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The Idea of Revelation in the Early Church—1

by Leonard de Moor

Dr. Leonard De Moor, who has made a special study of the history of the idea of revelation, and who has given us several products of this study for The Evangelical Quarterly, turns now to the early church and discusses what the second-century apologists and their Christian contemporaries had to say on the subject.

WHEN the Christian message was brought to the Greek with all his heritage of philosophical ponderings, it was inevitable that a defining of terms should ensue, which would either mean the adulteration of the outlooks of both systems, or the frank divergence of each on the grounds of its own unique genius.¹

It was felt, by all who thought on these matters, that the crucial question was the relation of human thought and ethical endeavor to ultimate reality: that is, whether man's best endeavors at the procuring of an imperturbed self-certainty and self-mastery was not founded upon illusion, because men always fell short of attainment in both of these spheres.² Greek Scepticism, which set itself against spiritual existence, and thus undermined ethical ideals and social customs, because it declared that only as things could be theoretically validated could they be received, led many to reach out, consequently, for the idea of revelation.³ Christianity, as one of the religions of the east, to which the Greek mind now more and more turned for an authoritative ground in which to rest itself, could therefore commend itself as corroborative of the highest views which the theoretical insight and the ethical impulse had so far autonomously gained, or it could commend the measure of truth which had thus been gained, but point to a fuller and larger truth within its own body of revelation. The question we are interested in is: what

1 Windelband, W., *A History of Philosophy*. pp. 210-212.

2 Windelband, W., *ibid.*, p. 212 and p. 219

3 Tillich, Paul, "Die Idee der Offenbarung" in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 8, 1927: "So stark war die Sehnsucht nach Offenbarung, dass die späteren Philosophenschulen, die immer den Charakter von Lebens- ja Kultgemeinschaften gehabt hatten, die Lehrsätze ihrer Schulgründer auf Offenbarung zurückführten: eine vollendete Paradoxie der geistigen Lage!

Der Spätantike Offenbarungsbegriff ist das Korrelat zur spätantiken Skepsis. Ihr Supra-naturalismus ist das Korrelat zum zerbrechen ihrer rationalen Zuversicht."

Cf. also Windelband, p. 211. He says: "Thus in all ways a deep, passionate need for true salvation of the soul . . . came to be increasingly felt, a hunger for something beyond the earthly, a religious urgency without an equal."

course was actually taken? The apologists, principally, give us the answer to our question.

We believe that, taken as a whole, the claim of the apologists was that the Scriptures of the Christians contained knowledge unattainable by the human mind. This is due to a *special inspiration* of those who were led to be the organs of the transmission of their contents, above and beyond any inspiration which might be allowed to Greek thinkers or sibyls, and who consequently could be relied upon as authoritative in the sphere of thought and of ethics. A writer of the history of dogma who must always be reckoned with, however, interprets the aim and claim of the apologists to be rather an endeavor "to explain Christianity to the cultured world, . . . to represent the Christian religion as a philosophy, and to convince outsiders that it was the highest wisdom and the absolute truth."⁴ Greek thinkers had come to the point, so he believes, where they *knew* what *values* they wanted to conserve, but they were now in search for some authoritative assurance. Consequently, the theistic and moral conception of the world which the apologists exhibited was not derived by them from the content of Scripture, but was rather the product of pure Greek thought. The Apologists therefore viewed the Bible only as "an ancient source of Revelation, and viewed the book as a testimony to the truth, i.e. to philosophy and virtue."⁵ We shall allow the apologists to speak for themselves, shortly, so that we may come to our own conclusions.

