

The Church's Intellectual Crisis

When bishops are asked why a practice violates church teaching, they make claim to the two sources of Catholic teaching: divine revelation and natural law. For moral questions, natural law is usually first invoked. I examine the question of revelation in this chapter. and the problems associated with natural law in the next chapter.

Revelation is not often directly spoken about despite its importance to church teaching. I have argued that the Second Vatican Council unintentionally undermined the idea of revelation by its actions. There is nothing wrong with formulas of beliefs emerging from debate. Beliefs that go back to the beginning of the church have a privileged position and are not usually debated and changed. The text of the Bible does not change but the understanding of many texts in the Bible has changed, especially in the last two centuries.

Bishops can usually produce passages from the Bible when they are asked why gay marriage or birth control is against revelation. Until the 1960s, bishops, with the support of theologians, would cite “proof texts” from the Bible and the fathers of the Church. When biblical scholars and church historians undermined many of these “proofs,” officials became cautious about saying that a sentence in the Bible was a revealed truth. However, the proof-text mentality has never disappeared. Particular texts are assumed to provide moral condemnations even if a narrative in the Bible is now understood differently from the way it was understood in the past.

The Council of Trent declared that revelation which is contained in scripture and tradition goes back to the beginning of the church. The bishops, as successors of the apostles, have transmitted without error this divine revelation which is the basis for official claims to speak with certainty about God and what God requires. In the nineteenth century, theologians coined a saying that was implied by Trent's doctrine: “Revelation closed with the death of the last apostle.”

There was a flurry of interest in “revelation” in the 1960s until a document from the Second Vatican Council was presumed to have provided a solid new basis for church teaching. That document, *The Constitution on Divine Revelation*, offered some criticism of the idea of revelation that had been established by the Council of Trent. On the whole, however, the Second Vatican Council let stand the idea of revelation from the Council of Trent.ⁱ By the early 1970s it was clear that any serious inquiry into the nature of revelation was finished. Since then, theologians

have debated how doctrines have developed but not what is the basis of those doctrines.

A leading moral theorist, John Finnis, states the uncritical idea of revelation that is still widely assumed in the Roman Catholic Church. He writes: “Revelation was completed in the life, the words, and the deeds of Jesus, communicated to and handed on by the apostles as a gospel which is ‘the source of all saving truth and all moral teaching’ and ‘includes everything which contributes to the holiness...of the People of God’.”ⁱⁱ

A less naïve version of this belief can be found in recent books but they continue to insist that there is a “something” called revelation that has been transmitted from the apostles to their successors, the Catholic bishops who have preserved and taught it. For example, Gerald O’Collins in one of the few recent books on revelation, emphasizes revelation as an event at the time of the Bible. But he supplements that meaning with revelation in a secondary sense that was passed on by the apostles. He acknowledges that *The Constitution on Divine Revelation* did not reject the Council of Trent’s teaching that there is a “propositional revelation” as the secondary meaning of revelation.

I have been writing on this topic since 1963 and I have tried without much success to make one point. I wrote in the first footnote of my book, *Scripture and Tradition*, in 1963: “I should remark at the beginning that revelation is never really an object that can be divided or contained. The invitation of the one God in Christ can only be proclaimed by the church and answered in faith.” What the authors of the Bible wrote may have been inspired by divine revelation, but their writings are statements of faith. Catholic Church officials and theologians continue to turn statements of faith into statements of revelation. God may have inspired the Bible, but God did not write it.

The Early History of “Revelation”

A striking feature of Christianity that is seldom puzzled over is why there are four gospels instead of one. If the gospel was the truth delivered by God, why are there multiple versions? Why didn’t the earliest followers of Jesus decide what was the most accurate version? Does Jesus want us to be perfect as is his heavenly father (Mt. 5:48) or merciful as is his heavenly father (Lk. 6:26)? Both verses seem to refer to the same statement by Jesus.

At first there were three gospels that largely covered the same territory; then a fourth gospel with a different style and content was added. The name on each version confirms the truth that these gospels did not arrive directly from a divine source but instead are the creative compositions of human authors. It is evident that the gospel is not a collection of revealed truths but a story. The reason why there are several versions is clear. Several versions can enrich an appreciation of a story.

The term revelation was not part of the Christian Church's inheritance from the Jews. This fact is more than an historical curiosity. The Christian and the Jewish ways of approaching the divine are sharply different. Christians might learn from Jews both a reticence in speaking about the divine and the importance of spirited debate within the church community in seeking the truth.

The term revelation, translated from its Greek equivalent *apokalupsis*, means an unveiling. It is a visual metaphor for the way to arrive at the truth. The activity of seeing as the metaphor for knowing was central to much of classical Greek philosophy. Revelation meant that the veil of ignorance has been raised and the truth came into the light. The truth is what you see.

