read as such – and for the forms of scholarly critical reading in academic departments described by Livingston (1995). Bielo (2009) has argued persuasively that Evangelical group Bible reading is a dialogical space, in the sense that it becomes the context for reflection, discussion and prayer, yet I would argue that the focus remains very much on an ideology of the Bible as a written text, rather than the Bible as an oral communication. *Lectio* reshapes contemporary assumptions about texts by offering an ideology of reading as oral communication: through *lectio* we listen attentively. As we see in Hirschkind’s account of sensory engagement with tape-recorded sermons among Muslims in Egypt, to listen attentively is to enter into a process of bodily engagement through which a new identity is cultivated. You are letting the sound enter you and act upon you (Hirschkind 2001).

What I am arguing is *lectio divina* aims to transform the relationship between reader and text by changing the method through which we approach the written word. Ong has argued that historically we see a movement from

the stage at which a book could be assimilated only by being read through (and was thought of as being read aloud), to the definitively typographical stage, when a book could be – at least in part – assimilated by being ‘looked through’ or ‘skimmed through’ (1958, 311).

Lectio is striking to anybody who has become immersed in this logic of how to approach a book (and I count myself in that number), because it goes against these developments. It is a method of reading which radically slows down the rate of movement familiar to the skim-reader and presents the book as something to be listened to, with the aim of building a relationship between the speaker and listener. Ong (1958, 308) makes the suggestion that it is the manipulable nature of print, especially with the invention of moveable type, and makes it such that ‘the unit of speech is considered as a mark on a surface, rather than as a phone (a speech sound)’. The significance of this development, for Ong, is that it divorces the written word from the art of rhetoric and divorces the reader from the act of listening. Instead, writing takes on its own spatial logic. The point at which we see a movement away from the *sound* of the text is a point for historical debate. Saenger (1997) has given an account of the developments in written script that made silent reading possible. Of particular importance in his account is the introduction of spaces between words. In the *scriptura continua* common in Greek texts and adopted in Roman script prior to the introduction of spaces in the early Middle Ages by Irish and Anglo-Saxon scribes, one word ran into the next. It was, therefore, necessary to vocalise the text in order to understand it; ‘in these circumstances, the ancient reader in his initial preparation or *praelectio* of a text normally had to read orally, aloud or in a muffled voice, because overt physical pronunciation aided the reader to retain phonemes of ambiguous meaning’ (1997, 8). This clearly limits the order in which the reader can read what is in front of him and the speed with which he can read it. By contrast

The complex structure of the written page of a fourteenth-century scholastic text presupposed a reader who read only with his eyes, going swiftly from objection to response, from table of contents to the text, from diagram to the text, and from the text to the gloss and its corrections. (1997, 260)

The way in which this text is written allows for jumping about and for fast and discontinuous reading. It allows for a new level of individual manipulation of the text. The individual reader can now take control of what is being read, make it a subject for literary analysis, irony and so on.

Yet, in the monastic culture of reading aloud which gives rise to *lectio divina*, the individual loses this control. He does not set the pace for reading; he does not dart from place to place in the text; ‘Listening, we have to take it as it comes; someone else is in charge of the words’ (Foster 2005, 19). This is what is learned in the life of the monastery and what shapes the monastic approach to scripture.

Notes

1. Fieldwork was carried out throughout the academic year 2005–2006 and involved sharing as a guest in the community's life, eating in silence in the monastic refectory, learning to make things in the carpentry workshop, drinking tea and following the daily cycle of prayer.
2. The words 'still small voice' are themselves taken from scripture, where they are used in the King James Version of the Bible to describe how the voice of God was heard by Elijah in 1 Kings 19:12.
3. John Henry Newman (1801–1890) was an Anglican convert to Catholicism who wrote widely on aspects of Catholic life and doctrine, as well as the experience of prayer. He is currently on the path to being Canonised as a Saint of the Catholic Church.
4. This call is the basis of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, promulgated in 1965 by Pope Paul VI after it had been formulated, discussed and voted upon during the Second Vatican Council.
5. The Second Vatican Council was a meeting of all of the Bishops of the Catholic Church, as well as those at the head of religious Congregations such as the English Benedictine Congregation. The Council, which took place over several sessions between 1962 and 1965, addressed many areas of Church Doctrine and released decrees declaring the outcome of these discussions.
6. Another document promulgated in 1965 by Pope Paul VI after it had been formulated, discussed and voted upon at the Second Vatican Council.
7. For an account of Christopher Butler's role in the development of *Dei Verbum*, see Wells (2002).

References

- Bielo, J.S. 2009. *Words upon the word: An ethnography of evangelical group Bible study*. New York: New York University Press.
- Boyarin, J. 1989. Voices around the text: The ethnography of reading at Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem. *Cultural Anthropology* 4, no. 4: 399–421.
- Butler, B.C. 1967. *The theology of Vatican II*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Crapanzano, Vincent. 2000. *Serving the word: Literalism in America from the pulpit to the bench*. New York: New Press.
- Flynn, B. 2005. *Running against the wind: The transformation of a new age medium and his warning to the Church*. Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails.
- Foster, D. 2005. *Reading with God: Lectio divina*. London: Continuum.
- Goody, J. 1977. *The domestication of the savage mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hirschkind, C. 2001. The ethics of listening: Cassette-sermon audition in contemporary Egypt. *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 3: 623–49.
- Jamison, C. 2007. Abbot Victor Farwell: The impact of Vatican II on EBC spirituality. Paper presented at the English Benedictine Congregation Theology Symposium, Worth Abbey, 11 April 2007.
- Keller, E. 2004. Towards complete clarity: Bible study among seventh-day Adventists in Madagascar. *Ethnos* 69, no. 1: 89–112.
- . 2007. Scripture study as normal science: Seventh-day Adventist practice on the East coast of Madagascar. In *The anthropology of Christianity*, ed. Fenella Cannell, 273–94. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Livingston, E. 1995. *An anthropology of reading*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

- Luhrmann, T.M. 2004. Metakinesis: How God becomes intimate in contemporary U.S. Christianity. *American Anthropologist* 106, no. 3: 518–28.
- Malley, B. 2004. *How the Bible works: An anthropological study of evangelical Biblicism*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Masson, M.E.J. 1983. Conceptual processing of text during skimming and rapid sequential reading. *Memory and Cognition* 11, no. 3: 262–74.
- Mauss, M. 1954. *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. Trans. Ian Cunnison. London: Cohen and West.
- Ong, W.J. 1958. *Ramus, method, and the decay of dialogue: From the art of discourse to the art of reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1982. *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. New York: Methuen.
- Piot, C. 1999. *Remotely global: Village modernity in West Africa*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Rees, D., et al. 1978. *Consider your call: A theology of monastic life today*. London: SPCK.
- Robbins, J. 2001. God is nothing but talk: Modernity, language and prayer in a Papua New Guinea Society. *American Anthropologist* 103, no. 4: 901–12.
- Saenger, P. 1997. *Space between words: The origins of silent reading*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Sperber, D., and D. Wilson. 1986. *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wells, A. 2002. Bishop Christopher Butler at Vatican II: His role in Dei Verbum. *Downside Review* 120: 129–54.