

The Nature of Revelation

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I wish to argue against the widespread view that divine revelation does not consist in a set of propositions. I think that I can show conclusively that a non-propositional view of revelation cannot be reconciled with Christianity.

I

What are propositions? I cannot do better than quote from Natham Salmon and Scott Soames:

... If you utter the words 'Snow is white' and a French speaker utters the words 'La neige est blanche', there is some sense in which both of you say the same thing despite your having used different words. This thing that both of you said is a proposition: the proposition that snow is white. When uttering or writing a declarative sentence (in a given context) one asserts (or records) a piece of information, which is the semantic information content of the sentence (in the context). Since they are the contents of declarative sentences—and what one asserts in uttering declarative sentences—propositions are the sorts of things that are true or false. But making true or false assertions is not the only thing we do with propositions. We also bear cognitive attitudes towards them. Propositions are what we believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgement about. When you fear that you will fail or hope that you will succeed, when you venture a guess or feel certain about something, the object of your attitude is a proposition. That is what propositions are.¹

The first two characterizations of propositions given here—as the content of declarative sentences, and as the bearers of truth—are obviously right. The third characterization, however, might be rejected by readers unaware of the philosophical rationale for it. Why they might ask, should it be that propositions are the objects of cognitive attitudes like believing or hoping? Is it not more plausible to say that it is realities that are believed in, hoped for, and so on, instead of propositions?

Suppose that Bill believes that Aristotle is the author of the *Posterior Analytics*. Bill's knowledge of ancient history is spotty, however, and he does not know that Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander. He therefore does not believe that the teacher of Alexander wrote the *Posterior Analytics*. It is obviously possible for this sort of thing to happen. But if the *reality* of Aristotle's being the teacher of Alexander were the object of

Bill's belief, it would not be possible. Since Aristotle and the teacher of Alexander are one and the same person, the reality of Aristotle's being the author of the *Posterior Analytics* is the same as the reality of the teacher of Alexander being the author of the *Posterior Analytics*. If the object of Bill's belief were the reality, believing that Aristotle is the author of the *Posterior Analytics* would be the same as believing that the teacher of Alexander is the author of the *Posterior Analytics*, and he could not have one belief without the other. Since he *can* have the one belief without the other, however the reality cannot be the object of his belief. The object of his belief is a proposition.

The same kind of reasoning can be applied to cognitive attitudes other than belief. Suppose that Susan is lost in the desert, and that she hopes she will find water to drink. Her hoping that she will find water to drink does not mean that she hopes to find a compound of two hydrogen and one oxygen atoms at a temperature of between 0 and 100 celsius, even though that compound and water are one and the same reality. She might be ignorant of the constitution of water, and thus feel no hope for the compound. Indeed she might feel cruelly mocked by someone who offered her a compound to drink, when she was in desperate need of water.

Another objection to the idea that realities and not propositions are the objects of cognitive attitudes lies in the fact that cognitive attitudes need not be affected by the existence or non-existence of the realities that one might suppose were their objects. You may believe, wish or hope that your shoes are now being mended by the cobbler. What you believe, wish, or hope however, is not affected by whether or not your shoes are being mended—whether or not the state of affairs 'your shoes are actually being mended' by the cobbler. But if the reality were the object of these attitudes of yours, this could not be.

What about the fact that we frequently use expressions like 'I believe you' or 'I believe Michael', where the object of belief seems to be a person and not a proposition? The form of these expressions implies that their object is a person and not a proposition. But their actual meaning does not. When we say 'I believe you', we mean that we believe that the things you say are true. The object of this belief is a proposition. The proposition that what you say is true. There may sometimes be a further element in such expressions. We may be saying, not only that we believe what you say is true, but also that we trust you to the extent of being willing to act on the assumption that what you say is true. 'I believe you' implicitly states something about our intentions. But this implicit content does not state or imply that we have realities, and not propositions, as the objects of our beliefs.