Another layer of meaning was placed on the term apocalypse/revelation when used by religions in the Middle East. Apocalypse/revelation when used in a religious context referred to a special knowledge. What are called the mystery religions claimed to have an esoteric knowledge that included understanding God and the fate of the world. The truth had been unveiled or revealed to special recipients. The possibility of knowing where history goes, as well as when and how it finishes, was (and still is) attractive for many people.

For understanding the era just before and after the lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth, the small library of apocalyptic writing from this time is of interest to historians. By the time of Jesus there were competing versions of this revelation/apocalypse. Paul, writing in Greek, used *apokalupsis* several times, most prominently for his claim that he had received his message and mission from a vision of Christ. The message was announced by a voice from on high.

The idea of revelation as an unveiling of the truth conflicted with Jewish tradition. In Jewish history, the divine-human relation was understood with an oral/aural metaphor. God speaks, the people listen, and then they act in response. "Faith comes by hearing," (Rom. 10:17), said St. Paul. The truth is what one *hears*. That oral relation has no built-in endpoint. A person listens, then speaks, then listens and so on.

In a visual metaphor, God raises a veil and the truth is evident. The only response called for is submission to the truth. Revelation concludes the process. Revelation/apocalypse clashed with an appreciation of history and divine action within history. The revelation of God was situated at the end of history.

Christianity did introduce a sense of finality into the Jewish view of history. Jesus was said to be the Messiah or the Christ, the one who was expected. He was crucified and died but he had promised to return in glory. In the first two centuries of the Common Era, Christian expectations ran high, waiting for the imminent revelation of the Son of God. Even when hope for a quick return of the Christ faded and the church settled into its work in history, the idea of revelation/apocalypse retained a powerful attraction.

One of these special claims to revelation was attributed to the apostle John. The Revelation of John was especially consoling to Christians during times of persecution because it seemed to prophesy the sufferings of Jesus' followers. The text was enigmatic in many places but that was not unusual for a revelation. The enigmatic words are not the revelation but point to a vision. It was secret knowledge open only to the chosen few.ⁱⁱⁱ

When the New Testament was composed there was much debate about whether to include the Revelation of John. Its style clashed with the literature of the gospels and the epistles. Its content was also at odds with most of the New Testament that was concerned with living in history.

The canonical criterion was that a book should have the authority of a witness to Jesus' death and resurrection. The Revelation that was attributed to the apostle John fulfilled this criterion so that Revelation was included in the canon of the New Testament. With the Book of Revelation, the term revelation/apocalypse became a permanent element in the Christian vocabulary. Jewish teachings were on a scroll which can be unrolled and then rolled up. The Christians had a book, which is what "bible" means. The book had a beginning (the Old Testament), a middle (the Gospels and Epistles) and an end (Revelation).

The Latin translation of the New Testament by Jerome used the word *apocalypsis* as a Latin word for the Book of Revelation, but it used the classical Latin word *revelatio* for the same word when used by Paul. "Revelation" was thereby split into *apocalypsis* at the end of time and *revelatio* which showed up earlier.

Until the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholics were generally ignorant of the last book of the New Testament which they called *The Apocalypse*. They were told that it was filled with elaborate imagery and predictions and that it was not worth studying. There was no connection made between the Book of Revelation and other things that church officials said about revelation and revealed truth.

Because revelation was an attractive idea, church officials feared that it could undercut the historical mission of the church by pointing only to the end of history. If you know how the story ends why spend much time reading the whole book? If your concern is waiting for the end of time, then you are not likely to be interested in caring for a world that is soon to disappear,

In most Christian circles, except for Roman Catholicism, the word revelation is a reference to the Book of Revelation with its warnings to get ready for the last day. There are hundreds of thousands of uses of “revelation” on the Internet; the great majority of them refer to the Book of Revelation. Some of these uses of the term revelation are for bizarre theories that the Book of Revelation can give rise to.

The Book of Revelation required an interpretation not only of individual verses but of the context and purpose of the book itself. Augustine of Hippo was the great thinker who gave direction to the Western church. Augustine confronted the problem of revelation/apocalypse and provided an official solution.

For Augustine, the key to interpretation was the reference in the Book of Revelation to a thousand-year period after the revelation/apocalypse. Augustine theorized that the thousand years after the apocalyptic event referred to the history of the church instead of the end of history. Revelation was moved from the future to the past. Church officials could preserve and interpret the divine revelation given in the past to the disciples of Christ. “Revelation” referred to the life, death and resurrection of the Christ when God was finally revealed in full. ^{iv}

Augustine’s solution for the problem of revelation/apocalypse was a brilliant move, one which gave a secure basis for official teaching. The knowledge that has been divinely revealed was entrusted to a small circle of Jesus’s followers. They in turn have passed it on to the bishops in the church, the ones who are ordained to be the teachers of the new chosen people. The revelation gradually became a logical system of truths. Many of these teachings were singled out as indisputably true. A heretic was someone who denied one of the truths revealed by God and who could no longer be a member of the church.

