

REVELATION AND THE MODERN WORLD¹

BY

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IT is a disconcerting experience to read a book on what is perhaps the most important subject in theology, to be aware that one is making contact at every stage with a powerful mind ranging easily over the whole of the Biblical data, to be grateful for a number of profoundly true observations, and yet to find oneself at the end seemingly very little nearer the heart of the matter. The cause of this failure may be no further to seek than the present reviewer's obtuseness, or at least his habitual inclination to approach these problems in a manner quite different from that of the author; but it is not perhaps only the vanity of self-justification which looks for some other explanation. Dr Thornton is a difficult and obscure writer, but he is never unintelligible; given the necessary sympathy, there is significant meaning to be found in all that he says; there is also much that is rewarding. In his earlier work, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ*, he made a memorable contribution to our understanding of the New Testament. This book has many of the same qualities. Where, then, for one reader at least, does it fall short of the demands of its subject-matter?

The author is concerned with what he calls 'the form of the Christian Revelation as it appears in its original setting'. This he views under two chief aspects, namely, (i) 'the actual substance of the revelation', and (ii) 'its human context'. He deals in the course of the book with a great number of other topics, but all as related to these two main themes. Later he is able to state his position in such a passage as the following:

Thus we are confronted with three fundamental forms, under each of which a process of growth and development is seen to be included within the revelation of God's unchangeable perfection. The three fundamental forms are these: (i) the development of revealed religion in the story of Israel; (ii) the earthly life of our Lord; (iii) the growth of the Christian life in the Body of Christ. The entire biblical revelation is comprised within the unfolding of these three successive stages. Moreover, all the three parts are strongly interlocked and richly overlapping, with a single pattern of divine wisdom running through the whole.

A further quotation will be in place, both as indicating Dr Thornton's 'conclusions' as so far reached and as illustrating his manner of thought:

¹ *Revelation and the Modern World*. By L. S. Thornton. c.r. (Dacre Press; 30s.)

Thus at every point scientific criticism and traditional theology are mutually dependent. Each represents the truth of the whole, although in altogether different forms. Their very disparity is the condition of their mutual necessity and of their ultimate co-inherence in the proportions of truth. This kind of co-operation, which is indispensable to a sound biblical theology, corresponds to the other forms of co-operation which characterise the realms of nature and of grace. Objects are known in their relations, and in no other way. But these relations are always of two kinds. Each system of knowledge can be seen to be, in this respect, analogous, on the one hand, to some one cultural grouping of human society or again to any one of the 'levels' which 'interlock' or overlap in the graded universe. Each of these units draws its character and its coherence from the uniform system of relations which it contains within itself.

In a sense it is unfair to describe the above as embodying the author's conclusions; for these, in so far as they are ascertainable at all, can only be grasped from the work as a whole. With Dr Thornton everything is in multiple relation to everything else—'*Objects are known in their relations, and in no other way*'—and his exposition proceeds with constant reference to what has been, or is yet to be, said. For him revelation is to be regarded as an 'organism', a 'living biological phenomenon'; we must avoid a 'spurious simplicity' and 'fragmentary forms' and accept the fact that revelation and interpretation are correlated and inseparable. The foregoing quotations, though they leave on one side the incidental riches of the book, do perhaps give some idea of its general drift; they suggest enough to form a basis for criticism. This is now offered, as it needs must be, summarily, but with the tentativeness due to personal impression.

