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Protestant and Roman Views of Revelation¹

I. Protestant Views

DONALD EVANS

ARCHBISHOP WILLIAM TEMPLE, in two oft-quoted passages, says this about revelation:

There is no such thing as revealed truth. There are truths of revelation, that is to say, propositions which express the results of correct thinking concerning revelation; but they are not themselves directly revealed.²

I do not believe in any creed, but I use certain creeds to express, to conserve, and to deepen my belief in God. What is offered to man's apprehension in any specific Revelation is not truth concerning God but the living God Himself.³

Twentieth-century Protestant⁴ theologians who differ on many important issues are in general agreement concerning Temple's main claim and its crucial corollary: God reveals himself, not propositions concerning himself, and so the Bible is not infallible. Otto,⁵ Tillich,⁶ Farmer,⁷ Farrer,⁸ and Barth⁹ would all say "Amen" to this, although they go on to propound theories of revelation which differ radically from each other.

Fundamentalist Protestants are appalled by this rejection of propositional revelation in general and scriptural inerrancy in particular. They tend to ignore the striking differences among those who reject propositional revelation and scriptural inerrancy, dismissing them all as "liberals" or "modernists" whose basic assumption undermines every aspect of their thought. Roman Catholic theologians presumably still hold that scripture is inerrant and that it was dictated by the Holy Spirit, and that the propositions in papal dogmas are infallible. Yet they obviously do not dismiss contemporary Protestant theology; our ecumenical dialogues reveal a keen interest, which

1. The two following papers were read at an Ecumenical Dialogue in Montreal in 1963.

2. William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1934), p. 317.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

4. The word *Protestant* is here used to include Anglicans. This is a matter of convenience; there is no other convenient label for Christians who are neither Roman Catholic nor Orthodox.

5. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1950).

6. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1953), Vol. I; *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957).

7. H. H. Farmer, *The World and God* (London: Nisbet, 1935); *Revelation and Religion* (London: Nisbet, 1954). See also his article in *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), Vol. 1, pp. 3-31.

8. Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Glasgow: Dacre, 1948).

9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, eng. tr., 1957), Vol. 2, Pt. 1, ch. 5; cf. Vol. 1, Pt. 1 (1936).

is reciprocated from the Protestant side. So I ask two questions: "Which of the many strands in contemporary Protestant theory concerning revelation could be woven harmoniously into contemporary Roman Catholic theology, and which are too alien?" "Are there any insights in contemporary Roman Catholic discussions of revelation which could be accepted and adapted by Protestants so as to move towards an eventual rapprochement?" I hope that Father Martucci will answer these questions. Meanwhile, my task is to try to give a sketch of contemporary Protestant thought concerning revelation, especially its rejection of propositional revelation, and its view of the inspiration, uniqueness, and authority of the Bible. This is not a peripheral issue for ecumenical dialogue; it is central. In my opinion, the crucial division between Roman and Protestant today does not reside in conflicting claims of tradition and scripture, infallible Pope versus infallible Book. Most Protestants (at any rate most of us in ecumenical dialogue with Rome) no longer claim infallibility for the Bible, and no longer reject tradition as a vehicle of revelation; but we do reject propositional revelation. This is the crucial difference. Is it an insuperable difference? I do not know. I should be surprised if Roman Catholic theology has been totally uninfluenced by the post-Kantian philosophy and Hebraic biblical theology which have so profoundly affected Protestantism. If we probe the question of revelation deeply, we may find, not an *impasse*, but the first glimpses of a possible agreement. One basis for hope is the extreme fluidity and confusion of Protestant thought at the moment. Perhaps we shall welcome help from a Roman Catholic who can sort out our thoughts and establish us on a less obscure intellectual path!

I shall now distinguish six different views of revelation, referring to one or more theologians to represent each view. The classification will be crude and oversimplified. Indeed, there is a danger of misrepresenting particular theologians by placing them in one pigeon-hole when they actually fly in and out of many. Nevertheless, I hope that my schematic method, though unscholarly, will provide a basis for useful discussion.

