

REVELATION: A CONTINUING PROBLEM

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During the years of the Second Vatican Council I was privileged to be a graduate student at the Catholic University of America. Better still, I was a student in the department of religious education at a time when Gerard Sloyan was gathering an interesting faculty, people who were deeply rooted in tradition and also open to new ways. Berard Marthaler was - and is - one of those teachers committed to both historical knowledge and pastoral practice. The appreciation that I received for history and education within the Catholic church has continued to nourish me even as I teach history of education courses in a secular university.

As a doctoral student I was allowed and encouraged to grapple with the big issues of a changing church. For a dissertation topic, I presumptuously chose to examine the rethinking of the idea of revelation and the implications of that change for catechetical practice. I am amazed that more than three decades later I still find the question provocative and nowhere near resolved. In this essay, I do not attempt to provide a resolution, but I do assert a few principles that I think would be helpful to progress in understanding.

At the beginning of the second half of my dissertation (published under the title Catechesis of Revelation), I said that while the educational implications could be read as a paragraph by paragraph deduction from the theology in the first half, the relation was not all one way. If I had been more candid I would have admitted that the relation was mainly from educational practice to theology. I might have defended such a method with the ancient formula that the rule of prayer is the rule of belief. That is, I wanted to

know what Christian doctrine looks like if one takes quite literally the liturgical "proclamation of God's word." Is it possible that in reading the Bible or teaching Christian doctrine we are dealing with God speaking (rather than with an object that is the result of what God said)? The British edition of my book is entitled God Still Speaks, a title that was not chosen by me, but which does capture the main thesis of the book.

I did not realize at the time that I was asking the question which Jean-Jacques Rousseau had addressed to the Archbishop of Paris. Rousseau's Emile, published in 1762, had gotten him into trouble, particularly for its view of revelation. While praising "natural revelation" (and Jesus as its perfect representative), Rousseau ridiculed the idea of a supernatural revelation as found in "the three religions of Europe." Rousseau had to flee for his life after the Paris parliament declared the book "subversive of religion, morals and decency, seditious, impious and sacrilegious, besides much else."ⁱⁱ

In response, Rousseau addressed his question to the Archbishop. Despite the question having an edge of arrogance and self-importance typical of Rousseau's writing, it still seems to me a good question. He asked: "Is it simple, is it natural that God should go in search of Moses to speak to Jean-Jacques Rousseau?"

The question deserves either an answer or a reformulation that would lead to wrestling with the meaning of God speaking to believers in the ordinary events of their lives. The answer which the Archbishop or Christian thinkers might have given to Rousseau is that God does speak to Jean-Jacques, a speaking which is the more powerful and more profound because God spoke to Moses. Of course, when one tries to give an answer of **Both/and** rather than **Either/or**, one must not just repeat the question. If two things are to form a unity, then one of them must be able to include the

other. Or the alternative possibility is that both of them are encompassed by a larger category.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is often called the first modern man for, among other things, his acute self-consciousness. The Christian church's educational efforts are confronted by the irrepressible demand of modernity: "I've gotta be me." A religion in which God speaks to me can pander to the narcissistic and solipsistic tendencies of the age. Nonetheless, that God still speaks to me as a member of a community which draws individuals out of complacent self-absorption to love of God and neighbor is at the heart of Christianity.

Eighteenth-century Christianity rejected Rousseau but it accepted the language of revelation that Rousseau (along with Voltaire, Butler, Hume, Locke and others) forged. Since the eighteenth century, we have been caught in a set of dichotomies that prevent an adequate formulating of the question. The contrasts include revelation and reason, natural and supernatural revelations, general and special revelations, Christian and Jewish revelations, propositional and personal revelations. Some of these contrasts could represent helpful distinctions. For that to be the case, however, there has to be a unity within which such distinctions lead to understanding. The linchpin, I believe, is the relation of past and present. Only if today you can hear God's voice can religion be a vital response and not just dead weight.

For a start, two things have to be said about the term "revelation." First, the choice of the term is somewhat puzzling and was perhaps unfortunate. Second, given its historical place, the elimination of the term is unlikely and probably undesirable. The term, in any case, deserves a thorough examination, something that does not generally

occur in Christian, Jewish and Muslim writing.

