Revelation, Experience and the Triune God

Introduction

How do Christians know God? A traditional response might be both through God’s works and through the scriptures; the book of nature and the book of revelation. Within the Catholic tradition, the belief that God might be known through creation derives from an understanding of the sacram mentality of creation. According to Richard McBrien:

A sacramental perspective is one that ‘sees’ the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical. For Catholicism, therefore, all reality is sacred.

(Catholicism. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994) 9-10.)

Grace and nature are not in opposition, but rather, grace is the fulfilment and perfection of nature. Although, there have been other elements of the Christian tradition that have emphasised the opposition between nature and grace. Christianity has always existed within this tension between immanence and transcendence, the human, the divine, and the cosmic. However, both the incarnation and the idea that we are made in the image of God affirms that there also exists continuity between the human and the divine. The human and the divine grace and nature, while distinct, are not ultimately separable because the very first grace is creation itself. It is the idea of this nature, graced from its creation and perfected in Christ, that lies at the heart of the Christian understanding of the history of salvation.

Christians believe that the definitive revelation of who God is has taken place in the man Jesus whom Christians confess as the Christ. God is not revealed in the abstract but in a human being, in history, and in culture. In Jesus we see the fullness of what humanity is called to be.

The Idea of Revelation


Although the idea of revelation does not appear normally within the Bible, and in fact does not become a central theme of theology until after the Enlightenment, “revelation” (from the Latin revelare, “to remove the veil”) is a dominant theme in biblically based religious traditions. However, today it is also one of the most controversial ideas in theological discussion.

In the history of Christian theology “revelation” has often been understood as an inner “illumination” or as a divine teaching and instruction. At times this understanding has led to what has been called a “propositional” theory of revelation. That is, “revelation” has been taken to be the communication of information capable of being expressed in sentences or propositions. However, the propositional understanding has become questionable in modern theology, and the central model for understanding revelation has shifted to a more “personal” one. Revelation is now understood fundamentally as God’s self-revelation. It is first of all the gift of God’s own being, and only secondly is it the illuminative or propositional unfolding of the foundational event of a divine self-giving. Revelation is not primarily the uncovering of hidden truths of information otherwise inaccessible to reason and ordinary experience. Such a “gnostic” idea, tempting though it has been since early in the history of Christianity, trivialises the idea of revelation, making it appeal more to curiosity than to our need for transformation and hope. Instead revelation means God’s self-unveiling and self-gift.
As Karl Rahner has often insisted, revelation is fundamentally the communication of the mystery of God to the world. This divine self-communication influences the world at every phase of its coming-to-be, and not just within the confines of the biblical world alone. Revelation is the ongoing outpouring of God’s creative, formative love into the entire world. In this sense it has a “general” character, and it is even constitutive of all things. Thus the idea of revelation in contemporary theology tends to converge with the biblical theme of creation. Creation itself is already the self-revelation of God.

However, biblical faith has influenced theologians to speak also of “revelation in history,” “historical revelation,” or “special revelation,” in addition to God’s universal or “general” self-revelation. In the history of Israel and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Christians believe that God who is present to the world everywhere and at all times manifests the divine essence in a definitively redemptive way. . .

The consensus of much recent theology (Jewish, Protestant and Catholic), however, is that the idea of revelation in history does not imply a magical intrusion of privileged information untouched by the vicissitudes of history, as is often imagined in popular piety. Special revelation does not suspend the limited and historically contingent character of all human consciousness. Instead it may be understood as the manifestation of the divine mystery to the whole world from within the limitations of a particular people’s existence. . .

The self-revealing God is given to faith not as a possession but in the mode of promise. The sense of a divine revelation occurred first to people whose destinies were uncertain but whose lives were nonetheless filled with expectation. Today as well, any meaningful conviction of revelation can occur only to those who share this same sense of promise and the hope that adheres to it. Hence the most important reason for our accepting the notion of revelation is not to evoke a sense of privilege, but to give strong expression to faith’s perennial impression of the always surprising initiative or “prevenience” of God, that is, to the conviction that we are not ourselves the authors of the promise we live by. The notion of revelation is indispensable in any theology grounded in faith’s experience of a mystery of promise that is by its very nature always new, surprising and unpredictable.

