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Edmondo Lupieri

To Bible or Not to Bible: How on Earth Does a Text Become Scripture? (In Jewish, Christian, and Derived Traditions)

1. We call “Scripture” a written text which is considered inspired and therefore normative by a specific religious group. In Jewish, Christian, and derived traditions it is commonly believed that normative scriptures somehow contain or transmit the word of God. Since inspired and normative scripture is usually represented by a fixed list, or “canon” of books, they are also called “canonical.”

Both in Jewish and in Christian history, centuries after the beginning of their religious traditions, groups of leaders felt the need to officially define which books had to be considered sacred and which not, even if most people among their followers would have agreed on a good number of them. Jewish leaders who traced their own tradition back to the Pharisees and whom we call “rabbis,” during the second century C.E. (therefore after the destruction of 70 and almost certainly after that of 135), in what we traditionally call the Academy of Jamnia (even if a good part of the news we have about it is a subsequent construction), met to decide which books were really inspired and which not.¹ Please notice that this happened late, when the priestly class had probably lost most of its political power.² In any case, the rabbis at Jamnia tried to establish an objective rule. Since the presence of God is contaminating for humans, the scrolls containing the genuine word of God must also transmit that peculiar “en-

¹ Probably without anything that could be considered a “Council of Jamnia;” see E. SCHÜRER, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. – A.D. 135)* (3 vols.; revised and edited by G. VERMES, F. MILLAR, AND M. BLACK; Edinburgh: Continuum, 1973), 2:314–22.

² The ongoing influence of priestly leadership, though, is indicated by the high number of rabbis of priestly descent who were associated with Jamnia: R. Yose, R. Hanina, R. Eliezer, R. Joshua b. Hananiah, R. Eleazar b. Azariah, and R. Ishmael are all connected to Levitical and priestly families—the last is said to be the son of a high priest, see *bKet.* 105b and *bHul.* 49a (SCHÜRER, *History*, 2:369–80).

ergy” caused by the spiritual presence of God in the text containing his sacred word and his sacred name. This brought them to believe that the scrolls containing a sacred text would have “dirtied their hands.” They handled the various scrolls, then, with bare hands, and decided when they “felt” contaminated and when not. In some dubious cases (as always in rabbinic discussions) the decision was reached according to the majority’s opinion.³ A corollary result was that the rabbis confirmed all the rules to protect the scriptural scrolls from human profanation and to protect the humans from the contamination caused by the sacredness of the scriptural scrolls. This is why the scrolls are usually covered⁴ and must be “handled with care,” even by using a little silver hand (a *yad*) to help following the reading without directly touching the written surface.

2. Every Christian church had to face a similar situation and different solutions were chosen by the different churches. Some books accepted in the so-called New Testament had to wait centuries before being accepted by some or most churches,⁵ while other books have been accepted into the Old Testament only by some, like the Books of Enoch, which are canonical in the Ethiopic Church, but not in any other Christian confession. Only in the 16th century the Catholic Church decided to write the final word regarding which are the biblical books to be considered inspired (by excluding, as an example, what we now call the *Fourth Book of Ezra*) and to do so had to recur to the authority of a Council, precisely the Council of Trent.⁶ Even in this case, though, the decision was not officially based on human authority (not even a Council can make such decisions on the basis of human will), but on the presence of the Holy Spirit directly inspiring the assembly of bishops.

³ As in the case of the Song of Songs; see *m. Yad.* 3:5.

⁴ This must be a very ancient “taboo,” of priestly tradition, according to which contamination can happen even “by sight.” A high priest was expected to even avoid the sight of a bier or a human corpse: *m. Sanh.* 2:1; cp. S. LIEBERMAN, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission. Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the 1 Century B.C.E.* (New York, 1950), 165. A sacred text (similarly to an object destined for the temple: see the case of the knitting of bread for presentation: *m. Hall.* 2:3) must be protected from “seeing” human parts or acts potentially contaminating (so the Torah scroll, if kept in a bedroom: L. BLAU, *Studien zum althebräischen Buchwesen und zur biblischen Literatur- und Textgeschichte* [Strassburg: Trübner, 1902], 173) and the idea must have been transreligious (see the oral tradition regarding the Mandaeans and their sacred book in E. LUPIERI, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002], ix).

⁵ As an example, the position of Revelation was not clear for a long time, to the point that it does not appear in the lectionaries of the Greek and Oriental Churches, meaning that, when it was accepted, the readings for the masses had already been established and it is not read today during the Eucharistic liturgy (E. LUPIERI, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006], 4).