In the light of all this, we can now try to evaluate the non-propositional theory of revelation, which can be put like this: (A) Divine revelation does not consist in propositions and has nothing to do with propositions. Grave objections to this view suggest themselves at once. We can list them thus:

- If something can be expressed in language, it is a proposition. So, if revelation does not consist in propositions, it cannot be expressed in language. If it cannot be expressed in language, it cannot be transmitted through preaching, and it cannot be contained in Holy Scripture. But, as Christians, we want to say that revelation *is* contained in Holy Scripture.
- If something is or can be true or false, it is a proposition. If revelation is not propositional, then it cannot be said to be true. But we want to say that revelation is true.
- If revelation is not propositional, it cannot be the object of cognitive attitudes. It cannot be believed, disbelieved, doubted, known, hoped for or feared. We want to say, though, that revelation can be and is the object of some or all of these attitudes.

If we put these objections together, we see that the non-propositional view leaves revelation completely vacuous. (A) is therefore untenable.

It seems likely that theologians who deny that revelation is propositional do not entirely grasp what propositions are. I say this because such theologians rarely seem to anticipate the above objections and defend themselves against them, obvious though they are. I also say it because some of the commonest arguments against a propositional view of revelation are based on misconceptions about propositions. Consider, for example the position adopted by Fr Avery Dulles in his article 'The Symbolic Structure of Revelation'.

Fr Dulles characterizes propositions in two ways. First, he defines 'propositional speech' as 'conceptual language that is amenable to syllogistic logic'.² He then goes on to contrast a propositional theory of revelation with a symbolic theory, which maintains that divine revelation is given in symbolic form. Propositions and symbolic expressions are thus seen as different and mutually exclusive. Here Fr Dulles is adopting a position he put forward in 1964, when he wrote: 'The mutual discourse of persons is normally accomplished more through symbolism than through propositional speech.'³

Having thus described propositions, he argues against a propositional view of revelation in this way. Revelation is contained in Holy Scripture; much of Holy Scripture is expressed symbolically and is not amenable to syllogistic reasoning; therefore, much of revelation is not propositional.

This argument would be a good one, if Fr Dulles's characterizations of propositions were not mistaken. A proposition is not the same thing as a literal statement. Symbolic and metaphorical statements can be expressed in language, can be true or false and can be the objects of cognitive attitudes; they are therefore propositions. This is true, whether or not it is always possible for the propositional content of symbolic and metaphorical statements to be put in literal terms.⁴

Nor should we suppose that propositions must be amenable to syllogistic logic. There are many perfectly good propositions that cannot be adequately dealt with by syllogistic methods; the existence of such

propositions is one of the things that led to the development of modern logic. However, to say no more than this might not be fair to Fr Dulles. I suspect that what he had in mind when characterizing propositions as statements amenable to syllogistic logic, was that propositions are the sort of statements that can be used in *deductive* logic; and that he thought of deductive and syllogistic logic as amounting to the same thing.⁵ But if we change Fr Dulles's argument so as to express this thought, the argument no longer works. Instead of saying 'Not all of Holy Scripture can be expressed in syllogistic terms, therefore not all of revelation can be expressed in syllogistic terms, therefore not all of revelation is propositional', the argument will run 'Not all of revelation can be expressed in deductive logic, therefore not all of revelation is propositional'. The trouble with this argument is that modern deductive logic (sentential or propositional logic) can be applied to any statement that is true or false. Any revelation that cannot have a deductive logic applied to it will indeed be non-propositional, since it will be neither true nor false. But it is pointless to suppose that such vacuous revelation exists.

Most critics of a propositional view of revelation often advance an argument like this. 'Propositions are abstract; but the things with which revelation deals are not abstract—they are realities, like Christ and God. Therefore, revelation cannot consist in propositions.'

This argument confuses propositions with the things they are about. It may well be that propositions are abstract objects—this is a philosophical question that need not be answered here. But if they are abstract objects, it does not follow that the things they are about are abstracts. The fact that a proposition about the Red Sea is an abstract object does not entail that the Red Sea is an abstract object. There is thus no objection to revelation being made up of propositions, which are abstract, and yet dealing with realities.

