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Revelation's Supernatural Dimension

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A FAMILIAR SENTENCE by William Temple reads: "What is offered to man's apprehension in any specific revelation is not truth concerning God but the living God himself."¹ Today few would dissent from Temple's rejection of revelation as so many divinely guaranteed propositions set down in the Scriptures for our acceptance. His statement is concerned with repudiating all mechanical theories of revelation. Yet it is a statement which may be misleading when taken on its own or understood literally and without qualification. For Christian faith claims more for itself than that it apprehends the living God. It claims also that it can speak *about* the living God in concrete terms, because of the revelation given in Jesus Christ.

The matter is well put by John Baillie in his book *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*.² There he indicates that in recent discussions concerning the nature of revelation there is general agreement on two points: first, that what is fundamentally revealed is God himself, not propositions about God; and second, that God reveals himself in action invading the field of human history.³ Very clearly, the second point adds substantially to the first. It suggests why God can properly be called a "living" God, and what is implied in divine self-revelation. Baillie says that the Bible is "essentially the story of the acts of God," and that the Christian gospel is "essentially a story."⁴ But, on this basis, it follows that the Christian must believe the gospel story to be essentially *true*. Whatever critical canons he may apply to the narratives contained in the New Testament, and however much he may question the historicity of elements of these narratives, he must be willing to admit that his faith is centred in "the established facts in our religion" (Luke 1:1—Moffatt). Anyone who asserts that the gospel story is essentially true, however, is committed to supporting a reading of history which finds room for the supernatural. For the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, if viewed as expressions of the activity of God, break through the presuppositions of naturalism. When it is said, for example, that God raised his Son from the dead, then the story of the resurrection can be put forward as true only by taking for granted an act unimaginable from the perspective of "normal" human history. Conversely, any statement about God raising his Son which stays within the limits of the natural and does not posit a breach with ordinary human experience is one which, *ipso facto*, declines

1. *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1934), p. 322.

2. New York: Columbia University Press, 1956.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 57.

to claim that the resurrection is God's act—except in the sense that everything which takes place in the universe may be called an act of God.

It is the argument of the present essay that an adequate statement of the Christian doctrine of revelation must include the recognition of supernatural acts (and therefore facts) as part of revealed truth; so that merely to assert the self-manifestation of God in revelation is insufficient and may allow—or even encourage—views quite thoroughly at odds with traditional Christian faith. The argument will be developed by reviewing two well-known modern expositions of revelation: the one given by Reinhold Niebuhr in the first volume (*Human Nature*) of his Gifford Lectures, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*,⁵ and the one given by H. Richard Niebuhr in his monograph, *The Meaning of Revelation*.⁶

I

In place of the old division of revelation into *general* and *special*, Reinhold Niebuhr proposes to present revelation as “twofold”—either *personal-individual* or *social-historical*.⁷ He sees his distinctions of type as being akin to the traditional view, and he does not stop to investigate any differences. But differences there are, and they are important ones.

To begin with, Niebuhr's twofold revelation is a continuous process showing development rather than a confrontation through two distinct channels.

Since all men have, in some fashion, the experience of a reality beyond themselves, they are able to entertain the more precise revelations of the character and purpose of God as they come to them in the most significant experiences of prophetic history.⁸

From this explanation it appears that historical (special) revelations are more precise than personal (general) revelations, and that no other important distinction can be made between the two types. However, because the reality of revelation is grounded in the universal validity of the latter, all revelation is—in fact—reduced to general revelation. The most that can be said is that some revelations are less completely general than others. The resulting view of revelation is one which tacitly denies to special revelations any content of their own; for these revelations simply bring into focus the nature of the reality disclosed in less precise fashion by general revelations, stating more exactly what already is known in principle.

The consequences of making special revelation into a development of general revelation are far-reaching. In particular, Niebuhr's view is one which goes a long way towards suppressing the supernatural dimension of revelation. That this is so may be seen from the way in which Niebuhr justifies his joining together of personal and historical revelation by saying

5. 2 vols., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941–43.

6. New York: Macmillan, 1946.

7. *Human Nature*, p. 127.

