Introduction[1]

The Argument

> At present we see puzzling reflections in a mirror,
> but one day we shall see face to face.
> My knowledge now is partial;
> then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me. (1 Cor 13:12, REB)

Tap "divine self-revelation" into a computer search engine, and you receive links to a plethora of sites assuring you their authors are already recipients of God's revealing, often, God's self-revealing (with or without further qualification). Usually they will claim support in their particular understanding of Jesus Christ as revelatory divine emissary. They will mostly base all this on their respective readings of "the Bible" (whether the longer Catholic or Orthodox versions, or the somewhat shorter Protestant collection). Some may specify that their God has revealed truths about himself, and his designs and demands; but many will insist that these are adjuncts to the main issue, God's self-revelation, specifying the kind and quality of awareness of God thus already possible, and (one way or another) available.

Rather than going online look back into the history of the Christian church(es). There you find, perhaps to your surprise, that making such claims about God "revealed" in and through Christ and the Bible are relatively recent. A major focus on the term "revelation" starts to emerge in the controversies of the Reformation, fueled by humanist intellectualism with its stress on communication, especially in Calvin. But it really gathers weight as a defensive response to the European Enlightenment and then Deism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, typified by a contrast

1. Here, and for chapters 1 to 8 following, there is an opening illustration, hoping to encourage preliminary reflection on what it points to (rather than its draughting). Here there is a reminder of the varieties of biblical and then subsequent Christian characterizations of God.

between "revealed" and "natural" religion.[2] Then it was only in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries that divine *self*-revelation in very deep, interpersonal terms was widely affirmed as a present possibility and presented as the central achievement of God's gracious love in Christ.

Prior to all this (and more in keeping with the surface at least of the shared Scriptures), God was certainly trusted to have conveyed some truths "about" himself (always "himself," of course), and some commands and plans for humankind; and all this was important. It is most likely taken as definitively stated, and on occasion "revealed" is used. But God's main purpose in Christ was taken as other. It was (in some sense or senses) to change the human situation: to make humans more acceptable to himself, and also (perhaps at the same time) to change them so they (at least the compliant, perhaps if also pre-chosen) would (ultimately) "enjoy him for ever." What God had affected in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was expressed in terms other than "revelation": it was reconciliation, justification, salvation, atonement, redemption, new creation (or, as the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* puts it, "a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world"). Believers were expected and encouraged to respond in faith by accepting ongoing strengthening, transformation, sanctification, enlightening. It was the inauguration of all this that had been made possible and was already to be found effective in individuals-in-community. "Revelation" in any full sense, a full and clear shared enjoyment of the "beatific vision," would, however, only be possible after our own death and resurrection (along with those of us still physically alive at Doomsday).

Of course what God was held to have done in and through a very visible Christ was in keeping with his character, and so was indicative of it and afforded in his physical absence some inklings (Paul's "now . . . puzzling reflections in a mirror"). But the details, the implications, the understanding and appreciation (let alone explanation of it all), any full responsive enjoyment of our inaugurated "at-one-ing", our reconciliation, justification, salvation, redemption, must wait till the completion of our transformative formation: our full sanctification, our total re-creation. Then we would not just be "accounted right" but "made righteous," fully enlightened, fully capable of receiving, comprehending, responding, "seeing and knowing," and enjoying.

Meanwhile there were debates and arguments, even bitter and physically violent disputes, in the sad and often cruel history of the Christian

2. See McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation* and his *Theories of Revlation;* Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?,* 9–17.

movement over what quite obviously had not been made clear, revealed, as to the purposes and the nature of the God and Father of Jesus. Even whether we would *ever* fully comprehend this God was open for discussion (as will be illustrated later). How is it possible to make coherent sense of these contradictory assertions?[3]

In the late 1950s and early 1960s questions about this recent emphasis on "divine (self-)revelation" were in fact being raised by a handful of English language theologians. John McIntyre wrote,

> Not only did the Church for many centuries find it possible to describe what happened "when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us," without using this term, but further, because of the history of theology in the last hundred years or so, the term "Revelation" has acquired a significance for us which it has never had in the whole history of the Church.[4]

John Knox also noted, "There is no evidence whatever that the Early Church entertained the view that the purpose of Christ's death was to disclose the love of God." And James Barr reached a similar conclusion: "it is doubtful whether the common theological use of 'revelation' for the divine self-communication is appropriate in the light of the biblical usage."[5]

With some support from McIntyre and Barr I published *Has Christianity a Revelation?* in 1964 (It was not my chosen title; I would have preferred *Christianity Without Revelation*.)[6] This present study attempts to bring that earlier one, including both its positive and its negative conclusion, up to date, in response to criticisms (and misunderstandings) over the intervening fifty years. For there still seems to persist an apparent and widespread lack of awareness of the disadvantages of any uncritical deployment of the term.

