Faith and Revelation

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In everyday usage faith is most frequently understood as a human activity. As patients we must have "faith in the doctor" that the desired cure will be accomplished. As students we must have "faith in ourselves" that we will pass a difficult exam. Even in a religious context we are told that we "must have faith and believe something," meaning that we must adhere to certain values as absolutely true. If the biblical documents would encounter us with the same understanding of faith as a human activity, we could expect them to contain interesting stories about their main characters, telling us what kind of faith they had. Yet these texts could hardly demand ultimate allegiance from us, pointing us to something that is ultimately trustworthy. At most they could serve as inspirational materials which could incite us to have faith like these biblical characters. Indeed, some biblical figures are introduced by the biblical writers as examples of faith. For instance, Paul writes of Abraham as "the example of faith" (Rom. 4:12).

Yet when we look at the Old Testament we notice very quickly that faith is usually not an anthropological phenomenon, i.e., that someone has faith, but mostly a theocentric experience. According to the Old Testament faith is always a human reaction to God's preceding activity. This is also true for Abraham. He did not decide to have faith in God, but God spoke to Abraham and "so Abraham went, as the Lord had told him" (Gen. 12:4). It would therefore be contrary to their own intention should we read the biblical texts as just inspirational writings that provoke activity in us. They should be seen rather as texts that want to draw us into a divine/human occurrence which incites us to a certain reaction. The same is true for the New Testament.

Rudolf Bultmann writes about Paul's understanding of faith that for Paul faith does not appeal to its own activity or stature, but to God's preceding, prevenient act of grace.[1] Faith is not a neutral report on certain events in history or about objective facts of truth. Faith implies foremost an existential transformation. While faith cannot exist without knowledge and experience, these characteristics are not considered to be neutral deposits. Since God is an active God who cannot be described in neutral objectivity, God's preceding activity provokes in us a certain response of faith. This faith is then

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projected into the future trusting that God's activity, which is mediated through and encountered in the biblical documents, will continue and find its ultimate fulfillment.

Faith is not a pious attitude with which we approach the biblical texts. It is our reaction to these texts as we are drawn into the God-disclosive history which they reflect. In faith we appropriate them to ourselves by realigning our existence with that history. Faith must therefore be joined with revelation as its presupposition, since we would not know about God's activity unless it were disclosed to us in and through these texts. Since the first half of the 20th century theology has been predominantly concerned with the biblical texts, discovering the Word in the words, thus the issue of revelation has been high on the agenda. For instance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer claimed that Karl Barth's theology shows a positivism of revelation, meaning that revelation is the starting point and the basis for Barth's theology of the Word. While Barth's decided emphasis on a christocentrically mediated revelation may have been an overreaction to 19th century liberalism, it is indeed questionable whether there can be theology, meaning any word of or from God, if this God has remained mute and has never established contact with us. The only other possibility would be that we could somehow comprehend God's activity in relation to the world on our own. Karl Barth rejected such autonomous employment of reason as inappropriate for theology. But should we really follow Karl Barth and confine ourselves to the biblical texts, considering them as sacred and as our unquestionable starting point for theological reflection? Our secular mindset at least challenges such sacrosanct foundations.

How can these sacred texts — so the questioning goes — that stand in the center of the Christian faith be proven to be more than something that people dreamed up over the centuries and in which they finally believed, putting into these stories and images their hopes and desires? The claim made by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) that God is a product of our desires which we project on the screen of transcendence and in which we believe and put our hopes is a heavy legacy which Christians and adherents of other faiths have to face. The only obvious answer to Feuerbach's charge would be that there will be an eschatological, i.e., endtime verification of the Christian faith. Then the unanswered questions of our existence will be resolved. We will find out whether Feuerbach was right or whether we have trusted the only one who is indeed trustworthy.

