

## MODERN UNIVERSALISM

### THE BIBLICAL ASPECTS OF DIVINE REVELATION

#### INTRODUCTORY: MANY WAYS TO THE CENTER?

Modern Universalism<sup>1</sup> is strictly speaking not a biblical problem, even though biblical texts often figure in discussions of it. It has come about through the concurrence of a variety of factors. Some of these are old and relate to the impulses of Old Dogmatic Universalism,<sup>2</sup> while the majority reflect the current criticism against the Christian Faith for its 'triumphalism'<sup>3</sup>

1. By *Modern Universalism* is here meant the modern tenet that the Oneness of God and the unity of the human race necessitate the assumption that God has revealed himself equally and adequately through the various religions ("living faiths"), and that there are many ways - not only the Christian one - that can lead to God and to salvation. It would appear that the lower forms of religion, like animism, are not included among the beneficiaries of divine revelation. For the purpose of the comparison, too, the so-called "living faiths" like Hinduism and Buddhism, are divested of their polytheistic and crude elements, and are treated as if they were almost pure religious ideologies of what is best and most beautiful in human thought.

2. By *Old Universalism* is meant the belief that owing to God's goodness, in the end every creature, human or angelic, will be saved. On Origen's universalism, see his work *De Principiis*. See further H. Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, Vol II, London 1961, 305-12; J. Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol II, 1953, 87-91; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, London 4th ed. 1968, e.g. 186. For a brief discussion of the history of Universalism see R. J. Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey", *Themelios*, 4 (1979), 48-54, and A. Fernando, *A Universal Homecoming?*, Madras, 1983, 9-19.

3. See e.g. D. G. Dawe, "Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World" in *Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World* (Eds. D. G. Dawe J. B. Carman), Maryknoll, N.Y.

"imperialism",<sup>4</sup> failure to convert the world, showing its inherent weakness,<sup>5</sup> and antisemitism, which took expression in the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> One further factor seems to be the consciousness of emergent Third and Fourth World nations, which find it difficult (though understandably so) to forget the Age of Colonialism.<sup>7</sup> All these factors, under the impact of the cos

1978, esp. 17ff.; S. Samartha, "The Lordship of Christ and Religious Pluralism" in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (Eds. G. H. Andersson - T. F. Stransky), Maryknoll, N.Y. 1981, 23. Dorothy Sölle describes Christology as "Christofascism"!, see P. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the World Religions* Maryknoll, N.Y. 1985, 164, and M. B. J. Brown, "Response" in *Christ's Lordship*, 75ff.

4. "The connection" (i.e. between Christian universalistic claims and various kinds of imperialism) "is very simple", says K. Stendahl; "If my faith is universalistic in its claim, then woe unto those who do not see the world as I do" ("Notes for Three Bible Studies" in *Christ's Lordship*, 15). See further, Samartha in *Christ's Lordship*, 22; M. Palihawadana, "A Buddhist Response: Religion Beyond Ideology and Power" in *Christian Faith*, esp. 38-43, and K. L. Seshagiri Rao, "A Hindu Response: The Value of Religious Pluralism" in *Christian Faith*, 48f f. However, see A. C. Krass, "Accounting for the Hope that is in Me" in *Christian Faith*, 156f.

5. Dawe in *Christian Faith*, 15; Samartha in *Christ's Lordship*, 20f.

6. E.g. Dawe, in *Christian Faith*, 14; Samartha in *Christ's Lordship*, 22. See further F. P. Littell, "Kirchenkampf and Holocaust: The German Church Struggle and Nazi Anti-Semitism in retrospect" *Church and State* 13 (1971) 209ff.; E. L. Falkenheim, "The Holocaust and Philosophy" *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1986), 505-15; R. R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* New York 1974. For a critique of the thesis that the Holocaust-Trauma implies a "Holocaust-Theologie" see E. Gräßer, "Exegese nach Auschwitz?", reprinted in his *Der Alte Bund im Neuen* (WUNT 35), Tübingen 1985, 259ff. See K. Haacker's critical attitude to the above, in his "Der Glaube im Hebräerbrieff und die hermeneutische Bedeutung des Holocaust. Bemerkungen zu einer aktuellen Kontroverse", *ThZ* 39 (1983) 152ff.

7. Cf. Samartha's reversal of Ps 137:4 "How can we sing a foreign song (i.e. Christianity) "in the Lord's land" (i.e. Ceylon or India) (in *Christ's Lordship*, 20). See further Appian-Kubi's "Response" to P. Rosanno's paper in *Christ's Lordship*, 121ff. from the African viewpoint, O. Costas' Liberation Theology from South America: "A Radical evangelical Contribution from Latin America" in *Christ's Lordship*, 133-56, and P. Sudhakar, "A Christian Among Hindu Neighbours" in *Faith in the Midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue and Community* (Ed. S. J. Samartha), WCC, Geneva

mopolitan outlook of modern life,<sup>8</sup> have led many to consider Christianity *passé*, arrogant in its universalistic claims<sup>9</sup> and a hindrance to world-community,<sup>10</sup> and to raise the outcry that Christians must stop pretending<sup>11</sup> to possess the only way to God.<sup>12</sup> The argument goes, all religions are culturally conditioned,<sup>13</sup> but God has nonetheless revealed himself equally through all of them<sup>14</sup> and appointed different ways of salvation,

1977, 93f.; M. Palihawadana in *Christian Faith*, 40ff.; K. L. Seshagiri Rao, in *Christian Faith*, 48ff from Asia. For an African contribution criticizing the syncretistic and nationalistic tendencies of much thinking in Third and Fourth World countries, see Byang H.Kato, "The Gospel, Cultural Context and Religious Syncretism" in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Ed. J. D. Douglas), Minneapolis 1975, 1216-23, where in reference to J. Getonga's statement that imperialist western Christianity expected the African to sever all ties with the past, even "throw away his native clothes ..." appositely rejoins "One is tempted to ask Getonga what native clothes he has in mind and whether he would honestly like to go back to them"! (1222).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Dawe in *Christian Faith*, 14; Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 1, says: "Today our intercommunicating planet has made us aware, more painfully than ever before, of religious pluralism and of the many different answers. Why painfully? Because the quantity and quality of this knowledge of many and other religions is today setting off a barage of questions that religious persons of the past, secure in their own isolated religious camps, never had to face". Similarly, Samartha in *Christ's Lordship*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 40 f. on Toynbee's views. *By Christian (or Gospel) Universalism or Universality* is meant the universal relevance of Christianity as a religion or of the Gospel as a message of salvation owing to God's unique revelation of himself through it for all mankind, and hence its applicability to all peoples on earth without exception.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 15: "To collaborate in building a common world", see also 34; K. Stendahl, "Towards World Community" in *Jewish-Christian Dialogue* WCC, Geneva 1975; Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Interreligious Relationships*, WCC.Geneva 1981, 15f f.