**Revelation as Salvation History**

One way in which revelation can be understood as God’s self-communication is through the biblical idea of salvation history. German Lutheran Wolfhart Pannenberg is one theologian has focused upon this idea. For Pannenberg, revelation is essentially a public and universal historical event which is recognised and interpreted as an “act of God”. According to Pannenberg:

- The revelation of God does not take place directly but indirectly through God’s acts in history.
- Revelation is not completely apprehended at the beginning, but only at the end of revelation history.
- The universal revelation of God is fully realised in the destiny Jesus of Nazareth, insofar as the end of history is anticipated in that destiny.
- The Christ event cannot be regarded as revealing God in isolation but is set in the context of the history of God’s dealings with Israel.
The Christian understanding of revelation is intrinsically related to the idea of “salvation history”. Christianity inherited from Judaism an understanding that God acts in and reveals himself through history, from Adam, Noah, Abraham, particularly through Moses and the deliverance of Israel from slavery, and through the later prophets. It is from Judaism that we get the idea of “salvation history”. That God’s self-communication is realised by deeds and actions means that God’s self-communication takes place through history. This salvation history reaches a climax in Jesus Christ where God himself enters the historical process. Here the God who created the world, the Word through whom all things were made, enters himself into creation, the historical processes of becoming, as the fulfilment of both salvation history and creation, bringing all things back to God. For Christianity then, revelation is tied up with the idea of “salvation history” of which Jesus is the climax, the culmination and the fulfilment of God’s saving action in creation and history.

Two models of Revelation

Most theologians today, Catholic and Protestant, interpret revelation fundamentally as God’s personal self-gift to the world. In the past however, as John Haught notes, the Catholic theology of revelation has suffered from a “propositional” and correspondingly impersonal view of revelation in which revelation was understood very much as though it were a set of truths and very little as the unfolding of a dialogical relationship between God and the world.

St. Thomas Aquinas understood revelation as the “saving act by which God provides us with the truths necessary for our salvation.” This “cognitive” interpretation with its accent on propositional “truths” greatly influenced subsequent scholastic theology as well as ideas on revelation operative at the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council. The former was intent on preserving (in opposition to the Reformers) the “objective” character of revelation as existing independently of the believer’s faith. And the First Vatican Council insisted (against rationalism and fideism) that some revelatory truths are accessible to reason and can be found in the natural order, while others come to us through the prophets, apostolic witnesses and the church. It is important to keep in mind that these councils were not concerned so much with providing a fully developed theology of revelation as they were with combating what they considered to be doctrinal errors. It is not surprising, therefore, that in their polemics they carried on a rather “cognitive” approach to revelation.

The Second Vatican Council, however, represents a renewal of revelation theology that began in the last century and continues today. Its “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” reflects the contemporary shift toward emphasizing the promissory nature of revelation and the notion of God’s self-communication. Its treatment of revelation is more biblical, more attuned to the theme of salvation history, more personalistic and less “propositional” than previous Catholic documents on the subject had been. Of particular importance is the document’s emphasis on the importance of the revelatory word of the Scriptures for theology and Christian life. Although it still holds to the view that “sacred tradition and sacred Scripture” together constitute “one sacred deposit” of the word of God, there is a distinct emphasis on the importance of the Bible as a source of revelation. The Second Vatican Council no longer views revelation simply in terms of propositional “truths” that support dogmatic positions. Though the document on revelation is little more than an outline, its tone and perspective are a radical departure from official dogmatic formulations of the past. And it challenges us to think of revelation not as a collection of timeless formulas, but as an always enlivening embodiment of God’s word that can illuminate and transform each new situation in a special way.
And so, as Gerald O’Collins explains, theologians have:

moved away from a propositional view of revelation to develop the model of revelation as interpersonal encounter or - in a word - dialogue. Instead of being interpreted primarily as God revealing truths, revelation was now understood to be God's self-revelation. It was expounded first and foremost as the gratuitous and saving self-disclosure of God who calls and enables us to enter by faith into a new personal relationship. Revelation is a person-to-person, subject-to-subject, I-Thou encounter. The appropriate primary question is "Who is revealed?" rather than "What is revealed?"