⁶ *4 Ezra* was excluded from the canon in the *Decretum de Canonis Scripturis* on April 8, 1546, during the fourth session of the Council.

3. For the establishment of new Scripture, I have chosen more recent religious phenomena, all grown in the Jewish and Christian traditions. I will briefly present the official explanations of why certain texts are sacred and how people know that they are. The first three are very successful examples, with some common elements and also meaningful diversities. In all three cases one man entered more or less unexpectedly in contact with a male spiritual entity from whom, in different ways, he received either a preexisting text or a revelation to be written in order to be conveyed to the rest of humankind. Biblical ecstatic prophetism, and particularly the scene according to which John of Patmos received a text from an angel,⁷ could be one of the cultural precedents. The three men are Muhammad, Joseph Smith, and Sun Myung Moon.

In the seventh century C.E., Muhammad had a series of encounters with the angel Gabriel. Independently from the ways in which the various messages were later collected and spurious words wrongly attributed to the Prophet were identified,⁸ what was revealed to Muhammad is the content of a book that exists from ever and forever by God, in a way similar to the preexistence by God of His Word according to Christian traditions. This book is the Holy Qur'an and is not the word of humans nor, obviously, of Muhammad, but is the eternal word of God, expressed in classical Arabic, which is the sacred language used in Heaven.

In the 19th century, Joseph Smith was visited by the angel Moroni. The angel revealed to Smith the existence of a box containing a large number of golden plates on which, written in an alphabet no one was able to decipher and in a language no one was able to understand, descendants of the Jews who had escaped the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in the 6th century B.C.E. and had reached America wrote down their history before going extinct. The angel gave Smith a special instrument⁹ that allowed Smith to accomplish the dual task

⁷ Rev 10:8–10; in this case the text was written (an opened scroll) and the seer was expected to eat it (following the scriptural example of Ezek 2–3; cp. Jer 15:16).

⁸ Even traditionally, the 'Uthmānic text was compiled (in a *scriptio defectiva*) over several decades while a vocalization of the text was not "canonized" for three more centuries (G. BÖWERING, "Recent Research on the Construction of the Qur'an," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* [ed. G.S. REYNOLDS; New York: Routledge, 2008], 70–87). 'Uthmān also brought some regularity to the language, insisting that it be in Muhammad's dialect. The collection of these materials is reported to have started even earlier under Muhammad's successor and first Caliph, Abu Bakr, who commissioned Zayd ibn Thabit to collect written fragments of the Qur'an under several conditions, including that the recital of the material by Muhammad should have been heard by at least two witnesses, that it was written down in his presence, and that it was not later declared as abrogated by the Prophet (E. ESACK, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* [Oxford: Newworld, 2005], 86–87).

⁹ At times depicted as a pair of spectacles, the lenses of which are transparent "peeping stones" or "seer stones" (other times as a single "stone" or as a group of them mounted into a round object, similar to a disk).

of interpreting the unknown signs and understanding the unknown language. The sacred text (the *Book of Mormon*) is not written directly by God, but is the memory of an extinct branch of the ancient Israelite populations which completes the revelation contained in the Bible.¹⁰ Later these spectacles allowed Joseph Smith to interpret some Egyptian papyri fragments he acquired (together with the mummies that apparently contained them) by a merchant;¹¹ this interpretation constitutes now the *Book of Abraham* and has been canonized by a part of the Church (in 1880), although Smith's interpretation does not correspond at all to the content of the Egyptian texts.

This is an extremely interesting case for us, since the Egyptian text, historically speaking, has no connection whatsoever with its narrative interpretation, as it was mystically or spiritually proposed by Joseph Smith.¹² From the point of view of our historical-biblical research, though, it could be considered an extreme case of superimposition of a new meaning to an ancient text, that is or was considered "Scripture." It is common, among the Church Fathers, to "discover the hidden meaning" in the Bible, applying an allegorical interpretation (usually Christological/typological) to a text that, in its Hebrew original, had historically nothing to do with Jesus. As an example, a patriarchal bene-