<sup>11</sup> See A. C. Krass's discussion of Baum in *Christian Faith*, 156ff.; R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, e.g. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 40f.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. O. Costas in *Christ's Lordship*, 150ff.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. C. P. Price, "Religion and Revelation" in *Christian Faith*, 117fg.; Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 38ff. and *passim*; Bleeker, *Christ in Modern Athens*, 103f f.

none of which is unique, or universal.<sup>15</sup> In other words, there are many paths to the summit of Mount Fuji!<sup>16</sup>

To this largely humanistic reasoning are then added some 'theological' arguments, namely, the Oneness of Godhead, the unity of the human race, the indiscriminating love of God for all his creatures, which is understood to imply that he must somehow have made himself available to all through adequate revelation. Truth is thus thought to be larger than Christian truth.<sup>17</sup>

It will be readily apparent that the above reasoning is muddled, confusing legitimate with illegitimate criteria in deciding the very important question of God's revelation to man. In particular the unworthy conduct of some or even many of those who have borne the name of Christ can in

<sup>15</sup> The uniqueness of Jesus Christ is questioned or - which amounts to the same thing - at least attenuated by e.g. J. Hick, *God has Many Names*, London 1980; R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, London 1981; P. Sudhakar in e.g. *Faith in the Midst of Faiths* (ed. S. J. Samartha, 92; Knitter, *No Other Name?*, e.g. 222f.; S. J. Samartha in e.g. *Courage for Dialogue*; Stendahl, with particular reference to the Jews, in *Christ's Lordship*, 17f.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 145f. The matter is put well by Samartha, in *Christ's Lordship*, 31f., when he says: "There is no reason to claim that the religion developed in the desert around Mt Sinai is superior to the religion developed on the banks of the River Gānga". Note well that for Samartha "the religion developed in the desert of Mt Sinai" is equivalent to the religion developed on the shores of Galilee, see e.g. chapter 11 in his *Courage for Dialogue*, 142ff. See further R. Panikkar, *The Trinity and World religions*, Madras 1970, and *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*; S. W. Ariarajah, *Dialogue*, Singapore 1980 and "Towards a Theology of Dialogue" in *Inter-religious Dialogue* (ed. R. W. Rousseau) WCC, Geneva 1981; and P. Sudhakar in *Faith in the Midst of Faiths*, 93. For criticism of the "Many Ways Hypothesis", which is found to be dependent on the "Theocentric Hypothesis", see A. B. da Silva, *Can Religions Be Compared?*, Uppsala 1986, 55ff., 73.

<sup>17</sup> The claim is made repeatedly by Knitter, *No Other Name?* See also Samartha, "Ganga and Galilee: Two responses to Truth" in J. Hick - H. Askari, *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, Dorset 1985, 91ff.

no way be a valid criterion for discrediting the Christian Faith as such<sup>18</sup> or for denying it a unique revelation from God. The two are quite different matters. Then, again, there is no logical rupture between the oneness of God, the unity of the human race and the loving nature of God, on the one hand, and the claim that God has revealed himself to one particular people in order to make it his instrument to reach the whole world, on the other.

The question of whether other religions have an authentic revelation of God and his eternal purpose cannot be decided by a review of the Crusades, the Inquisition or the conquistador tactics of certain missionaries, nor by modern humanistic considerations, but by a sober-minded investigation of the nature of God's self-revelation.

Now here we are faced with a methodological difficulty. By what criteria do we decide whether an assumed divine revelation is authentic or not? It seems that people of different religions will never agree upon any one set of criteria. But if there are no 'objective' criteria for deciding which religion(s) has/have received authentic revelation from God, there are two criteria that can give an authentic answer to the question whether God has revealed himself through more than one religion. These are the *Criterion of Continuity* and the *Criterion of Coherence*. The criterion of continuity can be defined as follows: since God's revelation is generally conceived as not being limited to a single occurrence, the various parts of that revelation must exhibit continuity and development. Therefore, if God has revealed himself through various religions, those revelations must be in a relation of continuity to one another. The criterion of coherence implies that not only may the several parts of God's self-revelation not be inconsistent or contradictory with one another, but more than that, they must exhibit a coherence, an inner harmony, whereby only when taken in their totality will they yield an adequate picture of God. These two tests do not *a priori* dis

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the sharp distinction between real and nominal followers of Jesus in e.g. Mt 7:21.

pose of any religion. Hence their applicability. But they do demand that authentic revelation of God exhibits the traits of continuity, consistency and coherence. Thus, if it can be proved on other grounds that God has revealed himself, for example, through Buddhism, and the revelation which Christianity claims to have is not in a relation of continuity and coherence with it, then the Christian revelation cannot be authentic revelation! It should be therefore obvious that I am not engaging in the fruitless debate of "*My* religion has the authentic revelation, while *your* religion has the counterfeit revelation". All I am saying is that authentic revelation, to whatever people or peoples it may have been vouchsafed, must exhibit the traits of continuity, consistency and coherence.

At this point, adherents of oriental faiths, who are accustomed to thinking in terms of opposites, that live in happy *symbiosis* with each other within an impersonal, all-pervading 'God', might find my 'Western' logic objectionable. But if our talk about God, his self-revelation and his will is to have any meaning at all and to communicate any specific content that is intelligible to man and renders man accountable to God, then the two principles of Continuity and Coherence must be strenuously upheld.

It should thus be clear that while there are no independent grounds (i.e. outside the parties concerned) for determining which religion has received authentic divine revelation, it must be axiomatically laid down that mutually contradictory revelations cannot be held together as authentic revelations.

However, the claim is often made that the Bible does not discountenance the possibility of authentic divine revelation in other religions and appears to allow for God's saving activity through other faiths and other 'Saviours'. The continued discussion will be addressed to the biblical evidence on issues such as these as well as to the biblical claims to divine revelation and the biblical concept of continuity and coherence.

## II. HAS GOD REVEALED HIMSELF EQUALLY TO ALL?

The essential meaning of revelation is that somebody reveals something to somebody. This implies four components: a Revealer, an act of revelation, a content that is being revealed, and someone to whom a revelation is communicated. In our context the Revealer is God, the content of revelation is God and his will, and the recipient of revelation is man. It is not likely that there will be any great disagreement about these three points, but the fourth one, the act or process of revelation, which discloses the mode or means of its occurrence, and hence relates to the very factuality of the *revelation occurrence* is the pivotal point. Hence this is the chief point that will engage us in the following discussion.

There are two ways in which divine revelation can be mediated to man: one, by means of Nature (sometimes called General Revelation), and two, by means of Special Revelation.<sup>19</sup> I shall discuss briefly both of these questions.

### 1. Natural (or General) Revelation and Its Limitations.

Both the Old and the New Testament assert that Creation bears valid witness to its Creator. For example, the Psalmist muses: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament his handiwork" (Ps 19:1).<sup>20</sup> From this it might be concluded that if one were to turn his eyes towards the heavens one would discover God. And so one might be tempted to see in this as well as in other texts of similar tenor a *Natural Theology*. And it might be concluded that there is biblical support for the idea that God has given adequate knowledge of himself to all peoples by means of creation.

<sup>19</sup> Human conscience, sometimes included within Natural (or General) Revelation, is not quite comparable to either Natural or Special Revelation, in as much as these imply a communication *ab extra* rather than something continuously residing within man's own self.

<sup>20</sup> See also Ps 8:1-3.

But this is by no means the case. It is, of course, true that the universe is here portrayed as objectively manifesting its Creator, but that manifestation can be perceived only through faith. The *genre* of the texts, too, makes it plain that the language used here is one of faith and worshipful confession. That God's manifestation through Nature is not of compelling force upon every spectator is proved by the fact that the "fool", too, contemplates the sky, but comes to the conclusion that "there is no God"! (Ps 14:1; 53:1).

