

SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

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WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A THEOLOGY OF REVELATION?**

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**What is the Purpose of a Theology of Revelation?**

To understand the purpose of a theology of revelation, the terms “theology” and “revelation” will be first briefly defined. Theology can be described as “faith seeking understanding” – that is, a process by which a person articulates or expresses their knowledge, understanding, or experience of God.<sup>1</sup> Revelation may be simply defined as God’s self-disclosure to humans. Or, more specifically, it is “the reception in faith of God’s gracious offer of himself in experience and history by the individual, and ultimately by the community”.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of a revelation theology is to address questions about God’s disclosing of self to humankind. This paper addresses the following questions: (1) What is the nature of God’s revelation? (2) Where does God’s revelation take place? (3) What type of relationship between God and humans is involved in revelation? (4) What features comprise God’s revelation? (5) What is the role of faith in revelation? In response, the purpose of a theology of revelation is to:

Nature of God’s Revelation

*Describe the nature and focus of God’s self-disclosure to humankind in history.*

Revelation is the personal, self-communication of God to people in the history of salvation. It reaches its fullness in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> The focus is personal disclosure – rather than a body of supernatural truths disclosed.<sup>4</sup> However, knowledge remains a consequence of the personal self-communication of God in Christ.<sup>5</sup> Today, revelation continues in that God is a living God and remains available to people.<sup>6</sup>

*Present the limitations of an entirely propositional (or verbal) view of revelation which is the communication of an abstract body of truths about God.* The biblical account of revelation reflects the historical, social, and cultural circumstances of the time of its composition.<sup>7</sup> It therefore suggests that the prophets and apostles did not arrive at their insights about God simply as a result of divine dictation.<sup>8</sup> A verbal view of revelation also implies that the communication of God to people has stopped, that God has withdrawn from the world, and that he has left the human race bereft.<sup>9</sup> Such a perspective contradicts the doctrine of the omnipresence of God and the indwelling of his gracious Spirit among people.<sup>10</sup> In sum, the revelation of God cannot be reduced to a series of propositions to which the individual must give assent in faith.<sup>11</sup> The living reality of God is more than a body of frozen truths; indeed, God cannot be confined to or captured by a simple set of propositions.<sup>12</sup>

*State basic principles for a theology of revelation in order to better understand divine revelation between God and the individual.* Such principles would include the following. (1) The basic elements for the dynamics of human revelation also belong to the nature of divine revelation between God and humanity.<sup>13</sup> (2) Personal participation in faith is integral to the experience of revelation – there is both an objective and a subjective dimension.<sup>14</sup> (3) The revelation of God is always addressed to human self-consciousness and as such draws self-consciousness out of its lonely estrangement into a new liberating communion with God<sup>15</sup> – it is only in and through the revelation of God that people become truly conscious of themselves, their origin, and their destiny.<sup>16</sup> Finally, (4) a theology of revelation must be balanced to avoid extremes, such as Modernism or extrinsicism.<sup>17</sup>

### The Place of God's Revelation

*Explain the proper place of experience in the process of revelation.* Revelation always takes place in, and through the medium of, human experience.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that revelation is reduced to human experience.<sup>19</sup> Rather, revelation begins in human experience and takes one beyond experience to that deeper divine dimension which can be called the mystery of God at the centre of life.<sup>20</sup> Since revelation is experiential, it is incarnational and sacramental. Lane adds “the God who reveals self through human experience is both immanent and transcendent. The transcendence of God is discovered through the immanence of God which addresses us in human experience”.<sup>21</sup> In sum, the medium or locus of God's revelation is in human experience, which is the primary point of contact between God and the individual in history.

### Type of Relationship between God and Humans in Revelation

*Demonstrate that revelation involves a relational and personal encounter with the reality of God in Christ.* The reality of the loving relationship between God and his people is not something that can be summed up in a body of truths (with the resultant concern of safeguarding that deposit of truth).<sup>22</sup> The relationship between God and humanity seen in revelation goes into the deeper realms of the interpersonal, the experiential, and the historical.<sup>23</sup> This promotes a living, active faith among the people of God because the concern of the Church will be to express that relationship in a language and practice that is in touch with people's present, personal, and historical experience of God.<sup>24</sup>

