

REVELATION AND VATICAN II

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) is logically the first of the conciliar decrees of Vatican II; it is the most fundamental, and therefore the most important, at least from a theoretical point of view. No-one, I should imagine, would rank it before the Constitution on the Church in profundity and in breadth of scope. It might well be wondered, also, whether its practical importance ranks very high. The immediate importance and the practical impact of other conciliar documents, such as the constitution on the Church, or the decrees on liturgy and on ecumenism are much more easily realised. It is difficult to appreciate the importance of *Dei Verbum*, partly because we take so much for granted the common teaching on Revelation, and are perhaps little aware of the enormous problems involved; and partly because it reads as something extremely familiar, not to say platitudinous. This is to some extent true of all the documents, as it is so often true of papal encyclicals and other magisterial statements. Of their very nature they arouse in us the reaction: 'We have heard it all before,' or, 'What is so earth-shaking about that?' It would seem that with all these documents it is necessary to become aware of pre-suppositions, implications and consequences, which are rarely apparent in the texts themselves. This is especially true, at least for many of us, in the case of this decree on Revelation.

The very history of the producing of this decree should make us hesitate to put it aside as a rather platitudinous repetition of a well known doctrine. The rejection of its first draft, on November 20th 1962 was a turning point in the Council, and even sober historians of the future will undoubtedly regard it as an event which changed the face of the Church. But the implications of the rejection of the schema *De Fontibus Revelationis*, for the future progress of the Council are not our concern here. The reason why I mention this event is to underline that the document finally promulgated has a very different approach from the one originally proposed, which without question was intended to be a reaffirmation of the standard text book treatment of such questions as revelation and tradition, inspiration, inerrancy and principles of interpretation.

It is not difficult to understand why this particular schema changed the whole direction of the Council. In spite of Pope John's declared intention for the Council, it was almost inevitable that in the minds of those entrusted with its preparation there was the conviction that the Council was to be a solemn endorsement of traditional doctrines in stereotyped formulations which seemed the only possible ones, and

which indeed were the only ones with which the controlling personnel were thoroughly conversant. Moreover, it seemed particularly necessary that this should be so in matters relating to the Scriptures. It was precisely here, and only here, that Catholic theology had been affected by the considerable changes which had taken place in the world at large. Here was the Achilles heel, it seemed to those genuinely fearful of the onslaught of the world against the citadel of the Church. It is clear from the preliminary campaign that this was realised. The attack launched against the Biblical Institute in December 1960 was virulent, and downright sordid. This underlines once more the strong conviction that this question of Divine Revelation was vital, and had the gravest implications for everything the Council might be expected to do. Perhaps the one matter of surprise to those less familiar with the dour determination of the opposition to modern Biblical studies, was the clear rejection of Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante*, which to the more simple, had seemed to settle many of the difficulties. But in all fairness it must be recognised that the impetus it had given to Biblical Studies had tended to shake the whole edifice of theology. It had already led to a liturgical revival, which itself was not without its threat to the post-Tridentine Theology regarded, somewhat over optimistically, as traditional. The question therefore, of whether the Council was to be a solemn reaffirmation of this theology along with a nipping in the bud of incipient deviations, or on the contrary a reorientation in the light of modern problems, largely depended upon the outcome of the discussion on Revelation.

The importance therefore of *Dei Verbum* should not be underestimated; and if it would seem to be on first reading somewhat dull, somewhat unspectacular, we should at least suspect, in view of its history, that there is more to be found there than first meets the eye. But it is impossible to discuss the whole of this decree in one short article; neither would a mere summary of its contents serve any useful purpose. What I intend to do is simply to offer some reflections on Chapter I.

Within Christianity the crisis of today lies fundamentally in the question concerning Revelation.

The Christian Gospel is losing its appeal; it is having less impact; the world is becoming increasingly indifferent to it. Why is this? The gospel remains the same; but the world to which it is preached has changed with incredible rapidity. Especially in the west it can be said that never has there been such a rapid development in certain spheres of knowledge and consequently so rapid a change in social structures.

