

Revelation in the Reflections of Reason

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The relationship between reason and religion has turned out to be one of the perennial intellectual problems, and it may not be amiss to characterise it as more of an acrimonious than an amorous affair. Naturally each side has formed its own coterie of defenders and advocates to safeguard its doctrinal integrity and inviolability against any encroachments of the opposition. Cognisant of this continuous conflict, the pope's *Fides et Ratio* attempts to address in one single discourse these two incompatible inclinations as manifested among the contemporary thinkers interested in this debate: on the one hand, the scepticisms of immanentism, and, on the other, the suspicions of fideism.

Immanentists, in the words of the encyclical, distrust 'the human being's great capacity for knowledge' and 'rest content with partial and provisional truths, no longer seeking to ask radical questions about the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence.' (§ 5) Accordingly, 'amid the pressures of an immanentist habit of mind' (§ 15), reason 'has lost the capacity to lift its gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being. Abandoning the investigation of being, modern philosophical research has concentrated instead upon human knowing. Rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned.' (§ 5) Consequently, philosophy 'seems to have forgotten that men and women are always called to direct their steps towards a truth which transcends them.' (§ 5) Indeed, the pontiff surmises that the rise of 'currents of irrationalism' could be traced back to the nineteenth century when 'the affirmation of the principle of immanence, central to the rationalist argument, . . . provoked a radical questioning of claims once thought indisputable.' (§ 91)

Fideists, on the other hand, are characterised by the encyclical in terms of 'their distrust of reason's natural capacities' (§ 52) whereby they fail 'to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith, indeed for the very possibility of belief in God.' (§ 55) As one of the most important symptoms that the pope identifies among the aberrations of fideism is its tendency towards "biblicism" in scriptural interpretation: a tendency which is manifested by making 'the reading and exegesis of Sacred Scripture the sole criterion of truth.' (§ 55) *Fides*

et Ratio also dwells on ‘the scant consideration accorded to speculative theology’ and the ‘disdain for the classical philosophy’ as the other major shortcomings of fideism. (§ 55)

To appreciate the full significance of the foregoing characterisations, they should be set against the papal perspective on revelation, according to which the truth made known to us by revelation ‘is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason.’ (§ 15) Correspondingly, this paper is devoted to a re-examination of the liaison between reason and religion in terms of the role of revelation in religion and its source of epistemic justifiability. The approach that I am adopting here is more of a deconstructive slant in the sense that an attempt will be made to unmask the suppressed concept, or more precisely the suppressed precept, that is presupposed by those who put forward revelation as an independent source of knowledge. Specifically, the deconstruction involves an examination of the epistemological process by which revelation can be authenticated and thereby – to use a Derridean phrase – to ‘reverse the hierarchy’ of epistemic authority.¹

The basic contention is that revelation seems to face an epistemological dilemma: namely, either it can be rationally justified or it cannot. If it can, it means that it does not transcend the powers of reason and, at least after being justified, it ceases to merit the name of revelation by being absorbed into the sphere of justified knowledge. On the other hand, if revelation cannot be rationally justified, it becomes indistinguishable from illusory states of mind and thus ceases to possess any epistemological significance. Should the deconstruction succeed, it would turn out that revelation, as a genuine source of knowledge and understanding, is primarily dependent on reason for its epistemic validation.

Revelation as a concept and an event plays a pivotal role in religion – or more accurately in the Judaic-Christian-Islamic tradition or, as otherwise known as, the Semitic tradition. Even in the case of non-Semitic religions, one could show that although they do not employ the vocabulary of revelation, they cultivate the memory of certain outstanding religious personalities and the study of certain religious writings as privileged channels of enlightenment and of access to the transcendent. Such features could, therefore, be readily interpreted along a broad understanding of revelation. For example, in the case of Buddhism which is generally considered to be a religion without revelation, as Keith Ward notes, ‘there is certainly an authoritative teaching in Buddhism, derived from the enlightened insight of Gautama. He had a special mode of access to the supra-sensory realm, nirvana, and he revealed it to his disciples by turning

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 41.

the wheel of dharma. In so far as the Buddha is himself seen as having passed beyond the sensory realm into nirvana, one can properly speak of a communication of information from that realm. It is in that sense that it is not wholly improper to speak of Buddhism as a revealed religion . . . as long as one is careful to note that there is no personal supernatural god who reveals the holy truths that most disciples learn from the Buddha.²