Revelation means to unveil what has been secret. The English word, like its other European counterparts, goes back to the Greek term for bringing something from the dark into the light. In Hellenistic philosophy, the term for truth means passing from darkness into light; it is a strongly visual metaphor. Thus, revelation is simply the process of reaching truth. Actually, the most direct English descendant of the Greek term for revelation is **A**pocalypse. The narrow and peculiar meaning of apocalypse in English is indicative of the problem inherent in **R**evelation. Although violent conflagration is not inherent to the meaning of revelation/apocalypse, the sudden exposure to the light of what has been kept secret is the root meaning of the term.

The entire Hebrew Bible (or Christian Old Testament) does not have a word corresponding to revelation/apocalypse. The governing metaphor is call and response rather than the manifesting of an object or a truth. Christians have tended to read their Old Testament as merely a preparation for the manifestation of a secret that had been hidden throughout the ages; revelation logically fits as the last step in the process. It should not be surprising that fundamentalist Christians consider the Book of Revelation to be the single key to unlocking history and predicting its end. I used to think that it was a curious ambiguity that someone named the last book of the New Testament **R**evelation while everyone knows it belongs to (at least) all the books of the Bible. I have come to see this curious ambiguity in the reverse: although it makes some sense to call the New Testament conclusion **A** the Book of Revelation, it distorts the Bible (and more) to extend that term to the entire divine-human encounter.

The transition from God speaking to a revelation from God had the advantage of

providing stability for the Christian religion. The complaint in classical times against Christianity was its instability - everything depended on the arbitrary activity of an all-powerful creator. The category of revelation meant that there was a something, an object to be believed rather than someone that you had to trust in. For many centuries, while the authority of the church was strong, this divine revelation provided light in the darkness.

In adopting revelation as central, Christianity prepared for its own undoing. When it confronted the rise of the empirical sciences it was fighting on the wrong terrain. Another word for revelation is enlightenment. Modern science proved to be better at revelation/enlightenment than Christianity is. Modern science was and is about the task of taking back the veil of darkness so that truth shines forth. Christianity could not compete at revelation/enlightenment because its strength lies elsewhere. One could say that Christianity is concerned with a healing knowledge, a kind of knowledge from which modern science explicitly distanced itself; or one could say that Christianity is ultimately not about knowledge but life.

Instead of radically rethinking the language of divine-creature relations, Christianity (and Judaism) accepted a compromise: the revelation of the natural world was given to the "natural" sciences; the knowledge/truth/revelation/enlightenment of God was given to the competing Christian and Jewish claims. An ambiguity in the term "natural" (which is still with us today) left open the possibility that the inner life or the human soul could be included in the religious domain. The settlement may have seemed logical, even gracious on the part of the natural sciences, but Christian and Jewish belief was excised from the "natural world."

The story need not have gone this way. And an understanding of the history is more important than ever as modern science is losing its grip on the claim to all truth. The rebellion against science today does not mean a return to the special revelations of Jews, Christians or Muslims. Part of the rebellion today is against the metaphor of revelation/enlightenment. For the survival of civilization it is crucial to articulate an alternative to enlightenment other than endarkenment. Darkness has always been a part of life, but as with other dichotomies mentioned above, juxtaposing light and dark is not enough. In Christian theology one sometimes sees the phrase "the hidden and revealed God"; the phrase points in the right direction but must be carried further.ⁱⁱ It should not be assumed that light/darkness is the whole expanse of knowledge. A God who is both hidden and revealed is still merely a God known by the visible and the visual metaphor. As the mystics of Western religion have known, God lies beyond both darkness and light.

Jewish and Christian traditions have affirmed that the whole of creation, including the complete human being, is the handiwork and partner of God. All of the senses and all of the actions of a person are included in the divine-human relation. How to include all the senses and to keep each in proper proportion is the problem. From the first sentence of Genesis onward, the Bible gives primacy to speaking and listening, with the tactile as the immediate context. The (nonverbal) visual is kept within this framework. And words concerned with visual metaphors (bringing secrets to light) have their place among the numerous languages in the Bible. More important than the revelation of secrets are promise, command, forgive and love. When ~~A~~ revelation~~s~~ is lifted from its setting, it tends to swallow or eliminate other important ways of speaking.