An increasing awareness of this has led to a deep questioning within the hearts of sincere Christian preachers. Has the Gospel any relevance today? Has it any intelligible message? Can it continue to be good news? It strikes me as strange when one considers that we are the greatest Christian Church in the world, that we should perhaps have been least preoccupied with this problem so far, though the Council certainly showed signs of realising it. Theologians of other Christian Churches have certainly showed a deep awareness of the challenge to be met, and however radical and indeed fantastic their attempts to meet it may seem, we should bear in mind the incontrovertible fact that they are spurred on by a deep desire to preserve the redeeming power of the Gospel and make it efficacious.

Possibly the first sign for many of what is afoot was the appearance of the Bishop of Woolwich's *Honest to God*, with all the sensational journalism attending it. But as Dr. Robinson himself points out, this short book is simply the popularising of a considerable amount of serious theological thought, over a considerable period. This theological discussion cannot perhaps be said to have started with Bultmann, but his proposal, made in 1941, that the New Testament be demythologised and interpreted in terms of Heideggerian existentialism was of tremendous significance, and much of the later development stems from this. The influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred by the Nazis in 1945, has only made itself felt latterly, for many, by way of Robinson, but already before the end of the last war he was maintaining that 'Honesty demands that we recognise that we must live in the world as if there were no God'. This line of thought has been pursued by various theologians, and in very recent days seems to be becoming prominent in the U.S.A. One of the latest books is surely soon to provide journalists over here with headlines comparable to those which announced *Honest to God*. I refer to Altizer & Hamilton's, *The Death of God*. Their poet might well be Blake:

Thou art a Man, God is no more,
Thine own Humanity learn to adore.

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Tho' thou art worshipped by the Names Divine
of Jesus and Jehovah, thou art still
The Son of Man in weary Night's decline
The lost traveller's dream under the hill.

What are the basic assumptions of this search for a secular Christianity, a religionless Christianity, or indeed a Christianity without God? Doubtless I oversimplify here, but it might be useful to list a number of suppositions:—

1. That the traditional Christian message (and here I mean the whole Christian Revelation as read in both Old and New Testaments and expounded within the Church) is failing to maintain its impact.
2. That it is no longer intelligible: in fact it is absolutely incomprehensible to modern man: man 'who has come of age'. To quote Paul van Buren: 'That which cannot be conceived in terms of man and the world explored by the natural sciences is simply without interest because it is not "real".' (*The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, p.5) Or again: 'The whole tenor of thought of our world today makes the biblical and classical formulations of this Gospel unintelligible.' (ibid. p.6).
3. Man's search for salvation is a search for his 'authentic existence', and the only satisfying discovery is a true self-understanding, namely in terms of man's experience of himself, his fellows and the world in which he lives. 'The mythological view of the world has gone, and with it went the possibility of speaking seriously of a *Heilsgeschichte*: a historical 'drama of salvation', in which God is said to have acted at a certain time in this world to change the state of human affairs'. (ibid. pp. 11-12).
4. If we are to take seriously the Christian statement that God wills that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth we must take equally seriously the implications of this, namely that God must make available to *all* men the possibility of being saved. But the traditional Christian Gospel can only explain this by inconsistencies which make it self-contradictory.

It may at this point seem to some that I am concerning myself with lines of thought and preoccupations with which Catholics have nothing in common. Of course it is perfectly true that this 'Death of God' theology strikes us as so extreme and so totally alien to our own way of thinking as hardly to merit our consideration. But there are signs of our own preoccupations, and our own slight stirrings in this direction. We cannot, I hope, altogether avoid the same preoccupations. The Church and her theologians have always had them: they are not new; but do not let this fact lead us to complacency. Certain age-old problems are striking us with a new force. Thus there is an altogether greater preoccupation, in face of the indifferent

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millions, with the problem of God's universal salvific will: the problem of sufficient grace, the problem of Grace and Nature. It is no accident that Teilhard de Chardin is regarded by many as immensely important. We are concerned as never before with the need for the Christian to be truly involved in this world: to be wholly committed to concern for his brethren, for the full implications of the Incarnation to be spelt out, as it were. We are greatly concerned about the intelligibility of the Gospel, and are beginning to wonder whether the biblical revelation can possibly mean anything to the 'man in the street'. It strikes me as somewhat ironical that at a time when, slowly and reluctantly, the biblical revival is penetrating the indifference or hostility of many Catholics, clerical and lay, it should be showing signs of having quickly spent itself among the select and precocious few. Even Catholic Christianity shows signs of becoming synonymous with loving service to the community.

