

Chapter 1

The Distinction between General and Special Revelation

Through God alone can God be known. This is not a specifically Christian principle; on the contrary, it is the principle which is common to all religion and indeed, to the philosophy of religion as a whole. There is no religion which does not believe itself to be based upon divine revelation in one way or another. There is no religion worth the name which does not claim to be “revealed religion” Further, there is no speculative philosophy of religion which does not endeavour to base its statements about God and divine Truth upon a self-disclosure of the divine ground in the spirit of Man. The issue is clear: either religion is based upon Divine revelation, or it is simply the product of the phantasy of the mind which desires it. The statement: “Through God alone can God be known” might be made equally well by a Christian, a Neo-Platonist religious philosopher, a Parsee, or a Hindu. For many of our contemporaries this is sufficient reason to declare that the general principle of relativity applies also to the sphere of religion. I do not intend to enter into any discussion of this problem of apologetics; the question with which we are here concerned is a preliminary question, and indeed it is one which, if it were answered in a satisfactory way, might even make all apologetic superfluous. The preliminary question is this: wherever the appeal is made to revelation, is the word “revelation” used in the same sense?

This question at once makes us aware of a striking difference. All living popular religions¹ appeal to revelations; they feel it essential to be able to produce a large number of revelations, theophanies and divine oracles, miraculous incidents of all kinds, in which the divine and personal character of the supersensible world manifests itself in this temporal world. The whole cultus with its conceptions and its ritual action, in fact, its life as a religion, is based upon manifestations of this kind. The religious man believes that the reality of the object of his faith is guaranteed by the concrete character of such revelations. Through them he “knows” that his god, or his gods, are beings which have a personal relation with him and with his world.

The philosophy of religion, religious speculation, and the mysticism which is connected with this school of thought, have a different conception of the nature of revelation. In their origin, indeed, they might actually be regarded as a conscious corrective to the “primitive,” “falsely realistic,” “revealed” character of the popular religions. To this type of thought “revelation” does not possess this solid character of historic fact which, in the majority of cases, is nothing more than an illusion based on an overstimulated imagination, due to lack of rational knowledge of the world and primitive psychology. In the “higher” relation to God of speculation and mysticism, in the “religion of educated people,” revelation means rather the emergence of the eternal basis of all phenomena into consciousness, the perception of something which was always true, the growing consciousness of a Divine Presence, which might have been perceived before, since it was there all the time. Hence in this connection both revelation and religion are

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1. By living popular religions I mean those which may also be called historical religions, that is, all religions which are not essentially individualistic—like genuine mysticism and “spiritual religion” of a philosophical character—but which are essentially social. In them the one thing that matters is the cultus and the “myth”; the individual can only be religious at all in so far as he shares in the worship and life of the community; on the other hand, mysticism and philosophically speculative religion—the “religion of the educated man”—equally definitely flees from social religious life and seeks solitude.

spoken of in the singular. Revelation as the objective element, and religion as the subjective element, are fundamentally everywhere one and the same; this is the “essence of religion,” and its basis, even when it cannot be recognized as such by man owing to the hampering limitations of his sense-environment. Fundamentally, indeed, there is only one religion, and the differences between the various religions are due simply to the precise individual form of that which is ever the same, a non-essential modification of the “essence” of religion itself. Revelation of every kind means that the eternal Divine Presence behind all phenomena shines through the phenomena; religion means—however dimly and imperfectly—the realization of this divine reality. Religion, however, is not fully developed until it is freed from the trammels of these accidental elements, that is, from all that is historical and contingent. Thus the idea of revelation as “primitive” man conceives it, in the sense of a characteristic divine and objective event, a fact which has actually taken place in the world of time and space, has here become transformed into knowledge, vision, the sense of a Divine Being which, although in itself it is active and creative, is yet at the same time in absolute repose; the manifestation of this Being is not based upon any actual historical self-manifestation in particular, but simply upon the fact that certain hindrances within the individual have disappeared; hence this “revelation” is based upon a subjective process—like throwing back the shutters and opening the windows that the light of morning may stream into a darkened room—upon the unfolding of the soul to the Divine Light, upon the attainment of the right degree of “recollection,” or “introversion,” or “solitude,” or “sinking into the Divine Ground,” or some other expression which is characteristic of religion of this type.

Thus, while it belongs to the very essence of the living popular religions that they should be based upon “special revelations,” it is of the very essence of religious speculation, religious idealism, and mysticism, to be independent of all special “external” revelations and, indeed, to regard them as merely subjectively determined forms of something different, namely, of the one fundamental revelation which is always and everywhere the same, a process freed from all the “accidents” of an historical process in time and space. The distinction is clear: on the one side are many revelations in

the sense of actual incidents; on the other, a revelation which does not take place at all but simply “is”; on the one hand the idea of revelation is connected with definite events, on the other it means the consciousness of freedom from all that is actual in the sense of bondage to the world of time and space, from all external, “sense-bound” events; on the one hand revelation is “special”; on the other it is “general.”