The efficiency of Natural Revelation therefore depends upon two conditions: one, the objective manifestation of God through Nature, and two, man's apprehension of that manifestation subjectively. The two conditions together constitute what was termed above as *revelation occurrence*, in other words, revelation *occurs* when it is both *given* and *apprehended*. This implies that God's manifestation through Nature is not unconditionally experienceable by all. As we shall see these two conditions obtain also in the NT, and herein lie the limitations and inefficiency of Natural Revelation. In what follows I shall discuss briefly some of the "classical texts"<sup>21</sup> of Universalism one by one.

**Acts 14:15-17.** In his address to the Lycaonians Paul is described as calling upon them to turn away from their vain idols<sup>22</sup> to the living God, who in contradistinction to them, is the Creator of all things. He goes on to say that in past generations God allowed all nations to go their own way, that is, wander in idolatry, though he did not leave himself without witness, in that his providential care for mankind never ceased. The three central points of this short address are: one, that the pre-Gospel period is understood as a time of ignorance and revolt, when mankind went its wayward way. Now this pre-Gospel period is not simply a temporal marker, but above all an existential marker. Man, any man, of whatever time, place,

<sup>21</sup> Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 83,92.

<sup>22</sup> The Greek word μάταιος (*mataios*) is occasionally used of idols, cf. e.g. Jer LXX) 2:5.

and culture, outside Christ belongs to this pre-Gospel period. The second point is that God's witnesses here are simply his ordinances in Nature, which actually bear sufficient testimony to an intelligent, and powerful Architect and Sustainer. But these, while making men's fall into idolatry fully reprehensible, cannot be said to disclose God's Person, will, and salvation. The third point is that now, in the Gospel period, God calls upon men through the preaching of the Gospel to turn to "the living God". It is indeed strange that a text like this, which so clearly refutes Universalism, is sometimes cited in its support!

**Acts 17:22-31.** This speech, according to Adolf Deissmann "The greatest missionary document in the New Testament ... a manifesto of worldwide importance in the history of religions and of religion"<sup>23</sup> has been looked upon as another cornerstone of Universalism. In particular, the view that the Athenians worshipped the true God without knowing him finds more than an echo in Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christianity",<sup>24</sup> though this thesis has been vigorously controverted.<sup>25</sup> But on what grounds can it actually be said that the Athenians worshipped the true God? The existence of an altar to the honor of an Unknown god can under no circumstances be a guarantee that the Athenian populace had received authentic revelation from the living God.

According to ancient authorities<sup>26</sup> among the altars erected to a multitude of divinities and even to personifications of virtues and qualities,<sup>27</sup> the Athenians had erected altars to "Unknown" or "Anonymous" gods. Paul

<sup>23</sup> *Light from the Ancient East*, 384.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. "Christianity and the non-Christian Religions" in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. I, Baltimore 1966, and Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 128ff.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. H. Küng, *On Being a Christian*, New York 1976, and Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 128f f.

<sup>26</sup> See Pausanias, *Attica*, 1,4; V,5; XVIII.9; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii*, VI,3; Diogenes Laertius, I, χ,IIO.

<sup>27</sup> Such as *Eleos*, *Aidos*, *Pheme*, *Horme* (see Pausanias, *Attica*, XVII,1).

had apparently stumbled upon one of these, and quite appropriately took the inscription on this altar<sup>28</sup> as the starting-point of his address. It would be reading too much into the words attributed to Paul to construe them as meaning that the Athenians actually worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who had recently given his final self-revelation through Jesus Christ. From the circumstances it becomes obvious that Paul seizes the fact of reverence toward unknown deities, which being unknown are undefined, and consequently empty of any content, and pours into the term the content of his own Object of proclamation. The sentence "what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" indicates neither continuity nor identity of being between the two. This is further corroborated by the use of the neuter form of the relative pronoun, which does not so much refer to the Person worshipped (since the masculine would then have been more appropriate) as to the fact of worship,<sup>29</sup> a worship in ignorance.<sup>30</sup>

Paul goes on to present God as Creator of the whole cosmos, at the same time administering to their idolatrous practices a criticism which has at once precedents in OT prophets<sup>31</sup> as well in such Greek authors as Xenophanes and Euripides.<sup>32</sup> He underscores the unity of the human race, perhaps consciously opposing the Athenian claim to *autochthonous* origin<sup>33</sup> or perhaps for regarding all non-Greeks as inferior and barbarous.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Jerome thought that Paul had changed the plural, witnessed by ancient writers, to the singular, but these altars were probably dedicated each to one unknown deity, cf. F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, London 2nd ed. 1952, 336; *id.*, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (NICNT), Grand Rapids 1954, 356, and B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, Uppsala 1955, 244ff.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. G. Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte* (HTKNT), Freiburg 1980, 238.

<sup>30</sup> *Contra* Haenchen, *Acts* 529, who seems to think of a true worship of God in ignorance.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Isa 44:9-20.

<sup>32</sup> E.g. Xenophanes, *frgs.* 11, 12, 14, 15, 16 and 23; Euripides, *Heracles*, 1345; *frgs.* 63 and 292.

<sup>33</sup> Euripides, *Ion*, 29; Aristophanes, *Vespae*, 1076.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 337.

He asserts that God created men in order to live on the earth and to seek him,<sup>35</sup> in the hope that they might *feel after* him and find him, just like a blind man or a man with sight in total darkness fumbles or gropes after something.<sup>36</sup> The term ψηλαφάω (*psêlaphaô*), which modifies the meaning of εὐρίσκω (*heuriskô*) and purports a most inadequate acquaintance with the object of search, expresses well the kind and degree of knowledge which Paul could concede to Natural revelation. While the *modus potentialis* underscores that even such an inadequate acquaintance with God was and remained at best a very remote possibility.<sup>37</sup> This is so even despite the fact that God is not far from men, as certain heathen poets have said themselves. The concessive clause in vs 27b shows that men have not found God through their fumbblings. In the light of this the earlier mention of the worship of the unknown god can under no circumstances be understood to imply a genuine discovery of the true God.

Vs 29 is an incisive criticism of idol-making, couched in OT language<sup>38</sup> and vs 30 characterizes the pre-Gospel period as "times of ignorance". With the advent of the Gospel a new *aeon* has broken in. God, having overlooked all past ignorance, now commands all men everywhere to repent. It would be difficult to find a more emphatic phrase to express the

<sup>35</sup> The infinitives κατοικεῖν (*katoikein*) and ζητεῖν (*zetein*) have been understood as exegetic of ἐποίησεν (*epoiesen*) (Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 337), but they are most likely final; so most commentators: H. Conzelmann, *Apostelgeschichte*, 99; G. Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Freiburg, etc. 1980, 240; J. Roloff, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Göttingen 1981, 262; I.H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (TNTC), Leicester 1980, 288; see also J. Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB), New York 1967, 171. Similarly A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical research*, Nashville 1934, 1020f.

<sup>36</sup> The word ψηλαφάω (*pselaphaô*) properly means a fumbling with the fingers as of a blind person, see Homer, *Odyssey* I, 416, of the blinded Cyclops. In Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazousai*, 315, "feel after" occurs together with "find". See also Platon, *Phaedo* 99B.