Perhaps these problems seem very unreal. They are not; and moreover they will loom larger in the near future. And it is because of this, that the decree on Revelation is so important. It reaffirms traditional Catholic doctrine, but in a way which shows awareness of the problems facing the theologian, and therefore the preacher of the gospel too, in the present time. It would of course be foolish to expect the decree to produce ready made solutions. That is our task; but we must be grateful for the guide-lines which it gives us, and the encouraging awareness it shows of our difficulties.

The Council was well aware that the widespread ignorance of Divine Revelation and the growing indifference to it, present us all the more urgently with the problem of God's universal salvific will. In face of the facts of experience on the one hand, and our belief that God wills the salvation of all men, on the other, must we not modify radically our notion of salvation being attained through the obedient hearing of God's word, spoken through the prophets and in these last days, in the Son? In the days of a more flourishing Christian practice, and optimistic missionary endeavours, it was easier to think that the Gospel would soon be preached to the ends of the earth, and that unbelievers within the Christian world stood condemned because of their wilful blindness. If there is no other name under heaven whereby we may be saved, except the name of Jesus: 'For of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved' (Acts 4, 12), then it would seem easy enough to understand the absolute need for the Christian Gospel, and its saving character. By the same token the need for the Christian Church, and the biblical character of its message seemed obvious.

It is true, on the other hand, that the Church was never unaware of the problem presented by ignorance and unbelief, and it is not surprising that this was faced at Vatican I, since the problem was by 1870 already becoming urgent enough. Precisely because the problem has increased until we are almost overwhelmed by it, *Dei Verbum* endorses the teaching of Vatican I that God gives an enduring witness to himself in the 'created realities' (§ 3). And in § 6 the constitution quotes Vatican I to the effect that God can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason. It seems somewhat strange that the decree returns to this point here, after already having made it. But the council is evidently determined to underline the possibility of 'natural revelation', though these actual terms are not used. There has been a tendency to underestimate the teaching of Vatican I on this subject, and the Protestant theologian Barth, who has had considerable influence on Christian theology explicitly rejects it. We are therefore reminded once more, that in spite of the many difficulties it raises, we must not call in question the possibility of man's acknowledging God without benefit of the Christian Gospel. And in this we must seek the solution to the problem of salvation of a world largely ignorant of the Gospel.

The Council was indeed distinguished throughout, by its respect for the dignity of man as the crown of God's creation. Never before has the Church given such explicit witness to the greatness of man by virtue of his human nature, and this is brought out in other decrees, such as *The Church in the Modern World* § 13. And the Council refused continual appeals to issue any direct condemnation of Atheism, not only because it wished to avoid a condemnatory tone, but also because of the realisation that this term can in practice be ambiguous.

The consciousness of the ignorance and indifference of the world has led to a new realisation of the problem of the knowledge—the obedient knowledge—of God. The council's reaffirmation of its possibility by the light of human reason is therefore the more reassuring. But does it not at the same time make it more difficult to maintain the existence of a special and supernatural revelation, given to the chosen people of God and offered to the world through the Scriptures expounded in the Church? Is there any absolute need of this? Is not, indeed, that which we call supernatural revelation, simply man's knowledge of God, through created reality seen by the light of reason, and expressed in terms peculiar to a determined historical existence? The question becomes the more pressing, the more we are conscious of another factor which to many seems evident: namely that this determined historical expression of man's knowledge of

God is no longer intelligible, because the determined historical existence of man today is so radically different. To put the question more simply: Is there any real distinction between what we are accustomed to call Natural and Supernatural Revelation? It seems only logical to go further and question the validity of the usual Christian claim to possess the sole, and final revelation, which is of permanent value. It would seem that the logical end of this line of thinking, is to abandon the traditional Christian Gospel, in favour of a new start, a new search for God which in the intelligible thought of today would rather be a new search for an authentic human existence, expressed in the language of the 'secular man,' living in this very 'secular' world.