Yet Wolfhart Pannenberg rightly claimed that people do not want to wait for an answer to this charge until the endtime. Thus we must consider whether there is at least a partial verification of the

object of our trust, so that faith is trusting the one who is truly trustworthy and not believing something that we are not sure it is right. Yet how can we attain such partial verification? If there is a Word in the words, it would presuppose that through the words someone was mediated who is of ultimate significance. Jesus alone as an earthly figure would not suffice. He must at least be backed or vindicated by the one who is the true ground of all being. But how can we be certain that such ultimate being does indeed exist who endows faith, revelation, and theology with more significance and that it is not a projection of our own mind? Throughout the centuries theologians have attempted to reach the desired goal by fathoming God through reason, arriving basically at five different ways of asserting God's existence. They searched for a necessary being (ontological argument), they looked for a first cause (cosmological argument), argued for God's existence from the design of the cosmos or its parts (teleological argument), identified the voice from within with God's own will (moral argument), and claimed that since all people believe in God, God must indeed exist (historical argument).

These assertions of God's existence were never really considered to be actual proofs of God's being within space and time in the strict sense of the word. At the conclusion of investigating the ontological argument Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033-1109) pointed out that he had proceeded from the prior awareness that God must exist to show that God does indeed exist. Therefore Anselm could say: "I give thanks, good Lord, I give thanks to You, since what I believed before through Your free gift I now so understand through Your illumination."[2] Furthermore, as the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) aptly recognized, there is a vast difference between a philosophical God, who is asserted by reason through the so-called proofs of the existence of God, and the living God attested by the biblical text, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. A philosophical God quite necessarily remains a lifeless construct. The biblical God, however, was first understood to be a history-making God who chooses and selects individuals and people and guides and directs them. Later this God was also grasped to be the creator of the universe and of everything within it. We cannot first employ reason to construct a concept of God and then try to convince the sceptic that such a God must indeed exist. To the contrary, through the hermeneutical key of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, we must discern God's working in history. On the basis of the identity of the universal with the incarnate *logos* reason will then discover that such a God indeed makes sense.

Since God confronts us through revelation, this process can never be just a disclosure of something, a so-called propositional revelation that would give us new insight about the world or about moral issues. It must also be an existential revelation through which we perceive ourselves in a new light. Even if God sets forth certain precepts for our conduct, they disclose something about God. Conversely, through God's self-disclosure we are also told something about ourselves and the surrounding universe. God's self-disclosure always involves an act of divine self-mediation, but not a transmission of ideas, precepts, or insights that have nothing to do with God's relationship with us. Revelation is a self-disclosive act through which God becomes involved in our world history. This involvement is then mirrored and reflected upon in the biblical texts when they talk about God's mighty acts in history.

Since God has always been perceived as a steadfast God, a God who elicits trust, a new revelation can only provide us with a clearer perception of God, but cannot reveal God in a totally different light. A God whom we could not trust in this self-disclosive process and who would surprise us through self-contradiction would be a capricious and demonic God who stands in contrast to the God perceived in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This means that revelation can never be accepted on its mere claim to be a revelation, but alone by showing its continuity with the God disclosive Judeo-Christian history. This history witnesses to an unfolding of revelation, beginning with the perception of a God of the Fathers, then a tribal God, and finally of God as the ruler of the whole universe. Yet how can we know that the perception of God is correct as it emerges in the Old Testament and is continued and expanded into the New? Does it all depend on faith, on accepting at face value that which has been adduced as revelation in the Judeo-Christian tradition?

In classical theology a distinction was made between a general and a special revelation. It was claimed that the former can be attained through general observation apart from Scripture while the latter is only accessible through Scripture. Martin Luther, for instance, conceded that there is knowledge of God outside the biblical revelation. This was attested to him through other religions and through pagan philosophers such as Cicero (BC 106-43) and even Aristotle. Since in other religions Gods were worshipped he found that this presupposes a notion of God and a recognition of divine attributes. Even atheists who deny God have the voice of their own conscience which attests to God and contradicts their own intentions. According to Luther this general revelation does not just contain the insight that God is omnipotent and omniscient. It also allows people to recognize that God is the giver of all good things, a gracious and

benevolent God and a help for those who call out in need. There is a vast amount of literature and religious reflection which contains genuine insight about God. For Luther this general notion of God is attested by biblical writers such as Paul who says about humanity: "What can be known about God is plain to them. ...Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" Rom. 1:19f).