It should be said that even in the case of Christianity one also needs to enter a caveat. The term “revelation” does not appear in the creeds and seldom commands a central *locus* in the Scriptures. Historically speaking, treatises on revelation did not begin to be written until the Enlightenment period, in controversies with the Deists. But, since that time theologians have recognised that an implicit doctrine of revelation underlies every major theological undertaking. Indeed, many of the great theological disputes turn out, upon reflection, to rest on different understandings of revelation. As Avery Dulles notes, the modern and recent controversies ‘about the divinity of Christ, the inerrancy of the Bible, the infallibility of the Church, secular and political theology, and the value of other religions would be unintelligible apart from the varying convictions about revelation.’³

Nevertheless, focusing on the Semitic tradition, it may be noted that from an expository point of view in all three religions an episode of revelation formed the initial inception of the new path, and the subsequent articulation of the message was informed by a stream of revelatory incidents. Thus, revelation is construed as some kind of divine disclosure towards which the human response of acceptance and submission is referred to as *faith*.⁴ Basically, these religions are

² Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 58.

³ Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), p. ix. In his monumental monograph, *Theology of Revelation*, René Latourelle chronicles the rise of revelation in Christianity as follows. With some foundation in fourteenth-century Scholasticism, the concept of revelation began to achieve prominence only in the sixteenth century, when orthodox theology, both Protestant and Catholic, appealed to it as justification for its confessional positions. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the doctrine of revelation was further developed in opposition to the Deists, who held that human reason by itself could establish all the essential truths of religion. The apologetic notion of revelation which had been formulated at the time of the Enlightenment was attacked and defended in the nineteenth century, when evolutionists held that all religious truth was the outgrowth of human enquiry and when positivists denied that the human mind could have knowledge of the divine. [René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1966)]

⁴ Some critical theologians, however, make faith prior to revelation, and even demote revelation to the status of second-order language (spoken from God's side) as opposed to the language of faith (spoken from man's side) as a first-order language. James Mackey, for instance, calls revelation ‘a metaphorical or mythical description of the literal truth of faith,’ which adds no new content to the latter but invests it with a claim to divine authority. [James P. Mackey, *Problems in Religious Faith* (Dublin: Helicon, 1972), p. 191]

founded on the conviction that the existence of the world and the final meaning and value of all that it contains ultimately depend on a personal God who, while distinct from the world and everything in it, is absolute in terms of reality, goodness, and power. They profess to derive their fundamental vision not from mere human speculation, which would be tentative and uncertain, but from God's own testimony, *i.e.* from a historically given divine revelation.

Part of the underlying rationale for revelation in these religions is that "revealed truth" is, if not completely but at least partially, beyond the capacity of the human mind to discover by its own connatural powers. This is in part based on the consideration that human reason is competent only within the limited sphere of worldly matters. To refer to a rather radical rendition of this rationale for revelation, Emil Brunner, for example, remarks that insofar as the truths of religion are concerned 'the divine revelation alone is both the ground and the norm'.⁵ However, the objective here is to show by a process of epistemic deconstruction that the concept of revelation "suppresses an opposite" concept which it presupposes and derives its privileged position and primacy from it. If the argument succeeds, the privileged position and primacy attributed to revelation/religion should be assigned to the presupposed concept, namely, our rational faculty.

To set the scene, a few preliminary points are in order. First, the notion of revelation is understood in its traditional sense as a *communicational* relationship between a person and a divine being. It should, however, be immediately noted that I am conscious of the fact that there are other conceptions of revelation like *Heilsgeschichte* or *non-propositional* model of revelation.⁶ In his comprehensive theological survey, Dulles classifies the various theories of revelation into the following five categories: (i) Revelation as Doctrine; (ii) Revelation as History; (iii) Revelation as Inner Experience; (iv) Revelation as Dialectical Presence; and (v) Revelation as New Awareness. The models are respectively characterised as follows: (i) 'Revelation is divinely authoritative doctrine inerrantly proposed as God's word by the Bible or by official church teaching.'; (ii) 'Revelation is the manifestation of God's saving power by his great deeds in history.'; (iii) 'Revelation is the self-manifestation of God by his intimate presence in the depths of the human spirit.';

⁵ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), p. 3. An even more radical stance is taken by Karl Barth where he claims that religion 'is unbelief' since man's 'attempts to know God from his own standpoint are wholly and entirely futile . . . in religion, man bolts and bars himself against revelation by providing a substitute.' [Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, Part 2: 17.2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. 299]

⁶ See, for example, John Hick's *Philosophy of Religion*, Third Edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1983), Chapter Five.

