

## REVEALED RELIGION IN AN AGE OF SCIENCE

*by Charles P. Price*

The topic of this discussion is one of great scope and complexity. I have been invited to contribute to it because I represent a somewhat conservative and traditional point of view. I shall advance it, perhaps more energetically than I usually do, for the sake of establishing one pole of the discussion. Within the limits assigned to me, the best I can do is to point out certain lines along which I think further inquiry would be fruitful.

### A NOTE ON RELIGION

The topic is revealed religion in an age of science. We are asked to examine two quanta: revelation and religion. I should like to begin by making a provisional distinction between these two things. By religion, in its broadest sense, I would mean something not very different from what has emerged in the discussion so far. It is a human activity, whose aim is to embody and express an interpretation of human life in the cosmos. It is a *human activity*: It involves people in doing and saying things which leave their mark on human culture, its architecture, sculpture, law, philosophy, and literature. These things can be collected, studied, and interpreted by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and others. The history, philosophy, sociology, and psychology of religion are well-known and well-regarded branches of human learning. The standpoint of the observer of such data makes a good deal of difference in the results. Einstein's revolutionary insight that the position of the observer of the cosmos affects what he sees has an analogue in all observation. A communist's history of religion or a Buddhist's psychology of religion is likely to be quite different from what you or I might propose. We must learn to accept all such studies with sympathetic understanding. A student may not forget

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his own *pou sto*, but he may learn how to subordinate himself in love to the object of his study. Such a capacity may be a part of man's religion.

I wish we had a word to represent not what people do but what is done to them. But if I said that revelation is a human passion, I do not think it would communicate what I mean. Man is the receiver of revelation. He is the doer of religion. Revelation is a disclosure to men of how things stand in the cosmos. Men receive it. It would not be inappropriate to say that it is by revelation that men are seized by the *tremendum*, and in the grasp of it, reach out to understand it, and relate themselves to it, and take measures to cope with it—whether to fend it off, appease it, or to praise it and give it thanks. (See Erwin Goodenough's use of *tremendum* in this issue, pp. 10–11). I would be concerned to say that the *tremendum* does not always have a negative aspect, appearing over against us to attack us; also inclosed within the dark threat is a power which exercises itself for man. Part of religion is to estimate the balance between the positive and negative power, and I take it to be the biblical word that "those that be for us are more than those that be against us."

But I am getting ahead of myself. My purpose now is simply to distinguish between *religion*, which is a human activity, and *revelation*, that to which religion is the visible and embodied response.

Now I want to make a few observations about religion. As you will see, they are on the whole further footnotes to Erwin Goodenough's lecture.

The word "religion" probably comes from the Latin word *religare*, meaning "to tie again." Now I am not so naïve as to base my understanding of religion on what is at best a dubious etymology. But what I have to say can be conveniently introduced by that remark, and would tend to confirm that derivation, although to establish it would obviously require textual evidence which is lacking. Religion has to do with men's *ties*, with their relations. Religion is man's connectedness with the totality of his environment. Religion is man's ties, devotion or commitment—if you please, his connectedness—to the *tremendum*, whatever that may be, to other men, and to nature. A full-scale religion involves all of these things: a way of worship, a way of life, a way of thought, and at least a nascent science. One remembers that Buddhism and Taoism are primarily ethical religions, that the Jewish Torah involves both a ritual and a moral code, that the dawn of astronomy was connected with the star cults of the ancient world, and that the Pythagoreans almost certainly used their mathematical

knowledge in the course of cultic mysteries. It would be a mistake to say that religion is just a cult, that is, just a relationship to the unknown and unseen powers, or just a moral code. It would be a mistake to isolate any one element in religion as if it were the whole. Religion involves a totality of life and thought for a whole people. Religion involves an individual in his whole society over the whole spectrum of his life.