II

So a non-propositional view of revelation faces insuperable difficulties, and the main arguments in its favour are based on misconceptions. But defenders of the non-propositional view could retreat to a more defensible position, if they are willing to abandon some of their ground. They could say something like this:

'I admit that you have refuted what might be called the naive non-propositional view, which was set out in (A) above; the view that revelation does not consist in a set of propositions, and has nothing to do with propositions. The naive non-propositional view does indeed leave revelation vacuous, as you say. But it is possible to present a different, sophisticated non-propositional view, which is not open to the charge of vacuousness, and in fact is a better expression of what non-propositional theorists want to say than the naive view is. The sophisticated view is this: (B) God's revelation does not consist in his communicating propositions to

humans, but in his bringing about certain events, and/or his inducing certain experiences in people. The events and experiences brought about are revelation proper. (We assume that the events brought about do not consist in the communication of propositions to humans; otherwise the difference between the sophisticated non-propositional view will collapse.) Humans observe the events and/or have the experiences that are revelation; they then formulate propositions about them and pass on the propositions to others. For those people who do not personally observe the events or have the experiences, the propositions formulated about them are the only access to revelation; but they are not revelation itself.'

Before we try to judge the sophisticated non-propositional view, the propositional view of revelation, which it is competing against should be formulated precisely. We can name it (C); (C) God's revelation consists in his communicating propositions to humans . He may also reveal himself through other acts; but these other acts are only part of revelation if he also reveals propositions that give the import of these acts.

(C) is not meant to include any position on what might be called the mechanisms of inspiration, that is on the way in which God communicates propositions. He might do so by causing his prophets to hear voices, to see fiery letters in the sky, to have certain ideas come into their heads, etc., etc.,—it only maintains that He *does* somehow communicate them. (C) is also somewhat broader than what might be called a pure propositional view. A pure propositional view would say that propositions and only propositions count as revelation; it would deny that revelation includes any of God's acts, aside from the ones in which He communicates propositions. Christian and Catholic teachings are better expressed by (C) than by a pure propositional view. But propositions are still the main thing about revelation, according to (C); they are what confer the status of revelation on God's acts, so that knowledge of the propositions is the means by which we are given the part of divine revelation that consists in acts.

One possible objection to (C) was set out by the nineteenth century writer Johann Sebastian von Drey, as reported in James T. Burtchaell's *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810*. Drey seemed to think that God would destroy human freedom by communicating propositions to men. 'Philosophically, he would not accept that words or even ideas could be planted in the human mind without being actively produced in that mind.'⁶ But this is a weak objection. No-one supposes that their freedom is destroyed or that the faculties of their mind are violated, when they have a proposition communicated to them by another human—when, for instance, someone tells them that it is now two o'clock, or that the Second World War began in 1939. Why should they suppose that this happens when they a proposition communicated to them by God? There is just no constraint involved in the act of communicating something. Drey, it seems, was led to this opinion by a certain view of the way of communicating revealed propositions, of the mechanism of inspiration,

which held that God communicated propositions by taking over the actions of His prophets and using them like puppets, rather like the way the priestess was supposed to be possessed by the Delphic Oracle. This would indeed be an infringement of freedom, but there is no reason why a believer in propositional revelation should accept it.

No other objections to (C) suggest themselves, aside from this rather bad one. But (B), the sophisticated non-propositional position, faces serious sceptical objections from a Catholic point of view and from a general Christian point of view. To see how these objections arise, we should bring out a consequence of the traditional, propositional view of revelation. God is held to be all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good. From this it follows that (1) He cannot lie (2) He cannot be mistaken, and (3) that any propositions He communicates must be the very proposition He intended to communicate; He cannot be frustrated in His efforts to communicate something, as a being of limited power might be. These three facts mean that if God communicates a proposition, then it is true.