(iv) 'Revelation is God's address to those whom he encounters with his word in Scripture and Christian proclamation.'; and, (v) 'Revelation is a breakthrough to a higher level of consciousness as humanity is drawn to a fuller participation in the divine creativity.'⁷ However, Dulles admits that the five models could still be classified into the two broader categories of propositional and non-propositional accounts of revelation: 'Proponents of the first two models hold that revelation is inseparably connected with the knowledge of specific statements or deeds attributed to divine agency. Proponents of the last three models commonly assert that revelation gives no factual information.'⁸

Nonetheless, the model presented here is wide enough to include both the orthodox propositional interpretation of revelation as well as the non-propositional one, and the accompanying argument is sufficiently general to be applicable to all models of revelation. Moreover, it should perhaps be mentioned that there are theologians like William Abraham who argue that a non-propositional understanding of revelation is more akin to a sort of radical 'agnosticism rather than any positive religious faith.'⁹ It is also claimed that the *biblical* literature itself seems to be more in line with what George Mavrodes calls the *communication* model of revelation according to which revelation might be seen as a primary means of communicating propositional knowledge to its recipients by the divinity.¹⁰

Thus, on the model presumed here, revelation could be schematically represented as

A reveals *c* to *R* by means of *m*,

where *A*, *c*, *R* and *m* stand respectively for the revelatory agent, the content of revelation, the recipient of content, and the modes or means of transmission. Obviously, the schema cannot be claimed to be complete and exhaustive as it does not include variables like place and time, yet it incorporates elements that appear to be the most significant ones in the notion of revelation.

The second point to note is that whatever one's conception of revelation is, it has to conform to a twofold constraint which may be referred to as *diachronic intersubjectivity*.¹¹ The rationale for this condition is as follows: on the one hand, the conception has to take into account not only the *individual* but also the *corporate* significance of revelation, because a notion of revelation construed solely in

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁹ William Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 21.

¹⁰ George Mavrodes, *Revelation in Religious Belief* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

¹¹ The encyclical's remark that the 'word of God is addressed to all people, in every age and in every part of the world' (§ 64) may be interpreted as an expression of the diachronic intersubjectivity constraint on revelation.

terms of a purely personal phenomenon would be incapable of creating a communal convergence.¹² Indeed, any such personal experience, taken in itself, would be too frail and transitory to serve as the basis for a personal life of faith, let alone for that of a stable community of faith and witness. This is for the *intersubjectivity* part of the constraint.

On the other hand, the conception must be able to secure the relevance of *past* revelation to the *present*, since without such a guarantee religion loses its universality, and incidents of revelation would be consigned to the realm of historical irrelevancies. Without a common horizon between the communities that received the original revelation and the subsequent generations that embrace it, the notion of a continuous faith or religion would not be feasible. To achieve such a temporal convergence, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's words – though catered for a somewhat different context – there must be 'a fusion of horizons.'¹³ This counts towards the *diachronic* qualification of the constraint.

But, it seems that the only way to ensure diachronic intersubjectivity for revelation is to appeal to reason, the very faculty which is also simultaneously responsible for its authentication. In a nutshell, the claim could be justified by noting that what is revealed, even if complete, will be unavoidably both structured by the *world-view* of a particular human recipient and applicable only to some specific historical context. Without reasoning, one could not escape the individual and historical specificity of revelation, and reasoning becomes an inseparable element of the very content of revelation. Therefore, we can accept divine revelation insofar as it can be purified and seen to coincide with our rational nature. Our acceptance is based not on the fact that it has been revealed but on the fact that we can discover its truth.

It should be observed that these considerations might lend themselves in a Kantian frame of mind to an expression of agnosticism about revelation and that 'substantive theological content is thus incidental and not essential to genuine religion.'¹⁴ However, these epistemological considerations have been adduced here for the purpose of highlighting the contribution of reason towards the diachronic intersubjectivity of revelation rather than advocating some kind of, for example, *deism*. Indeed, revelation itself has been taken as a *given* in the present discussion.

¹² I have adopted the terms *individual* and *corporate* aspects of revelation from John Baillie. However, their characterisation and employment in my account of revelation are somewhat different from Baillie's. [John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. 108]

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 255.

¹⁴ Joseph Runzo, 'Kant on Reason and Justified Belief in God', in Philip Rossi and Michael Wreen, eds., *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 31.

