

Reason and Religion

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God has given us an assured revelation that lights up the world, John tells us in his gospel. Such was the claim of the early Christians, beginning with Peter and the rest of the twelve. Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob worshipped a God who, they believed, revealed himself in human history; Mohammed and Muslims, Luther and Lutherans, Zoroaster and Zoroastrians have all held that God has broken into the world of humankind and shown us the way to salvation. Jim Jones and David Koresh also claimed to be special recipients of the word of God.

How can a person assess this embarrassingly rich array of “revelatory claims,” claims by various human beings that God has revealed some particular thing? Many Christian believers have held that reason cannot or should not play an essential role in the assessment of revelatory claims. In this paper I wish to consider and respond to arguments given in support of this position. Each heading below represents an objection to using reason in the evaluation of a revelatory claim; in each case I will argue that the objection is unsound.

“(Christian) revelation is not propositional.”

One finds contemporary Christian theologians arguing (sometimes) something like this:

- 1) Christianity takes divine revelation as essentially involving God’s descent into human history.
- 2) Therefore, Christianity understands divine revelation to be essentially non-propositional.
- 3) Therefore, any attempt to investigate “revelatory claims,” which are essentially propositional, is doomed.

This is an argument associated primarily with Protestant theology, but one can certainly find Catholic theologians who seem to criticize a “propositional” understanding of revelation.¹

It would be ludicrous to deny the first premise of the argument. God acts in human history, according to the Christian, and acts in various ways. The world is itself revelatory of the causal action of God; and beyond this, God broke into the world of human history and became human, according to Christianity. There is an “ontic” dimension to revelation. But it does not follow from this that Christian revelation has nothing to do with propositions, or that it is essentially non-propositional. One who is attracted to Christianity can reasonably ask: are we getting a message from God? Even if the message is simply “God broke into history,” there is a propositional content to Christian revelation.

Christianity seems to teach that part of God's manifestation in human history includes Christ speaking to the world in propositional form, making promises that have propositional entailments ("if you believe in Jesus you will be saved" entails "there is or was a person named Jesus"). And it teaches as well the retention of that message, endlessly evolving, becoming clearer in propositional form. God broke into the world as Logos, as Word, the Christian claims. Since Christianity seems to teach these things as essentials of the faith, we would deny that premise 2) of the argument follows from premise 1).

Conceivably one might want to accept 2) as a consequence of 1), but deny that 3) follows from 2). Either rejecting the inference from 1) to 2) or from 2) to 3) is sufficient, so far as we are concerned, to clear the obstacle from the path of our inquiry. We want to confront the propositional revelatory claims of Christianity (whether or not divine revelation is itself thought of as essentially propositional) and ask: are they true? You can't ask whether events are true or false. Faith comes by hearing; you have to ask yourself whether what you hear is true.

The Christian is committed, we think, to claiming that God broke in and told us in some sense the way things are. To preclude misunderstanding, however, we should note that the Christian is not committed to a "whisper theory" of revelation which says every doctrinal proposition has been whispered to the recipient in his own language. Christians typically claim that revelation has been given in some form that permits its communication in any human language. Nor are Christians committed to the (false) idea that if the church or the tradition transmits an idea, e.g., in Latin, and then in French, that what is transmitted is precisely the same proposition.² The Christian is committed to the claim that there is a substantive communication of what God wants to be understood, in whatever medium is suitable for the communication or extension of that message to the ends of the earth.

Though Christianity neither precludes nor requires the whisper theory, there is good reason for rejecting the theory. The theory restricts the role of church and tradition, because according to the theory the church or tradition can't re-express the message. And the theory seems extraordinarily naive — it seems to imply that God dictated the New Testament in rather broken Greek. A more nuanced account of propositional revelation is possible, an account that speaks of gracious control, inspiration, or maintenance, consistent with and explanatory of the original revelation.

A necessary condition of expressing a refutation is to argue for a proposition that's incompatible with the proposition at issue. But this can't be done unless either a proposition is put forward which directly contradicts the proposition at issue, or which entails a proposition logically incompatible with the entailments of the original proposition at issue. One who purports to refute a propositional view of revelation must produce a proposition of the requisite sort.

"Our minds are too small to rationally apprehend (Christian) revelation."

More fully:

- 1) God is omniscient; his mind is infinite.
- 2) Our minds are finite.
- 3) So we're in no position to judge whether what God says is so.
- 4) That's just what we must do if we're rationally to investigate revelatory claims.
- 5) So we can't carry out the project.

