

# DESCRIPTIVE AND EVALUATIVE FORMULAE FOR COMPARATIVE RELIGION

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TO FORMULATE the distinction and connection between specifically Christian faith and non-Christian spiritual faith, recourse has been made throughout theological history to a number of formulae. The dominant aim of this essay is to propose a more adequate conceptual framework for dealing with this relationship. But because the question of the relation of Christian faith to non-Christian religious faith has frequently been confused with another issue, the formulation of my proposal requires that close attention also be given to this other matter. This is to say that the unfolding of my conceptual scheme entails a simultaneous scrutiny of the distinction between faith in God evoked by participation in a historical religious tradition and that mediated by man's universal depth experiences in creation. A derivative result of my attempt to understand the relation of Christian and non-Christian religious faith is the emergence of another formula which may prove illuminating in describing and distinguishing these two kinds of revelation or experience of the sacred transcendent.

Before proceeding to an exposition of my novel formulae, this essay reviews the main resolutions of the problem in the past and raises a number of objections to them.

## NATURAL-REVEALED THEOLOGY

What is probably the most familiar formula expresses a distinction between revealed theology and natural theology. By revealed theology is meant that knowledge of God attained only by faithful attention to the particular history of Israel and Christ recorded in the Bible—a history understood as the definitive and final revelatory and redemptive acts of God.

Opinions differ as to the defining characteristic of natural theology. Some, using as their perspective the way in which knowledge is attained, view it as the product of the operation of man's unaided natural reason, i.e., his reason apart from the illumination that comes through faith in Christ. On this view the ontological argument, no less

than the cosmological, would be an example of natural theology. Others lay the stress not on the natural reason but on nature or creation itself. In this current of thought what makes theology "natural" is not primarily the manner in which it is appropriated (i.e., by man's natural or divinely unaided reason) but its source (i.e., in nature, in the common created world).

It must be conceded, however, that the characteristic use of "natural theology" emphasizes its rational quality. It is knowledge deriving from the supernaturally unaided operation of man's reasoning powers. Since the data on which such reason normally operates is that provided by the natural, sensible world, it is easy to discern how the alternative meaning of natural theology as knowledge of God having its source in nature emerges. But classically the stress falls on natural reason, not the natural world.

The relevance of this scheme to the problem of classifying non-Christian tradition and faith in relation to the Christian is readily apparent. The concept of natural theology, on the one hand, permits the entertainment of a positive evaluation of non-Christian faith by contending for the reality of knowledge of God outside the sphere of biblical history. The concept of revealed theology, on the other hand, functions to bolster the conviction that the fullest knowledge of God has been bequeathed in the Christian revelation.

Now many thinkers, on the basis of empirical assessment or humanitarian sentiment, maintain the reality of divine encounter outside Israel and Christ, specifically, in the great world religions. Where such strong intellectual or moral pressure to acknowledge the validity of non-Christian religious tradition and faith as a place of meeting with the one true God is felt, such conviction can (so the argument runs) find a theologically legitimate roost in the concept of natural theology. Such knowledge of God as non-Christian traditions possess may be regarded as a form of natural theology—not to be identified with the final revelation in Christ but, nevertheless, showing the marks of a valid knowledge of God available to men apart from their contact with the unique biblical witness.

The question, however, of the appropriateness of this subsumption of non-Christian faith under the category of natural theology needs to be re-examined. Do non-Christian tradition and faith present, in fact,

the sort of phenomena that can validly be identified with the putative findings of natural theology?

Thoughtful scrutiny discloses that historic non-Christian religious traditions and faiths are discernibly in a different class from the static rational formulations of natural theology. The existential life-positions advanced by the diverse traditions, reinforced by myth, cult, and social institutions, as well as systems of metaphysical belief, are palpably other than the rationalistic explanatory hypotheses of natural theology. A thorough phenomenological approach discloses that non-Christian tradition and faith are not the same sort of thing as natural theology. The concept of natural theology, therefore, cannot serve to comprehend the historical and existential quality of non-Christian faith.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, in the contemporary theological context, another difficulty in using the category of natural theology as a pigeonhole for non-Christian faith has emerged. The pigeonhole itself seems to have disappeared. Under the attacks of contemporary logical and theological thinking, the idea of natural theology is largely rejected as a viable theological possibility. The reasons are well known and scarcely need to be reviewed here.<sup>2</sup>