With that proviso in mind, this is how the argument works in detail. An event of revelation could be analysed in two ways: either in terms of its *character* or in terms of its *content*. First the character: an examination of the character of revelation shows that not only it fails to command any intersubjectivity but also that its very *intrasubjective* plausibility is indebted to something *outside* itself. This is due to the fact that the character of revelation is *experiential* and as such consists in the *phenomenal* or *subjective* state of the person undergoing the experience of revelation. Now, in virtue of this *qualitative* feature of revelation that renders it singular and one of a kind, it is not accessible to any other person than the recipient of revelation. This obviously indicates that the character side of revelation is not a suitable foundation for intersubjectivity.

This problem of objective accessibility, or rather the lack of it, is further accentuated when one notes that there are other features of revelation that apparently prevent it, in contrast to most other experiences, from attaining intersubjectivity forever. Revelation as an experience, unlike ordinary experiential events, is *spontaneous*, *sporadic*, *unique*, and *involuntary*. These qualities themselves stem from the fact that revelation is a *unidirectional* process over which the recipient can exert absolutely no influence. The purse strings of revelation, so to speak, are held solely by the revelatory agent.

It was also contended earlier that the character of revelation falters even in fostering intrasubjective credibility under its own steam for the recipient of revelation. To justify this claim, the issue could be approached in at least two different ways. One approach is to recognise that experiences by themselves cannot vouchsafe for their own *veracity*. The problem is basically that an experience *qua* experience is neither *veridical* nor *delusive*.¹⁵ In the specific context of revelation, the problem is: How does a prophet as a recipient of revelation know that his or her experience of revelation is genuine or hallucinatory?¹⁶

William James was similarly preoccupied with this epistemological problem of how religious experiences, including revelatory ones, could on their own decide on the question of their truth or illusory nature and signify anything except the self's experience of itself. He observes that the quality of religious experience can never establish that God is in fact experienced, and as such religious phenomenology cannot pronounce on the reality of revelation.¹⁷ The worry here is

¹⁵ In the section on the necessity and functions of *fundamental theology*, the encyclical appears to be concerned with the same type of issues when it delegates the duties of distinguishing revelation 'from other phenomena' and 'the recognition of its credibility' to that division of theology. (§ 67)

¹⁶ The theme of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* is a fictional version of this epistemological concern.

¹⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Fontana Library, 1971).

that the experience of revelation may not be anything other than machinations of the mind, and thus the experience itself is incapable of making any inroads for adjudication either way.¹⁸

The second approach broaches the issue by assuming the experience to be veridical but asking: How does one *recognise* the object of revelatory experience? Presumably, the object of experience is a divine being, and even if one adopts the most minimalist understanding of divinity, still it is unclear as to how that conception is conveyed in the experience. In other words, what is it about the revelatory experience which warrants *that* minimalist understanding rather than any other one about the divinity? Patently, the question becomes more intractable and recalcitrant if one thinks of the object of revelatory experience in some richer ways, for example thinking of it as omnipotent and omniscient.

The above difficulty, however, should be distinguished from two other objections that have been raised by James and Kant on somewhat similar grounds. In discussing the problem of how the object of revelatory experience is recognised by the recipient of revelation, James rather sternly remarks that since visions and ecstatic revelations of the prophets 'corroborate incompatible theological doctrines, they neutralize one another and leave no fixed results.'¹⁹ Part of his diagnosis is that such prophetic experience 'has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own' and that is why it 'is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies'.²⁰ However, as it will become clear later, my account does not go as far as James' and allows for revelatory experiences to have specific content.

Also, despite appearances, the problem that I am raising is different from the objection that Kant raises by his remark that 'if God should really speak to man, man could still never *know* that it was God speaking.'²¹ Denis Savage interprets this as an inability of the recipient of revelation to determine whether the experience is genuine 'and not just his own imagination doing the talking.'²² This is more or less the problem raised earlier about the demarcation between

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that at least in one case of prophetic revelation there are some historical accounts that the revelatory recipient in question was intensely exercised by this epistemic scruple. Mohammed is said to have been assailed by such scepticism and 'cries of doubt and despair' in the initial and early period of his revelatory experience. [Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed*, Anne Carter (trans.) (London: Penguin Press, 1971), p. 77 and Chapters 4 and 6 *passim*] To allay his fears lest he had trespassed into the territory of insanity, he resorted to confiding in others for assurance of sanity and confirmation.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 489.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

²¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Mary Gregor (trans.) (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. 115.

