

REVELATION AND HISTORY

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Introduction

A theology which asks the question "What is the meaning of revelation?" is peculiarly a child of modern times. Theologians and school children alike knew the answer throughout most of Christian history in terms of a simple distinction between natural or rational and revealed knowledge, the former a function of the unaided human mind, the latter direct communication from God Himself. To be sure, theologians of the Middle Ages might encourage a questioner to approach God from either direction, but from the thirteenth century onward, there was often an insistence upon a separation of the two ways of knowing. St. Thomas Aquinas and his followers all made the distinction. Even the breakup following the Middle Ages did not notably disturb its terms even while shifting its balance of emphasis.

To the majority of seventeenth and eighteenth century rationalists, supernatural revelation, if indeed there was such, was a concession to weaker minds, and concerned truths open to an unaided reason whose exercise was sufficiently sustained. Spinoza, for example, allotted to reason the whole field of truth. He would allow revelation to define dogmas of faith but only insofar as they were prerequisites to obedience and piety. It was reason's task to determine precise doctrine.

The reformers, on the other hand, peering through an Augustinian conception of human depravity, saw little or no reliable knowledge of things divine issuing from so damaged an instrument as reason. True, Calvin inconsistently granted to reason the power to discover "innumerable proofs" for God's existence from the world of nature, but Luther contemplated

human reason only with contempt. Their spiritual progeny hastily reverted to a viewpoint allowing greater room to reason, however. Melancthon's position was virtually that of the scholastics.

The natural or rational theology of the late Middle Ages was little heard of outside of Roman Catholicism by the nineteenth century. But during that century this also meant that the concern for revelation which St. Thomas conceived of as a supplement to reason also virtually disappeared. Kant, for example, makes little reference to revelation, and the great Schleiermacher almost confines the conception to a single postscript.

Schleiermacher's emphasis on a religious self-consciousness seems to preclude the idea of a revelation which could provide cognitive knowledge. To him revelation had to do with a state of feeling rather than cognition. Not many were willing to follow him thus far, but he did in a way express the intellectual climate of much of the nineteenth century. Lessing, Jacobi, and Hegel all held positions consonant with that of Schleiermacher. Ritschl saw theological knowledge as resting on "value judgments of faith" rather than upon theoretical knowledge of God as preliminary to faith. "We know the nature of God and Christ only in their value for us." Certainly there was no place in his system for revelation conceived as doctrine communicated with authority.

Biblical criticism had made the concept of verbal inspiration so untenable to many nineteenth-century scholars that they were forced to conclude that only by abandoning the term revelation itself could they effectively retreat from so vulnerable a position. This retreat provides the historical antecedents for much of contemporary thinking on the subject.

It shall be the acknowledged purpose of this article to consider in somewhat general terms the essential features of the current discussion. An attempt will also be made to assay its significance to Christian faith. It will not be possible even to resemble in so brief a treatment adequate coverage

of the variant viewpoints available to us. But since they are in somewhat general agreement in what they deny if not in what they affirm, it seems worthwhile to assess their agreement and what it implies.

I.

Traditionally, revelation has meant an unveiling of something formerly hidden. Now there is a sense, of course, in which all knowledge may be regarded as revealed. The knowing mind observes, selects, and interprets. But it must do so from that which is presented to it, and therefore must be active as well as passive in the knowing act. I apprehend correctly only when my apprehension agrees with that which is apprehended. However, some theologians anxious to maintain a clear distinction between what they have called divine revelation and rational knowledge have spoken as if revelation alone is something given to us and as if the knowledge available to reason is largely the creation of the knowing mind. It might seem obvious that no act of perceiving can be explained solely from the side of the knowing subject, regardless of what kinds of objects enter into the knowing experience. If it is to be knowledge about something and not merely imagination or false opinion, something must, at least in one sense, be presented to the knower. But the question that concerns us here is whether this is all we indicate by the term revelation; whether revealed knowledge differs only in the kind of information made available.