We hold rather that the longing for revelation, which arose from within Greek philosophy and sought satisfaction for its lack along the purely philosophical track, ended in a conception of revelation wholly removed from that which the apologists as spokesmen of the Christian Church proclaimed, although both answers were addressed to an age of men weary of the husks which philosophical Scepticism had been offering them. Revelation was, in the purely scientific philosophical schools, sought as "a *supplement* for the natural faculties of knowledge," and that in "an immediate illumination of the individual by the deity. On this account revelation is here held to be a *supra-rational apprehension* of divine truth, an apprehension which the *individual man* comes to possess in immediate contact (ἄφῆ) with the deity itself: and though it must be admitted that there are but few who attain to this and that even these attain only in rare moments, a *definite, historically authenticated special revelation, authoritative for all, is nevertheless here put aside*. This conception of revelation was later called *the mystic conception*, and to this extent *Neo-Platonism is the source of all later mysticism*."⁶ Much as we

4 Harnack, Adolf *History of Dogma* E.T. Vol. 2, p. 170.

5 Harnack, Adolf, *ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 173.

6 Windelband, W., *A History of Philosophy*, p. 227

need to grant that the concept (as distinguished from the idea) of revelation is the creation of hellenistic philosophy, and that Christianity took over this conception and concentrated it upon Christ who was conceived to be the culmination of the *supernatural* revelation, this understanding of revelation which is grounded upon historical facts is wholly other than the *natural* revelation which is the genius of the purely speculative conception of it.⁷ In the Renaissance, in mediaeval mysticism, and finally in subjective idealism of recent times the legitimate fruit of this naturalistic seed has appeared, planted by Greek philosophy and assimilated by some in the Church who unfortunately wedded it to Christian views. But the accepted doctrine of the Christian Church has always been that "Offenbarung kommt *über* uns, nicht *aus* uns. Sie ist unbedingt. Denn sie ist Erscheinen des Unbedingt—verborgenen in unserer Bedingtheit."⁸ Instead of *historical mediation* between man and God being purely a chance occasion, a vehicle, a symbol, as in the speculative naturalistic, idealistic schemes it must be, historical mediation becomes an absolute essential in the Christian conception.

Zwischen der Seele und Gott, zwischen der Menschheit und Gott, zwischen der Welt und Gott steht ein Drittes, vielmehr ein Dritter, der beide Teile ebenso auseinanderhält als er sie verbindet, als der, durch den allein jene Verbindung zustande kommt, durch den allein also Gott sich offenbart: der Mittler—Dort (in idealism) die grundsätzliche Unmittelbarkeit, hier (in Christianity) die grundsätzliche Mittelbarkeit: Das ist der Grundgegen-satz.⁹

This much needs to be conceded to Harnack, that *when the Greek mind first began* to turn to Christianity as an authoritative ground of revelation, it came with the object to find in the documents of this religion, confirmation for its own independently held views, and to bring about a harmony. In doing this the device of allegorical interpretation was lavishly used. This method had already been employed by Philo in the attempt to reconcile Greek speculation with the Old Testament Scriptures. The method now came to be used by the *Gnostics* who were the first to attempt the creation of a Christian theology, in which the distinctively historical in Christianity would be sacrificed to "the ideal content of the Scriptures."¹⁰

But it is exactly as a protest against this Gnostic adulteration of the Christian revelation that the apologists arise with arguments to

7 Tillich, Paul, "Die Idee der Offenbarung", p. 406

8 Tillich, Paul, *ibid.*, p. 412; cf. also Brunner, Emil, *Der Mittler*, p. 16.

9 Brunner, Emil, *Der Mittler*, p. 11 (writer's translation, since there was no English translation at the time of this writing).

10 Windelband, W., *ibid.*, p. 222. There is a good deal of similarity between the phrases, "the ideal content of Scripture," and the Ritschlian formula of "value of Scripture for me". And this may account for the fact that Harnack virtually glorifies the Gnostics in his *History*, while the apologists, where they are not made out to be pure Greek philosophers, are denominated corrupters of pure Christianity. Harnack was a Ritschlian.

show the distinctiveness, the uniqueness, the supernatural and super-rational character of Christianity. Let a few of them speak for themselves.

