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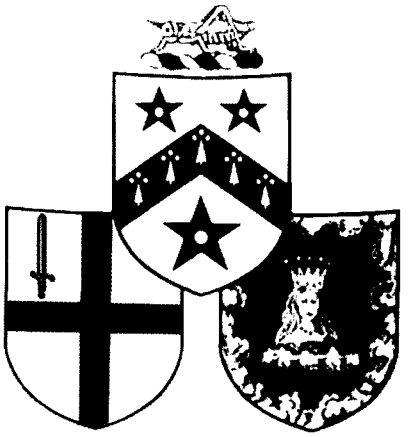

LIVING THEOLOGY

Lecture 1

LIVING WITH REVELATION

by

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I

Living with Revelation

There used to be a useful distinction made between what was called *natural theology* and *revealed theology*. The best way to work with the distinction is to think of an example, so let me tell you about the house in the woods. You are out walking in a wood, far from civilisation, when you come to a clearing in the forest, and in the midst of the clearing there is a cottage. It is clearly an inhabited dwelling, because everything seems to be in good order. There are curtains in the windows, a fire is burning in the grate of the living room and a large room at the back is clearly the study, comfortably littered with books and papers. The whole place testifies to the personality of the owner, though he or she is not present. Using common-sense and a flair for detective work, you can build up a picture of the owner from the evidence that lies all around you. A pipe-rack on the mantelpiece suggests to you that he, and it is likely to be a he, smokes a pipe. The hundreds of books that cram the cottage suggest a reader, a person of learning and study. The pictures on the wall and the careful attention to colour and design in the furnishings and decoration suggest someone for whom beauty and comfort are important. In this way, in the absence of the owner, using your natural reason, you build up a picture of the absent occupant. You have, in fact, engaged in a piece of natural theology, deducing from evidence that is present to your senses the existence, and something of the character, of the absentee owner, who is not present to your senses. The arguments for the existence of God used to follow that kind of procedure, Paley's watch being one of the most famous of the versions offered, in which the finder of a watch inferred from its presence on the beach the existence of a watch-maker. Most of the arguments from design were worked out before Darwin discovered the unimaginably long aeons of time required for the adaptation of species to their environment, and few people offer them as serious arguments today, but they do illustrate the distinction I am trying to explain.

It was held that, by our natural reason alone, we could infer or deduce the existence of God from the evidence our senses gave us of a created order that required a

creator, a level of design that spoke of a designer, and the presence in our breasts of a conscience that pointed to the existence of a moral structure to the universe. From all of that a picture was built up of a God outside the system who was not available to our senses directly, but to whose existence and character we could argue from the evidence that was available to our senses.

To go back to the house in the forest for a moment, there is something unsatisfying about a purely hypothetical cottage owner. We long for him to stride out of the forest and make himself known to us, invite us in for tea, and charm us with his conversation and wisdom. But we cannot be in control of that event; we can only be alert for it, and open to it when it occurs, when the revelation finally takes place. *Revealed theology*, therefore, is that knowledge of God that comes to us, it is claimed, from outside ourselves, from God, from beyond. And it tells us things about God that we could not deduce for ourselves. The revelations usually come through inspired individuals who are recognised as having been with God; and these sacred individuals either create, or there is created round them, writings that record the details of the revelation. Revealed theology then becomes the study of this body of material, and it is usually approached with greater reverence and care than natural theology, because it is held to be sacred in itself. Sometimes this reverence is expressed liturgically, as when, for example, the book of the Gospels is carried in procession and is incensed and kissed during the eucharist in the Christian Church; or when devout Moslems turn towards Mecca in their prayers, because Mecca was the place of revelation to the Prophet and is, therefore, deemed to be a sacred place.

