

# Some Thoughts on Revelation from the Epistle to the Romans

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We are living in an age in which Christianity can no longer pretend that it is the only actor on the religious stage. The church is now keenly aware of the seriousness with which claims to revelation are coming from those who continue to stand outside the Christian fold. These claims represent an inescapable challenge to the Christian church. This challenge is felt first of all by those who are primarily concerned with the mission of the church, who find it imperative to rethink the whole evangelistic task. But the challenge comes in an even more far-reaching form to the church's theological thought. These non-Christian claims to revelation force us to reopen the whole question of the nature of revelation, and particularly of the circle of questions which in a somewhat different context were associated with the problem of 'natural theology'.

The opening chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans comprise what has been recognized to be the crucial Biblical passage dealing with these questions. This is the passage which has been used to support and to reject the concept of natural theology and to determine the possible position of such a theology in the structure of a Christian idea of revelation. One would expect the Christian church to react to the challenge which now comes from non-Christian religion first of all with a clear exposition of this scripture passage. But it is precisely at this point that we find the church undecided and lacking a uniform theological approach to the problem. One is painfully aware of this lack of unity for instance when one glances at the great variety of interpretations even among the major representative Protestant theologians. While to some this passage appears to be an example of Paul building his arguments upon a form of natural theology, to others it represents an express denial of the validity of all religion.

How is one to sort out this tangle of different interpretations? I would suggest that for our purposes here we may see the way in which they fall into two groups depending on the basic epistemological approach to the problem. We have then what we may

call the 'Biblical' and the 'historical' approaches to interpretation. The 'Biblical approach' we may define as that which is characteristic of all those who begin with the postulate, in one form or another, that the Bible alone speaks to us of God's revelation. The 'historical approach', on the other hand, starts with the postulate that Paul's thought is to be understood in the terms of the theological heritage out of which he spoke.

The approach which we have taken the liberty to call 'Biblical' we see for instance in the works of men like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Hendrick Kraemer. Barth's exposition of this passage is well known and has been ably developed into a thorough position with regard to non-Christian revelation by Hendrick Kraemer in his book *Religion and the Christian Faith*. Barth takes the whole section (1:16-3:20) as a single 'kerygmatic proclamation' and sees in it no evidence of any 'prior' or 'natural' revelations. It is simply a description of the mutual opposition that arises when God confronts man in the only revelation, which is Jesus Christ. From this point of view Jesus Christ stands not as the fulfilment of a natural knowledge of God, but precisely the opposite as the judgement that 'all religion is unbelief' (*A Shorter Commentary on Romans, Church Dogmatics 1, 2, pp. 250 ff.*).

We would be presumptuous to pretend to challenge the great theological system which Karl Barth has established. Nevertheless we would venture to suggest that Barth and others of the 'Biblical approach' are inevitably led into a dead end in their discussion of the idea of revelation. Their consistent assertion that exegesis of Holy Scripture can be the only source of knowledge has already put aside the whole realm of man's spiritual experience. This might at first sight seem to be a reasonable delineation of the Christian sources of knowledge. But along with this seemingly acceptable epistemological commitment it would seem that they have consciously or unconsciously gone on to limit the area of ontology as well and brushed aside the whole theological problem of the human consciousness. What we have then is the prior assumption of the static idea of consciousness which has been so characteristic of Western thought with its bent toward historical dynamism. As a result when they come to exegesis they are compelled to skip over and ultimately leave unintelligible the crucial idea of 'faith' which Paul puts at the heart of his message in Romans. We see then for instance how Barth is led on from his original postulate to the cutting away of all possible human elements in the revelational process, and eventually to his two conclusions that 'all religion is unbelief' and 'revelation is only the one way process of God confronting man in Jesus Christ.' One cannot help but think that these conclusions point to a reality much narrower and more restricting than Paul had in mind when he spoke of God's revelation.