A logical system of truths had attractive aspects. For new converts, church teachers could present a creed attributed to Jesus' apostles that listed the object of faith in twelve statements. The downside to revelation having become a collection of truths was its separation from the prayer life and moral actions of church members. Mary Perkins Ryan, a great leader in religious education, used to ask: "How does the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity affect the behavior of Catholics on the subway?" She was not implying that the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity is unimportant; she was asking for how divine revelation influences the daily life of Roman Catholics.

A divine revelation in the past as the basis of Christian life was a change of overwhelming importance. The biblical tradition of God speaking to a people and reminding them of what they have agreed to do was replaced by God as author of a book. The instruction in the book was complete.; no additions to the text would be forthcoming. Only in the future at the end of time would puzzling parts of the story be cleared up.

One of the quiet but constant protests against this placing of revelation in the past has been the liturgy. The Eucharist, while it draws from the past and looks to the future, exists in the present. The scriptural readings before the eucharistic meal come from the past but with the reminder that the word of the Lord is always spoken now. The Eucharistic meal is a reenactment of the past that makes present the body and blood of the Christ.

The whole liturgy is a challenge to our ordinary image of time in which the past has disappeared, the future does not yet exist, and the present is a disappearing point between them. In the liturgy, the present is all there is. That statement is not a denial of past and future. The past lives on in the present and the future is the quickening possibilities of the present.

The liturgy uses the biblical metaphor of speaking and listening for the relation of divine and human. God speaks and humans are called to hear and to act in the present. The liturgy uses all the senses to bring the worshipper into the presence of a great mystery. But all the senses are centered around the activity of listening. The words that may seem dead on the page of a book come alive in the speaking. Music has always had a special place in the liturgy. The absence of both choirs and artistic music in today's liturgy is a sign of serious problems with the Roman Catholic Church.

For those who are open to the word spoken today the divine speaking in the liturgy points to God speaking everywhere in human life. The liturgy is a quiet protest

against the idea that God revealed himself by the year 30 CE and then retired to the heavens.

A second source of protest against the assumption that God revealed himself in the past and that the era of revelation has ended, is the mystical tradition of the church. Like the liturgy, and in alliance with the liturgy, the mystical strand of the church refuses to accept that God once appeared to deliver the final truth and then left behind a church that would transmit it.

Church officials tried to control outbreaks of mystical activity with the category of “private revelation.” God may have spoken to a saint, but it was a strictly private message. Private revelations had to be interpreted by the “public revelation” which the official church received in the past and still possesses today.

Mystics were always in danger of having a conflict with the church’s official teaching. It was not that they rejected official dogmas; they just tended to go around them in searching for hints of the divine in all creation. They drew upon the scriptures for a life of contemplation that overflowed into witnessing for justice.

When mystics referred to revelation in the New Testament, they generally were referring to the last book. The Book of Revelation offered a wealth of material on which to reflect about history and its conclusion. This speculation could go wildly astray. Thomas Aquinas, who had a mystical side to his person and work, was impatient with the outbreak of mysticism that had begun in the twelfth century and was led by Joachim of Fiore’s interpretation of the Book of Revelation.

Joachim has had a profound influence on all western history, secular as well as religious. The idea that history is best understood as having an ancient part, a middle part, and a modern part is the doing of Joachim. The modern part of that history for Joachim was the beginning of the end, the era of the Holy Spirit. Joachim is largely responsible for interest in the spirit and the idea of the spiritual that has run throughout philosophy and religion in modern times. For Joachim the spiritual age is what follows the ages of the Father and the Son. It does not leave out the ages of the Father and the Son but locates them in the spiritual present.^v

The Spirit moves in every person and reveals a truth which has been hidden up until now. It is obvious that each person being moved by the spirit has the potential for badly disrupting any society, including the church. But there is also a potential for the spirit giving inspiration for activity in the church and by the church. Saints such as Meister Eckhart, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, and Catherine of

Sienna show what can be accomplished by attentiveness to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

The title of Thomas Aquinas's major work is *Summa theologiae* which suggests a book that describes the nature of God and all things divine. That assumption is overturned in the first article which says, "Since we cannot know what God is but only what God is not, let us proceed to investigate the ways in which God does not exist." The book is about everything except God. Whatever understanding of God is possible can only be reached by studying everything in creation. Thomas uses the term revelation seven times in the first article of the *Summa* but as the object of a preposition: "a holy teaching which comes to us *through* revelation."^{vi} The teaching is not the revelation. There is no body of material called revelation; the term revelation can only be used as an activity attributed to God.