1. *Experientialism*. I use this label to refer to the twentieth-century progeny of Schleiermacher, for example Otto and the early C. H. Dodd.¹⁰ Experientialism (which some people might call "pietism" or "liberalism") is unfashionable today; but it is still influential. For experientialism, revelation comes through religious experience, and religious experience is primarily a matter of intense feelings: a feeling of absolute dependence or numinous awe which is often mingled with a feeling of moral fervour. God reveals himself to men by evoking religious experiences; men then try to express or describe these experiences, as best they can, in words. The Bible is inspired, not because *words* were inspired, but because *men* were inspired: the men of religious genius who wrote the Bible, or whom the Bible deals with. If an experientialist claims uniqueness or authority for the Bible, it will be on the ground that the Bible culminates in the religious experience of Jesus, which

10. C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (London: Nisbet, 1928).

establishes the norm for all other religious experience, and which evokes similar experiences in others. The Bible is the inspiring expression of inspired experiences. There are revelatory experiences of God, but no revealed propositions concerning God, because there are no propositions at all concerning God in himself or by himself. Men cannot describe God, as they can describe an elephant or a mountain. Utterances which look like descriptions of God are actually expressions of states of mind in which men are aware of God. One cannot indicate what one means by "God" except by referring to the feelings which God evokes.

2. *Existentialism*. I use this label to refer to such thinkers as Tillich and Bultmann,¹¹ who refuse to call anything "revelation" unless it provides an answer to man's existential questions: for Tillich, questions of ultimate concern, of meaningfulness versus meaninglessness; for Bultmann, questions of human existence, of human self-understanding. Tillich and Bultmann differ in important ways, of course. Tillich sometimes equates faith with the state of ultimate concern itself, in abstraction from any particular focus of revelation; thus man's posing of an existential question is itself revelatory, whether or not the question receives a specific answer. Bultmann, on the contrary, finds revelation only in demythologized biblical answers to his existential questions. Both theologians, however, agree in making a sharp distinction between factual questions and existential questions. No answer to a factual question—that is, no proposition concerning matters of fact which are in principle open to scientific or historical investigation—can by itself provide an answer to an existential question. There are no revealed propositions, because propositions have to do with factual questions whereas revelation has to do with existential questions, questions of personal meaningfulness. All references to God in the Bible are to be interpreted in relation to existential questions; so the uniqueness and authority and inspiration of the Bible are to be found in its power to evoke normative answers to existential questions. Answers need to be *evoked* rather than merely provided; for the acceptance of revelation is not a neutral assent to a brute fact, but a self-involving commitment to a new focus of ultimate concern or to a new self-understanding. One cannot indicate what one means by God without referring to the commitment in which one comes to know Him.

3. *Personalism*. I use this label to refer to Martin Buber¹² and to such Christian theologians as John Baillie,¹³ H. H. Farmer, and Emil Brunner.¹⁴ All these thinkers locate revelation in a personal "I-Thou" encounter between God and man. Here too there is a sharp contrast between alleged propositional revelation concerning God and a genuine knowledge of God, though for the personalist this genuine knowledge does not come primarily in experientialist feelings or existentialist concern, but rather in a personal I-Thou attitude. The divine presence comes as a gift and a demand, a divine

11. Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1955), ch. xii.

12. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937).

13. John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939).

14. Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1944).

self-involvement with man which evokes a human self-involvement with God. All talk *about* God is, at best, a by-product of prayer addressed *to* God in response to his indescribable personal presence. That is, God reveals himself, not propositions concerning himself. Any such propositions are attempts to formulate what is implicit in the attitude and act of prayer. One cannot indicate what one means by "God" without referring to the thanksgiving and trust and self-offering in which one responds to God.

Note that, as in the case of experientialism and existentialism, the Bible is revelatory in a twofold way: it tells me about revelatory personal encounters of men with God, and it can be the medium or catalyst of a similar personal encounter for me, the reader.

