

## THE PROBLEM OF REVELATION

Regarding the basic meaning of the term "revelation" there is a fair degree of consensus in our time. The term may be defined either phenomenologically or theologically. Phenomenologically, it signifies a sudden or unexpected disclosure of a deeply meaningful truth or reality. Revelation usually connotes that the new awareness or knowledge comes upon one as a gift, that it answers a real need, and that it effects a wonderful transformation in the recipient.

Theologically, revelation signifies an action of God by which he makes known himself or something he intends to manifest. The theological notion of revelation presupposes, or at least implies, that God exists and has dealings with the world. Divine revelation, according to Christian theologians, is a gift; it answers a real need—delivery from darkness and death—and makes a profound difference, inasmuch as it "justifies" or "saves" those who would otherwise perish. Christians believe that God's revealing action undergirds the faith of ancient Israel and that of the Christian Church. The Bible, which expresses this historical faith, is accordingly viewed as a primary document of revelation.

Notwithstanding these basic agreements there is no consensus among Christian or Catholic theologians as to the forms in which revelation comes, where it is principally found, or how it is related to faith. In the present paper I shall seek to classify and evaluate some of the most prominent modern theories.<sup>1</sup>

My own concern is with the logical schematization of positions, but in order to give concreteness and actuality to the analysis I shall take the risk of naming some authors as representatives of the various points of view. In so doing I am not seeking to pass judgment on any author, and I gladly recognize that most authors are too complex in their thinking to fit neatly into one or another of my pigeon holes.

<sup>1</sup>This paper may therefore be read as a reflective supplement to my *Revelation Theology: A History* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), which sets forth the main lines of the historical development.

## A. OBJECTIVIST OR INTELLECTUALIST THEORIES

In some theologies of revelation the accent is placed primarily on the revealed datum as a divinely given truth that can be conceptually known, formulated in human language and passed on by speech and writing. These objectivist or intellectualist view of revelation may be divided into two subcategories according to whether revelation is thought to be given primarily in propositions or in historical events.

*1. Propositional Theories*

The propositional theory of revelation is so familiar to most Catholics that a very brief description will suffice. In this theory human knowledge is sharply divided into two kinds—revealed and acquired. Revealed knowledge is a gift; it descends from on high, and man receives it passively. Acquired knowledge is achieved through an exercise of man's natural powers; in an ascending movement he actively lays hold of the truth.<sup>2</sup>

Revelation according to this theory is initially given to certain privileged recipients, to whom the word of God comes directly. This occurs in two distinct ways: prophetic and apostolic. Prophets receive the word of God as an interior gift. Concepts and judgments are directly infused into their minds from on high. The apostles initially receive the word of God directly from Jesus Christ and then, through further inspirations of the Holy Spirit, penetrate more deeply the meaning of Christ's message. Revelation, having been received by the prophets and apostles, is then handed down in Scripture and tradition, which constitute the written and oral vehicles of the word of God. Such, in outline, is the view of revelation set forth by Francis Suarez.<sup>3</sup> With some qualifications this view may be said to correspond to the statements of the Council of Trent (*DS* 1501) and of the first Vatican Council (*DS* 3004, 3006, 3011).

Although still maintained by many theologians whose ideas were formed before Vatican Council II, the propositional theory of revela-

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, Part IV, chap. 1.

<sup>3</sup>For a succinct summary of the views of Suarez see R. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1966), pp. 182-5.

tion has been under steadily increasing pressure from exegetes and theologians. Biblical scholarship has reached a virtual consensus that the prophets, the apostles, and Jesus himself did not arrive at their insights solely through miraculously infused knowledge, but that they relied heavily on experience and personal efforts. The Holy Spirit assisted the prophets, but did not prevent them from being conditioned by their historical situation.

In its treatment of mediate revelation, the propositional theory neglects the religious dimension of the assent of faith. As many Thomistic theologians have objected, faith goes out, in the first instance, not to the content of abstract statements but to God as a concrete and personal reality grasped with the help of such statements.<sup>4</sup> For revelation to have the saving value attributed to it by the biblical and Christian tradition, it must make a profound impact on the believer as subject; it must make God and his saving activity concretely present. In the propositional theory, mediate revelation appears not as the self-disclosure of the living God but as a collection of human statements about God. The biblical term "word of God" is distorted by being understood too intellectualistically, too abstractly, and too statically. The healing and transforming dimension of God's word is treated as if it were separable from revelation itself.

## 2. *Event-Theories*

In an attempt to get away from the excessively verbal and abstract presentation of revelation in the propositional theory, an increasing number of theologians in the 1940's and 1950's turned to the facts of history, and especially the history of Israel recounted in the Bible, as the primary locus of revelation. Revelation according to this theory consists primarily in God's action in history and secondarily in the divinely guaranteed record and interpretation of that action. This basic position, previously set forth by William Temple, George Ernest Wright, and others, is today most stoutly defended by Wolfhart Pannenberg and a small circle of theologians associated with him.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2; cf. J. Walgrave, *Unfolding Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), pp. 98-9, 348-58, 372-6.

<sup>5</sup>The positions of Temple, Wright, and Pannenberg are sketched in Dulles,

Pannenberg and his associates contend that there is no direct self-communication of God either through infused ideas or through divinely given words. God makes himself known indirectly through the mighty acts by which he exhibits his lordship over history. Pannenberg insists on the self-evidencing character of the historical events as known by the recipient of revelation—events that can be reconstructed by objective scholarship. Historical revelation, he asserts, is “no secret or mysterious happening” but is “open to anyone who has eyes to see.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast to many exponents of “salvation history” Pannenberg asserts that the words of Scripture and tradition add nothing to the inherent intelligibility of the events themselves, provided these are viewed in their full historical context. Ultimately, he points out, the full context must include not only the immediate significance of the events but also their extended causal efficacy within the framework of universal history.

While this equation of revelation with historical events has attracted considerable interest, it has not won a wide following in either Protestant or Catholic circles. In Protestantism opposition has come from conservative evangelicals, who reject a critical approach to the Bible, and from Lutherans and Calvinists, who insist on the primacy of faith over reason. Barthians, Bultmannians, and post-Bultmannians find that Pannenberg neglects the efficacy of the proclaimed word.

Catholics have been attracted by the efforts of Pannenberg to overcome the dualism between faith and reason, but they have been bothered by Pannenberg's naturalistic conception of reason. Omitting other criticisms, we may here concentrate on two. First, the theory of historiography behind Pannenberg's work, especially his early work, overlooks the subjective input of the historian in the selection and interpretation of the data. Pannenberg seems to presuppose a historian whose point of view is entirely determined by the events themselves as perceived in their historical context. A neutral or unconcerned historian, as Pannenberg's critics remark, could never find revelation in history.<sup>7</sup>

*Revelation Theology: A History*, pp. 111-3, 122-3, 128-31.