The prevailing criticisms of natural theology (and, in passing, of the rationalistic feature of revealed theology) make the natural-revealed theology formula an unsatisfactory means of handling the relation of Christian faith and non-Christian faith for two reasons. The first is basically an academic question of classification. If the objections to the notion of natural theology are conceived as cogent, while at the same time there are grounds for affirming the authenticity (i.e., godliness) of non-Christian religious faith, then it follows that the idea of natural theology cannot serve to designate such extrabiblical faith. A more adequate theoretical intellectual framework must be evolved to handle the connection between Christian faith understood as a locus of final, normative revelation, and non-Christian religious faith interpreted as a place of genuine, though perhaps limited, meeting with God.

<sup>1</sup> It will be subsequently argued that neither can the divine knowledge mediated by the historic religious traditions be identified with the intuitive, primordial apprehension of God represented by the concept of general or universal revelation.

<sup>2</sup> They are touched upon in the next section, where the attempts of general revelation to meet the objections brought against natural theology are considered.

The second reason for abandoning the concept of natural theology lies on a more fundamental, moral, and personal level. If the objections to natural theology rightly expose it as an invalid concept, i.e., not standing for authentic knowledge of God, then the subsumption of non-Christian tradition and faith under this concept is tantamount to their repudiation as loci of authentic divine revelation. It may be argued, of course, that this line of argument is precisely the right one: non-Christian traditions do not mediate a true and saving knowledge of God but are idolatrous distortions.

But over against this is the deepening recognition that the empirical reality of non-Christian religious faiths, sympathetically and honestly studied and assessed by the criterion of Christ, warrants a positive appraisal. To repudiate them by associating them with the discredited notion of natural theology is to falsify their fundamental revelational quality as this presents itself to the skilled and personalized observation of the Christian operating with the presuppositions implicit in his own religious selfhood.

#### GENERAL-SPECIAL REVELATION

The recognition that the objections raised against natural theology are substantially valid has led to a more penetrating understanding of the manner of God's revelatory working outside the realm of biblical history. Some of these insights are represented by the term "general revelation." Animating the formulation of this notion was the desire to maintain the reality of revelation outside the sphere of biblical history and at the same time to take into account the logical and theological objections leveled against the concept of natural theology.

Briefly, by general revelation is meant that knowledge of God which is mediated through creation. For some, this remains, as in the case of the concept of natural theology, inferential knowledge. The new stress on revelation, prompted by the desire to acknowledge God's grace and reflected in the term itself, is not seen as excluding the operation of reason in the traditional sense. Proper reflection (so the argument runs) on the data of nature, moral experience, or general, profane history leads to the conclusion that there exists as the source of these phe-

nomena a transcendent Cause or Ground. This apprehension of the divine Being, however, is only possible (this school of thought claims) because God, in His graciousness, has placed these evidences of His presence and nature in the universe, or implanted this sense of the divine in the constitution of the human mind. On this view, general revelation is simply rechristened natural theology, a rechristening motivated, it must be conceded, by a sounder grasp of the working of God's grace.

The regulative definition of general revelation is not, however, simply a pious synonym for natural theology; rather, it indicates quite a different understanding of the nature of revelation outside the biblical history. This will become clearer in my exposition of the way in which the concept of general revelation attempts to meet the objections against natural theology. By special revelation is meant God's unique and decisive acts of self-disclosure and redemption in the holy history of Israel and Christ. The significance of special revelation is also elaborated in the subsequent argument.

The concept of general revelation is able to withstand the logical objections directed against the idea of natural theology by acknowledging that God is not known by an incontestable train of reasoning. Such knowledge of God as is available through His creation is not inferred from it but is given instead by God with an immediacy foreign to the successive and provisional steps of logical argument. God is not an induction from empirical data, nor a deduction from some logical principle. Rather, God Himself meets us through His works in nature, in the depths of personal relationships and moral experience, and through the crises and ambiguities of so-called profane or secular history—especially in its righteous revolutions to succor the dispossessed.

This is a meeting with God that is readily appreciated as "revelation," for the divine presence is directly encountered—not inferred as in natural theology—and appropriated by faith. And yet it is designated as "general," because it is available, in principle, to all men qua men. Not through contact with missionaries reporting a unique historical revelatory event, but in exposure to the universally available experiences of mankind, comes this knowledge of God.

