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REVELATION AND INSPIRATION¹

AS THE Ecumenical dialogue goes on it becomes more and more evident that, underlying the debates on the Sacraments, the Ministry, the Church, the question which constantly arises between confessions of the Catholic and of the Protestant type is the question of the exact rôle of the Holy Spirit. Indeed the problem is not discussed only between Catholicism (Roman, Orthodox or Anglican) and Protestantism; but also within Protestantism between divergent tendencies, e.g. the Oxford Group, Pentecostalism, Liberal Theology on the one hand, and Reformed Theology on the other. It is enough to mention these divergencies to cause the actuality and primordial importance of this subject to become manifest.

In a word, the question comes to this. When Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, "He will lead you into all truth", did He mean that the Paraclete would direct the disciples in the course of the ages towards elements of truth "completing" those taught by Christ during His life? That is both the Catholic and the liberal thesis. Or did He mean that the Spirit would clarify for them all the truth which He, Christ, had revealed to them, and which was to be preserved from change in the Bible? That is the Reformed thesis. To make the Reformed doctrine on this subject as clear as possible we shall express it under the form of Propositions.

PROPOSITION I

Revelation is the work of the Word, Second Person in the Trinity, and as such is expressed in clear definite words. It is "verbal". A revealed God is a God who has spoken.

Inspiration, as the name indicates, is the work of the Holy Spirit, Third Person in the Trinity, and is expressed in "groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. viii. 26). It produces sentiments, impressions, ineffable certitudes, which must be translated into ideas by the mind which receives the inspiration. In view of the sinful state of all human faculties this intellectual

¹An article by Prof. Jean de Saussure, appearing in the *Centenaire de la Faculté de Théologie de l'Église Évangélique Libre du Canton de Vaud*, translated with the author's permission by the Editor.

translation cannot be accomplished without a coefficient of error. This inevitable gap between the divine inspiration and its human expression explains the diversities of human beliefs, sin being the cause of variance from individual to individual.

The point is therefore that Revelation and Inspiration should be always distinguished without being absolutely separated, and should be always united without being identified. If we believe in the Trinity we shall easily perceive the reason. We shall recognise in Revelation and Inspiration the action of the same and only God. They are therefore not separable as if they came from two different sources. But we shall discern in Revelation the particular work of the Second Divine Person, the Son, the Word of God; and in Inspiration that of the Third Person, the Holy Spirit. They must not therefore be identified, for the Three Persons of the Trinity, though essentially One, are nevertheless distinct and their respective rôles are distinct. To reduce Revelation to an Inspiration or to make revelations of inspirations amounts in the last analysis to confounding Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Every believer receives inspirations, in prayer it may be, in contemplation and meditation, or even without looking for them. But we all know also how difficult it is for us generally to discern exactly what is God's will for us, what is the precise meaning of these divine suggestions and solicitations, what clear idea we are to make of them. We know also how it is often difficult to distinguish authentic inspirations of God from our personal imaginations or indeed from satanic instigations. For such translation into conscious formulated thoughts, for sorting out what is divine from what is human or demonic, we have only a sinful mind, that is to say a mind subject to error. As we are sinful in different ways we can thus explain the variety of opinions, beliefs and convictions, religious and moral, which nevertheless derive from the same divine source. As, on the other hand, all these products of human reflection on inspirations received from above are the work of fallible minds we can only allow them an optional character, I was going to say evidential, in any case never normative.

If there were nothing in the world but beliefs deduced from inspirations, even authentically divine inspirations, we could not speak of a Revelation even if we could suppose that

exceptional inspired persons had perceived and translated better than the rest of us the ineffable divine suggestions. In reality, between the experience of the bearers of Revelation and that of other believers subject to inspirations there is not merely a difference of degree. There is a difference of nature.

A God Revealed, author of fixed and normative doctrines, is quite different from an inspiring God, source of varied and optional beliefs. A God Revealed is He who has Himself defined Himself by His own Word made flesh, humanly expressed but according to a divine and therefore infallible decree, conferring on that expression His absolute authority. A God defined by men on the ground of ineffable inspirations, in words which vary according to the kind and degree of each man's discernment, cannot, properly speaking, be said to be "Revealed".