Justin Martyr, after reviewing the teaching on religion contained in the prominent Greek philosophers, continues by saying:

Since therefore it is impossible to learn anything true concerning religion from your teachers, who by their mutual disagreement have furnished you with sufficient proof of their own ignorance, I consider it reasonable to recur to our progenitors, who both in point of time have by a great way the precedence of your teachers, and *who have taught us nothing from their own private fancy*, nor differed with one another, nor attempted to overthrow one another's positions, but without wrangling or contention *received from God the knowledge* which also they taught to us. *For neither by nature nor human conception is it possible for men to know things so great and divine*, but by the gift which then descended from above upon the holy men, who had no need of rhetorical art, nor of uttering anything in a contentious or quarrelsome manner, but to present themselves pure to the energy of the Divine Spirit, in order that the divine plectrum itself, descending from heaven, and using righteous men as an instrument like a harp or lyre, might reveal to us the knowledge of things divine and heavenly. Wherefore, as if with one mouth and one tongue, they have in succession, and in harmony with one another taught us both concerning God, and the creation of the world, and the formation of man, and concerning the immortality of the human soul, and the judgement which is to be after this life, and concerning all things which it is needful for us to know, and thus in divers times and places have afforded us the divine instruction.¹¹

Here no compromise is made with the worldly wisdom of the pure thinker nor, as Harnack would have us believe, is the Scriptural content used merely as an external attestation of ideas gained through the reason. The super-rational character of Christian revelation could be stated in no plainer words.

Athenagoras is at one with Justin when, in speaking about the superiority of the Christian doctrine respecting God, he says that

Poets and philosophers, as to other subjects so also to this, have applied themselves in the way of conjecture, moved by reason of their affinity with the afflatus from God, each one by his own soul, to try whether he could find out and apprehend the truth; but they have not been found competent fully to apprehend it, *because they thought fit to learn, not from God concerning God*, but each one from himself, hence they came each to his own conclusion respecting God, and matter, and forms, and the world. But we have for witnesses of the things we apprehend and believe, prophets, men who have pronounced concerning God and the things of God, *guided by the Spirit of God*.¹²

The uniqueness and authority of Christian doctrine, because of a special self-disclosure of God to man through the prophets, as against the way of self-insight, is clearly drawn here.

11 Justin Martyr, *Hortatory address to the Greeks*, Chap. 8, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*; ed. by A. Roberts and James Donaldson. (Note: Except where otherwise indicated, quotations from the subsequent apologists will be from this above-mentioned edition.)

12 Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians*, Chap 7.

Theophilus, in his *Defence of Christianity*, when he comes toward the end of his treatise to summarize what had been his purpose throughout, says that since "the names of those who are called gods (amongst the Egyptian and Greeks), are found to be the names of *men* who lived among them" as "we have shown from their own histories," and since they have therefore been in ignorance of the truth, "*God* at least, the Father and Creator of the universe, *did not abandon mankind, but gave a law*, and sent holy prophets to declare and teach the race of men, that each one of us might awake and understand that there is one God."¹³ Revelation, we may say on the basis of this statement, is God's voluntary and loving gift of true knowledge concerning Himself, which all man's own groping had not only failed to attain, but caused to become vitiated because he gave God a name which rose in significance no higher than a human name.

This same idea of a special divine initiative which wills that man shall come to a full knowledge of Himself, Tertullian expresses. For, having declared that through contemplation of the κόσμος man may come to a knowledge of God, he continues;

But, that we might attain an ampler and more authoritative knowledge at once of Himself, and of His counsels and will, *God has added a written revelation* for the behoof of every one whose heart is set on seeking Him, that seeking he may find, and finding believe, and believing obey. For from the first *he sent* messengers into the world,—men whose stainless righteousness made them worthy to know the Most High, and to reveal Him,—men abundantly endowed with the Holy Spirit, that they might proclaim that there is one God only who made all things, who formed man from the dust of the ground . . .¹⁴