<sup>37</sup> Robertson, *Grammar*, 1021.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Isa 44:9-20.

absolute universality of the Gospel.<sup>39</sup> The command to repentance and the announcement of judgment by a Man whom God appointed by raising him from the dead, underscore the gravity of the new situation and the severity of God's judgment on account of the special and full revelation which God has now given of himself, in sharp contrast to the gropings of men during the times of ignorance!

I conclude therefore that the Areopagus speech does not offer a Natural Theology, nor any support for the view that all peoples have been the recipients of authentic divine revelation. On the contrary, the speech regards the discovery of God by means of men's efforts as an academic possibility which has never been realized.

**Romans 1:18-23.** Following a superficial interpretation of its statements to the effect that God has revealed to men what can be known of him, so that the revelation assumed as given is adequate to render them without excuse, and then combining this data with Rm 2:14-15, where Gentiles without the Law are said to be fulfilling the Law, the text is supposed to open the door to Universalism.

For a proper understanding of the passage we need to begin with vs. 16: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, because it is God's power (or effective working) unto salvation to everyone who believes". This verse no doubt gives the theme of the Epistle.<sup>40</sup> In the next verse "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed ..." the word 'righteousness' comes very close to being the equivalent of 'salvation' (σωτηρία) (*sôteria*)<sup>41</sup> in vs 16. Now there is a conscious juxtaposition between vs 17 "For in it (that is, in the Gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed" and vs 18 "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven". This twofold revelation marks the

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech*, 229ff.; J. Roloff, *Apostelgeschichte*, 265f.

<sup>40</sup> Similarly C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans I*, 87; J. Murray, *Romans*, 26; C. K. Barret, *Romans*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> The Hebrew צדקה (*tsedakah*) often bears this sense in the OT, as in e.g. Isa 42:6; 45:8; 46:13; 51:6,8 (see C. R. North, *The Second Isaiah*, Oxford, 1964, Ulf., 118, 152 and 166) and Ps 24:5; 31:1; 98:2; 143:11 (see H. J. Krause, *Psalmen* (BKAT),

difference between special revelation and natural revelation. Therefore if we are to understand what has been treated in vv 18-23 we must see them in their relation to vv 16-17, not in isolation.

And now, Paul charges mankind with a wilful perversion of the truth, which renders them inexcusable.<sup>42</sup> From this it might be concluded that a) God has actually revealed himself, and b) that mankind has had access to this revelation, in other words, that both the objective and the subjective aspects of what we have called the *revelation occurrence*, obtain here. And from this the conclusion may again be drawn that the *revelation occurrence* is a continuous process, wherefore all peoples on earth today may be considered as being constantly involved in this ongoing process. In this way the passage may be turned into another pillar of Universalism.

The key to a correct understanding of what Paul is saying is to *realize* that Paul is treating mankind collectively and not individually. Thus, when in vs 19 he says that "What can be known of God is manifest to (or among) them" Paul is treating mankind as a unity. At the same time the present tense "is manifest" (φανερὸν ἐστίν) (*phaneron estin*) underlines the fact that the revelation is there — objectively. Now the manifestation is there because God "manifested" (ἐφανερώσεν) (*epkanerôsen*) it to them — aorist tense of a past historical manifestation. Vs 20 states that "his invisible things (or aspects) ever since the creation of the world are seen by the mind through the things that are made, his invisible things, namely, his eternal power and divine nature".<sup>43</sup> Here, as the passive καθορᾶται (*kathoratai*) shows, the point is not any subjective, factual, continuously recurrent apprehension of God's manifestation, but the means by which this manifestation is mediated and apprehended.<sup>44</sup> The point may be brought out better by using the auxiliary 'can' just as the Modern Greek Version has done: "the human mind *can* see them through the things that

Neukirchen 1978, I, 395; II, 847). Cf. also Barrett, *Romans*, 29f.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. B. Reicke, Article πᾶς (*pas*) in *TDNT* V, 894.

<sup>43</sup> On θεϊότης (*theiotes*) see Käsemann, *Romans*, 41.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. O. Kuss, *Römer*, 36: "Seit der Welterschöpfung ... ist die sichtbare Welt dem Menschen ein Weg zu einer Erkenntnis Gottes".

are created".<sup>45</sup> This does not imply that everyone who looks at nature at the same time catches a glimpse of God, but that given certain conditions and attitudes, one can see that behind this amazing universe stands an intelligent and powerful Creator, rather than that it all came about completely by chance as a result of a Big Bang.

Since a true manifestation of God is there and man has had the possibility to apprehend it, he is without excuse for his refusal to recognize the Creator. Vv 19 and 20 stated the naked fact that God manifested himself to mankind, the means by which he did it, as well as the means by which he was to be apprehended. In vv 21-23 Paul goes on to discuss mankind's response. He begins with a co-called *participium conjunctum* with concessive significance, conceding to them the knowledge of God and thus enhancing their responsibility, and then uses a series of aorist indicatives<sup>46</sup> in order to describe mankind's negative response. These aorist indicatives show that Paul is not thinking of men's individual actions, but of mankind's original revolt against God through those who actually had knowledge of God. In other words, his argumentation is similar to that in ch. 5. Paul therefore is not saying that each individual human being of his own day, who is confronted with God's objective manifestation in nature, has the possibility to apprehend God, but instead chooses to reject it and to take to idol-making. No! for Paul this is a historical event, having transpired at the beginning of History, though by his persistence in idolatry every man says his own individual 'Yes' to the original revolt and thus comes under judgment, in a similar way as all have sinned in Adam as well as in their own persons individually. There is thus an ambivalence between the historical event and the repeated occurrence (ef. 1:32). This text therefore does not hold out the promise of any revelation of God to mankind in general. Instead, it deals

<sup>45</sup> Similarly M. B. Newman - E. A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans*, UBS, Stuttgart 1973, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Actually all of the verbs in these verses (apart from the present participle φάσκοντες (*phaskontes*), which, too, takes on past time) are aorists: ἐδόξασαν (*edoxasan*), ἠὲχαρίστησαν (*euchatistesan*), ἐματαιώθησαν (*emataiōthesan*), ἐσκοτίσθη (*eskotisthe*), ἐμωράνθησαν (*emoranthesan*), ἤλλαξαν (*ellaxan*).

with how the original revelation was rejected as well as with the present plight of man as a result of that choice.

**1 Corinthians 1:21.** The limitations and hence weaknesses of natural revelation become evident in 1 Cor 1:21. A word-for-word translation might be:

Because since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through the wisdom, it pleased God through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe

Now there are at least four *prima facie* ways of construing A "in the wisdom of God", and B "through the wisdom" into two groups of two alternatives each:

1:a A and B refer to God's wise plan

1:b A refers to God's wise plan, and B to human wisdom (intellect, philosophy)

2:a A and B refer to God's wisdom manifested through creation

2:b A refers to God's wisdom manifested through creation, and B to human wisdom

In 1:a and 2:a the two statements are almost tautologous, and the resultant meaning is clumsy. 1:b neutralizes the force of 'since' which thus becomes non-sense.<sup>47</sup> 2:b is by far the best alternative and is supported by the following arguments: (1) Whether the 'wisdom' of these early chapters of 1 Corinthians is Greek wisdom (i.e. philosophy) or Gnostic wisdom,<sup>48</sup> it is clear that Paul treats it as human wisdom (21 b), from whose viewpoint the Gospel appears "foolish", even if Paul does not shrink from applying the term also to God (21a); (2). Vv 19f. show that Paul is concerned with wisdom as a human means for apprehending God. Now Greek wisdom was not

<sup>47</sup> This is also Barrett's view, *1 Corinthians* (BNTC), London 1968, 53.