First, it must be said that Dr Thornton, despite his learning, does not deal with the fundamental problems involved in the nature of revelation. His philosophy (which owes much to Leibniz) is unequal to the burden placed upon it; it is intricate rather than subtle, it extends over vast surfaces at many different planes but plumbs no depths; it fails in analysis—and until its elements have been adequately analysed every synthesis is premature. Thus Dr Thornton does not redeem his promise to deal with the 'actual substance' of revelation. Indeed, the category of *substance* is un congenial to him; everything is classified in terms of *relation* (i.e., a secondary aspect of 'substance'). And this leads one to think that he confuses exegesis with theology, understood as the science of revealed truth. His 'philosophy' appears to be modelled upon the interrelated structure of the Hebrew sentence and is not really

critical; that is to say, it does not take sufficient account both of the nature of extra-mental reality and of the limitations of the human mind. He seems to think it possible, by a process of dialectic, to apprehend the Biblical revelation as an objective whole; whereas our apprehension is conditioned by our capacity to build it up for ourselves piece by piece in terms of ideas whose objective counterparts are individual *facts*, to which their admitted interrelation is subordinate.

Without an ontology and epistemology at least as profound as Aristotle's—as St Thomas clearly saw—we can give no satisfactory account of how God's word is received by man. What happens, for example, in the mind of the prophet when the word of the Lord comes to him? The answer here depends not so much on Scriptural exegesis as upon an epistemological enquiry into the actual mental processes involved. What precisely are they? On this Dr Thornton has little or nothing to say. Again, the implication of much that he does say is that all knowledge is relative; to which the questions suggest themselves: Has Christianity, then, no absolute and unchanging truth? Are there any *facts* of revelation? If not—then what of the Creeds? If yes—then surely we can, analogically it is true (though in St Thomas's, not Dr Thornton's, sense) determine something of their absolute metaphysical value. How, too, is revelation mediated to each individual man today? As Newman pertinently observes: 'the common sense of mankind feels that the very idea of revelation implies a present informant and guide, and that an infallible one; not a mere abstract declaration of truths unknown before to man, or a record of history, or the result of an antiquarian research, but a message and a lesson speaking to this man and that. . . . A revelation is not given, if there is no authority to decide what is given.' It would be interesting to have Dr Thornton's comment upon this.

Space will not permit any further indulgence in the unwelcome task of pointing out the deficiencies in what is manifestly a major undertaking. But one may be permitted to regret what can only be described as a note of theological insularity. The underlying philosophy has neither its principles in the *philosophia perennis* of the 'great Church' of the West, nor its conclusions within the reach of the *sensus communis* of mankind. To say that St Thomas Aquinas (whose work is apparently *terra incognita* to Dr Thornton!) has both these advantages is to say nothing decisive, but it does suggest a grave omission. One remembers how Archbishop Temple claimed to have read the entire *Summa Theologica*! There may be much that is valuable in 'the new psychological approach to scripture', but it should surely proceed upon, and not by-pass, a metaphysic that has

served the Church from as early as the Council of Nicaea. Dr Thornton's debt to Catholic theologians is, for all practical purposes, nil. Even the elements of the standard theological tractate '*De Revelatione*' he is either unaware of, or ignores;—and how much he might have gained from it. It is a pity; for had he been able to ally his great gift of scriptural interpretation with a truly metaphysical theology, he could have given us a book on Christian Revelation of the first importance.

It is an ungrateful task to be obliged to criticise so radically a major work of a distinguished Anglican theologian—especially so for a reviewer who is by mental habit more interested in points of agreement than of difference. But Dr Thornton is too important a writer to be treated casually. One can see how much of the work of a Gore or a Temple can be embraced in the Catholic synthesis, but it is hard to discern what place can be assigned to so idiosyncratic an essay as this. To seek the 'wholeness' of the Christian revelation through a dialectical philosophy superimposed upon the Biblical data, without reference to the living voice of the Church and the metaphysic of common sense, appears to the present reviewer at least (a conclusion arrived at in all charity and with deep regret), as the pursuit of a will-o'-the-wisp. Is there not, too, something delusive about straining after the 'wholeness' of Christianity by means of a precarious intellectual and imaginative effort towards a return to the primitive Church? Surely the sounder method is to contemplate, in the light of faith and the revealed facts, the Church in its past history and present condition, thence to discern the eschatological pointers to its consummated state as indicated in 1 Corinthians 15, 24-28. Does not the Bible itself prompt us rather to this line of enquiry?