Inspiration produces in the first instance effects belonging to the affective or emotional order. It arouses impressions and sentiments which can only be formulated as subjective beliefs, in view of the uncertainty of a double translation. Revelation belongs to "verbal" order. It brings knowledge of God which is objective because communicated by Himself.

PROPOSITION II

The confusion of Revelation with Inspiration leads to Humanism. (I shall as a rule employ this word in preference to Liberalism; in the first place because the latter has only a formal character while Humanism denotes a thought which has a content. Formally in his behaviour an orthodox thinker can be liberal so long as he does not see everything from a purely human point of view as Humanism does. Moreover Humanism is found in all the Christian Confessions in one form or another. Protestant Liberalism represents only one of its manifestations, and it is the principle in its totality that we wish to examine.) Humanism confounds the Biblical doctrines as the Word of God has announced them to the Patriarchs and Prophets and in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ with beliefs such as we have defined in Proposition I, that is to say with the words of men *about* God. In thus relativising their truth, it confers on them an optional character which allows each man to adopt them or emend them or reject them. Thus to reduce Revelation to Inspiration amounts to abolishing Revelation.

I mean by Humanism every religious conception which sees in every thought a product elaborated by the human faculties; which takes the Biblical Revelations for ideas drawn from simple inspirations, and consequently reduces Christ to the rôle of "inspirer", which is that of the Holy Spirit. This Humanism is found in Roman Catholic Modernism, in Anglican liberal Catholicism and in Protestant Liberalism.

The humanist theory is perfectly right in making the religious "truths" of humanity the result of an intellectualisation of religious sentiments aroused by inspirations. Its error is to confound Revelation, a unique fact which has appeared only in Jesus Christ and in those whom He has directly illumined by His Word (the authors of the Old and New Testaments), with Inspiration, a fact common to all believers. Humanist psychology explains quite correctly the formation of natural beliefs, i.e. religious convictions due to the elaboration of religious sentiments by the natural intelligence of man, but it does not touch the genesis of the Biblical doctrines produced by the supernatural revelation of divine truths to the minds of certain men who have been accosted by Christ, the Word of God.¹

Beliefs formed as Humanism indicates are of a speculative order, since they are due to reflection, to intellectual speculation on the data of the religious sentiment. *Doctrines* are of a canonical order, since they express what ought to be believed on the authority of God, which is infallible and absolute rule (canon) for our faith whether we can understand it or not, express it or not. Though beliefs and doctrines are expressed in words of one human vocabulary, so much so that in studying their formulæ one can easily confuse them, their genesis and character are totally different. So long as Humanism limits itself to explaining the formation of human beliefs its work is legitimate, for they abound even in Christian minds, and we willingly admit that its theory is correct. But insofar as it identifies the Biblical doctrines with such beliefs and imputes them to the human reflection of the sacred authors upon impressions they had received from God or Jesus, Humanism confounds Revelation and Inspiration. It reduces the Biblical Revelation to a series of inspirations, humanly expressed and formulated variously and sometimes even contradictorily, according to the philosophy of each writer. It puts the unique Gospel of Christ, Word of God,

¹Cf. A. Lecerf, *De la Nature de la Connaissance Religieuse*, pp. 38-42.

upon the same level as human religions; even if it puts it at the top, it makes it of the same order. In other words it denies that there has been Revelation properly speaking. Inasmuch as it pretends to apply its psychological explanations to the unique divine miraculous, i.e. inexplicable, fact of the Biblical Revelation, we must reject it.

To show that we are not inventing, let us cite, as one example in a thousand, this passage from the Report on *Doctrine in the Church of England*:

Nothing can be discovered by man about God apart from the revelation of Himself by God to man; *nor can anything be effectively revealed by God to man apart from an activity of human reason in apprehending it.*¹ But a distinction may be drawn: (1) There is a factor in our knowledge of God due to reflection on the general nature of experience (though this reflection, so far as it leads to knowledge, must itself be recognised as implying the prevenience of the divine action and the illumination of the human mind by God). (2) There is also a factor due to the apprehension of individual historical facts through which God reveals Himself to man in a special manner or degree (p. 44).

