

Symbolism and Revelation.

THERE are possibly times when we all echo the ancient Pessimist's complaint that "in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." Perhaps this is nowhere felt so keenly as in the loss of that naïve anthropomorphic view of God and the world with which most of us began our intellectual career. I sometimes wish that I could recapture that youthful sense of the reality of the spiritual world, when the Bible was literally God's word, in which Adam and Enoch and Moses had real conversations with God, when Heaven was a real place up there, and Hell a real place down yonder, when real angels went up and down real ladders. Is this what Wordsworth means when he says that "Heaven lies about us in our infancy"? But alas! "the angels" do not "keep their ancient places"; with developing experience, the shadow of dubiety disturbs the confidence of such beliefs.

Of course, the sense of loss is never the whole of such a story. The old does not simply disappear; it is replaced by more adequate views of the structure of the world, of communion with God, of the possibility of Heaven and the actuality of Hell. Life develops for us richer meaning as we put away childish things. But these new meanings have not the vivid directness which characterised the earlier view. The world, instead of being a "brave new world,"¹ breaking out in unexpected places, becomes a series of problems, the solution of which it is our business to discover. In such discovery the realm of the natural encroaches upon that of the supernatural, and the extension of knowledge leaves less and less room for the direct activity of God. The category of Revelation tends to fall away, and belief in a personal God becomes more and more difficult to retain. "They have taken away our gods and what have we left?"

It is unquestionably true that when the category of Revelation does fall away, the specific character of the Christian, perhaps we may say of all, religion disappears. But Revelation is not a simple concept. We use the word in such a variety of senses that some examination of its essential meaning is necessary before its connection with religion is clearly discerned.

If we examine current uses of the term we shall find that there are two constituents of the idea. (1) The process is one of disclosure as against discovery. Dr. Farmer² cites in illustra-

¹ As Shakespeare, not Aldous Huxley, uses the phrase.

² *The World and God*, p. 77.

tion the investigation of crime. The police discover certain facts which implicate a certain individual, on the basis of which they submit him to intensive questioning, under which he confesses and reveals to them facts which they had not discovered. (2) The content comprises an element of surprise: what is discovered is something over and above what could have been collected from the facts we know. The facts revealed differ from the facts discovered, not merely because of our failure to unearth them; they belong to an order that can be apprehended only when other influences than our own investigations are operating. With respect to both these constituents, Revelation stands contrasted with Reason, the instrument of investigation.

Using, then, this concept of Revelation, it is easy to arrange the items of our knowledge under the two headings, those we can discover for ourselves, and those which are revealed to us. Within theology this distinction has often been made. Natural theology is contrasted with revealed religion and sometimes opposed to it. But the distinction is not always drawn in the same way. St. Paul insists that the natural world and the law written on the heart are valid, if limited, sources of religious knowledge. For Aquinas our knowledge of God was derived from two sources: the Church, the organ of revelation, and Aristotle, the master of analytic knowledge. He argues at length that e.g., the existence of God is capable of being demonstrated. It is not an article of faith, since it can be reached by using the categories of Aristotelian logic. While, however, it is not an article of faith, it is one of the preambles to the articles; and for any one who lacks either the patience to follow or the ability to understand the demonstration it may be accepted on faith. So that the two sources are not antagonistic. Indeed Aquinas exhibits remarkable ingenuity in the attempt to reconcile the Aristotelian and the Christian conceptions of God.

Among the Deists the distinction was drawn in still another way. For them Natural Religion was that knowledge of God which could be discerned intuitively, by the operation of the natural light: a set of innate ideas which, until corrupted by priests and other exponents of revealed religion, was sufficient to give to all men the knowledge of God. For extreme Deists there was no place for Revelation; for the more moderate, e.g., Locke, Revelation was to be accepted so long as it did not conflict with Reason. It was part of the great work which Bishop Butler did, to bring back the distinction to the New Testament usage: natural religion was that knowledge of God which could be collected from the course and constitution of nature and the deliverances of Conscience.

In recent times this sharp distinction of categories is not

regarded as satisfactory. The tendency is to insist, as with Goudge in his article on Revelation in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*,³ that "no valid distinction can be drawn between discovery and revelation." If by *valid* Goudge means *ultimate*, there is something to be said for his position. In the last resort all we know of truth anywhere is the gift of God, and the most specific revelation of God cannot be received without some measure of activity on the part of man. But while this extension of the meaning has relative justification, it obscures a very real distinction, and it is extremely dangerous. No doubt there is genuine insight in Browning's vision of the Omnipresence of God.

