

## 6

### *Contemporary Views of Revelation*

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[p.89]

"What do we mean by revelation? It is a question to which much hard thinking and careful writing are being devoted in our time, and there is a general awareness among us that it is being answered in a way that sounds very differently from the traditional formulations." These are the opening words of Dr. John Baillie's book, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (London: Oxford University Press, and New York: Columbia University Press, 1956) and they are true. Indeed, the point could be stated much more emphatically than this. The question of revelation is at the very heart of the modern theological debate. And, just because Christianity purports to be a revealed religion, whose content and character must be determined from the revelation on which it rests, this means that the real subject under discussion is the essential nature of Christianity. The modern debate is carried on with a measure of awareness of this fact among all parties, though the depth of the cleavage between the evangelical position and its alternatives within modern Protestantism is not always seen.

The aim of this essay is to survey, from the standpoint of evangelical faith, some influential lines of thought which are being prosecuted today concerning the nature of God's saving revelation of himself to man and the place of the Bible in that revelation. While limitations of space will preclude a full assessment of representative theologians, we hope to clarify the trends of the day in terms of underlying principles. It would not, in any case, be fair to take isolated statements by modern theologians, on this or any other topic,

[p.90]

as purporting to be final. Theologians generally write today in hope of furthering discussions rather than of finishing them, for modern theology is well aware of its own fluid and transitional character. The Barthian hopes that a new epoch of Church science is beginning; the liberal has never doubted that the Christian apprehension of God requires constant reassimilation and restatement in terms of shifting cultural forms; and theologians of all sympathies within the ecumenical movement envisage the synthesizing of the scattered insights of a fragmented Christendom as a task that claims urgent attention. None doubts that theology is on the move, however much disagreement there may be as to where it is going. In this situation, it would be risky to regard any particular expressions of view as other than exploratory and provisional. Our aim in this chapter must rather be to understand the tendencies which individual modern views embody, and to ask how far these represent progress along the right lines.

#### **I. HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF THE MODERN DEBATE**

We shall best understand the modern debate if we first remind ourselves of its historical antecedents.

From the earliest days of Christianity, the whole Church regarded the Bible as a web of revealed truths, the recorded utterances of God bearing witness to himself. Theologians varied in the significance which they attached to the historical character of Scripture (Irenaeus, for instance, allowed it more than Origen). Nor were they all agreed on the limits of the Canon, or on the value of allegorical modes of exegesis. But these differences concerned only the meaning and content of Scripture, and presupposed a common view of its character. In the Middle Ages, it came to be held that Scripture needed to be authenticated, interpreted and supplemented by the *ecclesia docens*, and that faith (here conceived as *fides*—credence—merely) had as its proper object the teaching of the Church, as such; but this did not mean any change of view as to the nature of Scripture. The Reformers broke with the Roman position at many points. They enthroned the Spirit in place of the Church as the authenticator and interpreter of Scripture; and, since they recognized that the Spirit's testimony to Scripture is given in and through the statements of Scripture itself, they expressed their position by speaking of Scripture as self-authenticating (*autopistos* was Calvin's word) and self-interpreting. As self-interpreting, they held, Scripture must be allowed to fix its own sense from within; arbitrary modes of interpretation, such as were practiced by the medieval allegorists, may not be imposed upon it. Scripture has only one sense: the literal (i.e., natural). This insight made possible for the first time a just appreciation of the literary categories of Scripture, and, guided by it, the Reformers laid the foundations of scientific exegesis. Concern for the literal sense in turn led them to a new understanding of the real contents of Scripture—Law and Gospel, saving history and gracious promise,

[p.91]

the love of God revealed in Christ. The self-sufficiency of Scripture was also recognized, and the Bible was set up, according to its own demand, as judge of those traditions which had previously been supposed to supplement it. Faith was now correlated with Scripture, both formally and materially; as a result, the concept of faith was enlarged so as to include, along with credence, *fiducia*—personal trust and reliance upon the Biblical promises and the Biblical Christ; and the task of theology came to be conceived, not as a matter of systematizing the agglomerated contents of the Church's teaching (the medieval view), but as, on the one hand, receiving, studying, and expounding the written Word and, on the other, reforming the belief and practice of the Church by it. These changes of view as to the place and use of Scripture in the Church were radical and far-reaching; but—and this is the point that now concerns us—there was in all this no break with the historic conception of Scripture as a unified web of revealed truths. Witness to this was borne as eloquently by Luther's doubts about the canonicity of James and Hebrews, on the grounds of their teaching, as by the proliferation of confessions in which the new-found Biblical doctrines were set out in credal form.