The Christian religion² belongs neither to the first nor to the second group. It is opposed to both and yet connected with both. In common with the popular religions it points to an actual divine reality, which has been made known in a definite particular way through an act of revelation. It is based wholly upon something which has actually happened, within this world of time and space, and indeed, to put it still more plainly, it is based upon

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2. I am afraid lest the following observations may once more arouse the displeasure of Haitjema, who accuses me (in Karl Barth: *Kritische Theologie*, p. 109) “of beginning to operate with Faith, Revelation, the Word, as though they were impersonal entities,” in the spirit of a mere spectator. I am fully sensible of the force of this accusation, for as soon as we use comparisons in speaking of the Christian religion it is impossible to avoid “operating” in a certain sense with “fixed” conceptions. This danger can be avoided, of course, by renouncing this work of comparison altogether. Until now this has been Barth’s attitude—and with good reason—whereas I see clearly that this cannot be done if we wish to avoid the danger of gradually falling a prey to a kind of spiritual conservatism which may lead to obscurantism. Discussion with the thought of the day, with philosophy and religion is—it is true—certainly not the primary and most important task of theology; but we have no right, on that account, to neglect this duty altogether or to leave it to the next generation. Within this task, however—which Haitjema does not seem to understand at all—it is inevitable that we should employ certain fixed fundamental conceptions of Christianity. This does not mean that we regard the actual theological labour as already finished, but it does mean that this second duty cannot be discharged in any other way. From the second and third sections of this book, if not from the first part, it ought to become quite clear that I do not really regard those conceptions as “fixed,” and that it is unjust to reproach me as a mere spectator.

something which has taken place once for all. By its very nature it is absolutely opposed to that saying of Fichte's (which is an amazingly plain statement of the speculative and mystical idea of a divine "ground"): "It is the metaphysical element alone, and not the historical, which saves us." In the Christian religion "salvation" is always indissolubly connected with an historical fact: with the fact of the Incarnation of the Divine Word, with the fact of Atonement by Jesus Christ. Although the time and space element, that is, the element of historical contingency, does not, in itself, constitute a revelation, yet the revelation upon which the Christian faith is based is founded upon this fact alone, and apart from it Christianity itself could not exist.

On the other hand, the Christian religion is equally opposed to all forms of popular religion, since it is not based upon a series of events, but upon one single event; moreover, it is fully conscious that this one fact of revelation, this event which took place once for all, is unique.³ Ἐφ' ἅπαρ, once for all, this is the category to which the Christian revelation belongs. The Scriptures bear witness to this unique character of the Christian revelation—a revelation which can never be repeated. There is nothing accidental about the unique and unrepeatable character of revelation in the Christian religion; it is an integral element, or rather, it is not one element alone, but constitutes its very essence. The whole meaning of this revelation would be destroyed if it could be severed from this unique event which took place once for all. This means, however, that this idea of revelation, since it is of its very nature that it should be unique, is, essentially, entirely different from the conception of revelation in

3. *Einmaligkeit* (lit. *oneness*) is the word used by Brunner to express the exclusiveness of the Christian faith as a special revelation. "Uniqueness" is the nearest word in English, but it does not fully express the author's meaning. "*Einmaligkeit*" means occupying a *unique* moment in *time*. "Un-repeatableness" is the real meaning. This sense I have endeavoured to give in paraphrase form, since the word *Einmaligkeit* occurs frequently in this chapter, and at intervals throughout the book. Where a noun was necessary I have employed "uniqueness," usually suggesting that the real meaning is that of something which happened "once for all."—TR

other forms of religion. The fact that this revelation⁴ has taken place once for all does not constitute an arithmetical difference, but a positive difference, a difference in quality. In its essence a revelation which, by its very nature, can only take place once, differs absolutely from a revelation which, also by its very nature, can necessarily be repeated an indefinite number of times.

In order to see this more clearly let us return to the conception of “special revelations.”

The fact that special revelations—as, for example, theo-phanies and incarnations—are said to have happened several times really means that nothing happened at all. The element which was repeated in each of these events was not final. A final event *can* only happen once. A final decision is made once, or it is not made at all. The serious nature of the decision can be gauged by the fact that inevitably the decisive event takes place once for all, and once only. A factor which recurs constantly belongs to the cyclic rhythm of Nature. Hence the mythological element—that is, the revelation which is frequently repeated—belongs to the realm of Nature. The essential rhythm of Nature is reflected in the recurrent type of revelation; the revelation-myth belongs to the sphere of natural religion. The myths of the Saviour-God who dies and then returns to life are typical of this kind of religion.