¹⁰ Thanks also to the fact that Jesus, after the resurrection, came to America to explain the unclear parts of the Bible to the lost tribes of Israel (3 Nephi 9–26). Jesus' teaching to the Nephites, which, in Smith's rendition, show strong similarities to the text of the King James gospels, is preceded by statements exposing his intent (3 Nephi 11:28, "And there shall be no disputations among you, as there have hitherto been; neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine, as there have hitherto been") as well as establishing a "canon" (3 Nephi 11:40, "And whoso shall declare more or less than this, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock"). As an example of how Jesus guides the interpretation of the established canon, see 3 Nephi 15:21–24 where Jesus gives the proper interpretation of John 10:16 so that the American Nephites are the "other sheep" about whom Jesus told them: "And they understood me not, for they supposed it had been the Gentiles... And they understood me not that I said they shall hear my voice [which the Nephites now hear]; and they understood not that the Gentiles should not at any time hear my voice—that I should not manifest myself unto them save it were by the Holy Ghost" (15:22–23).

¹¹ The merchant Michael Chandler sold Smith three papyri in 1835 while the prophet was in Kirtland, OH, one that Smith claimed was written by Abraham, the other two by Joseph (which were never translated). Smith's "translation" of the *Book of Abraham* was not published until 1842 (F.M. BRODIE, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* [2nd ed.; New York: Vintage, 1995], 170–71).

¹² And numerous were the reactions by Egyptologists, accusing Joseph Smith of fraud and ignorance, first by Jules Remy, who published Smith's interpretation alongside the translation of the Egyptian text a Coptic scholar had identified on the basis of Smith's drawing of the fragments (J. REMY, *A Journey to Great Salt-Lake City by Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley* [2 vols.; London: W. Jeffs, 1861]), later by a team of Egyptologists (F.S. SPALDING, *Joseph Smith Jr. as a Translator* [Salt Lake City: Arrow, 1912]), and finally, after the original fragments of the three papyri were found from which to translate directly, by University of Chicago Egyptologist Klaus Baer (K. BAER, "The Breathing Permit of Hôr: A Translation of the Apparent Source of the Book of Abraham," *Dialogue, A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3[1968]: 109–34).

diction promising wealth and richness to a descendent, to the point that this last one was expected to be able to soak "his garments in the blood of [his] grapes," becomes a prophecy of the body of Christ, "soaked" in his own, salvific, blood.¹³ While the Church Fathers did not usually deny the existence of a literal or historical meaning in the Scripture, beyond which the faithful was expected to go guided by the Patristic exegesis, Joseph Smith with his peeping stone(s) and his inspiration is able to discover stories of Abraham and Joseph in Egypt in what actually is a fragment of the well-known Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.¹⁴ Is this just an incident in an already controversial career of a contested prophet? And why are people ready to believe, even after the interpretation was "debunked"? I would suggest that the process of attributing a new meaning, that is not historically inherent to the content of an existing text, is similar to the totemization of an object or the creation of now possibly famous relics (which have no relationship whatsoever to the historical figures of Jesus, Mary, or the given saint) or the construction of a pseudepigraphical text. For a believing member of the Church of the Latter Day Saints it has zero relevance that the Egyptian fragments do not contain what Joseph Smith was able to read into them: Joseph Smith's explanation is the only meaningful thing.

To move on, I will briefly describe an event that took place in the 20th century. The young Sun Myung Moon, at sixteen, had an encounter with Jesus, who told him that he (Jesus) had failed his mission and that it was now his (Moon's) duty to take over and continue and bring to the right conclusion Jesus' work. No specific text was communicated, but the future Rev. Moon received the foundational vision on the basis of which he could start his own mission. In this way the content of his message, collected with the help of a disciple and written in a book, the *Divine Principle*, is the foundational writing of the Church of the Unification (the most common and shortened denomination).¹⁵ Interestingly, the Rev. Moon claimed to be the only and/or the first one to have a clear interpretation of the Jewish-Christian Scripture, the Bible, of which it is the completion. The Arabic version of the *Divine Principle* presents itself not only as the correct interpretation and completion of the Bible,

¹³ The example chosen is the benediction of Judah by the dying Jacob in Gen 49:11. See for example (Ps.) Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Anti-Christ* 11; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* I, 6; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* XVI, 41.

¹⁴ According to BAER ("Translation," 111), two papyri, from the early first century B.C.E., come directly from the *Book of the Dead* (those supposedly written by Joseph in Egypt), while the *Book of Abraham* is said to be based upon the third papyrus, from the first century C.E., which is a *Breathing Permit*, a compilation of materials from the *Book of the Dead*.