<sup>6</sup>W. Pannenberg and others, *Revelation as History* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 135.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. J. P. Mackey, *The Problems of Religious Faith* (Dublin: Helicon, 1972), pp. 186-9. Mackey's own position will be examined in the concluding section of this paper.

This brings us to the second criticism. Pannenberg considers that man's natural powers, without any special divine assistance, suffice for the appropriation of revelation. Revelation, he contends, can be recognized by those who have no faith. In his insistence that reason can cogently demonstrate the fact of revelation, Pannenberg exposes himself to the suspicion of accepting a rationalism akin to that of the nineteenth-century German Catholic, Georg Hermes.<sup>8</sup> This position, according to some scholars, is contrary to the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. *Event-plus-Word Theories*

Dissatisfied with the theories that would place revelation simply in words or simply in historical events, some theologians have attempted a combination of the two preceding theories. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, J. B. Franzelin, relying on the earlier work of John de Lugo,<sup>10</sup> wrote that "God actually speaks not by words alone but by the whole complex of his words and deeds."<sup>11</sup> The word of God in its totality thus consists of both formal words (written or spoken) and significant actions. The words announce the truth; the deeds authenticate the words as divine and revealed.

In our own century this theory has been developed with rather more emphasis on the value of deeds as inherently significant. Edward Schillebeeckx holds that the word of God in the Old Testament consists in God's salutary actions in history as "clarified by the word of the prophet, in whom this action and dialogue have found a clear response." So in the New Testament, according to Schillebeeckx, the words of Jesus and of the apostles complement the human actions of Jesus (which may be called words in a wider sense, since they communicate his mind and spirit) and thus constitute them as revelation.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>L. Monden, *Faith: Can Man Still Believe?* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1970), pp. 102-4.

<sup>9</sup>See G. O'Collins, *Foundations of Theology* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1971), pp. 120-1, 126-8.

<sup>10</sup>For a summary of De Lugo's position see Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, pp. 185-7.

<sup>11</sup>J. B. Franzelin, *Tractatus de divina traditione et scriptura*, 4th ed. (Rome, 1896), p. 626, cited by Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, p. 196.

<sup>12</sup>E. Schillebeeckx, "Revelation-in-Reality and Revelation-in-Word," in



René Latourelle adopts a similar position, except that he seems to distinguish more sharply between word and deed. He holds that the works of God in salvation history are not revelation apart from the divinely given word of testimony that accompanies them. God's word comes first to the prophet in the form of an interior revelation enabling the prophet to understand the historical event. Then the prophet by speech or writing presents the event and its meaning as objects of divine testimony. Events such as the Exodus and the Cross, apart from the divine or prophetic word, would not be revelation, but, accompanied by such a word, would become revelation.<sup>13</sup>

The basic position of these authors can claim some support from Vatican II's *Dei verbum*, which declares:

This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.<sup>14</sup>

This compromise position escapes some of the difficulties involved in each of the two preceding theories taken alone. The deed-element lends concreteness and credibility to what would otherwise be an excessively abstract and authoritarian view of revelation; the word-element provides a means of overcoming the ambiguity of the events of salvation history. But as long as word and deed are seen as two parallel, disconnected, and complementary forms of revelation, the theory remains unsatisfactory. If the events themselves convey no clear significance, how can an authoritative declaration make them clear? Must we not say that in the last analysis revelation is communicated only by the words? We seem, then, to be ultimately thrown back on an infused knowledge for which only the prophet can vouch. This is to incur the risks and improbabilities associated with the propositional theory of revelation as noted above.

*Revelation and Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), pp. 33-41.

<sup>13</sup>Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, pp. 315-20, 348-51.

<sup>14</sup>*Dei verbum*, art. 2; cited from W. M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966), p. 112.

## B. PERSONALIST AND EXISTENTIAL THEORIES

The traditional theories of revelation thus far described may be characterized as objectivist. They define revelation almost entirely from the point of view of God rather than that of the believing subject. The revealed datum is constituted by God alone, who then miraculously transmits it to his human messengers. The necessity of faith is explained not in terms of its intrinsic relationship to man's needs, but rather in terms of man's extrinsic obligation to accept whatever it may please God to assert.

In the twentieth century, both Protestants and Catholics have turned sharply against the objectivist view of revelation. The new trend was remotely prepared for by Luther, to whom faith came as delivery from a deep existential anxiety. Some nineteenth-century German philosophers, such as Kant, Fichte, and Feuerbach, emphasized the contribution of the knowing subject to the content of his knowledge. Influenced by idealism, some German theologians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Schleiermacher, Otto, Troeltsch) began to look upon revelation as necessarily correlative with man's innate religious sensibilities. Others (Kierkegaard, Barth), while vigorously denying that man has any antecedent capacity for revelation, strongly asserted that revelation, when it comes, has a profound salutary impact, destroying man's self-reliance and giving him confident reliance on God. All these tendencies have in common a new interest in the believer as subject. They may be called "subjectivist" or, to use a term less tainted with pejorative connotations, personalist.<sup>15</sup>

### *1. Kerygmatic Theology*

Protestants such as Barth and Bultmann, followed in part by Catholics such as Jungmann and Lakner, identified revelation very closely with the kerygma—that is to say, with the proclamation of God's mighty deeds in Jesus Christ. This kerygmatic theology had a strongly existential quality because it saw the kerygma as intimately related to

<sup>15</sup>In a hitherto unpublished paper, "Towards a Subjectual Theology of Revelation," Thomas F. O'Meara suggests the term "subjectual." This term, which I prefer to avoid as a neologism, conveys very accurately what I mean in these pages by "personalist."

human experience and to the demands of Christian living.

In Bultmann the existential dimension becomes particularly strong because revelation is identified with the event that occurs here and now when the message of the Cross and Resurrection is preached. This message summons man to decision and authentic existence today; it opens man's eyes to his own status before God and enables him to actualize the authentic possibilities of his existence. Bultmann is emphatic in holding that revelation consists only in this transforming impact; it does not rest upon scientifically authenticated historical information or involve abstract doctrinal truth.