**The ‘how’ of Revelation and the capacity of the receiver**

Catholic theology in the twentieth century has been shaped by what is sometimes called the ‘turn to the subject’. What this means is that theology has come to realise that theology begins with the question of humanity. According to Karl Rahner:

We must reflect first of all upon man as the universal question which he is for himself. . . . This question, which man is and not only has, must be regarded as the condition which makes hearing the Christian answer possible.


Reflecting upon this approach William Hill concludes that theology "is anthropology; less the science of God than the study of humanity as it stands before God".[William J. Hill, “Theology”, in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Komonchak et al. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987) 1022.]

How a God who is incorporeal, eternal and infinite can reveal Godself in finite time and space is a question beyond our capacity to answer. In considering revelation as a process of communication from God to humanity, we can only understand it from the perspective of being recipients; we are not the sender. We can ask questions about how we receive revelation but we have a limited ability to ask questions about how God does the revealing. So we cannot talk about God speaking but we can talk about us hearing. God’s ability to reveal may be limitless in one sense, but limited in another sense, namely, limited by our ability to receive. Monika Hellwig puts this well:

But what God reveals to us is not apparent instantaneously, once and forever in all its implications. What God reveals is received or seen according to our present capacity. That capacity is shaped by our individual human maturity, by the maturity of our society and its culture and language, and also by our access to testimonies of God’s self-revelation. [*Understanding Catholicism*, (New York : Paulist Press, 1981) 1]

Dermot Lane, for one, has written that we cannot understand the matter of God revealing unless, at the same time, we address the issue of the human capacity to experience revelation (or to experience God). He says that experience means that the subject encounters the world (or whatever) as a given reality, and then interacts with that reality:

it [experience] is the critical assessment of reality by the subject through the movements of response, refraction and critical reflection. Within experience there is always a reciprocal flow between the subject and reality which creates a new
Lane classifies religious experience as a type of depth experience, one that puts us in touch with realities such as truth, value, meaning and beauty (like other depth experiences) but also puts the individual in touch with transcendence. Lane wishes to argue that the human subject co-experiences God through different human experiences. In other words we do not experience God apart from our other experiences but in and through them:

Religious experience enables us to see that which was already there in our experience but which we failed to acknowledge explicitly in the first instance. (Ibid., 15.)

In an article he wrote earlier, Lane stated:

The primary point of contact between God and man in history is human experience. The medium of revelation, therefore, is human experience. The revelation of God to man takes place in human experience. The search for God outside human experience has been rightly described as a search for idols. This particular emphasis on experience is a reaction against abstract and overly intellectualist approaches in the past to revelation. It also highlights the need for some degree of active awareness and self-consciousness in the recipient who appropriates God’s revelation. [D.A. Lane, "The Nature of Revelation," The Clergy Review 66 (1981), 93.]

He is careful, though, not to confuse revelation and human experience:

This does not imply that revelation is reducible to human experience. Revelation begins in human experience and takes us beyond experience to that deeper divine dimension which we call the mystery of God at the centre of life. A revelatory experience is a human experience seen in its full depth. (Ibid., 94.)

This is a little like the way Paul explained things to the Athenians in Acts 17.

The Second Vatican Council’s Dei Verbum presents three means through which people have experienced God’s revelation:

through creation;
through the history of Israel;
and through Jesus.

Some theologians have been a little critical in that the bishops at Vatican II did not place much emphasis on revelation occurring through human personal experience. What we can say, though, is that human experience is the overarching or common denominator in the other three.

If God is to communicate with us then this communication must be in a way we can understand, it must take place in a human way. In fact, God’s revelation takes place in and through our personal human experience and in no other way. (Ian Knox, Theology for Teachers. Ottawa: Novalis, 1994. 80.)

Monika Hellwig points out that we may discover God "in the inner depths of our own conscience and consciousness" (Understanding Catholicism, 17). She outlines several ways this may happen: when we discover a moral imperative to do the right thing even above our personal self-interest, when we transcend ourselves and rise above situations and limitations, and when we are relating with other people, particularly as a parent with a child. Here one needs to think about the relation between such personal revelation and the public revelation of God in Jesus.
Why Has God Revealed?

Vatican II provided a clear and simple answer to the question of why God revealed Godself.