#### REVELATION

Now let us approach the matter of revelation. I want to begin with some observations about an ancient and familiar distinction between revealed religion and natural religion. The distinction dates from the twelfth century, to the best of my knowledge, and the reason for its appearance is relevant to our purpose. The Crusades introduced western European Christendom—which during the Dark Ages had become a closed society—to a flourishing Arabic culture, more sophisticated, more inventive, more abundant than its own. At the root of this culture, they found a grasp of reality based on the philosophy of Aristotle. No honest mind could deny that the Aristotelian philosophy provided a sharper, more subtle, more refined grasp of the world than the truncated Platonism which was the best possession of the Christian West. All the intellectuals at the University of Paris went over to the Aristotelian views and were increasingly unable to affirm traditional religious formulations. Hence this distinction between revealed religion—the old way—and natural religion, on the basis of reason. Let me quote a paragraph from Windelband's *History of Philosophy*:

Hence the form in which Arabian science was first taken up was that of *Averroism*. In this, however, science had marked off its boundaries in the most definite manner as against positive religion. This had taken place not only in reaction against the attacks to which the philosophical movement in the East had been subjected, but still more in consequence of the great mental revolutions which the age of the *Crusades* experienced through the intimate contact of the three monotheistic religions. The more ardently these religions fought in the sphere of historical reality, the more the sharpness of their contrasting doctrines became blunted from the point of view of theory. Those who passed through this conflict of religions as thinking observers could not resist the impulse to seek the common element behind the differences, and to establish above the fields of battle the idea of a universal religion. In order to attain this, every form of special historical revelation must be stripped off, and the path of universally valid scientific knowledge must be taken. So with the aid of Neo-Platonic memories, a return was made to the thought of a universal religion, founded upon science, and the ultimate content of this common conviction was formed by the moral law. As Abelard in

his own way had already reached this result, so Roger Bacon later, under Arabian influences, designated morality as the content of the universal religion.

This scientific natural religion, however, had had stamped upon it more and more by the Arabs the exclusive character of an *esoteric* doctrine. The distinction originating with Philo, and current in the entire patristic thought, between a verbal-historical and a spiritually timeless sense of religious documents here became the doctrine that positive religion is an indispensable need for the mass of the people, while the man of science seeks the real truth back of religion, and seeks it only there,—a doctrine in which Averroës and Maimonides were at one, and which completely corresponded to the social relations of Arabian science. For Arabian science always moved within narrow and closed circles, and as a foreign growth never gained true sympathy with the mass of the people: Averroës, nevertheless, expressly honours Aristotle as the founder of this highest, most universal religion of the human race.

Thus in line with this thought, Abubacer made his "*Man in a State of Nature*," who had attained in his isolation to the philosophical knowledge of God, come into contact again at last with historical humanity, and in so doing discovered that what he had known clearly and in abstract thought, is here believed in its picturate wrappings, and that what holds for him as a self-evident demand of the reason is here extorted from the multitude by means of reward and punishment.

If now it is hereby admitted that *natural* and *revealed religion* have ultimately the same content, it still follows that they necessarily differ, at least in their expression of the common truth,—that the conceptions which form the expression of philosophical religion are not understood by believers, while the picturate ideas of believers are not regarded as the full truth by philosophers. If, then, by theology, we understand the exposition of the positive doctrine of religion, arranged and defended according to the formal laws of science, *i.e.* Aristotelian logic (and this was the form which the relation of theology to religion had taken in the West as in the East), it follows that something may be true theologically which is not true philosophically, and *vice versa*. Thus is explained that *doctrine of the twofold truth*, theological and philosophical, which went through the entire later Middle Ages, although we cannot exactly fix the authorship of this formula. It is the adequate expression of the mental state necessarily brought about by the opposition of the two authorities under which the Middle Ages stood, *viz.* Hellenistic science and religious tradition; and while at a later time it often served to protect scientific theories from the persecution of the Church, it was for the most part, even in these cases, the honest expression of the inner discord in which just the most important minds of the age found themselves.<sup>1</sup>

I think you will agree that this picture parallels in a remarkable way what has happened between Christianity and modern scientific thought over the past two hundred years or so. In this development, the Unitarians have played a particularly central role.