It should be noted that the claim of general revelation to a direct

encounter with God serves only to meet the objection that the "proofs" proposed in the traditional philosophical approach to God are logically vulnerable. The idea of general revelation recognizes that the traditional arguments do not, in fact, function as rational demonstrations for the existence and character of God. There still remains, however, the question regarding the reality of the confrontation with God alleged by the proponents of general revelation. But this is a problem that is resolved by empirical enquiry and personal decision, not by logical analysis. Whether the experiences adduced by the advocates of general revelation as the basis for their belief that God directly and universally encounters persons must incontestably bear the interpretation thus put upon them is a question whose answer begins in empirical investigation but moves ultimately into the realm of personal faith. The important point for our purpose here, however, is the recognition that the approach entailed in the concept of general revelation is immune from the criticisms of logical inadequacy brought against the rational approach of natural theology.

The idea of natural theology, by stressing the unaided reason of man, implies that a knowledge of God is possible apart from His gracious initiative. This conclusion, by weakening the doctrine of divine grace, would repudiate the biblical witness as well as the testimony of profound Christian experience. The concept of general revelation, on the contrary, takes cognizance of God's gracious overture in *all* knowledge of Him, including that deriving from outside the holy history recorded in the Bible.

This is not, of course, simply a matter of alternative nomenclature. Involved in the idea of general revelation is the insight—faithful to the Bible's perspective, as the proponents of this school hold—that to label such extrabiblical knowledge "natural" is in fact to misinterpret the gracious manner of God's working in the world.

The position described above, refuting natural theology's contention that God may be known as the result of logical inferences from nature, serves also to meet another of the theological deficiencies in that concept; for on the biblical understanding of revelation, what God discloses is Himself and not propositions about Himself. God communicates who He is and what He wills by actually meeting us in a personal relation that discloses His saving character. The idea of general revela-

tion stresses the revelational character of the knowledge of God that occurs outside the Christian holy history by insisting that the knowledge of God mediated through creation is fundamentally His personal presence and not rational truths about Him inferred from creation.

The substitution of the concepts of general and special revelation for those of natural and revealed theology seemed to dispose of the inadequacies in the old formula, and it is still commonly thought that the newer revelational scheme functions as a useful instrument for handling the distinction between Christian faith and the great non-Christian traditions and faiths. For by applying the idea of *revelation* to the non-Christian world religions, one concedes that they are loci of dynamic encounter with God. By further qualifying them as *general* revelation, the claim is made that the knowledge of God mediated through them is universally available in principle to all men. More specifically, the claim is implied (it is rarely explicitly asserted, otherwise its inappropriateness would be almost immediately perceived) that the knowledge of God conveyed by non-Christian traditions and faiths is identical with, or at least builds upon, that sort of sacred universal depth experience briefly described above in defining general revelation.

Moreover, the modifier "general" is, on a purely linguistic basis, easily understood as implying a "particular" or "special" revelation—which, of course, is precisely the meaning intended by the Christian thinker who, while wishing to affirm the reality of extrabiblical revelation, desires to remain faithful to the traditional belief that God has spoken His final, authoritative word in Jesus Christ.

The general-special revelation framework, accordingly, seems to function very acceptably to meet the demand of love and percipience to recognize that God has savingly disclosed Himself in the great historical religions of the world. Further, it appears to satisfy the demand of Christian fidelity to the claim that all things are summed up in Christ.

Now it is truly surprising that it is not more frequently noted that, as a plain empirical judgment, it is seriously misleading to equate the deliverances of the great non-Christian traditions and faiths with the

intuitive apprehension of God mediated by creation which is expressed in the normative concept of general revelation. One of the few to remark on the error of this identification is John Baillie:

Hence, while greatly preferring the distinction between a general and a special *revelation* to the traditional one between a natural and a revealed *knowledge*, I cannot find it wholly satisfactory. Not all the light that God has imparted to the various pagan peoples in the course of their historical experiences is *general* to them all; there is something that is special to each.<sup>3</sup>

So far we have stressed the inadequacy of the idea of "general" revelation to stand for the unique historical quality of the actual world religions. But much the same point may be established by analyzing the "special" side of the general-special revelational scheme; for latent in the notion of special revelation is an assumption that renders it misleading as a tool for comprehending and expressing the relation of Christian and non-Christian faith.