4. *Expressionism*. I use this word to refer to a central idea which I have drawn from William Temple's discussion of revelation (and also from my own research into the biblical concepts of holiness and glory).¹⁵ According to expressionism, God reveals himself in expressive actions. God reveals himself in what he does, in natural and historical events which express his inner nature—his love and his glory. Divine self-revelation is analogous to that form of human self-revelation which consists of expressive actions: for example, a moral act of self-sacrificing love, or an artistic act of musical improvisation. The appropriate response to expressive actions, whether these be divine or human, is what Temple calls "appreciation." Thus revelation (divine or human) requires three elements: the inner nature or state to be revealed, the observable behaviour which is the vehicle of revelation, and the appreciative response of a recipient. Such an analogy between divine and human self-revelation implies that revelation does not consist of propositions, descriptions, or reports. The self-revealing agent does not describe himself in propositions; nor does the appreciative response consist of propositions, but rather of feelings and attitudes and intuitions (and, sometimes, actions). Moreover, no propositional description of the agent is equivalent to the self-revealing expressive action itself. A music critic's account of a concert is no substitute for the concert itself; similarly, a theological proposition concerning God's self-revelation in Christ is no substitute for the self-revelation itself, the particular and expressive event. Propositions concerning God are bound to be inadequate. This is so, not because such propositions are incomplete descriptions, analogous to an incomplete description of a mountain or a galaxy, but because *no* description *could* be equivalent to the expressive actions in which God reveals himself. Indeed, one cannot indicate what one means by "God" without referring to (a) observable events which are God's self-expressive actions and (b) appreciative responses in men.

For Temple, the uniqueness and authority of the Bible do not consist in its being, itself, revelation; rather, the Bible is a record of revelation, a record of specially revelatory events, a record of God's expressive actions in human history. Temple, like the experientialist, existentialist, and personalist, rejects

15. Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-involvement* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), ch. 5. [See our Book Review Section—Ed.]

the traditional view of the Bible as inspired *words*; but his emphasis is not so much on inspired *men* as on inspired *events*. The appreciative response of men to these events is also inspired; but the response is subject to the defects of men, and the verbal account of event and response is not equivalent to the revelation itself.

Temple wrote before "salvation-history" biblical theology had become dominant in Protestant thought. This biblical theology, however, does not seem to me to contain any additional basic insights except those which I shall indicate when I refer to Farrer and Barth.

5. *Imagism*. I use this ugly label to refer to a beautiful theory which is expounded by Austin Farrer¹⁶ and which seems to me to be the basic assumption underlying contemporary Protestant interest in theological word-books.

According to Farrer, God reveals himself by supernaturally empowering men to *actions* as he inspires them to interpret these actions in terms of particular *images*. These God-given images are not mental pictures, but key words or phrases which build up rich associations of meaning in the Bible as a whole: Kingdom of God, Son of Man, covenant-loyalty, redemption, glory, etc. The actions of Jesus and the early Christians would not have constituted divine revelation if there were not divinely authorized images with which Jesus and the early Christians interpreted their actions. The verbal imagery is a necessary element in revelation. Farrer insists that it is no use trying to find a non-verbal core of revelation by stripping away the biblical images. Experientialists find religious feelings when they do this; existentialists find a state of ultimate concern; personalists find an elusive Divine-human encounter; expressionists find historical events in which God, somehow, acted; but for Farrer, the substance of revelation vanishes. Divine self-revelation cannot be abstracted from the imagery with which God interprets his actions—that is, his actions in human agents.

Farrer explicitly rejects the traditional theory that God dictated the Bible as a set of revelatory propositions. He replaces this theory by one which seems to involve a virtually inerrant inspiration of verbal imagery: "inerrant" in the sense that, if we interpret the actions of Jesus and the early Church and ourselves in terms of this imagery, and live accordingly, we shall live in *right relation with God*. One cannot indicate what one means by "God" without referring to human actions which receive their form and intention from particular images.¹⁷

6. *Verbal Instrumentalism*. I use this label to refer to some central ideas in the theory of revelation which Karl Barth expounded in his early *Church Dogmatics*. Here the dangers of oversimplification will be most evident, but perhaps any simplification of Barth will be welcome!