These are difficult questions, and they must be taken seriously. Not only are they questions which come to us from the world outside the Church; they are questions which in some degree rise up within ourselves, since we too are men of this world. If we are both children of this scientific and technological age, and believers in a biblical and sacramental religion then we cannot avoid such questioning, however faint, however unprecise it may be. The anti-biblical and anti-sacramental stirrings within the Church and within ourselves should neither surprise nor shock us. Such an awareness should, however, lead us to appreciate the guidance and the support which this constitution gives when it reaffirms the need and the existence of a special and supernatural revelation. The decree does in fact restrict the term 'revelation' to this *further* action (*insuper*) of God when, after creating man He from the start manifested Himself to our first parents. Ceaselessly keeping the human race in His care, He in due time called Abraham, and through Moses and the prophets taught this chosen people, until finally and definitively He revealed Himself by sending His Son, the eternal Word (§§3-4). Thus, 'Through divine revelation God chose to show forth and communicate *Himself* and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men': thus sharing 'these divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind' (§6). It is by this revelation that 'The deepest (*intima*) truth about God and the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ' (§2).

Clearly therefore the Council reaffirms the existence of a divine revelation which gives us knowledge of truths transcending human reason. And in reaffirming this the Council reiterates that God chose a people to be His special possession, in order to make this special revelation. The exclusiveness and perfection of the Christian Revelation is further maintained by the statement that no new public revelation is to be awaited. It is interesting to note, that in the 1963 draft the

preoccupation behind this is made clear by the sentence, subsequently omitted: *Quare Christianismus non est tantum aetas quaedam transitoria historiae religiosae humanitatis, sed omnino novissima et definitiva.*

Thanks therefore to this decree it is clear that the problem of the seeming irrelevance and unintelligibility of the Christian gospel cannot be solved by so great a stress on man's self-understanding whereby he may discover God, that it replaces divine revelation, or so becomes synonymous with it as to reduce it to the same status.

In §2 we are told that Revelation is realised by deeds and words 'having an inner unity': *gestis verbisque intrinsecus inter se connexis*. On the other hand in §3, after mentioning the call of Abraham, 'In order that he might make him into a great nation', the decree simply mentions that God *taught* this nation certain truths about Himself, through Moses and the prophets. Probably therefore the accent still is, as in theological discussions about Revelation, on the words or teaching, of God, rather than on the deeds. These deeds are said to manifest and confirm the *teaching*, whilst the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. When, moreover, the decree in §4 speaks of Divine Revelation through the Son, the eternal Word, it refers first to Christ's words, whereby he told them the innermost realities about God. But it does mention his deeds also (cf. §§14:17).

The paragraph on the obedience of faith is very important, since it emphasises a truth of our creed which has been overshadowed in our excessive intellectualising of the faith. For instance there has been, at least until recently, the tendency to question the 'good faith' of those who decline to believe, after the truths of faith have been presented to them. How often has this been our attitude when instructing converts, for instance, or when discussing non-Catholic Christians? We as it were *prove* the truths, rather like demonstrating theorems in geometry, and confidently expect our pupils to be forthwith converted. This paragraph makes it clear that in spite of all our instruction, there has in fact been no revelation unless our hearer 'entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals', and 'freely assenting to the truth revealed by him.' This he cannot do without the grace of God.

Note that the direct object of faith is God Himself; faith is an entrusting of oneself to God, a movement of the heart turning to God. It is true that the decree here speaks of God as the God who reveals, and speaks of the assent to the revelation given by Him. Moreover it mentions 'the joy and ease (*suavitatem*)' given to everyone assenting to the *truth* and believing it. But one wonders whether there is here a partial solution to the problem concerning the salvation of those

who have not heard the gospel, or indeed who reject it. What distinction is to be made between Revelation as it is formulated in human terms, and 'God who reveals' or 'the truth'? Can it not be said that a man has saving faith who commits himself to God insofar as he commits himself wholly to what he knows as truth, genuineness, reality? In §2 the decree speaks of God revealing Himself and the sacrament of His will (cf Eph. 1, 9). Is not the word 'and' epexegetic and could not we say that revelation is the 'sacrament' of God?