For many present day thinkers, Biblical revelation seems to differ from the more casual knowing process by always taking place between persons. In other words, revelation is not of an object to a subject but from mind to mind, from subject to subject. There is a further distinction to be noted. In Biblical revelation, it is revelation of the Divine Mind to the human mind, and not merely of one human mind to another. According to this distinction, when we reveal ourselves to others, we do so for the most part in terms of knowledge

about ourselves rather than knowledge *of* ourselves. God, on the other hand, discloses *only* Himself rather than a body of information concerning certain things about which we might otherwise be ignorant. In short, divine revelation has not to do with information about God, but the very God Himself.

Kittel notes that both in the New Testament and in the Old, revelation is neither the communication of supernatural knowledge nor the stimulation of numinous feeling, though both of these may accompany the revelation. "His offering is Himself in fellowship."

It should not be necessary to observe that this is far from the church's classical understanding of revelation. The Christian Church very early began to equate divine revelation with a body of information which God communicated to men. Its stubborn defense of the position was partially due to its apologetic needs during those troubled years, and partially because it buttressed threatened ecclesiastical authority with a necessary unity of doctrine.

Revelation thus formulated characterized later Judaism and Christianity in both its Roman and Protestant branches with minor exceptions until the modern period. The words of the Bible were conceived as the *ipsissima verba* of God, a view still more or less prevailing in much of Roman Catholicism and in certain so-called fundamentalist branches of Protestantism.

Elsewhere in Christendom revelation has come to be considered in quite other terms. Let us note some prominent examples: Wilhelm Herrmann of Marburg said, "God is the content of revelation. All revelation is the self-revelation of God."¹ Karl Barth's "Word of God" which may be spoken to man as he reads the words of the Bible but is not itself the words of the Bible is also typical.² William Temple once

¹ Wilhelm Herrmann, *Der Begriff der Offenbarung* (1887); reprinted in *Offenbarung und Wunder* (Giessen, 1908), pp. 9 ff.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, part 2 (New York, 1956), pp. 473 ff.

said, "What is offered to man's apprehension in any specific revelation is not truth concerning God but the living God Himself."³ (It is interesting that almost all of these men claim this to be the conception of the Bible writers themselves.) Says John Baillie,

[When we] consider the Biblical view of revelation, it is abundantly clear that what is here regarded as revealed is a way of deliverance from an ultimate human exigency, a way of salvation . . . it is not primarily the knowledge of salvation that is spoken of as revealed but the salvation itself . . . The Bible does indeed speak of saving knowledge, but this is no mere knowledge *that*, and no mere knowledge *about*; it is knowledge *of*. It is what our epistemologists call knowledge by acquaintance as distinct from merely conceptual knowledge. God does not give us information by communication. He gives us Himself in communion.⁴

This God who gives Himself in communion rather than in propositions is revealed as Being-in-action, invading the field of human experience. The Bible is the story of God's acts, the record of what He has done. Emil Brunner says that "revelation is not a book or a doctrine; the revelation is God Himself in His self-manifestation within history. Revelation is something that happens . . ." ⁵ Rudolf Bultmann writes, to reveal ". . . does not designate a doctrine which enlightens but an action of God, that is, an event . . ." ⁶ Such events may also point to future events and thus fuller revelation.

II.

All this represents a departure from classical thinking on the subject. To our older theologians, God's action in history was seen as only "among other things" concerning which we are informed in the Scriptures. Well-known is the division by St. Thomas Aquinas of revelation into information concerning

³ William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London, 1953), p. 322.

⁴ John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation* (New York, 1956), pp. 46, 47.

⁵ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (London, 1947), p. 8.

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen, 1929), p. 22, note 5.

God's nature, His works, and the events to be expected at the end of earthly history.