16. *The Glass of Vision*, especially chapters 1, 3, and 4; cf. the article by I. M. Crombie in *Faith and Logic* (ed. B. Mitchell, London: Allen and Unwin, 1957). A somewhat similar theory is to be found in E. Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), chs. 11–14.

17. Farrer does maintain that natural theology provides a limited meaning for the word *God*, but I am not considering this aspect of his theology here.

For Barth, the Bible is not itself God's revelation. The Bible is *adopted* by God as an *instrument* of revelation, a vehicle for God's own Word, which is a verbal *action*. The two key words here are "adopted" and "action." (i) As for *adoption*, Barth sees a close analogy between God's choice or adoption of words (for example, words in the Bible or words in a sermon) and God's choice of men. For Barth, God's choice of a man as a vehicle of self-revelation does not depend on any inherent appropriateness in the man as contrasted with other men. No special capacity, power, virtue, or genius in a man conditions the divine choice. God adopts a man, appointing him to be a "pointer" towards himself, making him a true witness of himself; God justifies and sanctifies and empowers the man, who in himself is merely a sinner, inappropriate as a vehicle of revelation. Similarly, Barth argues, God adopts words, appointing them to be pointers towards himself; God justifies them and sanctifies them and empowers them to be instruments of revelation, though in themselves they have no inherent capacity for this. Men of genius are not specially appropriate as God's witnesses; similarly words which are less obviously anthropomorphic are not specially appropriate in referring to God; the word "infinite" is no more inherently appropriate than the word "righteous," or the word "righteous" than the word "mouth." God appoints and empowers words to apply to himself; for men, this choice is bound to seem arbitrary, like his choice of prophets. The Bible is unique and authoritative *by divine appointment*. (This analogy between words and men, if pushed very far, becomes untenable;¹⁸ but we need not push the analogy too far.)

(ii) Secondly, God's Word is an *action*. We have seen that Barth distinguishes the words in scripture or sermon from the divine Word to which they point. His view of the divine Word is interesting. For him, it is not analogous to human propositions, reports, descriptions, items of information, etc.; it is analogous to human commands, appointments, evaluations, givings, and promises, differing from these in that it has absolute authority. (Here I am interpreting Barth rather than simply expounding him.) God *orders* men to exist as his servants, he *appoints* men as stewards over nature, he *judges* creaturely existence to be good, he *gives* existence as a blessing, he *pledges* his steadfast love to man. Each of these verbal *actions* calls for a human response which is not mere assent to propositions: Man acknowledges God's command, accepts God's appointment, accepts God's verdict on creation, thanks God for his gift, and trusts God's pledge. Thus the divine Word itself is not propositional; rather it is the authoritative performance of a verbal action—it is what linguistic philosophers call a "performative

18. Barth himself seems to claim that words do not apply to God in even a provisional way by virtue of their "capacity" as they are applied to creatures (*Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, Pt. 1, p. 230). This is nonsense. He has failed to see that what corresponds to a man in his analogy is not a word, but a sound or a written token. If the meaning or use which a sound or token has in human language outside revelation is totally irrelevant to God's choice (as the character or genius of a particular man is irrelevant to God's choice), then what God chooses is *not a word at all*, but merely a particular sound or token.

utterance."¹⁹ Moreover, according to Barth, one does not understand what he means by "God" unless one has responded in faith to the active divine Word which comes through the words of scripture.

I have outlined six different views of revelation. In conclusion, I should like to make a few brief comments concerning this outline:

1. Let me repeat that the labels are not to be taken too seriously, and especially that a theologian is not to be restricted to the pigeon-hole in which I have placed him. For example, Temple is in some respects a personalist, and Bultmann a verbal instrumentalist. Moreover, I should make it clear that I do not think of the theories as mutually exclusive; indeed, it seems to me that they all contain insights which should be retained and explored and brought together.