It seems always to be assumed that the term "special revelation" applies only to Christian faith and, indeed, it is often used synonymously for it. Special revelation is God's definitive and final disclosure in Christ of His saving character and will, a disclosure that effects salvation for those who accept it by faith. Moreover, this unique and decisive salvific act is, by its very nature, *historical* action. It is this latter feature that has come to be regarded as the defining characteristic of special revelation. When the general-special revelation formula is applied to the problem of comparative religion, it is assumed that non-Christian faith is nonhistorical, that is, the product of a general, universally diffused theophany. In contrast, Christian faith is the result of unique, unrepeatable acts of God in history. Even when the obvious fact of historical agents in other faiths is pointed out, they are dismissed as incidental to the universally disseminated revelation in nature or in the religious and moral consciousness which is held to be the real source of whatever valid knowledge of God they contain, regardless of the allegations made by the traditions' founders and spokesmen. Even so fine a study as Schlette's is marred at times by the assumption that the revelatory validity of other religions is based

<sup>3</sup> John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (London, 1962) p. 188; italics added.



on their recognition of a general divine disclosure in nature and moral experience. He writes, for example:

There seems, therefore, to be an intrinsic legitimacy in all religions and forms of religion and there is found in them a recognition of God based on nature and the rhythm which preserves its life, that is to say, the manifestations of God that perpetually occur in the creation, as well as on the moral imperative in the heart of every non-Christian (cf. Rom. 1:20; 2:14-16). The Fathers of the Church had the courage to affirm that all that is good, true and beautiful, wherever it is found, comes from the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

I shall in what follows argue that this interpretation of matters is unsatisfactory and that in the simplest meaning of "historical," non-Christian traditions and faith are historical in the manner in which Christianity is a historical revelation. Then I shall try to show that they are historical in a second and more profound sense in which Christianity is understood as a historical revelation.

#### HISTORICAL-UNIVERSAL REVELATION

##### *Historical Revelation*

In spite of the superiority of the general-special scheme over that of natural-revealed theology, it still suffers from the great defect of moving almost exclusively within the context of Western theological thought. The only distinction it seriously considers is that between biblical historical faith and faith stemming from a revelation in creation which is elucidated by philosophy of religion largely in reply to philosophical atheism. Our chief concern in this paper, however, is to understand the relation of the revelation in Christ and the Christian's faith to the other revelational claims and correlative faiths found in the historical religious communities of the world. For this task the special-general revelation formula is of little assistance; for, as we have observed, it is clear that the non-Christian faiths are not to be identified with general revelation.

General revelation, by definition, means revelation that is, in principle, open to all men in virtue of their common humanity and exposure to a common environment and experience through which God conveys His holy presence. General revelation is not restricted by

<sup>4</sup> Heinz Robert Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (New York, 1966) pp. 35-36.

historical factors, that is, by the peculiar historical contexts of different persons.

✻ The great world religions are idiosyncratic (and hence resistant to classification as general revelation) not only because of their distinctive contents, but also because of the unique historicity of their origins and transmission. It is important that we recognize that the different religious traditions are historical, and hence indissolubly individual and distinct, with respect to their roots and their conveyance from believer to believer.

The great non-Christian religions do not have their source in a common apprehension of divine mystery and presence in the universal human environment. They are not the results of inference from, or intuition in, creation (understood in the wide sense that encompasses not only physical nature but human nature and secular history as well). Rather, they originate, mundanely speaking, in particular historical events—the advent of historical teachers, prophets, and saviors.

But non-Christian religious traditions and faith are historical not only in respect of their origin but also of their transmission throughout time. Access to their power of revelation, that is, to the message and divine reality that they mediate, is possible only by standing in a line of historical connection with the traditions. To receive the revelation that they communicate requires involvement with some missionary enterprise of that religious tradition.

In the light of these arguments, the classification of non-Christian religious traditions and faith under the rubric of general revelation should be regarded as seriously mistaken. To adequately handle the distinction between Christian faith and other religious faith, other appropriate formulae that more adequately comprehend the range and complexity of man's knowledge of God must be devised. To this attempt I now turn.

The first major division I propose is that between *historical* revelation and *universal* revelation. I speak in both cases of "revelation," because I wish to affirm that our knowledge of God is always the result of His graciousness and not the result of any unaided efforts on our part. The term "historical" in the context of discussion on revelation can bear two senses. It may have the simple meaning of an occurrence in the past that is open, in principle, to the researches of historical science.

