

# About the word 'revelation'

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## 1. The fundamental importance of the word

### *Religions of the word*

In the Hebrew, Jewish and Christian religions—for there are three religions, the Hebraic, the Judaic and the Christian, and not one or even two, just as there are two new testaments, the Christian and the Talmudic, and not one alone—everything begins with a 'word' of 'God' and remains founded on that primordial or very topical utterance. A human statement, embodied in a language, concepts and images, is understood as a pronouncement so 'inspired' by 'God' that we may call it 'the word of God'. (In a fourth religion of the same family, Islam, the word practically ceases to be human, and that position, regarded by Muslims as fundamental, has been a constantly recurring temptation for the preceding faiths).

### *Word of God, human discourse*

Hence the legislator of Israel, the prophet, the 'Son' (he who 'knowing his father, alone can reveal him') make thoroughly human pronouncements which are recognized as emanating, at a deeper level, from another source. Sometimes the speaker says that he has had a 'vision', or heard a 'voice', but those visions and voices are already articulated, organized into a perceptual structure and a language which are wholly earthly and familiar, however strange their content may be. And it is not that strangeness alone which makes the message divine. More usually, symbols and concepts elaborated by men are said to be vehicles of a power to make known the will of 'God', or to give intimations of his mystery, because deep within the creative work of the spirit of those witnesses a radically different animation (a 'heteronomous' factor, as they say) has intervened and, as such, compels the listener's assent. This is what the speaker claims, and the listener believes him, not only because the former asserts it, but because the quality of his utterance authenticates his claim and finds a resonance in the latter.

### *The word creates a break*

So the expression 'word of God' implies a rupture of the circle of our thoughts and conceptions, a tear deep within a previously unbroken

mental and verbal tissue. Or at least a choice which enhances this or that habitual image (let us say, 'the gentle breeze'), and perhaps the inspired speaker's creation of a new figure (for example, 'the endlessly burning bush'). Above all, it implies that 'God' is making a statement. Only if he 'speaks' thus, on his own initiative, can 'God' be known, and he is not reached at the end of a mind's ascent from the world towards a 'source', or in the depths of a religious heart's searching attempt to recall its divine 'origin'. In the religions I am considering here, the crucial religious experience is gained neither in 'nature' (e.g. a manifestation of the sacred in cosmic forces or in the order of the universe), nor in the 'mystical' inner life, but in 'God's' voluntary, historical interventions among witnesses who are charged to bear a message to their relations, their people, the whole world. Admittedly, this initial outline, which, I hope, may seem acceptable to both the historian of religions and the believer, must be filled out in many respects.

## 2. A few traits of the word

### *A multiple word*

Clearly, we are dealing here with a living, multiform word rather than with a revealed doctrine. Paul Ricoeur,<sup>1</sup> attempting to relativize the idea of 'inspiration', which always risks suggesting that the human intermediary remains passive, stresses that, in the strict sense, it describes only one of the modalities of the Bible's religious communication process: that of the prophets. Reflecting on this usage, he is led to point out other equally important modes of inspired communication, some of which bring out the witness's active role more clearly: the chronicler's narration; sapiential meditation; prayer, in which the petitioner's very cry becomes a divine message for others; or the commandment, bearing in mind that the commandment is always founded on God's saving action, and that the invitation to make a Covenant with him is always more far-reaching than the mere precept.

### *Word and event*

The above remark prompts me to underline a point which the preparatory draft, the text and the commentaries of Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*<sup>2</sup> especially emphasize. The 'word' should not be seen as a doctrine or an ideology (although it inevitably has a social impact and therefore might be used ideologically). Rather, it is an existential message which comes after the saving event. God 'acts' before he 'speaks', and the 'word' designates the divine character and meaning of what has been accomplished (or, at times, its proclamation is reiterated and recalls the founding event). The fact that the event precedes the word is characteristic of biblical history and it allows us to speak of a 'manifestation' of God—an all-

encompassing term—rather than of a ‘revelation’. The term ‘revelation’, in any case, has the threefold disadvantage of suggesting a passive recipient, an abstract discourse and a full stop which permanently fixes and closes the divine communication. I shall return to this point in a moment.