For the sophisticated non-propositional theorist, however, this sort of reasoning cannot be made. God does not communicate propositions, he just brings about experiences and events. The propositions through which we have access to these events and experiences are formulated by humans, and humans can be mistaken. It is quite possible, therefore, to hold that the propositions that tell us about revelation are false. It is no good to say that God guides people so that they do not, in fact, formulate false propositions about revelation. This amounts to saying that God reveals propositions in a roundabout way, through the medium of the people He guides to affirm true propositions about revelation. If we deny that God communicates propositions, we must accept that it is possible for the propositions that describe revelation to be false, framed, as they are, by humans who are capable of being mistaken.

But this leads to sceptical consequences that are unacceptable from a Catholic point of view. The Catholic Church holds that there are certain propositions that are infallibly taught by the Church. To profess the Catholic faith, it is necessary to believe all these propositions. If you reject even one of them, you no longer have the faith, and are not a Catholic. This proposition cannot be maintained, however, if one accepts the sophisticated non-propositional view. Since the view implies that the propositions that give us access to revelation can be false, it follows that there can be no infallible teachings. For an infallible teaching is simply a proposition infallibly stated by the Church to be true, because revealed.⁷ An infallibly taught proposition cannot be false—that is what infallibility consists in. But the sophisticated non-propositional view implies that the propositions that give us access to revelation *can* be false, even if they all happen to be true, because they are of human, and not of divine, origin. And if there are no infallible teachings, it becomes unreasonable to demand inner assent to all the teachings previously thought to be infallible, since it is possible for at least some of those teachings to be false.

We thus have an objections to the sophisticated view, (B), from a Catholic standpoint. If (B) is true, then Catholicism is false. But Catholicism is not false, therefore (B) is false. One might, of course, deny that the Catholic Church is infallible. But the view that the Catholic Church can teach infallibly has been an integral part of its beliefs, ever since the beginning. Because the view is so central to Catholicism, it could not be removed without the Catholic faith becoming something entirely different—without its ceasing, in fact, to be Catholic. The Catholic Church's rejecting infallibility would be like the Communist party's rejecting materialism and affirming the divine right of kings—in doing so, it would cease to be Communist; affirmation of materialism and rejection of the divine right of kings can be said to be essential to Communism, just as the doctrine of infallibility can be said to be essential to Catholicism.

A non-Catholic might, however, feel quite uncomfortable with this sceptical argument. A Protestant believer in (B) could simply think that it demonstrates that one ought not to be a Catholic. But (B) can be used to construct another sceptical argument, that undermines not only Catholicism but also the central tenets of Christianity.

The outline of such an argument can be found in an objection of the Anglican divine Tillotson, to the doctrine of transubstantiation. David Hume gives this account of Tillotson's objection:

There is in Dr Tillotson's writings, an argument against the *real presence*, which is as concise, and elegant, and strong as any argument can possibly be supposed against a doctrine, so little worthy of serious refutation. It acknowledged on all hands, says that learned prelate, that the authority, either of scripture or of tradition, is founded merely in the testimony of the apostles, who were eye-witnesses of the miracles of our Saviour, by which he proved his divine mission. Our evidence, then, for the truth of the Christian religion is less than the evidence for the truth of our senses; because, even in the first authors of our religion, it was no greater; and it is evident it must diminish in passing from them to their disciples; nor can anyone rest such confidence in their testimony, as in the immediate object of his senses. But a weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger; and therefore, were the doctrine ever so clearly revealed in scripture, it were directly contrary to the rules of just reasoning to give our assent to it. It contradicts sense, though both the scripture and the tradition, on which it is supposed to be built, carry not such evidence with them as sense; when they are considered merely as external evidences, and are not brought home to everyone's breast, by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit. Nothing is so convenient as a decisive argument of this kind, which must at least *silence* the most arrogant bigotry and superstition, and free us from their impertinent solicitations.⁸

To paraphrase Hume, I flatter myself that I have discovered an argument of a like nature to Tillotson's, which can demonstrate that the sophisticated non-propositional view cannot be reconciled with Christianity. Tillotson argues like this:

- The grounds for believing revelation are weaker than the evidence of our senses.
- The doctrine of the real presence contradicts the evidence of our senses; so, the grounds for disbelieving the doctrine are as strong as the grounds for accepting the evidence of our senses.
- Thus it is more probable that revelation is mistaken, than that the doctrine is true; so we ought not to believe the doctrine, even if we think it is contained in revelation.