In addition to the phrase which I have italicised and which denotes an obvious rationalism, let us observe the words "knowledge of God due to reflection on the general nature of experience", "apprehension of historical facts", "illumination of the mind", which clearly prove that in speaking of Revelation nothing is really meant but an Inspiration which can only produce a truth by means of an elaboration by the human faculties. And it is not the genesis of mere religious opinions that is being thus described, it is that of "the body of Christian Doctrine".

As for us, we shall reason quite simply in the opposite way from Humanism. Because the Logos of the Alexandrian philosophers is found in St. John, and the idea of expiation professed by many a pagan religion is found in St. Paul, Humanism sees in the Apostles nothing but human philosophy which must be purged out of their writings in order to find the "pure Gospel". On the contrary, since the doctrines of the Logos and of expiation are found in the Word of God and are therefore revealed as agreeable to the divine reality, we recognise on these points in Hellenistic philosophy or in such and such pagan religion a spark of divine truth springing up amidst the religious errors in which these systems abound. We can only know that there is some divine truth in these Greek theories or

¹This "God cannot" recalls painfully the *ἀδυνατόν εἶναι* of an Apollinarius or a Nestorius. Age after age this expression reappears as the Shibboleth of the heresiarchs. And it insinuates itself even into the semi-rationalism which is Romanism.

these pagan ideas so far as we see them ratified by the Word of God. In the absence of this criterion we can only put a large question-mark at all human beliefs. But by the Word of God illumined for us by the Holy Spirit, in other words as "spiritual", we can "judge" all the religious opinions of humanity.

The point is we must always add a reservation which was very properly expressed by an Orthodox delegate at the Edinburgh Conference apropos of the Nicene Symbol and the theology of the Greek Fathers. It would be a grave error, he remarked, to think that these doctors of the Early Church simply adopted the notions which they met with in Greek philosophy in order to express their Christian theology. Speaking Greek to a public of Hellenic culture, they were indeed obliged to use Greek *terms*. But if their thought is studied more closely it is clear that they did not do this without infusing into these words a *new* content. That is what Christian thought has had to do in every age and within every civilisation—to take over as well as possible words known to the circle to which it was speaking to make these people grasp another meaning than that which these words had hitherto conveyed. That is what God had to do in Jesus Christ: to accommodate Himself to human speech to make man grasp another truth than human truth, the truth "which has not entered into the heart of man" (1 Cor. ii. 9), divine truth.

It is therefore too naïve to assume a Hellenistic content under a Greek envelope or to infer from their use of Greek words the adoption of Greek philosophy by the Christian teachers. Looked at externally we can hardly avoid judging in this way because of the verbal analogies. But studied from within we discover differences of thought hidden beneath identity of words.

Now Humanism shares in this naïvety when it denounces in the "theology" of St. John or in the "metaphysics" of Nicaea the transformation—it would gladly say deformation—of the pure Gospel into a Greek philosophy which has nothing more to do with our faith. It does so because, anxious for a pretended scientific objectivity, it approaches these subjects from without. Here we find a particular case of the confusion just described between doctrines and beliefs; and Humanism falls into this confusion because it keeps to the surface of verbal analogies. It proceeds as an historian would do who about the

year 2000 should observe that round about 1940 the word "spiritual" was very fashionable in the European world—"spiritual values", etc.—and should conclude that at that period Christianity had covered the pure Gospel with a "spiritualist garment" because we also use the word spiritual. He would have simply forgotten to go a little deeper than identity of words and so to discover that when the world to-day says "spiritual" it means at bottom "cultural" and denotes the product of the human mind; whereas when authentic Christianity says "spiritual" it means uniquely the product of the divine Spirit, the Holy Spirit. By the same term entirely different realities are meant; and in saying "spiritual" in the Christian sense of the word the Church to-day remains perfectly loyal to the primitive Gospel, even though it *seems* to adopt notions from the philosophy actually in vogue. Similarly when St. John and the Early Fathers employ the same word as the Alexandrian philosophers in speaking of the Logos, they infuse into it an entirely different meaning, so that they remain faithful to the Gospel though they *seem* to adopt the concepts of Alexandrian philosophy. They spoke like the Greeks, but they thought like the Gospel.

