

# RELIGION & REVELATION



KEITH WARD

# *Religion and Revelation*

A Theology of Revelation in  
the World's Religions

KEITH WARD

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## INTRODUCTION

There is no one proper starting-point in theology, since every question leads on to every other. I have chosen to begin with an attempt to say what sort of discipline theology is, and what the proper methods of theological investigation are. Only when the study is complete will one be able to check back to see if such a preliminary analysis was correct.

Theology is in fact a well-established intellectual discipline, which the most ancient universities in Europe, including my own, were founded to teach. So rather than beginning completely anew, it seems appropriate to start by examining the definition of one of the greatest of classical theologians, Thomas Aquinas. Accepting a modified version of Thomas's account of theology as the rational elucidation of revealed truth, it is natural to proceed to a study of what revelation is. The main body of this volume is concerned with an investigation into the nature, sources, and limits of revelation.

The most distinctive feature of the book is that it espouses a comparative method, examining the idea of revelation as it is found both in primal religious traditions and in the great canonical traditions of the world. In the light of this diachronic and synchronic survey, a distinctive Christian idea of revelation is propounded. I then investigate how far this idea must be revised or adapted in the light of developments in scientific and historical knowledge, which provide a new and extended context for religious traditions originating in a pre-scientific age.

My general conclusion is that there is an intelligible, natural, and defensible notion of revelation, the main elements of which can be found in a number of diverse religious traditions. I suggest that each tradition, including the Christian, with which I am particularly concerned, may hope to preserve the main elements of its own distinctive witness, while engaging in an open, and in some important ways convergent, interaction with others.

My intention is to articulate a concept of revelation which will be true to the main orthodox Christian tradition, yet which will be open to a fruitful interaction with other traditions, and with the developing corpus of scientific knowledge. This will make possible

a committed, open, and developing understanding of faith in the contemporary world. It might be seen as a defence of a sort of 'open orthodoxy'.

As an essay in comparative theology, this work is intended to lay the foundation for the holistic and eirenic study of religious belief and practice, which is an important, even essential, task for believers and non-believers alike as the world moves into the third millennium.



# PART I

## Towards a Comparative Theology

### A. THEOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

#### 1. *Aquinas: Theology as Science*

'Christian theology should be pronounced to be a science.' So declares Thomas Aquinas in article 2 of question 1 of the *Summa Theologiae*.<sup>1</sup> The pronouncement seems alien to an age which recognizes physics, chemistry, and biology as sciences, but which is apt to regard theology as a rationalization of personal opinions. Scientific knowledge, since the seventeenth century, has been seen primarily as knowledge of the physical world obtained by observation and experiment. It may issue in universal and mathematically formulable laws, as in Newtonian mechanics, or it may be more a matter of classification based on careful and, where possible, repeated observations, as in some parts of botany. In either sense, there is an emphasis on observation which is repeatable in principle by any competent observer, and on the formulation of general principles of classification and regularity which clarify or explain very complex data.

In this sense, it is clear that theology is not a science. It does not begin from careful and dispassionate observation of physical phenomena; it does not attempt to classify such phenomena or to bring them under laws of regular succession. Further, it is not concerned to predict or manipulate physical occurrences, so as to become an 'applied science'. Where then does theology begin? What does it attempt to do? And what is its practical application?

For Aquinas, theology begins from Divine revelation, which is to be found in the Holy Scriptures; and, in a secondary sense, from the dogmatic definitions of the councils of the Church, which seek to unfold the sense of the Scriptures. Here is to be found a body of propositions which have the authority of God himself.

Adopting a generally Aristotelian notion of 'science', Aquinas

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I (London: Blackfriars, 1964): 'Sacra Doctrina ist Scientia': Ia. 1. 2.

holds that the premisses of any science are either evident or belong to a higher science.<sup>2</sup> The propositions of a science are demonstrated by valid arguments from evident premisses. They give knowledge which is certain about objective reality, revealing the natures of things by the method of demonstration. In the ideal case, they give conclusive knowledge by deduction from necessary premisses; though one may speak more widely of probabilistic judgements based on contingent premisses, as scientific. This is the case, for example, in moral or political science.