One strand of Western thought kept the aural/oral as the primary metaphor of understanding. Christian, Jewish and Muslim religions, sometimes in spite of their official positions, have kept alive the importance of human speaking and the possibility of divine speaking. The Bible is read aloud in the assembly; the Qu'ran is to be recited. The flow of words is spoken now.

The mystics in all three religions have always insisted that God speaks now. To the guarantors of orthodoxy this principle is likely to sound heretical. But far from rejecting the scriptural text, mystics have insisted that they revere the text by letting it speak here and now.ⁱⁱⁱ Mystics have generally distrusted visions. This fact is sometimes misinterpreted to mean that they distrusted the bodily; the opposite is the case; they distrusted sight as the primary road to reality in favor of listening and responding with the whole bodily self. When Thomas Aquinas writes that "anyone is far surer of what he hears from the infallible God than of what he sees with his own fallible reason," he is a good Aristotelian in connecting reason and seeing; he is a good Christian in connecting God and hearing.^{iv}

This struggle between the visual and the aural/oral may seem like a reprise of the discussion that pitted Hebrew and Greek mentalities. In that contrast we have often been encouraged to put aside philosophy and return to the Bible. But that strategy is ineffective and not really possible. The Christian must constantly return to the Old Testament as a source of inspiration and content for living a Christian life. But that should not be done with an anti-philosophical attitude that only guarantees an uncritical absorption of whatever philosophic ideas are at hand.

Jewish life was already being influenced by Hellenistic thought before the advent

of the common era. And the New Testament is profoundly shaped by the influence of Greek thought and language. The attempt to recover a pure Christianity uncontaminated by Greek philosophy risks making Christianity into an archeological specimen. The study of the Bible and Christian history have to be situated within the right framework of questioning if the answers are to make sense to anyone but a few scholars.

The term "revelation," when used alone, cannot do the job. Its unavoidable bias is toward bringing to light truths or objects previously unknown. That movement is part of Christian, Jewish and Muslim religions but only a relatively small part. And once the objects or truths have been brought to light, the process ends. They have then been revealed. How truths came to be known in the past becomes of secondary interest in the present. For the person in the present, the revelation claimed by religion exists as a set of assertions, open to visual inspection.

One route of response to the problem is a contrast between personal and propositional revelations. The term "propositional" has often been a rallying point for what revelation is not. But rejection of "propositional revelation" seems to remove what is obviously part of the Christian story, leaving the personal to vague or sentimental assertions. At least in human relations, propositions of some kind are a necessary means of transaction. The choice is not personal or propositional revelation; to the extent that there is personal revelation, propositions are a medium.

Before trying to put together personal and propositional revelation, the question should be whether revelation is the primary issue. The uneasiness associated with "propositions" is at some level a symptom of unease with the root idea of revelation.

Christianity need not do away with revelation (including a person who reveals and propositions that are revelatory) but revelation needs a context within which the unveiling of truth is not the first question.

I noted earlier that in the game of unveiling truth, Christianity, Judaism or Islam could not compete against modern science. Whether the truths that the religions claim to have are really true, the revealing of revelation in these religions is finished. Modern science, in contrast, did not have a revelation; it was a revealing. As Kant wrote, this is not an enlightened age, but it is an age that is becoming enlightened.^v

The conventional wisdom in the nineteenth century was that Christianity, Judaism and Islam were slowly disappearing; whatever rear-guard action might keep them alive their disappearance was just a matter of time. Who in the nineteenth century could have predicted that at the end of the twentieth century science would have its foundations rocked and religion would be on the rise throughout the world? That is not necessarily good news for Christianity but it is an astounding piece of news.

What could hardly have been imagined in previous millennia is the twentieth century's attitude toward the question of truth. There have always been people who challenged the truth. The Sophists were accused of selling out the truth to greed and ambition; ancient schools such as the Skeptics and the Cynics provide us with names for attitudes of doubt about truth; some medieval thinkers were accused of holding a double theory of truth which might suggest that they thought truth to be unimportant; Machiavelli and his successors in the practice of hardball politics have taken a casual attitude to truth. Nevertheless, these examples do not measure up to the depth and the breadth of the questioning of truth in this century.