The people who understood the spiritual and metaphysical importance of Thomas's work were the mystics of the fourteenth century and the centuries that followed. Meister Eckhart, one of the greatest thinkers in the history of the church, has been described as having rewritten Thomas's *Summa* as mysticism. Actually, Eckhart simply saw that the *Summa theologiae* was a document that ends in mysticism. Eckhart's sermons denouncing the concentration of wealth in the Rhineland followed from his mysticism and got him condemned during his lifetime. "He was a great man pulled down by a lot of little men," wrote Thomas Merton.^{vii}

I think that Etienne Gilson, the great interpreter of Thomas Aquinas, gets it wrong in his book *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*.^{viii} Gilson tries out the various possibilities for how reason and revelation can be related. Throughout the book he refers to "Christian revelation," a term that did not exist in the middle ages. He credits Thomas Aquinas with having found the right balance between reason and Christian revelation. Gilson quotes Archbishop Tempier of Paris in his condemnation of Thomas in 1277 as having said that Thomas made mistakes about "Christian revelation." That statement concerned me. If anyone had used the term "Christian revelation" in the thirteenth century I had badly misunderstood the history of "revelation." When I finally got hold of the Latin text of the Archbishop's condemnation, I found that what Gilson translated as "Christian revelation" were the words *lex Christiana* (Christian law).

The Modern History of Revelation

Modern science was at first inclined to appropriate the term revelation. The visual character of modern science led to a claim that science is a revelation of the world

of nature. This takeover of revelation was a challenge to Christian teaching. The Roman Catholic Church protected itself by claiming that although science possesses “natural revelation,” the church has a “supernatural revelation”; Protestants appealed to a “special revelation,” as opposed to a general revelation.

The church thus saved its revelation of the divine by isolating it from ordinary experience. Church officials were in firm possession of supernatural revelation at the cost of its losing the meaning of revelation to most Christians. The supernatural or special revelation was the basis of something called “revealed religion.” As if it were religion that was revealed.^{ix} Scientists soon lost interest in using the term revelation but the isolation of supernatural revelation remained.

The origin of the church’s intellectual crisis today lies in part with the church’s failure to engage secular philosophy, science, and social studies. But ironically, the crisis has come in part from the interest in Christian scripture and the desire for meaningful liturgy. Neither of these sources supports the official assumption of a Christian revelation in the past that supplies answers in the present.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Catholic students of the Bible were aware that their findings might conflict with the church’s teaching. They relied on a distinction between the concepts of inspiration and revelation. Everything in the Bible was said to be inspired but not revealed. It was affirmed that the authors of the books of the Bible were inspired or guided by the Holy Spirit. But every word of the Bible, including the words attributed to Jesus, were written by a human writer in a human language.

The application of literary and historical criticism to the Bible made apparent that books of the Bible were often composed by multiple authors over a long period of time. There were various sources of a book that sometimes conflicted with one another. The Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek had many inaccuracies as did the Douay version of the New Testament, the standard Latin text used in the Roman Catholic Church. Was God the author of such a messy collection if the point was to deliver revealed truth? If a divine revelation exists, in what language is it?

In the early part of the 20th century Catholic scholars operated under some restrictions, especially in the study of the New Testament. In 1941, Pope Pius XII gave them more latitude with the encyclical *Divino Afflante*. By the 1960s there was a wide gap between what bishops still taught as revealed truth and what modern criticism of the Bible had revealed.

Catholic biblical scholars had no desire to challenge the church's meaning of revelation. They maintained a strict orthodoxy even as theology began to radically change. Theologians were unenthusiastic about exploring the nature of revelation. They left the job to fundamental theology or pre-theology. Catholic philosophers were wary of getting involved in church teachings and tried to avoid controversy..

Some Protestant theologians in the twentieth century used the idea of revelation as a central category. Karl Barth famously made revelation an all-comprehensive category.^x Barth was not a fundamentalist, but he did take the scriptures as the one source for the church's encounter with Christ. Any philosophical exploration of revelation did not much interest him. So dominant in the 20th century was the identification of revelation with Barth that when I first wrote on revelation, it was assumed I was a Barthian.

Rudolf Bultmann, inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, understood revelation as an activity occurring in the present, not a text from the past. Bultmann wrote: "Revelation is understood in its true nature only when it is understood as something that takes place in the present, in my particular present."^{xi} Bultmann seemed to be offering a radically reformed Christianity that incorporated modern philosophy and psychology. When I wrote that revelation is an act that occurs in the present, I was described by Dietrich von Hildebrand as full of Bultmannism.

The Roman Catholic thinker that grasped the profound problem of revelation was Karl Rahner. In 1961 the first of his twenty volumes called *Theological Investigations* was published in English. I can still recall the experience of turning the first few pages of the book and thinking to myself "I don't understand much of what he is saying but I get enough to know that he is playing a different game from everyone else."