¹⁵ S.M. MOON, *Divine Principle* (5th ed.; New York: Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, 1977) (1st ed. 1970).

but also of the Holy Qur'an.¹⁶ In this case the canonical writing of the Church is not a preexisting text, translated or interpreted, but a new, inspired interpretation and completion of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic scriptural tradition.¹⁷

In all three cases we have a human (male) seer and prophet who begins a very successful religious movement, the followers and sympathizers of which can be counted in the millions. The starting point is a revelation brought by a supernatural entity (also male) and connected with a text which can be pre-existing in God, or written down on golden plates or Egyptian papyri, or not physically pre-existing, but which becomes quite quickly foundational and is considered sacred and inspired: Scriptures are born.

4. I will try to present now three cases of American post-Christian nativistic movements.¹⁸ The first one took place in the Mexican state of Chiapas, beginning in 1708. After various confused events, the Virgin Mary began appearing to several Indian women, particularly to Maria de la Candelaria, from the Tzeltal village of San Juan Cancuc. The Virgin Mary wanted the institution of a particular new cult, but the Spanish authorities intervened harshly by destroying the sanctuaries that the Indians kept rebuilding and by trying to prohibit pilgrimages and markets in Cancuc. When the bishop, Juan Baptista Álvarez de Toledo, announced a new (expensive!) pastoral visit in 1712, Maria de la Candelaria spread a new message of the Virgin: God and the king are dead; Catholicism has collapsed and the Indians must wage war against it; the only true religion is the one of the Virgin of Cancuc; only *Indios* will be saved, while Hell is ready for whites, blacks, mestizos, mulattoes... A certain Sebastian Gómez de la Gloria (= from Heaven) organizes the new church and the new society: all Indians able to read become immediately priests; with vestments and objects taken from the churches they celebrate their masses (at the end of which they come to the plaza of the village to distribute alms); "soldiers of the Virgin" raid the villages killing the whites and the priests and taking white women as concubines (they were obliged to dress and talk like Indians). The whites are called "Jews," Cancuc becomes Ciudad Real (then the capital; now San Cristobal de Las Casas) and Ciudad Real becomes Jerusalem. On August 25, 1712, about four thousand Indians attack Jerusalem, the

¹⁶ I had access to the English translation of the Arabic version; for a more recent attempt to explain the Divine Principle in light of the Qur'an, see A. AHMED, *United Visions: One God, One Truth, and One Human Family* (English and Arabic; Self-published, 2009).

¹⁷ And the "Oriental" one as well, since the *Divine Principle* claims to also be the correct interpretation of the *I-Ching*.

¹⁸ For this section, see my, *In the Name of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), 86–103, with further bibliography.

“former” Ciudad Real, but are repelled. The repression is effective. The inhabitants of the villages are deported and relocated; all chiefs are executed; Sebastian disappears. In 1716 Maria and a small group of followers are finally captured: she dies in childbirth shortly after. No image whatsoever or artifact has survived.

I am unable to prove that the messages of the Virgin became Scripture (but, what is “Scripture” in an Indian village of Chiapas at the beginning of the 18th century?). It is important for us to see how a female spiritual figure of the Christian pantheon talks to a woman and her words become foundational and normative for a whole religious nativistic movement, short lived, but tragically effective in its way.

The second event is closer to us. In 1799, a sick Iroquois chief called Handsome Lake began a series of visions of celestial beings, angels and also Jesus, who revealed to him a message for his people and accompanied him in an ultra-mundane voyage in which he also saw the destiny of humans. The imagery and content are a unique fusion of Indian and Christian lore. Having been healed, Handsome Lake started announcing the “Good Word” or “Good Message” which had a tremendous, although contradictory effect among his fellow Indians. While the restoration of the old Six Nations Confederacy was no longer a possibility, after the final American victory in the war of 1812 and the end of the Franco-English belligerence, the message was effective in saving the Indian identity in a period of devastating crisis. After the death of Handsome Lake (1815), the message was memorized and finally written and translated into English (1913). The “Code” of Handsome Lake is the Scripture of the new religion called “The Old Way” of Handsome Lake and is actually read in a liturgical cycle of one or two years in the major festivities (like the Bible in the lectionaries). From every point of view, the “Code” is considered a sacred, inspired text by the followers of the “Old Way,” for whom it is “Scripture.”