The last sentence of §5 is very important, because it reminds us that our faith is constantly to be perfected by the gifts of the Spirit, in order to attain a deeper understanding of revelation. We are inclined to think that 'we have the faith', when what we ought to say is rather that we give a certain assent to a collection of doctrinal statements. If this is so, then we take for granted this gift of faith, and see no need for the constant and humble meditation on divine revelation in the Scriptures. It is precisely for the perfecting of our faith that the concluding chapter of the decree urges so strongly the constant reading of the word of God.

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BOOK REVIEW

Yves M.-J. Congar, *Dialogue Between Christians* Tr. Philip Loretz. Geoffrey Chapman, London-Dublin 1966. pp. 472, 508.

This is a translation of Congar's *Chrétiens en dialogue* which was published in 1964 as the fiftieth in the *Unam Sanctum* series. In a sense the book is not new, since it is a collection of articles on ecumenical subjects written by Father Congar between 1935 and 1963. This collection of articles is far from exhaustive; it would take several volumes to republish all the author's articles on ecumenism. But the book does offer a fairly representative selection of what he has published on this subject since his *Chrétiens désunis*, published in 1937 as the first volume of the *Unam Sanctum* series.

Moreover, the preface of this book, specially written for it, is a fifty-page autobiographical sketch, recounting the origins and development of Father Congar's vocation to ecumenical work, his theological contribution and the vicissitudes he has passed through in his work for ecumenism. One's eye is inevitably caught by his reference to England, "I like England even though I get bored there fairly soon", which is a reaction anyone who has lived in France will appreciate. There are also hints that Father Congar's work has been welcomed more by Anglicans than by English Catholics, and it is to be hoped today this is no longer so.

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The articles collected here fall into six groups. The first of these is entitled 'The Ecumenical Movement and its Work' and it contains four articles, the first of which was written in 1947, and deals with the Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Movement on the eve of the Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Reading this essay twenty years after it was written arouses various reactions. It is astonishing to read that publication of the original article was forbidden: the change of atmosphere in the Church's attitude to ecumenism, as expressed today in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, is apparent. At the same time one is impressed by Father Congar's treatment of his subject, given the situation at the time he wrote.

The second section, "Some Ecumenical Studies", has a useful survey of the changing forms of encounter between Christian confessions since the Reformation. The next four sections deal with Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Protestantism and Israel in that order. English Catholics tend to be suspicious of French approaches to Anglicanism, so it is worth pointing out that the article on Anglicanism is a balanced one, and not unduly preoccupied with the Anglo-catholic side.

As one would expect, the section on Protestantism is the largest in the book; the ten articles include two studies of Luther, one on his Christology and the other on Catholic works on Luther. There is also 'A Letter on Religious Liberty with Reference to the Position of Protestants in Spain', written in 1948. In a note the author observes that the position now (1963) is not the same as in 1948, but it may be noted here that at the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting at Enugu in Nigeria early in 1965, it was said that the situation of Spanish Protestants, after a short period of improvement, had deteriorated. The final article is a most interesting assessment of what religious significance, if any, is to be attributed to the state of Israel.

It is fair to say that Catholic ecumenical theology began with '*Chrétiens désunis*' in 1937, and we may perhaps hope to receive from Father Congar a work of equivalent eminence on the post-conciliar ecumenical situation. Meanwhile this book gives us a rich selection of his work for ecumenism since 1935. It should however be noted that the present work is not a complete translation of the original, since several articles have been omitted from the English version. A useful list of articles and books on ecumenism by the author was included in the original French edition, but it is not included in the English one. Those wishing to study the whole of Father Congar's massive contribution to ecumenism will therefore refer to the original edition.

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