Luther saw two limitations in this general revelation: 1. Reasons can only obtain a surface knowledge of God. But there is no certainty involved in that which is known. It can speak of revelation only in terms of probabilities. 2. Reason knows that God is, but it lacks the intimate capacity to know who God is "in his heart." One is always confronted with conflicting truth claims concerning the one ultimate God and finds it empirically impossible to decide in favour of one or another. By contrast, the special revelation as reflected in the biblical documents contains already a narrowed down version of history, i.e., salvation history. This segment of the universal history was then recognized to contain God's decisive action valid and directive for all humanity.

Paul Althaus (1888-1966) from Erlangen University followed Martin Luther in claiming in contrast to Barth that outside the biblical texts there is a primal revelation (*uroffenbarung*).[3] According to Althaus, the true being of God is disclosed outside and prior to Christ. Though this is not a full disclosure it leaves one with the experience of God. This self-attestation of God can be found in human existence and human destiny, in history, nature, and in our knowledge of truth. Althaus does not deny the tragic aspects of human existence, history, and nature. But he is convinced that there is a divine order which we can experience in the arrangement and structure of things and events. Althaus goes one step further than Luther by distinguishing primal revelation from natural theology. Natural theology is based on the assumption that we are able to know God on our own. Primal revelation, on the other hand, is the general experience of God from which no one completely escapes. This primal revelation is important for Althaus, since it provides the point of contact at which the transition can be made from a general awareness of God to the biblical revelation in Jesus Christ. It also allows for a positive evaluation of other religions, since they are expressive of God's presence.

Karl Barth in particular reacted very negatively against the concept of a primal revelation. As we have seen he focused exclusively on God's self-disclosure as reflected in Scripture christocentrically understood. He claimed that apart from Jesus Christ we know

absolutely nothing of God. While the divine self-manifestation is revealed to us in Jesus Christ who demonstrates God's desire to reconcile us to God, religion is our attempt to come to terms with life and to justify ourselves before God. In short, religion only witnesses to the godlessness of humanity. Barth collapsed primal revelation and natural theology into one and rejected both. This move is understandable when we consider that Barth spoke out against a liberal theology which had molded itself into a kind of cultural Protestantism, welding together culture and religion, a religion for which the enlightened reason of the late 19th century was the sole criterion for truth.

Long before the debate in the early 20th century between Karl Barth and theologians such as Paul Althaus and Emil Brunner who asserted a kind of natural knowledge of God, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) had claimed in *The Education of the Human Race* (1780) that revelation does not give a person anything which this person might not have derived from "within oneself." Instead one merely obtains it more quickly and more easily.[4] Revelation, in other words, does not add anything to our knowledge and insight which in principle we could not have known otherwise.

When we listen to the tone of other publications of that period, mainly from Great Britain, such as those of John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696), or Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as Creation or the Gospel, a Re-Publication of the Religion of Nature* (1730), we realize that a significant change had occurred concerning the content of revelation long before liberal theology emerged at the end of the Enlightenment period. General revelation had become the norm for special revelation and was understood to take place only within the limits of natural theology. Everything in Scripture which did not agree with natural theology and would exceed its claims has to be discarded. To understand the full consequences of the dominance of natural theology we must remember that this was also the time of Reimarus' devastating critique (Hermann Samuel Reimarus: 1694-1768) of the biblical documents.

Yet natural theology as an attempt to speak about God on the basis of our own possibilities is a contradiction in itself. If such speech is merely an extension of ourselves, it cannot reach God; if it is not just an extension of ourselves, it must be facilitated by something or someone from beyond. Underlying a legitimate natural theology and the notion of a general revelation is the concept of the *praeparatio evangelica,* i.e., the preparation for the gospel. In order to understand God's word of grace, it is necessary to have some prior understanding of God.

For Karl Barth the self-disclosure of God occurs only in the Word reflected in the biblical documents. He emphatically denied that we could have an understanding of God's word prior to God's self-disclosure to us. Not even God's law can be our guide preparing the way for Christ, since, as Barth insisted, nobody understands the law and the gravity of our deviation from it without first experiencing the graciousness of God. Most other theologians, however, pursued the notion that God intends to be perceived in the world, since the world is God's creation. They claimed that this presence is apprehended by us even if our perception might be quite weak. God alone provides the point of contact with us, not through special revelation, but through preservation and sustenance.

