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THE PRIORITY OF DIVINE REVELATION: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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To an historically given divine revelation Judaism and Christianity trace their confidence that a sovereign personal God is the creator of the universe and the absolute source of meaning and value. This revelation, in contrast to finite human speculation and naturally acquired knowledge about reality, they consider a permanently valid divine disclosure reaching back to ancient patriarchal and prophetic times.

The whole edifice of Christian doctrine—the Church's good news for the world and its assurance of man's redemption and final destiny—presupposes, as Emil Brunner puts it, that divine revelation is "the ground and norm, as well as the content" of the Christian message.[1] "With the reality of revelation," said Herman Bavinck, "Christianity stand or falls. . . . The science of the knowledge of God stands on the reality of his revelation."[2]

Avery Dulles notes that the term revelation "does not appear in the creeds" and "is not central in the Scriptures."[3] But he insists that "the idea of revelation is pervasive in the Bible and in the theology of the early centuries."[4] The acceptance of revelation he considers "of fundamental importance to the Christian faith" and foundational to Judeo-Christian theology, to the Church's mission, and to the Christian's individual spiritual life.[5]

Revelation is in fact a core doctrine of the Bible. Without it the entire Scriptural message would lose its authority. Furthermore the doctrine holds an important place in the patristic writers, a point conceded even by F. Gerald Downing,[6] who contends unjustifiably that the conception of divine revelation lacks Biblical basis. The goal of the Bible, Downing stresses, is human obedience, not a communication of divine knowledge calling for intellectual assent.[7] But this overlooks the fact that Scripture as its proximate purpose transmits revealed infor-

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[1]E. Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946) 3.

[2]H. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 20.

[3]A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) ix.

[4]Ibid., pp.3-4.

[5]Ibid., p. 4.

[6]F. G. Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).

[7]Ibid., p. 46.

mation about God's will and purpose. Dulles rightly asks, "How could we obey a God who had not made his will known? . . . How could we proclaim salvation by a God who had not manifested himself as our Savior?"[8] Nor does the fact that Biblical writers await God's future end-time revelation exclude—as Downing contends, prophetic and Christocentric disclosure, since Scripture expressly speaks of God's revelation by the prophets and supremely in Jesus.

Dulles notes that prior to the sixteenth century Biblical theologians "rarely used the term 'revelation' in the modern sense" of an action that makes something "a matter of divine and Christian faith." The older authors usually applied the Greek term *apokalypsis* or Latin term *revelatio* to such psychic phenomena as visions and auditions.[9] But scholastic theologians in the fourteenth century to some extent and still more in the sixteenth century used the term less of a specific divine action than for "an objective deposit of truth which Christians accepted as simply given to the Church." Catholicism identified this content with what the Catholic Church taught in the name of Christ; Protestants identified it with the Holy Scriptures. Theologians consequently focused more on the disputed content of revelation than on revelation as a divine activity.

The enlightenment provoked many volumes that declared divine revelation the presupposition of every Biblical doctrine. When deists contended that man could by unaided reason attain all the essential truths of revelation, Protestants and Catholics—despite differences about natural theology and the content of revelation—together insisted that special supernatural revelation must not be disowned. Twentieth-century Protestant theologians, including B. B. Warfield, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and the present writer no less, have written vigorously and extensively on the subject. After Vatican II similarly made revelation a major concern, Roman Catholic theologians too began to address the theme.

The Christian doctrine is that the living personal God directly and objectively manifests himself by intelligible words, commands and acts. God's redemptive revelation is given once for all at definite times and places, but he also is continually disclosed in nature and history and in and to the mind and conscience of man universally. The inspired Biblical writings present us with logically consistent and supernaturally authoritative teaching, authenticated by miracle and by fulfilled prophecy. The prophetic and apostolic divine revelation, now complete, and the pre-eschatological revelation given in Jesus Christ, and the content of this revelation, gathered up for us in the Bible, as B. B. Warfield said, now serve as God's full and final revelation.[10] The historic Christian view is that revelation is given in the form of verbal truths inerrantly conveyed in the inspired prophetic-apostolic writings.

In recent modern times critical philosophy, sociology and psychology have mounted a variety of philosophical objections to the possibility of divine revelation. Critical theologians exaggerated their divergent theories and idiosyncratic views into a basis for skepticism. Radical theologians affirmed that revelation is

[8]Dulles, *Models* 12.

[9]Ibid., p. 19.

[10]B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Oxford University, 1927) 48.

unnecessary to Christianity and rested Biblical religion on other epistemic grounds. Some critics dismissed revelation as sheer speculative myth, although certain humanists spoke instead of religio-mythological revelation.

The traditional view of revelation was repudiated on a wide variety of conflicting assumptions. Some representative objections are noted below:

(1) James P. Mackey categorizes revelation as "metaphorical or mythical description," a second-order language that creatively postulates divine authority.[11] Similar explanation of all reality in terms of natural processes and events is characteristic of atheism, naturalism and humanism.