Theology is the highest science of all, since it takes its first principles from God. It is 'maxime sapientia inter omnes sapientias humanas',<sup>3</sup> the highest wisdom of all human wisdoms, since it is based on Divine knowledge, which cannot err, and it deals with the most important of all topics, God. Human authorities are prone to error, but God's knowledge of himself is the most certain form of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Aquinas does concede that, even though theological knowledge is certain, some human beings are unsure of it or believe it to be false; but this, he holds, is due to the weakness of the human intellect. Divine revelation is in itself absolutely certain.

For Aquinas, then, it seems that theology is a deductive or demonstrative science, drawing conclusions about objective reality from an organized body of certain knowledge, which is itself accepted on faith. This body is the canon of Scripture—'Our faith rests on the revelation made to the prophets and apostles who wrote the canonical books.'<sup>5</sup> The first principles of theology are the articles of faith which are contained either explicitly or implicitly in the canon. Aquinas' acceptance of Scripture is unequivocal. 'It is heretical to say that any falsehood whatsoever is contained either in the gospels or in any canonical scripture,' he writes.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, what Scripture says is true in a literal and not just in a metaphorical sense. Of course there are many metaphors in Scripture, and he accepts the general medieval distinction of four senses of biblical language: the literal or historical sense and three which can collectively be called the spiritual sense—the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical or eschatological. He holds that 'nothing necess-

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Ia. I. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Ia. I. 2: 'divinae scientiae, quae est una et simplex omnium'.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Ia. I. 8.

<sup>6</sup> In *Job*, 13, lect. 1.

Divine Rev.  
is absolutely  
certain

Everything is in the Bible  
 ary for faith is contained under the spiritual sense that is not openly conveyed through the literal sense elsewhere'.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the spiritual sense, words literally signify things which are false—as when we say, 'God has a mighty arm'; but then these things themselves signify something else which can be literally said—namely, that God has great power of doing and making. The literal sense is thus primary, and 'from this alone can arguments be drawn'.<sup>8</sup> It must further be said that this literal sense is so certain that 'whatever is encountered in the other sciences which is incompatible with its truth should be completely condemned as false'.<sup>9</sup>

It may seem from all this that Aquinas holds a merely propositional view of revelation, and sees theology as a matter of deducing doctrines from the propositions of Scripture and setting them out clearly and systematically. This would be a wholly inadequate view, however. Aquinas clearly states that the reason for revelation is the 'salus hominibus', the salvation of human beings and their orientation to an end beyond the grasp of reason, namely, eternal beatitude.<sup>10</sup> Further, the object of revelation is God himself: 'Deus est subjectum hujus scientiae.'<sup>11</sup> So theology should be seen as an intellectual activity which brings one to share in the wisdom of God; that is, in the life of Christ, the Divine Word, to whom Scripture attests. In this eternal joy consists, when reason is directed towards its proper supernatural end, in contemplating the mystery of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. That end can be attained simply by grace, without any intellectual activity. But for those who are able, the intellectual activity of theology could well be called a form of prayer, since it is an articulation of the self-revelation of God in personal form, as appreciated by that human reason which is part of the created image of the Divine in human lives.

Christian theology, for Aquinas, is a way of contemplating God which leads to eternal bliss, in response to Divine self-revelation. It is important that it is a disciplined intellectual exercise which gives knowledge of objective reality. It is not some sort of imaginative fantasizing on personal experiences, in which logic gives way to rhetoric. Nor is it the expression of some socially relative form of thought which lives alongside many others without disputing their

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia. I. 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Ia. I. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Ia. I. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Ia. I. 7.