8. *Ibid.*

that a similar union is involved in all human knowledge.⁹ Such a justification presupposes the expectation that revelation will follow the pattern of man's *natural experience* as a matter of course, so that anyone who has an intelligent grasp of the human condition will also recognize the reasonableness of revelation. Thus Niebuhr believes the experience of being confronted with God in revelation to be broadly identical with the experience of conscience.¹⁰ Of course, it is impossible to introduce any concept of revelation whatsoever into an entirely naturalistic world-view, and Niebuhr does not endorse pure naturalism. He argues that we must look beyond the world in order to explain the world. He tells us that the presuppositions of biblical faith must be first accepted before we can be led to the discovery that conscience is the result of the judgment of God upon us; yet, once we have adopted these presuppositions, we shall find the assumption of faith to be "the only basis of a correct analysis of all the factors involved in the experience."¹¹ In other words, belief in revelation involves recognition of a transcendent element in experience. Where this element is not admitted, all experience is misunderstood. Where this element is given place, all experience becomes luminous. The result of adopting the presuppositions of "Biblical faith," however, is the clarification of experience as such. Whereas previously we might have overlooked or denied the significance of conscience, now we know what conscience really is, and we listen to what it has to say to us. According to such a viewpoint naturalism is denied, because a transcendent principle (the judgment of God) is introduced in order to explain the natural. Nevertheless, the supernatural is not invoked. Biblical faith serves merely to undergird the findings of conscience as these are present universally—naturally—in the self-awareness of mankind.

The limitations of Niebuhr's view of revelation become obvious when this is compared with an avowedly supernaturalistic one: that of John Wesley, for example. Wesley, like Niebuhr, finds revelation exhibited in the experience of conscience. In his sermon "The Witness of our own Spirit"¹² he says of conscience: "Its main business is to excuse or accuse, to approve or disapprove, to acquit or condemn."¹³ He then goes on to distinguish the "rule of the Heathens" from the rule of the Christian, the law written in the heart from the rule of right and wrong set forth in Scripture. If the Christian is to have "a good conscience toward God,"

there is absolutely required, first a right understanding of the Word of God, of His "holy, and acceptable, and perfect will" concerning us, as it is revealed therein. For it is impossible we should walk by a rule, if we do not know what it means.¹⁴

9. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

12. Sermon xi, *Sermons on Several Occasions, First Series* (London: Epworth, 1944), pp. 123-33.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

To this must be added a true knowledge of ourselves and an agreement of our hearts and lives with the Christian rule.¹⁵ Wesley concludes:

But whoever desires to have a conscience thus void of offence, let him see that he lay the right foundation. Let him remember, "other foundation" of this "can no man lay, that that which is laid, even Jesus Christ." And let him also be mindful, that no man buildeth on Him but by a living faith; that no man is a partaker of Christ, until he can clearly testify, "The life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God"; in Him who is now *revealed* in my heart; who "loved me, and gave himself for me."¹⁶

It may be objected that Wesley's identification of the Word of God with the written word of Scripture leads precisely to that understanding of revelation which today is happily discarded, namely, the view of revelation as a series of infallible propositions. And the objection is a just one, in so far as the contemporary theologian does not appeal to biblical texts just as Wesley did, confident that he must find there final and authoritative answers to all his questions. Yet the fact that Wesley was not aware of the problems raised for us by the critical interpretation of the Bible by no means invalidates his whole approach to revelation, and particularly his conviction that for the Christian "a living faith" can be based on nothing else except the special revelation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Wesley, indeed, was very far from adopting a merely propositional view of revelation. Not statements about Christ, but Christ himself in the believer's heart, was the revelation he found necessary to the existence of true Christian faith. At the same time, the revelation which was wholly personal was one having a most definite content. The Christ revealed in the believer's heart was none other than "the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." In his sermon on "Scriptural Christianity" Wesley quoted this same text from Galatians, saying that the words expressed the "very essence" of the Christian's faith, "a divine *elenchos* [*evidence* or *conviction*] of the love of God the Father, through the son of His love, to him a sinner, now accepted in the Beloved."¹⁷

What is decisive in Wesley's description is his insistence that a supernatural act of God in Christ is at the centre of revelation. Here we are a world away from Niebuhr's belief that special revelation is simply a more precise version of general revelation. According to the latter outlook, revelation is essentially the communication of true information about the conditions regulating human life on the historical scene. Such information is available once we know, with fair accuracy, "the character and purpose of God." Very differently, the former outlook supposes revelation *to be news of what God has done in history*. It is not merely the case that the character and purpose of God are illustrated "in significant experiences." Rather, the living God himself is brought into relationship with us.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

17. Sermon iv, "Scriptural Christianity," *Ibid.*, p. 34.

In one instance Niebuhr does speak of revelation as an act. He writes:

God speaks to man in the Incarnation; and the content of the revelation is an act of reconciliation in which the judgment of God upon the pride of man is not abrogated, in which the sin of man becomes the more sharply revealed and defined by the knowledge that God is Himself the victim of man's sin and pride. Nevertheless the final word is not one of judgment but of mercy and forgiveness.¹⁸

The passage certainly gives the impression that its author accepts the Incarnation and Atonement as aspects of a supernatural act of God in which the believer places his trust. However, the impression arises chiefly because Niebuhr's language here follows traditional usage much more closely than usual; and, when the setting of the passage in question is taken into account, a different picture emerges. Niebuhr has laid down the principle that man "is a creature who cannot find a true norm short of the nature of ultimate reality."¹⁹ He then has declared that, because no adequate norm is discovered within the natural order or human society: "The only adequate norm is the historic incarnation of a perfect love which actually transcends history, and can appear in it only to be crucified."²⁰ It appears, therefore, that Incarnation means, for Niebuhr, not God's once-and-for-all act in the coming of the Son of God to earth, but the exemplification of perfection in love and of the inability of history to accept that perfection.

Thus Niebuhr's understanding of revelation remains basically a belief in the possibility of knowing the truth about mankind's *general* destiny. To know that "God is love" is to know that "the ultimate reality upon which the created world depends and by which it is judged is . . . the vital and creative source of life and the harmony of life with life."²¹ To know that Christ has come is to know that man's sin has "become the more sharply revealed and defined" when perfect love appears within history only to be crucified. The logical implicate of this view is that faith must be the attempt to live in harmony with the creative source of life, guided by the norm of love; and, consistent with his reading of revelation, Niebuhr's prescription for the Christian life appears in the following terms: "The ideal possibility is that faith in the ultimate security of God's love would overcome all immediate insecurities of nature and history."²²

Because Niebuhr sees revelation as having its source in man's natural experience of God, he is led to describe Christian faith as a particularly enlightened attempt to live in communion with God. The Christian sees that God is indeed love, that he forgives as well as judges. But because Niebuhr does not see revelation as God's authentic act in Jesus Christ, he

18. *Human Nature*, pp. 147-8.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

cannot describe Christian faith as trust in the Son of God, who loves and saves.²³

II

Reinhold Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures and H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation* present an almost identical view of revelation; they differ principally in terminology. There are also slight differences in exposition. Where the former divides revelation into personal-individual and social-historical branches, the latter finds all revelation to have as its sphere "inner history" or "life's flow as regarded from the point of view of living selves."²⁴ So Richard Niebuhr emphasizes the fact that revelation always arises in a social context and has for its subject-matter "the living memory of the community."²⁵ But both Niebuhrs, when they come to examine the "special" content of Christian revelation, agree substantially. Concerning this content, Richard Niebuhr writes:

It is true that revelation is not the communication of new truths and the supplanting of our natural religion by a supernatural one. But it is the fulfillment and the radical reconstruction of our natural knowledge about deity through the revelation of one whom Jesus Christ called "Father."²⁶

The words in this passage may have a different sound, but the sense is the sense of Reinhold Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures. The only difference is that what is there called *more precise revelations of the character and purpose of God* is here called *the fulfillment and the radical reconstruction of our natural knowledge about deity*. It adds up to the same in the end. As Reinhold Niebuhr believes that the more precise revelation found in Christianity is that of a love so perfect that it can appear in history only to be crucified, so Richard Niebuhr believes that the radical reconstruction needed in connection with our knowledge of deity comes through the discovery that in God the Father of Jesus Christ there is "the simple everyday goodness of love."²⁷ We find that this deity "exercises sovereignty more through crosses than through thrones."²⁸

In short, *The Meaning of Revelation* gives us the same reduction of "special" revelation to a development within "general" revelation which we see expounded in *Human Nature*. But what it provides that the other does not is the pedigree of this approach to revelation. Richard Niebuhr

23. In an article on "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr" Paul Lehmann attempts to show that Christology is central to Niebuhr's theology. Yet Lehmann concludes that Niebuhr's teaching here "does not sufficiently stress" God's mighty acts as transforming events. He concludes: "In short, faith in Christ not merely apprehends but also obeys. . . . Justification is not only a principle of meaning and a historical possibility. People are 'in fact' justified, and the fruits of faith in sanctification, however tenuous, are actual human and historical realities" (*Reinhold Niebuhr, His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, edited by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, New York: Macmillan, 1956, p. 279).

24. *The Meaning of Revelation*, p. 77.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

states that it is "necessary to begin where Schleiermacher and Ritschl began," although it is not necessary to accept all their conclusions.²⁹ This historical information is most valuable, for it shows that the writer, if not treading exactly in the footsteps of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, is walking in the same direction.