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, however, the history of Protestant thought was one of steady inroads made into the Reformers' position by the forces of subjectivism. By subjectivism we mean the attitude which posits final authority for faith and life in human reason, conscience or religious sentiment. It is the application to theology of Protagoras' dictum: "Man is the measure of all things"; defined in terms of the Reformers' position, it means failure to recognize the need of submitting oneself to the correcting judgment of Scripture, and betrays an unwarrantable confidence in the power of the unaided human mind to work out religious truth for itself. It perverts the Reformers' principle of the right of private judgment, from a demand for freedom to be subject to Scripture into a demand for freedom

from such subjection: freedom, that is, to disagree with Scripture where it does not fit in with our previous ideas. Subjectivism has taken two characteristic forms: *rationalistic* and *mystical*. In the first, final appeal in matters of faith is made to the verdict of speculative reason, informed by extra-biblical principles of judgment; in the second, to the content of the empirical religious consciousness. The first appeared on the circumference of seventeenth-century Protestant orthodoxy, in certain a priori developments and modifications of the doctrine of Scripture and in a widespread reversion to the Scholastic belief in the validity of natural theology. But the great efflorescence of rationalistic subjectivism came in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The "age of reason" forced Christianity on to the Procrustes' bed of Deism. The Enlightenment was avowedly naturalistic in temper, being as hostile to the idea of supernatural interruptions of the ordered course of nature as to that of supernatural revelation. Accordingly, it whittled down Christianity, as the English Deists had done earlier, to a mere

[p.92]

republication of the religion of nature. Kant, the greatest philosopher of the movement, denied the very possibility of factual knowledge concerning a super-sensible order, and this appeared to seal the fate of the historic doctrine of revelation. The legacy of the Enlightenment to the Church of later days was the axiom that certainly some Biblical teaching, and perhaps all, is not revealed truth; Biblical affirmations, therefore, should not be received except as confirmed by reason. Modern Protestantism has not yet fully rid itself of the incubus of this rationalistic axiom, as we shall see.

At this point Schleiermacher, the father of modern liberal theology, introduced the mystical type of subjectivism into Christian thought. He sought thereby to save Christianity from rationalistic malaise, but, despite all the skill of his ministrations, the cure was in some ways worse than the disease. To side-step Kant's critique of the idea of revealed truth, he abandoned the notion altogether, and argued that Christianity is essentially not knowledge but a feeling of dependence on God through Christ. The Christian faith is simply an infectious historical mysticism, "caught" (like measles) from contact with others who have it. Doctrine does not create Christian experience, but is created by it. Doctrinal statements are attempts to express in words borrowed from the culture of the day the contents of the corporate Christian consciousness, and theology is the systematic examination of this consciousness as thus expressed. The proper study of theologians is man; theology is an account of certain human feelings, and its method is that of a psychological science. Man's self-consciousness is the reference-point of all theological statements; to make them is simply a way of talking about oneself; they tell us nothing of God, but only what men feel about God. Theology is thus dogmatically agnostic about God and his world. As a science, it knows nothing of any events but states of mind. For information about the nature of the world and the, course of history—including the historical process out of which Christianity came—it looks to other sciences. It reads the Bible as a classic expression of religious experiences, but is not concerned with it as anything more. Schleiermacher's position made the idea of revelation really superfluous, for it actually amounted to a denial that anything is revealed. On his principles, divine revelation must be simply equated with human advance into God-consciousness. Thus, his legacy to the Church can be summed up in the axiom that, whatever else revelation may be, it is not a communication of truth from God to man. This, too, is an incubus which the Church has not yet succeeded in throwing off.

The vacuum left by Schleiermacher's denial that Christianity involves any positive world-view or historical affirmations was swiftly filled by nineteenth-century science. The devotees of "scientific" history practiced "higher criticism" on the Biblical records and rewrote the story of Hebrew-Christian religion in terms of the naturalistic principle of unilinear evolution. The supernaturalism which in fact determines the whole Biblical outlook was eliminated as a matter of method; that miracles happen was not considered

[p.93]

a permissible hypothesis, and miracle-stories in the Bible, it was held, should be dismissed as superstitious accretions, just as such stories should be if found in any other document. The question-begging character of this procedure was not seriously considered. Meanwhile, the "scientific" concept of evolution was pressed into service to provide a clue to the meaning of history, sacred and secular alike, and a glowing eschatology of inevitable progress. These rationalistic developments had the blessing of Schleiermacher's disciples, for they did not in any way impoverish Christianity as this school conceived it. And the liberal understanding of Christianity grew increasingly dominant throughout the nineteenth century.