Of course, revelation as a fuzzy idea has advantages, as some of its users have insisted, and as *Has Christianity a Revelation?* acknowledged. Someone revealing something, and even more, someone revealing his/her self is usually taken as having the initiative. It is an act of grace, not a discovery, not an uncovering, a knowledge, that you, the other, have to achieve for

3. One study available at the time that seemed to display some awareness of the problems of Christians' inability to discern an agreed clarity, was Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*.

4. McIntyre, "Frontiers of Meaning," 133; and in his *Christian Doctrine of History*, 2.

5. Knox, *Death of Christ*, 146–47; Barr, "Revelation," 849.

6. However, I was allowed to keep "Christianity without Revelation" as the heading for the final chapter. In 1999 Barr reaffirmed his agreement in *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 485.

yourself. There is a further (often only implicit) advantage (or risk). If God is revealed to me or us, then I/we must be right about him/her; and if you disagree with me/us about God and his character, his will, his demands on us, you must be wrong.

Yet there is little evidence, in our very mixed and divergent Christian responses to God, that any one extensive group among us has received, been given, an agreed divine revelation. Still less has any such gained an effective, transforming, and agreed divine self-revelation. We all differ and bicker (and still even come to blows) not just between but within our groupings: Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostalist, Baptist, Methodist. . . . We might well *like* to have a graciously granted and assured clarity and certainty, but it is surely graceless—and, frankly, dishonest—to arrogate it to ourselves before it has graciously and effectively happened.

I argued this in that first book, and here reinforce the argument in a fresh chapter outlined a little later. Of course, as I allowed fifty years ago and reaffirm, it is possible to use any word impressionistically, including "revelation." But the uses I cite critically are the ones that claim with it a distinctive clarity—and only that accords the supposed advantages.

Issues of making sense of talk of divine revelation/self-revelation in the light of disagreements and schisms, from the earliest days right up to the present, were broached in the previous book. They are re-examined here in the light of others' responses and my own ongoing critical reflections. But further, the logic of "at-one-ment" talk, reconciliation already, in advance of any fuller or final culminating revelation of God, is now subjected to a similar critical questioning (only implicit in the earlier book's discussion of "salvation" already procured).[7]

The concentration on explicit verbal usage in Scripture that I deployed, with support from Knox, Barr, McIntyre, has itself been criticized. "Absence of a particular word from the biblical writings does not mean that the concept is not to be found in them," quite fairly objected Timothy Gorringe, with explicit reference to Downing and Barr (and echoing some earlier reviewers).[8] I thought that I had anticipated the point; however, it will be more forcefully addressed in what follows, in chapter 1, on the semantics of religious language. Although the "analytical" philosophy I attempted to deploy in that previous study is now no longer the dominant Anglo-American fashion, the issue of clarity in usage remains important, especially when

7. It was reassuring to find "at-one-ment" picked up recently by Kathryn Tanner: Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 256.

8. Gorringe, *Discerning Spirit*, 8.

clarity is claimed. However, initial reviews and ongoing discussion have made me recall that in 1963–64, while I had absorbed something of John L. Austin, I had at that time not encountered LudwigWittgenstein, with his important insistence on the "use" of words, use in context, rather than insistence on "the meaning." So, in chapter 1, I survey more recent discussions of language in use, noting where these bear on the issues in hand. "Revelation" in much if not all use—for metaphorical "unveiling"—involves claims to "knowledge". Chapter 1 also takes more account of contemporary epistemology, theory of knowledge, than did the previous study.

Then, in more detail, in chapter 2 I try to explore less sharply defined uses of "reveal," "self-revelation," but also, newly, uses of "self-identification" and "self." Also I then freshly explore the logic of recent talk of being reconciled, "at one" with someone or some others, often person or persons not yet fully known, in fact possibly still badly misunderstood.

My analysis of usage (similar to Barr's) in canonical Jewish writings is only summarized here, in chapter 3. More space is now given to assertions of and complaints against divine hiddenness, especially in the Psalter. Freshly minted are also considerations in these documents of "self" and "(self-)identification."

First Cor 13:12 and arguably similar passages, along with "reconciliation already" (2 Cor 5:17–19) and divine (self-)identification, are then considered in some detail, in conversation with recent commentors (chapter 4). John's gospel, however, may seem the canonical source most resistant to my negative case, and is therefore also discussed afresh.

In chapter 5 examples of patristic usage are now taken from additional sources, especially in relation to "negative theology" and divine "incomprehensibility," and our (inaugurated) transformation to "share the divine nature" to be "deified."