There is one aspect of the position taken by the above quoted apologists for the Christian faith which, before we leave them, it is necessary we should not leave untouched, and that has reference to their attributing all true knowledge, whether in Scripture or outside of it, to the *Word* (Logos) or the Spirit or Holy Spirit. Statements like the following recur in these authors. "Whatsoever either lawgivers or philosophers *uttered well*, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the *Word*."¹⁵ "But men of God carrying in them a holy spirit and becoming prophets, being inspired and made wise by God, became God-taught . . . and also among the Greeks there was the *Sibyl*."¹⁶ The very concluding portion of Theophilus's defence consists of a collaboration of passages which he draws from the Sibyl "who was a prophetess among the Greeks", and testimonies drawn from the Greek poets confirmatory of the precepts from the prophets of Israel.¹⁷ We see, then, that Theophilus believed that the

¹³ Theophilus *Defence of Christianity addressed to Antolycus* 2.33.

¹⁴ Tertullian, *Apology*, 18.

¹⁵ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, 10.

¹⁶ Theophilus, *ibid.*, 2.9.

¹⁷ Theophilus, *ibid.*, 2.36-38.

Sibyl and the Greek poets on occasion were inspired by the Holy Spirit as well as the Jewish prophets. Nevertheless, that he regarded their testimony only as confirmatory may be seen in that the body of his argument is built around Scriptural teaching. Throughout his *defence* his main use of the poets and philosophers is to show the absurdity of their pictures of the gods, as merely magnified men, particularly as regards men's vices which the poets glorify in the gods.

We are told that the circumstances of Clement of Alexandria's writings were to show the relation of Greek learning, especially as expressed in Philosophy, to the wisdom of the Scriptures, it being the inevitable question which those who would vindicate Christian faith in the eyes of the educated Greek needed to answer satisfactorily.

Clement himself had come to Christianity with a mind steeped in Greek learning, and he answered this question with clearness and confidence. Greek learning was not to be rejected. Philosophy at its best had stood to the Greeks in the same relation as prophecy to the Jews; it had been, he held, a preparation for Christ. It showed glimmerings and forebodings of the divine teaching, and could not have come from the devil . . . Clement can prove by quotations that philosophers, Plato especially, and even poets, had clearly taught the unity, supremacy, and goodness of God. But the greatest witnesses of all were the Hebrew prophets, through whom God gave His promises to men.¹⁸

The last sentence states accurately what, not only for Clement but for all these early writers, was always the final authority, the norm of their systems: the holy Scriptures. When they discovered intimations here and there in Greek literature, which taught monotheism, and wherein glimmerings of other biblical doctrines were found anticipated and attributed them to the eternal *Word* (Logos), this is not only not surprising, but has a strictly Scriptural foundation, as when Paul, writing to the Colossians, speaks of Christ "in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden."¹⁹ And again Paul warned them to "take heed lest there shall be anyone that spoileth you through his philosophy and vain deceit", but he points to Christ as the measure of all truth, "for in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and in him are ye made full".²⁰ When we say, today, that God's special revelation of salvation in Christ comes mediated to us through the record of Scripture, that does not deny that God is operative immanently in the whole of creation and may be discovered everywhere, at least in the capacity of Creator. The application of the Logos doctrine to the understand-

¹⁸ Butterworth, G. W., *Clement of Alexandria*, Loeb Classical Library, Introduction, pp. xiv, xv.

¹⁹ Col. 2: 3.

²⁰ Col. 2: 8-10.

ing of the insights of the Greek Sibyl and poets is not something so foreign that it may not with profit be employed even today as the key to the coming to light of all truth in all spheres.

If our consideration of these primitive exponents of the Christian faith has brought anything into the clear, we think it must be that they believed that the Bible reveals man to himself as he could never have known himself without its help, and that it reveals God to him in lights and aspects of His grace which it could never have entered the wildest deams of his imagination to conceive. It means that they believed that God has come to us, not that we have come to Him.

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To be continued