## II. RISE OF THE "POST-LIBERAL" THEOLOGY

The first World War seemed to explode quite decisively the eschatology of inevitable progress, and led to a deep-seated uncertainty as to the rightness of the anthropocentric view of religion which had so gaily sponsored it. In this situation, two significant theological movements appeared, each stressing from complementary angles of approach the reality of the revealing action whereby God speaks to sinful man in judgment and mercy. The first was the dialectical "crisis-theology" of Karl Barth, which summoned the Church in the name of God to humble herself and listen to his catastrophic Word. The second was the "Biblical theology" movement, which first became articulate in English through the work of Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, calling the Biblical scholar in the name of historical objectivity to recognize that the Bible cannot warrantably be treated as a book of mystical devotion, nor as a hard core of non-supernatural history overlaid with unauthentic theology, but that it must be read as a churchly confession of faith in a God who has spoken and speaks still. These two movements, linked together in all manner of combinations, are the parent stems from which the theology of the past generation has grown. Taking as their own starting-point the reality of divine revelation, they have forced the Church to reconsider this theme with renewed seriousness, and to recognize that the proper task of theology is not reading off the surface level of the mind of man, as subjectivism supposed, but receiving, expounding and obeying the Word of God.

But this raises a crucial and complex problem for the theologian of the "post-liberal" age: how are we to conceive of the Word of God? in what relation does it stand to the Bible, and the Bible to it? The complexity of this issue in the minds of present-day theologians arises from the fact that they suppose themselves to be standing amid the wreckage of two fallen idols. On the one hand, the older orthodoxy, which recognized the reality of revelation and sought to build on it, was founded on belief in verbal inspiration and inerrancy; but these beliefs, it is said, have collapsed before the onslaught of Biblical criticism, and are no longer tenable. On the other hand, nineteenth century liberalism, with all its devotion to Biblical science and the study of

[p.94]

the religious consciousness, left no room for revelation at all; and that is seen not to be satisfactory either. A new synthesis is held to be required, incorporating what was right and avoiding what was wrong in both the older views. The problem, therefore, as modern theology conceives it, is this: how can the concept of divine revelation through the Bible be re-introduced without reverting to the old, "unscientific" equation of the Bible with the Word of God? It is admitted that the Biblical idea of revelation must be in some sense normative; and the main strands in the Biblical idea—that revelation is a gracious act of God causing men to know him; that his self-communication has an objective content; that faith and unbelief are correlative to revelation, the former meaning reception of it, the latter, rejection; that the subject matter of revelation concerns Jesus Christ; and that the act of revelation is effected, and its content mediated, through Scripture—are matters of general recognition. It is seen, too, that Schleiermacherian mysticism, which denies the reality of revelation in toto, and naturalistic rationalism, which substitutes for faith in what God has said faith in what I think, are both wrong in principle. Yet, it is said, we cannot go back on the liberal view of the Bible. Hence the problem crystallizes itself as follows: how can we do justice to the reality and intelligibility of revelation without recourse to the concept of revealed truth? How can we affirm the accessibility of revelation in Scripture without committing ourselves to belief in the absolute trustworthiness of the Biblical record? How can we assert the divine authority of Biblical revelation without foreclosing the possibility—indeed, it would be said, the proved reality—of human error in Scripture? Or, putting it the other way round, how on the basis of the nineteenth century view of the Bible can we vindicate the objectivity and givenness of revelation, and so keep out of the pitfalls of mysticism and rationalism? Plainly, this is a problem of some difficulty. *Prima facie*, it would seem to be an inquiry after ways and means of having one's cake and eating it. The aim proposed is, not to withdraw the Bible from the acid-bath of rationalistic criticism, but to find something to add to the bath to neutralize its corrosive effects. The problem is, how to enthrone the Bible once more as judge of the errors of man while leaving man enthroned as judge of the errors of the Bible; how to commend the Bible as a true witness while continuing to charge it with falsehood. One cannot help thinking that it would be something of a *tour de force* to give a convincing solution of a problem like this. However, such is the task attempted by modern theology. It is proposed, by drawing certain distinctions and introducing certain new motifs, so to refashion the doctrine of revelation that the orthodox subjection of heart and mind to Biblical authority and the liberal subjection of Scripture to the authority of rationalistic criticism appear, not as contradictory, but as complementary principles, each presupposing and vindicating the other. We are now to examine some of the main ideas about the nature

[p.95]

of revelation and its relation to Scripture which have been put forward in recent years for the furtherance of this enterprise.