Wolfhart Pannenberg therefore spoke of humanity's infinite openness to the world, Bernhard Lonergan (1904-1985) of its insatiable thirst for knowledge, Emil Brunner of its personhood, and Langdon Gilkey (1919-) of its paradoxial character of existence. These indicators which Peter L. Berger (1929-) called "signals of transcendence", serve as signs of God's presence in the world. Special revelation will then deepen the awareness of who God really is, the one who created the world and everything within it and who will preserve it for the final destiny, union with God.

Does God's special revelation, climaxing in the self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, indeed imply or even necessitate a general revelation? Or can this special revelation be thought of without a general revelation? If God is disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth, as Karl Barth emphasized, this would lead to God's involvement with history as an event in space and time or as a series of events. But history is not synonymous with revelation that one would look at history and see revelation as a present event or a past occurrence. As Wolfhart Pannenberg emphasized, God's disclosure occurs indirectly through historical acts.[5] This means that history, as far as it can be unearthed, must in some way or other lead to God's self-disclosure. This self-disclosure, as Pannenberg also pointed out, did not occur as an isolated event but as part of God's history with Israel, again indicating the historical dimension of revelation.

Contrary to Carl Braaten's assertion, Pannenberg's provocative title, *Revelation As History,* is an overstatement which Pannenberg himself corrects in his subsequent theses.[6] Furthermore, history is not just human history but also the history of the world and the cosmos. Of course, the history of nature, the cosmos, and humanity, including the history of Jesus of Nazareth, can be interpreted in many different ways. Therefore the interpretative word is necessary so that the facts become signs towards God and not stumbling blocks. Yet how do we penetrate to the Word if it is clothed in the facts of

recorded history, albeit a history of faith, as the biblical record indicates?

The German New Testament scholar Ernst Fuchs (1903-1983) advanced a very interesting hermeneutical principle elucidating the history of Jesus. He claimed that if in a story about Jesus sign and word point in the same direction then we have some historical ground preserved, which in all likelihood goes back to Jesus himself. Analogously this would mean that wherever the annunciation of God's Word and the actual course of history point in the same direction this piece of history can be understood as part of God's general revelation. Therefore we can never equate history, nature, or cosmos, with God's self-disclosure, but only those portions that point in the same direction as the disclosive Word encountered in the Judeo-Christian tradition. By being so highly selective do we not ignore a large portion of reality saying that it provides no context for God's self-disclosure? Rather, the opposite is true.

Since the world and its processes are not synonymous with God's self-disclosure we need a starting point or a perspective from which to interpret this process as disclosive for God. But is revelation not such a very slippery entity that we will never find an appropriate starting point? Indeed, whenever we talk about revelation, the possibility of a projection or of piously disguised self-deception looms high on the horizon. Moreover, the history of every religion is tarnished with fraud and self-deception. Therefore the claim of a revelation must always be carefully analysed. This caution pertains as much to the content of revelation as to its very occurrence. Yet it would be a gross overreaction to relegate revelation to the realm of fantasy or to say that it borders on credulity when we accept that God's self-disclosure has indeed occurred.

Naively waving the Bible and shouting that it contains God's old-fashioned gospel convinces hardly anybody of the truthfulness of revelation. We must employ reason to the fullest extent, not only critically analysing the texts that confront us with the claim of containing revelation, but also fathoming the limits of rational inquiry. In this context we should consider the route of Immanuel Kant, who at the close of the Enlightenment period investigated the limits of reason in order to see whether there is still an openness for faith. Though occasionally mysticism and intuition are held in high regard to allow us to reach the beyond, nothing is to be preferred to clear thought. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Immanuel Kant pointed to certain antinomies in our reasoning, i.e., contradictions, and thereby demonstrated that a two-layered view of the world as phenomenal and noumenal, or physical and metaphysical is indeed a logical possibility. He showed with these antinomies that we can

logically assert both that the world has a beginning in space and time and that it does not have one, that there is a smallest unit which can no longer be divided and that there is no such unit, that there is a necessary cause for the world's existence and that there is none.