Given his premises, Tillotson's argument is obviously sound. But the sophisticated non-propositional view implies the first of his premises. From this premise, we can construct sceptical arguments like Tillotson's, which are directed, not against transubstantiation, but against a central doctrine of Christianity—the Incarnation.

The sophisticated non-propositional view implies that the grounds for believing revelation are not only weaker, but considerably weaker, than the grounds for accepting the evidence of our senses. According to it, revelation proper consists in events and experiences. The recipients of revelation proper—call them the prophets and the Apostles—observe these events and have these experiences, and then formulate propositions about them, which they pass on to the rest of us through means such as Holy Scripture. But this means that revelation as we receive it is open to error in a threefold way.

- The prophets' and Apostles' observations of events could have been mistaken, and their experiences could have been delusory.
- They could have formulated wrong or misleading propositions about the events and experiences.
- The testimony that passed the propositions from the prophets and apostles to ourselves could have garbled them.

Keeping these possible sources of error in mind, let us first consider just one key Christian doctrine—that of the Incarnation.

The doctrine of the Incarnation states that Jesus Christ is divine; is the Second Person of the Trinity. This means that Christ has the attributes of divinity; such attributes as omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness. If we accept that revelation is non-propositional, we must accept that the events and experiences that make up revelation proper establish this doctrine. We cannot say that the doctrine is known because it is communicated by God, since that would mean admitting propositional revelation. This means that we cannot know it was true because Christ told us it was true; because Christ's telling us it was true *would* be a divine communication of propositions, since Christ is divine.

If the doctrine of the Incarnation is not based on Christ's word, what is it based on? What would be the observed events and experiences that

would justify us in maintaining that Christ was divine, i.e. that he was omnipotent, omniscient and so forth? They would have to be the observations and experiences of what Christ did, as opposed to what he said. Through observing the power, knowledge and goodness of Christ, the receivers of revelation (the apostles and early Christians) would have come to the conclusion that Christ was omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good, that is, that he was divine; these observations are the basis for the doctrine of the Incarnation.

But this raises a problem. If we are to know Christ is divine, we must know that he is omnipotent and omniscient. But (if we accept the non-propositional view) Christ's power and knowledge could never justify us in holding him to be omnipotent and omniscient, and it could thus never justify us in holding that he is divine.

Consider what omniscience and omnipotence are. Omnipotence is (roughly) the greatest possible degree of causal power, the power to do anything that is logically possible. Omniscience is the knowledge of all true propositions. Neither of these attributes could have been manifested in the acts of Christ that the Apostles and early Christians witnessed. Why not? Because the Apostles and early Christians, being finite beings, could not have witnessed Christ doing every logically possible action. Nor could they have experienced his knowing every true proposition, since there are an infinite number of true propositions. They could only have observed him exercising limited powers and manifesting limited knowledge, no matter how great that power and knowledge might have been. Since they could only observe Christ's having limited power and knowledge, they could only be justified in attributing limited power and knowledge to him—they could not be justified in attributing the infinite properties of omniscience and of omnipotence; and that means that they could not be justified in holding him to be divine. Thus, if you base revelation on observations and experiences, as the sophisticated non-propositional view does, you cannot be justified in believing the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The key point in the above reasoning is the contention that you cannot be justified in attributing limitless power and knowledge to a thing, solely on the basis of its having demonstrated limited powers. If anyone denies this, they should think about the consequences of their denial. They say that the power and knowledge shown by Christ is enough to justify us in holding that he is divine. But that means that we should hold anyone else with equal or greater power and knowledge to be divine. Think, for example, of the Curé of Ars, Saint John Vianney. There is a great deal of evidence for his showing extraordinary powers, such as healing the sick, and knowing facts unavailable to him through human means. True, he did not raise from the dead, but then the evidence for his powers often consists in the written testimony of eyewitnesses; and the evidence for Christ's extraordinary powers, for his miracles and resurrection comes through much less reliable channels. We thus have as good grounds for attributing such powers to Christ—if not better ones. Yet no-one thinks of holding

Saint John Vianney to be divine.