God is seen God

In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul, and the clod;
but it very easily slips into the Pantheism of Pope,

As full, as perfect, in a hair as heart.

And when this point is reached, Revelation has become so attenuated as to reveal nothing.

It is this wide range of meaning which the word may bear that gives point to Barth's insistence that Revelation must always be a unique process, unconnected with general intelligence or with the development of culture. One of the most perplexing of the many Barthian antitheses is that between Religion which he describes as the movement of man towards God, and Revelation, which is the movement of God to man. Between these two there is and can be no connection; Religion is one thing; Revelation is quite another.

Now it is possible to share Barth's concern for the recovery of some differentiating meaning for the term Revelation, without committing ourselves to his rigid distinction. The two movements which he separates are, after all, aspects of a single process. The communion of the soul with God which is the essence of Religion contains two elements for which we may accept Barth's description: the movement of man towards God, and the movement of God towards man. Between these two movements there is a real difference, which we may indicate by our pair of terms, discovery and disclosure. For the moment we are concerned with the difference. But the discovery is never bare discovery, and the disclosure is never bare disclosure. We should be false to religious experience if we erected this real difference into an irreconcilable antagonism.

Our concern, then, is with this second movement, that which alone can properly be called Revelation—the movement of God

³ Vol. X., p. 746.

towards man. How does God make His contact with the human spirit? Here again we come upon a Barthian paradox: "God is always the speaking subject, not the object of Revelation."⁴ There can be no doubt that in the moment of revelation there is, for the person concerned, an overmastering sense of the objectivity of the process. The assurance of Isaiah that he shares a secret with God (In mine ears, saith the Lord of Hosts), the conviction of many prophets that the word of the Lord came to them, are not merely examples of graphic writing; they record actual experiences. God is for them the speaking subject. But also for them in this experience God was not merely speaking; He was saying *something*. The content of the revelation was at least as important as the fact of communication. The uniqueness of the experience lay in this, that God was both subject and object, or, to put it quite simply, God was revealing Himself.

But this granted, we cannot, as Barth would seem to have us do, leave the matter there. With regard to both aspects of the experience questions of first importance arise.

It will be readily seen that, with regard to the mode of communication, the determining feature is the fact that, however real such an experience was to the experient, it was different from that of human intercourse. Whatever we mean by the personality of God we do not mean that He has organs such as those through which human intercourse is possible. An early writer could say with conviction that "The Lord spake unto Moses, face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend." That for us can only be a vivid figure of speech designed to indicate the intimacy of the fellowship between God and Moses. It may be most appropriate metaphor, but it is metaphor, or to use a word which Dr. Bevan has made current, symbolism. Further, it is not merely symbolic as a statement; it indicates an experience in which symbols form the medium of communication.

Let us examine this idea of symbol. It is significant that there should be, at the present time, a revival of this idea for purposes of explanation. For it is a revival. "That all the conceptions we can have of God or of the spiritual world are inadequate symbols is now a religious commonplace," says Dr. Bevan.⁵ It is at least as old as Plato, who uses the distinction between truth of fact and truth of idea to point a drastic criticism of popular mythology. Berkeley sees the whole physical universe as a Divine Visual Language through which the Author of Nature communicates with us. And Kant has made us familiar with the distinction between the world of phenomena and the noumenal world to which our categories do not apply. But in all these

⁴ *The Significance of Karl Barth*, McConnachie, p. 115.

⁵ *Symbolism and Belief*, p. 15.

cases there was no attempt to analyse the idea of symbol. Bevan bases his book on the distinction between two types of symbol: (a) those which stand for something of which we already have direct knowledge, e.g. the Union Jack and the British Empire. The rising bell, e.g., does not give us any information about getting up in the morning; it merely tells us that in the judgment of the authorities this action has to be performed now. (b) those which purport to give information about the things they symbolise. For these some sort of resemblance between the symbol and the thing symbolised is essential. It is with symbols of this second kind that Bevan is concerned, and he has placed us heavily in his debt for an illuminating treatment of the more important symbols we use in speaking of God.