In the twentieth century a small group of Catholic thinkers, including Karl Rahner, rescued Thomas Aquinas from the question-and-answer method of the seminary. They went back to the original texts of Thomas and read him in relation to modern and ancient philosophy. Rahner started from the human situation and examined the whole Christian tradition, employing the Bible and the fathers of the church, as revelatory.

The metaphors of "God speaking" and "God revealing" had always been in conflict. The prominence of the term revelation after the Council of Trent had

given first place to the metaphor of God revealing the truth. The biblical metaphor of God speaking trailed behind. The scholarly revival of scriptural studies led to a new and wider appreciation of the Bible in the Roman Catholic Church. A conflict between the two metaphors threatened to surface.

As the basis of official church teaching, revelation has one big advantage over speaking. Revelation offered a complete body of material that could be philosophically analyzed as the foundation of theology and the storehouse of official doctrines. In contrast, the metaphor of speaking and listening was difficult to put into philosophical categories. The word spoken today can lead to a variety of interpretations.

The idea of the development of doctrine originated in the nineteenth century and it has been the basis for progress in understanding doctrines. But the invoking of development can obscure the deeper question of the basis of doctrine. The idea of development originally met strong resistance from the conservative side of the church. These days even conservative church officials accept some form of development. But if one listens closely to these church officials, they do not actually accept the development of doctrine; they accept a development in *our understanding of* doctrine. The truth was always there from two thousand years ago, but we have been slow to grasp it. Whatever challenges to church teaching occur, the church has possessed the revealed truth from the beginning and the pope and other bishops have faithfully handed it on to their successors.^{xii}

The Second Vatican Council on Revelation

As I noted earlier, the Second Vatican Council's first document on revelation simply repeated the Council of Trent's teaching. The document was returned to committee for a complete rewriting and it became the last rather than the first document published by the Council. The work of rewriting the document was taken from the Vatican Curia and given to experts in Scripture. When the document reappeared for approval several years later there was a sigh of relief on the left. The new document embodied the positive attitude and serious scholarship that Catholic biblical scholars had been infusing into the church.

In the summer of 1965 one of the experts at the Council had given me a copy of the revised document on revelation which was to be discussed in the Fall. I was confident that the bishops would not make any major changes in the document. As I prepared the text of my book, *Theology of Revelation*, I left spaces for inserting quotations from the Council document. Fortunately for me, there were no

significant changes in the version that I had. I inserted the appropriate quotations in the spaces which I had left open. My book was published with its quotations from the Council hardly a month after the Council had approved the document.^{xiii} I could not claim that I was applying the Council's document but that my book was compatible with the Council.

In those days it was indispensable not to disagree with church teaching. And the Council document on revelation had been received with great enthusiasm. I was aware that my book was not saying the same thing as what the Council had said. I could appreciate the improvements made on the original document. It was just that the revised document seemed to me mostly irrelevant to the central question of revelation. The Vatican II document does not ask what revelation is, let alone provide an answer. The authors of *The Constitution on Divine Revelation* wished to avoid contradicting the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council. They were charged with rewriting the original document. As a result, they kept the framework of the Council of Trent's document centered on the *sources* of revelation.

The problem of revelation was presumed solved by tracing it to the single source of Christ. But the Constitution's second chapter which describes the *transmission* of revelation shows that the document's authors had not moved from Trent's idea of revelation as a body of truths that was given to the apostles and transmitted by the bishops through the centuries.

The document of the Second Vatican Council is referred to both as *Verbum Dei* (Word of God) and *The Constitution on Divine Revelation*. Which is it? The authors of the document were more comfortable with the Bible's "word of God" as the governing metaphor, but they were charged with writing a document on divine revelation. The result is an awkward attempt to say what revelation is by using references to the Bible. The Bible had no answer for them.

The most surprising thing about the Council document on revelation is that it makes no reference to the main source of the term revelation in the New Testament, the Book of Revelation. The Roman Catholic Church still does not know what to do with the Book of Revelation because it does not fit in with the church's use of revelation as truths under the control of the bishops.

In my book, *Both Sides: The Story of Revelation*, I claimed that there are two sides to the story of revelation, the main story of revelation as the basis of church teaching and a splinter story of revelation as a description of the end of history. Actually, there is only one side to the story. I misplaced the Book of Revelation as

the underside to the main story. The main story is that the Book of Revelation was domesticated into becoming the basis of the church's teaching. Roman Catholics might learn from Protestant Evangelicals who have continued to give importance to the Book of Revelation.

Tradition

The Roman Catholic Church maintains that its teaching is derived from tradition as well as from scripture. There is a problem of tradition being misunderstood as truths that have come down from the apostolic era. What is imagined is the apostles whispering secrets to a few of their followers. This problem with tradition has especially existed since the Council of Trent. However, the Christian idea of tradition, which was adopted from Jewish religion, has never had the richness of meaning that tradition had and continues to have for the Jews.