(2) Others restrict human cognition to phenomena. The human mind assertedly cannot acknowledge or verify metaphysical realities (Kant; logical positivism).

(3) The transcendent is experienced only through symbols that suggest to consciousness what lies wholly outside man's capacity to describe or define in logical categories (Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Ricoeur, Langdon Gilkey).

(4) The human mind cognizes only under finite limitations and conditions that preclude objective knowledge.

(5) The transcendent authoritarian character of divine revelation would objectionably undermine human freedom. Karl Jaspers therefore declares: "I myself cannot but hold with Kant that if revelation were a reality it would be calamitous for man's created freedom."[12] Barth criticizes such existentialist projection of a "magnitude known as transcendence" that exercises no "specific power and authority," nor "has a specific will, nor accomplishes a specific act, nor speaks a specific word" and that really is "an illusionary reflection of human freedom" projected "into the vacuum of utter abstraction."[13]

(6) All religious truth is attainable by unaided human reason (deists; evolutionists).

(7) Conflicting miracle-claims of the world religions cancel out each other. In view of such divergent claims, can Biblical religion credibly insist that it is revelationally unique?

(8) Religion is a mechanism that oppressive forces employ to suppress dissent. Marx declared religion an opiate of the masses, an instrumentality that capitalism uses to exploit and dull the moral protest of the worker class. Marxism has itself recently used ecclesiastical fronts to promote its own positions in the arms race.

The rise of naturalistic and idealistic philosophies and of liberal theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a questioning of revelation as a permanently valid body of divinely revealed truths and gave currency to nonpropositional theories of revelation. Mediating theologians eagerly restated the inherited doctrine. Some modern scholars willingly retained the term "revelation" only when evacuated of virtually everything that made it distinctive in Judeo-

[11]J. P. Mackey, *Problems in Religious Faith* (Dublin: Helicon, 1972) 19-21.

[12]K. Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation* (New York: Harper, 1967) 8.

[13]K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961) 479.

Christian theology. As they reconceived it, revelation was no longer a divine cognitive communication of literal truth.

The oracular form "God says," it was suggested, has its basis either in a heightened state of prophetic consciousness or in the literary adoption of a "messenger" preface. Emphasizing that interpersonal divine disclosure evokes volitional response, Barth's dialectical theology held that the truth of revelation is not propositional. Barth's disciple Brunner declared that God can speak his word even through false doctrine.[14] The existentialist Rudolph Bultmann stressed likewise that revelation communicates no doctrines or truths.[15]

The ecumenically-oriented theologian, Ray L. Hart, declared in 1968 that "no proposition would gain wider acceptance than the following one: the *content* of revelation is not a body of propositions to be accepted as the condition of faith."[16] Even if Hart's statement was less than historically accurate in view of the growing revolt against dialectical and existential theories and a firming emphasis on propositional disclosure, it reflected the insistent commitment of many neo-Protestants and neo-Catholics to nonpropositional alternatives. Revelation they no longer considered a transcendent disclosure that gave the meaning of revelatory events and provided valid truths about God's nature and purposes.

As alternatives to the traditional doctrine multiplied, their common element was difficult to find other than a mutually shared hostility to supernaturally revealed truths.

(1) Revelation was by some scholars considered an immanent and necessary aspect of the human mind's progress toward metaphysical truth or knowledge of the Absolute (Fichte, Hegel). This view canceled the inherited Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant conception of revelation as supernatural knowledge gratuitously given by transcendent divine initiative.

(2) Some critical scholars abandoned the appeal to Biblical miracle and prophecy as proof of revelation on the ground that natural and historical continuity precludes such divine intervention. They shifted the case for divine revelation instead to personal experience and held that the notion of transcendent rational revelation must also give way. Revelation was regarded as a private experience of communion with God. The existentialist Jaspers declared himself open to a liberal view that revelation is not a permanently fixed divine deposit but rather regards "the revelation of truth" as "a mystery, a series of sudden illuminations in the history of the mind," some of whose elements "have not yet been comprehended."[17]

(3) Revelation, said others, is essentially an inner subconscious experience, largely pathological, involving hallucinations, visions and auditions.

(4) Revelation was centered by others in historical acts of God, an external divine activity manifest especially or exclusively in Biblical history. G. Ernest Wright, John Baillie, and numerous others championed the view that divine rev-

[14]E. Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 137.

[15]R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (New York: Meridian, 1960) 85.

[16]R. L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968) 86.