### III. CURRENT VIEWS OF REVELATION AND SCRIPTURE

Before going further, however, it is worth pausing to see on what grounds modern theology bases its rejection of the historic view that Biblical revelation is propositional in character; for, though this rejection has become almost a commonplace of modern discussion, and is, of

course, axiomatic for those who accept Schleiermacher's interpretation of Christianity, it is clearly not something that can just be taken for granted by those who profess to reject his view.

J. K. S. Reid recognizes that "there is no a priori reason why the Bible should not have this... character" (viz., that of being a corpus of divinely guaranteed truths) (*The Authority of Scripture*, London, Methuen, 1957, pp. 162 f.). But if that is so, the a posteriori arguments brought against this view must be judged very far from decisive.

Archbishop Temple, in his much-quoted discussions of our subject (*Nature, Man and God*, London, Macmillan, 1934, Lectures XII, XIII; essay in *Revelation*, ed. Baillie and Martin, London, Faber, 1937), rejected this conception of Scripture on three counts: first, that little of it seems to consist of formal theological propositions; second, that little or none of it seems to have been produced by mechanical "dictation," or anything like it; third, that if we are to regard the Bible as a body of infallible doctrine we shall need an infallible human interpreter to tell us what it means; and "in whatever degree reliance upon such infallible direction comes in, spirituality goes out" (*Nature, Man and God*, p. 353). But, we reply, the first two points are irrelevant, and the third false. To assert propositional revelation involves no assertions or expectations a priori as to the literary categories to which the parts of Scripture will belong (only study of the text can tell us that); what is asserted is merely that all affirmations which Scripture is found to make, and all other statements which demonstrably embody scriptural teaching, are to be received as truths from God. Nor does this position involve any a priori assertions as to the psychology of inspiration, let alone the mechanical "dictation-theory," which no Protestant theologian seems ever to have held. ("Dictation" in old Protestant thought was a theological metaphor declaring the relation of the written words of Scripture to the divine intention, with no psychological implications whatever.) Temple's third point we deny; we look to Scripture itself to teach us the rules for its own interpretation, and to the Holy Spirit, the Church's only infallible teacher, to guide us into its meaning, and we measure all human pronouncements on Scripture by Scripture's own statements.

Others raise other objections to our view of the nature of Scripture. It is

[p.96]

said, for instance, that modern study has proved that Scripture errs. But proved is quite the wrong word: the truth is, rather, that modern critical scholarship has allowed itself to assume that the presence of error in Scripture is a valid hypothesis, and to interpret the phenomena of Scripture in line with this assumption. However, the hypothesis has never in any case been shown to be necessary, nor is it clear how it could be; and the Biblical doctrine of Scripture would rule it out as invalid in principle. Again, it is held that to regard the Bible as written revelation is bibliolatry, diverting to Scripture honor due only to God. But the truth is rather that we honor God precisely by honoring Scripture as his written Word. Nor is there more substance in the claim that to assert the normative authority of Scripture is to inhibit the freedom of the Spirit, who is Lord of the Word; for the Spirit exercises his Lordship precisely in causing the Church to hear and reverence Scripture as the Word of God, as Calvin reminded the Anabaptists four centuries ago.

However, despite the inconclusiveness of the arguments for so doing and the Bible's self-testimony on the other side, modern theology finds its starting-point in a denial that Scripture,

as such, is revealed truth. The generic character which this common denial imparts to the various modern views is clearly brought out by Daniel Day Williams in the following passage:

In brief this is the new understanding of what revelation is.... Revelation as the "self-disclosure of God" is understood as the actual and personal meeting of man and God on the plane of history. Out of that meeting we develop our formulations of Christian truth in literal propositions.... Revelation is disclosure through personal encounter with God's work in his concrete action in history. It is never to be identified with any human words which we utter in response to the revelation. In *Nature, Man and God*, William Temple described revelation as "intercourse of mind and event, not the communication of doctrine distilled from that intercourse."