The difficulty with the traditional distinction between natural and revealed theology is that no actual qualitative difference exists between the two sources of the theological data, apart from the particular honour that has been accorded to the allegedly revealed elements in theology. Even if we think there is something mysterious about the universe, and that it conveys some sense of latency or hidden presence, we have to admit that *everything* we know about it comes to us through our senses, and is recorded by our senses. We may be watching a person praying in Church and that person may be deep in communication with the invisible presence of God, but all that is available to us is the human, this-worldly side of that transaction; and what she

experiences of God comes through her own consciousness, since no other is available to her. We can only hear the sound of one hand clapping, as it were, see the person on her knees, rapt in devotion, not the presence she is focused upon. This need not necessarily imply the non-existence of the invisible presence that is beyond discernment by our senses; it *does* imply that the only thing we can have access to is the bit that lies on this side of the inter-action. Everything that is said or written about that inter-action is inescapably human, made by us. The frustrating thing about this situation is that it usually leads to a futile conflict between those who believe in the transcendent origins of revelation and those who see it as a human activity of projection. Those who believe in revelation assert that what they believe has come to them directly from God; those who believe that all religious claims can be explained in a naturalistic way dismiss that claim. What I want to suggest is that neither approach is really subtle enough to help us to engage with the mystery of discovery that, in theological shorthand, we call revelation. Moreover, the natural way of accounting for revelation need not be reductive; it may, in fact, increase our amazement at the mystery of its creativity, and the power of nature to so transport us. Shakespeare, as usual, got it better than anyone:

> *Yet nature is made better by no mean,*
> *But nature makes that mean: so o'er that art,*
> *Which, you say, adds to nature, is an art*
> *That nature makes...The art itself is nature.*
>
> The Winter's Tale[IV.3]

I would like to propose that we replace the distinction between natural and revealed theology with a new distinction, which I would like to call mental theology and imaginative theology, or cerebral theology and emotional theology. We acknowledge that theology is a human activity, something we do, but we also acknowledge that it is done in different ways, rather like the distinction between right and left brain thinking. However we put it, we begin by acknowledging that all these mysterious discoveries come from *us*, are part of the extraordinary reality of human nature and its gift of consciousness. Our forebears described these mysteries in one way; we think about them in another way; what is common is the experience; what differs is the framework or template we create in order to express it. The reference frame of the biblical writers was a three-tier, flat universe, with heaven above, earth in the middle and hell or the underworld, literally beneath us. That is why there is all that

spatial language in scripture about God being above us, and why when the hymn writers wanted to express something of the shock and newness of Jesus they said: *he came down to earth from heaven.* We take that language metaphorically today. I am not absolutely convinced that they did not also understand it metaphorically in their day, but it is now a cause of some confusion for us. Marcus Borg has said that one of the problems for theology nowadays is that some of its exponents want to historicise or literalise what were always meant to be metaphors in any case, thereby robbing us of a powerful way of using the biblical material. I can profitably use the metaphor of descent and ascent to describe the significance of Jesus; but if you insist that I take it literally, whatever you think you mean by that, then you deprive me of any valid and creative use of the biblical material.

If we can move away from theology for a moment and look at another, related field of inspiration we might get a better understanding of the kind distinction I am trying to make here. Let me say a few words about the Irish poet, W.B.Yeats. When Yeats was an old man he thought that he had lost the gift of poetry. He brooded on the fact that, when younger, the images of inspiration, what he called his circus animals, had come to him unbidden from outside himself, by revelation, as it were; but now they seemed to have deserted him.

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last being but a broken man
I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show.

A new biography claims that many of Yeats inspirations came from his fascination with the occult. Yeats was 51 when he married George Hyde-Lees on October 20 1917; his new wife was 21. It was a complex relationship, and there is plenty of evidence that Yeats was in love with someone else at the time. What cemented the relationship with his young wife, at any rate during its early years, was George's facility for automatic writing. This fascinated Yeats; indeed, Brenda Maddox, author of, *George's Ghosts*, the biography in question, suggests that his wife contrived the arrangement, probably unconsciously, in order to capture her husband's interest, and

that she continued to use it to direct the relationship, particularly in the sexual department. After all, a 51 year old man, just married, probably needs prompting to embark upon fatherhood, and what better coach could there be for someone who was fascinated by and passionately believed in the occult than a friendly ghost? But George's ghosts provided more than sexual encouragement and advice on domestic arrangements; they provided powerful images that went into some of Yeats most famous poems. Let me read you a couple of pages from Maddox's fascinating book.