The Jews first conceived of tradition as an oral source of truth that accompanied writing. That made possible disagreement with the official teachers without contradicting them. It was not a collection of truths but the community as a context of, among other things, writings. The Jews have always understood tradition as the basis of argument. The community's past contains conflicting elements and both sides of an argument may have some truth.

In a typical rabbinic story that illustrates tradition, an old rabbi is asked to mediate a dispute. The first person gives his side of the story and the rabbi says: "You're right." The second person gives his side and the rabbi says: "You're right." The rabbi's wife who has been listening to the exchange says to her husband: "They told you opposing stories. You can't just say to both of them: 'You're right.'" The rabbi says to his wife: "You're right."

The rabbi's wife is right that it is not enough to say "right" to the two people who are disagreeing. But each of those people may be defending part of the truth. What the rabbi or someone else must do is reconstruct the argument that the two parties are having in a way that reveals the partial truth on both sides.^{xiv} There is nothing wrong with argument and continuing to argue when one is sure of the truth.

In his Commentary on the Book of Job, Thomas Aquinas asks if it is proper that Job argues with God. Thomas' very Jewish answer is "Truth does not change because of the high dignity of him to whom it is addressed. He who speaks the truth cannot be overcome no matter with whom he disagrees."^{xv} If you are sure you

are in the right, keep arguing even it is with God. Jewish history is one long argument with God.

What keeps argument from becoming destructive is if it occurs within the boundaries of a living tradition. The arguing parties have to live within a community and respect the members of the community, both living and dead. Arguments are healthy when people accept rules of civility and a history that has established customs for how arguing takes place. To an outsider the process may seem chaotic. Both parties to an argument may simply be arguing their side with passion.^{xvi}

In another rabbinic story, a young rabbi presides over a religious service for the first time. At a certain point in the service, some people stand and the other people sit. The following week, the same thing occurs and there is murmuring of “sit down” and “stand up.” In the third week the voices of sit and stand are louder. The young rabbi visits an older rabbi and tells him of the problem. Does the tradition say stand? The older rabbi says: “no, that’s not the tradition.” The young rabbi says, “so the tradition is to sit?” The older rabbi says “no, that’s not the tradition.” The young rabbi says: “You have to give me some help. I have half the congregation shouting at the other half.” The old rabbi says: “Ah – that’s the tradition.”

If speaking/responding is imagined as the divine-human relation, a religious organization that attempts to facilitate that relation would be built upon the same give and take. The organization would embrace differences of opinion and civil debates about the beliefs and practices of the organization.

In a church that claims to possess truths that come directly from God, teaching is done by declarations and announcements of what is true. The proclaimers of the truth surround themselves with ornate trappings of majesty, and the truth becomes whatever the person in a high position pronounces to be true. In contrast, if tradition is an embodiment of the church’s life, then what replaces revealed truths that are to be accepted without dissent is the practice of dialogue and debate. The “faithful” student can disagree without its being called “dissent.”^{xvii}

Christians need to learn from the Jewish attitude that truth is discovered by argument. The Talmud says: “Moses pleaded with the Lord to reveal the final truth in each problem of doctrine.” The Lord replies: “There are no pre-existent final truths in doctrine or law; the truth is the considered judgment of the majority of authoritative interpreters in every generation.”^{xviii}

That attitude to debate means that the formulation of truth is in a constant process of change. In an earlier era of the church, the suggestion of doctrinal debate would not have seemed radical. The Scholastic method at its best was based on dialogue and debate. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa* is a good example of the method in which Thomas first states objections to the position he is going to take and returns to the objections before going on to the next question as part of a larger debate.

Less well-known than Thomas's work but just as important in the church's history is the *Decretum* of Gratian in the twelfth century. The *Decretum* was the basis of centuries of commentary and debate that formed the basis of canon law.

Gratian presents both sides of each issue documenting both sides of the debates from the church's past.

Divine Revealing/ Human Believing

For Catholics who have accepted "the faith" and submitted to the authority of holy mother church, almost any change is a dilution of the faith of our ancestors. What good is a religion if, like everything else, it changes with the fashions of the day? What is particularly distressing to them is that the present pope has been a chief instigator of some of these changes. He says he is not changing "doctrines", but he is allowing changes of "pastoral practice." It is evident to many people that a change in practice is already a change of doctrine.

At its best "Catholic faith" is not a set of propositions that one holds as true; it is an openness to trust and love, an acceptance of all that is real. The formulas that the Roman Catholic Church possesses can only claim to be the least inadequate expressions of faith. The certainty which we all seek can never be found in beliefs even though beliefs are important for uniting people in a community of seekers. The beliefs must be joined with both ritual practices and moral actions. Certainty is based on how beliefs come together in a life.