To put the matter perhaps too bluntly for the sake of emphasis,

revealed religion has come to be understood as religious propositions contained in the Bible which is interpreted quite literally—a dogmatic tradition. Natural religion came to be understood as the religious propositions which could be adduced by reason alone: as in Aristotle, or later, Kant, or later, modern empirical science. In the later Middle Ages, these two sources of information were brought together in a remarkable, if (I think) precarious balance by the theological work of Thomas Aquinas. Modern history has lacked its Thomas. These two ways have tended to diverge further and further: biblical orthodoxy disavowing philosophy and natural theology altogether and the philosophies of science demonstrating an increasingly hard time with revealed religion and religious categories in general.

#### REVELATION IN AN AGE OF SCIENCE

In an age of science, what can we mean by revelation? What I would call the liberal theological tradition, beginning with Schleiermacher, occupying a difficult middle ground, learned to talk about revelation as something different from a literalistically understood Bible and received doctrine.

First, liberal theology from Schleiermacher on learned from its engagement with science and is now clear that revelation is not propositional. We would not choose to speak of revealed *doctrines*. And although I am glad to speak of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God in some sense, we should not want to say that these books circumvent in any way normal human creative process. And insofar as biblical writers speak of empirical facts and represent a prescientific point of view, we simply say that such information is not authoritative and has often been superseded. We do not use the Bible as a scientific textbook.

What *do* we mean then by revelation? First, it is at least interesting to observe that the word revelation from the Latin *revelo* means “unveiling” or “disclosure.” The Greek word *aletheia*, which is customarily translated as “truth” also means literally an “uncovering” or “unveiling.” As before, I am not suggesting that this association of *revelation* and *truth* proves anything, but it is suggestive and illuminating of the point I want to make. I suggest that *revelation* ought to denote that furniture, that equipment of our reason, which we accept as true without argument. Or to be more precise, revelation denotes the way we come to accept as true those primal assumptions which we need before we can make any decisions or value judgments of any kind. For example, if to be truly religious is, as we have been told,

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to be devoted to the best in human life and society, we need some determination of the good *before* we can make any such decisions. What leads us to *this* rather than *that*? If it is true that our values, goals, and standards are not divine revelations but are our own imperfect creations, what is there about such a statement which impresses us as *true*? Every man who functions as a human being, who has self-awareness, is called upon moment by moment to make decisions about the true, the right, and good for him. At any given moment, you and I have explicit or implicit criteria for judgment, and at any given moment, our quest for these criteria comes to rest in certain affirmations about which we could say only that they are true because they are true; good because they are good. I want to argue that these irreducible criteria are the product of and evidence for *revelation*.

Every man stands possessed of revelation. If this be true, then the ancient distinction between revealed religion and natural religion is a misleading one. We may talk about the religion revealed in Torah and accepted by reason, or about the religion revealed in Christ and accepted by reason, or the religion revealed in reason and accepted by reason. If one has faith in Christ, then he finds he can use his reason naturally to illuminate that commitment, and other commitments seem to him in part at least partial or awkward and unreasonable. If one has faith in reason, then he finds he can use his reason to illuminate his reason, and other commitments seem in part at least partial or awkward and unreasonable. If one has faith in the world order, one can use his reason to illuminate that, and other faiths will seem partial, awkward, or unreasonable. I would like to suggest, however, that all religion is revealed religion; and it is the perennial task of human reason to illuminate and in the best sense of the word, to rationalize that revelation. Biology is reason rationalizing life. Theology is always faith seeking understanding.

This point of view may seem to lead to a welter of relativities. Now I want to discuss what seems to me to be a way out of complete and unqualified relativism. Is there an absolute? "Absolute" is probably a difficult word for many of us. But let me utter it, and let us live with it for a while.

I am helped by Rudolph Otto's *Idea of the Holy*. He argued, you may remember, that the "holy" was a universal feature of mankind's religions. I do not know about the universality of it, and will accept Erwin Goodenough's judgment that not all religions know about the holy. Some do. For Otto, it is precisely not a moral category, as it

has largely become for us. He argues persuasively and, I think, correctly that primitively the holy was a fundamental religious category, expressing man's sense of finitude and unworthiness when he confronted the all-powerful. Isaiah in the temple is perhaps the most familiar illustration of this idea of the holy, his acceptance, perhaps we might say, of his own fragmentariness. He saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and he said, "Woe is me, for I am undone." In the presence of the fulness of being, a man recognizes his own finite and broken being. Revelation is a revelation of the holy, the whole, Being Itself—in and through a finite section of being.