'In January 1919 Yeats completed what is probably the best-known poem of his later years, 'The Second Coming'. Incorporating the symbols he had been receiving through the Script (the automatic writing his wife was doing at his request) *since his marriage, it could not have been more timely. Europe was reeling from the effects of the war. From Russia Bolshevism cast its shadow over the old patterns of work. War had broken out between the sexes. Ireland was on the brink of rebellion and within Irish society the Protestant Ascendancy had lost its grip. The old order was dead. Yeats' poem encompassed it all:*

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.'

Maddox points out that this extraordinary poem is strong enough to accommodate all the meanings that have been read into it: historical, political, religious and scientific. Then she goes on to offer what she calls an obstetrical interpretation. I quote it here, not necessarily because I agree with it, but because it shows how powerful texts like this one are open to many interpretations, and become larger than their original meaning or intention. She writes:

'His personal life, with its newly established order, was menaced by the 'shape with lion body and the head of a man' advancing towards him in George's expanding belly. Very soon, after a burst of water and blood, he would be 'vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle', deprived of the total attention of his wife on whom he had come to depend, torn by primitive jealousies he had long fought to bury and disturbed by squalling noise when he needed absolute silence for writing poetry. After the unstoppable beast's arrival, the one certain thing is that his life will never be the same again.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?'[1]

The point main here is not the cogency of any particular piece of Yeatsian interpretation, but the fact that Yeats, at this stage in his career, would have claimed that his poetic symbols, his inspiration, came from another world, another realm outside himself, *The Second Coming*, being a potent example of that revelatory process. But here he is, an old man, unable to compose, his circus animals all on strike, refusing to visit him. Gradually, he realises that it was, all along, his own heart that was the source of his inspiration, and not some exalted sphere beyond himself. So he realises he must get back inside himself, back to where all the ladders of effort and inspiration start, like someone struggling to lift himself out of a slum. The poem ends:

[1] Brenda Maddox, *George's Ghosts*, Picador, London, 1999, pp127, 128

'Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.[2]

I think Yeats' experience offers us a way of understanding how inspiration or revelation really works, no matter what frame of reference we use to describe it, whether natural or supernatural. All the ladders start in the human heart; we generate the material; we create the images; the art comes through us or, to be more precise, through people of genius, inspired individuals. Using that as an approach, I want to look at two passages from the New Testament, both from the Acts of the Apostles, that will help us think about the meaning and processes of revelation, of those new discoveries we go on making about our own nature and the nature of the universe. The first passage is about Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, from chapter 9, verses 1 - 9:

[9:1] Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest [2] and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. [3] Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. [4] He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" [5] He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. [6] But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." [7] The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. [8] Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. [9] For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Remembering where all the ladders start, in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart, how can be interpret this interesting story? A literalistic reading would claim, as Saul himself did on subsequent occasions, that he was on the receiving end of a divine

[2] W.B. Yeats, *The Poems, 'The Second Coming',p235; 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', p394*, Everyman, London, 1994

intervention. He was riding along on the road to Damascus when a light from outside himself blinds him, and a voice, also from outside, commands him to cease his persecution of the followers of Jesus. We read in the following verses that a follower of Jesus named Ananias comes to him and ministers to him, restoring his sight, and Saul, now to be called Paul, becomes a Christian apostle. There is no doubt that something happened to Saul of Tarsus that turned him into the Apostle to the Gentiles and the formative genius behind the early theological understanding of Jesus. We can accept all that, we can even accept the apparently miraculous blindness that afflicted him, but we do not need to go anywhere other than the human heart of Saul to explain it all. The *occasion* of a conversion may be a single moment in time, but we know enough about the human heart to realise that the single moment was prepared for by a process, however unconscious, that was already going on. Saul's passionate vehemence against the followers of Jesus would suggest that his attention had already been arrested by the movement he was persecuting. This is a common phenomenon. We know enough about bigotry to understand something of its causality, and one of its roots is fear or anxiety. For example, the violent homophobe is often a man uncertain about and threatened by the unacknowledged whispers of his own sexuality. The classic way to deal with this kind of discomfort is to externalise or project it onto someone you can punish for the distress you feel about your own unadmitted longings. We call it scape-goating. Nietzsche captures it perfectly in the *Genealogy of Morals*:

'Every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent; still more specifically, a guilty agent who is susceptible to suffering - in short, some living thing upon, which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his affects, actually or in effigy: for the venting of his affects represents the greatest attempt on the part of the suffering to win relief, anaesthesia, the narcotic he cannot help desiring to deaden pain of any kind' [3]