PROPOSITION III

The confusion of Inspiration with Revelation, the inverse of the preceding confusion, leads to Illuminism. Illuminism confers on the ideas by which the believer expresses the inspirations he has received the dignity of revealed truths. It forgets the inevitable gap which separates the originally experienced sentiment from its intellectual expression, and the human and defective character of every elaboration of this kind. It takes the words of men about God for the Words of God. It transforms Inspiration into Revelation. This confusion extends indefinitely the domain of Revelation and makes the latter contradictory, in view of the diversity of beliefs which it erects into doctrines. It raises to the rank of divine truths all sorts of ideas alien to the Gospel or even contrary to it.

I classify under the name of Illuminism every religious conception which takes ideas drawn from inspirations for revelations, and thus attributes to the Holy Spirit the rôle of Revealer which belongs only to Christ. For Illuminism Revelation is added to from century to century. The Spirit communicates to us little by little truths which, on this showing, Christ

could not or would not teach us in the course of His earthly ministry, truths which progressively complete His Gospel.

Illuminism presents itself essentially under two forms: the collective form controlled by the Church which we find in Catholicism; and the individualist form which we meet with in Protestantism. The latter naturally reflects all the variety of individualities from the most serious to the quite perverse. It is under this individualist form naturally that Illuminism produces its extreme fruits since its tendency is restrained by no control. Let us then begin with this form. That will help us to unveil later the Illuminism which lurks under other more moderate forms.

Since the Reformation Illuminism has appeared in Anabaptism, just as from the Apostolic age it lifted itself up in pneumatism. As M. Courvoisier writes:

Anabaptism is an excrescence of spiritualism [the religion of the spirit, of the pretended Holy Spirit]. It is not without importance to note that its first appearance occurred at Zurich, where the most spiritualist of the reformers, Zwingli, exercised his ministry. . . . To affirm without ceasing the primacy of the Spirit and its entire independence of all the material means of expression was to run the risk that excited people and people without education would travesty the original thought that it was desired to utter. [Then] it is at Strasbourg at the moment when Bucer and Capito turned towards Zwingli and adopted a theology of Zwinglian tendency that the Anabaptists find from them a welcome certainly less hostile than anywhere else.¹

Capito allowed himself to be seduced.

For Capito the interior word is preferred to the exterior word [the Bible]. The Spirit acts immediately, the Biblical word mediately. The Bible provides only *notitia operum Dei*, the Spirit alone leads to a profounder knowledge.²

The result was not long in appearing among the Anabaptists as among the Pneumatikoi and the Gnostics. When the Spirit has been detached from Scripture certain people draw the conclusion in the sixteenth as in the second century (and this conclusion is frequent in the history of spiritualism) "that the children of God ought not to be anxious to restrain the lusts of the flesh but ought to follow the Spirit as leader under whose direction one cannot go astray". Since matter did not count for the spiritualists, "let a man put off, say they, every frivolous fear and boldly follow the Spirit who will demand nothing evil provided one give oneself entirely to His guidance". That is what the Spirit can be made to say when attention is no longer given to what He says in the Scripture.

¹*La notion d'Église chez Bucer*, p. 8.

²*Ibid.*, p. 14, n. 2.

Another example more recent and infinitely more respectable: the Quakers. Before making any criticism of them I must express my profound admiration for them and better still the veritable affection I feel towards the three great souls of their number whom it has been given me to meet. But all that cannot prevent me from regretting that their "inner light" has revealed to them, for example, that the practice of the Sacraments instituted by Christ is not indispensable for those who live by their spiritual substance. No doubt in their remarkable respect for Christian liberty they do not prevent those of their members who desire to communicate. But one realises that in their eyes a Christian who knows how to do without these exterior forms in order to retain only the inward reality is more advanced than those who dally with material sacraments. When the Spirit reveals such things to Christians and incites them "to leave Scripture" and "imagine I know not what way of reaching God", I cannot but with Calvin ask them :

Who is this Spirit by whose inspiration they are caught up so high that they dare to despise the whole doctrine of Scripture as puerile and beggarly? If they answer that it is the Spirit of Christ . . . I think they will concede that the Apostles and believers of the primitive Church were inspired by the Spirit of Christ. Now none of them, even so, learned to despise the word of God (*Inst.* I. ix).