Against this picture, we should, for a great deal of modern thought, set the picture of reason enthroned in Notre Dame Cathedral during the French Revolution, recall that a whole cult and calendar was established to honor her, and remember that Auguste Comte, the prophet of positivism, designed what Huxley called "Catholicism without Christianity." I will quote a paragraph or two of Gwilym Griffith's description of his ideas:

What, then, was to be the character of the new Faith? Briefly stated, it was, at least as first conceived, to be a body of positive beliefs rooted and grounded in science. All metaphysical dogma was to be excluded, and a civilization, trained to a scientific attitude and temper of mind, was to be sustained by a creed derived from the tested certainties of scientific knowledge. The pressing problem, manifestly, was not that of doctrine (for the six volumes of *Positive Philosophy* supplied material in abundance); the problem was that of inspirational power. An articulated structure of positive scientific affirmations, however acceptable to the reason, might conceivably fail to appeal to the imagination and feeling; and with God, the soul, and immortality necessarily excluded as "metaphysical," the possibility, no doubt, had to be regarded seriously.

But the difficulty was confidently met by the philosopher. The supreme being and dynamic centre of the new Faith should be *Humanity* itself: for nothing, it was argued, could be better calculated to captivate the imagination and stimulate the social and ethical emotions. By means of this one conception, it seemed, the obsolete theologies would be successfully superseded and a synthesis established more vital and enduring than that of the bygone orthodoxy. For what could more admirably represent that conception of Social Love which must be fundamental to the religion of the future than the idea of the Collective Being of mankind itself?<sup>2</sup>

This too, be it said, represents an experience of the holy.

My suggestion is that the experience of the holy is at the same time our apprehension of the absolute. You cannot, by taking thought, decide upon an absolute for yourself. If you stop to think about it, to decide for an absolute or to decide about an absolute is a contradic-

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tion in terms. For if you did, the criterion of your decision would be more absolute than the absolute. No, either we must give up any notion of the absolute at all, and then forego any further decisions about truth or right or good, or we admit the possibility that the absolute is given in some profound, even blinding, experience of which men's religions are full. The question of goal, criterion, is basically, I think, a religious question and, to be more specific, ultimately a question of revelation, although I hasten to add, proximately a question of facts and the cultural situation in general.

To say this much is perhaps to open Pandora's box. But let us take the problems as they come. Can the infinite and absolute be contained in a concrete and finite event? On the one hand, we recognize an ineffable experience too vast, too much to talk about. On the other hand, we talk about it—some people suggest we talk about it *ad nauseam*. Man's experience of the holy would suggest that the infinite reality which surrounds us has a capacity for the finite, *infinitum capax finiti*, if I may press a Latin phrase. I do not consider at all that I am saying something hard to understand. Analogies crowd upon us. Great art provides analogy. A painting like the "Mona Lisa" is at one and the same time a beautiful young lady and the eternal woman. Or Andrew Wyeth's haunting painting of a young boy in blue captures boyhood—all boys—without losing its finite particularity. Politics provides an analogy. In ancient cultures the king *was* the nation, and even in our own political provisions, the president is in a deep sense our representative man. When President Kennedy was assassinated, America participated in his death. Our life was called into question. Mathematics provides analogy. It is well known that if you draw a circle in the middle of a sheet of paper which you imagine to stretch to infinity, every point outside the circle corresponds to one and only one point inside. The point outside can be described in terms of its distance from the center of the circle measured in some multiple of the radius, and the angle between a fixed axis of the circle and the line between the point and the center. The corresponding point inside is described by the same angle and the reciprocal of the distance. In brief, universal reality, the entire *tremendum*, expresses itself to us through symbols.

At this point I need to adjust Professor Erwin Goodenough's account of religion as providing painted pictures on curtains which hide us from the *tremendum*. Those pictures are the symbols of which we are now speaking. I should prefer to say that religion consists of figures on stained glass windows, through which the light of the *tremendum*



shines. "In thy light we see light." These pictures are not arbitrary creations of our minds which give us deceptive security, which hide us from reality or truth. They are symbols with varying degrees of adequacy; they have genuine power to interpret the *tremendum*. They are revelatory.