[17]K. Jaspers and R. Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity* (New York: Noonday, 1958) 41.

elation occurs in divine acts rather than in words. David Kelsey holds that this insistence on historical revelation dominated all others in the period from 1935 to 1976.[18] James Barr surmised a decade earlier that future "historians of theology will look back on the mid-twentieth century and call it the revelation-in-history period," although he conceded that prior to nineteenth-century concentration on history this overwhelmingly historical orientation would not have emerged.[19]

(5) Revelation was declared paradoxical, so that it confronts man with cognitive antitheses that can be bridged only by a volitional leap of faith (Kierkegaard, Barth).

(6) Revelation was declared a form of myth, story or metaphor. The virgin birth of Jesus and his bodily resurrection are here considered nonfactual poetic representations. Jaspers holds in one work that God is merely a cipher for transcendence, not a personal being who speaks and acts in history.[20]

(7) Avery Dulles thinks divine disclosure was originally communicated in "symbolic" form. Revelation, he writes, is "given and transmitted by symbolic communication."[21] He holds that a symbolic view is superior to rival models of revelation.

(8) Revelation was conceived as expressing a language of moral intention rather than conveying information about God as a metaphysical reality. Reflecting the view of R. B. Braithwaite, F. Gerald Downing holds that creedal statements about God and Christ and the Holy Spirit are to be understood as "a declaration of intention to live 'agapeistically.'"[22]

(9) Revelation is private awareness of what we perceive or experience as holy and ultimate and conceptually interpret variantly in terms of differing cultural categories.[23]

(10) Revelation is equated with a perspectival shift or restructured consciousness that enlarges man's participation in divine creativity.

Dulles summarizes the current theological scene in terms of six major types of revelatory emphasis: doctrinal, historical, experiential, dialectical, new consciousness, and symbolical. Mediating theories borrow some aspects of one or another of these models. Although Dulles espouses the symbolic view, he is critical of symbolic theories that make revelation noncognitive.

Dulles views the Bible as Word of God not in the evangelical or traditional scholastic sense of divinely revealed truths but rather

> in the sense that it symbolically expresses and mediates the faith whereby the biblical authors were vitally in communion with God. Through symbolic deeds recounted in symbolic language the Bible vividly depicts the mysterious manner in which God

[18]D. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 32.

[19]J. Barr in *Int* 17 (1963) 193-205.

[20]Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith* 126.

[21]Dulles, *Models* ix, 128.

[22]Downing, *Has Christianity* 185.

[23]R. Schmidt, *Exploring Religion* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1980) 117-119.

> has made himself present through historical persons and events, as well as through community interpretation. God, as symbolic cause . . . directs the process of inner-worldly causality so that certain words and events become effective signs of his loving self-communication. When human beings are caught up in the life of grace, they become living symbols through which God speaks and acts. With the help of a religious interpretation of the symbolic words and deeds of the Bible, the modern believer may enter into communication with God.[24]

The doctrinal or propositional model of revelation, Dulles grants, has a "long history" and has held "unchallenged predominance in the recent past."[25] He concedes that the propositional theory "does not lack internal coherence."[26] It provides, moreover, "firm doctrinal standards, so that the orthodoxy and heterodoxy of theological opinions can be measured with relative ease." Dulles speaks of its "striking advantages" in view of "practical fruitfulness for the unity and growth of the church," for the preservation of doctrinal orthodoxy, and for fostering "a lively sense of mission."[27]

Despite its acknowledged strengths, Dulles questions the faithfulness of the propositional view "to either Scripture or the pre-Reformation tradition."[28] What he seeks to retain from the view is an emphasis only that the clear teachings of Scripture and of the creeds have a cognitive value grounded in revelation.

Dulles' objection to propositional revelation is partly governed by patristic tradition. He denies that the propositional view was dominant in patristic times as a whole or in the Middle Ages, which often depicted revelation in "more dynamic and less verbal terms."[29] Ancient and medieval exegetes, moreover, says Dulles, did not in the main hold "the narrowly literalistic views espoused by twentieth-century conservatives." Instead "the church Fathers and their medieval followers, by and large, were open to a great variety of allegorical and spiritual interpretations that went well beyond the literal meaning of isolated propositions, and sometimes even bypassed the literal sense." We need not dispute that Origen and other Church fathers and medieval philosophers opted at times for exotic allegorical interpretations of the Bible. But this is neither representative of nor is it normative for Biblical hermeneutics. Dulles' characterization of evangelical emphasis on propositional infallibility as "narrowly" literalistic[30] has little force unless he specifies where and when and why he prefers to dissolve the literal sense of Biblical teaching. What is at stake is not "narrow" or "broad" literalism, but rather literal or nonliteral sense. Evangelicals do not contend that evidently figurative passages should be taken literally, but they do insist that revealed doctrine should not be mythologized or allegorized.

Dulles argues, further, that a regard for the Bible as "principally . . . a collection of propositions, each of which can be taken by itself as a divine assertion,"

[24]Dulles, *Models* 274.

[25]Ibid., p. 36.

[26]Ibid., p. 46.

[27]Ibid., p. 47.

[28]Ibid., p. 48.