Doctrines, on this view, are not revelation, though they are formulated on the basis of revelation. As Temple put it elsewhere, "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" (*Nature, Man and God*, p. 317). What this really means is that the historic Christian idea of revelation has been truncated; the old notion that one part of God's complex activity of giving us knowledge of himself is his teaching us truths about himself is hereby ruled out, and we are forbidden any more to read what is written in Scripture as though it were God who had written it. We are to regard Scripture as a human response and witness to revelation, but not in any sense revelation itself. After observing that nearly all theologians today take this view, Williams goes on, in the passage from which we have already quoted, to explain the significance of this change: "What it means," he writes, "is

[p.97]

that Christian thought can be set free from the intolerable dogmatism which results from claiming that God's truth is identical with some human formulation of it" (scriptural no less than later creedal, apparently). "It gives freedom for critical re-examination of every Christian statement in the light of further experience, and in the light of a fresh encounter with the personal and historical act of God in Christ" (*Interpreting Theology 1918-1952*, London, S.C.M., 1953; *What Present-day Theologians are Thinking*, New York, Harper, 1952, p. 64 f., drawing on Temple, *op. cit.*, pp. 316 ff.).

Professor Williams' statement well sums up the modern approach, and its wording suggests at once the basic problem which this approach raises: namely, the problem of objectivity in our knowledge of God. What is the criterion whereby revelation is to be known? If there is no revealed truth, and the Bible is no more than human witness to revelation, fallible and faulty, as all things human are, what guarantee can we have that our apprehensions of revelation correspond to the reality of revelation itself? We are sinful men, and have no reason to doubt that our own thoughts about revelation are as fallible and faulty as any; by what standard, then, are we to test and correct them? Is there a standard, the use of which opens in principle a possibility of conforming our ideas of revelation to the real thing? Historic Christianity said yes: the Biblical presentation of, and pattern of thinking about, revelation-facts is such a standard. Modern theology, however, cannot say this; for the characteristic modern position really boils down to saying that the only standard we have for testing our own fallible judgments is our own fallible judgment. It tells us that what we study in Scripture is not

revelation but the witness of faith to revelation; and that what as Christian students we have to do is critically to examine and assess the Biblical witness by the light, not of extra-biblical principles (that, it is agreed, would be illegitimate rationalism), but of the contents of revelation itself, which the Church by faith has some idea of already, and which it seeks to clarify to itself by this very study. Such, we are told, is the existential situation in which, and the basic motive for which, the Church studies Scripture. And the "critical re-examination of every Christian statement in the light of further experience" which is here in view is a reciprocal process of reconsidering and re-interpreting the faith of the Church and the faith of the Bible in terms of each other: not making either universally normative for the other, but evolving a series of working approximations which are offered as attempts to do justice to what seems essential and constitutive in both.

Theology pursued in this fashion is held to be "scientific," and that on two accounts. In the first place, it is said, theology is hereby established as the "science of faith," a strictly empirical discipline of analyzing the contents of Christian faith in its actual manifestations, in order to elucidate the nature of the relationship which faith is, and of the object to which it is a response. (Reference in these terms to the reality of the object of faith is thought to parry the charge that this is just Schleiermacher over again.) Then, in the

[p.98]

second place, this theological method is held to vindicate its scientific character by the fact that, in interpreting and restating the faith of the Bible, it takes account of the "scientific" critical contention that the Biblical witness contains errors and untruths, both factual and theological—a contention which, no doubt, is generally regarded these days as part of the faith of the Church. But it is clear that theology, so conceived, is no more than a dexterous attempt to play off two brands of subjectivism against each other. On the one hand, the subject proposed for study is still the Church's witness to its own experience, as such, and the contents of Scripture are still treated simply as important material within this category. It is true that (at the prompting of critical reason) the *prima facie* character of this experience, as one of objective relationship with a sovereign living God, is now taken seriously, and that due respect is paid to the Church's conviction that the Biblically-recorded experience of prophets and apostles marks a limit outside which valid Christian experience is not found, but this does not affect the basic continuity between the modern approach and that of Schleiermacher. On the other hand, autonomous reason still acts as arbiter in the realm of theological methodology, following out only those principles of judgment which it can justify to itself as "scientific" on the basis of its own independent assessment of the real nature of Christianity. It is true that (out of regard for the distinctive character of Christian experience) this "scientific" method recognizes the uniqueness of Christianity, and resists all attempts to minimize it; and to this end it requires us to master the Biblical thought-forms, in terms of which this unique experience received its classical expression. But it does not require us to accept the Biblical view of their objective significance except insofar as our reason, judging independently, endorses that view; and in this respect it simply perpetuates the theological method of the Enlightenment. The effect of following the modern approach has naturally been to encourage a kind of Biblical double-talk, in which great play is made with Biblical terms, and Biblical categories are insisted on as the proper medium for voicing Christian faith, but these are then subjected to a rationalistic principle of interpretation which eliminates from them their basic Biblical meaning (e.g., a story such as that of the Fall is treated as mythical, significant and true as a symbol revealing the actual state of men today, but false if treated as