²² Denis Savage, 'Kant's Rejection of Divine Revelation and His Theory of Radical Evil', in Philip Rossi and Michael Wreen, eds., *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 62.

veridical and delusive experiences. However, Allen Wood offers another reading of Kant that tallies more closely with the text itself. The problem that Wood identifies is that due to the *infinite* nature of God, it is impossible for a human being to grasp that infinity through the *senses*. Now, what distinguishes Wood's Kantian problem from mine is that by invoking this observation Wood concludes that 'there is no such thing as supernatural revelation'; whereas, I am taking the occurrence of revelation for granted but seeking an epistemological explanation for its mechanism.²³

To emphasise the point, a slightly different variant of my problem, in contrast to both James' and Kant's, could be presented in the following form. In any experience, the subject contributes a host of socially acquired cognitive and qualitative attitudes which in great part shape the experience itself. The richer the experience the more abundant will be the required input. Experience is ongoing and cumulative; it grows gradually out of the past and moves towards the future. It is constituted not by lonely individuals but by groups who share and interact and is in fact subject to interpretation and appraisal in the light of many criteria.²⁴ What this entails is that these observations about experience in general hold also for religious and revelatory experiences. Religious empiricism tends to concentrate on certain rarefied experiences of a quasi-mystical order involving intense personal phenomenal states, where human and historical contexts are rather neglected or downplayed. Yet, such contexts are of constitutive importance to the nature of revelatory or religious experience.²⁵

To generalise the point, the contention is that there are no *pure* or *raw* experiences: experience always comes in some sort of conceptualisation. There is no *pre*-conceptual level at which experiences can be identified. The character of revelatory experiences is moulded by concepts and what wears the trousers, so to speak, is the concept.²⁶ But concepts are part of the content.

²³ Allen Wood, 'Kant's Deism', in Philip Rossi and Michael Wreen, eds., *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 11.

²⁴ I should hasten to add that the statement is not intended to prejudge the issue of externalism *versus* internalism about content.

²⁵ Steven Katz, for example, offers a survey of the ways in which religious experience is subject to interpretation by the language of the community and its corresponding concepts. [Steven Katz, 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism', in Steven Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), pp. 22–74]

²⁶ Norwood Hanson was apparently the first person to articulate this aspect of experience in terms of the *theory-ladenness* of scientific observations and to coin the phrase for it. [Norwood Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958)] It should, nonetheless, be pointed out that the degree and extent of theory-ladenness is a moot point. [For a critical view see, for example, Jerry Fodor's 'Observation Reconsidered', in his *A Theory of Content and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990).] Nevertheless, even within a Fodorian framework, the above argument could stand its ground.

This observation ushers the discussion nicely into the second way of analysing revelations: *viz.*, the content of revelation. Now, what is content? The basic point here is that content is essentially a *semantic* notion and as such is a matter of *truth* and *justification*. Applying this to the case of revelation entails that what is revealed through the process of revelation, *i.e.* the content of revelation, could stand on its ground only if it tallies with, or more accurately conforms to, the rational means of epistemic acceptability. It is only through this that one may be able to secure diachronic intersubjectivity for revelation.

It is indeed in response to such an epistemic vetting that one theologian, William Abraham, amongst others, feels compelled to delineate a set of seven standards by which genuine cases of revelation could be sifted from spurious ones. The precepts for putative cases of revelation are proposed to be:

- cognitive, moral and spiritual character of the recipient;
- conative consequences of revelation for the recipient;
- conviction and certainty of the recipient as to the origin of revelation;
- consistency and coherence of the content of revelation;
- continuity and consistency of the revelation with previous understandings of God;
- capacity of the revelation to illuminate and deepen what is arrived at independently; and,
- coherence of the content of revelation with its context of occurrence.²⁷

And, a further eighth condition is suggested by another theistic philosopher, Richard Swinburne, which for its very severity is rarely used in ordinary contexts of epistemic validation. It stipulates that,

A single falsity suffices to invalidate the whole of a revelation.

To justify the stipulation that ‘in revelation any falsity at all is enough to dismiss the whole’, Swinburne argues that ‘earthly witnesses in a criminal trial can make a few mistakes without their testimony as a whole being regarded as worthless, but a prophet purporting to have a message from God must be assessed by more stringent standards.’²⁸

Others have also offered similar conditions on the acceptability or otherwise of revelatory claims. Dulles, for example, gives the following seven criteria of fundamental theology within, of course, a broad Christian persuasion: 1. *Faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition*. Anyone who intends to do Christian theology will seek to stand in continuity with what believers of previous generations have recognized as compatible with faith. 2. *Internal coherence*. The notion of

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38. For the sake of presentation, without distorting their substance, I have slightly modified the clauses.