"Faith" in its original meaning is an activity, a verb rather than a noun. In the English language the word faith is undeniably a noun so that there is a tendency to talk about "the faith" as something one possesses rather than something one does. That tendency is strengthened when the adjective Christian is placed before "faith." The term "Christian faith" becomes something that the individual receives from the Christian church, the possessor of "Christian revelation."

Early in church history, Christian faith meant faith which finds a focus in Christ. However, since the Council of Trent “Christian faith” more often means the faith that the Christian church possesses. Thomas Aquinas’s use of “faith” compared to “Christian faith” is in a ratio of 132 to 1.^{xix}

For affirming faith as an activity rather than a possession, we have in English the verb to believe. For clarity’s sake one can say that there are two verbs, “believing in” and “believing that” which function quite differently. The verb “to believe in” is usually directed to a person or a cause; it indicates a commitment based on trust. In contrast, “believes that” is directed to a statement that is taken to be true. The individual cannot verify the belief for himself or herself and must rely on someone or something for the knowledge of truth.

The verb to “believe that” is subsidiary to “believing in.” We need to trust someone before we can assume that the statements which the person makes are true. This distinction may seem esoteric or one that is found only in logic books. But it is an ordinary distinction that people regularly make without thinking about it. Everyone understands the difference between “I believe in you” and “I believe that what you say is true.” The meaning of faith as “believing in” is not mainly a philosophical question; it is a question that every person has to ask herself or himself: What or whom do I believe in? The answer to that question is to be found in everything that a person does in life.

The early Christian Church used this distinction in the Creed which begins *Credo in unum Deum*: “I believe in God.” The verb “believe in” with the object “God” does not mean I believe that there is a God but instead I believe and trust in the only God there is. The Creed that was recited in the liturgy was not intended as a catalogue of revealed truths to be possessed but a basis of action beyond the liturgy.

The usual rhetoric of dividing people into believers and nonbelievers makes no sense. Everybody believes in someone or something or they would not get out of bed in the morning. The assumption of a division between believers and nonbelievers is that believers base their lives on a collection of beliefs that they hold as true because of an authority that supplied the truths. The nonbelievers, in contrast, supposedly base their knowledge on facts and reasoning. Many of these nonbelievers have, since the seventeenth century, looked forward to when religion and other belief systems are replaced by rational truths.

A puzzling fact is that the decline of religion does not seem to lead to rational agreements based on facts. More information than ever is available today to the whole population but there is a widespread distrust of whatever is said to be facts. People do not know who to believe (in). They turn to someone who promises to provide stability by relying on simple truths. The act of “believing in” is corrupted by a leader who attracts gullible people and convinces them to place their trust in an individual. The corrupt leader demands loyalty to himself instead of loyalty to the cause that they believe in. “Believing in” must be guided by a breadth and depth of experience that recognizes that the most any person or institution can do is represent a truth that the human race is still in quest of.

Conclusion

It would probably have been better if the Roman Catholic Church had kept “revelation” where it logically belongs at the end of history. Many Protestant groups do place it there. But what has happened over the centuries cannot be reversed; that is not the way that the Roman Catholic Church proceeds.

Words change their meaning over time. The etymology and history of the term revelation has seemingly been forgotten. But the long history of the term even if out of sight still exists as does the logic built into its etymological meaning. In its secular use today, “revelation” regularly refers to the disclosure of a secret. What had been unknown has suddenly come to light. Revelation is finished.

The Roman Catholic Church should stop using “revelation” as a noun. If the church continues to use the word, the appropriate use of “revelation” is as a verb that refers to activity attributed to God. The act of God’s revealing is coextensive with the act of creating. As Thomas Aquinas said, the way to understand God’s ways is to understand the creation. Within creation the church claims that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a “down payment” on revelation/apocalypse as the fulfillment of history.

Speaking or revealing is what God does, believing is what a human does. The faith is not a collection of revealed truths; it is an attempt by human beings to express what they believe in. The “deposit of faith” is not composed of revealed truths but statements of belief. The New Testament is a human witness to what the apostles heard and saw. The church can “transmit” teachings, books, works of art, statues, buildings and other monuments of the past. It cannot transmit divine revelation. Revelation occurs in the present for those who are open to believing. s.

Consider these two statements that may seem to be expressing the same thing but are widely different in their approach.

Archbishop William Temple, in his 1935 classic *Nature, Man and God*, writes: “Only if God is revealed in the rising of the sun in the sky, can he be revealed in the rising of a son of man from the dead; only if he is revealed in the history of the Syrians and Philistines can be revealed in the history of Israel; only if he chooses all men can he choose any at all; only if nothing is profane can anything be sacred.”^{xx}

Temple uses the verb form of revelation and he implies a single, universal revealing. The revealing of the son of man from the dead must be in the context of a divine revealing by all creation. Although Temple wishes to point to the one, universal revelation of the divine, there is no way to make universal statements. The mark of religious statements is the double negative (“if anything is not sacred, nothing is sacred. That is, everything is sacred”).

