

Revelation and Contemplation

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An article under this heading, as part of a series on how God speaks to us, is presumably meant to presuppose that revelation and contemplation are two ways or contexts in which God does so. I want to suggest that the two are inseparable, and that they have much more to do with mundane realities than is commonly thought. To illustrate both points here is an extract from John M. Hull's account of what it is like to be blind:

This evening, at about nine o'clock, I was getting ready to leave the house. I opened the front door, and rain was falling. I stood for a few minutes, lost in the beauty of it. Rain has a way of bringing out the contours of everything; it throws a coloured blanket over previously invisible things; instead of an intermittent and thus fragmented world, the steadily falling rain creates continuity of acoustic experience.

This seems to me to be at once a revelatory and a contemplative experience. It is also about something so ordinary that sighted people take it for granted, namely rain. Hull's account of this moment provides an extraordinarily vivid example of de Caussade's doctrine of the sacrament of the present moment:

The rain presents the fulness of an entire situation all at once, not merely remembered, not in anticipation, but actually and now. The rain gives a sense of perspective and of the actual relationships of one part of the world to another.

...I feel as if the world, which is veiled until I touch it, has suddenly disclosed itself to me. I feel that the rain is gracious, that it has granted a gift to me, the gift of the world.

... When what there is to know is in itself varied, intricate and harmonious, then the knowledge of that reality shares the same characteristics. I am filled internally with a sense of variety, intricacy and harmony. The knowledge itself is beautiful, because the knowledge creates in me a mirror of what there is to know. As I listen to the rain, I am the image of the rain, and I am one with it.¹

The rain gives John Hull a world and makes him one with it. It is as if this revelation is only available to him in his blindness—a variation on the theme in John 9, where Jesus says that the from-birth blindness of the man whose sight he restored was 'so that the works of God might be made manifest in him.'² To Hull the concentration on the acoustic

dimension which results from his blindness has revelatory consequences: 'Acoustic space is a world of revelation.'³ This revelation of the dynamic oneness and harmony of everything, including himself, is a making manifest of what is the case. But were he not ready to exercise a contemplative capacity, a receptivity, the wonder of this world would have remained closed to him.

Revelation, then, is a gift, and like all gifts it needs to be received. The saying that it is more blessed to give than to receive is, like so many such sayings, a half-truth, leading the unwary into that compulsive self-denial which prevents receiving. We cannot give in the gospel's sense if we have not learned to receive. It is even more blessed to give than to receive, because giving is the fruit of receiving: my life is a gift to be given.

Where, it might not unreasonably be asked at this point, does God come in? This talk about rain and the world and the human self is all very well, but without God none of it hangs together. The objection seems to be based on a misunderstanding of who God is, namely someone who needs to be brought in. Reflection on a crucial moment in the revelation of the name of God in the Judaeo-Christian tradition may help to correct this misapprehension, which leads so many to seek God aside from present reality. At the burning bush Moses asks for the Lord's name, ostensibly that he might reassure the people but doubtless at least as much for his own security. The reply is oblique, an 'answer answerless'. It has been variously translated as 'I am who am', 'I am who I am', 'I shall be who I shall be' or 'I shall cause to be what I shall cause to be.'⁴

That no translation carries unimpeachable credentials is probably all to the good, as the uncertainty promotes wider bearings on the mystery of God than might otherwise be the case. In the world of magic, knowledge of the name makes the named person available for your purposes. In the refusal of the name a quite different horizon is suggested. If we take all the translators' nuances together the Lord of the burning bush might be called 'I will be with you', or 'I am the one who shall be with you' or 'I am the one who is to be trusted'. In other words, while Moses and by implication the people want to know the name so that the mysterious presence can be housed within familiar categories of expectation, this perspective is reversed by the reply.

What is announced is a transcendent purpose and destiny which is at once beyond present imagining and yet assured. Moses is encouraged to trust in his new-found awareness as the bush burns but is not consumed. In this sense the Lord's reply elicits faith in the divine presence with the people. Revelation opens up a new dimension of consciousness, while contemplation of the mystery makes it possible to live in that dimension. 'Do on, then, this unknowing', writes the author of *The Cloud of the Unknowing*, implying that while revelation is not in total discontinuity with the past there is a work of unlearning to be done. More will be said about that later.

In the consequent journeyings of the people through the wilderness the image of the Lord's presence is still relatively external: the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. But there is a straight line from the burning bush to the Lord's strong words in Ezekiel, 'I shall put my spirit within you',⁵ the high point of the revelation of the name of God in the Jewish scriptures. These words imply that a time is coming when we are to behave with the spontaneity of God.