²⁸ Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 88.

revelation must be capable of being conceptually formulated in an intelligible manner and be free from internal self-contradiction. Self-contradictory positions are self-destructive. 3. *Plausibility*. The theory must not run counter with what is generally thought to be true in other areas of life, unless it is capable of providing an alternative explanation of the phenomena responsible for the general state of opinion. 4. *Adequacy to experience*. An acceptable theory of revelation will illuminate the deeper dimensions of secular and religious experience both within and beyond the Christian community. 5. *Practical fruitfulness*. The theory will commend itself to Christians if, once accepted, it sustains moral effort, reinforces Christian commitment, and enhances the corporate life and mission of the Church. Various psychological and social benefits may also be included under this rubric. 6. *Theoretical fruitfulness*. The theory of revelation must satisfy the quest for religious understanding and thus be of assistance to the theological enterprise. 7. *Value for dialogue*. The theory will be more acceptable if it assists in the exchange of insights with Christians of other schools and traditions, with adherents of other religions, and with adherents of the great secular faiths.²⁹

David Tracy, however, proposes four criteria such as: (i) meaningfulness, in the sense of disclosive power in relation to actual experience; (ii) coherence, *i.e.*, the internal intelligibility of fundamental concepts; (iii) appropriateness, in the sense of faithfulness to the meanings embodied in the tradition; and (iv) adequacy in illuminating the conditions and possibilities of ordinary experience.³⁰ Yet, one of the most minimalist accounts is given by Langdon Gilkey where he discusses the following three warrants: (a) fidelity to the symbolic forms of the community and the tradition; (b) relation to common secular experience; and (c) ability to generate categories that are illuminating for the whole of life.³¹

Now, what is very remarkable about all these criteria is their highly *rationalistic* orientation. One way to appreciate this emphasis on rationality is to envision a situation where one is required to judge between various *competing* claims of revelation. Here, it would be useless to say, as John Calvin for example does, that God makes his revelation 'self-authenticating' and it carries 'with it its own evidence'.³² For, in Keith Ward's words, 'Muslims and Jews say that as well as Christians, and they cannot all be right, since their alleged revelations disagree.'³³ Indeed, when Rudolph Bultmann protested

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

³⁰ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 64–87.

³¹ Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp. 460–65.

³² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, Chapter 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

against Karl Jasper that God does not need to justify himself before man, Jasper famously retorted that: 'I do not say that God has to justify himself, but that everything that appears in the world and claims to be God's word, God's act, God's revelation, has to justify itself.'³⁴ Thus, other than some kind of rational assessment, what can one invoke here that is not already indebted to reason for its own rectitude?³⁵

To round off the discussion about the nature of revelation, one may observe in a rather lofty Hegelian style that revelation is a type of religious consciousness that characteristically grasps truth in the form of sensory experiences, and it is the office of rational philosophy to translate these sensations into concepts, purging them of their merely experiential character and thus conducting humanity to an exact form of knowledge.

However, before the final conclusion, there are a couple of caveats that need to be made. Firstly, it may be objected that there is an unjustified underlying assumption about the content of revelation in the above argument: namely, construing the content of revelation mainly along ontological rather than, for example, ethical lines. In response, one may note that although it could be argued that religion is primarily an ontological model of explanation than ethical and in fact ontology precedes and underpins all other explanatory frameworks, the above argument is impartial in its understanding of religion in this respect. Whatever the content of a particular revelation turns out to be, whether ontological or ethical, it needs to be subjected to the principle of rationality for achieving diachronic intersubjectivity. Secondly, in order to restore the primacy of religion, one may be tempted to deny the epistemological priority of reason over religion. But, any attempt to deny the priority is too dear to be of any real value to its defenders. Indeed, a denial of priority of reason would consign religions to the realm of irrationalities. Therefore, concluding in a Kantian turn of expression, if revelation has any objective validity at all, it must be completely translatable without remainder into the concepts and expressions of rationality.

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³⁴ Quoted by Louis Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 211.

³⁵ Compare Swinburne's, amongst others', appeal to miracles in the context of revelation in his, for example, *Is There A God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 7.