[29]Ibid., p. 36.

[30]Ibid., p. 48.

conflicts with the Bible's apparent failure "to claim such propositional infallibility for itself."[31] A somewhat prejudiced way of stating the evangelical and neo-scholastic view here gives the impression that each and every proposition in Scripture "can be taken by itself as a divine assertion." The propositional view does indeed regard the whole body of Scripture as grounded in revelation, as verbally inspired, and as conveying divine truths in the form of revelatory sentences. But that does not necessarily imply that "every declarative sentence in the Bible, unless the contrary can be shown from the context, is to be taken as expressing a revealed truth."[32] While the evangelical view insists on the inerrancy of the whole, it does not conceive every declarative sentence as necessarily conveying revealed information. Dulles is no doubt right, however, when he observes that neo-scholastic theology multiplies the burden of belief in propositional disclosure since it adds to Scriptural inerrancy a claim for the supposed infallibility of apostolic tradition and of the Catholic magisterium.

Dulles emphasizes that critics have reclassified much of Scripture as saga, drama, and historical fiction, and even as legendary and mythical. He forfeits as "well nigh impossible" any use of the Bible as an authoritative source of historical and scientific information. If Scriptural propositions "cannot be accepted at face value, but are subject to reinterpretation," he comments, "one has already abandoned the objectivist concept of truth that underlies the propositional model."[33] But unless one embraces this whole range of critical negation, why should ever-changing critical theories be decisive in respect to Scriptural reliability?

Dulles obscures the theory's Biblical ground. He concedes that the Bible frequently depicts God as communicating messages in human language. The OT treats the Law and the Prophets as God's Word, and the NT cites many OT statements as the Word of God.[34] For all that, he grounds the propositional view in early Church fathers who, as Dulles sees it, were influenced by late Jewish rabbinical theories.

Dulles admits that "in their use of Scripture" the Church fathers and traditional theologians "show a tendency to treat individual biblical statements without reservation as the word of God. From the Reformation until the nineteenth century, both Protestants and Catholics were almost unanimous in accepting propositional views of revelation and in treating the Bible as a collection of divine oracles."[35] He concedes furthermore that the propositional conception was current in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that the Westminster Confession viewed revelation in terms of "a body of clear and distinct ideas."

James Packer insists, however, that "from the earliest days of Christianity,

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid., pp. 48-49.

[33]Ibid., p. 49.

[34]Ibid., p. 46.

[35]Ibid.

the whole church regarded the Bible as a web of revealed truths."[36] Francis Wayland, one-time president of Brown University, did not use the term "propositional revelation" but nonetheless lamented "a growing disposition to omit the proof of a revealed truth from revelation and to attempt the proof from every other source than the Bible."[37]

The emphasis on Biblical propositional revelation, Dulles holds, can be helpfully supplemented by the teaching authority of the Church and ecclesial tradition that mediates a revelation "more inclusive than the propositional teaching of Scripture."[38] Hence the Bible "is not to be regarded" too much as "an alien norm to be critically applied against ecclesiastical tradition."[39] Vatican I affirmed that "all those things are to be believed with divine and Catholic faith which are contained in the word of God, written or handed down, and which the Church proposes for belief as having been divinely revealed." If we ignore the added role assigned to tradition and to the magisterium in defining the content of revelation and focus only on what is said about Scripture—even if the Catholic canon includes apocryphal books—this is nonetheless a clear affirmation of Scriptural propositional revelation. Dulles grants that Vatican II in some respects "backed away from" the prevalent Catholic emphasis in the previous century that from 1850 to 1950 understood revelation to signify the body of propositional truth contained in Scripture and apostolic tradition.

Although the propositional view affirms that revelation cognitively interprets the special redemptive events, Dulles notes that it nonetheless is not fully committed to historical revelation since it "denies that the events of sacred history are by themselves revelation, at least for modern Christians."[40] Many champions of historical disclosure speak of history as the "primary" arena of revelation, but they do not indicate how events two or three thousand years ago "by themselves" become revelation today.

Dulles notes that William Temple and many others concede that the redemptive acts, to which they accord primacy, are not self-interpreting but require special prophetic or apostolic illumination. But in that case, Dulles asks, can primacy any longer be attached onesidedly to events? Along with many modern Catholic theologians Dulles prefers to regard revelation as "a complex reality consisting of the inspired word as the formal element and the historical event as the material element."[41] But the view that neither word nor event is revelation apart from the other, favored by Vatican II, lends itself, some critics say, to the event-character of revelation in a way that minimizes its Scriptural word-character.

[36]J. Packer, "Contemporary Views of Revelation," in *Revelation and the Bible* (ed. C. F. H. Henry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958) 90.

[37]F. Wayland, cited by J. T. Draper, Jr., *Authority* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1984) 58.

[38]Dulles, *Models* 224.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid., p. 53.

[41]Ibid., p. 66.