Bultmann's position, as is well known, has been attacked from two sides. On the one hand, traditionally oriented theologians, such as Barth, Cullmann, and most Catholic critics, complain that he arbitrarily reduces revelation to what contemporary man finds existentially meaningful. On the other hand, personalistic and humanistic theologians tend to find Bultmann's idea of the kerygma too authoritarian and too dogmatic. Karl Jaspers, for instance, protests that Bultmann's insistence on justification by faith alone makes his position "altogether orthodox and illiberal, despite his liberalism as a man and as a historian."<sup>16</sup>

Bultmann's contemporary disciples generally mitigate their master's sharp antithesis between faith and history, but they retain his concern for the existential impact of the message. There is no revelation, they insist, unless God's word encounters me today in an event that transforms my personal existence.<sup>17</sup> In bringing out this dynamic

<sup>16</sup>K. Jaspers and R. Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity* (New York: Noonday Press, 1950), p. 50. Gabriel Moran makes the charge that Bultmann, far from selling out to contemporary existentialism, leaves the word God "perched high above and unalloyed by human experience, thought, and activity," *The Present Revelation* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 32.

<sup>17</sup>Schubert Ogden defends this view in an unpublished paper "On Revelation" presented to the American Theological Society in April, 1973. His paper revolves principally about the problem whether Christian revelation is necessary for a man to attain authentic existence—a question he seeks to answer by means of distinctions which I do not find fully satisfying. In the less anthropocentric and more theocentric approach which I intend to develop later in this article the difficult question of the "necessity" of Christian revelation becomes less crucial. The primary purpose of revelation is to manifest the divine goodness rather than to fill human needs.



aspect of Christian revelation, the Bultmannians have made an invaluable contribution, much appreciated by some Catholics.

## 2. Karl Rahner

In twentieth-century Catholic theology there has been a concern for the subjective dimension parallel to that just noted in Protestantism. At the turn of the century the Modernists rebelled against the arid abstractions of scholastic theology and sought, as had Schleiermacher, to connect revelation with religious experience. The Idealism of Kant and Fichte made a profound impression on Catholic philosophers such as Maurice Blondel and Joseph Maréchal, who introduced a "Copernican revolution" into Catholic thinking. In the theology of Karl Rahner, Maréchal's transcendental Thomism joins hands with an existential philosophy derived, like Bultmann's, from Heidegger.

Rahner's theology of revelation,<sup>18</sup> which has profoundly influenced almost the whole Catholic theological scene, is rooted in a vision of man as a subject who constantly reaches out toward an infinite that evades his grasp. Man's exigency for the divine, combined with his incapacity to seize it, provides a point of insertion for revelation. The call of grace renders man positively restless for an experience of communion with God. To satisfy this call to eternal life, God makes himself present to every man; he offers himself in love to those who freely open themselves to the leading of grace.

According to Rahner, therefore, grace is offered to every human person. Grace, moreover, is not a merely objective or ontic reality. As the presence of God himself to the human spirit, grace has a profound transforming impact on man's outlook (his "horizon"). For this reason grace itself may in some sense be called "revelation." Revelation, for Rahner, does not consist primarily in external historical phenomena or in reports concerning another world. It is not given first of all in words, concepts, and propositions, but rather in a change of horizon. The shift

<sup>18</sup>For a sketch of Rahner's theology of revelation, with some references to his own writings, see Dulles, *Revelation Theology: A History*, pp. 158-62. A fuller treatment may be found in Francis M. Tyrrell, *Man: Believer and Unbeliever* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1974), especially pp. 170-279. Rahner's theology of revelation has been studied at length in Ronald R. Burke, "Rahner and Revelation" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1973).

of horizon effected by divine grace is, in Rahner's vocabulary, transcendental revelation.

Unlike Bultmann, Rahner does not deny that revelation is also given in historical events and propositional teaching. But these determinate forms of revelation are in his theology secondary. They result from the transcendental revelation constituted by grace. Once grace has been given and accepted into the inner life of the person, it inevitably tends to exteriorize itself in the believer's ideas, statements, and behavior. The reflexive thematization of transcendental revelation results in what Rahner calls "predicamental revelation."

The record of the progressive exteriorization of revelation in human history speaks significantly to the believer in so far as that history symbolically expresses fundamentally the same life of grace that is occurring within each individual. The person and career of Jesus constitute, for Rahner, the supreme expression of God's loving gift of himself and of creation's loving response. Since Christ is the unsurpassable point of meeting between God and man, between grace and nature, he is the high point both of transcendental and of predicamental revelation. He represents the asymptotic limit of the union with God to which all men are called. To discover Christ as the focus of salvation history is therefore to achieve a new level of self-understanding.

Rahner's theology of revelation, because it makes ample provision for existential and experiential factors, has had enormous influence on other Catholic theologians. For purposes of illustration we may here discuss three contemporary authors who owe a great debt to Rahner but who have not hesitated to move out in their own directions.

### *3. Piet Fransen*

Of the three, Piet Fransen remains closest to Rahner himself. Fundamental to all his writing on revelation is the basic Rahnerian thesis that grace inevitably produces an impact upon the recipient's consciousness. This is so because grace affects man as a spiritual being, present to himself. Even though we do not have a clear and distinct concept of what transpires in the depth of our own spirit, we do have an experience of grace. In Fransen's words, inner experience is "the focal point where revelation occurs concretely."<sup>19</sup> Having touched our human con-

<sup>19</sup>P. Fransen, "Divine Revelation: Source of Man's Faith," in P. Surlis, ed.,

sciousness at the very depths, God influences our life and speech in their totality. Grace gradually emerges into awareness as we open ourselves to it, respond to it, and communicate with others who have been similarly touched. The inner movement of the Holy Spirit forms and supports the community of those who have been transformed by that Spirit. Revelation, then, has a community dimension. We identify the experience of grace through the mediation of language, which is a communal patrimony. The Church as a community forges a language and ritual that symbolically express the spiritual experience of its members. Only gradually, with many false starts, does man correctly identify the source and direction of the movements of grace. "Man is a being who discovers the truth about himself and the world he is living in through a lifelong, slow, painful, and arduous effort of personal reflections and mutual confrontation in the concrete community in which he lives."<sup>20</sup> In the whole process of communitarian expression, God retains the initiative. His grace, and thus his revelation, are continuously given.

As Fransen himself notes, this processive, experiential understanding of revelation blurs many of the neat classical distinctions. It is no longer easy to specify what is and what is not an authentic expression of revelation. The distinction between Christianity as the true religion and other religions as less than true becomes problematical. No sharp line can be drawn between constitutive revelation and continuing tradition, for the process of transmission is isomorphic with that of revelation itself. Finally, the event of revelation blends imperceptibly into the ordinary experience of grace. In some sense, the individual and corporate experience of grace under the guidance of the Holy Spirit may be called a true revelation of God.

It would be unfair to compare Fransen's few scattered essays on the subject of revelation with the achievement of Rahner, who has written far more voluminously on the subject from a much more developed philosophical basis. Fransen's main contribution to our subject has been to confirm, from the standpoint of the theology of grace, what Rahner has said about "transcendental revelation."