the record of an objective historical happening). Thus theological currency has been debased, and a cloud of ambiguity now broods over much modern "biblicism." This, at least, is to the credit of Bultmann that, having pursued this approach so radically as to categorize the whole New Testament doctrine of redemption as mythical, he has seen, with a clear-headedness denied to many, that the most sensible thing to do next is to drop the mythology entirely and preach simply that brand of existentialism which, in his view, represents the New Testament's real "meaning."

It is clear that, "scientific" or not, this nicely balanced synthesis of two

[p.99]

forms of subjectivism is not in any way a transcending of subjectivism. It leaves us still to speculate as to what the Biblical symbols and experiences mean, and what is the revelation which they reflect and to which they point. It leaves us, indeed, in a state of utter uncertainty; for, if it is true (as Scripture says, and modern theology mostly agrees) that men are sinful creatures, unable to know God without revelation, and prone habitually to pervert revelation when given, how can we have confidence that the Biblical witness, and the Church's experience, and our own ideas, are not all wrong? and why should we think that by a "scientific" amalgam of the three we shall get nearer to the reality of revelation than we were before? What trust can we put in our own ability to see behind the Biblical witness to revelation so surely that we can pick out its mistakes and correct them? Such questions did not trouble the subjectivist theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who assumed the infallibility of the human intellect and wholly overlooked the noetic effects of sin; but the mid-twentieth century, haunted by memories of shattered philosophies and exploded ideals, and bitterly aware of the power of propaganda and brain-washing, and the Control that non-rational factors can have over our thinking, is tempted to despair of gaining objective knowledge of anything, and demands from the Church reasoned reassurance as to the accessibility of divine revelation to blind, bedevilled sinners. But such reassurance cannot in principle be given by those who on scriptural grounds acknowledge the reality of sin in the mind, and hence the bankruptcy of rationalism, and yet on rationalistic grounds jettison the notion of inscripturated divine truth. For unless at some point we have direct access to revelation normatively presented, by which we may test and correct our own fallible notions, we sinners will be left to drift on a sea of speculations and doubts forever. And when modern theology tells us that we can trust neither the Bible nor ourselves, it condemns us to this fate without hope of reprieve.

Modern theology is, indeed, fully aware of the scriptural and churchly conviction that revelation is objectively and normatively presented in and by the Biblical witness to it. In an attempt to do justice to this conviction while still holding Scripture to be no more than fallible human testimony, theologians focus attention on two "moments" in the divine self-revealing activity in which, they affirm, revelation does in fact confront us directly and authoritatively. These are, on the one hand, the sequence of historical events in which revelation was given, once for all, to its first witnesses; and, on the other, the repeated "encounter" in which the content of that original revelation is mediated to each successive generation of believers. Both "moments," of course, have a proper place in the Biblical concept of revelation; what is distinctive about the modern view is not its insistence on them, as such, but its attempt to do justice to them while dispensing with that which in fact links them together and is integral to

the true notion of each—namely, the concept of infallible Scriptures, given as part of the historical revelatory

[p.100]

process and conveying that which is mediated in the "encounter." Most modern statements make mention of both "moments" in combination (compare Williams' reference to "a fresh encounter with the personal and historical act of God in Christ"), but they vary in the emphasis given to each. Scholars whose main interest is in Biblical history, such as C. H. Dodd and H. Wheeler Robinson, naturally stress the first (cf. Dodd, *History and the Gospel*, London, Nisbet, 1938; and Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament*, London, Oxford University Press, 1946). Those chiefly concerned with systematic theology and apologetics, such as (reading from the right wing to the left) Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Rudolph Bultmann, lay more stress on the second (cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I. I, 2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1936, 1956; Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, London, S.C.M., 1944; *Revelation and Reason*, London, S.C.M. 1947; H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, New York, 1941; Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, I, London, Nisbet, 1941; *Faith and History* London, Nisbet, 1949; Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, London, Nisbet, 1953; Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Bartsch, London, S.P.C.K., 1953). These theologians all agree that what is communicated in the "encounter" is that which was given once for all in Christ; where they differ is in their views as to the essential content of the primary revelation and the precise nature of the existential "encounter." A third group of more philosophically-minded theologians have devoted themselves to fixing and holding a balance between these two emphases: among them, the late Archbishop Temple, Alan Richardson and John Baillie (cf. Temple, loc. cit.; Richardson, *Christian Apologetics*, London, S.C.M., 1947; Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, London, Oxford University Press, 1939, and *op. cit.*).