#### *A topical word*

If it is assumed that in post-biblical history God’s saving action is exclusively linked with the proclamation of the Gospel, we must admit that nowadays the sequence I have just described is reversed and that in our time the word precedes the saving event which is conversion. But is it true that in to-day’s world there are no longer any events which can be interpreted as manifestations of God? If we take a sufficiently critical look at the providentialism as well as the arbitrariness of the ‘theologies’ of history, or simply make a clear-sighted assessment of the way our forefathers would interpret certain facts as divine ‘victories’ or ‘punishments’, we are bound to remain very cautious at this point. All the same, might one not suggest that in human events which involve liberation, the conquest of dignity and justice, the triumph of life over death, and which therefore accord with the essence of the Gospel message, God’s salvific passion, forever working upon all mankind, does indeed play a role?

### **3. The spheres of the word**

#### *The word and the confession of faith*

We can approach the whole problem from another angle by pointing out that the ‘revealed word’ is always transmitted to us in the form of ‘confessions of faith’: witnesses declare their faith and, in that very attestation, God speaks. A confession of faith has two interrelated aspects: the witness’s conviction, his ‘creed’, in other words, the mysteries he welcomes (‘what I believe’), and his experience of salvation, his lived interpretation of those mysteries which have become enshrined in his existence (‘how I believe’ and ‘how I live my faith’). Constantly, each of these two aspects leaves its mark on the other: it is the proclamation of the mystery which configures our act of faith and the whole of our faith experience; and, conversely, the reality of our faith experience expands that confessed faith, leading it to be understood, to be expressed in renewed ways in a wide variety of existential and cultural contexts. So, once again, every ‘word of God’ reaches us through the mediation of a human experience, even when it has helped to generate that experience in the first place.

#### *The word and scripture*

Let us now examine a considerable difficulty which always arises from

the analogical use of 'word' when we are dealing with 'revelation'. That 'word', those confessions of faith, are contained for us in a book, the Bible. Should we then conclude that the Bible 'is the word of God', as people usually do? After all, a text is never a spoken word; reading and writing are not synonymous with speaking and listening. The communication structure is quite different in each case, and no past culture has been as assertive regarding this distinction as our own, which has even turned it, quite wrongly, into two wholly separate concepts. The Bible, as is common knowledge, is an inspired 'Scripture', a writing. But it is essential for us to come back to the idea of 'uttered word' and to work our way through it, if we wish to grasp the primordial yet ever-topical form that 'revelation' takes. How can these two terms link up with one another without becoming identical?

### *The word and the Bible*

To be brief, I must point out, first of all, that if the Bible is not the 'word of God', that 'word' is *in* the Bible. We are not expected to sacralize from cover to cover a book which is a collection of a people's most diverse, concrete and contingent traditions at successive stages of its history. For whoever approaches the Bible in this way might become irretrievably lost in blind alleys, ranging from sectarian fundamentalism to discussions on biblical inerrancy in which the most subtle solutions (e.g. the author's 'purpose') prove inadequate. It is the Bible's confessions of faith—regardless of their literary genre—which carry a message from God into human discourse, the words pronounced and reported, or the work of writing itself. And that inspired message is what Ricoeur calls 'the world of the text': that to which the text refers, what it proposes or aims to achieve.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, God 'speaks' when the Bible is proclaimed in an assembly of believers, or when a solitary reader studies the text in order to appropriate its meaning. The 'word of God' is always an act happening in the present, and 'God' is both the speaker and the object of the message, here and now. On the other hand, the Bible, considered as a book at rest, as it were, is a literary text which can be approached as such, in a 'profane' way. But at the same time, in the eyes of the believer, it contains the trace of God's 'deeds' (always a combination of salvation events and salvation experiences) and of God's 'words' (always a combination of divine inspiration and human groping), which all come together as 'the word', in the strong sense, for those who seek out their meaning in faith.