It is not clear, either, why we should require extraordinary powers as evidence of divinity, if we are to admit any finite powers at all as evidence of divinity. Both great and insignificant finite powers are infinitely less than infinite powers, so when you advance from insignificant powers to great ones, you have not got substantially closer to infinite powers. The possession of insignificant powers should thus be about as good evidence for divinity as the possession of great powers is —if we are to allow finite powers to count as evidence for divinity at all. But this consequence is absurd.

It is thus correct to say that the manifestation of finite powers is, by itself, no evidence for divinity. Since this is so, the experiences of the Apostles and the early Christians cannot be used to justify the doctrine of the Incarnation; and we should reject this doctrine, if we believe that revelation is non-propositional.

III

In section II above, it was shown that if we accept the sophisticated non-propositional view of revelation, we cannot hold on to the doctrine of the Incarnation. But this amounts to a *reductio ad absurdum* of the non-propositional view. If we must reject the doctrine of the Incarnation we must reject Christianity, and a view of revelation that makes Christianity untenable is useless for a Christian.

We might well ask at this stage; what would be the point of God's giving revelation in the form envisaged by the non-propositional thesis? Why would anyone want to suppose that revelation would be of this nature?

Even on the sophisticated non-propositional view, most people would only receive revelation in the form of propositions. They would not benefit from revelation coming in the form of events and experiences, since revelation as they experience it would be the same— would be propositions. The only difference would be, that the propositions would be more uncertain if the original revelation consisted in events and experiences, than they would be if the original revelation was propositional.

If anyone is to benefit from revelation coming in the form of events and experiences, then, it must be the persons who originally received the events and experiences. But why should they benefit?

The purpose of revelation, we may take it, is to enable people to save their souls. It does this by telling them what to believe and how to act. Revelation is given so that people can believe it and act on it. But to decide what to believe and how to act, the original recipients of revelation must figure out its purport, what it says about the world and about the moral law; that is, they have to figure out the propositions it points to. These propositions are what perform the function of revelation, the function of

bringing souls to God. Since it is only these propositions that perform the function of revelation, giving revelation in the form of events and experiences would be useless even for original recipients of revelation. They could not benefit from revelation being given in this way; they could only be harmed, because the necessary message of salvation could be obscured through God's giving revelation in that form. Since it would be useless for God to give revelation in the form of events and experiences, there is no reason to suppose that God would do so.

We can now sum up the results of this investigation of the theory that revelation is non – propositional. The naive non – propositional theory we saw to be quite impossible. The sophisticated theory should be rejected on two counts;

i) it would be pointless for God to give revelation in such a form, and
ii) if it was given in such a form, we could no longer be justified in accepting the doctrine of the Incarnation, and we would have to abandon Christianity.

Since no form of the non-propositional theory can succeed, we can conclude that revelation is propositional.

- 1 Nathan Salmon and Scott Soames (eds.), *Propositions and Attitudes*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1988), p. 1.
- 2 A. Dulles, 'The Symbolic Structure of Revelation', *Theological Studies* Vol. 41 (1980), p. 52.
- 3 A. Dulles, 'The Theology of Revelation', *Theological Studies*, Vol. 25 (1964), p. 57.
- 4 I think it is always possible for the propositional content of symbolic and metaphorical statements to be put in literal terms, for reasons given by William Alston in his paper 'Irreducible Metaphors in Theology', collected in his *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1989).
- 5 I do not mean 'deductive logic' to be understood here in the Aristotelian sense of reasoning that runs from the universal to the particular. Rather, I mean the logic that deals with arguments whose premises, if true, make their conclusions certainly true; as opposed to inductive logic, which deals with arguments whose premises, if true, only make their conclusions probably true.
- 6 Fr. James T. Burchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810: A Review and a Critique* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1969), p. 13.
- 7 *Lumen Gentium* §25.
- 8 David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1975), pp. 109–10.

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