*Faith: Its Structure and Meaning* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972), p. 24.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 48.

#### 4. *Gregory Baum*

Two North American Catholics, Gregory Baum and Gabriel Moran, would seem to merit special attention in the present review because their work, recent and highly original, has not as yet been thoroughly presented and assessed by others.

Gregory Baum's theology of revelation is heavily indebted to Rahner, though he himself refers more frequently to Blondel as having effected the shift away from the objectivist, extrinsicist, and authoritarian view of revelation previously prevalent in Catholic theology. Rahner, according to Baum, stands within the Blondelian tradition. Referring to a similar remark of Rahner, Baum asserts that "what is revealed in Jesus Christ is that the God-for-us is the God in himself."<sup>21</sup> For Rahner, this signified that the triune God who exists in himself is identical with the power of grace transforming the human consciousness. Rahner would say that it is possible to translate any statement about the God of revelation into a statement that refers to the phenomena of human life and consciousness. Baum seems to hold that before such statements can be revelationally meaningful they *must* be so translated, and indeed reduced without remainder to statements about man's self-awareness. Divine revelation, he states, is God's gracious entry into the process of man's becoming fully human. Thus the beliefs of the Church can be adequately stated by describing the new self-consciousness created by faith. "To believe in God as Father, Word, and Spirit means to be initiated into the self-awareness—in the sense explained above—that we are people with a destiny, that we are listeners, and that we are alive beyond the power of death."<sup>22</sup>

Baum recognizes a certain difference between himself and transcendental Thomists, such as Rahner and Lonergan. The transcendental Thomists, he asserts, hold that God is not directly known as an object, but is implicitly co-known and co-intended in man's knowledge of himself and of his world. Baum says that these authors fail to solve the problem for they revert to a certain objectification of God not in

<sup>21</sup>G. Baum, *Faith and Doctrine* (Paramus, N.J.: Newman Press, 1969), p. 27, note 2; cf. K. Rahner, "Theology and Anthropology," in T. P. Burke, ed., *The Word in History* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966), pp. 1-23. Baum returns to this theme in *Man Becoming* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), pp. 182-3.

<sup>22</sup>*Faith and Doctrine*, p. 28.

harmony with the contemporary experience of reality.

Because of the change in the understanding of man and his world, it has become impossible to think of God as a being over against and above human history. God is not objective: God cannot become an object of man's mind, of which he can acquire some knowledge, however analogous, and about which he is able to make true statements. God is not a supreme being, of which man can speak with any kind of spectator knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Baum, rejecting the notion of God as an objective reality, gives the impression of looking upon God only as a dimension of transcendence and creativity.

Having taken a firm stance against traditional theism, Baum seeks to translate the biblical and traditional affirmations about God into statements about human life as it is experienced today. Revelation, he maintains, is about ourselves, and is not about God except in so far as God is present in human consciousness. The divine message preached by the Church "makes explicit as thematized knowledge the divine self-communication that is gratuitously offered in human life itself."<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere Baum declares that revelation, far from being a communication of guaranteed information from a place outside history, is rather "the clarification and specification, through the experience of Israel and above all the person of Jesus Christ, of God's redemptive self-communication operative, in a hidden way, in the whole of human history."<sup>25</sup>

The doctrines of the Church, according to Baum, do not draw their truth-value from their correspondence with a sacred reality outside of man.<sup>26</sup> Rather, they have truth in so far as they serve as symbols. Symbol for Baum is not, as for the classical philosophers, simply a representation or reminder of some reality distinct from itself. Nor is a

<sup>23</sup>G. Baum, *New Horizon* (Paramus, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1972), pp. 56-7. Cf. *Man Becoming*, pp. 170-80, for a fuller and more qualified statement.

<sup>24</sup>*Man Becoming*, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup>G. Baum, "Ministry in the Church," *The Ecumenist* 11, No. 5 (July-August, 1973), 76.

<sup>26</sup>Foreword to A. M. Greeley, *The New Agenda* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 23.



symbol, as some Modernists may have imagined, a mere means of warming the heart, eliciting emotions, and arousing religious sentiments.<sup>27</sup> Rather, the symbols of the imagination enable man to sift, select, and organize his impressions of reality; they are co-constitutive of man's experience of the world. They play an active and creative role in the transformation of human life. Religious symbols, in particular, focus on the ultimate meaning of life.

The Christian symbols, according to Baum, disclose the mysterious divine presence in human life and thus transform man's relationship to himself and his world.<sup>28</sup> "As the Church enters a new age or a new culture, the symbols she has inherited give rise to new religious experiences, raise questions in regard to her new environment, produce new insights . . ." <sup>29</sup> The Church will continue to proclaim the ancient symbols, but will reinterpret them according to the needs and possibilities of the changing times. The mutable formulas of Christian teaching express the meaning the symbols have for a particular age and culture.

For Baum, as for Bultmann and Tillich, the value of the biblical symbols is not historical but existential. The central biblical happenings—the exodus-covenant experience of Israel and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—may or may not give accurate factual information. What counts, however, is the symbolic power of the stories—their power to effect a creative transformation in human life.

In this connection Baum speaks frequently of the Good News or the Christian message—terms by which he apparently means the revelatory significance of the story concerning Jesus Christ. "The Good News is that God is present to human life. The Good News is that God has redemptively involved himself in human history. . . . God is present to history in the growth and reconciliation of man."<sup>30</sup>

The Christian message, Baum concedes, implies some facts. We are told, for instance, that Jesus was born, that he suffered, died and rose for us. The facts associated with the Christian message, since they function as symbols, serve to mediate divine revelation, but by themselves

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>28</sup>*Man Becoming*, pp. 95-6.

<sup>29</sup>Foreword to *The New Agenda*, p. 32.

<sup>30</sup>*Man Becoming*, pp. 35-6.

they are not revelation.<sup>31</sup>

The Christian message, as understood by Baum, has a certain in-built flexibility. Baum speaks in this connection of the refocusing of the gospel. The Church does not simply repeat the primitive message in its original form. With the help of the Holy Spirit, the Church seeks always to grasp the word of God in new ways appropriate to the present moment.<sup>32</sup> Obedient to God's self-communication today, the Church views the entire testimony of the apostles in a new light. The new focus enables us in our time to speak about the Good News in a language drawn from contemporary experience. This would be, according to Baum, ordinary secular language.<sup>33</sup>

Baum has vigorously set forth in idiomatic English a clear and consistent position that carries to a logical conclusion some of the cardinal principles of Blondel and Rahner. He convincingly exhibits the necessary relationship between the content of revelation and the experience of grace. Baum is correct in insisting that revelation cannot consist of miscellaneous information about another world, or of inconsequential past historical facts taken simply as information. But he goes beyond Rahner when he affirms that revelation cannot tell us anything we did not already know, at least in an implicit way, through our own experience of grace. Rahner, I believe, would insist that the revelation includes the signs of God's powerful and merciful love actually given in past history as interpreted by persons of prophetic stature. Christian revelation, as I understand it, involves affirmations that could not be spun out of a purely personal experience of grace; it asserts, for instance, that the Son of God was Jesus of Nazareth.