When we come to look at the representatives of the 'historical approach' we seem to shift from the thought world of theology to that of the scientific study of religion. Some of these scholars for instance point to the close parallels between Romans 1 and Wisdom 13: 1-9 or Philo *de Monarch.* 34 ff. as evidence of the historically determined thought forms which Paul consciously or unconsciously uses in this passage. Others (particularly more recent scholars such as Alan Richardson in *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*) follow the lead of W. D. Davies in *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* where he traces Paul's thought back to his rabbinic teachers. Davies interprets Romans 1 in the light of the rabbinic doctrine of seven 'Noachian Commandments' which supposedly would refer back to a time before the Sinai law and the birth of Israel as a nation and so were to apply not only to the Israelite but to the 'stranger' and 'foreigner' as well. These Noachian commandments then may comprise a kind of 'natural religion' with which an Israelite could expect all men to comply. With such-like parallels serving as the key to interpretation, C. H. Dodd, who we may take as the best known representative of this 'historical approach', goes on to see this section (1: 18-3: 20) as a digression in which Paul makes use of the Stoic idea of a 'law of nature' (2: 14 and 15) and other accepted Greek ideas of conscience and a natural knowledge of God to bring self-condemnation on his hearers. He would see Paul then along with his contemporaries as recognizing the validity of this natural knowledge of God as a sufficient basis for ethical life and as a foundation for the proclamation of the Gospel.

The thing which the interpreters of the historical school tend to forget is that whether we have been able to trace Paul's thought to its Greek or its rabbinic roots we still have to go on to the theological task of interpretation. A theological work of the creative originality of Romans is not to be understood solely as a product of its environment. It would seem that the same philosophical process has taken place which we saw in the Biblical approach and that a seemingly reasonable epistemological approach has predetermined the limits of the ontological reality of revelation that they expect to find in the passage. In this case the approach through the historical study of thought forms was accompanied by the assumption that the truth to be discovered here would also have to be of the empirical order of realities. Hence we find in their exegesis that they identify Paul's mysterious idea of the revelation of the wrath of God with the purely natural law of retribution in the phenomenal world of moral relations. One cannot help but wonder if this is not much shallower than Paul's idea of revelation. If the Biblical approach cut off all human elements in the revelational process the historical approach has swung to the opposite extreme and reduced revelation to one of the phenomena of the human world of history and morality. In other words the historical interpreters end up by cutting off the divine elements in revelation.

So then we come back to the Epistle to the Romans itself. Our excursions into contemporary interpretation have left us with the sense that they are pointing to an idea of revelation much too narrow or much too shallow for Paul. We cannot hope to give a thorough exegesis of the passage here. But our hope would be that by attempting to dive into the inner mystery of Paul's idea itself we shall be able to make a few suggestions which will point toward a perspective in which Paul's idea of revelation might be better understood.

There are two basic questions which come to our mind in the light of the present non-Christian claims to revelation. The first is, 'Can there be revelation in non-Christian religions?' and the second 'What are the implications of this possibility for our understanding of the nature of revelation?' Logically the answer to the first grows out of the answer we give to the second, but chronologically they confront us in the order which we have given here, and we shall deal with them in that order. First of all then we must ask if Paul gives any hint as to the area in which revelation takes place.

Right from the beginning of the letter one can notice the breadth and expansiveness which characterizes Paul's mind as he sets himself to speak to the capital of the then known world. He is conscious of the fact that he has been commissioned to all the nations (1:5) and is thankful that the faith of the Romans is proclaimed in all the world (1:8). Anticipating the objections that are about to be raised by an imaginary Jewish representative in chapter 2 Paul is explicit that this 'power', or possibility of revelation, which he bears in the gospel is for Greek and barbarian (1:14), wise and foolish (1:14), Jew and Gentile (1:16). Having thus made clear that revelation shall know no national, nor intellectual, nor religious bounds we are not surprised when in chapter 2 Paul reacts vehemently against the Jewish claim that their religio-ethical structures of life were the most suitable for revelation.

Indeed Paul must be vehement at this point for such a claim represents a radical distortion and ultimate denial of his whole idea of revelation. Paul is not concerned with revelation as a body of religio-ethical ideas. Such forms and structures of life may at best serve as symbols or dogmas through which revelation takes place. But revelation itself is a spiritual process which takes place in any genuine communion of the divine and the human. Surely then there can be revelation in non-Christian religion as there can in other non-religious frames of mind. To confuse Christianity or any of the elements of Christianity such as the Bible or the church with revelation itself would be to repeat the Jewish error of confusing the symbol with the reality to which it points. What Paul is concerned for is that men should know that this spiritual process is now empowered (1:16) and made truly possible in the communion of the natural and spiritual natures in Jesus Christ. So we see then in the true embodiment

of revelation, Jesus Christ, not the rejection but rather the consummation and empowering of all other revelations which vaguely reflect this communion of the divine and the human.

But Paul had not been primarily concerned to show the breadth of the area in which revelation might take place. That problem had arisen as a rather irritating aside because the imaginary Jewish representative had begun to introduce limitations of his own. What Paul had really meant to do was to uncover the real nature of revelation by diving into the depths of his own experience and suggesting to the Romans some of the various shadings and colourings that had been there in the revelational beam of light. It cannot be our purpose to delineate the bounds or the categories of revelation but simply to discuss three of the colorations of this beam of light in the hope that they will suggest to us the true nature of revelation.