The first two propositions of the argument seem perfectly acceptable (assuming for the moment that God exists). The third likewise seems unproblematic, assuming that God exists and that the premise is taken at face value: "what God says" has to mean "what God really says", and not "what some person or persons allege that God says". For we can certainly make judgments about whether what some human being alleges that God says can rationally be believed. And it is just such judgments that we must make if we are rationally to investigate revelatory claims. So premise 4) of this argument is to be rejected: using reason to investigate putative revelatory claims, to evaluate the evidence for and against their truth, is not using reason to judge whether "what God says" is in fact true.

It is both possible and desirable to make judgments about claims human individuals or groups make about divine revelation. Locke made the point some 300 years ago:

God when he makes the prophet does not unmake the man. He leaves all his faculties in the natural state, to enable him to judge of his inspirations, whether they be of divine original or no. ... If he would have us assent to the truth of any proposition, he either evidences that truth by the usual methods of natural reason, or else makes it known to be a truth which he would have us assent to by his authority, and convinces us that it is from him, by some marks which reason cannot be mistaken in.³

Though Locke's assertion that an authoritative revelation has marks which reason cannot be mistaken about may seem excessive to some (it does to us), it is a useful antidote to anti-rationalism.

And even if there is some sense in which human reason cannot judge divine revelation, we focus here on revelatory claims, which are necessarily made by human beings; human reason can certainly judge such claims.

"Inquiry into (Christian) revelatory claims is wrong (for believers), because it is sinful to doubt God's word."

Let us consider a fuller statement of the contention or argument:

- 1) According to Christian teaching, Christian faith is a virtue.
- 2) So it's wrong to doubt, according to Christian teaching.
- 3) If you are honestly going to consider whether a revelatory claim is true or false, you must take a noncommittal position.

- 4) To take a noncommittal position is to suspend judgment and cease to believe.
- 5) To cease to believe is to doubt.

The first premise here would certainly be accepted by all traditional Christians (and by the vast majority of informed non-Christians). Is faith inconsistent with doubt? Perhaps the second premise is more troublesome — some Christians might suggest that whether it's wrong for a believer to doubt depends on what one means by doubt. Sometimes one may simply find oneself with questions and worries; if doubt is something that sometimes can just “happen to” a person (though sometimes it may be willful), then it is implausible that doubt is always morally wrong. Of course, one can encourage and nourish doubt that just “happens”; and that may be wrong. The situation parallels sexual desire: one can easily imagine circumstances in which it is wrong for a person to encourage or entertain such desire, though the fact that they become aroused, the fact that the desire comes upon them, is not itself wrong. We can be faulted only for what is within our control.⁴ So let us understand “doubt” in premise 2) as essentially willful.⁵

All of the remaining premises of the argument might be questioned, however. We limit ourselves here to just a few of the issues that arise.

Either premise 3) or 4) is false, we suggest, depending on what one means by “taking a noncommittal position” (and perhaps also by “honestly considering whether a revelatory claim is true”). If one understands a noncommittal position to be by definition a position in which one does not believe a proposition x (“God exists,” let's say), and then proceeds to review and reflect on evidence for and against x , then 4) is true but 3) is false. 3) is false on this reading because considering whether a revelatory claim is true or false can simply involve looking at arguments or evidence for and against it. One may believe that the earth is not flat, and still look at arguments to the contrary, honestly considering them in the sense that one does not lie to oneself or others about what one is believing or doing. One may believe that the earth is flat, and honestly look at arguments to the contrary, open to changing one's mind if the evidence requires it. Lots of people, presumably, have in the course of human history done just this.

But can the believer be open to changing his or her mind without taking a sinful attitude? Certainly. The Christian can acknowledge that his or her belief may be false in an epistemic sense: that is, the Christian can say that conceivably, for all one knows, Christianity may be false. This just means that “Christian doctrine is true” is not one of the propositions the Christian knows to be true (most traditional Christian theologians and philosophers have held that evidence for the truth of Christianity is not compelling, does not produce knowledge; rather, it is sufficient to ground belief, to inspire faith).⁶ Acknowledging that a belief may be false in an epistemic sense does not require acknowledging that it may be false in a metaphysical sense. Either Goldbach's conjecture is true or false; one might have evidence supporting a belief one way or the other, but acknowledge that one's belief may be false in an epistemic sense — for all one knows, evidence compelling a change in belief may come along. Still, if one believes the conjecture is true, and it is in fact true, then it is not metaphysically possible that it is

false, and one certainly need not (should not) hold that it is possibly false in the metaphysical sense.