With regard to Baum's anthropocentrism I have similar reservations. That God freely communicates himself to man and is in some sense immanent in human consciousness I fully concede. But when Baum collapses the objective reality of God into the existential, I tend to demur. The whole biblical and Christian tradition, with its life of prayer and worship, is inseparable from the conviction that God is a

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>32</sup>G. Baum, *The Credibility of the Church Today* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), pp. 164-5.

<sup>33</sup>*Man Becoming*, p. 169.

distinct and independent subject and that there is a genuine duality in the God-man relationship. This conviction seems to me too basic to be dismissed with a vague reference to its incompatibility with "the contemporary experience of reality."<sup>34</sup> For many of our contemporaries, the transcendent does not seem to be reducible to the immanent; God the revealer is regarded as a personal subject distinct from man and the world.

##### 5. *Gabriel Moran*

The American theologian, Gabriel Moran, is in some ways similar to Baum. Like him, Moran is concerned with the human, the contemporary, the experiential, and the ecumenical in the widest sense of that word. Like Baum, again, Moran is a radical thinker, in the sense that he does not hesitate to move to new outposts without waiting for the majority of his colleagues to express their agreement. His work is always stimulating, even when one does not fully agree with what he says.

Moran distinguishes three stages in the history of the concept of revelation: prerational, rational, and ecumenical.<sup>35</sup> In the prerational stage, characteristic of primitive religion, revelation is equated with a set of oracles from the gods prescribing certain rites, beliefs, and codes of behavior. Revelation is seen as provoking deep emotional responses such as wonder, adoration, ecstasy, terror and submission. Belief in revelation, understood in this crudely superstitious way, can easily inhibit human growth.

The rational state, according to Moran, corresponds in great part to biblical faith as interpreted by the Christian churches. Revelation is seen as a set of truths communicated by the one God to the people of his choice. This revelation, authenticated by prophecy and miracle, is handed down in the Christian tradition.

In the present stage of world history, when a major encounter is occurring among the various religions and ideologies, the authoritarianism of traditional Christianity is experienced as a liability. The theory

<sup>34</sup>*New Horizon*, p. 56.

<sup>35</sup>G. Moran, *Design for Religion* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), pp. 38-40.

of revelation is therefore passing into the third stage. In this ecumenical stage, anticipated by certain passages in the Bible and by certain Christian authors, revelation is seen as transcending all churches and all religions. Revelation is no longer equated with the teaching of any ecclesiastical body.

Unlike the practitioners of traditional theology, Moran is not content to validate his assertions by appealing to sacred or canonical sources. He pursues a different method which he describes as intermediate between theology as traditionally understood and phenomenology—less committed than the former, more involved than the latter.<sup>36</sup>

Moran's positive views concerning the nature of revelation are difficult to summarize. The word "revelation," in his usage, refers to a relationship of mutual interaction, not to a collection of revealed data. Normally, he says, revelation means an interpersonal exchange in which each of the participants grows by communion with the other and with the whole. While revelation, as a process, is one and universal, there are a multiplicity of concrete, particular expressions of it. Christianity may be reckoned a particular way of expressing revelation, but there is no specifically Christian revelation. Christianity is a limited expression of the one universal revelation.<sup>37</sup>

Revelation, for Moran, is not a set of firm answers, but is the very structure of the open-ended inquiry that underlies all faith.<sup>38</sup> Christianity has a special role to play in addressing the great questions raised by human experience. Without presuming to dictate any answers, Christianity must adopt the humble role of cooperating in the interpretation of human experience.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike Leslie Dewart, Moran affirms that Christianity has a message as well as a mission.<sup>40</sup> But its message, he adds, is its own, not God's. Christianity has every right to proclaim its own specific doctrines, but it must not do so in an arrogant way. In the past doctrine has often been used to dictate to experience rather than to interpret it.

<sup>36</sup>Moran, *The Present Revelation*, pp. 14-8.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 38-40.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>39</sup>*Design for Religion*, p. 48.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42.

For Moran it is clear that experience is the ultimate norm of truth. Experience, as he uses the term, is a much wider concept than empirical evidence.<sup>41</sup> It is a relational reality; it occurs in mutuality, and thus is open to revelation. Revelation occurs with special intensity when we experience the nearness of someone who cares, and thereby gives depth and meaning to our present.<sup>42</sup> In certain deep revelatory moments, which Abraham Maslow calls "peak experiences," we keenly perceive the presence of the divine. The divine in religion refers to the religious experience of living people, not to a reality beyond the experience of men today.<sup>43</sup> The primary meaning of revelation must therefore be a present, social, and practical reality—one available not only to Christians but to all mankind.<sup>44</sup>

As a Christian, Moran has to concern himself with the traditional claims that Jesus is the fullness of revelation. He regards the person of Jesus as central in a way in which an oral or written text could never be. Jesus is the man who brings mediation to a personal peak and who demonstrates in his life that the divine is mediated in personal communion everywhere.<sup>45</sup> Jesus was eminently receptive to the divine—so much so that his receptivity may be claimed as qualitatively unique. The uniqueness of Christianity, for Moran, has nothing exclusive about it. In fact it implies that all reality is revelational.<sup>46</sup>

Moran's theory of revelation may perhaps be summed up in terms of four options: he chooses the universal over the particular, experience over authority, the personal over the doctrinal, and the present over the historical (past or future). Where Rahner would seek by distinctions to save both members of these four antinomies, Moran decisively opts for one member in each of the four pairs. His theory of revelation comes out very much as Rahner's would if Rahner were to choose what he calls "transcendental" at the expense of "predicamental" revelation.

It is by no means clear that Moran has improved on Rahner's

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

<sup>42</sup>*The Present Revelation*, p. 130.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 299, 311.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 266-9.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 275.



essential position. In his first option, taking the stand that revelation is universal, Moran infers that therefore it is not particular. There is only one revelation, he declares, though there are many expressions of it. On reading this, one inevitably asks: what could revelation be apart from its concrete expressions? If revelation really occurs, how can it fail to be particular? If there were no such thing as a specific revelation, the general term could refer only to an abstraction or a hypothesis. It is therefore difficult to agree with Moran's denial that there is any such thing as Christian revelation. The term seems to be almost necessary to designate that self-disclosure of God which, according to Christians, was first imparted to the disciples who gathered about Jesus of Nazareth and which transformed their lives.