Confusion is sometimes caused by using the word revelation in an almost technical sense, to refer only to what is recorded in scripture. I remember being taught in Fribourg long ago that revelation ceased with the death of the last apostle. It seemed odd to be told in effect not to expect revelations. This is a very impoverished usage. It is also a distorting of scripture in that it forgets that the words are not to be equated with the pristine experience of God which gave birth to them and to which they are necessarily inadequate footnotes. The Jesus of the fourth gospel exposes the illusion: 'You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life.'⁶ It is easy to slip into thinking of this as just another condemnation of pharisaic legalism. In fact these words cut much deeper than that tired anti-Jewish Christian cliché would suggest. What is condemned is the notion that the text is the container of life, as if life itself is found and stored in the words themselves.

A variation on this theme is the assumption that the Second Vatican Council provides a coherent and guaranteed epitome of Christian life in the contemporary world. In other words that revelation is to all intents and purposes located in the documents of this Council. For instance, a battery of texts is commonly produced in support of the understanding of ecumenism which produced the inter-church process and the newly installed ecumenical instruments. Those unsympathetic to such developments make a different selection. The point often missed is that, if considered simply in terms of what the documents say, both sides have a case. Vatican II, in this as in other spheres, is resistant to all monolithic interpretation, thus manifesting probably without conscious intent some of the unresolved contradictions then as now in play within the Church. This is a blessing, for it encourages us to take responsibility and in so doing to grow up a little, recognising Vatican II as an ingredient in that growth.

To treat conciliar documents as holy writ is to treat them in a way in which not even scripture should be treated. This is by no means to say that the conciliar texts are without interest or authority, not least in the seismic shift into a new universe of discourse signalled by the preference for the deliberately ambiguous phrase 'subsistit in' over 'est' in *Lumen Gentium*.⁷ But no text can be the *container* of revealed life, any more than we can learn to pray by using other people's prayers out of books. In this connection it is worth recalling Abbot Chapman's dictum, 'Pray as you can, not as you can't'. This does not mean that you are exhorted

to put up with the second-best form of prayer which is all that an insignificant person such as yourself can manage. It means rather that you are not to be distracted or led astray by theories or models of prayer. There is a way of praying for you, a praying which is you. A similar point is being made in the statement that prayer is you surrendering to the unknown.⁸

Then there is the true story of the young monk who found what he thought was the ideal method of prayer. This seemed to work for a time, but he soon found himself in difficulties. The abbot, repeatedly approached for advice, repeatedly suggested the abandonment of the method as the first step, but the young man stubbornly refused, and things went from bad to worse. Years later this monk was able to recognise the abbot's wisdom, but at the time he had clung to a method rather than surrendering to the unknown. The human psyche is almost but not quite infinitely resourceful in resisting transformation.

Which brings me more directly to the subject of contemplation, which I take to mean prayer in its deepest and most comprehensive sense. To be contemplative is to be becoming fully alive in this world. It is to be in touch with God, tuned in to the Spirit's harmonies which turn out to be in tune with the deepest and least noticed breathing of our own spirit. It is a dangerous state to be in, for incipient sanity in a mad world is very exposing. It is the reverse of what is commonly meant by prayer, that is to say the fantasy of entry into another world, a world of pure spirit, in order to commune with a God who is above or outside the battle. This is one of the images which has given contemplation a bad name among so many of those caught up in the hope of a better world and eager to bring it about. The reality is that in putting us in touch with God contemplation brings a new birth in which everything is transformed. What was formerly a closed, oppressive universe now has open horizons. Even the malfunctions of creation in bodies, minds and spirits of which we cannot but be painfully aware are seen to afford the possibility of new ways of becoming fully human.

Yet there is nothing ethereal or escapist about the uplands of the Spirit. Here, for instance, is the witness of someone who has had a severe bone disease for twenty years:

I loathe and detest my bone disease. I am often miserable, often shamefully discontented, often isolated, often lonely. I fear pain, and the fear does not grow less. But oddly, after twenty years, I can no longer wish that things were quite otherwise, except for my husband's sake. Learning to live with the disorder as creatively as possible has in the end formed the person I am ... I think I can say, without any trace of masochism, that the disease has indeed been a creative medium. I have tried to use the pain of it to remind me to try to focus on what is really important. And what is really important is adoration.

The author goes on to write of her apparently unavoidable pain as being still an unmitigated evil, and yet somehow a means to an end:

I cannot describe the process very well, but I have found it to be one of somehow *absorbing darkness* (author's emphasis)—a physical or mental suffering of my own, or worse, of someone else's—into my own person, my own body, or my own emotions. We have to allow ourselves to be open to pain. If we are able to do this, to act, as it were, as blotting-paper for pain, without handing it on in the form of bitterness or resentment or of hurt to others—then somehow in some incomprehensible miracle of grace, some at least of the darkness may be turned to light.⁹

This person would probably not picture herself as a contemplative, but to be a blotting-paper for pain is part of the contemplative faculty, having to do with receptivity and surrender rather than initiating things. I suspect we exercise this capacity more than we realise, not least in absorbing others' pain—but that is another story.