The third phenomenon is the religious dimension of the so-called Caste War of the Yucatan. In 1847, while the federal Mexican government with Santa Anna was involved in a disastrous war with the United States, the complicated internal Mexican situation allowed a Mayan insurrection that almost brought about the conquest of Merida. The insurrection was partially subdued, but in 1850 a talking cross appeared, inviting the *Indios* to fight against the Mexicans. The cross was burned down and the *Indio* who spoke for “her” (supposedly a ventriloquist) was executed, but three more talking crosses appeared, with three *Indios* as their interpreters. The three crosses were “daughters” of the old one and they were also the “Trinity.” Following their messages, the Mayans organized the armed resistance: they built churches and barracks; the village of Chan Santa Cruz became the capital of an independent area; all male members of the population, starting at sixteen, were enlisted in

rotation and fought as *cruzob* (Mayan plural of *cruz*, the Cross) against the whites. The secession was at times supported by the British, interested first in mahogany and later in *chicle* and in general to foster the mercantile activity of bordering Belize; only in 1901 was the Mexican army able to occupy the capital, but skirmishes continued into the 1930s (and still during WWII some Indian commanders asked the US for help to support the secession). The oral messages by the crosses and later also some written ones, apparently delivered on slips of papers found by the crosses, were collected in a book, which became a *santo*: *Santo Almahatán*, where *Almahatán* means more or less "Scripture." It is not clear to me how much of this *Santo Almahatán* was the collection of the newly received messages or a new proposal of old texts, like those in the *Books of Chilam Balam*.

Apparently, after the end of WWII, what little was surviving of the religion of the Talking Cross gradually disappeared, possibly going underground. While we can trace meaningful connections to traditional images in Mayan pictorial representations of (possibly) trees of life that look like crosses as well as to Spanish veneration and floral ornament for Christian crosses, it is difficult to find traces of the Talking Cross.¹⁹ Even more difficult seems to be for white scholars to identify a copy of the *Santo Almahatán*.

In any case, the three examples are quite different but equally interesting for our inquiry: first we have a female divine entity who, through messages delivered to a woman, begins a temporarily successful religious experiment. Then we have a more traditional ecstatic form of prophetism practiced by a man who successfully transmits his messages and originates a long-term religious phenomenon. Finally, we have an "anomalous" situation (if events can be anomalous in the history of religions), according to which a series of religious objects that can have multiple meanings, through human (male) interpreters succeed in a new political and religious experiment which also involves the creation of a body of Scriptures.

5. In the last couple of centuries, the Catholic world has seen a large number of apparitions, many to women, some of them mostly concerned with new forms of piety,²⁰ some even quite interesting to our study, since

¹⁹ Apparently, blue crosses are painted in the ruins of churches where talking crosses were kept and one surviving talking cross is told to be hosted and kept protected from intrusive eyes in the main church of the town of Chan Santa Cruz. The image of a blue cross can be seen in L. HAWKES, "In Search of the Talking Cross of Chan Santa Cruz," n.p. [cited 30 April 2013]. Online: <http://mexicolesstraveled.com/talkingcross.htm>.

²⁰ As an example, the practice of the *Divine Mercy*, communicated by Jesus to the Polish (Saint) Maria Faustyna Kowalska [1905-1938]; by M.F. KOWALSKA, see *Jesus, I Trust in You!*: *Selected Prayers of Saint Faustina* (Cracow: Misericordia, 2004), and *Diary of Saint Maria*

they not only add details regarding Jesus' Passion on the cross, but have the tendency to fill up lacunae or explain difficulties and contradictions in the Gospel narrative.²¹ I have decided to analyze—and this will be the last point of my paper—three occurrences of another phenomenon quite typical of the Catholic tradition: an apparition of the Virgin Mary to a girl or a group of children, involving the communication of some sort of message or messages. The typology of the messages is different and their importance for us is also diversified (and I have organized their presentation in a sort of “crescendo”). The first case is that of Our Lady of Lourdes, who appeared at the opening of a grotto to the French (Saint) Marie-Bernarde (usually known as Bernadette) Soubirous [1844-1879] in 1858 (on Feb. 11 the first time). In 1854 Pope Pius IX had officially proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (after centuries of devotion on this subject in the Catholic Church, particularly in the territories under Habsburgic control). The important element is that the “Lady” in Lourdes told Bernadette that she *was* the Immaculate Conception. Once the interpretive difficulties were overcome, thanks also to the therapeutic success of the water of a new spring by the grotto of the apparition, the apparition became a strong support, in the Catholic world, for the dogmatic definition, for which it is objectively difficult to find scriptural support. So, the words of the Virgin of Lourdes may be considered to have a practical function somehow similar to a scriptural quotation.