Most of the writers to whom we have referred agree that the revelation of God in history is by no means simple. Involved are both God's activity and the interpretation of that activity. It does not necessarily follow that those who experience the events find in them God's revelation. The divine self-disclosure has as its necessary pre-condition the illumination of the receiving mind. Thus the words of Brunner, "The fact of the illumination is therefore an integral part of the process of revelation . . . Jesus Christ is not 'revelation' if He is not recognized by anyone as the Christ."⁷ History, according to C. H. Dodd, is "not merely occurrences but events which are occurrences plus meaning." He notes further that some of these events are such "that the meaning of what happened is of greater importance historically speaking than what happened."⁸ In much contemporary theology it is this capacity for seeing meaning in history that constitutes inspiration.

God's acts in history are accomplished through human agencies and thus are not only divine actions but at every point also the actions of men even though God may be their initiator. It is in meaningful response to God's action that man takes part in the revelatory encounter, and it is only because of this meaning-involvement that man is able to see God in history. Wheeler Robinson in his *Redemption and Revelation* says the prophets

. . . find in the migration of Bedouin tribes from Egypt the evidence of the redeeming activity of God. And they find in the deportation of the Israelites to Babylon the not-less-clear evidence of punitive activity of God vindicating His moral order. The events themselves are, of course, capable of other explanations. But this was theirs. And their explanation became a new event of far-reaching consequence for the subsequent history.⁹

⁷ Emil Brunner, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁸ C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel* (New York, 1938), pp. 104 ff.

⁹ Wheeler Robinson, *Redemption and Revelation* (London, 1942), pp. 182 ff.

History thus was not merely history but *Heilsgeschichte*, and the events clothed with meanings provided a living relation in history with the God who is beyond history.

Many of these writers see all of history as in some way the medium of revelation. Some (e.g., William Temple) see unusual interventions on God's part as providing an exceptional revelatory quality. Others (e.g., Paul Tillich) say that "there is no reality, thing, or event which cannot become the bearer"¹⁰ of revelation providing it enters into "revelatory constellations." Tillich speaks of persons as having the greatest possibility for revelatory significance.

Revelation as divine-human interpersonal encounter is bound to reject any simple and direct identification of the Christian revelation with the contents of the Bible. The Bible becomes rather the written witness to such a relation. Nor does it necessarily deny that the Holy Spirit was operative in the recording of that witness. Baillie suggests, for example, that "the same Holy Spirit who enlightened them unto their own salvation must have aided their efforts."¹¹ The question would seem to be, Aided them how much and in what fashion? The Roman Church, at least in the past, and the prevailing view in traditional Protestantism was that the aid was plenary, that is, to the point of inerrancy. The Roman Church could, of course, project plenary inspiration from the Bible on into the Church, in a manner denied Protestants.

Is the Bible equally everywhere the witness to divine-human interaction, and thus to revelation? It is held by some that various portions of the Bible must be judged according to the measure of their transparency to the living God. There may be many things in the Bible possessing little revelatory quality although it might seem artificial and unprofitable to list them since the referred-to transparency may differ from individual to individual.

None of the Scriptures will be the vehicle of revelation to

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago, 1951), pp. 118 ff.

¹¹ John Baillie, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

persons who are unable to hear God speaking through them. Such might read the Bible from cover to cover without ever encountering God's word. The Bible, indeed, supports this contention in such passages as, Spiritual things "are spiritually discerned"¹² and that the "preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness,"¹³ "none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand,"¹⁴ and Jesus' reference to those who had eyes and ears, yet could neither see nor hear.¹⁵ It must surely always be the duty of the Bible student to ask himself concerning any perplexing passage whether the defect may not be in himself rather than in the text.

III.

Granted that the conception of revelation discussed in the preceding paragraphs represents an important departure from the traditional views of the historical church, it remains to be asked whether it can justly claim to be that of the Bible. That the view is not wholly inconsonant with the Biblical record seems fairly evident. The centrality of God in Christ in the Bible is noted by Jesus Himself. Said He, "They are they which testify of me."¹⁶ The sermon at Nazareth and His conversation with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus all resolutely attest to this truth.