At what seemed the height of science's success in unveiling the truth, the prophetic voice of Nietzsche was directed not at one truth or another but at truth itself. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions, worn out metaphors now impotent to stir the senses, coins which lost their faces and are considered now as metal rather than currency. Despite "Beating philosophy with a hammer," Nietzsche could not succeed in eliminating truth. Nonetheless, the twentieth century is pervaded with a distrust of "truth." The distrust ranges from the unschooled despair of individuals who cannot find a place in modern society to the convoluted theories of academic critics who use their power to try shaping society. The connecting link is the belief that what counts is the power to get heard in the market place.

Such a picture is liable to evoke a naive hope for a new Christian apologetic. But Christians have to acknowledge that the Christian religion is so much part of the problem that it cannot appoint itself the problem solver. It cannot be a way out unless it rethinks its own position at a radical level. Although this process has been taking place in recent decades, I think that the problem inherent in "revelation" has barely been touched. The distrust of truth in the twentieth century is a distrust of revelation; this is a crisis for Christian, Jewish and Muslim religions, and a bigger crisis for western science and civilization. As in every crisis, the possibility for a breakthrough to new vitality presents itself. I will outline six points that would be helpful for examining the problem of revelation.

1. Christian writers cannot get anywhere by assuming the existence of or investigating an object named "Christian revelation." This supposed object is a modern invention and a disastrous one. The question of a divine revelation is one that includes

both secular science and religious dimensions of life. Thus, there are Christian perspectives on revelation or Jewish expressions of revelation or Muslim articulation of revelation. Revelation in fact provides an umbrella for dialogue among the three Abrahamic religions. The problem of revelation cannot be dealt with outside of this conversation among religious peoples.

2. The conversation in which these religions discuss their "texts" presupposes a context in which God having spoken in the past continues to speak today (phrases such as "continuing revelation" or "progressive revelation" obscure rather than express this point). Revelation may be an aspect of that process; it can be a consequence of the process. But speaking is not simply a means to revelation.

3. The term "revelation" inevitably highlights propositions that are assertions of truth, propositions in the form "it is a fact that x is y": God is our father, Christ is savior, justification is by faith. In contrast, speaking takes a variety of forms. If we take the Bible (and Qu'ran) seriously, we hear not only assertions of fact but the languages of command, promise, forgiveness, comfort, care, love.^{vii}

These languages were largely overwhelmed by the revelation/enlightenment of modern science. But now these languages have been making a comeback. However wonderful the discoveries of science, human life is unendurable without words of compassion, care and love; human connections survive because of forgiveness in reference to the past and promises regarding the future.

When speaking with someone, I do not wish to be lied to; however, the assertion of truth(s) is usually not my main concern. Even when **Auth@s** understood to be the manifestation of what is real, a relational context is still needed. A premise of much of

contemporary thought is that the first thing to ask of a statement is not whether it is true or false but whether it is interesting. If the statement is true, that adds to the interest.

This principle can be easily abused but it is not a rejection of truth

4. The relation between speaking and revelation is a complex one, not to be resolved by a simple formula; for example, that speaking is the means and revelation is the end. A human being in speaking will to varying degrees provide a revelation of his or her self. Even when the speaking is intended to be revelatory of oneself, a human being is not transparent to itself and is therefore incapable of providing more than a glimpse into the truth of his or her self. God presumably does not have that problem of being hidden to God's self-knowledge; but if the interlocutor is a human, then God's speaking can at most provide a glimpse of truth to human understanding and even that presumes that the human is really listening.

5. A question more ultimate than revelation is the nature of mediation.^{viii} What relational logic is presupposed and affirmed by terms such as word, presence, grace, faith, revelation? There are two possibilities for mediation in the divine-human relation. In the first case, there is a third party, a "middleman," who brokers deals between "God and man." One part of history, one institution, one group of leaders, one book, one person, one code of practices can function as the mediator, the source of truth and healing for everyone (else). Outsiders view Christians, Jews and Muslims this way: as those who claim to be the chosen few. The idea of a Christian (Jewish, Muslim) revelation, wherever located, fixes this picture of something mediating between God and humanity.