We must conclude one way or the other: *either* the Spirit of Christ who has spoken certain things to the Apostles and now tells us the opposite contradicts Himself; which is inconceivable; *or* this spirit who tells us other things than the Spirit of Christ is none of His. Then a Christian must reject him, or if he follows, renounce the name of Christian in the proper sense of the word.

Authentic believers therefore "recognise no other spirit than Him who dwelt in the Apostles and spoke by their mouth, by whom they are always brought to give audience to the Word". Indeed:

In promising His Spirit of what kind did Christ announce that He should be? He would not speak of Himself (John xvi. 13), but would suggest to the understanding of the Apostles that which He had Himself taught them by His word. Thus it is not the office of the Holy Spirit, as promised to us, to dream of new revelations unknown before, or to invent a new kind of doctrine to draw us away from the doctrine of the Gospel when we have once received it; but rather to seal and confirm in our hearts the doctrine dispensed to us in the Gospel. . . . If any Spirit, abandoning the wisdom contained in the word of God, bring us diverse doctrine it must be rightly suspected of vanity and lying. How could it be otherwise? Since it can happen that Satan transfigures himself into an angel of light, what authority will the Spirit have towards us if he is not noted

by a very certain mark [that is to say the text of Scripture]? . . . The Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture. He cannot be variable or unlike Himself. . . . God has not communicated a word to men which He wished to abolish straight away by the advent of His Spirit. Rather He has sent His Spirit by Whose divine power He had dispensed His Word to finish His work therein by confirming it efficaciously (Calvin, *Inst.* I. ix).

Alluding to the same example which we are citing here Professor Lecerf wrote:

We must be careful not to confound the testimony of the Holy Spirit, as Calvin understands it, with the 'inner word' of the Quakers even when they are evangelical. For Calvin it is in the Scripture that the Holy Spirit speaks. . . . Recall that the Holy Spirit promised by Christ to His disciples does not speak of Himself.¹

If, among the Quakers, the inner light is opposed to the Scripture text, in the Oxford Group recourse is often had to "directions" revealed during the "quiet time" rather than to indications of the Bible. "God has told me": such is the phrase one hears unceasingly or at least used to hear. For it seems, happily, that certain abuses have counselled increasing prudence in the adherents of this practice. So to express oneself is to telescope the facts. It is to forget that between the divine inspiration (of which I do not deny the authenticity) and the formulation of it there has been elaboration; elaboration of an ineffable impression into a clear idea; elaboration by our human, that is, sinful, mind which cannot but produce a result always more or less inadequate to the original datum. The Groupers forget or at least do not take sufficiently seriously the inevitable gap between the divine inspiration and the formula which they derive from it. So doing they constantly attribute to God the products of their human reflections. They transform their inspirations, which I do not contest, into revelations, which is a grave error.

Before the dangers of this proceeding, which appeared very soon—I could cite distressing cases as well as comic ones—the Groups have come more and more to institute a control over "directions" received by individuals. That brings us to the collective form of Illuminism, and we shall go directly to its most finished form which we find in Catholicism.²

¹*Bulletin de la Société Calviniste*, Novembre 1927, p. 18.

²The relationship of Illuminism and Catholicism in this respect did not escape Calvin. "However different this sect [i.e. the Libertines] may be from the Papists, and it is a hundred times worse and more pernicious, nevertheless both have this principle in common, to transfigure Scripture into allegory and to affect a greater and more perfect wisdom than we have there" (*Traité Contre la Secte phantastique et furieuse des Libertins qui se nomment spirituelz*).