As is well known, Schleiermacher found the concept of revelation somewhat of an embarrassment and had difficulty in fitting it into his system of doctrine; while Ritschl was not much more successful.³⁰ Schleiermacher's chief difficulty was to distinguish revelation from any type of inspiration at any level, since he denied the possibility of imagining any belief whatsoever *not* to have its origin in revelation. When Richard Niebuhr states that modern Christian theology must "begin again with the faith of the Christian community and so with revelation,"³¹ he inherits Schleiermacher's difficulty. If that which a religious community believes becomes revelation simply because it is believed, then all faiths qualify for the title "revealed." By localizing revelation in the experiences of inner history, Niebuhr seems to assent to this conclusion. It belongs to man's natural being to have a faith—and so to encounter revelation. All is included in the unfolding of the self. "The standpoint of faith, of a self directed toward gods or God, and the standpoint of practical reason, of a self with values and with a destiny, are not incompatible; they are probably identical."³² But whenever this touchstone is applied to the Christian faith, the Christian message ceases to be a declaration concerning what God has done in Jesus Christ and becomes instead an affirmation concerning the values accepted by a religious community and the vision that community has concerning the destiny of its members. The result is an entire transformation of the content of faith. Thus, while the New Testament confession is that God has raised up Jesus, Niebuhr tells us that we see the power of God in "his making the spirit of the slain Jesus unconquerable."³³ No longer does faith testify to the act of God in history and tell the story of the gospel. Faith sees a timeless spiritual truth in the flux of time and proclaims a value to live by.

We have seen how Reinhold Niebuhr's presuppositions make revelation into a species of insight into the conditions of human life distilled from "significant experiences." Revelation conveys to us information about the character and purpose of God. Richard Niebuhr's presuppositions lead him to conclude:

So we must begin to rethink all our definitions of deity and convert all our worship and our prayers. . . . This conversion and permanent revolution of our human religion through Jesus Christ is what we mean by revelation.³⁴

Here too revelation is primarily religious enlightenment, the result of our

29. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

30. A useful historical summary is given in Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation*, pp. 10-15.

31. *The Meaning of Revelation*, p. 36.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 190f.

being prompted to cherish higher values and to entertain a more exalted idea of deity. An attempt has been made to force revelation into the mould of the natural; so that faith becomes an intelligent reading of our earthly destiny in the context of a divine purpose, or another name for practical reason. But such an outlook allows Jesus Christ to have no more than an instrumental value. We reach an adequate—rethought, revolutionized—religion through him. We discover more precise revelations of the character and purpose of God through his teachings, his life, and his death. We estimate the power of God differently when we see that his spirit is unconquerable. But we do not believe *in* him.

The lesson to be learned thus seems to be that Christianity cannot be fitted into the mould of the natural. For Christians revelation has a supernatural dimension which cannot be suppressed or ignored without losing the essence of the gospel. There can be no faith in the God and Father of Jesus Christ which is divorced from faith "in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." For the gospel is a story and centres around particular acts and facts. Just as the Son in Christian confession of faith is the Saviour who humbled himself, died for us, and was exalted, so the Father is Lord of all who loved the world and sent his only Son. Revelation is indeed personal, the unveiling of deity and not of propositions. But the living God who discloses himself in revelation is always "he who . . ."

It is because of Christian revelation's supernatural dimension that Christianity through its history has always been supported by both Scripture and Creed. The gospel cannot be preached or the response of faith be given without remembering and confessing the acts of God which brought the Christian Church to birth. There has been an ever-present danger that the witness to revelation given in the Bible and in the confessions of the Church will become wrongly regarded, as though it were itself revelation. In the event of a triumph of biblicism or ecclesiasticism over living faith, a "propositional" view of revelation comes to the fore. On the other hand, a purely "spiritual" view of revelation free from Scripture or Creed loses contact with the gospel story and so proclaims, implicitly or explicitly, "another gospel." As John Wesley said (echoing St. Paul), there is no more than one right foundation for Christian life and Christian understanding, and we cannot walk by a rule unless we know what it means. But we shall not find the foundation or know the rule if we build on "our human religion," even when this has been refined or radically reconstructed by inspirational "revelation" drawing on the values of the religious community to which we belong. All our thinking about deity cannot show us what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. A revolution within the natural will not suffice; for the grace and truth that came through Jesus do not spring out of the natural. The gospel story is about one who came down from heaven and is not the object of man's testimony but of God's.