The term "Christian revelation" is not in itself exclusive or intolerant. A Christian can acknowledge the existence of "Mosaic revelation," or even of "Islamic revelation." There is no impossibility in God revealing himself at different times in different ways, as Hebrews 1:1 asserts that he has in fact done. The alleged superiority of God's revelation in Christ is not an automatic consequence that follows from belief in Christianity as a particular revelation. On the contrary, this belief rather suggests that there may be other revelations. If there is intolerance in Christianity, this comes not from its affirmation that there is a Christian revelation but from its Christological doctrine. Some theologians have sought, and are still seeking, to combine a high Christology with a recognition that God reveals himself to non-Christians and that Christianity has much to learn from the other religions and ideologies.

Moran's rejection of the notion of Christian revelation is closely connected with his second option—the primacy of experience over authority. He polemicizes against a "divinized authority image" as though the special respect due to any particular persons, documents, or offices could produce only repression, domination, and paternalism; as though it tended, by its very nature, to inhibit personal development and insight. Experience, Moran contends, must be the final arbiter of truth. Every statement and document must in the end be tested against experience.

Although fully justified in his dislike of authoritarianism, Moran seems to be unduly allergic to authority. Undoubtedly we cannot accept the insights of others unless they have some resonance with our

own experience; but this does not prevent us from having a high regard for their insights. In many areas, including religion, the testimony of experts and that of a trusted community may be more reliable than the limited experience of the individual, even in dialogue with those with whom he has personal contact.

My observations about Moran's treatment of doctrine—in what I have called his third option—would follow along the same lines. For him revelation occurs in personal communion rather than in teaching. The role of the prophet is to perceive and point to that personal relationship with God to which all men are called. But prophetic insight, according to Moran, cannot be taught; it cannot be conveyed by doctrine. The prophet has no way of communicating revelations to others; he can only awaken them to the revelatory character of their own lives.

It would be a mistake to dismiss the important points Moran is here making, but he is in danger of exaggerating. As if to discredit it the more effectively, he portrays doctrine as a codified set of frozen formulas rather than as a vehicle of personal communication. Doctrinal formulas, I would concede, could be inhibitive if imposed without due allowance for their original sociocultural context, but, interpreted within that framework, they may become intensely communicative. The words of Isaiah, Jesus and Paul have not lost their revelatory power. Because his own life has been enriched, the man of God can enrich the lives of others. He can challenge them to rise to the level of his own insights. If the words of the prophet are not treated with reverence, their challenge will not be heard, and the revelatory significance may be missed.

Moran assures us that if Buddha, Jeremiah, or Jesus were alive today, they would be saying, "Don't trust my pronouncements but listen to what your flesh and blood whisper."<sup>47</sup> I find no evidence for this conjecture. Prophets in the biblical tradition are very insistent that their words should be believed, for they feel a passionate commitment to communicate faithfully the insights that God has evoked for them.<sup>48</sup> The Church shares this commitment.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>48</sup>For the notion of "passionate commitment" see Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper Torchbook ed., 1964), chap. 10, pp. 299-334; also Donald A. Milavec, "A Theology of Christian Revelation Based upon Michael

Finally, Moran insists on the primacy of the present over the past and the future. "Either the present is everything," he writes, "or it is nothing."<sup>49</sup> True, he wants to include in the present a living memory of the past, but the past as it was holds little interest for him. He seems to discount the possibility that a more accurate knowledge of what really happened might be of great value in throwing light on present problems.

Moran's preoccupation with the present, moreover, causes him to devalue the element of hope in the Christian life. "Christian theology's fleeting interest in the existential moment must become a full-fledged commitment to the present as the fullness of time."<sup>50</sup> But what if the present is an unfulfilled time, a mere token of a more abundant future? On this point I prefer to adhere to the traditional Christian emphasis on eschatological hope.

In my criticisms of Moran I do not wish to imply that his reflections on present, personal experience are of small value to the theology of revelation. There is no doubt in my mind that he has made a major contribution which, if taken seriously, could rectify some of the imbalances of traditional theology. But I am unhappy about Moran's tendency to dichotomize: to pit the universal against the particular, the experiential against the authoritative, the personal against the doctrinal, and the present against the past and future. I should prefer to strive for a synthesis in which all these elements are maintained in a dynamic equilibrium.

### C. MEDIATING THEORIES

The objectivist theories place all the initiative on the side of God, who is regarded as delivering a formulated message or at least as expressing himself with full clarity by miraculous deeds that could bear only a single interpretation. Faith is represented as a merely passive reception of a previously determinate "word of God." The personalist or "subjectual" theories, on the other hand, attribute revelation, as a

Polanyi's *Interpretation of Scientific Discovery*" (unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Calif., 1974).

<sup>49</sup>*The Present Revelation*, p. 125.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 131.

formulated message, to the dynamism of the human spirit embodying its own inner faith-experience in an appropriate symbolic form.

Between these two opposed tendencies there is a large stream of contemporary theology, with which I align myself, that situates revelation and faith in a dialogical interaction, wherein the believer responds creatively to the self-manifestation of God, not simply in the depths of his own subjectivity, but in the cosmos and history. According to this third school of thought, revelation is neither an external datum that imposes itself on any sane and honest observer—as in the first theory—nor a free expression of one's own subjectivity—as in the second—but a disciplined response that unfolds under the aegis of faith within a community and a tradition. Among the many exponents of this point of view, I shall draw particularly in the following pages upon the work of Alan Richardson, Heinz Robert Schlette, Louis Monden, and James P. Mackey. Several of these authors have been powerfully influenced by Rahner, but they differ from the authors we have just considered by giving greater emphasis to Rahner's concept of predicamental revelation.

The process of revelation and faith, as depicted by these authors, may be broken down into a series of stages that are logically separable even if not always temporally successive. It may help to think in terms of the following four stages.