## **4. The written 'word'**

### *Scripture and the book*

As I said earlier, the Bible is a writing. But more particularly it is a book whose content has been established once and for all. Today more and

more emphasis is being laid<sup>4</sup> on the decisive circumstances in which the Jews gave shape to the Book and made it central to their religion. When they had lost their homeland (through the diaspora) and were deprived of the legitimate monarchy (from 300 B.C.), when the Temple was desecrated (167 B.C.) and finally destroyed (70 A.D.), the Bible—from the Beginning to the Apocalypse—was the substitute for all those losses: it became the very locus of the manifestation. The New Testament on the one hand, the Talmud on the other, each following its own procedure, came to be articulated, even integrated, into that sacred corpus whose boundaries were determined by a rabbinical or ecclesial magisterium, each affirming its authority in that decision. And this leads us to a second remarkable phenomenon: the ‘closing of the Canon’.

### *The Book and the Canon*

Although the precise number of books contained in the Bible has varied, it is characteristic of the whole corpus that it consists of a definite series of texts in which ‘revelation’ is enclosed and therefore that ‘revelation ceased at the end of the apostolic age’, as they say. Many have understood that decision to mean that revelation occurred in a privileged age of history; that it would subsequently stand guard, unchanging, over the vicissitudes of history, and that it can no longer happen in these enfeebled times. Reacting against this view, others are just as keen to suggest that revelation does indeed pursue its active course in history and constantly yields new fruits of the knowledge of God in the life of the Church and of the world—although not in exactly the same way as ‘in those days’. With Ernst Käsemann,<sup>5</sup> we are probably in a better position today to understand the fact of the ‘Canon’ as an event marking the contingency, the historicity, the irreversibly ‘fixed in time’ nature of the Bible, and consequently the distance or ‘difference’ of all subsequent ages in relation to the definitively established Bible. That distance could have been masked by continuously sustained and integrated commentaries, as the example of the rabbinical tradition shows. In other words, we cannot accede to the Bible and appropriate it unless we introduce our otherness into it or change it within ourselves, as we are, in our irremediably different situation. I would say that ‘revelation’ does perhaps include that indefinite process of constantly resumed and varied interpretations. And that is what makes revelation both closed and open: closed in its foundation, but open in its interpretation, to which historical man gives himself wholeheartedly by receiving and recreating.

### *Canon and interpretation*

Käsemann adds that the Canon also consecrates the insurmountable diversity of Scripture: that difference is already there in Scripture, which contains a plurality of situations and theologies. So it is impossible for us to refer to just one ecclesial model or one theology alone, and this accentuates the distance which I have just attempted to describe. From  
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this irrefutable observation he draws a conclusion: what we need is an organizing centre; we have to choose a standpoint which restores some kind of unity to that disparate corpus, or at least enables us to pick out the essential. We need a 'canon within the Canon'. Of course, it will be Paul, the Letter to the Romans, justification by faith. Faced with this resurgence of the most confessional and time-honoured Protestant theses, we may perhaps recoil in dismay. But a more attentive reading of Käsemann's argument shows that he interprets Paul himself in the light of Jesus' teaching (this is the whole benefit of his return, beyond the Bultmannian rift, to a certain relation between the Christ of paschal faith and the historical Jesus), and that, for him, justification by faith has a very precise meaning. Far from representing only the 'leap of faith' by the decision-making self which Kirkegaard writes about, and the arbitrariness of the workings of Grace amongst a doomed humanity, it signifies the resumption of Jesus' unconditional mercy towards the excluded of this world, those rejected by religion and society—the 'God-less'; a mercy ever-renewed throughout history. This gives us much food for thought about our Churches ...