<sup>48</sup> See U. Wilckens, Article σοφία (*sophia*) in *TDNT* VII, 519-22.

simply abstract speculation, but in fact an attempt to arrive at Truth invisible through the observation of things visible (cf. for example, Platon);<sup>49</sup> (3) This interpretation gives 'since' its proper force, showing that the "foolishness of preaching" becomes necessary because men cannot by the application of their mind on Creation obtain such knowledge of God as can lead to salvation; and (4) this interpretation is in line with the texts discussed above, especially Rm 1,<sup>50</sup> according to which men can no longer arrive at a proper knowledge of God because of their perversion.

In view of the above reasoning, the passage should be translated: Because since the world through (the exercise of its) wisdom did not come to know God in his wisdom (as revealed by creation), it pleased God through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe.<sup>51</sup>

The conclusion from the above discussion is that while the Bible recognizes the witness of Nature to God, and holds men inexcusable for their unbelief, perversion and idolatry, it does not consider God's manifestation through Nature an adequate self-disclosure of God which can lead to authentic knowledge of his person, his will and his salvation.

## **2. Has God Given Special Revelation to All?**

In a lecture delivered at Uppsala on the 22nd April 1986, Helmut Koester made a passing remark to the effect that it is illegitimate to distinguish between natural revelation and special revelation, because all the religions of the world have received adequate revelation from God. Indeed, many Universalists would not be content simply with natural revelation. They would claim that the religious insights of the 'living' faiths (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam) constitute genuine revelations of God. They would,

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. his doctrine of Forms in his *Respublica*, etc.

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. H. Conzelmann, *Korinther* (KEKNT), Göttingen 2nd ed. 1981, 64

<sup>51</sup> This interpretation is adhered to by the Modern Greek version of 1985; G. Bornkamm, *Gesammelte Aufsätze* II, 1959, 120f.; U. Wilckens, *TDNT VII*, 521.

of course, often recognize that the Bible does not explicitly state that God has given special revelation of himself through all religions. But they are of the opinion that certain biblical statements in combination with other factors tend to support Universalism. Some of the arguments put forward here are: the love of God, the unity of the human race, the fact that the Gospel has barely reached "20%" of the earth's population during the 2.000 years of its proclamation, and so forth. It is thus argued that God must have other means at his disposal than merely the Christian Messiah. Thus, the 'Indian' pluralist Stanley J. Samartha puts the religion of the River Ganga on a par with Christianity,<sup>52</sup> while his 'compatriot', Raimundo Panikkar, rejects the co-extensiveness of Jesus with Christ, who may be revealed as Jesus, Rama, Krishna, Ishvara, Purusha or Tathagata.<sup>53</sup> But here we stand on non-biblical ground.

From the biblical perspective, the argument is based partly on a number of texts which seem to speak of the salvation of all men, and partly on texts that appear to support universal revelation.

### *1. Texts Using such Expressions as "all men" and "whole world"*

Among texts using the expression "all men", "whole world", etc. may be mentioned Jn 12:32: "And I, when I am lifted from the earth, will draw *all men* to myself"; 1 Tim 2:3-4: "God our Saviour, who desires *all men* to be saved ..."; Heb 2:9: "That by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone"; 1 Jn 2:2: "He is the expiation / propitiation ... for the sins of the whole world".<sup>54</sup> In texts like these the expression "all men" and "whole world" are taken to imply that all individuals without exception are considered as saved. This simplistic interpretation breaks down on two scores:

<sup>52</sup> See note 15, above. Samartha is Ceylonese; Panikkar Indian-Portugese.

<sup>53</sup> See Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, 1981; Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 152f f.

<sup>54</sup> Other 'universalistic' texts include Acts 3:21; Rm 5:18; 2 Cor 5:19; Col 1:20; Tit 2:11; 1 Pt 3:9.

(1) the expression "all men" (Gr. πάντες) (*pantes*) in biblical usage has sometimes representative rather than inclusive sense.<sup>55</sup> Thus, for example, Mt 3:5 tells us that "all Judea and all the region about the Jordan" went to John's baptism. It would be, however, absurd to deduce from this that Matthew meant that every single individual in Judea had become a follower of John's. Besides, such a supposition is expressly contradicted by Mt 3:7 and 21:32. Similarly Jn 12:19 "the whole world has gone after him" simply means that Jesus had convinced a large number of people, but obviously not the whole world. In the case of 1 Tim 2:3-4 "all men" presumably means all men, but the text speaks of God's desire that all men be saved, not of their actual salvation. That the salvation of all is not contemplated in Scripture is proved by the fact that Scripture speaks of the perdition of some! Moreover, the very idea of salvation presupposes a contrary state from which one is saved. (2) These passages in one way or another involve the activity, particularly the death, of Christ, as the precondition for the announced salvation. Thus Jn 12:32 speaks of all men being drawn to none other than Jesus as the Christ as a result of his being lifted up on the cross (i.e. his crucifixion), but this, so far from being the solution to the Universalists problem, would actually be *anathema* to his position! The same holds true of texts like Rm 5:18, and 1 Tim 2:3-5, and Tit 2:11-14, and Heb 2:9, and 1 Jn 2:2, and 2 Cor 5:19. In each of these texts salvation does not come to men directly from heaven, but through Jesus Christ. It would therefore seem that God has no dealings with mankind apart from Christ.

## 2. Does the NT Recognize Special Revelation on a Universal Scale?

The most important texts here would be Rm 2:12-16,<sup>56</sup> which normally is understood as in some way setting forth Paul's classical statement of

<sup>55</sup> See e.g. B. Reicke, *TDNT* V, 896.

<sup>56</sup> On the exegesis of this text see Barrett, *Romans*, 49ff.; Murray, *Romans*, 69ff.; E. F. Harrison, *Romans* (EBC), 30ff.; E. Brunner, *Romans*, 21; Sanday-Headlam,

the heathens' salvation outside Christ. This text has been often treated in isolation from its context, as if it were a parenthesis containing Paul's view of the salvation of the Gentiles outside of Christ. Thus, the very difficult problem, of the fate of those Gentiles who never heard the Gospel is supposed to get its answer in vv 12-14. This is no doubt very convenient. It is another matter, however, whether this is what Paul is discussing here.

It appears to me that this text must be viewed in the light of Paul's argument in chs. 1-3. Paul's overall argument in these chapters is to show that all mankind without national or individual exception is guilty before God. In ch 1 Paul has established the guilt of all mankind corporately before it was divided into Jews and Gentiles. In 2:1 Paul addresses the man, any man, who judges others, but who does the very same thing himself. Who is this man? Some commentators understand him of certain Gentiles, who did not indulge in the gross sins mentioned in ch 1.<sup>57</sup> But this is hardly tenable. The man in view must be none other than the Jew. With this judgment concur a number of commentators.<sup>58</sup> This view finds support in vv 4-5, which speak of his "hardness of heart", a term particularly applicable to Jews,<sup>59</sup> in vv 9-15, according to which the Jew stands out as one who regards himself as superior to the Gentiles and therefore is put in his right place by Paul, and in vv 17-29, which identify him expressly with the Jew.