Catholicism admits squarely that the Bible is not sufficient and must be "completed" by tradition. If Orthodox Catholicism takes a pretty static view of tradition, Roman Catholicism gives it a dynamic character, especially since its apologists have applied in this field the evolutionism of the nineteenth century. According to Romanism the Holy Spirit reveals to the Church, little by little, developments of the truth which the Gospel contains only in germ, *in nuce*. But Rome has fully perceived the danger of leaving these revelations to individual fantasy. She has more and more subjected them to the control of the clergy, itself more and more controlled by the Papacy. In short, Rome has been able in some measure by the dogma of papal infallibility to curb the aberrations that are natural to every pretended progressive revelation. I say "curb", not "avoid". Far from it. If in form and principle there is nothing more autocratic than the Roman magisterial office, in practice in their origin and content there is nothing more demagogic than some of the "truths" which it defines (e.g. cult of the Sacred Heart, justification of amulets, progressive development of the cult of images, etc.). M. l'Abbé Journet has maintained, not without reason in the case of certain liberal circles, that for the Protestant truth is what pleases himself.

Until Protestantism it was said: truth expresses that which is. Protestantism will say: truth expresses that which pleases. To be able to deny supernatural mysteries—the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Church, the Sacraments, Grace, Hell, etc.—Protestantism has had to resolve itself tacitly at first, then more and more openly, into the doctrine which pleases . . . We have tried to mark the fundamental tendencies of this pseudo-evangelism: the tendency to define truth by that which pleases.¹

We could with no less reason affirm that for Rome truth is what pleases the masses.

In spite of all, I do not hesitate to say that if I had to choose between Catholic Illuminism, at least controlled by the age-long experience of the Church, and the Illuminism falsely called Protestant but more properly called spiritualist (because it is really a different type of religion), I should choose the former because it is at least armed against individual fancies and protects us against their graver aberrations. But if one goes to the bottom of things one must recognise that all forms of Illuminism, Catholic as well as "Protestant", collective as well as individualistic, controlled as well as libertine, partake in the same error which

¹Journet, *L'esprit du protestantisme en Suisse*.

consists in confusing Inspiration with Revelation, and in attributing to the Holy Spirit the announcement of new truths. Before this false interpretation of the famous text, "He will lead you into all truth", we realise how important it is never to separate it from that other word of Jesus: "He shall bring all things to your remembrance whatsoever I have said unto you." If the first of these phrases, taken in isolation, can be interpreted in the two manners mentioned at the beginning of this study, the second fixes quite clearly which of the two exegeses is the correct one, and proves that the rôle of the Holy Spirit is to clarify for us all the truth announced by Jesus and not to add other truths thereto. And is not that further confirmed by this third declaration of Christ?—"He shall not speak of Himself but whatsoever He shall hear that shall He speak . . . He shall take of mine and shew it unto you".

That these precise declarations and precautions of our Lord were not useless Calvin bade Sadolet observe, and that in regard to Catholicism as well as to Anabaptism. These two, as we have seen in connection with Libertinism, only represent two faces of one error. Calvin noticed that too.

The Lord [he wrote], foreseeing how dangerous it would be to vaunt oneself of the Spirit without the word, affirmed certainly that the Church was governed and administered by the Holy Spirit. But in order that that administration should be certain, stable and unmovable, He joined it to and allied it with that same word of His. That is what the Lord cries: those are of God who hear the word of God: those are His sheep who recognise his voice as that of their shepherd, rejecting every other voice as that of a stranger. . . . Chrysostom has therefore given wise advice to reject all those who under the name of the Spirit would draw us away from simple evangelical doctrine. Because the Spirit was promised not to stir up some new doctrine but to write the truth of the Gospel in the hearts of men. To-day assuredly we know by experience how necessary is this admonition. We are opposed by two sects which seem to be very different. For in what do the Pope and the Anabaptists agree? And yet . . . both have one same weapon with which they try to oppress us. For when they thus boast themselves as having the Spirit they tend to nothing else than to suppress and bury the Word of God and to give place to their own lies. And you, Sadolet, stumbling at the threshold, have been punished for the injury you have done to the Holy Spirit by separating Him and dividing Him from the Word. For you are reduced to the dilemma: which is more suitable, to follow the authority of the Church or to listen to those whom you call inventors of new doctrines? If you had known that the Spirit enlightens the Church in order to open the understanding of the Word, and that the Word is as the touchstone wherewith gold is tried, to judge all doctrines, would you have escaped so involved and spikey a difficulty? Learn then from your fault that it is not less unendurable to boast oneself of the Spirit without the Word than it is hopeless to put forward the Word without the Spirit.¹

¹Calvin, *Letter to Sadolet*.