

Theologies of Revelation

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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I have always been a reader of mysteries – any sort of mystery from the hardboiled San Francisco gumshoe to the batty old English spinster variety. So when I hear “all will be revealed” I am immediately cast into the manor house drawing room or Nero Wolfe’s study with all the suspects assembled and the detective about to explain why the dog barked at midnight. But today is the third in our series of comparative theology services, and so the revelation we speak of will not end with anyone cooling their heels in the pokey.

But just what is this revelation we speak of? In this religious context, what do we hope or expect will be revealed? To reveal something is, of course, to uncover it, as in removing an obscuring veil or discovering something previously unknown. Used theologically it means God’s disclosure of God’s self and will to humanity, or the disclosure of ideas that humans could not arrive at by reason alone.

In revealed religions, those religions that depend primarily on God’s disclosure of self, there is assumed to be an existing body of Truth, with a capital T. That truth is communicated to humanity through written scripture and through special individuals who received God’s revelation: prophets. The Torah, itself considered to be the revelation of God’s will through and to humanity, is filled with descriptions of prophetic visions, some given in great detail, others affirming only that the prophet heard the word of the Lord. When Maimonides drafted the thirteen articles of Jewish faith in the 12th century they included the belief that God communicates with humanity through prophets, belief in the primacy of Moses as prophetic teacher, belief in the divine origin of Torah and its immutability. So Torah, which means “teaching,” can be both the written scriptures and the oral Torah of the prophets and rabbis.

In Christianity, the New Testament continues God’s revelation in scriptural form, but Jesus Christ is the seal of God’s revelation, the most perfect form of God disclosing God’s self to humanity. Christian theologians in the Middle Ages further categorized revelation as *general* or *special*. Thomas Aquinas declared that *general* revelation is seen in the order and nature of creation through which all people can experience something of God, but that *special* revelation is available only through supernatural means.

Islamic theologians also identified different forms of revelation. One is the infusion of an idea into the mind, and another is “from behind a veil,” which includes knowledge of received through dreams, visions or by hearing words of inspiration. The final form is through a messenger or prophet. Jesus is seen in this light as a prophet of the Mosaic tradition, though as a wholly human one. Muhammad is considered the seal of the prophets, the final messenger bringing the word of God which forms the Qur’an. While Jesus and Muhammad are seen as both fully human, still their words and actions reveal something of God’s nature and will to people by virtue of their divine inspiration.

This is an important point about revelation that was popularized in the 20th century by existential theologians. The idea is that the content of the revelation, the words spoken or the vision seen, is not as important as the prophetic experience of God—that when God reveals’ God’s self to the prophet, they are forever changed in profound ways, and this human response to God is itself the revelation.

A number of 20th century theologians, Christian and Jewish, took up this stream of thought developing theologies that casts meaning in terms of human-divine interaction. Jewish theologian Martin Buber wrote about the I-Thou interchange as the way people came to experience a relationship with God.

Buber defined two types of human interactions the I-It and the I-Thou. In an I-It attitude, a person experiences or uses an object separate from the self. Here, it doesn’t matter is the “It” is an object, an animal or another person. The point is that this attitude experiences the other as separate from the self and defined in terms of the other’s function. What can that sales clerk do for me? How can that patient’s symptoms define their disease? In an I-Thou encounter there is no such sharp distinction of separation. The I acknowledges a living relationship that does not objectify the other. The I-Thou relationship is entered into without preconditions, and allows the two parties to be fully present without pretense or expectations. It is in living these relationships, Buber says, that humans come to experience relationship God, the Eternal Thou.

Paul Tillich, the Christian theologian, also sought to create theological guidance for everyday living by viewing the human-divine interaction through the lens of contemporary culture and mundane existence. Tillich reacted against early Christian doctrine that arose within a Greek worldview where spirit and matter were clearly delineated, and matter (our physical being) was decidedly the inferior. Tillich saw Christ as bringing the two together, healing the gap between the two, and thus acting not as God but as what God wanted for all humanity. For Tillich, Christ was more revelation of God’s will than God’s self.

There were other existential theologians as well, but these and the various theologies that derived from them do not see revelation as sealed. They define a God of living relationship, and a human experience rooted in the here and now but with vast possibilities of meaning. These theologies have given rise to a postmodern religious view where God’s revelation is still alive. In Islam this means that true religion invites people toward a living God who listens to the supplications of the people, helps them in times of trouble and continues to speak. In his explication of the precepts of Islam Muhammad Asad writes that “righteous living—and not merely believing—is a necessary corollary” to the perception of God. In Judaism this living God is seen in a movement of human history toward liberation symbolized in the Exodus and in Christianity revelation lies not only in a text, but anywhere people live out lives of forgiveness, compassion and love. The marketing slogan of the United Church of Christ—God is still speaking—pretty much sums up the contemporary progressive view of people of the book.

So that’s the view from revealed religions of the book, and even though our roots lie in Jewish and Christian traditions and we hold a welcome for all religions, Unitarian Universalism is not a revealed but an organic or philosophical religion. This means that rather than starting from the proposition of an existing body of truth communicated to humanity, we begin with our own

questions. You know, those big questions about human existence, about the existence and nature of the divine, about good and evil, life and death and what next. So in that context does revelation even make sense?

I would submit that it does since if we have questions there might be answers. And it also implies that revelation cannot be sealed or we would either already have the answers or know definitively that questions are unanswerable. But don't take my word for it. Let's see what a few other Unitarian and Universalist theologians have had to say on this score.