Now, how does Paul prove that this man, the Jew, is guilty of the things he criticizes in the Gentiles? Well, he does not argue for it, he just

*Romans, SA; Barth, Romans, 65ff.; Bruce, Romans, 88f.; O. Kuss, Römerbrief, 68-82; P. Achtermeier, Romans, 43-9; O. Michel, Römer, 117-26; H. Schlier, Römerbrief, 75-81; U. Wilckens, Römer, 131-46; Käsemann, Romans, 61-8; Cranfield, Romans I, 153-63.*

<sup>57</sup> E.g. Bruce, *Romans*, 86f. thinks of Stoics like Seneca.

<sup>58</sup> See e.g. Murray, *Romans*, 54; Brunner, *Romans*, 20; Sanday-Headlam, *Romans*, 53; Cranfield, *Romans I*, 138, where see for reasons.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. e.g. the LXX text in the following passages: Ex 33:3,5; 34:9; Dt 9:6, 11, 27; 2 Chr 30:8; Ps 95:8 as well as Mt 19:8 = Mk 10:5; Acts 7:51.

assumes it. On what grounds? Again, he does not indicate, but the grounds may be presumed to be, one, the original, corporate revolt of mankind against God, treated in ch 1, which naturally includes the Jews as well, and two, the empirical knowledge that *also* Jews do come short of keeping the Law.

Vv 7-10 are chiastically structured having two groups in view: 7 and 10 "those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality" and vv 8 and 9 "those who are factious and do not obey the truth". Now it is interesting that each of these groups includes both Jews and Gentiles! But how shall we understand this? Is Paul saying that there are some Jews and some Gentiles who are evil and therefore will be judged according to their evil works, and again, there are some Jews and some Gentiles who do good and therefore will be saved? This is a usual way of understanding Paul's statement. But had he meant this he would be delivering his funeral speech over his own mission and preaching! According to Paul the only ground upon which Jews and Gentiles are brought together and united in one body is Christ.<sup>60</sup> Conversely, if Paul had admitted for a moment that Jews *as* Jews fulfilled God's law, that would disrupt his whole fundamental understanding of human guilt, faith and salvation, and would conflict too flagrantly with e.g. 3:9, 20, and 23. As Cranfield puts it "the inconsistency which this explanation attributes to Paul is altogether too colossal and too glaring to be at all likely".<sup>61</sup> The two groups therefore must be Christians and non-Christians of both Jewish and Gentile descent. This is the only legitimate division of mankind which Paul as a Christian recognizes.

In vs 11 Paul takes up the Jew's special problem, viz. that since God favored him with his law, God is also going to show special favor and leniency towards him. Paul tells him that this is not so. God is impartial. Vs 12 may be interpreted as supporting a double way of salvation, but what that verse actually does is that it speaks only of the damnation of Gentiles

<sup>60</sup> Gal 3:26-9; Eph 2:11-22.

<sup>61</sup> *Romans* I, 152.

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and Jews, but *not* of their salvation. The verse deals with one of the two groups, the group that is outside of Christ and which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles. With respect to the other group, the group of those who are in Christ, inasmuch as Paul is arguing against Jewish bigotry and exclusivism on the grounds of physical descent, he singles out for treatment only the Gentile element of this second group, just the element that is problematic to the Jew. Paul first tells the Jew that his possession of the Law without the performance of it is worthless before God, and then states that Gentiles (note the absence of the definite article!) who by nature do not have the law,<sup>62</sup> perform the things commanded by the law, and thus show that the law is written on their hearts. Without doubt here we have a reference to the new covenant in Jer 31:33, which some commentators without good reason have dismissed.<sup>63</sup> The Gentiles referred to here are the Gentile

<sup>62</sup> The expression "by nature", which is usually understood as belonging to the following words, "do the things of the law" (so Käsemann, *Romans*, 63f.; Wilckens, *Römer*, 134; Schlier, *Römerbrief*, 77; Kuss, *Römerbrief*, 69; C. H. Dodd, *Romans*, 37; Michel, *Römer*, 117) can with equally good reason be connected with the preceding "Gentiles who do not have the law", that is, *by nature*, in other words, by virtue of their descent. For this connection speaks verse 27, where the uncircumcised are said to be such by nature, and which, according to the argumentation, are the same as "Gentiles who do not have the law by nature" here! Grammatically, the other alternative is possible - hence the wide support it enjoys - however, theologically it is less probable. See Cranfield, *Romans* I, 156f. Achtermeier's remarks against the usual interpretation are apposite: "If gentiles know by nature what is good and they do it, they are morally superior to the Jews, who need the law to tell them what is good and how to do it. Such inherent moral superiority of gentiles over Jews not only makes the chosen people morally inferior to all others but it also makes nonsense of Paul's argument ... we ought to relate the phrase in 2:14, not with 'do the law', but rather with 'have not the law'. Paul is describing gentiles who 'by nature' (by birth) do not have the law ... not gentiles who 'by nature' (inherently) do what the law requires (God's will)".

<sup>63</sup> Because the Jeremiah reference is to the eschatological act of God on Israel. So e.g. Michel, *Römer*, 80, 83; Bruce, *Romans*, 91; Barrett, *Romans*, 52; Käsemann, *Romans*, 64. But as Cranfield, *Romans* I, 159, appositely remarks "As soon as it is recognized that the Gentiles whom Paul had in mind are Gentile Christians, the objection to seeing here an intentional reference to Jer 31:33 disappears; for it is abundantly clear that Paul did think that God's eschatological promises were already beginning to be

part of the Christian Church.<sup>64</sup> The written law is, of course, the distillation of Moses' law as in e.g. Mt 7:12; 22:40 and Rm 13:8-10.

### 3. *Is Universal Revelation Free from Inconsistency?*

Finally, God's revelation of himself through various religions must exhibit Continuity and Coherence. Not only must a clear continuity be discernible, but, in addition, since God cannot contradict himself, the revelation given to various religions may be complementary, i.e. additive, but not contradictory. We may remind ourselves of one of the basic principles of exegesis, sc. that an author tries to be consistent in what he writes and does not intentionally contradict himself. This rule is certainly applicable here, too. If God were to give a contradictory picture of himself and his will, how could ever humans be accountable to him, or be sure of his will?<sup>65</sup> Thus, by studying the various religions—if there is genuine revelation from God—one ought to be able to discern the same Revealer and the same Object of Revelation! If these indispensable presuppositions of Continuity and Coherence do not obtain, then (assuming the authenticity of the Judeo-Christian revelation) the revelations claimed by the various religions cannot *all* be authentic.

fulfilled through the gospel in the lives of the believers, both Jews and Gentiles".