Dulles in fact criticizes G. Ernest Wright's emphasis on revelatory historical events[42] for not clarifying the process by which the Biblical authors moved from events to their interpretation. Since Wright considers interpretation an activity of fallible human inference, and since Wright assumes that the Biblical account of the redemptive events also comes from this fallible source, Dulles comments, can we be any more sure of the events than of their Scriptural interpretation?[43]

Theologians who have emphasized divine revelation in history have in fact disagreed over which history is revelatory. Some, like Wright, emphasize only the great Biblical redemptive acts. Oscar Cullmann too connects revelation only with "salvation history," a stream of events distinct from ordinary history, which however he declares inaccessible to historical inquiry and knowable only to faith.[44]

Wolfhart Pannenberg insists that revelation is not confined to some single strand or "ghetto" of history but is given rather in universal history. This general history, he affirms, is self-interpreting and requires no special prophetic illumination.[45] Pannenberg holds that OT events give merely a provisional revelation of the one God, a revelation later illuminated by the resurrection of Jesus, which, in the context of ancient prophecy and eschatological anticipation, must be selectively viewed as proleptic of the end of the world.[46] Pannenberg dismisses the virgin birth as legend. Other critical scholars who retain or exclude certain Biblical events discard the resurrection claims as well.

Dulles applauds the historical view for merits that really attach also to the propositional view: that it evokes deep personal response, that it attends to the great divine deeds, and that it sees the acceptance of the revelation "not as a blind leap but as a fully reasonable act."[47] Nor is it clear why he holds that propositionalism "disregards the immediacy of God's transforming presence in the minds of those open to his grace."[48] When he declares that the doctrinal theory tends "to present revelation as a body of discrete propositions all having identical values as 'revealed truths'" and on that ground tributes the historical theory as "more organic"[49] he confuses matters. While revealed truth is revealed truth, equal revelatory status need not preclude the doctrinal priority of certain truths over others, as when the apostle Paul declares supremely important his proclamation of the substitutionary death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

B. B. Warfield rightly emphasizes, moreover, that the Bible does not depict

[42]G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952) 12.

[43]Dulles, *Models* 55-56.

[44]O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper, 1967) 90-92.

[45]W. Pannenberg, *Revelation as History* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) 18-20, 135-138.

[46]Ibid., pp. 139-141.

[47]Dulles, *Models* 62.

[48]Ibid., p. 242.

[49]Ibid., p. 61.

divine revelation solely as a concomitant of redemptive historical acts. "It occupies a far more independent place among them than this," he writes, "and as frequently precedes them to prepare their way as it accompanies or follows them to interpret their meaning."[50] The Pauline letters are striking NT examples of a revelatory content directly given by the Spirit of truth. Even G. E. Wright conceded that the Biblical wisdom literature—for example Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes—constitutes a problem for the view that connects revelation only with historical acts. Dulles acknowledges, moreover, that the creation account cannot readily be viewed as a revelatory act except through the propositional model,[51] although he insists rather on the symbolic significance of the Noahic flood story (e.g. as a figure of baptism).[52]

Only a propositional intention would convey teaching about Biblical persons and about history and about God, says Dulles, yet the propositional approach "needs to be supplemented by the symbolic because the truth of the Bible is much richer than its propositional teaching."[53] The propositional view, he complains, excludes inspired images and deprives Scripture of a variety of genres.[54] He takes the Bible's use of other genres than prose (e.g. parables, stories, metaphor, symbolic-evocative communication) as demonstrating that divine revelation in symbols is also a "source of meaning and doctrine." "God communicates through symbolic realities and through the inspired images whereby believers express the meaning they have found in those realities."[55] "Revelation comes into being through symbolic persons and events and is initially expressed through symbolic forms of communication."[56]

Dulles disavows the views of Temple, Tillich and others who contend that there are no revealed doctrines at all. He grants that propositional revelation avoids "the ambiguities in symbolic communication" and regards "the teaching of the Scriptures rightly interpreted" as "an inviolable norm."[57] "God's revelation achieves itself through human concepts and words."[58] Symbolic language is not noncognitive, but it is evocative and appeals "more to tacit than to explicit reason." It can be validated by criteria applied to symbolic language, as in the interpretation of poetry.

Dulles shies away from instrumental divine causality in the writing of Scripture. He prefers the idea of marginal control, which excludes "the older inerrantism" that, he holds, "tended to fix on individual statements taken out of historical and canonical context."[59] As he sees it, the Church identifies the Bible, not vice versa. In short, "the Church is the symbolic presence of Christ, who is himself the symbolic presence of the word in human flesh. . . . The symbolic words and actions of the Church, perceived in faith, are signs and sacraments of the

[50]Warfield, *Revelation* 12-13.

[51]Dulles, *Models* 63.

[52]1 Pet 3:20-21.

[53]Dulles, *Models* 205-206.