It may also be used in the technical theological sense of an occurrence in time in which faith describes the very activity of God, the unfolding of His will and purpose and the communication of His saving presence.

Christianity and Islam are consciously historical in both senses. Christianity is rooted in certain historical happenings in the life of the nation Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, and the early Church. The historian may approach these events with his normal criteria of historicity to assess whether or not the events alleged in the community's tradition did in fact happen. It is, however, unlikely that many Christians would allow any of the tentative findings of historical science to count decisively against their faith in the actual occurrence of these events.

But the Christian's understanding of revelation entails a second meaning of "historical"; for he holds that these unique and unrepeatable events recorded in the Bible are, in reality, the revelatory and redemptive acts of God. In the escape of the Israelites from the Egyptians across the Red Sea, God is at work to deliver His chosen people and disclose His grace. God is in Christ—in His life and death—acting to reconcile estranged humanity to Himself. This conviction is what the Christian has principally in mind when he speaks of historical revelation.

The same line of reasoning holds true for Islam. Islam is rooted in the events inspired by Muhammad in Arabia in the seventh century of the Christian era, events out of which grew the Muslim community. But these events are properly understood, on the Muslim view, only when they are seen as the action of Compassionate and Merciful God who, in bestowing the Qur'ān through the intermediacy of His messenger Muhammad, is disclosing to mankind His eternal saving will for man and society. In both the Christian and Muslim cases the series of past events are viewed as the revelatory and redemptive historical action of God.

But in what sense can Buddhism or Hinduism be said to be historical religions? Indeed, most contrasts of Hebraic faith with Indic faith are designed to show precisely that Buddhaic and Hindu faith are non-historical. What can we say to this commonplace contrast between the biblical view of divine historical salvation and the Indic view of timeless, mystical autosalvation? We should note first that, given the enormous complexity and diversity of Indian religious traditions,

few unqualified statements can be made affirming that " 'Buddhism' asserts such and such" and " 'Hinduism' believes this or that." The truth is that with its acceptance of the different paths of action (*karma mārga*), knowledge (*jñāna mārga*) and devotion (*bhakti mārga*) as ways to spiritual emancipation (*moksha*), the Hindu religious tradition can provide affirmations in support of a wide diversity of positions. Buddhism with its main divisions of Theravāda and Mahāyāna embraces propositions that would seem to substantiate the claim, on the one hand, that salvation is the result of supernaturally unaided human discipline and wisdom and, on the other, that the sacred transcendent graciously intervenes in history to save man.

I think, nevertheless, it can be fairly said that the forms of the Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions that are viewed in the West as "classical" are, in fact, those that emphasize the nonhistorical quality of the transcendent and the necessity of man's effort and knowledge in deliverance from his plight. There is in this "classical" Buddhism and Hinduism little or no sense that the Sacred Absolute has intervened historically to effect a redemptive purpose. What matters for men's salvation is not the objective, saving action of God; it is rather their personal appropriation of a timeless teaching concerning man's true end and the way of life designed to achieve it.

It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that in a technical theological sense the aforementioned contrast is apposite: the Indic faiths are, in this sense, nonhistorical.

And yet there is a sense in which even these theologically nonhistorical faiths are historical, and that is in the simple sense I mentioned earlier. The fact remains that these religious communities and systems of belief, worship, and morality would not exist were it not for the advent in history of the inspired teacher, prophet, or savior with a message of transcendent significance. The insertion into the stream of human history of these distinctive faiths is the result, not of the common application of a universal religious consciousness to public data, but of the deliverances at one point in time of men with a transcendent claim. The deliverances of Gautama Buddha, Muhammad, Śankara, Confucius, and Chuang Tzū are not disquisitions on philosophical theology or the republication of universally available insights into truth. They are, instead, messages of salvation whose presence in the

world cannot be divorced from their historical bearers.<sup>5</sup> The existence of diverse communities that revere the name of this or that specific religious innovator, and worship in distinctive ways whose origins are in the peculiar religious slant of the founder, is clearly the result of unrepeatable historical events.

Considerable progress can be made in understanding the character of historical revelation by recognizing that because this knowledge has its origin in an unrepeatable historical event, contemporary access to this revelation is through other persons who stand in a line of historical continuity with the original revelatory event. The knowledge of God that comes from historical revelation is not our possession as man qua man, except insofar as some aspects of universal revelation duplicate those of historical revelation. Rather, failure to come into contact with witnesses of the original revelatory event means exclusion from this knowledge. The nature of historical revelation necessitates missionary activity.