His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature (cf. Eph. 2:18; 2 Pet. 1:4). By this revelation then, the invisible God (cf. Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17), from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends (cf. Ex. 33:11; Jn. 15:14-15), and moves among them (cf. Bar. 3:38), in order to invite and receive them into his own company. (Dei Verbum, 2.)

This is the very essence of salvation. Revelation is not merely for our information or edification; it is meant to unite people with God and in God; it is meant to liberate us from sin; it is meant to make us participants in the Kingdom.

Revelation does not simply tell us how we can be saved. Jesus did not simply come down to pass on a set of instructions. Rather, Jesus is our salvation. God’s self-communication is our salvation as salvation is nothing less that participation in the life of God.

The Self-Revelation of the Triune God

This discussion of revelation leads us to the heart of the Christian experience of revelation in the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is not simply the result of philosophical speculation, but is itself an expression of the Christian experience of salvation revealed in and by Jesus Christ.

The experience of the risen Christ by the first Christians led gradually and over time to a deepening appreciation of divine nature of Jesus. The development of doctrine is at the heart of Christian experience as the implications of what God has done for us are worked within the human condition of culture and history. This idea of the development of doctrine is expressed by Gregory Nazianzen in the fourth century when he wrote:

the Old Testament announced the Father openly but the Son obscurely. The New Testament has shown forth the Son but only an indication of the divinity of the Spirit. At the present the Spirit is among us, and shows himself in all his splendour.

Gregory was the first major theologian to unambiguously affirm the full divinity of the Spirit. It is only with this affirmation that the doctrine of the Trinity comes into being.

The mystery of the Triune God is the reality underlying the Catholic doctrine on salvation and grace; it is the foundation and the font of the Church and the sacraments. God creates through the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit leads creation back to God through Christ. The doctrine of the Trinity is not some pious speculation about the inner life of God. We only know God in God’s relation to the world. The revelation of God in God’s self communication and grace must, if it is a real self-communication, reflect the divine nature and hence be Trinitarian. God is who God is in relationship. No other God exists.

One might visualise the idea that God’s self-revelation is oriented towards bringing us and the world to share in the life of God is depicted by the following diagram:
The parabolic model expresses the one ecstatic movement of God whereby all things originate with God and are returned to God. The purpose of God’s self-revelation is to bring us to God and to allow us to share in God’s life.

**If God is three how can God be one?**

The fundamental theological question facing the early Church was what does it mean to call Christ God and how is this consistent with the monotheism that Christianity inherited from Judaism? Such questions could not simply be answered by referring to the authority of scripture, since appealing to the scriptures only revealed the problems involved in interpreting the word of God. It soon became evident that there were four types of biblical texts relevant to the emerging Christological question. They express respectively:

- An “adoptionist” theme or event. For example, the baptismal episodes of the Synoptics imply that Jesus is taken into a new relationship with, or adopted by, the Father.
- Jesus’ oneness with the Father, especially in John
- A clear distinction between Jesus and the Father, as when Jesus is “sent” by the Father
- Jesus’ derivation from the Father as his Word and Wisdom.

This last type of biblical expression would prove decisive for Trinitarian doctrine. But then, as later, a simple appeal to scripture provided no simple solution. The scriptures are simply the data upon which theology reflects, not a textbook of ready answers.

It is perhaps worth recognising that the Church does not come up with doctrines and dogmas just for the sake of it. What was at stake in the Trinitarian controversies was a deep intuition that arose from the foundational experience of the Church itself and expressed in the worship of the Church. It was only the challenge that Arius posed in denying what was perhaps taken for granted that made it necessary to articulate logically what had previously been an experience. This would be what Sebastian Moore had in mind when he described the Creed as “dogmatised mystical experience”.

The point is that Christians prayed to Jesus, as God, before the Church came up with any doctrine saying as much. This of course was not an invention but founded upon the very experience of the Risen Lord that is at the heart of Christian experience. Similarly, it was argued, the Holy Spirit must be divine because the Holy Spirit does what only God can do. The Holy Spirit is “the Lord, the Giver of Life”.

But why does it matter? If we are created in the image of God, and called to share in God’s life, then the nature of God as a community of persons “that is characterised by relationality and mutuality” also presents a challenge as to what sort of persons we are called to be.