[54]Ibid., p. 202.

[55]Ibid., p. 201.

[56]Ibid., p. 274.

[57]Ibid., p. 222.

[58]Ibid., p. 223.

[59]Ibid., p. 206.

encounter with God."[60]

Dulles suggests, moreover, that without the Church revelation is not complete. This is so, he says, because without the response of believers there would be no revelation (although prophets and apostles were prime recipients of revelation, "the church *is* revelation," albeit in dependence on the prophets and apostles and apostolic tradition).[61] The Church is "the proper symbolic environment for the actualization of the ancient patrimony."[62] "The Holy Spirit continuously active in the Church supplies" the necessary creativity to express in every age "the revelatory meaning of the earlier formulations."[63] Yet there can be extensive dialogue over the meaning of the symbols, although no conclusions will be "exempt from human and historical influences."[64] Hence we should expect only "relative stability of the doctrinal tradition."[65]

What shall we say to these things?

The symbol theory of revelation locates divine disclosure especially in the "symbolic aspect" of the Word of God. Biblical revelation is replete with symbolic elements, Dulles emphasizes, including prophetic visions and apocalyptic imagery, and not least of all the resurrection of Christ and descent of the Holy Spirit. Symbolic meaning lacks propositional definiteness; symbolic communication "always suggests more than it clearly states."[66] Norman Perrin contends, for example, that symbol stands so much in the forefront of Jesus' teaching that we can form no "clear concept or idea with a single, univocal significance" even of Jesus' representation of the kingdom of God.[67] The central themes of the prophets, apostles and Jesus, says Dulles, are clearly symbolic.[68]

Dulles recognizes that one cannot prove that revelation must be symbolic from the de facto prevalence of symbolism in Scripture. The claim rests rather on an a priori theological view of revelation.[69] He argues that symbolism gives "participatory knowledge . . . of a self-involving type" and not objective knowledge. It "has a transforming effect on the knower, evokes response," and introduces "realms of awareness not normally accessible to discursive thought."[70]

[60]Ibid., p. 227.

[61]Ibid., p. 220.

[62]ibid., p. 224.

[63]Ibid., p. 274.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid., p. 136.

[67]N. Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 33.

[68]Dulles, *Models* 135.

[69]Ibid., p. 136.

[70]Ibid., pp. 136-137.

Dulles therefore objects to the insistence of propositionalists that revelation "must impart some definite truth, or else it could not be believed."[71] "by eliciting participation, "he claims, "a symbol can convey a richer and more personal apprehension of reality in its deeper dimensions than propositional language can do."[72] Yet he concedes that the response of propositionalists that the symbolic approach "seems to imperil the truth of revelation" is "not altogether imaginary." Dulles insists, however, that there is a propositional element in revelation. He wishes to affirm the authority of the Bible and the qualified value of propositional clarifications of revelation. Yet he views propositions as inadequate substitutes for symbols and urges that we give "greater cognitive weight to symbols."[73]

Underlying this debate are competing epistemological theories. Dulles rejects both "subjectivism" and "objectivism" and, in line with Bernard Lonergan, insists that there is no way to objectivity except through subjectivity. The creative role of the knower is held to be indispensable to the knowledge situation. But unless this emphasis is objectively true it does not escape subjectivity, and if it is objectively true, is not the alternative theory of knowledge it adduces false?

Neo-Protestant theologians abandoned spoken or written words as the medium of divine revelation and looked beyond the conceptual meaning of prophetic and apostolic language. Instead, neo-orthodoxy substituted a paradoxical or dialectical witness to a supernatural reality that embraced contradictories and that could not be cognitively grasped. Religious language seeks by paradox and metaphor, it was said, to communicate what cannot be stated in conceptual structures or conveyed by direct propositional expression. The Roman Catholic doctrine of analogy somewhat anticipated this demotion of the adequacy of all human statements about God by insisting as much on the inappropriateness as on the appropriateness of any and all concepts applied to deity.

Neo-orthodoxy insisted that the content of revelation is God himself, not abstract ideas: God reveals himself, not truths about himself and his purposes. But if God's self-revelation is not rationally structured its factuality remains in doubt, for no cognitive basis would exist for distinguishing God's self from another self—e.g. man's own "higher self"—or for distinguishing selfhood from nonselfhood.

Dulles finds the unity of the Bible in God's self-expression.[74] God is personally present in redemptive grace "when the symbolic events of redemptive history are rightly interpreted and when the symbolic language of the Bible is read. . . . The various schools and writers who contribute to the biblical tradition may be seen as reflecting, always inadequately, a faith that is beyond the comprehension of any human witness."[75] Their individual statements must be read in the light of historical context and of a developing faith. Hence Dulles seems to leave their transcultural significance in midair.

Dulles rejects an historical-critical approach that reduces "everything to hard

[71]Ibid., p. 142.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Ibid., pp. 143, 207.