Nor need we leave the human heart of Saul to account for the apparently miraculous blindness that afflicted him. The blindness was probably psychogenically produced,

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, third essay, section 15, *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, The Modern Library, New York, 1992, p.563.

a somatic expression of the turmoil in his soul, as he refused to acknowledge, refused to *see*, what his own heart was telling him: that Jesus of Nazareth had captured him for himself and would, if surrendered to, take over his entire life. The story of Paul's conversion, therefore, can be accounted for without recourse to supernatural agency; it was a struggle that was resolved within his own heart. And we see a similar process at work in the life of the other great apostle, Peter. In Acts chapter 10:

[10:1] In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. [2] He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. [3] One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." [4] He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. [5] Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; [6] he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." [7] When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, [8] and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

[9] About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. [10] He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. [11] He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. [12] In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. [13] Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." [14] But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." [15] The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." [16] This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

A similar dynamic is at work in this story as in the story of Saul's conversion. The admission of the gentiles to the Jesus movement was clearly the most neuralgic issue in the life of the young community. James of Jerusalem, the brother or cousin

of Jesus, was the conservative of the movement, who resisted any liberalising of the requirements of the Law for converts to the Jesus movement. The young church was a messianic movement within Judaism, a tendency, a sect even; but it had no pretensions to replace or go beyond Judaism, which the admission of the gentiles would clearly result in. The new and zealous convert to the movement, still deeply mistrusted by its leadership, was the radical Paul, who believed that the new revelation of God that had come through Jesus had superseded the Law. And Peter, like many leaders anxious to preserve unity, was caught in the middle. We can imagine the turmoil in which he lived and which even invaded his dreams. The fascinating thing about the dream of the sailcloth let down from heaven, containing creatures forbidden to a Jew, was that it represented a struggle in Peter's understanding of the authority of scripture, a subject that still torments believers. God had already forbidden the very creatures Peter was now being commanded to eat. Peter's dilemma is that he has a hunch God is now calling upon him to change his mind; God is revising God! Is scripture a word for all time or can it be revised, or our interpretation of it, to allow us to respond to new challenges and conditions? That is a very contemporary dilemma, and it was Peter's dilemma at Joppa. Again, we need not leave Peter's heart in order to account for the struggle and its resolutions: that's where all the ladders start. We know that Peter resolved the question, at any rate for the time being, when Cornelius came knocking on the door asking for baptism. And that, too, fits the dynamic of revelation. We struggle intellectually or psychologically with an abstract issue: can women be ordained? should gay and lesbian people be allowed the blessing of the Church for their relationships? At this stage it is an issue in our own hearts and heads, but pretty soon it becomes a person, a person knocking at the door like Cornelius, and we are called out of the refuge of abstraction to confront real human beings who are being victimised by those same abstractions. That has certainly been my own experience. What begins as abstract theorising, almost as an intellectual game, soon becomes flesh and blood that makes its challenge directly and wont let me escape into theory. 'Your theory, this abstraction you struggle with, is actually about *me*, and it is causing me to suffer. Your theology *hurts* me, gets me beaten up, sometimes killed: think about it!' Peter certainly thought about it, when confronted by Cornelius, but we know that he was not really converted, not really turned round inside, because he

equivocated on a number of occasions, later on. Like many leaders he wanted to keep his options, or his avenues, open to both sides.

From our point of view, the thing to notice is that all of this is going on inside us all the time. We can all testify to moments of conversion, moments when the scales fell from our eyes and we *saw*, for the first time, how racist or sexist or homophobic we had been. We did not really admit it to ourselves, of course, but it showed itself in all sorts of ways, usually by our use of language, by the throw-away remark that's meant to be funny, but betrays deep prejudice or fear. When the moment of conversion comes, the moment we see what has been going on inside us, we use the language of revelation, the language of disclosure. William Temple claimed that scripture was the witness to the gradual revelation of the true nature of God to humanity. We can use that language, placing it firmly within a world-view that suits our own contemporary way of putting things. Yeats was right:

'Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.[4]

Richard Holloway

[4] W.B.Yeats, *The Circus Animals' Desertion*, The Poems, Everyman, London, 1998, p.394

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