A new problem, however, emerges immediately. Though it may be proper to subsume the phenomena of non-Christian tradition and faith under the heading of "historical," is it, in fact, legitimate to classify them as "revelation"?

The new scheme proposed here does not prejudge the issue. The customary distinction made in Christian theology between special revelation and general revelation assumes that only Christian tradition and faith know of genuine knowledge and saving action of God through unique historical events. If it is conceded that men of other faiths possess a valid knowledge of God in some degree, its ground is seen in a universal disclosure in creation and not in those particular events that constitute their distinctive religious history. The formula of special-general revelation actually contains a built-in prejudice against other traditions and therefore cannot serve as a phenomenological, descriptive tool. For though it recognizes that decisive knowledge of God comes through historical events, these are conceived exclusively as the

<sup>5</sup> I recognize that there are problems of classification here, especially when salvation is construed in supernaturalistic terms as ultimate deliverance into some supernatural realm or as mystic union with deity. On these premises Confucius' concern with the proper ordering of society can scarcely be understood as salvation. In this paper's context, however, salvation means simply the rescue from man's existential plight, however that be conceived.

history of Israel, Christ, and the apostolic Church, and hence to these are given the designation "special revelation." Then it is assumed that such other knowledge of God as may be available to man must be derived only from his universal depth experiences in and through creation. The consequence of this is that the religious history of the non-Christian traditions is not taken seriously as a locus of revelation.

Unlike the conventional Christian scheme, the interpretation and scheme offered here do not presuppose that the only authentic historical revelation occurs in the biblical history. It recognizes the importance of a religious community's history and contends that if there is valid knowledge of God in the faith of other men, it is mediated primarily through that history and not the ambiguous disclosure of God in creation.

Nor, it should be pointed out, does the proffered scheme presuppose that the history of other religious traditions must necessarily render a knowledge of God of the same sort and veracity as that derived through the biblical history; it leaves this an open question to be settled (to the extent that it can be) by careful empirical scrutiny and sensitive personal encounter. What it does is focus attention where as a plain matter of historical sense it belongs, namely, on the distinctive traditional histories that are the heritage of men of religious faith.

Indeed, we might go so far as to say that my proposed descriptive scheme of historical-universal revelation does not even presuppose the absolute and final character of the revelation in Christ. A further inadequacy of the special-general revelation formula is that having originated and being utilized within the Christian family, it assumes that the historical events of which the Christian message speaks are, unquestionably, revelation of a final kind. My formula of historical-universal revelation is simply a descriptive tool to be employed in the scientific study of all religious traditions and experience, serving to distinguish that knowledge of God which stems from unrepeatable historical events and that which emanates from potentially universal human experiences.

When I classify non-Christian tradition and faith as "historical," I am using historical, as I have already intimated, in the common-sense notion of an occurrence in time of an unrepeatable event that requires the transmission of missionaries to be accessible in the present.

It does seem to me, however, that both meanings of historical will, in fact, be present even in those traditions that intellectually eschew the notion of historical revelation in the Hebraic sense; for if it is the case (as I believe) that the great non-Christian faiths are genuine places of divine confrontation (in what degree, does not enter into the scope of this paper), then it will be true that they are historical in both senses. First, because they are the consequences of the inspiration of *particular persons* appearing at a particular time and place in history, and transmitting their message and transcendent influence throughout history through the intermediacy of missionaries. And secondly, because these historical movements are recognized as the *intrusion of grace* into space and time—which is another way of saying that God was acting in them for the reclamation of a portion of His human creation that He created in love and in love desires to restore to Himself.

#### *Universal Revelation*

Historical revelation, Christian and non-Christian, stands in contrast to what I call universal revelation. The term “natural theology” is too narrow to cover my meaning, because it has been traditionally restricted to a putative knowledge obtained from the employment of natural (unredeemed) reason either on the common data of nature or on the implications of logical processes themselves. If the only knowledge of God apart from historical revelation were to be found in natural theology, then this would mean that nonhistorical knowledge of God would be confined to an intellectual elite capable of the intricacies of such argument; and this I take to be clearly not the case. The point has already been made that there is strong evidence of knowledge of God that is neither historically nor rationally derived. The acknowledgment of this sort of knowledge is enshrined in the normative concept of general revelation analyzed earlier. Mankind’s depth experiences of love and sacrifice, anxiety and tragedy, beauty and joy may become luminous with transcendent meaning and sacred presence.