[74]Ibid., p. 204.

[75]Ibid., p. 206.

facts, as though the faith interpretation and the literary symbolism were unessential and misleading." At the same time he rejects the view that "since myth and symbol are revelatory, facts are never important,"[76] the role of the Biblical words is not to serve as symbols whose impact is purely existential.

Such statements are so broad that they settle little in terms of Biblical specifics. Dulles refuses to subordinate the historical to the symbolic. He holds that the facts themselves (e.g. the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus) are often the most powerful symbols and avoids using the term "myth" with reference to Biblical revelation. Yet although he concedes in passing that "passages such as 2 Peter 1:16 [on the nonmythical character of the transfiguration] can occasionally be found," he writes that "the biblical authors, to be sure, are not greatly concerned with drawing a precise line between history and parable, literal statement and metaphor."[77]

Dulles commends Tillich's view that "the symbolic language of Scripture arises out of revelatory experience and that such language can induce revelatory experiences in those who read in faith." He says revelatory symbols are "not pure creations" of human imagination but presuppose the persons, events and other realities whereby God brings the Church into being. On the basis of his self-manifestation God inspires believers to construct images helpful for understanding and communicating.[78] Revelatory symbols have a twofold truth, the affirmation of what is antecedently real and a "symbolic truth" that is linked to transformed consciousness.[79]

The implications are apparent: "Revelation does not initially occur in the form of propositions" nor can it be "adequately transposed into any determinate set of propositions. The statements in Scripture and tradition represent valid though limited aspects of revelation as seen from a particular point of view."[80] Yet revelation is "not an unintelligible word" and its meaning "does not change so radically from one age to another as to contradict the previous meaning."[81] It has "cognitive value" expressible "to some extent in true propositions." The revelatory symbols of Scripture evoke participation and communion with God, who speaks and acts through them. "The word is an event as well as a content, and the word-event succeeds all that can be said about it in clear propositional speech."[82]

The emphasis on symbolic revelation presupposes that revelation communicates more than can be conveyed in clear concepts and that doctrine has a dynamic aspect that propositional revelation denies. In T. F. Torrance's words,

[76]Ibid., p. 207.

[77]Ibid.

[78]Ibid., p. 266.

[79]Ibid., p. 267.

[80]Ibid.

[81]Ibid., p. 268.

[82]Ibid., p. 269.

dogmas are genuinely cognitive and yet are "fluid axioms."[83] Dulles concurs: "Far from being a fixed object in the world revelation involves a mysterious personal encounter with Transcendence. It invites exploration and is always susceptible of deeper penetration."[84]

Dulles assigns symbols a cognitive value beyond that of propositional truths, which, he emphasizes, are always framed in human concepts and language.[85] Symbolic events or language can integrate data that might otherwise seem disconnected or incompatible.[86] In this "dimension or component of mental activity elicited by God's self-presentation through symbolic mediation, the human mind may transcend itself in affirming, in a humanly conditioned way, the very thing that God is manifesting to it."[87] "When believers accept revelation, they allow their minds to be determined by the meaning they find in the symbols."[88] This is not to say that "revelation is faith."[89] "Faith . . . stands in dialectical tension with revelation. The completeness of revelation, were it ever given . . . , would do away with the very possibility of faith."[90]

This exposition of revelation recalls in numerous ways the emphasis of recent dialectical theologians who shifted revelation from the Scriptural teaching to internal response and viewed faith as a revelation-stimulated leap into an ontological realm clouded by logical contradiction. "The revelatory power of Scripture depends on the continued presence and activity of God,"[91] says Dulles. He commends Barth's emphasis on the present inspiringness of Scripture and holds that Vatican II endorsed this view. In such encounter the Bible "transmits a deeper and richer meaning than could be conveyed by ordinary conceptual speech."[92] The Bible, to be sure, "brings its own horizon with it, and thereby shapes a tradition of interpretation," but "the meaning of the classical text and of its symbols is never static."[93] The Church is able "to educe new meanings and old from the stories, symbols, and teachings of Scripture"; the horizon common to all Christians is their consciousness "of possessing the same grace-given relationship to God that was disclosed with incomparable power in the appearance of Jesus as the Christ."[94]

The symbolic theory holds that God's historical acts cannot be revelatory unless we regard them as symbols of divine presence. Dulles yields to empirical psychology's rejection of ancient revelatory vision and audition in order to postulate instead "the interpretation of historical persons and events seen as symbols and mediators of God's gracious self-communication."[95]

[83]T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 50-52.

[84]Dulles, *Models* 277.

[85]Ibid., p. 142.

[86]Ibid., p. 272.

[87]Ibid.

[88]Ibid., p. 279.

[89]Ibid., p. 280.

[90]Ibid.

[91]Ibid., p. 208.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Ibid., p. 209.

[94]Ibid., p. 210.

