

Preface

1. Discerning God's 'speaking' .

The horrors of war not only lead to a rise in church attendance. They also lead thoughtful Christians to ask again the old, old question: How exactly, if at all, has God spoken to us?

Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation issued in 1965 by Vatican II, begins its first chapter with the words: 'It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will' (n. 2).

Would it in fact make sense to talk about a 'non-revealing God'? But some of what we read about God even in the Bible can revolt us. And what sense can we make of all the outrageous things that human beings have done to others supposedly under the guidance of sacred scripture? The pervasiveness of anthropomorphic language in Christianity can be a problem for some of us too. It is tempting to look for other grounds for believing that God has revealed himself to the world—reasons tucked away inside our heads, nothing to do with the past.

This, though, is not easy. Our line of reasoning can quickly become circular. For what reliable grounds have we got for claiming that the Source of our being must be self-communicating? None, surely, that are not based at least partly on what we believe to have been that Source's self-communication? And by that is meant what all sorts of persons and believing communities in the past have declared to be God's self-revelation. For it is only ideas that we already have about God (some of them hidden in our subconscious) that make it possible for us to discern God's self-communication to us personally as 'God's'. Our discernment is *never* 'just our own'; it *never* comes absolutely 'cold'.

It is not primarily because of the odd or gory content of some of those past testimonies to God's self-communication that those testimonies seem to so many people today positive obstacles to faith. It was easier for men and women to make sense of the idea of God 'speaking' to them when the notion of 'the cosmos' shaped their way of understanding reality. They could, in those days, see themselves mirrored in the heavens without great difficulty, see in all things messages meant for them. The breakdown of the notion of 'the cosmos' makes it more difficult for us to recognize God's 'speaking'. Therefore now many of us in the West who still believe in God, including many practising Christians, take really seriously solely 'the God speaking within'. In other words, sell out to the currently all-pervading radical individualism. But that is no genuine solution. For our predominant way of understanding ourselves and the universe has not only led us to see most of that universe as hardly anything to do with us; it has very nearly cut us off from the past too.

But the Church says—quite rightly—that theists cannot get away

from the past. Not altogether. *Dei Verbum* starts from God as he is found in the story of ancient Israel.

2. *Dei Verbum*

Here there is no point in attempting to comment on *Dei Verbum* more than extremely briefly. (The ground has already been covered many times, and above all in the important commentaries of De Lubac and Ratzinger.) Note particularly the way the document is ordered. Note, too, its stress on the interrelating of God's 'acting' and 'speaking' (Père Jossua has something to say about this). But the most obvious influence of *Dei Verbum* in the post-conciliar Church has been the emphasis that it gives to scripture and to the place it should have in Church life. See the guidance it gives to exegetes: 'Rightly to understand what the sacred author wanted to affirm in his work, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer, and to the conventions which the people in his time followed in their dealings with one another' (n. 12). See also its requests for 'suitable and correct translations' of the Bible (n. 22), and for theologians and preachers to develop a profound sense of scripture (n. 24).

In the 1960s *Dei Verbum* seemed like a breath of fresh air in the Catholic Church. If it is not so obviously so in the 1990s, that could be a sign of its effect. But—to use a 1960s word—there was nothing trendy about it. It says unequivocally that we cannot hear God's word if we cut ourselves off from our history.

3. *The present number*

This special issue was originally planned to be the first of a series on fundamental aspects of Christian faith. The Editorial Board considered that it would be good to begin with an examination of the Christian understanding of 'revelation'. In fact what is being offered here is not an integrated treatment of this topic (it would be mad to attempt that in such a tiny space), but a discussion of five issues relating to God's 'conversing' with us.

First of all, Timothy McDermott of South Africa, who combines a very considerable knowledge of Aquinas (in 1989 Eyre & Spottiswoode published his Concise Translation of the *Summa*) with many years of researching the theory of computer languages and artificial intelligence, approaches from his theoretical background the question of how God works in 'sacred history'.

Next we turn to the word 'revelation' itself. It is a tricky word, as a few moments' reflection on how it works *outside* fundamental theology will show the reader. Does it suck us into systems of closure? Does it treat as being 'unveiled' something rather 'sought for'? Does it tend to conceal the importance of the hearer? These are the questions that leap to mind. In his book *The Origins of Modern Atheism*, Michael Buckley SJ drew

attention to how one of the consequences of the ‘Copernican revolution’ in classifications of the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries was that theologians felt compelled to follow the crowd, and so turned ‘revelation’ into a material concept (in other words, geologists came to be concerned with rocks, etc. etc., and theologians with ‘revelation’).

In his article here on some of the issues, problems and presuppositions which ‘divine revelation’, as a term and concept, involves today, Jean-Pierre Jossua OP, former Rector of Le Saulchoir and for many years on the Central Directorate of *Concilium*, favours the all-encompassing term ‘manifestation’ rather than ‘revelation’. He argues that ‘it is the proclamation of the mystery which configures our act of faith and the whole of our faith experience; and, conversely, the reality of our faith experience expands that confessed faith’.

Today fundamentalism is promoting world-wide a very different idea of what revelation is. In ‘Time and Telling’, Timothy Radcliffe OP, Prior Provincial of the English Dominicans, follows a number of other scholars in criticising the introduction into the world of scripture by fundamentalists of the basically modern notion of the ‘dispassionate witness’. Father Radcliffe, however, is rooting his critique in a discussion of what the differences between modern and biblical understandings of time imply.

In his paper here, Rowan Williams, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, speaks about ‘the tyranny of a “total perspective”’. He wrote in his article of 1986, ‘Trinity and Revelation’ (*Modern Theology* 2:3, pp. 197–212), about how easily theological language could be thought of even by theologians ‘as essentially heteronomous, determined from an elusive “elsewhere”’. He stated that this was true not only of the propositional account of revelation favoured by fundamentalists but also of ‘a liberal theology which appeals to some isolable core of encounter’—one which in fact still operated with ‘a model of truth as something ultimately separable in our minds from the dialectical process of its historical reflection and appropriation’. In ‘Theological Integrity’ Professor Williams has taken up and developed some ideas found in that earlier article. He speaks about the need for ‘dispossession, suspicion of our accustomed ways of mastering our environment’. Of contemplative prayer, he says it is ‘precisely what resists the urge of religious language to claim a total perspective.’

And this brings us to the last contribution, ‘Revelation and Contemplation’, in which Nicholas Peter Harvey, who has written widely on prayer, also argues—but from a different perspective—for the intimacy of the link between ‘the revelatory’ and ‘the contemplative’. For him it is a crucially important link for us all, not just for theologians: the only way of opening the door that leads from ‘the habit of unredeemed self-securing’ into ‘a newly vibrant universe where old anchors are no longer in place but it is possible to breathe more easily’.

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