Revelation is indeed an encounter with the living God Himself. But, we make bold to ask, can this crucial emphasis upon the centrality of God in the revelation be maintained in the absence of certain propositions *about* God? Is it not possible that a too-radical denial of the propositional content of revelation runs the risk of negating the entire enterprise?

One example of the implications of such a position can be

¹² 1 Cor 2 : 14.

¹³ 1 Cor 1 : 18.

¹⁴ Dan 12 : 10.

¹⁵ Mk 8 : 18.

¹⁶ Jn 5 : 39.

found in contemporary ethics. It is precisely this viewpoint which has given rise to contextual relativism in ethics, an ethical stance that leaves the seeker for moral guidance little comfort in the face of tragic moral decision save divine forgiveness. Paul Lehmann, one of its key exponents, writes, "The fact is that propositional revelation and juridical expositions of a divine will are as obsolescent in Protestant theology as thorough-going anthropological relativism is in social ethics."¹⁷ Contextualist ethics constitutes a radical denial of the possibility of discovering precise, enduring and dependable answers to the question of what it is that I as a Christian am supposed to do in the world. It escapes the ethical nihilism of a thorough-going relativity only by insisting on the context of the church as its proper field of operation—a context, by the way, notoriously difficult to define. This position, underplaying as it does the continuities in the human predicament and purposes of God, seemingly fails to provide even the minimal moral guidance which every Christian has a right to seek from his faith.

The emphasis we are considering appears to be largely one of reaction against the sterile propositionalism of past Roman Catholic and Protestant views of revelation—views which were more often quests for authority and the buttressing of church apologetics than a seeking for the mind of God. As in most theologies of reaction, may it not be that its rejection of propositional revelation is also an extreme, undercutting viability in another direction? May it not be the case that while the person-to-person encounter with the living God constitutes the heart of the revelatory experience, such an encounter depends more than might be obvious upon propositions both for its communication and its confirmation? Is it ever possible to know God by acquaintance, apart from supporting constellations of propositions about Him? Moreover, pray tell, how does one proceed to introduce Him to

¹⁷ Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York, 1963), P. 248; see also n. 1.

individuals in ignorance without at least a minimal medium of symbolic or analogic conceptual formulae? Surely these constitute the bulk of what is meant by propositions about God.

Knowledge by acquaintance would seem to presuppose at every step knowing the *that* and the *about* even though the *of* finally transcends such knowledge in relative significance. The vertical dimension, to use Barth's well-known figure, presupposes the horizontal it transects. Would it ever be possible to check illusion and delusion without the logical tests of coherence and meaning provided only within the realm of propositional knowledge? As one young man once expressed his wrestling with the concept of God, "I am never quite sure whether I am merely shadow-boxing with half-forgotten memories of my old man." How does one test truth and distinguish it from its competitors apart from information belonging to the public domain? And finally, can an ethical response to a revelation devoid of propositional context survive as a force in a world of men half uprooted from their fathers' concrete convictions regarding moral excellence?

There is no doubt justification for a protest that the description of revelation to which the above comments are directed is a selective caricature rather than the total view of very many responsible modern thinkers. This we freely admit, however noting that the function of caricature is to throw into bold relief sub-surface tendencies not casually apparent. What we intend is to draw attention to what we insist is a hazardous tendency in contemporary theology. We take some comfort from the evidence that others have also sensed the peril. Surely this is the warning note sounded by the new quest for the historical Jesus as well as some current wistful glances at the Ten Commandments.

Lionel Thornton once wrote,

The Biblical writers wove the garments in which theophany is clothed apart from which it cannot be manifested, for without that external medium of presentation the revelation would simply

disappear from our ken. As surely as in a modern scientific romance "the invisible man" was no longer seen when he took off his clothes.¹⁸

May we submit that the invisible word was beheld only by becoming clothed in flesh. To this, Biblical faith bears ever abundant witness. To dismiss the *that* and the *about* in revelation is to run the tragic risk of losing the *of* as well.

¹⁸ Lionel Thornton, *Revelation in the Modern World* (London, 1950), p. 130.