Almost fifty years later, on May 13, 1917, the Virgin Lady appeared to three Portuguese children in Fatima (and would do so every month, until Oct. 13). In this case, the messages entrusted to the children contained prophecies, namely about a new world war destined to begin after a great sign in heaven (later identified in the aurora borealis of Jan. 1938) and the conversion of communist Russia. Three of the messages had to be kept secret for years and one, regarding a priest dressed in white being shot and killed, is particularly important: when Pope John Paul II survived his assassination attempt on May 13, 1981, he was sure that the Virgin Mary of Fatima had protected him, so that he was not actually killed (and later sent one of the four bullets to be set in the crown of the little statue of the Virgin Mary in Fatima). Like biblical

Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in my Soul (Cracow: Misericordia, 2012). On Kowalska, see M. TARNAWSKA, A. HARGEST-GORZELAK, AND S. WESOLY, *Sister Faustina Kowalska: Her Life and Mission* (Stockbridge, Mass.: Marian, 2000).

²¹ As an example, the enormous amount of details communicated by Jesus to the Italian Maria Valtorta [1897-1961]; see M. VALTORTA, *The Gospel as Revealed to Me* (trans. G. ALLEGRA; 10 vols.; Rochester, N.Y.: Valtorta Publishing, 2013), formerly *The Poem of the Man-God*. See also IDEM, *Autobiography* (trans. D.G. MURRAY; Sherbrooke, Quebec: Éditions Paulines, 1991), and *The End Times as Revealed to Maria Valtorta* (2nd ed., trans. P.T.Y. ATWORTH; Sherbrooke, Quebec: Éditions Paulines, 1994).

prophets, the three children, and particularly the only one who survived the Spanish Flu epidemic, Lúcia de Jesus Rosa dos Santos, later Sister Mary Lucy of Jesus and of the Immaculate Heart [1907-2005], were the subject of a form of ecstatic prophetism which, after some early criticism, was taken very seriously by the highest religious authorities in the Catholic Church. Prediction of future events is particularly strong in this case and the messages of the Virgin, although never considered by orthodox Catholics to be properly "Scripture," on a practical level, play a role very similar to that of the ancient Scripture in its prophetic dimension.

On June 24, 1981, the Virgin Mary started appearing to six Croatian children in Medjugorje, a village ethnically Croatian, but situated in Herzegovina. The set of apparitions is anomalous in many respects, because the Virgin has kept appearing (now for more than 30 years) to the six seers, in Medjugorje and all over in the world, when they travel. Also, Tomislav Vlašić, the Franciscan priest who was the spiritual director of the visionaries in the first years and who had already impregnated a nun in the 1970s, was defrocked in 2009 and now, together with an Italian lady, Stefania Caterina, is a key figure in a New Age Movement centered around the so-called Central Nucleus, connecting the dimension of God to the various humanities present in the universe. Most of the numerous messages of the Lady of Medjugorje are public and can be read on-line; some, including a life of the Virgin Mary, are kept secret for now and will be divulged when the Virgin Mary will so decide. Most of the public messages have simple ethical and moral contents, often containing exhortations to pray and do penance and have little that could conflict with a conservative version of traditional Catholicism. Nevertheless hundreds of thousands of pilgrims do converge every year to Medjugorje or wherever one of the visionaries goes and receives a new message, and a number of phenomena are reported, of the kind traditionally accompanying apparitions (from smelling roses, to seeing the sun moving irregularly in the sky, to cases of healing).

My final question is: how important are the messages for the faithful who accept their divine origin? The messages, indeed, are often told to come from Jesus, through Mary, through the seer, to the people. The chain of revelation is similar to that described by John at the beginning of his Apocalypse, where the chain is described as originating with God, through Jesus Christ, through his angel, through the seer John, to the people (Rev 1:1-2). Structurally, Mary has the function of the angel of Jesus Christ in Revelation.

Certainly, now the canon is closed, and it is improbable that a collection of messages of any of the appearing Marys will become "Scripture," at least in the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the mechanism is

in place and it is worth asking ourselves what would allow or impede the creation of a new canon, or the expansion of an existing one, maybe in some splinter group of unorthodox believers.²²

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²² Spiritualistic and—more recently—UFO-related religious phenomena appear to constitute rich and interesting backgrounds for the dictation of messages and the constitutions of new Scriptures in the post-Christian Western world. Their analysis, though, goes far beyond the limited scope of this contribution.