Can the objective accessibility of revelation be vindicated in these terms? We think not. Consider first the idea that revelation, imperfectly mirrored in the Bible, is directly available in the historical events of which the Bible bears witness. Temple expounded this idea very clearly. He thought of revelation as God's disclosure of his mind and character in the "revealing situations" of redemptive history. At no stage does God give a full verbal explanation of what he is doing, but he enlightens prophetic spirits to discern it. (The notion somewhat suggests a divine charade, to be solved by the God-inspired guesswork of human spectators.) The Biblical authors were prophetic men, and made roughly the right deductions from what they observed; though their recounting and explaining of revelation is marred throughout by errors due to human frailty. Our task is critically to work over the records which they left, checking and where necessary correcting their representations; and the facts themselves, thus discerned, will speak their own proper meaning to us.

But (not to dwell on the arbitrary and unbiblical features of this view, and

[p.101]

the fact that, if true, it would create a new authoritarianism, by making the expert historian final arbiter of the Church's faith) we must insist that, on this showing, so far from being able to use historical revelation as a norm, we can only have access to it at all through prior

acceptance of another norm. For, as Alan Richardson points out, commenting on Temple, all our study of the past is decisively controlled by the principle of interpretation which we bring to it; that is, by our antecedent ideas as to the limits of possibility, the criteria of probability and the nature of historical "meaning" and explanation. In this case, if we do not already share the supernaturalism of the Biblical writers' faith about God and his work in his world, we shall be debarred from sharing their convictions as to what happened in redemptive history. So the revealing facts of history are only accessible to those who are already sure that Christianity is true. And how do we become sure of this? By faith, says Richardson. But what is faith? Receiving what God has said, on his authority, is the basic Biblical idea. But Richardson cannot say this, for he has already told us that until we have faith we are in no position to gather from the human records of Scripture what it is that God has said. He wishes (rightly) to correlate faith with spiritual illumination. But he cannot depict this illumination as an opening of blind' eyes to see what objectively was always the case—that the Bible is God's Word written, and its teaching is his revealed truth; for to his mind this is not the case. He is therefore forced back into illuminism. He has to represent faith as a private revelation, a divine disclosure of new information not objectively accessible—namely, that what certain human writers said about God is in fact true. On his assumption that Scripture, as such, is no more than human witness, there is nothing else he can say. So we see that the idea of an objective presentation of revelation in history, when divorced from the idea of a divinely authoritative record, can only in principle be maintained on an illuministic basis. Before I can find revelation in history, I must first receive a private communication from God: and by what objective standard can anyone check this? There is no norm for testing private revelations. We are back in subjectivism with a vengeance.

At this point, however, appeal will be made to the concept of "personal encounter." This, as generally expounded, attempts to parry the charge of illuminism by the contention that God, in sovereign freedom, causes the Biblical word of man to become his word of personal address in the moment of revelation. Brunner has, perhaps, made more of this line of thought than anyone else. Basing it on an axiomatic refusal to equate the teaching of Scripture, as such, with the Word of God, he treats the concept of personal encounter as excluding that of propositional communication absolutely. God's Word in the encounter comes to me, not as information, but as demand, and faith is not mental assent, but the response of obedience. Truth becomes mine through the encounter; but this truth consists, not in any impersonal correspondence of my thoughts with God's facts, but in the

[p.102]

personal correspondence of my decision with God's demand. "Truth" is that which happens in the response of faith, rather than anything that is said to evoke that response; "truth" is an event, correlative to the event of revelation which creates it. But this is a very difficult conception. If we are to take seriously Brunner's Pickwickian use of the word "truth," then his idea is one of a communion in which nothing is communicated save a command. God speaks only in the imperative, not at all in the indicative. But is it a recognizable statement of the Christian view of revelation to say that God tells us nothing about himself, but only issues orders? And what is the relation between the command given in the encounter and what is written in Scripture? Never one of identity, according to Brunner; Scripture is human witness proceeding from and pointing to communication in encounter; but not embodying its content; for that which is given in the encounter is ineffable, and no form of words can properly express it. So, where Augustine said: "What Thy Scripture says, that (only that, but all that)

Thou dost say," Brunner says: "What Thy Scripture says, that is precisely not what Thou dost say." But how, in this case, can Brunner parry the charge of uncontrolled and uncontrollable mysticism? Nor would he be better off if he said that what is spoken by God in the encounter is the exact content of Scripture texts, that and no more; for then he would either have to abandon the idea that Scripture is throughout nothing but fallible and erring human testimony, or else to say that God speaks human error as his truth, which is either nonsense or blasphemy.