The distinction between the historical and the natural element lies in the fact that the historical event can only happen once; it cannot be repeated. But in history, as we know it, this absolute historical element does not exist; all that it possesses is the tendency towards that which cannot be repeated (*Einmaligkeit*). Just as Nature is not wholly without the tendency towards that which cannot be repeated, so also History contains some elements which recur. The distinction between History and Nature consists in the tendency to nonrepetition. The distinction is, however, not absolute; therefore

4. The relation of this unique revelation to the wealth and variety of the revelations in Nature and in Holy Scripture will only become clear in the course of this whole inquiry. The Christian view of this relation is this: that that which took place once for all in Jesus Christ constitutes the truth of all other forms of revelation. The whole Bible witnesses to this Christ, and indeed this JESUS Christ, the Crucified and Risen One, to Whom the apostolic Εὐ' ἀλαξ was applied.

History has an aspect of natural law, and Nature has an historical aspect. If some historical event could be proved to have taken place once for all, it would be an absolutely decisive event. Such an event, however, cannot be discovered within history; for if such an event could be discovered, it would be the end of all history, the “fullness of time.” It is precisely an event of this kind which the Christian religion regards as revelation. Revelation means the unique historical event which, *by its very nature*, must either take place once or not at all. And it is *only revelation* in this Christian sense which contains this element of absolute and never-recurring actuality. Here the word “uniqueness” (*Einmaligkeit*) has its full and absolute meaning; the relative element which is implied when we speak of something which only happened once has been eliminated. Hence by revelation we mean that historical event which is at the same time the end of history, that is, an event which, if it really did take place, by its very force shattered the framework of history; in other words, that in fulfilling the purpose of history it ends it. Here, however, we can only speak of a special revelation in the strict sense of the word. For where the opposite takes place, that is to say, where revelations are frequent, there can be no valid revelation in the ultimate sense of the word. In each of these revelations what was said to have happened did not take place; for if it had actually taken place it could not have happened repeatedly. This point of view is supported by the fact that these “revelations” on which certain religions are based are not actual events. They are not *Individual*⁵ but *General*. They are myths which, in the strict sense

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5. If, however, in contradistinction to this, Buddha or Zoroaster were held up as examples of religious personalities who were themselves revealers, the answer might be made that whenever Buddha or Zoroaster is cited as a historical personality and, therefore, as strictly unique, in each instance he is not regarded as a revelation, but only as the bearer of a word of revelation, or even of a merely philosophical doctrine. There is no *ἐοῤαξ* either in Zoroastrianism or in Buddhism. On the other hand, in the history of universal religion, incarnations always occur more than once, and are thus essentially mythical, non-historical. We can state, therefore, with absolute certainty that only within the sphere of Christianity can historical criticism become a decisive problem for faith; this is the distinctive

of the word, can lay no serious claim to historicity. The mythical element eliminates historical reality from the actual event, and also prevents us from regarding the “revelation” as a serious decisive element; in both instances for the same reason.

Hence, in the last resort, the so-called “special” revelations of the various religions come to the same thing as the speculative assertions of the philosophy of religion and mysticism: namely, that revelation is merely an individual concrete instance of a general truth, or, in other words, the accidental incarnation of that Essence which reigns supreme beyond the confines of time and space, in the realm of eternal Being. The important distinction, therefore, is not that which exists between the Christian revelation and these mythological religions, with their recurring revelations, but the distinction between the Christian belief in the revelation which has taken place once for all, and this general kind of religion, with its conception of a general diffused type of revelation, and its non-historical outlook, since, in point of fact, the primitive type of religion tends either to be absorbed into this diffused type of religion, or into the Christian religion itself. More and more the distinction centres round one point, and the issue is clear: either the mystical, idealistic, ethical, general kind of religion (in all its various forms), which lays no claim to “revelation” in the concrete sense of the word, but which rejects such a conception of religion as “crude,” “unspiritual,” “sense-bound,” “external,” or the Christian belief in the unique revelation of Jesus Christ. Stated in this way, however, we can see that it is not correct to say that one claim to revelation is opposed to the other. A claim to revelation in the Christian, concrete, and at the same time absolutely serious sense is made only by the Christian religion. This may be regarded as settled without in the least anticipating any further conclusions. There is, however, a very sharp contrast between these two conceptions: the religion of general revelation, and the Christian belief in the unique and final revelation in the fact of Jesus Christ, a contrast which cannot be removed by any attempts at compromise. Attempts at reconciliation have been made, it is true; we shall be dealing with them in the next chapter; our first endeavour, however, must be to

feature of the Christian belief in revelation which distinguishes it from all other religions.