Again, to attempt an analysis of the idea was not altogether a new departure. Three years earlier Dr. Farmer had drawn the distinction between extrinsic or conventional symbols, and intrinsic or expressive symbols.⁶ Nor was this entirely new. For in 1926, at the Yorkshire Ministers' Conference at Cober Hill, the present writer had suggested a similar distinction in connection with the significance of the sacraments, and at the instigation of Dr. Wheeler Robinson had developed it into an article which appeared in the *Baptist Times* in September of that year. There the distinction was almost exactly like that of Dr. Farmer. It worked on the difference between purely conventional symbols, e.g., the "x" of a mathematical equation and those which are likenesses of the thing they symbolise, a portrait, e.g., as against a monomark, a landscape picture as against a map. It was contended that symbols of the former kind are merely marks of identification. Symbols of the latter kind, employing the psychological mechanism of Association *re-present* the things for which they stand.

We may carry the analysis a stage further and distinguish between symbols according as they make their association by the principle of Resemblance or of Contiguity. Through association by Contiguity even conventional symbols may become expressive. The Union Jack, e.g., while not like the British Empire, has acquired a wealth of significance which varies with the individual. A symbol may thus become expressive, not through its intrinsic nature, but in virtue of the personal history that has gathered round it.

Now how does all this bear upon the process of Revelation? To put it abruptly, I would submit that any revelation of God to man will make use of symbols, that these symbols will need to be interpreted, and will therefore involve the whole fabric of

⁶ *The World and God*, p. 74. Bevan's book was published in 1938, though the Gifford Lectures, which it embodies, were delivered in 1934-5.

experience. In this respect it does not differ absolutely from human intercourse. "When I speak to a friend," says Dr. Farmer, "I cannot thrust my meanings directly into his mind however much I may be disposed to think it would be to his advantage if I could. I can only come as far as the frontier and signal my meaning, and the latter can become his only after he has interpreted the signals."⁷ In ordinary intercourse the symbols, though doubtless possessing shades of significance varying with the individual, have a meaning which is broadly the same for all, since they spring from and relate to the world of common experience. The case of revelation is different. Here we have God taking hold of some unique quality of spiritual genius and lighting up some particular experience with a meaning unguessed before. It is a process in which the personality and the experience of the saint become the channel of the Divine revelation. God is definitely speaking, but the message clothes itself in symbols which the man's experience has made significant. This is uniquely true of those who, in the history of religion, have been the conspicuous bearers of revelation; but in its degree it is true of all who at any time have heard a word of the Lord.

When we turn to the content of revelation we meet questions of a different kind. The reference to Laws of Association carries no assurance of validity; for these laws work in ways that are often grotesque, and links are forged which flagrantly defy the law of probability. True prophets have always had to contend against the false. How shall we distinguish the one from the other?

To such a question there is no simple answer. The outstanding difficulty arises from the fact that the ordinary test of symbols fails us here. The value of a symbol depends upon the relation between a sign and the thing signified. When any question of the utility of a symbol arises we appeal to that for which it stands. But for the present issue such an appeal is impossible. All our ideas of God are but inadequate and groping symbols. Are we then for ever shut up to appealing from symbol to symbol?

In the end, I do not think that we can avoid the objection, if objection it be, that revelation must be self-authenticating. As we can find nothing to guarantee truth save truth itself, so we can find no criterion for revelation except the content of the revelation itself. But that content never stands in isolation. It springs out of a concrete situation, and is a present word for present needs. It always relates itself to experience, and however new the knowledge which it brings, it throws a flood of light upon phases of experience hitherto obscure. In the last

⁷ *op. cit.*, p. 71.

resort, the truth which any spiritual genius finds must itself find us. This is not to commit the authority of a revelation to the approval of our chance desires. Often it cuts right across our ideas and holds us to unwelcome duties. But in the end it is what we must believe or perish, what we must do or be false to all we hold good.

Of the many other things that ought to be said in this connection, I limit myself to two :—

- (1) Every genuine revelation of God will link itself up to our highest conceptions of duty and make an absolute demand upon our will. Did not Jeremiah lay down the essential condition of revelation in that word of the Lord, "When thou shalt sift the precious from the vile thou shalt be as my mouth" ? Such a capacity to discriminate is never easily acquired. It depends upon more than intellectual insight, though insight there must be. Its main conditions are purity of heart and consecration of the will. "The pure in heart shall see God." "He that willeth to do shall know of the teaching." Such conditions are beyond our own power to attain or maintain. And this brings me to my second point.
- (2) Every genuine revelation of God brings with it an awareness of the infinite distance between the human soul and God. Such an awareness is a humbling experience, but it never paralyses. It provokes, not despair but, rejoicing in the infinite resources of God. "O the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! . . . For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things." Before such infinite resources we are "lost in wonder, love and praise."

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