I have, however, resisted the inclination to adopt the term “general revelation,” because to do so might lead to confusion. The use of one term of the special-general revelation nomenclature would normally lead to the conclusion that the other term and its fundamental meaning are also accepted. We have seen that this is not the case without the

qualification that admits the status of non-Christian faith as historical revelation. And so, to avoid confusion, I propose the adoption of terminology that suggests, if not a different meaning, at least a different orientation to the whole question of discriminating among presumptive revelations.

On the one hand, then, there stands *historical* revelation: that knowledge of God, that living encounter with Him, which comes through historical events kept viable by the testimony of adherents of the believing community owing its existence to these events. One can, of course, distinguish empirically the biblical history, which most Christians take to be normative for all knowledge of God, from the histories of the other great religious communities.

On the other hand, there is *universal* revelation: that knowledge of God which comes from responding in trust to His presence mediated by creation. This knowledge is, in principle, open to all men regardless of their involvement in a community bearing historical revelation, though, in practice, most persons who meet God in this universal revelation will have known Him also (at least in the Christian case) more clearly in the unique historical events in which He has manifested Himself to them and summoned them to discipleship. This universal revelation may serve as background for the preaching of a historical bearer of revelation or may only be awakened by the new vision imparted by faith in some theophanic historical occurrence.\*

This is the place, perhaps, to anticipate and dispel a charge of ambiguity that may be levelled against my proposed formula of historical-universal revelation. I have included under the classification of universal revelation in creation the awareness of transcendent authority and sacred presence that may emerge from one's involvement in compassionate crusades and righteous revolutions within secular history for the weak and afflicted. The contention may be advanced that this also ought most properly to be understood as historical revelation.

But this apprehension of God in secular history's perennial revolu-

\* It may be helpful to point out that my concept of universal revelation may be assimilated, in some respects at least, to Ian Crombie's notion of "undifferentiated theism." See his "Theology and Falsification," in Flew and MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London, 1955) p. 111.



tionary struggles for justice, abundance, freedom, and dignity is, in principle, open to all men in all ages who discern and align themselves with God's loving and healing purpose for mankind. Hence its designation as universal. It should be clear that the kind of revelatory history that is designated by the term "historical revelation" is that distinctive history which characterizes the great religious communities of the world. This characteristic religious history is comprised of both the primal, paradigmatic events and the cumulative historical traditions that they inspire.

It would be illuminating to pursue the question whether the divine disclosure in contemporary secular history should be viewed as an extension of God's self-revelation as transcendent presence and authoritative summons in our moral experience. But this cannot be done here.

An advantage of my terminological system—historical and universal revelation—is that it serves as a theological tool for all religious traditions. When this analysis of revelation into universal and historical kinds is applied to Christian experience, we recognize immediately that the Christian's revelation is principally of the historical kind, that is, derived from an event in history the knowledge of which is mediated to the present by missionaries who stand in the line of transmission from the apostolic witness of the Christ-event to the present. It should also be seen that the other great religions of the world are formed and reformed by historical revelation understood in this same simple sense.

Universal revelation must not, however, be seen as an automatic disclosure of divinity to whoever takes the time and effort to see. When universal revelation was understood in the sense of natural theology, this was indeed the case, theoretically speaking. The proponents of natural theology believed that by applying sound observation and reasoning to the constant, universally accessible data of nature one could arrive at a valid inferential knowledge of God. This conclusion implied that revelation was composed of propositions, natural theology providing a more simple sort than was delivered in revealed theology.

But once revelation is understood in a dynamic and personalist sense as a personal revelatory act of God, then the view of automatic and inescapable disclosures cannot be maintained even in regard to universal revelation. Instead, we must acknowledge that those uni-

versal moments of human anxiety, love, sacrifice, and beauty that become bearers of sacred presence do so by God's grace.