Inquiry into revelatory claims does not necessarily submerge believers in doubt.

“(Christian) religion is a matter of the heart; reason is not capable of judging it.”

“The heart has its reasons which reason does not know,” Pascal tells us, giving tribute to the depth, the freshness, the pathos and joy of human love and commitment and responsiveness. His words surely do not mean that reason can never make judgments about the most profound questions — he himself famously urges those who are agnostic about God’s existence to calculate possible consequences attaching to the options for belief, and to use reason in deciding on a course of conduct. To say “religion is a matter of the heart” is by itself unproblematic (though vague and amorphous). To say that since it is a matter of the heart reason can’t judge it is to offer an argument with a huge gap in the middle.

How is the gap to be filled? What does it mean to say reason can’t judge matters of the heart, and what reason do we have for accepting such a claim?

It is sometimes said that argument has little to do with religious conversion; studies suggest that converts themselves hold that philosophical arguments were not pivotal in their decision. Perhaps this view about the psychology of conversion motivates the contention at issue. But even if the view is correct it does not support the contention at issue. For surely if conclusive arguments concerning religious belief were available, they would make an impact. In an extreme case one can imagine, for instance, constant miracles which form the basis for philosophical argument. The arguments actually available for theism are less than commanding, less than compelling, we think; they thus play less of a role than arguments in the extreme case imagined — but they surely can play some role. Furthermore, intellectuals often abandon religious belief because of what they perceive to be bad under-girding arguments; and many other individuals are probably influenced to follow leading thinkers on this path. Further yet, one should be very cautious in relying on the accounts people give of their own conversion: people can easily be deceived about their own histories, and there may be elements of argument in those histories to which they do not attend. (We believe philosophical argument played a crucial role in our own conversions, though we expect others to be cautious about our assertions concerning the matter.) And even if most converts do not come to belief through philosophical argument, some may; indeed, some people may be so constituted that if they are to become believers at all, it will be through argument.

Perhaps we need to examine not case studies of conversions, but the reflections of theologians in order to fill in the gap in the argument we’re considering. The great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth provides us with an eloquent statement of the contention we wish to refute:

[A]s far as one can see there is no theory of knowledge and no pattern of thought which can embrace revelation in the Christian sense of the term. We can work through the whole history of philosophy ... and we shall be forced to the same conclusion. There is no room for revelation in the Christian sense in any human inquiry or any human faculty of reason. ...

The revelation of God can only be searched, understood and judged in the act of obedience, of listening, which leads to decision — or it will not be searched, understood and judged at all. ... Because it is the Word of God, the revelation of God cannot be recommended and defended; it has no advocates and no propagandists. And, finally, one cannot profess one's belief in it by protesting and asserting that it exists. ... Revelation can only be presupposed in our thinking and our speaking, and in our Christian theology and preaching too, in the way that certain axioms or objective facts are presupposed in every branch of knowledge, when the belief and the testimony and the presupposition are only forms of that one possible decision, the decision of obedience.⁷

Eloquent, but opaque. What does it mean to say there is “no room” for revelation in philosophy or in any human inquiry? Perhaps it means that philosophy (let us say) consists of a set of statements, {S-1, ... S-n}, and that the truth of Christianity is not among the statements in this set. Or perhaps it means that the set of statements in philosophy, {S-1, ..., S-n}, includes or entails the statement that Christianity is false. These two interpretations of Barth's claim are certainly not equivalent. Under the first interpretation, Barth's claim that there is no room for revelation in philosophy may be true, but it is irrelevant for our project. Under the second interpretation, the claim seems clearly false, since surely the set of statements in philosophy should include only true statements (or at the very least, should not include false statements). Perhaps there is a third interpretation of the claim that is worth considering, but the text does not suggest in any perspicuous way what it might be.

If taken literally, Barth's language in the second part of the quoted excerpt would mean we could only understand revelation by following a command. But it would seem one must understand a command in order to obey it. How are we able to understand the divine command? Is it that we are to enter into some form of life, and then the command and the grounds for the command will become clear? Or perhaps Barth might say that a non-believer who sincerely inquires into Christian revelation will in fact be obeying God's command, will be doing what God wants, even if the person does not understand what they do to be an act of obedience to God. But then “obedience” is being taken in a metaphorical sense. Most Christians would probably agree with Barth that revelation can only be understood, understood with the depth and breadth of our being, if we are conscious that our effort to understand is commanded by God — such understanding presupposes the existence of God and the acknowledgment of his law. But searching for an understanding of revelation, inquiring into its truth, is another matter altogether.