It has been said that the best way to make an act of attention to God is to make an act of inattention to everything else. This could easily seem a flight from reality, commending a God remote from the hurly-burly; but that would be to misunderstand, as I did for many years, thinking the saying dualistic. It is perhaps worth noting in passing that the saying's author, Abbot John Chapman of Downside, was suspected of a form of quietism. What Chapman saw, though he would not have put it in these terms, was the need to slacken the grip of our conscious mind if the contemplative dimension was to be entered. What is at stake might be described as a choice between remaining problem-centred, which is a recipe for sterility, or opting for mystery-encountering.¹⁰

There is no question here of avoiding whatever the preoccupying problem is. The movement is away from being ruled or defined by the problem to experiencing it as part of the mystery of the becoming of all things in God. Chapman's act of inattention is a move away from the fragmented state of things perceived by 'normal', half-awakened, overly rationalistic and compulsively controlling human consciousness. This move leaves space for the living God as the mystery of all things to be declared. It makes our contemplative capacity available for revelatory experience, so that we may receive a world and know our oneness with it. Otherwise we shall continue to be cut off from the springs of life however hard we try to get in touch with God.

Contemplation has to do with becoming aware of how intimately God is in touch with us, and learning to live in that awareness. An aspect of this process is elucidated by Sebastian Moore:

People with problems tend either to seek distraction or perhaps to pray. But prayer, as commonly understood, is a sort of distraction. It speaks of the problem but it invokes someone else and seeks comfort away from the problem—the

problem that is you waiting to be born.

... Problematising becomes prayer when the centre of the problem becomes like the centre of the storm, which is still. And the stillness comes from the unconscious part of ourselves which, successfully evoked, reveals *our* tortured life as simply life. To learn to pray is to learn to suffer as man, not as a tortured parcel of consciousness.

... Sins and problems and all forms of personal anguish ... are symptomatic of the same thing, namely a self that has become dissociated from the wholeness of living.¹¹

If revelation is the showing-forth or unveiling of the transcendent dimension of all reality then contemplation is the sustaining of that perspective, that sense indivisibly of the otherness of God and the glory of the universe. This was epitomised for me long ago in the question of a very unsentimental friend: 'Have you ever felt that the universe is about to dissolve into love?' In thinking of revelation and contemplation we are unavoidably considering a transformation-scene. This has its dangers, including the temptation to stop the world at the high moment, as Peter sought almost comically to do on the mountain-top when Jesus was transfigured. In seeking to hold things at that point of explicit radiance Peter understandably missed the sacramental nature of what was happening. A parallel temptation is to repine when the ordeal which goes along with the transfiguration has to be undergone.

In an article on such a topic in such a magazine it would be odd to say no more about Jesus, who has often been spoken of as the revelation of God and in the contemplation of whom many have found solace and strength. While not wishing to deny that in Jesus something of divinity is disclosed I find myself wondering whether it is not more helpful for most purposes to focus on him as the revelation of humanity, the epitome of what it is to be fully human, insofar as this can ever be said of an individual. In the life and death of Jesus the possibilities of human becoming are changed decisively and for ever.¹² In his baptism he knows from within the true identity of humankind as the sheerly beloved of God, and in the saving events which are at one and the same time his destiny and ours this world-changing consciousness is made available to us. In identification with him we have what has been boldly called emotional equality with God.

Why do I call this identity world-changing? Because the sense of being unconditionally loved by the one who is the mystery of my origin, my destiny and every particular of my life is the unhardening of the heart, the beginning at least of the release of vast energies hitherto engaged in the unregenerate project of keeping my show on the road, or what Ernest Becker would call building against death.¹³ Sebastian Moore offers a hint of the socio-political implication of appropriating this properly human identity when he writes of the poor as 'the forgotten people of my self-securing. ... Jesus, I cannot see you in my wretched

brother until you face me with my own wretchedness, not my sin but my sense of being unlovable that issues in sin'.¹⁴ The content of this is revelatory, the personal appropriation of it contemplative, the outworking to be discovered in the particularities of our distinctive gifts and vocations. Here we have the realisation that what keeps me apart from the poor is precisely the same conditioning that keeps my own fundamental poverty at one remove from me, namely the habit of unredeemed self-securing obstructing growth in that proper self-love which desires and counsels and enables self-gift. No ideological or other moralising can bring me to this point, though it can all too easily induce helpless and hopeless guilt about the poor.