### *1. The Fundamental Option of Faith*

Man experiences his empirical world, including his own existence, as radically contingent and problematical. He may avoid facing the problem of existence, simply turning his attention to day-to-day questions. Or he may, like Jean-Paul Sartre, look upon existence as absurd and offensive to the human mind. Or finally, he may look upon it as an invitation to acknowledge a gracious Creative Will enabling contingent things to be.<sup>51</sup> If I see myself and my empirical world as a gift, I shall spontaneously turn to God as the giver.<sup>52</sup> Existence will appear to me as a grace and as a communication addressed to me by God. This sense of the living, creative presence of God will evoke in me the response of

<sup>51</sup>Mackey, *The Problems of Religious Faith*, p. 86.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 91.

faith and will establish an atmosphere of trust such that the universe becomes perceptible as language.<sup>53</sup>

For the ancient Greeks and Israelites alike, the world of nature was diaphanous.<sup>54</sup> It was an "epiphany" in the sense that it reflected the divine. It did not, however, speak determinately enough of God so that one could assign it a clear meaning. The faith elicited by the cosmic epiphany, taken alone, characteristically expresses itself in fanciful myths referring to vaguely apprehended archetypal realities.<sup>55</sup> In the undetermined openness of this incipient faith there is as yet no unequivocal revelation of the divine. For this reason one may hesitate to employ the term "general revelation." Rather, one may speak of a primordial faith or a general openness to revelation that arises from the common experience of mankind, influenced, no doubt, by the all-pervasive attraction of grace.

## 2. Historical Epiphany

The primordial faith already described may well dispose a man to find additional disclosures of God in the unique, unpredictable, and unrepeatable events of history. In many religions the fuller manifestation of the divine is associated with certain prophetic personalities and with certain striking episodes in their biography. The biblical religions are based on the conviction that God has specially disclosed himself in a series of interconnected historical events that, taken together, manifest him as Lord of history. More particularly, these events showed forth God's qualities as loving, faithful, patient, forgiving, and supremely powerful.

If these events are considered merely in their external features, they do not stringently impose the interpretation that faith gives them. They may be seen, and were in fact seen, by persons outside the Israelite tradition as merely natural or fortuitous.<sup>56</sup> But for the Israelites, who were involved in these events, and who perceived them against the

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>54</sup> H. R. Schlette, *Epiphany as History* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1969), pp. 83-92.

<sup>55</sup> Monden, *Faith: Can Man Still Believe?* pp. 92-8.

<sup>56</sup> Schlette, *Epiphany as History*, pp. 47-50.



background of an antecedent communal faith, these events appeared as epiphanies—that is, as manifestations of God calling for a faith-interpretation. The events did not clearly contain their own interpretation, but had the obscurity and polyvalence characteristic of symbols. Symbols are indeed the only vehicle by which the absolute and the ultimate can make itself present in realities that are provisional and relative.<sup>57</sup>

These symbolic events in which God is believed to give special signs of his presence may be called, in the terminology of I. T. Ramsey, “cosmic disclosures,” for they point to a new fullness of meaning in the whole of existence. Ramsey sees such disclosures as “an interaction of insight and self-donation, of option and optics, of discernment and commitment.”<sup>58</sup>

Yet the cosmic disclosure to which this language refers is not a whim of the imagination; it is not a subjectively colored glass through which we view the world arbitrarily. It is an experience which is true to reality and provides us with a new insight into it. That is why religious language does not remain an individual, poetical code-language but becomes, at least for all who share the same meaningful existential option, a *communicable cipher of experience*, a language which may be used in dialogue, whose words and expressions may be critically tested for their referential value and put together into meaningful contexts.<sup>59</sup>

The history of Israel, as interpreted by the biblical tradition, hinges on a series of crucial historical epiphanies, such as the call of Abraham, the Exodus, Sinai, the Babylonian Captivity, the Return from Exile, and the fate of Jesus. These events fall into a certain pattern giving them a cumulative significance that they would not have in isolation. They contain successive disclosures that are progressively more concentrated and sublime. The resurrection of Jesus becomes meaningful and credible when seen against the Old Testament background of God's mighty deeds for his people.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup>Monden, *Faith: Can Man Still Believe?* pp. 88, 154.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49; cf. I. T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (New York: Macmillan paperback ed., 1963).

<sup>59</sup>Monden, *Faith: Can Man Still Believe?* p. 50.

<sup>60</sup>See A. Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), pp. 213-41.

### 3. Historical Faith

The historical epiphanies are not, of themselves, fully constituted revelation. Like poetic symbols, they call for discernment. They are meaningful not to everyone in general but to those who are inwardly disposed to penetrate their profound significance.<sup>61</sup> To affirm that an epiphany has a certain definite significance is an act of explicit faith.

In the Israelite religion, the interpretation of the "signs of the times" was especially the task of the prophets. Already schooled in faith according to the traditions of their people, these specially gifted interpreters were deeply concerned with the practical demands contained in their own message. Discernment and commitment were for them inseparable. Interpreting the signs given in the concrete events of their day, they continually recalled Israel to "its costly vocation to serve the righteousness of God."<sup>62</sup>

The prophets were men of faith. They spoke out of their own faith and called others to share their vision. They became the primary spokesmen of Israel as a community of faith. The faith of Israel gradually embodied itself in succinct confessional formulas expressing the prophetic interpretation of history. For example, the young Israelite was taught to declare, "The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand" (Dt 6:21; cf. 26:8).

Analogously, the Christian Church was founded upon the interpretation given to the person and career of Jesus by the leaders of the apostolic community. The Christian neophyte entering the community was required to confess his faith that, through the power of God, Jesus has risen from the dead.

The kind of interpreted history that forms the basis of Jewish and Christian religion has little resemblance to history as a modern academic discipline. Yet there is no complete severance between faith and history. The faith-commitment of the historian gives him the antecedent expectations and concerns that enable him to rediscover and appreciate certain events of the past that might not appear credible or meaningful to the non-believing historian. Conversely, the past heroes of

<sup>61</sup>Schlette, *Epiphany as History*, pp. 31-2.

<sup>62</sup>Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane*, p. 226.

faith, whose memory is enshrined in the pages of history, transmit something of their vision and insight to those who live today, and thus profoundly alter the experienced world of posterity.<sup>63</sup>

#### 4. *Historical Revelation*

Following Mackey, we may profitably distinguish between the language of faith and that of revelation. The language of faith self-consciously expresses a free commitment. It contains, explicitly or implicitly, the statement, "I believe." The language of revelation speaks rather from God's side. It employs terms such as "the word of God," "God says." Revelation language, as Mackey observes, is not prior but subsequent to faith; that is to say, it presupposes an interpretation by a believing subject of the events in which God is thought to be disclosed.<sup>64</sup> At most revelation may be said to exist seminally or virtually prior to faith, somewhat as color without an eye to see it, or sound without an ear to hear it, may be said to have virtual existence. Revelation is formally constituted as such by an eye or ear of faith that tunes in to what God is communicating in a particular situation.