We are assured in the Qur'an that nothing from God's side conceals God: the only veiling is ours, our ignorance, intransigence, refusal to learn, to comply with God's will. "Whithersoever ye turn, there is the face of God."[9] The Qur'an on divine self-disclosure came to my attention some while after writing and publishing my 1964 monograph. It next returned to my attention on discovering John L. Schellenberg's 1993 argument on divine hiddenness (an issue that has occasioned a cluster of journal articles, especially in the quite recent past).[10] Both he and I agree that adherents' disagreements, and much else beside, "reveal" that God remains unrevealed. However, for Schellenberg, that forms a base for an "atheistic" argument—no truly loving

9. Arberry, *Sufism*, 17, citing Qur'an 2.109.

10. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness*.

deity would be so coy—while I take it as innate *and coherent* in Christian, as in other "Abrahamic" theistic, traditions. My attempt to join in this recent debate forms chapter 6 in the present book.

The concluding chapters—chapter 7, "Faith While Awaiting Revelation" and chapter 8, "A Very Brief Agnostic (Unknowing) Systematic Theology for Awaiting God's Self-Revelation"—echo some of the concluding arguments of the previous study, but develop them further in reflections on living a prayerful, imaginative, and agnostic Christian faith in the light of reliance on a lovingly reticent God whom we trustingly imagine to intend to transform us in the power of the Spirit into a full Christlikeness, Godlikeness. This God whom we "imagine as real" will, we may trust, change us so as to be able to enjoy being drawn deeper together into the life of the divine Trinity, "face-to-face."

These reflections are enriched, I hope, by engagement with Sarah Coakley, George Herbert, Grace Jantzen, Kathryn Tanner, Rowan Williams, and a number of others.

Footnotes are for the most part purely bibliographical, with only very occasional explanatory comments.

A Continuing if Occasional Debate

Looking back at my original file of reviews, I am amazed at the number (two dozen) that reached me (in addition to private letters from friends and acquaintances). By no means were all persuaded, but all seemed to take the argument seriously, some writing at considerable length, such as Diogenes Allen in *Theology Today* (largely in approval), Richard E. Koenig in *The Christian Century*, K. Runia in *The Reformed Theological Review*, F. C. Copplestone in *Heythrop Journal*, N. Clark in *Baptist Times*, Eric Routley in *British Weekly,* H. E. W. Turner in *Theology*. It was discussed in some detail by Gerald O'Collins in *Foundations of Theology*, and, rather more cursorily, by Avery Dulles and by Paul Helm.[11] In response to these and others I contributed an article, "Revelation, Disagreement and Obscurity," to which the latter two responded personally—still unconvinced.[12] Some of this latter article's further arguments and clarifications appear in the forementioned chapters.

Since then I have noted occasional further references to my study: Timothy Gorringe, referred to earlier, accepted my critique of "crying

11. O'Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, 142–49; Helm, *The Divine Revelation*; Dulles, *Models of Revelation*.

12. Downing, "Revelation, Disagreement and Obscurity."

'Clarity! Clarity!' where there is no clarity," but no more than that.[13] John F. Haught in 1993, admitted that "the church" had managed without any such theology, and allowed the need to be "sensitive" to the attention I drew to the lack of clear unanimity, and to others' objections, insisting nonetheless on its appropriateness, emphasizing "the prevenience of God" (without observing that "prevenience" had previously been effectively stressed without this factitious aid).[14] In 1995 Colin Gunton, in his Warfield Lectures, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, allowed that I raised some very interesting questions (without, however, himself seeming to deal with them), while accepting my case that a concentration on this theme unbalances faith. The implications of diversity among believers, in response to what is claimed to be revealed, are not considered.[15] In the same year Stephen W. Williams, from Belfast, published *Revelation and Reconciliation: A Window on Modernity*, where his contrast between "epistemology" and "reconciliation in history" has some superficial (and independent) resemblances to my preference for "salvation" talk over against "communication" talk, but ignores the factor of communal divergence (despite his date and place).[16] Kathryn Tanner, in "Jesus Christ" in the 1997 *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine,* cited my book with approval, especially my critique of "self-communication" as the focal purpose discerned for God in Christ. In her more recent (2010) and much fuller *Christ the Key*, her stress on incarnation as commonality with us, enabling our gradual healing for life with God to be "fully manifest in us only at a time in some unknown future" is much as I urged earlier and here argue afresh.[17] Noel Leo Erskine, with his "How do We Know What to Believe? Revelation and Authority" seems to be struggling to allow divine salvation as our ongoing present hope, and divine self-revelation as its aim, ending as he does with 1 Cor 13:12; compare Joseph Augustine DiNoia, in his "What About *Them*?" in the same collection.[18] In his *A Modern Introduction to Theology* (2006) Philip Kennedy only uses the word "revelation" three times, and in passing; "knowledge" ("of God") is touched on, also three times and also only incidentally, under "epistemology."[19]

