

# I

## INTRODUCTORY: THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF REVELATION AS TRUTH

### I

In the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* we find the term "revelation" defined by H. L. Goudge in a double sense. "The word stands either (a) for the process by which God makes known to man the truth which He requires, or (b) for the body of truth which God has made known."<sup>1</sup> Such a definition reflects the readiness with which it was formerly accepted that revelation is concerned with truth. Latterly it has been increasingly questioned how far it is so. The present-day theology of Karl Barth will not allow that revelation can assume the form of truth at all. Barth goes far beyond Calvin in holding that the *Imago Dei* is effaced, not defaced, so that our human nature is not only incapable of spiritual good, but can neither retain nor pass on a divine gift. Whatever God gives to man ceases to be a divine gift immediately His presence is withdrawn.

It follows that revelation can never be truth. Truth is the possession of reality by mind in the form appropriate to the understanding, and remains with him who understands. Since human agencies cannot carry revelation to us, it follows also that all our endeavours to understand and obey the Will of God as if it were given us through the Scriptures are illusory. It is indeed repeatedly denied by Barthian writers that the life lived on earth by Jesus of Nazareth and recorded by the evangelists is even intended to express the meaning of God's Will for us. The Will of God can be known only through a *present* act of God which reaches us as a special call to service. Accordingly Barth compares common faith and practice to the building of the tower of Babel,<sup>2</sup> and declares that our fitting conduct is not to seek the divine Will as given, but to be silent that it may be given. "We ought to apply ourselves with all our strength to expect more from God."<sup>3</sup>

We are not concerned to return to the once general belief that revelation is given in the form of ready-made, propositional "truths". It must be received as the experience of God. Nothing less could authenticate, to the recipient, its origin in God. As regards the actual giving of revelation, therefore, we would not disagree with the view of Dr. Temple, that its essence consists in

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, X, 745b.

<sup>2</sup> *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

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the interaction of the divinely illumined minds of men with divinely guided events of the "world-process".<sup>1</sup> We would agree further that the written Word, being conceptual, occupies an interim position.<sup>2</sup> It lies between the original experience of God which gave rise to it and our own appreciation of God which it may enable us to attain. But if it is allowed that human nature can receive and pass on anything of what it receives from God, it appears arbitrary to confine the term "revelation" to the actual intercourse of man with God, and to deny its application to the truth which is the outcome of this intercourse.<sup>3</sup>

If the word of truth is at once a gift of God and of practical significance in its conceptual form, it is surely justifiable to say that it is itself revelation, no less than the events which give rise to it. We cannot assume that it is not the divine intention to give us the Word as a divine gift significant in its own right. By its form of truth precisely it accomplishes a necessary redemptive work. Truth is one of the principles of integration by which personality is brought into harmony with the spiritual cosmos to which it belongs.<sup>4</sup> The Christian life, as an expression of this harmony, involves a maximum conviction of "what is", including a doctrine of man and the world along with its doctrine of God, and in its capacity of truth the Word gives us an understanding of the universe without which the practical life of faith could claim no rational basis.

The aim of this essay will be to show how the divine approach to men testified in the Old and New Testaments maintains its revelational character as a Word of God to us, despite its rationalization in the form of truth, and to urge that it is sufficient, by the claims which it lays upon us, to guide our endeavours now in channels relevant to God's purpose, despite the limitations imposed by the process of reaching us through the medium of human minds. In upholding these convictions we are at every turn dependent on the principle which Barth denies—the principle that men can appropriate divine grace by their works of faithful response to it. The nature of revelation itself must be the final grounds upon which we maintain that it remains with us in the form of truth, and revelation must be allowed to explain its own answer to the contention that the necessary human appropriation of grace is impossible.

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Before proceeding to enquire how truth disclosed through revelation is possible, a discussion of its distinctive nature may

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Nature, Man and God*, pp. 312 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *op. cit.*, pp. 314, 350 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 116–118.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 237.