Thuo = intellectual act.

claims to truth. The discipline of theology claims rigorous intellectual thought and it claims truth about God. Such claims should not lightly be surrendered just because theology does not fit the pattern of an empirical science. So Aquinas sees theology as a body of disciplined reasoning about Divine things based on revealed truths; and in that sense it can be called a science. In this he is, I think, importantly right.

## 2. *The Diversity of Revelations*

Yet it is hardly surprising that an account of the sources and methods of theology coming from the thirteenth century should seem hard to accept in its entirety in the twentieth century. What has become much more questionable is the sort of certainty which is claimed for the conclusions of theology, the kind of reliance placed upon the canon of Scripture and the notion that propositions can be demonstrated from Scripture in a rigorous way by the use of reason alone. It seems much too cavalier to dismiss the rejection of Christian faith by some of the most eminent philosophers as due to a disability of reason, as Aquinas suggested. It is impossible to ignore the results of scholarly research into the biblical documents, which cast doubt on that literal inerrancy which was so important to Aquinas. And it is difficult to regard the existence of so many divergent interpretations of Christianity in the modern world as due to arrogant heresy, as a thirteenth-century Catholic might have done. Any twentieth-century account of theology must take these factors seriously. And if one does that, a rather different account will emerge. Such an account will need to ask in what sense theological assertions can be certain; what the revelatory content of Scripture is, after critical enquiry has been taken into consideration; and to what extent and with what hope of success one can derive a systematic doctrine from Scripture.

Aquinas' view would be that theological assertions are certain because they derive from biblical propositions which are given by God. There is no better reason for making claims about God than that God reveals such truths in person. God reveals truth to whomsoever God will; there need be no expectation that there will be universal agreement; and one is justified in placing complete confidence in what God reveals. This sounds a fairly convincing argument, until one reflects that it could be, and is, used with equal force by Jews, Christians, Muslims, Mormons, Hindus,

THO. IS  
A SCIENCE  
REASONING  
BASED ON  
REVEALED  
TRUTHS.

and Jehovah's Witnesses. The position depends upon the basic belief that God has revealed the Divine nature to particular human beings—whether to Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, or Joseph Smith. But can one be certain that is true, especially in view of the fact that so many diverse and conflicting claims to have received direct Divine revelation exist? The question becomes: how can we be certain that particular persons have received a revelation from God, or know what God truly is? It is not that, knowing a revelation comes from God, we are then presuming to question it; which would indeed be absurd. It is that we cannot be certain a particular revelation really does come from God. As Thomas Hobbes put it with characteristic force: (for a man) 'to say God hath spoken to him in a dream, is no more than to say he dreamed that God spake to him'.<sup>12</sup>

It turns out that we have to begin the enquiry into the status of theology at a stage further back than article 1 of the *Summa Theologiae*. That article takes the inerrancy of the Christian canon of Scripture for granted. But once one clearly sees that this canon is just one of quite a number of alleged Divine revelations, one is forced to enquire into the criteria for accepting something as a Divine revelation. [It is useless to say that God makes his revelation self-authenticating; for Muslims and Jews say that as well as Christians, and they cannot all be right, since their alleged revelations disagree.]

This does not mean that there is no place for knowledge and certainty in religion. It does mean that such certainty cannot be a matter of simple self-evidence (available when the denial of a proposition is self-contradictory); or of immediate intuition (possible only for immediately experienced non-inferential truths); or of universally agreed and testable observation. Thus a gap begins to open between the natural sciences and theology. The sciences accept that their one agreed source of truth is experimental observation and testable hypothesis. They agree on the optimal conditions for making truth-claims of a scientific sort, even if they often disagree on specific claims. But Muslim and Christian theologians disagree on their basic source of truth, on what they accept as Divine revelation; and there seems to be no way of resolving such fundamental disagreements, at least in this life.

DISAGREEMENT ON REV. BETWEEN RELIGIONS =

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), part 3, ch. 32.