Has the objectivity of revelation been vindicated by this appeal to the "encounter"? Has anything yet been said to make intelligible the claim that, though we regard Scripture as no more than fallible human witness, we still have available an objective criterion, external to our own subjective impressions, by which our erring human ideas about revelation can be measured and tested? It seems not. By deserting Richardson for Brunner, we seem merely to have exchanged a doctrine of illuminism (private communication of something expressible) for one of mysticism (private communication of something inexpressible). The problem of objectivity is still not solved; and, we think, never can be on these terms.

#### **IV. LESSONS FROM THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION**

From this survey, sketchy as it is, we learn three things.

First, we see the essential kinship of the various modern views of revelation. They differ in detail, but all begin from the same starting-point and have the same aim: to restore essential Biblical dimensions to the older liberal position.

Second, we see the dilemmas in which modern theology hereby involves itself. "Post-liberal" thought turns out to be liberalism trying to assimilate into itself certain Biblical convictions which, once accepted, actually spell its

[p.103]

doom. The spectacle which it provides is that of liberalism destroying itself by poisoning its own system. For liberalism, as such, rests, as we saw, on a rationalistic approach to the Bible; and the acceptance of these new insights makes it as irrational in terms of rationalism as it always was unwarrantable in terms of Christianity to continue following such an approach. By recognizing the incomprehensibility of God and his sovereign freedom in revelation, while retaining its peculiar view of Scripture—by trying, that is, to find room for supra-rational factors on its own rationalistic basis—liberalism simply lapses from coherent rationalism into incoherent irrationalism. For the axiom of rationalism in all its forms is that man's mind is the measure of all things; what is real is rational, and only what is rational is real, so that in terms of rationalism the supra-rational is necessarily equated with the irrational and unreal. By allowing for the reality of God who in himself and in his works passes our comprehension, theological rationalism declares its own bankruptcy, and thereby forfeits its quondam claim to interpret and evaluate Scripture, with the rest of God's works, on rationalistic principles—a claim which it could only make on the assumption of its own intellectual solvency. It is simply self-contradictory for modern theology still to cling to the liberal concept of Scripture while professing to have substituted the Biblical for the liberal doctrine of God. And the fact

that it continues to do the former cannot but create doubt as to whether it has really done the latter.

Again, by admitting the noetic effects of sin, and the natural incompetence of the human mind in spiritual things, without denying the liberal assumption that reason has both the right and the power to test and explode the Bible's view of its own character as revealed truth, modern theology is in effect telling us that now we know, not merely that we cannot trust Scripture, but also that we cannot trust ourselves; which combination of convictions, if taken seriously, will lead us straight to dogmatic skepticism. Thus, through trying to both have our cake and eat it, we shall be left with nothing to eat at all. Modern theology only obscures this situation, without remedying it, when it talks here of paradox and dialectical tension. The truth is that, by trying to hold these two self-contradictory positions together, modern theology has condemned itself to an endless sequence of arbitrary oscillations between affirming and denying the trustworthiness of human speculations and Biblical assertions respectively. It could only in principle find stability in the skeptical conclusion that we can have no sure knowledge of God at all.

Thirdly, we see that the only way to avoid this conclusion is to return to the historic Christian doctrine of Scripture, the Bible's own view of itself, which this book is concerned to present. Only when we abandon the liberal view that Scripture is no more than fallible human witness, needing correction by us, and put in its place the Biblical conviction that Scripture is in its nature revealed truth in writing, an authoritative norm for human thought about God, can we in principle vindicate the Christian knowledge of God

[p.104]

from the charge of being the incorrigibly arbitrary product of our own subjective fancy. Reconstructed liberalism, by calling attention to the reality of sin, has shown very clearly our need of an objective guarantee of the possibility of right and true thinking about God; but its conception of revelation through historical events and personal encounter with the speaking God ends, as we saw, in illuminism or mysticism, and is quite unable to provide us with such a guarantee. No guarantee can, in fact, be provided except by a return to the old paths—that is, by a renewed acknowledgment of, and submission to, the Bible as an infallible written revelation from God.

[p.404]

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