The priority of faith to revelation is persuasively argued by Schlette and Mackey. According to Schlette, "every intervention on God's part requires interpretation and exposition by man, an interpretation which itself presents revelation as such for the first time."<sup>65</sup> Mackey independently comes to the same conclusion. "There are no truths," he asserts, "complete in conceptual content and verbal expression . . . which are direct and literal revelations of the divine mind itself."<sup>66</sup>

This does not mean that the language of revelation is unwarranted or that it is mere metaphor. Faith includes the conviction that its own

<sup>63</sup>The great man of faith, Mackey remarks, "will interpret God, man and man's world anew, and will give man and his world a unique and irreversible orientation. He will change the religious faith of his fellow men." *The Problems of Religious Faith*, p. 189.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 191-3. Mackey calls the language of faith "first-order language"; that of revelation, "second-order language."

<sup>65</sup>Schlette, *Epiphany as History*, pp. 16-7.

<sup>66</sup>Mackey, *The Problems of Religious Faith*, p. 206.

interpretation of the clues, although not universally evident, is far from arbitrary. The data taken in their full context, according to the believer, cannot be adequately understood apart from faith. Thus faith issues spontaneously into the language of revelation. The prophet, as spokesman of faith, dares to herald his message in the name of God.

Revelation, then, is the divine component of faith. It is what enables faith to be faith. We can never take it for granted that faith is fully itself. In its existential condition it is always mingled with unfaith. To the extent that it purifies itself it achieves a fuller grasp of revelation.

Revelation never exists in some chemically pure state. It is always revelation to some particular believer or believing community. Faith, and consequently the perception of revelation, is always conditioned to some extent by the particular situation in which it comes to birth. What is revealed to one individual or people may not be revealed, or even revealable, to another.

For the correct interpretation of the Bible and the creeds it is important to bear in mind the active intervention of faith in the constitution of the revealed datum. In some sense, of course, every historical account is an interpretation; every so-called fact is an interpretation of evidence. The biblical accounts, however, are interpretative in the special sense that they present the past from the point of view of a particular confessional stance and frequently reconstruct the external events by the help of an imagination nourished by religious faith. In the Bible fact and interpretation are so interwoven that in many cases the reported fact is no longer knowable apart from the interpretation faith has given to it. We cannot accurately reconstruct what a neutral observer would have been able to perceive of the Exodus or of the resurrection of Jesus.

Because of the literary conventions of the biblical tradition, the intervention of faith in the shaping of the narratives is rarely explicit. This presents a difficulty for some modern readers, accustomed to a different style of history. They are tempted either to a fundamentalistic acceptance or to an incredulous rejection of the statements of the Bible and the creeds. For many modern readers it is necessary to make explicit the faith-component in the biblical language; that is, to retranslate it back into the language of faith, so that it clearly appears as a passion-

ately committed interpretation.

In setting forth this mediating theory of revelation, which I presently accept as the most fruitful of the various approaches, I have tried to preserve and build upon the strong points in all the other theories—those which see revelation in terms of propositional utterances, historical events, or personal experiences. From the propositional theories, this position takes over the idea that the inspired prophets and apostles play a cardinal role in the ongoing life of any biblical faith-community. Thanks to Scripture and tradition, in which their insights are transmitted, these religious founders continue to exercise a decisive influence on the whole future development of such a faith-community. Israelite or Christian existence demands participation in the faith-vision originally expressed by the prophets and apostles. The historical and social dimensions of revelation, brought into high relief in the propositional theories, are not sacrificed in the mediating theories.

Like the event theories, the mediating theories hold that revelation never has been a matter of merely propositional knowledge, nor did it first arise in the form of written or spoken words. Rather, the primordial form of revelation is the faith-experience of privileged persons in privileged situations. Historical revelation has occurred through a series of remarkable events, each involving a special presence of the revealing God through signs and symbols.

Finally, the mediating theories are indebted to the personalist position for a better insight into the involvement of the human subject in the revelatory process. Revelation cannot occur except where individuals and communities passionately search for the realities that faith affirms. The signs of God's presence in the world do not speak except to those who are actively in quest of the God who is communicating himself. Personalism has taught us that we cannot speak of revelation without attending to the believing subject in whom revelation initially comes to birth, and apart from whom it cannot subsist.

The personalist theories, however, are themselves in need of criticism. Taken alone, they tend to isolate the individual in the privacy of his own experience. They allow too little place for mutual learning and mutual correction within the community of faith. More particularly, they belittle the public structures of the community of faith: the prophetic tradition, the apostolic witness, the Bible and the Church, with



its authoritative commission to preach and to teach. Minimizing the dependence of contemporary man upon past religious experience, some personalistic theologians run the risk of dissolving everything into the incandescence of the passing instant.

The Church plays a more decisive role in relation to revelation in the third theory than in either of the other two. In the objectivist theories the Church's role is simply to transmit unchanged the patrimony of God's past words and deeds. In the subject-centered theories, the Church can do little but exhort men to reflect on the revelatory character of their own lives. In the mediating theories, the Church, as the community of Christian faith, is seen as both the matrix and the product of the very special revelation which it accepts and proclaims—the unsurpassable self-revelation of God in his own Son. That revelation, which first achieved its existence on the lips of the believing community, continually challenges the Church to purify and perfect its faith and its confession.

As Monden points out, "it is only through the prophetic witness of a community that the meaningful language of the message is able to resound, making its invitation heard as history continues its course."<sup>67</sup> In and through the Church, the message of revelation, passed down from generation to generation, unceasingly actualizes itself. It gives rise to a dynamic tradition in which the meaning of past events is translated so as to speak effectively to the present. Thanks to this process every moment is capable of bringing forth a fresh encounter with the living God.

With regard to the theme of this convention, the specificity of revelation, I have given my reasons for holding that revelation is always concrete and particular. Transcendental revelation never exists except in dialectical combination with its predicamental counterpart. "Revelation in general" is only an abstraction. Christian revelation is not Mosaic revelation; still less is it Islamic or Hindu revelation.

We should even be cautious, I suggest, in speaking of Christian revelation as though it were a single undifferentiated block. What God reveals in Christ is not precisely the same for any two individuals, still less for any two confessional traditions. In the last analysis my faith is ineluctably my own; yours is yours. Revelation as given to me—and as

<sup>67</sup>Monden, *Faith: Can Man Still Believe?* p. 97.

received by me—differs in some measure from revelation as given to anyone else. The Catholic apprehension of God's epiphany in Jesus differs somewhat, for better or for worse, from the Protestant or the Orthodox. Christian revelation, therefore, is a family name that expresses an analogous unity in the faith of those who try to shape their lives according to the gospel. As God continues to manifest himself through Jesus, in the concrete circumstances of changing situations, Christians may deepen and enlarge their religious understanding and progress toward "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph 4:13) which is the goal of our hopes and aspirations.

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