## 5. Welcoming the word

### *Discovery and knowledge*

The mere idea of a word of God to man, or of a revelation by him, involves a host of problems which a philosopher might regard as so many preliminaries, but which a theologian can address from within his own faith experience. As I suggested earlier, those who have discovered 'God' attest that, regardless of his unpredictable newness, a deeper sentiment of secret understanding, of gratitude, was then born within them: He, they say, is the one whom all their hopes, all their waverings, were seeking, perhaps unconsciously. And this conviction is associated with an inner impulse which can be understood as a 'grace', an attestation given deep within them by God, of the authenticity of the external testimony borne to him. Some even believe that God cannot be the object of a word that proclaims him, or of the act of faith that responds to it, without also being the object of both: He who utters both in the depths of man's being. But we can also interpret that impulse as the surge of an aspiration which lies embedded in our inmost being because our true self is unfulfilled or wounded. Such an anthropological view—namely, that God's salvation concerns our very being as a matter of life and death—raises a number of problems today. It belongs to an 'ontological' type of philosophy which is alien to our understanding of ourselves and the world. It seems to presuppose that human beings who do not know God are always incomplete or evil, and that their life is stunted. An unacceptable idea! Yet God is not a superfluous luxury, and something of ourselves is revealed in our very recognition of him. So we must

endeavour to rethink our relation to God in such a way as to show that he may seem to us both optional and (on reflection) indispensable, and that he can respond to the limitless search for 'something more' which animates us, without wiping out the sense of need which our incomplete state leaves within us.

### *The word of God and man's consistency*

We may also ask ourselves if history, being fragile and contingent, can really bear the weight of a discovery, an absolute revelation, of God. This is a complex and rather tricky problem which, basically, amounts perhaps to this much debated question: if we still cannot reach God after our mind has exhausted all its habitual approaches to him, even the most elevated and reliable, and if we can know him only through a kind of rupture, an otherness, a new initiative taken by him in history, how can we reach him at all without the consistency, indeed the legitimate autonomy, of our thought and action being destroyed (a consistency and autonomy which, we are told, has not only constituted the dignity of 'adult' man since the Renaissance, but even characterizes the creational 'difference' and God's respect for his creature)? Some hold that only the ethical domain—and therefore the word of the Commandment—enables us to fulfil both terms.<sup>6</sup> Others again regard *witness*<sup>7</sup> as the sphere in which are guaranteed both the power of the Manifestation and the freedom of the person who welcomes it, as far as its meaning is made explicit in the *symbol*,<sup>8</sup> whose light and shade also safeguards both.

There is no need for me to supply a conclusion to an essay which does not claim to be a comprehensive study, but merely presents some of the issues, problems and presuppositions which 'divine revelation', as a term and a concept, involves today. I have simply tried to formulate them in a language which might persuade my readers that those problems have not become wholly anachronistic or insoluble.

1 'Herméneutique de l'idée de Révélation', in *La Révélation*, Faculté S. Louis, Brussels 1977.

2 *La révélation divine* (Unam sanctam, 70), Cerf, Paris 1968.

3 'Herméneutique philosophique et herméneutique biblique', in *Exegis*, Delechaux et Niestlé, Paris 1975, pp. 201—28.

4 See A. Paul, *Le fait biblique*, Cerf, Paris 1979, pp. 23—59, and *Inter-testament* (Cahiers Evangile, 19).

5 *Exegetische Versuche and Besinnungen*, Güttingen 1960 and 1964 (partly translated into French and English). For example, 'Le canon du NT et l'unité de l'Eglise' (1951), 'La justice de Dieu chez Paul' (1961).

6 See E. Levinas, 'La révélation dans la tradition juive', in *La révélation divine*, op. cit.

7 See P. Ricoeur, 'L'Herméneutique du témoignage', in *Le témoignage*, Aubier, Paris 1972.

8 See Note 1. The symbol, being extensive, may be the narrator's poetic language, and so on.