

ON THE LOGIC OF 'REVELATION'

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It is often argued that we do not need philosophical analysis to understand the concept of God or to try to decide whether such a concept is or is not coherent, for God describes himself in the Scriptures. In talking in an appropriate manner about faith we must remain within this closed circle of faith, for a faith appropriate to revelation can be understood only by revelation. Without revelation there can be no Christian faith and to understand what it is to have such faith one must, in Barth's words, have the good tidings "of Jesus Christ, his words and deeds, his death and resurrection."¹ This, to switch to the words of Brunner, "is a divine action; it is a movement which does not proceed from man, but one which comes to him."²

A philosopher listening to this for the first time is likely to be utterly amazed. The natural rather untutored response is to ask: Why believe this is so? There are many putative or candidate revelations. Why believe in this particular putative revelation? More fundamentally still, why believe in any revelation or even believe there can be any revelation at all? What criteria can be given for accepting that what an individual or confessional group maintains is revelation, is indeed revelation or The Revelation.

Things begin to get interesting when we note how theologians try to block these questions. A significant attempt at such blockage occurs in Gordon Kaufman's important essay "Philosophy of Religion and Christian Theology."³ Kaufman argues that it follows from the fact that one is committed to a Christian doctrinal frame that one is committed to the claim that there can be no human perspective higher than or superior to revelation in accordance with which revelation can be judged. To give up that commitment is in effect to cease to be a Christian. One cannot be a believer in Christian revelation, one cannot remain within the Christian framework, and admit that there is a human point of view external to and apart from revelation which can understand and investigate revelation and assess its truth.

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¹Karl Barth, *Against the Stream*, pp. 205-14.

²Emil Brunner, *The Philosophy of Religion from the Standpoint of Protestant Theology*. In this context see my "Dialectical Theology and Humanism," *The Humanist*, forthcoming.

³Gordon Kaufman, "Philosophy of Religion and Christian Theology," *The Journal of Religion*, vol. XXXVII (October, 1957).

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To think that there is or could be such a position is itself (among other things) to fail to understand the concept of Christian revelation. It is as senseless to say that revelation can be assessed by human standards as it is to say that a bachelor can be married. Anything that could be so assessed would *not* be revelation.

In further explicating the concept of revelation, we came to see that a revelation is not a discovery. It is not something we can gain through scientific investigation, intuition or mystical insight, but is something *not otherwise accessible* to man which God chooses to reveal to man. It is something that suddenly and inexplicably comes to man from beyond him and not something that he comes to understand from the normal exercise or even the abnormal exercise of his cognitive faculties. In speaking of revelation, we are speaking of something *essentially* unpredictable which must come from beyond all human capacities. It is something which is hidden from man if God does not act to reveal it. Thus the term 'revelation' "refers first and foremost to *God's act*, not man's". It refers to something which, apart from God's grace, "is in principle accessible only to God and not to man and which therefore only God can make known to man".⁴

In considering what we can know or understand or what we can accept as a sound argument or a valid line of reasoning, we inescapably must operate with the canons of validity, intelligibility and truth that human beings have (including, of course, the ones that we might devise). Revelation, Kaufman argues, necessarily is not accounted for by these canons and would from such an exclusively 'human point of view' "have to be regarded as absurdity or illusion . . ."⁵ But this is only to say in a misleading and dramatic way that revelation is revelation and not discovery, scientific or mathematical knowledge, intuition or even mystical insight. It is that which is not assessable in human categories or predictable through human imagination. It is God's free self-disclosure of something which otherwise is utterly hidden from man. We cannot expect anything which is to count as 'revelation' to fit in with our conceptions of knowledge; "anything that did fit in with these canons could be known *ipso facto* not to be revelation . . ."⁶ To argue, Kaufman continues, that revelation is "illogical or irrational, or something which we cannot reasonably accept on the basis of what we know of human experience" is not to have actually said anything destructive of the notion, but to have unwittingly shown that one does not understand the concept of revelation.

Given the above explanation, Kaufman argues, it should no longer seem "so arbitrary that (1) no other criteria are allowed sufficient

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

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validity to judge revelation", and (2) that the Christian theologian will refuse to give philosophy or what I have called philosophical theology primacy over theology or, at a more fundamental level still, that he will, and indeed must refuse to give the canons of human reason primacy over the commitments of Christian faith. The theologian "is operating under the peculiar compulsion to take his final norms from the specific event or series of events which he refers to as revelation" and he cannot "accept the philosopher's work as in any real sense normative or definitive for his own work, however conclusive it may seem to be as a work in philosophy".⁷

In philosophy and theology there are rival basic criteria for the fixation of belief and while "each point of view finds it possible to deal with the other in its own terms, neither is in a position to assert with finality the error of the other and the truth of itself".⁸

It is tempting to think that at this point rational dialogue between philosophy and theology has come to an end and indeed not with a bang but a whimper. Let me give you some of my reasons for believing that the dialogue should not end there by indicating what nags me most in the theological line of reasoning which I have just explicated. What nags me most is the claim that we cannot properly argue about whether revelation is an actuality. I feel the force of the arguments leading up to it, yet I also feel confident that such a claim must be mistaken: that it is far more reasonable to believe that something is wrong with the arguments leading to such a conclusion than to believe that we cannot properly argue whether revelation is an actuality. To this it is surely natural to respond that I am in effect appealing to one of my *bliks* or 'saving myths'. I very much need a sound argument for having such a conviction.