## Features of God's Revelation

*Show that the nature of revelation is Trinitarian.* Lane states that revelation is “an act of God the Father, who discloses self through the Word Incarnate in Jesus, with a view to drawing humanity to the Divine self in the Holy Spirit”.<sup>25</sup> It is, therefore, a personal invitation by God, out of love, addressed to the individual in faith to enter into a new life of fellowship with himself.<sup>26</sup> In other words, revelation is an action of God, who out of the abundance of his love, communicates self to people through Christ for the purpose of offering and giving humans a share in the divine nature.<sup>27</sup>

*Distinguish between universal (natural) and special (supernatural) revelation.* Universal revelation involves the primary communication of God to persons that takes place, in the experience of faith, through contact with creation, human existence, and other people.<sup>28</sup> It is universal because it does not depend on a particular place in the world, or time in history.<sup>29</sup> Evidence for universal revelation is given in the Scriptures – for example, Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:19-20, and Acts 14:17.<sup>30</sup> This universal revelation gives rise to basic religious faith – hinted at by Augustine: “the heart is restless till it finds its rest in thee (God)” and by Aquinas’ “instinct of faith” which is graciously endowed upon every human spirit.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, special or supernatural revelation occurred in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ. The Israelites came to know God through their experience of history. God had initiated their history in the past, and then led them forth in hope, with promises for the future.<sup>32</sup> Their historical events disclosed a pattern of God being present to them as Lord of their history – their God was active, concerned, and involved.<sup>33</sup> The prophets interpreted the historical events and summarized them into basic statements of faith.<sup>34</sup> Over time, creeds and codes of behaviour were written; oral traditions were

committed to writing under the direction of the elders of the Jewish community.<sup>35</sup> From this process, the Hebrew Scriptures took form. Later, Jesus Christ became the personal revelation of God to people.

*Emphasise the christocentric character of all revelation.* Jesus Christ is the personal mediator and the fullness of God's revelation to humankind.<sup>36</sup> This revelation is first and foremost the personal revelation, or self-communication, of God – that is, Jesus is the personal expression of God to humanity.<sup>37</sup> The reality of Jesus further reveals the personal activity of God in history. As the revelation of God in the human person, Jesus is also the perfect response to God's offer of love, as well as the embodiment and bearer of God's invitation to women and men alike.<sup>38</sup> In the reality of Jesus, then, one is dealing with the personal gift of God's self.<sup>39</sup>

#### Role of Faith in Revelation

*Clarify the relationship between revelation and faith.* A fundamental unity exists between divine revelation and faith – there can be no divine revelation without the response of faith which receives it, and there can be no faith without the grace of God's revelation which draws forth faith in a person.<sup>40</sup> Without a response in faith, revelation remains at the level of an unrecognized gift and an unacknowledged invitation (that is, there is no real revelation for the individual until it has been received in faith).<sup>41</sup> A proportionate relationship, therefore, exists between the response of an individual in faith, and the content of revelation.<sup>42</sup> However, revelation is the source of religious faith – that is, faith originates out of the experience of God's power and presence in history, that is, out of revelation.<sup>43</sup> Faith, then, is always a response based on, derived from, and inspired by the

experience of the revelation of God.<sup>44</sup> In sum, one cannot separate the revelation of God to the person in experience from the faith which receives it; nor can one isolate faith from the revelation that generates it in experience.<sup>45</sup> The primacy of God's grace within the unity that exists between divine revelation and faith must be maintained.<sup>46</sup>

A theology of revelation fulfils several purposes. It shows that revelation is God's personal self-disclosure to people – and not simply a set of propositions verbally given. Revelation occurs in history, in human experience. It involves a loving relationship between God and humans. Its features are both Trinitarian and christocentric. Finally, a close link exists between revelation and faith.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, Study Edition (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1981), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Dermot Lane, *The Experience of God: An Invitation to Do Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 32-61.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 56. Lane refers to *Dei Verbum*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 57. Again, Lane refers to *Dei Verbum*.

<sup>6</sup> Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 272.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, *The Experience of God*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 267, 272.

<sup>18</sup> Lane, *The Experience of God*, 42.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 60, Lane bases this comment on *Dei Verbum*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Again, Lane is referring to *Dei Verbum*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* *Dei Verbum* is being referred to here.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 57. Lane bases this statement on the *Dei Verbum*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* Again, *Dei Verbum* is being referred to.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* From *Dei Verbum*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

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- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 45-46.  
<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 48.  
<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 48-49.  
<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 49.  
<sup>35</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 57-58. Lane is referring to *Dei Verbum* here.  
<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 53-54.  
<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 53.  
<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 54.  
<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 57, 38.  
<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 39.  
<sup>42</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>43</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 41.  
<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 39-40.  
<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 40.

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