13. Gorringe, *Discerning Spirit,* 7–8.

14. Haught, *Mystery and Promise,*107–8.

15. Gunton, *Brief Theology*, 8 and 18.

16. Williams, *Revelation and Reconciliation.*

17. Tanner, "Jesus Christ," 270n8 and 271n25; and in *Christ the Key*, 98–99, 170, and quoting 198.

18. Erskine, "How Do We Know What to Believe?" citing 48; DiNoia, "What About Them?"

19. Kennedy, *Introduction*; but few of the other chapter and section headings in this present text receive much, if any, attention either.

Ben Quash, "Revelation," in the 2007 *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, overlooks the issue of divergence among supposed recipients of divine revelation, despite his reliance on Rowan Williams on the centrality of "participation and formation." Richard Topping, *Revelation, Scripture, and Church* (2007), also ignores the kinds of issues I tried and would now hope again to bring to attention.[20] Mike Higton—significantly qualifying "revelation"—prefers to speak of God believed to "identify himself," offering his "self-identification" in loving address, a phraseology that will be taken up, but critically, later on.[21] Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, while noting James Barr's reservations, insists on "the self-disclosure" of God, which, albeit partial "is nevertheless reliable and adequate."[22] On the other hand, Catholic author Anthony Towey, in his very recent *Introduction to Christian Theolo*gy, can avoid any main heading under "revelation," touching on the theme only in passing (and without reference, so far as I can see, to *Dei Verbum*), and also without any talk of divine "self-revelation."[23]

It was, then, with some surprise, that this year (2014) I found very recently the English translation of Michael Welker's *God the Revealed: Christology*, and I then obtained Ingolf U. Dalferth and Michael Rodgers' collection, *Revelation*.Welker boldly opens with "'God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ!' Christian faith has proclaimed this for nearly 2000 years."[24] In the unqualified terms deployed that is simply untrue, as was, for instance, shown by McDonald, even though he approved of this innovation. Welker surveys something of the range of recent German and wider theological disagreements, but without, it seems, even considering that this might raise the question: If God is revealed, how come this unclarity? (I note also that Welker completely ignores 1 Cor 13:12.)

Dalferth and Rodgers' collection again has much of interest in itself (some to be noted later, but mostly, while thought-provoking, are tangential to the discussion here). However, the contributors fail to consider any of the critical questions that were raised in *Has Christianity a Revelation?* and are repeated in what follows. Dalferth, in his "Introduction" mentions but then

20. Quash, "Revelation," 325–44, citing 337; Williams, *Christian Theology*; Topping, *Revelation, Scripture, and Church*.

21. Higton, *Christian Doctrine*, see ch. 2, "Knowing and Loving," 31–52.

22. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 153, relying on Martin Luther; cf. "a rigorous correlation between God's self-disclosure in history and God's eternal being," 244.

23. Towey, *Christian Theology.*

24. Welker, *God the Revealed*, 11; for McDonald, see n. 1. My surprise is compounded by finding that otherwise I have much in common with Welker, with his attention to Bonhoeffer, and his Trinitarian, incarnational, and sacramental theology, a lot of which I found both reassuring and enriching.

ignores Barr on the relative lack of talk of revelation in the Scriptures, while others, apart from Claudia Welz, either offer passing references or largely ignore biblical tradition.[25] Welz also draws helpfully on Jewish mysticism and its take on divine incomprehensibility. Apart from Kirsten Gerdes' apposite attention to Hadewijch of Antwerp, Christian mysticism and apophaticism (God beyond speech) are bypassed.[26] The Jewish reflections adduced are particularly illuminating, so it is regrettable that no Islamic theologians were included. Further, in the collection as a whole, far too often abstractions are reified, foremost when we are told what revelation "is," without attention to the variety of stipulative definitions then affirmed. What is disclosed if the disclosing itself is clearly seen as so diverse? It is simply assumed that using the same word ensures they are all concerned with the same topic, without checking. Although Michael Rodgers allows that pluralism creates a problem, he does not discuss it.[27] Of course, the contributors might well still say in response that my critical questions are misconceived, off-beam, and irrelevant. The reader is left to decide.

I am not aware of any other recent discussions with "revelation" in the title or subtitle.

25. Dalferth, "Introduction," 8; Welz, "Resonating and Reflecting."
26. Gerdes, "Materiality of Metaphor."
27. Rodgers, "Finding Meaning in God's Actions," 49.