Let us start by taking note of certain anthropological and historical facts. There are literally, if we take all the cultures of the world, nearly a thousand competing faiths all (or nearly all) with their putative revelations. Given what a revelation is, in trying to decide which candidate revelations are genuine revelations, it is irrelevant (or so it would seem at least) that a candidate revelation comes from a large or dominant culture, a scientifically more sophisticated culture, a culture which has a complex literary and philosophical history, or even a literate as distinct from a preliterate culture. As far as claims to religious truth or divine revelation are concerned, "advanced cultures" have no advantage over their primitive contemporaries. But once this is admitted we are faced with this obvious problem: given the fact that there are a multitude of alleged revelations, diverse and often conflicting, what reason have we to think that we as members of

⁷Ibid., p. 240.

⁸Ibid., p. 242.

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a given confessional group have the real article, or that any of the alleged revelations have the real article, or that any of the alleged revelations is the real article? Is it not an incredible bit of ethnocentric hubris to think that our tradition — one tradition among a thousand — is the tradition which has the Word or the genuine encounters while the others are to a greater or lesser degree deceived? But if we can only confess and proclaim 'Christian Truth' and if we cannot even properly raise the question of how to decide which putative revelation is right, i.e., a genuine revelation, are we not in just this bind?

However, if revelation is what it purports to be, is it clearly not the case that there can be no appraisal of revelation or no deciding whether revelation is an actuality? Surely this is a surd: if this is the conclusion we are forced to, one would have to be mad to believe in revelation for one would have to be willing to believe, for no reason at all, that the candidate revelation of one's own tradition was *the* or at least *a* genuine revelation and the other conflicting candidate revelations were *Erzatz* revelations. You Jews and Moslems indeed are good fellows but we Christians have the Truth. (It is no help here to say à la Lessing that they all say the same thing really, for they plainly do not. This is particularly obvious when we consider primitive religions as well as the different candidate revelations of the so-called great religions.)

It will not help us out of this bind simply to proclaim that we have God's self-disclosure, for the others allege that also, or allege that they have a saving revelation of some ultimate reality. To claim truth in such a circumstance is either folly or schizoid arrogance or both. And if this is what it is to have faith, then to have faith is to crucify one's intellect and one's moral sense as well.

However, the other side of the coin is that if there is to be revelation must it not have at least in the most basic respects the logical character claimed by the dialectical theologians? There are strong reasons for thinking the answer should be 'Yes' and that philosophers who want to evaluate what is actually given in revelation are trying to square the circle. For if x is a revelation there can be no norms, exterior to x , to judge its correctness, for anything which could be so assessed would by *that very count* fail to be a revelation. Anyone who understood the use of 'revelation' in religious contexts would see that this is so. If H confesses that p is a revealed truth of Christianity and if p can be known to be true or false on historical grounds or any other purely human grounds, then p is not independent of the changes and chances of time and thus not absolute, it is not a creative Word which is superior to all being, it is not the self-disclosure of the being we have characterized as God, it is not the something essentially

unpredictable which must come from beyond all human capacities or that which necessarily stands as a judgement over every form of human activity. Because it is none of these things *p* is not and cannot be a revelation any more than a married man can be a bachelor. If *H* knows that these conditions obtain, in claiming that *p* is a revelation he has in effect exhibited (assuming he has neither misspoken himself nor lied) that he does not understand the use of the term 'revelation'. He is calling something 'a revelation' which couldn't possibly be a revelation and is in effect admitting a test for what he takes to be a revelation which is inapplicable to genuine revelations, if indeed there are any or could be any.

These conceptual claims should make the wary philosopher agree with the theologian that there are sound logical reasons why we cannot evaluate or assess the truth of what is actually given in revelation. It is not faith but conceptual analysis which justifies the claim — in reality a truism — that there can be no human point of view external to and apart from revelation which can know that revelation and assess its truth. Our tension turns on wanting both to affirm this conceptual remark and to affirm the claim, which appears at least to be incompatible with it, about the diversity of revelations and the ethnocentricity of theological arguments in which an appeal to revelation is made.

The way out is to start by asking why we should accept as true the Christian theologian's claim that what *is taken* by Christians as revelation should be taken as the truth about ultimate reality, even in the face of the fact that there are a multitude of alleged revelations none of which can be known to be the genuine article. Under such circumstances to opt for one as being the truth seems not only non-rational but positively irrational and something to be avoided.

We are also in a position now to do justice both to the theologian's correct (or at least seemingly correct) conceptual point and to the philosopher's complaint about the appeal to revelation. Surely, given the use of 'revelation', Kaufman is right in maintaining "Revelation, if it is revelation, judges us and our standards; we are in no position to judge it".⁹ But the rub is in 'if it is revelation'. Though we cannot judge revelation, we can and must judge whether any given putative revelation is something which could count as 'a revelation' or whether anything at all could count as a revelation. Here man is indeed — and inescapably — the measure of all things which concern man. And this is not a hubris but a truism. Man cannot judge revelation, if there is any, but he can judge whether 'revelation' has a coherent use, e.g., whether the very concept is self-contradictory or in some other

⁹Ibid., p. 239.

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way defective. Moreover, a rational man in our cultural context faced with the plethora of competing candidates for revelation and with the at least seeming incoherence of such concepts as God and nirvana cannot but take carefully reasoned philosophical arguments as normative for both theology and religion. There is no way of being sure in religion that can rightly elude philosophical scrutiny and judgment.