Problematisch.

### 3. *On Certainty in Religion*

It is not only in religion that such fundamental disagreements exist. They exist most obviously in philosophy, where materialists, idealists, and dualists may each be certain of their views, while accepting that the others exist and are not irrational. They exist in morality, where Utilitarians, Deontologists, and Axiologists exhibit a similar range of disagreements. And they exist in the arts, where there are different notions of what counts as a great work of art. Does the acceptance that such disagreements seem to be irresolvable and that equally rational people stand on either side of them mean that the notion of certainty is inoperative in these areas? It does mean that one cannot argue for certainty in the sense of indubitable truth which any rational person must accept. But a more basic sense of certainty remains, as unhesitating commitment to a practice or way of life which is held to be of great value, even when others disagree with it. Such commitment may be termed 'practical certainty'; and it is plausible to think that it is a good thing for humans to commit themselves to such practical certainty on at least some matters.

It is difficult to lay out the conditions under which one may be justifiably certain in such cases. One's whole outlook in philosophy, morality, art, and religion tends to be governed by some basic principles, from which more particular judgements are derived, in conjunction with particular experiential beliefs. When one gets back to such basic principles it is hard to see what they, in turn, could be derived from. Philosophers tend to argue for them in terms of such criteria as the richness, adequacy, and fruitfulness of the conceptual schemes which they generate. Such criteria are themselves disputable, however, and so it often turns out that one will accept a scheme if it is a workable framework which one has learned from an early age and if its foundational principles seem simple and persuasive, and do not raise great problems when applied to the data of experience.<sup>3</sup> Such principles will be certain, in that they form the basis of a whole scheme; they are the framework within which one thinks and acts in these areas. They are not unquestionable, but if one questions them one is questioning a whole system of particular judgements, not merely some isolated particular judgement.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, in some remarks in *On*

*Certainty*, written towards the end of his life, writes, 'It may be . . . that all enquiry on our part is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt.'<sup>13</sup> Thus, within the practice of counting hens in a farmyard it is senseless to ask whether such physical objects as hens exist. That is taken for granted in this context; 'My life shows that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there.'<sup>14</sup>

What I take for granted, as the background of my practices, may be said to form a 'picture of the world' (*Weltbild*) which is 'the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false'.<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein is, I think, trying to move away from thinking of certainty as a peculiar sort of mental state towards thinking of it as a basic form of activity. Within such a form of life, 'my convictions do form a system'.<sup>16</sup> They cannot be treated as isolated beliefs; they must be seen as part of the framework for action which I learn, which is rooted in my nature as a rational agent. 'The end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting.'<sup>17</sup>

Such ways of acting are not fixed and unalterable. Wittgenstein uses the picture of a river-bed, in which some things are relatively fixed and others move along. 'The same propositions may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing.'<sup>18</sup> The river-bed can shift; but 'bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast';<sup>19</sup> they are 'held fast by what lies around it'. We have a picture of the world, and 'the whole picture which forms the starting point of belief . . . gives our way of looking at things . . . their form . . . perhaps, for unthinkable ages it has belonged to the scaffolding of our thoughts'.<sup>20</sup>

This may sound as if one might simply have alternative pictures of the world, rooted in diverse ways of acting. Certainly, 'A language-game does change with time',<sup>21</sup> and there is no absolute bedrock which every rational being must accept. There is the possibility of fundamental disagreement in pictures and in ways of acting, which one would just have to put up with. 'It might be that he was contradicting my fundamental attitudes, and if that were how it was, I should have to put up with it.'<sup>22</sup> At the same time, it

<sup>13</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 88.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 7.      <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 94.      <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 102.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 110.      <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 98.      <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 144.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 209–11.      <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 256.      <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 238.

is not an arbitrary matter, even though it is not a matter amenable to disinterested rational analysis. Wittgenstein speaks of 'something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal';<sup>23</sup> and he locates the most significant question to ask about such practices as the question: 'What difference does this make in their lives?'<sup>24</sup> Ways of life are not, after all, decided at random; they are rooted in human nature, as social, developing, and temporal. 'I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination . . . language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.'