<sup>64</sup> Two of the earliest writers to voice this interpretation were Ambrosiaster and Augustine. It is also supported by K. Barth in his shorter commentary on *Romans*, 36, and Cranfield, *Romans* I, 156. The majority of commentators prefer to see heathen peoples rather than Gentile Christians, without, however, making any strong case for their view. Cf. e.g. Wilckens, *Römer*, 133, who thinks that reference to Gentile Christians is excluded because "das artikellose ἔθνη (*ethné*) sowie die Konjunktion ὅταν (*hotan*)(*nicht* ἐάν (*ean*)) zeigen, dass er nicht etwa die Heiden insgesamt den sundigen Juden gegenüberstellt"! Others include Schlier, *Römer*, 77; Michel, *Römer*, 117; Käsemann, *Romans*, 65, who speaks of "Augustine's mistake", though he does not offer a positive argument for the contrary view.

<sup>65</sup> In the OT God is presented as keeping covenant and steadfast love (e.g. Dt 7:9f.; Neh 1:5; 9:32) and as unchanging (Mal 3:6).

One final matter. Universalists often explain the variety of religion as a cultural phenomenon. Thus, Christianity is said to be a religion for Westerners, Hinduism a religion for Orientals and so on. This, of course, still leaves the plurality of religions in the East unexplained! At the same time it reduces God's self-revelation to what human culture makes of it.

Moreover, it is misleading to say that Christianity is a Western religion, for it is, in fact, if anything, a Near Eastern religion. It is true that it has received certain Greek elements. But this circumstance cannot validate the notion that just like a Western (i.e. Greek) superstructure was placed upon a Semitic foundation, so now we may erect an Eastern superstructure again in order to make Christianity accessible to the Eastern mind. This is nothing to do with Paul's becoming all things to all men, as is argued sometimes. The Greek element entered Christianity during its formative stage, and it was inserted by those who gave Christianity its normative form. The changes which pluralists like Panikkar, Samartha, Ariarajah, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Carman, Paul Knitter and others advocate are of a nature that, as the Jewish scholar E. B. Borowitz, pointed out, Christianity cannot accept and still be true to itself.<sup>66</sup>

### III. SOME BIBLICAL DATA ON GOD'S SELF-REVELATION IN HISTORY

According to the Bible one of the most conspicuous features of God's revelation is its universality.<sup>67</sup> God's revelation is painted against the background of creation and the whole of mankind is directly or indirectly brought into its orbit. God reveals himself in History, but that History is true History only when it includes the several histories of the various peoples. In this section I shall discuss some important features of God's ini

<sup>66</sup> In "A Jewish Response" in *Christian Faith*, 64f f.

<sup>67</sup> For definition see note 9, above.

tial revelation recorded in the OT as well as a few aspects of God's final revelation in the NT.

## **I. God's Initial Self-revelation in the OT: Through Speech and Act**

According to Ex 3:6 God introduced himself to Moses at the burning bush with the words: "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". In their next encounter, mentioned at Ex 6:2-3, God is reported as saying "I am the Lord, (i.e. *Yahweh*). I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty (i.e. *El Shaddai*), but by my name the Lord (i.e. *Yahweh*) I did not make myself known to them". These solemn declarations from God's side, which formed the foundation of OT religion, are of fundamental significance for the nature of biblical revelation. The following important points may be observed:

1). The origin of biblical faith is understood as being found in a sovereign act of God, who independently of external circumstances, or coercion, chooses to reveal himself.

2). These texts purport to be a self-revelation of God rather than a human discovery of him. In other words, the revelation comes by divine initiative.

3). The revelation disclosed carries a particular content. God describes and identifies himself in a way that gives a definite content to the conception of God.

As *El Shaddai* God is seen in his almightiness.<sup>68</sup> As *Yahweh* He is the Ground of all existence. "In him we live, we move, and have our being" is a Greek way of expressing the idea contained here.

<sup>68</sup> This seems to be the usual sense (cf. the Versions and the LXX, which in Job always has *Pantokrator*; see further F. Brown - S. R. Driver - C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. *Shaddai*, 994) though etymologically there is doubt (cf. L. Koehler - W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, s.v. *Shaddai*, 950. See further J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, London 1972, 99; W. Michaelis, Article

The corollary from the above three points is that apart from God's self-revelation, no avenue is open to man for arriving at authentic knowledge of God. At the same time the above texts disclose the mode of revelation. God's self-revelation is made to Moses verbally or propositionally. We are given to understand that Moses had no possibility of eliciting any revelatory content by merely gazing at a bush - even one that was burning!

But the OT not only recognizes the propositional aspects of God's revelation,<sup>69</sup> it also evidences a revelation of God that consists in his mighty acts.<sup>70</sup> And what is more, these mighty acts—the crossing of the Red Sea, the Sinai revelation, the occupation of Palestine—are supposed to be in line with God's propositional revelation. For example, the events connected with the Exodus authenticate God's propositional revelation of himself as *El Shaddai* and *Yahweh*. God speaks, and his word is translated into an act or event.<sup>71</sup>

Now from this follows the important corollary of monotheism.<sup>72</sup> Thus,

κράτος (*kratos*), etc. in *TDNT* III, 914f. and J. A. Motyer, *The Revelation of the Divine Name*, London 1959.

<sup>69</sup> Compare, for example, how God is represented as speaking face to face with Moses, Ex 33:11.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. e.g. G. E. Wright, *The God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, London 1952, 33f.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. the Hebrew *dabar*, which stands both for 'word' *as well as* for 'thing'! It is not the purpose of this paper to delineate in any detail the process at work in the giving and apprehension of divine revelation, which ultimately would also involve the question of the mode(s) of inspiration. However, it would be a misunderstanding if the above statements were understood as implying that biblical revelation in its entirety consists of divine speech and acts. For as a matter of fact the great bulk of words in the Bible are attributed to human rather than divine speech. In the final analysis the process of revelation is a very complex matter, involving in some way not only the inbreaking of God into human existence, but also the interaction of the human element with the divine, with the consequent 'translation' of the divine message into a form that is intelligible to humans - I do not say culturally conditioned!

<sup>72</sup> See Bright, *History*, I53f.

when God says "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:2f.), this is not necessarily an expression of *henotheism*, the recognition that there are other gods for other people.<sup>73</sup> The gods of other peoples are called "idols" already in the Pentateuch.<sup>74</sup> Here the self-revelation of God to Israel is placed in world-wide perspective rather than the clannish relationship assumed sometimes. And his demand for monotheism underlines the universal character of God's self-revelation.<sup>75</sup>

One thing, not to be overlooked, is that God's self-revelation to Israel has salvation-historical significance.<sup>76</sup> The election of Israel is one of the building blocks in this edifice. And so God's self-revelation continues on in the NT, where, too, God is the Revealer<sup>77</sup> as well as the Revealed One.<sup>78</sup>

With this I turn to a brief consideration of some of the NT data.

## 2. God's Final Self-Revelation in the NT

It should be underlined at the outset that the revelation given through Jesus Christ is not understood in the NT as being something new and unconnected with what has preceded, but as something in direct continuity and fully coherent with the OT revelation.<sup>79</sup> As Heb 1:1-2 reminds us "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets;

<sup>73</sup> See Bright, *History*, 141.

<sup>74</sup> E.g. Lev 19:4; 26:1, 30; Dt 29:17. Cf. Bright, *History*, 152f. See the discussions by H. D. Preuss, Article *Gillulim*, *TDOT* III, 1-5 and '£///, *TDOT* I, 285-7.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. the Hebrew insistence that the idols of the nations are false and unreal, while the Lord is the Creator of the Universe: 1 Chr 16:26; Ps 18:31; 96:5; 115:3-8; Isa 44:6-20. The fact of their being mentioned is surely only "an accommodation of language" Bright, *History*, 153.