With these antinomies between the two sets of propositions, each of which can be conclusively proven, Kant demonstrated the limits of human reason and indicated that since human reason is the measure of all *things,* it cannot extend itself beyond the boundaries of things. There is a fundamental two-foldness built into our perceptible world of things we can know and of things we cannot know. Since we cannot look at the world from the outside and verify that it really is the way it appears to us, we are confined to the world of phenomena without knowing whether they are more than they appear to be. Scientists long ago recognized this limit and no longer pose the question regarding the real nature of the objects of their investigation, e.g., of particles, waves, life, etc. Rather, they ask how they function. While the "nature" of things is withdrawn from our investigation, in modern science there is still a contact maintained between the investigator and his or her subject matter. Scientists cannot existentially divorce themselves from the object which they investigate. There always occurs an interaction between the scientists and their subject matter which prevents a strictly neutral investigation.

This state of affairs has significant consequences for a critical investigation of Scripture. As soon as we encounter the claim of God's self-disclosure the event portrayed in a text which provoked the claim is related to other phenomena within our dimension of space, time, and causal nexus. Once we have integrated the God-disclosive phenomenon into our phenomenal world of experience and attempted to explain it as a this-worldly phenomenon, we should keep in mind that a one-dimensional or single layer interpretation need not be the final answer. It may well be that a higher dimension has been involved in this occurrence. Thus a God-disclosive phenomenon, such as the biblical story of Jesus walking on water, asks us whether we want to consider it as more than a parapsychologically explainable phenomenon of levitation. Once we are open for more than a single layer interpretation of reality, we are also open for the question of whether, with the aforementioned episode, God tells us something about the nature of the new world to come.

An important role of Scripture is to demonstrate that the occurrence of revelation results in our existential response of indifference, acceptance, or rejection. For instance, when Jesus as God's disclosure

took up his mission, he confronted his audience with the words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). We do not eliminate reason once faith commences. We rather trust that a certain event is indeed God's self-disclosure. For example, Anselm of Canterbury explicitly employed reason in order to understand what he already believed. Once the initial decision of accepting or rejecting a higher dimension is made, the reasonable implications of such a decision must be delineated lest one end up in credulity.

It would be wrong to assume that the decision of accepting or rejecting the actuality of revelation (though not its possibility) can ever be based on a strictly rational argument. Reason can and must investigate the phenomenon of revelation as such but it cannot verify the claim that it is indeed revelation. Here the issue of faith or trust enters in, not in terms of believing credulously or against solid evidence, but to believe that the God of whom we first learned through the biblical witnesses and who has been with us to the present is the same God who according to the biblical promises will continue to be with us to the ends of the world. Christians are not people who believe against reason but who trust that the so far trustworthy process will continue to run its course and reach its fulfillment. Faith therefore does not lead to an arbitrary decision of blindfoldedness.

Faith is learned and reinforced through Scripture and embedded in a history of faith which is continued further into the future. Revelation and faith are eschatological phenomena, being directed and pointing to the future and awaiting their ultimate verification. Although ultimately the verification that revelation as reflected in the biblical texts is indeed trustworthy will occur in the eschaton, believers are never neutral observers of the God-disclosive history. They are drawn into it and experience continually anew that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Father of Jesus Christ is indeed active in history in general and in the individual histories of the believers. This self-attestation of God parallels his involvement in history and is not closed off to inquisitive and critically analysing reason. It is the basis for trust and the existential ground of faith in the one God who is active in one's own life and beyond.

References:

1. Cf. for the following Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 318f. (Y 35), 8th ed.
2. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* (IV) in: *St. Anselm's Proslogion with a Reply on Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilo and The Author's Reply to Gaunilo*, trans., intr.

and philosophical commentary by M.J. Charlesworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 121.

3. Cf. Paul Althaus, *Die christliche Wahrheit. Lehrbuch der Dogmatick*, (Gutersloh: Gerd Mohn , 1969), pp. 37-94.
4. Cf. Henry E. Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1966), p. 151f.
5. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, Dogmatic Theses, Nr. 1.
6. Cf. Carl E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics*, p. 27.