Are there different, better statements of this contention than the one Barth provides? Different, no doubt. Actually, the next contention we examine — a “Wittgensteinian

fideist's" contention — might be taken by its proponents as a better formulation of Pascal's original claim.

“(Christian) religion is a matter of engaging in a particular practice, a language-game, a form of life; reason cannot judge religion, which has a logic of its own.”

“Wittgenstein has shown that the religious language-game has a logic of its own, making it immune to rationalistic criticism and judgment,” it may be suggested.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, a powerful and enigmatic philosopher who lived the first half of this century, spawned numerous lines of inquiry in the philosophy of language, of mind, and of mathematics. Though his pronouncements concerning philosophy of religion were few, there has grown up a school of believers known as “Wittgensteinian fideists”⁸ who borrow terminology and theses from the later Wittgenstein⁹ in an effort to develop and expound their understanding of religious belief.

If “Wittgenstein has shown” that there is some sense in which religion has a language or logic of its own that doesn't map onto the language of science or philosophy, then we would like to see the argument laid out. One ought to be highly skeptical of sweeping generalizations about what some famous philosopher has shown. If a person asserts that some important truth has been shown by some philosopher, then the person making the assertion ought to be able to present the argument purporting to show the important truth. Often what is said to have been shown hasn't been shown at all.

The published writings of Wittgenstein do not, so far as we know, contain any explicit argument for the conclusion that religious belief is inaccessible to rational inquiry. But let us take John Wisdom's famous parable of the gardener to illustrate the position of the Wittgensteinian fideists.¹⁰ Wisdom asks us to imagine the following:

Two people return to their long neglected garden and find among the weeds a few of the old plants surprisingly vigorous. One says to the other “It must be that a gardener has been coming and doing something about these plants.” Upon inquiry they find that no neighbor has ever seen anyone at work in their garden. The first man says to the other “He must have worked while people slept.” The other says “No, someone would have heard him and besides, anybody who cared about the plants would have kept down these weeds.” The first man says “Look at the way these are arranged” ... [W]hen after all this, one says, “I still believe a gardener comes” while the other says “I don't” their different words now reflect no difference as to what they have found in the garden, no difference as to what they would find in the garden if they looked further and no difference about how fast untended gardens fall into disorder

D.Z. Phillips, one of the Wittgensteinian fideists, writes,

No one among contemporary philosophers has done more than Wisdom to show that religious beliefs are not experimental hypotheses about the world. Whenever this

question is discussed nowadays, reference is likely to be made to Wisdom's parable of the long-neglected garden.¹¹

Just what is the parable is supposed to show? It may suggest that some believers won't give up their position, no matter what. This is psychologically interesting, but philosophically irrelevant (and of course, people are dug in on the other side as well). Phillips seems to think the story suggests religious belief is not an experimental hypothesis about the world. What does this mean? Maybe that religious belief is in principle unfalsifiable. Now it may be true of some religions that they cannot conflict with science. If God is turned into a symbol for an abstraction such as "truth" there is no problem of conflict. But a religion certainly can teach something that is in conflict with the weight of scientific evidence. Every standard science text dealing with human origins conflicts with a literal reading of Genesis; if a religion teaches that Genesis is literally true, then that religion conflicts with contemporary science. Genesis can sensibly be understood as teaching great religious truths through myth, we think (and so the main-line religious denominations teach). But here our point is simply that it is obviously possible for some religious beliefs to conflict with science.

Take another example: many Christians believe that the resurrection of Jesus was as much a real, historical event as his death. Hume argues that all science and all ordinary experience is against it, decisively. Some Christians are persuaded. "We can no longer understand the resurrection of Jesus in a literal sense ...," says Gerd Ludemann, because of "the revolution of the scientific picture of the world."¹² Ludemann finds it possible to remain a Christian while giving up the literal truth of the resurrection. Others do not see it that way, and judge that if Jesus did not rise bodily from the dead, then Christianity is false. Sophisticates might regard this as unenlightened, but it is impossible to deny that this attitude toward the resurrection is a religious one. It is simply no use to maintain that there is no proposition *p* that can properly be ascribed as a part of a religious belief and thrown into doubt by science.