The alternative meaning of mediation recognizes that all of a person's experience

is mediated by the material world, one's community, and one's own body. Religiously, the meaning of divine is mediated through everything that is. The only way to get rid of a middleman as mediator is to see everything as mediating. Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions are based on the belief that all of creation is the speaking of God. The Bible opens not with light and darkness but "God said...." Revelation (light from darkness) was an immediate effect of God's speaking and everything in creation continues to be a speaking of God.^{ix}

The claim that everything, every person, every event is God speaking may seem just a pious sentiment without specific content. It can be taken that way unless we listen for a voice that speaks in different languages, a voice that comes through more strongly in some places rather than others. To say God speaks in all events of life is not to reduce all events to a homogenized mumble. Each event has its own way and its own degree. One event can be helpfully interpretive of another; one community or one tradition can throw light on all history; one person or one book can have supreme importance in our lives for hearing a divine voice. "Today, if you will hear his voice...." The divine spirit is always blowing; it is the sails of human listening that may or may not be raised.

6. The Christian belief in Jesus, as Christ, a life that is interpretive of the divine-human relation, is compatible with and supportive of this logic of divine speaking. But I think that the standard formulas of Christian theology ("Jesus Christ is God's self-revelation") are likely to undermine this logic. Too often the equating of "Jesus Christ" with "God and man" has the effect of creating the great middleman, who is then neither divine nor human. "Jesus Christ" becomes the name of a storehouse of truths, the

revelation of God.

The living, dying and rising of Jesus of Nazareth is God speaking; for Christians that person and those activities are the most profound speaking, revelatory of God. But it is not intelligible to say that here one finds the revelation of God. Because of the limitation of human beings, one can only speak of a revelation of God, revelatory to whatever degree humans are capable of capturing a glimpse of divine truth. Humans remain mostly ignorant of God and creation, which is why they have to listen carefully to one another, to whatever wisdom has been gathered through past centuries and to a divine voice that still commands, promises, threatens, and comforts in the events of daily life.

i. Maurice Cranston, The Noble Savage (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.346.

ii. For example, David Tracy, The Hidden God: The Divine Other of Liberation, @Cross Currents, 46(Spring, 1996), pp. 5-16; William Placher, The Domestication of Transcendence (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1996); Paul Ricoeur, Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation, @in Essays on Biblical Interpretation, ed. Lewis Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p.73-118.

iii. Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken, 1961), pp.1-39.

iv. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 2a.2ae.4.8.ad 2.

v. Immanuel Kant, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals; What is Enlightenment? (New York: Macmillan, 1970(1794), p. 88.

vi. Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations as cited in Alasdair McIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990), p. 35.

vii. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Divine Disclosure (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

viii. I have explored this issue in Uniqueness: Problem or

Paradox in Christian and Jewish Traditions (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992).

ix. For one of the most persuasive descriptions of revelation in the context of creation and redemption, see Franz Rosenzweig, The Star of Redemption (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

Revelation, classically understood. noun. Concealed information, inaccessible to unaided human intelligence, requiring supernatural disclosure through oracular and literary media, and occurring long ago. There are three problems with the classic idea of revelation, expressible in three sets of questions.Â These last questions expose classical revelation's most serious problem--that it ever elevates the past above the present, that it presumes every present has no gift for novelty, that it implies truth was told in the past and that every present must simply offer the old retold.Â Or why not a continuing revelation, ever updatable, generation by generation? The matter was powerfully put by Boston's Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1836 essay, 'Nature:' Our age is retrospective. Some modern theologians want to allow for continued inspiration or updated revelation. At least one, Dewey Beegle, believes that some of the classic anthems of the church are inspired in the same way as Scripture. He has written, "Some of the great hymns are practically on a par with the Psalms, and one can be sure that if Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Augustus Toplady, and Reginald Heber had lived in the time of David and Solomon, and been no more inspired than they were in their own day, some of their hymns of praise to God would have." That strikes me as a peculiar approach to the problem of false prophecy. Can a school teach neophyte prophets how to use their "gift"? Can people be taught to give their dreams and visions "grounding and clarity"?