Paul begins then with the assertion that true revelation is first of all revelation of the  $\delta\rho\gamma\eta$  of God. This Greek term  $\delta\rho\gamma\eta$  is usually translated into English by the term 'wrath'. But the difficulty with using the term 'wrath' is that it over-emphasizes the idea of moral indignation that there is in the term  $\delta\rho\gamma\eta$  and leaves us with the idea of God in an 'angry mood' as if it were one of a number of the possible moods in interpersonal human relations. The more primary meaning of the term  $\delta\rho\gamma\eta$  is that of 'otherness'. A glance at the Rig Vedic pantheon or at other religious texts would reveal the fact that the idea of the 'otherness' of God has been known in ancient India and elsewhere. But perhaps in Israel the religious sense of the 'otherness' of God has received its fullest development. There we see on the one hand the idea of God as the ruach or wind which comes sweeping into the life of man only to move just as imperceptibly and uncontrollably away. Or we have on the other hand the awe-inspiring majesty of the one before whom Isaiah bows in his great vision in Isaiah 6. Paul here lets this Old Testament religious sense combine with the analogy which we can draw from the manifold experience of awe in everyday life to describe this experience of God as a revelational reality. That awareness which revelation brings then is first of all not of this natural order but something breaking into this order as an 'other'.

Here is the awareness before which all men stand as Abraham said 'as dust and ashes'. Before the awareness of God as  $\delta\rho\gamma\eta$  stands man as weak, fearful, and in one word sinful. This is the true nature of the experience of 'mysterium tremendum' which Rudolph Otto has so ably described in his book *The Idea of the Holy*. It is this implication of the light as it shines back on the religious subject which many imperfect revelations of the  $\delta\rho\gamma\eta$  of God have failed to grasp. But in a way that only Paul could do he lets this light shine, this awareness which is continually revealed (present tenses) as men meet Jesus Christ; he lets it shine

out into every corner of life. It shines on the religion and philosophy of the Greek (1:22) and the Jew (2:1 ff.) and on the resultant moral life of either people (1:26 ff. and 2:17 ff.). In every case we see in man again the 'dust and ashes' in a brokenness, a rottenness and increasingly multiplied sinfulness.

The first coloration that makes up this beam of revelational light then is that of the *ἀργή* of God and the corresponding awareness of the sinful creatureliness of man. It is then in the prayer of the publican 'be merciful to me a sinner', which has been repeated by Christians truly aware of the mystery of the deity ever since, that true revelational light begins to shine.

But there is a second colouring in this revelational process which may occasionally chronologically precede the first but which logically grows out of it. This second is the revelation of the *δικαιοσύνη* of God. This Greek term *δικαιοσύνη* is usually translated into English with the term 'righteousness'. But again we find the translation misleading for in modern usage we tend to associate the term righteousness with the moral characteristic of standing free from guilt. But exegetes are now generally agreed that the term *δικαιοσύνη* does not refer primarily to ethical standing but rather to the Hebrew concept of God as a warrior leading forth in 'saving activity'. The analogy of revelation then to which the term *δικαιοσύνη* points is distinctly not that of a being who is set before us in all his righteous splendour to be wondered at by the expectant audience. It is rather that of a dynamic purposiveness and process which is to be known as it is joined. To know the revelation of God as righteousness is to look within ourselves and to see that in Jesus Christ we have been joined in the creative saving activity of God in the midst of the world.

Thus far it may seem possible to identify the saving activity or *δικαιοσύνη* of God with one of the number of ideas of the dialectical progress in history. Such an identification was very prominent of course in Israel's history and is always one aspect of this *δικαιοσύνη*. But the inner esoteric nature of this saving activity is seen when we turn to the corresponding human side of this revelational light which is seen in the term *πίστις*. Because the translations of this term as 'faith' or 'belief' have become part of everyday vocabulary we tend to forget that they refer to a purely spiritual reality and to a dimension of the human consciousness for which we have no adequate analogies in natural human life. Jesus seemed at times to point to the nature of this reality as being the opposite of doubt or fear and Paul from a somewhat different point of view as the opposite of works. Recently scholars have tried to define faith as 'a moment of passivity' in order to avoid the suggestion that there could be a frame of mind which would merit salvation through a right form of belief. But surely this characteristic of the Romans which is proclaimed in all the world (1:8), which is the only context in which the 'power unto salvation' is known (1:16), and which is the revealing of the saving activity of God is more dynamic, creative, and free than