Religious belief, whether it is fundamentalist Baptist or orthodox Catholic or Buddhist, is not just an empirical hypothesis about the world; religion has a depth reason cannot fathom. But this is consistent with our being able rationally to investigate questions about the truth or falsity of religious claims. It's just wrong to say that religious belief, as most people understand it, is in principle unfalsifiable.

Can the Wittgensteinian fideist successfully portray this common understanding of religion as unsophisticated? Perhaps there will be an attempt to paint the common view as crass or mercenary. A Wittgensteinian fideist might suggest,¹³ for instance, that even if there turns out not to be an afterlife at the world's end, Christianity is not thereby falsified, since the meaning and value of a religious life does not lie in the hope or expectation of immortality. In some sense, surely, the meaning would not be drained out of a saint's life should it turn out that the beatific vision Christianity promises in an afterlife does not exist. The love the saint has shown to his or her fellow human beings, the virtues developed, the truths discovered, will still remain. But even though the holy person has not loved, and struggled for virtue, and searched for truth in order to gain an

eternal vision of God, if there is no such vision his life will have been monumentally misguided, or foolish. A woman wrongly convinced of her husband's fidelity who goes through life steadfast in her conviction, ignoring the evidence of adultery, telling others that they are mistaken in thinking the infidelities constant and egregious, does not live a life devoid of meaning — but she may rightly be called foolish.

Wittgensteinian fideism seems to appeal to believers who want a riskless faith, a faith nothing can show to be false. The position may remind one of Gerard Manley Hopkins's words.¹⁴

I have desired to go Where springs not fail, To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be Where no storms come, Where the green swell is in the havens
dumb, And out of the swing of the sea.

But a faith without risk is a faith without content.

Notes:

This paper, which I wrote for the 1996 Summer Seminar on Science and Theology, presents issues and arguments I am developing together with Thomas D. Sullivan for inclusion in a book we are working on titled *A Ship for Simmias: Revelation from a Philosophical Standpoint*.

1. See Avery Dulles, "The Church and Revelation," in *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday and Company), 1974. It's hard to tell what he takes a "propositional" or "institutional" understanding of revelation to be, since he conjoins quite a number of claims in his depiction of the view. He's loaded a lot of accidental features into the propositional model.
2. Propositions are distinct from states of affairs; propositions refer to states of affairs through cognitive displays which include the semantic access to the relevant concepts. "Cognitive display" is broader than "proposition".
3. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, Ch. XIX ("Of Enthusiasm"), Section 14.
4. One may by wrongful actions in the past have put oneself in a situation where either desire or doubt "comes upon" one. One bears some responsibility for being in such a situation.
5. It is not easy to understand all of what the new Catechism of the Catholic Church says concerning the sin of doubt. We are told (pp. 506-507, English edition): 2088 The first commandment requires us to nourish and protect our faith with prudence and vigilance,

and to reject everything that is opposed to it. There are various ways of sinning against faith:

Voluntary doubt about the faith disregards or refuses to hold as true what God has revealed and the Church proposes for belief. Involuntary doubt refers to hesitation in believing, difficulty in overcoming objections connected with the faith, or also anxiety aroused by its obscurity. If deliberately cultivated doubt can lead to spiritual blindness.

2089 Incredulity is the neglect of revealed truth or the willful refusal to assent to it.

Are we being told here that “involuntary doubt” is a way of sinning against faith? Is involuntary doubt supposed to encompass an intellectual failure to see through a bad argument against the faith? We surely are not being told that one sins against the faith merely by reflecting on objections connected with the faith, but what we are being told is not entirely clear.

6. Some Protestant theologians would take exception to the claim that a Christian does not know that God exists. Alvin Plantinga is an illustrious proponent of the view that faith is a kind of knowledge.

7. Karl Barth, “The Christian Understanding of Revelation,” in Abernathy and Langford, *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Macmillan), 1962.

8. Basil Mitchell and D.Z. Phillips are well-known representatives of the school.

9. Though it’s the “later Wittgenstein” who inspires the Wittgensteinian fideists, Wittgenstein may have had a deeper religious sensibility as a young man. See Ray Monk’s biography, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: The Free Press), 1990, especially the discussion of Wittgenstein’s days as a soldier.

10. John Wisdom, “Gods,” in *Wisdom’s Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis*, 1953, pp. 149–159. The essay is widely reprinted.

11. D.Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry*, (New York: Schocken Books), 1970, p. 174.

12. Gerd Ludemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 180.

13. This was in fact suggested to me in conversation.

14. “Heaven-Haven: A Nun Takes the Veil,” *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed., ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1967, p. 19.