Temple affirms a Christian expression of belief in a divine revealing within a context that invites affirmations by other religious groups. There is no denial of any Christian doctrines but there is no claim that the Christian church possesses the final truth about God. Divine revelation is an activity attributed to God. The result of that activity can be found by opening one’s eyes to all of creation and listening to the voices of all God’s creatures.

Compare William Temple’s statement with one that Pope Francis makes in *Laudato si*, The Pope, quoting his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, says: “Alongside revelation, properly so called, contained in scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of the night.”

The clumsy syntax of the Pope’s sentence compared to the poetic flow of Temple’s sentence is indicative of confused thinking. The Pope’s statement would be a poor formula at any time, but in a twenty-first century encyclical on the environment that is addressed to the whole world it is a disaster. Its effect is to undermine the point of the encyclical, namely, divine revealing is shown by the creation which humans have a responsibility to care for. Instead, the Pope isolates “revelation properly so called,” from the rest of creation. His phrase “contained in scripture” is from the Council of Trent.^{xxi}

Pope Francis in his many references to revelation does not seem to have a clear and consistent meaning. In commenting on women deacons, he said: “As in the case of

the diaconate, we have to see what was there at the beginning of revelation. If there was something, let it grow, let it live. If there was not something, it doesn't work." It is not clear what the "something" is that he is looking for. He concluded that "we cannot go beyond revelation and dogmatic expressions." That combination is puzzling.

If revelation is used as a verb pointing to all creation, it would be crucial for the church to be receptive to enrichment and purification from other traditions.^{xxii} The term "Christian revelation," implying that the Christians possess a revelation, is a conversation stopper. The Roman Catholic Church has every right to claim that it teaches the truth but that does not exclude other traditions from embodying other aspects of the truth. Human formulas that are a response to divine revealing can be improved upon by conversations with other religious believers.

The most obvious interlocuters for Christians are Jews and Muslims. The three "Abrahamic religions" have a common ancestry and a similar sense of God's speaking through all creation. All three religions also absorbed the term revelation as something that occurs in the present. A Jewish *midrash* states: "When was the Torah given? It is given whenever a person receives it."^{xxiii}

The case is similar with Islam. Christians historically dismissed Islam as a fundamentalist religion that equates revelation with the text of an ancient book. But revelation is not the text of the Qur'an but what happens when the reader encounters the text. The Moroccan scholar Aziz Lahbabi writes: "Not the text in itself is the revelation but that which the believer discovers every time afresh while reading it."^{xxiv}

A conversation between Christians and Jews is still at an early stage. A genuine Christian-Muslim dialogue has barely begun. How these several billion people understand what God is saying today is crucial for world peace and the unity of a human family. Jews, Christians, and Muslims can be united rather than divided by the present revelation.

ⁱ "The Constitution on Divine Revelation"

ⁱⁱ John Finnis, *Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision and Truth* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1991), 30. His quotations are from *The Constitution on Divine Revelation*.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Collins, Stephen Stein and Bernard McGinn, *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

^{iv} Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), Book XX. Chap. 7.

^v Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore* (New York: Harper, 1977).

^{vi} Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I. I. q. 1.

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- vii Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 53.
- viii Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1966).
- ix Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1991), 41
- x Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- xi Rudolph Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (New York: Harper, 1962), 78-79.
- xii George Weigel, "The Catholic Church Does Not Do Paradigm Shifts," *First Things*, Jan. 31, 2018: "Evolution of the Church's understanding of the gospel over the centuries is not a matter of 'paradigm shifts,' or ruptures, or radical breaks and new beginnings; it is a question of what theologians call the development of doctrine."
- xiii Gabriel Moran, *Theology of Revelation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).
- xiv The Talmud: 'Erubhin 12b in Jacob Petuchowski, *Our Masters Taught: Rabbinic Stories and Sayings* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 41.
- xv Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991), 117.
- xvi Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 223.
- xvii Nicholas Lash, "Teaching or Commanding," *Commonweal*, Dec. 13, 2010, 17-20.
- xviii Yerushalmi Sandhedrin 4:2 in *The Essential Talmud*, ed. Adin Steinsaltz (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
- xix William Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 299, 11.
- xx William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 306.
- xxi Pope Francis, *Laudato s On Care for Our Common Home* (Washington, DC: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015), par. 85.
- xxii Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 265.
- xxiii Emil Fackenheim, *What is Judaism? An Interpretation for the Present Age* (New York: Summit, 1987), 28.
- xxiv Quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering Islam* (Albany NY: SUNY press, 1994), 165.