#### NORMATIVE-COMPATIBLE REVELATION

Having distinguished universal from historical revelation, it is now necessary to take note of a further distinction which may occur *within* historical or universal revelation. It could be argued that as far as historical revelation is concerned, this distinction is already accounted for in the way diverse historical traditions are denominated, e.g., Confucian, Buddhist, Muslim, etc. It will be immediately recognized, however, that these distinctions are also descriptive and phenomenological, not philosophical or theological. These designations isolate the varieties of historical religious traditions, but they do not serve to rank or evaluate them. What is needed is an intellectual tool that will clarify and facilitate this philosophical or evaluative function, and to its formulation we shall presently turn.

But first I should like to point out that one of the unsatisfactory features of the general-special revelation formula is that it combines, perhaps often unconsciously, a descriptive and an evaluative function. The term "special" denotes at the same time the mode by which revelation comes and the value attaching to this mode; for special revelation indicates historical revelation in Christ (the mode by which it comes) and also implies that this is superior, absolute, normative knowledge of God. The term "general revelation" stands for nonhistorical sources of revelation usually conceived as creation, and also carries the connotation of inferior, provisional knowledge of God.

For the sake of clarity, we might readily prefer two sets of terms: one that would enable us to describe the locus and mode of revelation, and a second, evaluative set, serving to express our conviction whether any presumptive revelation—that of the biblical history, for example—is indeed normative. The old scheme of general-special revelation prejudices the issue, because an evaluative role has been mixed with a descriptive one. On that view biblical history is, by definition, final revelation.

One of the virtues of my approach is that it keeps separate these two scholarly tasks, description and evaluation, and supplies a conceptual

device for performing each task. The formula "historical-universal revelation" serves to classify diverse revelations on the basis of their source. Those which have their origin in historical events looked upon as revelatory and which are perpetuated in the ongoing history of the believing community are classified as historical revelation. Those having their origin in the potentially universal depth experiences of mankind are designated as universal revelation. For the evaluative task, recourse must be made to another formula, designed to perform only this function.

Provisionally, I should like to propose the following evaluative concepts. That revelatory tradition and religious faith which is confirmed in one's own experience as ultimate and authoritative is designated *normative revelation*. Other traditions and faith in which the gracious revelatory activity of God is discerned—even while divergences from one's normative revelation are acknowledged—are termed *compatible revelation*.

This is not to say, of course, that all alleged revelations must be evaluated according to this formula. One may, in fact, decide that some claims to revelation are false, at least in terms of one's own understanding of God.

The cynic may charge that the evaluative distinction I have proposed is, in reality, nothing more than the distinction between "my faith" and "the others' faith." This rebuke is mitigated by recognizing that the designation "normative" does not facilely prejudice the question of the revelatory status of the other historical traditions, i.e., their power to serve as vehicles of the gracious divine presence in history. It simply acknowledges the relativities of human historical existence; persons who have experienced the divine presence and grace through the cumulative tradition in which they participate will inevitably employ it as the touchstone for assessing the degree of divine disclosure in other traditions and faith. It seems an indisputable fact that the criteria for assessing other faith must be derived from one's own existential selfhood, i.e., from one's own experience of who God is, and what He is doing, and where He discloses Himself.

There is, of course, the question whether an outsider can ever sufficiently know the faith of others to ascertain the degree of revelation going on in the lives of those who participate in a religious tradition in

which he does not. Here I can only report my conclusion that though perfect comprehension of another's religious faith is not possible, sensitive enquiry and encounter does, nevertheless, issue in an appreciable degree of understanding.

In this connection, the designation of appropriate religious traditions as "compatible" is useful for two reasons. First, it recognizes that a religious tradition will not exert the same revelatory claim on one who has not committed himself to it and who stands, therefore, in considerable degree outside its meaning. This is signified by the connotation of diversity (rather than identity) that inheres in the term "compatible." But, in the second place, it implies that sufficient revelatory quality has been detected in the alien tradition and faith to allow the inference that it is, prospectively, a vehicle of saving transcendence. Hence the connotation of compatibility.

In encountering persons of other religious faith, the conviction may grow on us that because they have met the proper condition of revelation, namely, single-minded dedication to the claims and promises conveyed through a religious tradition, their tradition has become for them, in reality, a medium of the sacred transcendent. Indeed, we may be persuaded that were we to undergo the necessary initiation and participation that is a condition of a tradition becoming revelatory, then this compatible and prospective revelation would come to bear even for us the same final and normative quality that we have already known in our original Christian tradition. But about this—as relative outsiders—we can never make a final judgment. Hence the moral and intellectual desirability of the concept of "compatible revelation."