This consideration brings us to another aspect of revelation. Revelation is recognized and accepted as such because it has some genuine power to interpret and control the *tremendum*. In the biblical tradition, which I know best and I think most of us know best, one crucial moment of revelation was whatever happened at the Red Sea. The tribes were delivered from danger. In that act of deliverance, Israel believed that the character of ultimate reality was disclosed. It was a revelation because it was a deliverance. In the New Testament, the decisive, holy, revealing moment is whatever happened in the death of Christ. Christians believe that in his death, death was overcome. The last enemy has been destroyed. In that act, however historians and scientists choose to describe it, Christians believe that the character of reality has been disclosed. Revelation is an act of deliverance. Many would say that science has disclosed the ultimate character of reality (as a Christian I am delighted that the scientists who have spoken at this conference have made no such claims for its ultimacy). Science has indeed meant an incalculable freeing of life. It is understandable that science should be regarded as revelatory. It too has been saving.

So the world swarms with revelations. What then? Surely we admit—I do at least—that truth has been revealed in every religion. But I am a finite man. That statement can only mean that from the particular and finite place on which I stand, on the basis of criteria which I recognize, I can perceive truth in other religions as well as my own. But I do not think it does anyone a service to pretend that this matter of criteria is irrelevant, or to pretend to a universal inclusiveness on the basis of saying that there are no differences. Each of us has some principles of judgment for truth. They are not all alike. I do not think that any of us really believes that the aim of religion is to eliminate difference, but rather to maximize charity. The question of criteria has come up too often and too seriously in the conference to let us ignore it with impunity. The fact that there are different religions implying different revelations of truth, lays upon each of us the duty and burden to listen openly and carefully to each other as, in meetings like this one, we unburden ourselves to each other of our deepest understandings. We test out other criteria. We expose ourselves. We even risk changing our own minds. It is only in that way that we shall begin

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to find our unity as men, and can work toward unified goals, values, and criteria. Force is an increasingly dangerous and always unsuccessful shortcut. We may wish things were different and that there were a more efficient way to final unity. But, for the time being at least, I see no other way.

### CONCLUSION

The subject is revealed religion in an age of science. I hold that every religion is a revealed religion. Ideally, a person's own religion would appear to him to be a natural religion too. Reason could illuminate every nook and cranny of it as we expect reason to illuminate every nook and cranny of the physical universe. I hold that modern science yields us knowledge of incalculable value. This knowledge must be taken into account when religion formulates its account of the way things stand. Teilhard de Chardin does it one way. Old nascent science must be purified and corrected. New theology must be written. It will be far richer and more inclusive than the old, if any man can do it at all. But the one thing I do not hear science talking about is revelation, and I therefore do not expect to change revelations because of what science says.

Can revealed religion do anything for science? In May of 1962 the *New Yorker* magazine ran a profile of the two Chinese physicists who discovered the non-conservation of parity at Columbia University in the 1950's. They won a Nobel prize for their work. In an acceptance speech, one of them told this charming fable:

Suppose a man wants to be the king of heaven. Buddha says to him—and Buddha is, let's say, 100 feet high—"You can be king of heaven if you can jump into my hand and jump out again." So the man who wants to be king of heaven jumps into the hand of Buddha, and for a billion years he jumps, thousands of miles at a jump; and finally he comes to a place where there are five columns that look like the absolute end. So he writes: "The king of heaven was here." And then he jumps back to where he was in the beginning and says: "Now let me be king of heaven. I have reached the end of Buddha's hand." And Buddha simply picks him up in the other hand and shows him some perspective on the matter, for he shows him the tiny letters at the base of his third finger where the would-be king of heaven had written his inscription.

To me that means that revealed religion, whose theological formulation is open to science, can undergird the scientific enterprise by expressing the source of courage and confidence to look and think, rooted in our certainty (by faith) that in looking and thinking we will not run out of Buddha's hand.

NOTES

1. W. Windelband, *A History of Philosophy* (London: Macmillan Co., 1893), pp. 319–20.
2. Gwilym O. Griffith, *Makers of Modern Thought* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948), pp. 123–24.