'a moment of passivity'. If then we are to understand the true import of the term *πίστις* we must see it first of all as pointing to a new dimension of the human consciousness which is opened up by the spiritual process of revelation itself and secondly as the freedom and creative activity of the soul as it relates itself to the saving activity of God. (Here we would do well to borrow from the term *γνώσις* of the ancient theologian Clement of Alexandria or the term *jyāna* of the pundits of ancient India. These terms correspond to *πίστις* in symbolizing for their religious or philosophical systems the human understanding of its participation in the divine life, but have been able to preserve more clearly both the inner nature and the creative activity that were there in the original term *πίστις* but have been lost in our development of the idea of 'faith').

The second coloration of the revelational light then is that of the *δικαιοσύνη* of God and the corresponding human activity of faith. And so it is in all aspects of the creative activity of the soul as it participates in that saving activity of God that the divine and human commune and revelational light shines.

And finally there is a third colouring in the revelational process which we may refer to as the meeting of Spirit with spirit, the divine Spirit with the human spirit. Structurally this may be thought of as the basis of the other two but logically it comes as the final fulfilment which Paul leads up to by chapter 8. Again we have in the revelation of God as *πνεῦμα* a term which suggests analogies all the way from the animistic idea of spirits to the more modern idea of spirit as an aspect of the personality. But Paul here is building on the Old Testament idea of *רוח*, 'Ruach' could with equal validity be translated as 'wind', 'breath', 'the directive or inclined aspect of the human personality' or 'the directive or inclined aspect of the divine personality'. And so in a sense it could include the 'otherness' of God who rushed into human life as wind and the 'saving activity' of God as he manifested the directive purposing aspect of his personality. But the primary and significant import of this term *רוח* of God was not in its objective manifestation of God to Israel but in providing a subjective ground for the participation of man in the divine life. It is when the *רוח* of God filled a man, whether he be carpenter, warrior, king or prophet, that he began to *share* in the burden of the creative work and purpose of God. And so the revelation of God as *רוח* or Spirit then is a pointing as it were to a realm in which man shares a common life with God and as such the term suggests the subjective ground for the communion of the divine and human in revelation.

The corresponding human awareness of this light of revelation is seen in the rich description of 'life in the Spirit' which Paul gives us in Romans 8. We need only point to the way in which this experience of life in the Spirit is not other than our union with Christ and hence is a sharing of his perspective in

both its divine and human aspects. In the first instance then it is part of Christ's participation in the life of the divine trinity for it is here that we experience the Spirit within us crying through our nature unto the Father (vv. 15, 26). But the Christian idea of revelation is never simply an escape from the natural to the spiritual, or from this world to the beyond. And so in the second instance the life in the Spirit is part of Christ's participation in the natural human order for it is here that we also experience within us the groaning and travailing of the creation (vv. 18 ff.).

And so the final coloration that makes up this beam of revelational light is that of the Spirit of God and the corresponding life of the spirit of man. It is then in the Spirit's crying within our heart 'Abba Father' and in a consciousness and articulation of the groans of creation that lie within our being that the final stage in the revelational communion of the divine and human is seen.

As we mentioned at the beginning these claims to non-Christian revelation which now confront the Church come to her as a distinct challenge. What we would hope to suggest in this essay is that this challenge can represent at the same time a golden opportunity, an opportunity to rediscover the breadth and depth that there is in the process of revelation which Jesus Christ has opened up. If we are bound by the epistemological commitments of the 'Biblical approach' we may refuse to recognize both the challenge and the opportunity. On the other hand if we are bound by the commitments of the 'historical approach' we may be unable to recognize the transcendent realm to which these revelations point. But if we can afford to open our lives to these claims we may find in ideas such as the East's more flexible understanding of the human consciousness the insight through which the revelational process opened up in Jesus Christ shall be rediscovered. It is there in the hope that the divine-human communion be seen again in its proper balance that we shall once again sense the mysterious reality of 'sin' and begin to participate in the 'saving activity' through which alone we can know the 'life in the Spirit'.

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*'God gives us many things in which He Himself has no part. Being Himself self-existent, He gives us a beginning of existence. Being Himself exempt from want, He gives us nourishment. Himself always the same, He gives us growth. Himself immortal and exempt from old age, He gives us a happy old age, and a happy death.'*

ST. CLEMENT: Stromata