[95]Ibid., p. 273.

Some symbol-proponents argue that Biblical redemptive history is unimportant, and they replace even the claim that God became incarnate in Jesus by the central symbol of Jesus as the Christ. Dulles goes beyond the instrumentalist view that religious myths are merely useful and insists that symbols tell us something about God and Christ and redemption. While he holds that truth can be affirmed only in commitment, he professes that commitment cannot be detached from reality. His aim is to forego the revelational objectivism of historic Christian theology by substituting revelation as an "immanent norm within faith itself."[96] The symbols wherein God expresses himself, he says, precede their understanding and acceptance and are "virtual revelation."

The subjective orientation of symbol interpretation is clear from its advocates' insistence that symbol is self-involving, self-transforming, and evocative of a response outside discursive awareness. In these circumstances, symbols potentially have limitless signification and can represent contradictory commitments. Dulles distances himself from humanism, which regards symbol rather than words or truth as the medium of religious experience, and from "new consciousness" theories, which often view symbol as the prime bearer of revelation. But no objective test can distinguish symbol-revelation in a given historical situation from projections of the human consciousness. Much as symbolists may invoke the term "revelation," revelation readily becomes an ambiguous reflex of personal experience since revelation is said never to exist outside of faith.

The symbolic portrayal of revelation thus imperils the truth of revelation, which according to evangelical orthodoxy takes propositional form and conveys universally shareable information. Symbols by contrast carry no clear meaning and impart no definite truth. Dulles concedes that this may be true "in the abstract" but contends that symbols have a very clear and definite impact in the way they function in Scripture, tradition and Church life. But if one abandons laws of logical communication, the links between symbol and transcendent revelation and likewise the links between symbol and shareable truth become tenuous. While some champions claim that symbol can convey truth, they leave objective truth in limbo. Symbol may be cognitive in the sense that it gives rise to thought and can be reflected in thought. But its diffraction into propositional statements and into universally valid truth becomes more a matter of individual creativity than of revelatory impartation. By affirming that revelation is symbolic, Dulles does not call into question its literal truth but rather asserts overtones that convey more than the dictionary meaning of words. But the meaning of words is clear only in logical or propositional context, and not above, behind or under this. The complaint that propositions blunt the power of symbols must itself be communicated propositionally if it is to make any sense. Even theologians who argue for symbol as a revelatory form must, insofar as they achieve clarity, rely on propositional communication to indicate what they mean.

Tillich contended that symbols have no abiding validity. Are the so-called Biblical and Christian symbols then doomed to displacement? And would not Christianity then be relativized? Biblical symbols are not open to change or interchange, or subject to indefinite reinterpretation, Dulles responds. The God of the Bible, says Dulles, is the Lord of time, and Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday,

[96]Ibid., p. 279.

today and forever."[97] When it serves his purpose or need, Dulles invokes Scripture readily for its objective propositional truth. "Without repudiating its own foundations Christianity cannot deny the permanent and universal significance of Jesus Christ as the preeminent 'real symbol' of God's turning to the world in merciful love," says Dulles. Yet the Christ-symbol, like other religious symbols, he adds, "can always be better understood and presented with the help of elements derived from other faiths and traditions, and can contribute to the better understanding of these elements."[98] It should not surprise anyone, once the propositional revelation of the Bible is subordinated to symbolic revelation consummated in internal response, that even Jesus Christ can be "better understood . . . with the help of elements derived from other faiths" that the Bible, to the contrary, views instead as needing Scriptural illumination.

In seeking to escape both objectivism and subjectivism Dulles' symbolism imperils what historic Christianity treasured most in supernatural revelation: universally valid information about the Creator and his purposes, about man's dignity and duty and destiny, and about the gracious redemption provided for sinners by Christ Jesus. Before the modern era the Christian community would unhesitatingly have answered the query "What has God revealed?" by the response "What the inspired writers teach." The Biblical writers themselves understood the term revelation that way, and so did Jesus Christ.

A symbolic epistemology, Dulles concedes, holds that faith and revelation coexist and constitute each other.[99] Roman Catholic dogmatics affirmed that revelation gifts man with objectively revealed truths, and the Protestant Reformation acknowledged the Bible as an objective literary deposit to be the Word of God. Modern theology has invoked Biblical criticism to herald instead "the crumbling authority of the Scriptures." Dulles affirms objectively revealed truths but insists that the truths are symbolic, and he emphasizes the subjective conditions for perceiving them. Dulles tries to retain for Scripture a preliminary propositional role that accommodates Catholic tradition as well, and then correlates this eclectically with rival views that dwarf propositional significance, until in the end there emerges a symbolic view that cannot, in the opinion of this writer, protect itself from subjectivizing the very disclosure of God that Dulles would preserve.

[97]Heb 13:8.

[98]Dulles, *Models* 275.

[99]Ibid., p. 280.