

Revelation

Revelation refers to the fact that **God** can be known only by being disclosed. Because God is not an object of sense experience and ordinary modes of knowledge, God is **hidden** and remains so until becoming unveiled. Theology bears witness to the ways in which God is disclosed to us.

It is common to distinguish revealed (or kataphatic) theology from negative (or apophatic) theology. Revealed theology is human knowledge of God in so far as God has been disclosed to us. Revelation provides us with words with which to speak about God. Negative theology is an exercise in remembering that all language about God, even language rooted in revelation, is inadequate. It reminds us that theology is as much about what God is not as about what God is. Negative theology reminds us that, however revelation comes to us, we receive it in the medium of human words and that our language about God is always analogical, metaphorical and symbolic.

It is also common to distinguish general revelation from special revelation. Revelation is general when it is available to human being universally, as when Paul spoke of God's law being written on Gentiles' hearts (Romans 2) or when Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and other medieval theologians argued that we can know God through the order of the universe. The idea of general revelation is that we can know of God in ways such as these that are available to everyone regardless of their knowledge of the **Bible** or **Jesus Christ**. General revelation is thus often associated with **natural theology**. Special revelation consists in particular historical events and realities that disclose God. Jesus Christ is the principal example of special revelation; other examples include events such as Israel's return from the Babylonian exile and the Bible. Revelation is considered special when it is available only to those with access to the revelatory events or to testimony about those events.

Revelation is often associated with the idea of mystery. In this view, because God is infinite, we cannot discover the most important truths about God. God, therefore, must reveal these truths to us in a medium such as the Bible. Because these truths surpass our ability to understand, faith comes to be understood as submission to the authority of the Bible and of the church. This view has been characteristic of the **Roman Catholic** tradition, although recent Catholic theology has considerably broadened its understanding of revelation.

An alternative to this traditional view was offered by Karl Barth (1886-1968), who argued that revelation is primarily the person of Jesus Christ. For Barth, what is given to us in revelation is God's self. In the **incarnation** and in the obedience of the Son to the Father, God—and not just information about God—is presented to us and is with us. Accordingly, Barth did not regard the Bible as revelation. It is instead, he argued, the church's witness to revelation and a means by which God speaks to us.

Whereas (for Barth) Jesus Christ is the objective reality of revelation—the content of revelation—the Holy Spirit is the subjective reality of revelation. Barth meant that revelation is not simply the historical person of Jesus but the event in which the incarnate God is given to us today by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit actualizes revelation in the hearts of those who hear the Bible and preaching today, and, in the Spirit, hear the Bible and preaching as the word of God, God's address to them in their particular situations.

Subsequently, Wolfhart Pannenberg (b. 1928) argued that Barth had defined revelation too narrowly. Drawing on the Bible's apocalyptic literature, Pannenberg asserted that revelation consists in the

totality of history. Since God is active in history, each historical event reveals God. But the full revelation of God awaits the eschatological end of history, which in a sense has already taken place in the resurrection of Jesus. The church thus bears witness to revelation by testifying to the resurrection.