In 1841, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker delivered one of the three seminal addresses defining 19th century Unitarianism. In it, he denied the miracles of Jesus as providing any proof for the truth of Christianity. Any religion, he said, that relied on miracles for proof of its veracity was grounded in ether. Bear in mind that Parker was himself a Christian. He was not standing apart criticizing another tradition, but trying to reform what he claimed as his own tradition. He went on to claim that the authority of Jesus rested on the truth of his moral example and teachings, and not the other way around. Truth, he said, transcends any particular tradition, but is still accessible, at least in part.

Twenty years later, the Unitarian hymnist Samuel Longfellow wrote the words which remain in our hymnals today and which we sang earlier:

*Revelation is not sealed;
 Answering now to our endeavor.
 Truth and right are still revealed.
 That which came to ancient sages,
 ...
 Shines to-day, forever new !*

So we have a clear statement from at least the 19th century that revelation is not sealed; that we, as human beings, have access to ultimate truth beyond that printed in the pages of ancient scriptures. And you already heard the thoughts of 20th century theologian James Luther Adams in this morning's reading that "religious liberalism depends first on the principle that revelation is continuous."

So if revelation is not sealed how do we, as Unitarian Universalists, access further truths? Some of the forms (though we do not pretend they are *all* of them) are laid out in the six sources that accompany our seven principles. You'll find these on the first page of the hymnal. Our tradition and we as individuals intuit that capital T Truth in the following ways:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Well, that's a nice lot of theological history, and some guidance about where revelation is to be found, but what do theology and revelation matter to us? Is it more than a vaguely interesting intellectual exercise for seminarians? How does it make a difference in our lives and world? The more mundane answer to that question is that understanding what other people believe helps us navigate the world because what we believe has a tricky way of influencing what we do. But the deeper answer, and one I find far more inspirational and influential, comes from the inescapable nature of humanity as meaning-making beings, of needing a worldview that helps us navigate human existence.

In explanation, let me offer another excerpt of Adams' *Five Smooth Stones*, which lies in his definition of the term "God." He writes:

One way of characterizing this meaning is to say that through it God is active or in the process of self-fulfillment in nature and history. To be sure, the word "God" is so heavily laden with unacceptable connotations that it is for many people scarcely usable without confusion. It is therefore well for us to indicate briefly what the word signifies here. In considering this definition, however, the reader should remember that among liberals, no formulation is definitive and mandatory. Indeed, the word "God" may in the present context be replaced by the phrase "that which ultimately concerns humanity" or "that in which we should place our confidence."

God (or that in which we may have faith) is the inescapable, commanding reality that sustains and transforms all meaningful existence. It is inescapable, for no one can live without somehow coming to terms with it. It is commanding, for it provides the structure or the process through which existence is maintained and by which any meaningful achievement is realized. Indeed, every meaning in life is related to this commanding meaning, which no one can manipulate and which stands beyond every merely personal preference or whim. It is transforming, for it breaks through any given achievement, it invades any mind or heart open to it, luring it on to richer or more relevant achievement; it is a self-surpassing reality. God is the reality that works upon us and through us and in accord with which we can discern truth, beauty or goodness.¹

Muhammad Asad concurs saying that it is revelation, or knowledge of the ultimate ground of being, that impels us toward the good. If you accept this proposition that there is an inescapable and commanding reality, one that can impel us toward truth, beauty and goodness, does it not

¹ James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously: Selected Essays in Religion and Society*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976).

behoove us to spend some time seeking, defining, clarifying that reality? Finding where that reality exists for us? What shape it takes? UU minister Richard Gilbert put it this way: “If we are living, breathing, hurting, laughing, crying, questing human beings, it is impossible not to be theologians.”

I have known people in my life and ministry so rudderless that they could not answer the simplest questions about what was of importance to them. They could not tell you what makes them happy, or what they want from life. They could not tell you whether they want to be close to other people or alone, where they find meaning or fulfillment. This can be a very painful place to be. It is, at best, a very numb place to be, being washed by the tides of others through life like so much flotsam and jetsam. It is not the condition of most of us, but we all may have some elements of it, or wish to be more intentional and awake to our finite time in this world, qualities which can be built through theological awareness and spiritual practice.

You’ve heard the words of plenty of theologians today so let me include some words from atheist philosopher and secularist Daniel Dennett that speak to why the theological search for grounding is more than mere intellectual quibbling but a roadmap for living. He writes:

What these people [spiritual people] have realized is one of the best secrets of life: let your self go. If you can approach the world’s complexities, both its glories and its horrors, with an attitude of humble curiosity, acknowledging that however deeply you have seen, you have only just scratched the surface, you will find worlds within worlds, beauties you could not heretofore imagine, and your mundane preoccupations will shrink to proper size, not all that important in the greater scheme of things. Keeping that awestruck vision of the world ready to hand while dealing with the demands of daily living is no easy exercise, but it is definitely worth the effort, for if you can stay centered, and engaged, you will find the hard choices easier, the right words will come to you when you need them, and you will indeed be a better person. That, I propose, is the secret to spirituality, and it has nothing at all to do with believing in an immortal soul, or in anything supernatural.²

So if we want more than to drift through life unaware and unfeeling we must participate in the exercise of meaning-making, to know what is of ultimate concern so that it may guide our way, to know (in the words of liberal theologian Gordon Kaufman) “that reality (whatever it may be) that grounds and undergirds all that exists, including us humans; that reality which provides us humans with such fulfillment or salvation as we may find; that reality toward which we must turn, therefore, if we would flourish.”³

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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² Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, 2006

³ Gordon D. Kaufman, *God-Mystery-Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1996) 99.