

7-9-2021

## On Revelation, Faith, and Justice

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

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### Recommended Citation

Penny, Joseph. 2021. On Revelation, Faith, and Justice. *Obsculta* 14, (1) : 174-178.  
<https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol14/iss1/15>.

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#### ABSTRACT:

Defined as the relational self-disclosure of Godself, divine revelation has the potential to propel us ever deeper into the mystery of the crucified God. In a faith-filled response to the Paschal Mystery's salvific and liberating promise, we can traverse the ontological gap between humanity and divinity, but how does this embodied revelation influence the trajectory of social justice? This paper embarks on a methodological endeavor to articulate the purpose of divine revelation.

## On Revelation, Faith, and Justice

by Joseph Penny

Divine revelation is the relational self-disclosure of Godself to women and men.<sup>1</sup> Scholarly epistemological endeavors towards this understanding fail to humbly acknowledge that humans lack the intellectual capacity to fully comprehend the essence of God. For this reason, theologians have identified divine revelation as an apophatic, analogical, and super-knowable mystery rather than a linear progression towards an empirically verifiable end.

A true understanding of God cannot be sought independent of God. Since God

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1 In its document *Dei Verbum*, Vatican Council II proclaims the deep relational dimension of God's self-disclosure stating: "In His Goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself." See Vatican II Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: *Dei Verbum*," Solemnly promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965, Accessed March 12, 2021.

animates and sustains all life, separation from God results in a reversion to the previous nature as explained by Athanasius' creation *ex nihilo* (created from nothing).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, human existence is contingent on the presence of God. Genesis further embellishes this point when God responds to Adam and Eve saying: "By the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread until you return to the ground because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). The incarnate Son of God reconciles this divine dilemma by taking on human flesh and living out the Paschal Mystery, thus fulfilling the messianic prophecy. Through Jesus Christ, we may now traverse the ontological gap that separated humanity and divinity. Jesus Christ capacitates humanity to enjoy the fullness of divine-human relations as described by Gregory of Nazianzus in Oration 38: "He partakes of my flesh that He may both save the image and make the flesh immortal."<sup>3</sup> Though God has continued God's salvific work by entering into human history, one must consider the various sources of divine revelation and how we receive it.

In *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, Stephen B. Bevans claims that revelation's manifestations are threefold. He writes: "In our everyday experience, in the experience of reading or hearing the Word of God in Scripture, and in the experience of the meaning of Christian Tradition."<sup>4</sup> These sources help to cultivate an environment and facilitate an encounter with God which leads to and strengthens the divine-human relationship. Revelation must therefore be gratuitously offered before it is received through a faith-filled response. The Latin root of revelation means to "remove a veil," thus alluding to the paschal tearing of the temple veil that once concealed the Holy of Holies. Through this parallel, we can come to understand revelation as not solely a deposit of empirical knowledge, but as God's relational self-disclosure. Therefore, divine revelation balances both its propositional and relational views to inform a theological discourse that holds justice as central and foundational to the Christian faith.

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2 Athanasius makes this interesting claim as part of a larger argument about God creating from nothing through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. See *On the Incarnation*, John Behr, trans., (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2011), see especially sections 2-4.

3 Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 38," XIII. in Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 7.* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894.)

4 Steven Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 18.



Through an expression of authentic faith, all people can cooperate with God in being co-creators of justice in our world. Dulles defines faith as an, “acceptance of a revealed message on the word of the divine revealer. Insofar as it is trust, it involves self-surrender into the hands of God and confidence in God as the savior who is utterly faithful to his promises. Insofar as it is commitment, it involves an intention to conform one’s conduct to the values and norms established by revelation.”<sup>5</sup> Faith can no longer be reduced through abstraction as a purely intellectual act exclusively reserved for those privileged with theological education. Such an understanding reinforces power-reliant structures of oppression, in that knowledge becomes a mechanism to ensure the perpetual subjugation of those deemed intellectually inferior.

As articulated by Gustavo Gutierrez and James Cone, divine encounters with God received through an authentic expression of faith compel us to reach out to our marginalized brothers and sisters who have been de-centered for a multiplicity of reasons.<sup>6</sup> After identifying this contemplative rhythm between a vertical experience with the immutable, yet dynamic, God and horizontal expressions of faith that center the crucified among us, we can hear Reverend Kelly Brown Douglas’ words with greater clarity; as she states, “if we are ever going to know justice, then that movement towards justice has to start with those people who have experienced it the least or not at all. Otherwise, we begin to confuse justice with the privileges that have indeed come from an unjust society.”<sup>7</sup> The justice of God must not be a static destination tainted by performative efforts, but a daily call answered in faith to engage in the relational work of cofacilitating ideological, spiritual, and embodied liberation. Before we can embrace a universalist approach to justice-centered work, we must begin by identifying the distortion of power dynamics as foundational

5 Dulles quote taken in entirety from Steven Bevans. See Steven Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 30.

6 James Cone speaks about the purpose of theology in relation to this contemplative rhythm. He states: “This means that its [Christian theology’s] sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God’s activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ.” See James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), 1.

7 See Kelly Brown Douglas, “Black Theology and White Terror: A Union Conversation,” *Union Theological Seminary*, New York, NY, January 12, 2021.

for oppressive structures. Are we then to fall into the same plight as the citizens of Babel who sought the privilege of being god-like in their structural attempt to usurp divine sovereignty?<sup>8</sup> As citizens of the United States of America continue to fall victim to systems and structures of oppression such as racism, the prison industrial complex, xenophobia, homophobia, islamophobia, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, and their intersections, do we have the courage to allow our faith to compel us to act? By de-centering God’s liberating activity from sacred scripture, tradition, and lived experiences, we are compromising the authenticity of the Christian message.

Relying on a Thomistic notion of co-operative grace, we can co-create a world that normalizes the Second Vatican Council’s behavioral and affective theology.<sup>9</sup> Considering theology’s etymological meaning, one could simply define theology as words about God, but such a definition would give the implication that God can be objectively understood. The previously mentioned apophatic, analogical, and super-knowable mystery of God therefore implies that understanding must be divinely revealed. Therefore, Anselm transcends conventional logic and defines theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) thus holding divine revelation and faith in tension with one another.<sup>10</sup> Fideism and rationalism fail to achieve this balance by speaking of faith apart from logic acquired through experience and by reducing revelation to objectifiable truth.

In conclusion, the relational self-disclosure of God through Jesus Christ is foundational to any Christian understanding of divine revelation. As promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, theologians must hold relational and propositional views of divine revelation in tension with one another so to better articulate God’s liberating activity in a broken world. Therefore, clergy, scholars, and the laity can give prophetic witness to God’s liberating power by engaging in a contemplative rhythm of divine encounter and liberation. Just as the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, divine revelation welcomes an encounter between human finitude and divine infinitude (Jn 1:14). Stamped

8 Gen 11:1-9 (all biblical citations taken from the New American Bible (Revised Edition))

9 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 111, art. 2, C. in A. M. Fairweather, *Aquinas on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 167-168.

10 Steven Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

with the imago Dei (image of God), humanity finds restoration through an encounter with the original image. Therefore, divine revelation, faith, and theology are no longer abstract truths subject to the monological and empirical verification of theologians. Rather, divine revelation is the dynamic self-disclosure of a super-knowable crucified God who engages in relational dialogue with us.