2. I have noted that each theory carries with it a view concerning the uniqueness, authority, and inspiration of the Bible. Each theory also carries with it a view concerning the *Trinity*, for theories of the Trinity and theories of revelation are closely interrelated; yet I have not mentioned the Trinity at all. This omission is not an indication of heresy; it is an attempt at simplicity. Also, I should explain that my only reason for not considering revelation in relation to the *Church* is that this topic goes beyond my present responsibility.

3. I have not taken time in this paper to criticize the theories, but it seems to me that none of them are very clear concerning the connection between revelation and propositions. Experientialists find revelation in feelings, existentialists in concern, personalists in encounters, expressionists in historical events, imagists in Bible-key-words, instrumentalists in divinely appointed language. In each case there is an allegedly sharp dichotomy between revelation and propositions. I suspect that if the various *connections* between propositions and revelation were explored with philosophical rigour rather than sermonic slogans, the allegedly sharp dichotomy would be badly blunted. Distinctions between revelation and propositions would remain, but in a radically revised form. Perhaps we might then find common ground with a radically revised propositional theory from Rome.

4. It is important to distinguish two aspects of the claim that scripture or tradition is inerrant. On the one hand, someone may claim that biblical or papal propositions concerning God and God's self-revelation are inerrant. On the other hand, someone may claim that biblical or papal propositions concerning matters of historical fact are inerrant. I have been considering the former claim. But I would be interested, also, to know where Roman Catholic theology stands concerning the second question. Could scripture err concerning the raising of Lazarus? Could tradition err concerning the perpetual virginity of Mary?

5. Finally, I should draw attention to a common theme which runs through all six Protestant theories of revelation: Revelation is always *corre-*

19. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

lated with a human response, apart from which we do not know what is meant by "God." Different responses are emphasized: the experientialist's feeling of numinous awe, the existentialist's self-commitment, the personalist's I-Thou attitude, the expressionist's "appreciation," the imagist's image-interpreted action, the instrumentalist's submissive faith. Moreover, theologians differ concerning the extent to which the response in man is man's act or God's act. But all would agree that revelation is neither understood nor accepted in a personal state of neutrality, a bare assent like the assent which men can give to propositions in positivist science. Revelation is not an item of information which a man might both understand and accept, and yet go on to ask: "So what?"

2. A Roman Catholic Commentary

JEAN MARTUCCI

MY DISTINGUISHED COLLEAGUE, Doctor D. D. Evans, has just summed up with exceptional clarity the tendencies of contemporary Protestantism regarding the concept of Revelation. At the lecturer's suggestion, our ecumenical group now awaits a Roman Catholic commentary on his exposé. I shall try not to disappoint those who chose me to give this commentary and particularly to answer the questions which Roman Catholic theology has just been asked. For the sake of clarity I have considered the problems at three different levels: God, the Bible, and the Church.

I

There is no such thing as revealed truth. There are truths of revelation, that is to say, propositions which express the results of correct thinking concerning revelation; but they are not themselves directly revealed. . . . I do not believe in any creed, but I use certain creeds to express, to conserve, and to deepen my belief in God. What is offered to man's apprehension in any specific Revelation is not truth concerning God but the living God Himself.

These two quotations of Archbishop William Temple could perhaps surprise or even displease many Roman theologians. They would appear to them as a negation of Revelation itself; a relegation of God to his transcendence, to the detriment of any possibility of conceptual communication between men and the Divine. But I see in these quotations other than this, and I would even go so far as to compare these texts with the most traditional conclusions of Roman Catholic theology! Let us therefore examine them attentively in order to understand them in all their amplitude.

Speaking of the object of faith, Thomas Aquinas says: "Actus autem credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem" (IIa IIae, q.1 art. 2 ad