One should not, Wittgenstein suggests, regard humans as intellectual beings who can decide between rational systems of belief on some purely neutral criteria, as if choosing the most elegant pattern from a set of possibilities. They are, after all, animals, and language evolved out of their social behaviour, their natural ways of acting in the world. They did not choose a language or a system of beliefs. The language emerged out of primitive forms of life, as a set of tools which helped to express and further those natural ways of behaving. 'Why should the language-game rest on some kind of knowledge?'<sup>25</sup> It is not based on any intellectual intuition or inner experience. 'The language-game . . . is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there . . . like our life.'<sup>26</sup> This is not a form of conventionalism, as if language rested on some set of decisions or matters of taste. It runs deeper than that. 'Doesn't it seem obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts?'<sup>27</sup> Our ways of acting are lived out in the real world, as reactions to that world; they are not fantasies.

On this view, one might speak of certain framework beliefs as the scaffolding upon which a whole system of concepts is built, which articulates a practical way of life, and finds its primary use in forwarding that way—'This game proves its worth.'<sup>28</sup> There is a strong emphasis in these remarks on the holistic nature of our language and on its primarily practical use, as rooted in deep human needs, dispositions, and attitudes. The practice of religion could be seen as a form of life, grounded in practical interests and needs, which is sustained by a whole web of concepts, within which alone talk of God makes sense.<sup>29</sup> The idea of God is given only by

<sup>23</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, 359.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 338.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 477.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 559.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 617.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 474.

<sup>29</sup> Fergus Kerr rightly warns, however, against thinking that Wittgenstein would have been happy to see religions as 'language-games', where this is itself used as the



the whole system of concepts which has its proper use in framing a distinctive way of acting. Worship and prayer, for example, are natural practices by which humans relate to the world of their experience in specific ways. They do not, as such, stand in need of justification, for they are rooted in basic attitudes of awe and reverence, gratitude and dependence, which show themselves in human behaviour. They form the basis for developing sets of concepts which aim to provide illuminating descriptions of how the world is and of how humans ought to live. At that stage they become subject to rational enquiry and assessment. They then generate particular beliefs of which one may be more or less certain.<sup>30</sup>

But the general conceptual frameworks themselves are neither certain nor uncertain; they simply express our ways of acting, in so far as these ways embody attitudes towards the world, pictures of the world in which our action takes place. As Peter Winch puts it, 'Within science or religion actions can be logical or illogical . . . But we cannot sensibly say that either the practice of science itself or that of religion is either illogical or logical.'<sup>31</sup> It is a fact of life that there are different pictures, different forms of practical commitment, and this may have a great importance for theology. It means that certainty pertains to fairly central beliefs within a framework, where one wants to speak of what is unalterable or fundamental in this view of things—even though the whole view may collapse, if the worst unpredictably happens. The exact beliefs which are held to be certain, and their precise formulation, will not be decided a priori and once for all time. It is a matter of discerning the nature of the framework and the way concepts hold together or fail to hold together in mutually supportive ways within it. It is a matter of the way in which specific concepts undergird and make possible specific ways of life and the adoption and expression of very general reactive attitudes to the manifold objects of experience. The use of reason with regard to such a framework is not to trace propositions back to one set of basic propositions which are themselves either self-evident or arbitrarily chosen. It is rather to elucidate and clarify the structure of the framework itself, in a manner which

basis for a metaphysical programme, perhaps of a behaviouristic sort. Cf. F. Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>30</sup> An exploration of the idea of God along these lines is given in: K. Ward, *The Concept of God* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974).

<sup>31</sup> Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: Routledge, 1958), 100.