### 2

serve to indicate the view adopted on some recurrent controversial points. The truth made known by the revelatory process may be said to be concerned, broadly, with God and the continuum in which we stand related to Him. The natural reason may seek to discover this also, by submitting itself to reality as it meets us in normal human experience. We cannot say off-hand that knowledge of God through revelation is characterized by a divine act which makes it possible, and the discoveries of natural reason by the absence of any such act. It is only as the influence of the outgoing activity of God reaches us in some recognizable way that we can know Him at all.

The term "revelation" may be reserved to signify, as in its traditional usage, the special communication which issued in the written Word and is present in the Person of Christ; but if so it must be recognized that this need not be the only way in which God reveals Himself. The biblical witnesses themselves do not appear to deny that God can reveal Himself otherwise than in the ways they illustrate. We must not ignore the significance of utterances such as that of Jesus: "and no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal Him."<sup>1</sup> But the purpose of such a declaration is surely to point out the uniqueness of that knowledge of Father and Son together, and of the nature and identity of each in relation to the other, which corresponds to the uniqueness of Christ Himself, and which is only possible in and through spiritual communion with God through Christ as Son. The process whereby saving knowledge of God is given need not be commensurate with the process whereby all knowledge of Him is rendered possible. God may relate Himself otherwise to us.

May it not be that God has related Himself to us through the physical and spiritual cosmos, which is His own creation, in a continuously present relationship, and has done so in such a way that the natural reason can thereby know at least to a degree how it stands related to God, and therein something about God Himself? If this Self-relating of God to us is to afford a knowledge of God it must be charged with the power to reveal itself as what it is, namely, the self-relating to us of God and not of some other.

The theory of "preservation", maintaining that the permanent activity of God is required to sustain all creatures in being, would suffice for the permanence of the required relationship. But exception may be taken to this preservation on the ground that the act of creation is an act complete in itself once it is accomplished, and that there is no need for a continuous outgoing divine activity. Yet, even though we do not commit ourselves to believe in such a

<sup>1</sup> Matt. xi. 27.

statement concerning the activity of God, the permanent relationship may be maintained.

The initial act of God in creation must itself bring into being a relation of God to creatures which continues throughout the existence of creatures. Aquinas indeed denied this, naming it as one reason among others for holding the theory of preservation. "The impression made by an agent does not remain in the effect when the action of the agent ceases, unless that impression turns into and becomes part of the nature of the effect."<sup>1</sup> The necessary condition cannot be fulfilled when a superior genus acts on an inferior, nor therefore when God creates the creature. "What belongs to the superior genus in no way remains after the action is over."<sup>2</sup> But since we no longer think of creation as the bestowal on the creature of what belongs to the Creator, we may say that the impression made by God in creation does turn into and become "part of the nature of the effect". The act of creation cannot be without permanent effect. The created cannot cease to be created, and must continue in its creaturehood. If creaturehood signified only a quality of the created, in view of which we might contrast its internal character with some character of the divine, the creature could hardly provide the means of knowing God. But creaturehood would seem to signify, not the inner character of the creature in contrast to God, but the story of its creation. The term draws attention to the dependence in virtue of which the creature is and always shall be related to the God Who created it. If so, there is a permanent relation between God and all creatures.

When we turn to the spiritual world, the continuous sustaining activity of God may again be deemed superfluous. Even so, the initial act of creation must be of permanent influence on spiritual creatures no less than on others. We can no more escape from our creaturely nature than can inanimate things, and to be creaturely is to be related to the God Who made us. Yet the idea of preservation may be applied more acceptably in the spiritual than in the physical realm. The continuous outgoing act of God may be superfluous to our existence as creatures merely, but few theistic thinkers would deny that the continuous influence of God is essential to our life as spiritual creatures in the full sense of the word "spiritual". If the phrase "spiritual creatures" denoted only some character or characters obtaining purely within our created nature, which might be contrasted with the divine, this would afford no relation of God to us by which we could know Him, beyond that of the causality of creation. The category of causality, though enlightening in its own way, is so to a limited degree only.

<sup>1</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 65, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 21.