It is only the way of revelation/contemplation that can open this door into a newly vibrant universe where old anchors are no longer in place but it is possible to breathe more easily. It is hardly surprising that when a mediaeval mystic said 'My true I is God' (the obverse of which is 'I and the poor are one') there was considerable alarm among some in authority. Yet there need not be anything dramatic about this recovery or first glimpse of a solidarity in God for which we are clearly made. There is more likely to be a sense of obviousness, of homecoming about it: 'When I am made holy in you', the Vulgate version of Ezekiel has the Lord saying, 'I shall bring the scattered exiles home'.¹⁵ Without the dynamic of revelation/contemplation which is the declaring and the sustaining of the holiness of God in us we are in exile at once from God and from one another, and so from our true home. This is perhaps most true of those in the dire predicament described by R.D. Laing who 'finding nothing in men and women worthy of love, dedicate themselves to the service of humanity. ... nothing can stop them scourging us, undeserving humanity, with their terrible dedication.'¹⁶ Such loveless dedication is even more oppressive when offered in the name of God.

The view that we are to love the unlovable because that is what God does has always seemed to me perverse. It rationalises our unconverted state, projecting onto God our inability to discern beauty, and grounds for wonder, in humanly improbable places. The reason God loves everybody is, quite simply, because everybody is lovable. A variation on the theme is provided by the claim that the fact of being loved by God makes the unlovable worthy of love. This is nonsense, for we also rightly claim that all are made by God, and the making is out of love and for love. Thomas Merton was true to this revelation:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy

existence is a dream. ...

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. ...

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, ... the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they are really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed ... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. But this cannot be seen, only believed and 'understood' by a peculiar gift.

... This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak his name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.¹⁷

Here is the contemplative voice at full throttle, acknowledging that the glory of God whom years earlier he had gone apart to seek, while discernible only by the gift of revelation, is to be found everywhere.

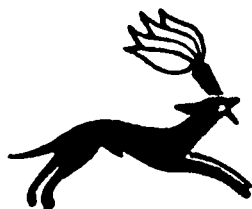
Finally, there is a vigorous tradition which says that we are to hand on to others the fruits of our contemplation. 'Contemplata aliis tradere': we are to be catalysts of revelation to others by way of our contemplation. If there is anything in the suggestion of this article that revelation and contemplation are inseparable in that they are elements in the one process of continuing conversion, then it would seem that we have no option. To the extent that the revelation/contemplation dynamic is operative in our lives we are being changed, as Paul says, from one degree of glory to another.¹⁸ That change cannot but be its own witness, just as authentic love is: there is no need to make a studied decision to hand on what we have contemplated. Indeed such a proposal seems distinctly staid! It should also be said that the very considerable possibilities of self-deception in this sphere need of course to be recognised—but life has a way of finding us out.

The most arresting image I have found for the process this article seeks to describe occurs in a story from the Desert Fathers:

Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph and said: 'Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do?'

The old man, rising, held up his hands against the sky, and his fingers became like ten torches of flame. He said: 'Why not be totally changed into fire?'¹⁹

- 1 John M. Hull, *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness*, London 1990, pp. 22–24.
 - 2 John 9:3.
 - 3 Hull, *opp. cit.*, p. 64.
 - 4 Exodus 3:14.
 - 5 Ezekiel 36:27.
 - 6 John 5:39.
 - 7 cf. *New Blackfriars*, September 1990, pp. 387–390. It is significant that the frightened ones labour to make this shift mean as little as possible.
 - 8 Sebastian Moore and Kevin Maguire, *The Experience of Prayer*, London 1969, p. 11.
 - 9 Margaret Spufford, *Celebration*, London 1989, pp. 92–93.
 - 10 Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator's Alternative to Kohlberg*, New York 1981, *passim*. He uses the phrase 'mystery-encountering' in contrast to 'problem-solving', but the point is the same. A problem looks to a solution rather than to a mystery, and there is unreality in this where the deepest things in life are in play.
 - 11 Sebastian Moore and Kevin Maguire, *The Dreamer Not The Dream : Studies in the Bi-polar Church*, London 1970, pp. 110–111.
 - 12 cf. Nicholas Peter Harvey, *The Morals of Jesus*, in process of publication by Darton, Longman and Todd. London 1991.
 - 13 Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, London 1975, *passim*.
 - 14 Sebastian Moore, *Let This Mind Be In You: The Quest for Identity through Oedipus to Christ*, London 1985, p. 168.
 - 15 Ezekiel 36:23.
 - 16 R.D. Laing, *Sonnets*, London 1979, pp. 54–55.
 - 17 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.
 - 18 II Cor. 3:18.
 - 19 Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*, London 1961, p. 50 (translation slightly altered here).
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