<sup>76</sup> See O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, London 1967, 24f.; G.v.Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Edinburgh 1962, e.g. 121f f., 344.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Mt 11:25 = Lk 10:21; Mt 16:17; 1 Cor 2:10; Gal 1:16.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Mt 11:27 = Lk 10:22.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. E. Gräßer, "Ein einziger ist Gott" in *Der Alte Bund im Neuen*, 242f f.

but in these last days he has spoken to us by (his) Son,<sup>80</sup> whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the world". Continuity here implies (a) the identity of the Revealer, and (b) the connectedness of the subject of revelation (i.e. a development). Coherence implies that the revelation given through Christ is (a) consistent with God's revelation in the OT, and (b) more than that, it is in a reciprocal relation of coherence or inner harmony with the OT revelation.

### *1. Continuity and Coherence Between the OT and the NT Revelation*

We may exemplify the continuity and coherence of God's self-revelation in the OT and the NT by briefly considering five topics, which at the same time disclose some aspects of God's revelation in the NT.

#### *i. The Formula "in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled" etc.*

One important pointer to the continuity and coherence between the OT and the NT presupposed by the Early Church is the oft-repeated formula "this happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled" or when something is said to occur or to be in accordance with Scripture, or some other phrase, as when Apollos "powerfully confuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus" (Acts 18:28).<sup>81</sup> These expressions are interspersed in the Gospels and serve the purpose of proving that Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection are in accordance with God's eternal plan (Acts 2:23) and in fulfillment of what was written of him in the OT (cf. e.g. Lk 24:26f.; 1 Cor 15:3-4).

#### *ii. In Jesus' Teaching.* All three synoptic Gospels agree that Jesus, following his baptism and temptation, initiated his public ministry with the words

<sup>80</sup> ἡ ἐν αὐτῷ (*en autōi*) the possessive 'his' is understood, in line with Greek usage. The expression does not mean "by a son" but "by his son"!

<sup>81</sup> In this sense the substantive γραφή (*graphie*) occurs 51 times, and the verb γράφω (*grapho*) 90 times (see Moulton - Geden, *Concordance to the Greek Testament*).

"Repent, for the Kingdom of God (Heaven) is at hand."<sup>82</sup> It is the firm conclusion of modern scholarship that the Kingdom of God constituted the heart of Jesus' teaching.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, it is an equally firm conclusion of scholarship that the Greek βασιλεία του Θεοῦ (*basileia tou Theou*) or βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (*basileia tōn ouranōn*), in line with the Semitic use of מלכות (*malkuth*) when used of God's Kingdom, had dynamic meaning and referred to God's sovereign rule rather than to a territorial realm.<sup>84</sup>

There is perhaps no other term that could summarize better God's purpose of his election of and dealings with Israel than the term "the kingly rule of God". This term is the essential theme of the OT all along, but in particular toward the close of that period, this theme shines forth in a dramatic fashion, when in Daniel's Book the concept assumes truly universalistic dimensions. It becomes God's alternative to all the kingdoms of men, which is established by his chosen, the Heavenly Being described as "One like a son of man".<sup>85</sup> That it is the same kingdom becomes clear not only from the associations and references to the OT texts, but also and not least from Jesus' words "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand" addressed to a people acquainted with and in expectation of it. The novelty in Jesus' teaching did not consist in any radical contradistinction to or unrecognizable reinterpretation of what had preceded him, but in the immense difference that while the OT spoke of the time of fulfillment, Jesus proclaimed authoritatively that the fulfillment had already come—in his own person!<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Mt 4:17 = Mk 1:15. Cf. Lk 4:43, where this is implied.

<sup>83</sup> See e.g. J. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, Göttingen 1992, 7; G. Lundström, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, London 1963, 3ff.; N. Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, London 1963, 13-36; G. E. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom*, London 1966, *passim*, and W. G. Kummel, *Promise and Fulfillment*, London 1957.

<sup>84</sup> See G. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus*, Edinburgh 1902, 94ff.; Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom*, 118-44.

<sup>85</sup> See C. C. Caragounis, *The Son of Man: Vision and Interpretation* (WUNT 38), Tübingen 1986, 61-80.

<sup>86</sup> There is an immense literature on the debate on whether the Kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching is future or present, with a multitude of intermediate positions. In general, recent scholarship has tended toward the view that the Kingdom of God is bound up

### iii. *Jesus' Relation to the Law*

Jesus' relation to the OT—and in an extended sense Christianity's relation to the religion of the OT—is articulated in his programmatic declaration "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt 5:17). The relation of continuity and coherence is here expressed in terms of fulfillment. But 'fulfillment' in what sense? The term can be taken in at least three senses: (a) To perform what the law requires. But it can hardly be claimed that Jesus always fulfilled the law in this sense. Cf. e.g. his repeated breaking of the Sabbath. (b) To fulfill what the law has foretold in regard to the Messiah. This sense can certainly be upheld in as much as many details of Jesus' life, ministry and sufferings are said to be in direct fulfillment of scripture. (c) To bring out the deeper significance of the law and thus to fulfill it at a higher level. The antitheses of Mt 5:21-48 would tend to support this interpretation.<sup>87</sup> It would therefore appear that Jesus' 'fulfillment' of the OT did not consist so much in a crude and mechanical performance of the letter of the OT, but in a deeper understanding and fulfillment of the spirit of the OT. And in this, too, we see not only the continuity of the NT with the OT, but also the advance from the OT in what is depicted as a fuller revelation in the NT, exemplified by the One who felt himself in a position to say: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old ... *but I say to you ...*" (Mt 5:21). And in this sense the passage is an apt reflection of the relation of the NT revelation to the OT revelation as a whole. Thus, the NT revelation is not merely an addition to the OT revelation; more than that, it is the finalization of what there was presented by way of figures and shadows (cf. Heb 10:1).

with Jesus' person and mission, see e.g. R. H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus*, London 1954; W. G. Kummel, *Promise and Fulfillment*; Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom* (second ed. *The Presence of the Future*).

<sup>87</sup> See Bauer - Arndt - Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon* etc. sv. πληρόω (*pleroō*), 4,b; W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, Cambridge 1964, 101f., and D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, Princeton

#### *iv. The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.*

The continuity and coherence between the OT and the NT is further confirmed from the way in which the Early Church interpreted the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. To the astonished crowd Luke ascribes to Peter the confident assertion "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel"! (Acts 2:16).<sup>88</sup> In other words, the revelation of God through the Spirit is not conceived of as something foreign and unconnected from God's revelation in the OT, but as something that is in fulfillment of the OT promises.<sup>89</sup> The Spirit that once was understood to have spoken through the prophets is now understood to be at work in the Church. Indeed, the Spirit is perceived as the medium of revelation (cf. e.g. 1 Cor 2:9-15) as well as the one who effects salvation in man.<sup>90</sup> As such the Spirit is indispensable in the *revelation occurrence*. Thus, the Holy Spirit's activity in the coming of God's revelation, in the new life of the Christian believer, and in the accomplishment of God's purposes are in the NT understood to be in a direct continuity and coherence with the OT revelation.

#### *v. Justification by Faith.*

This concept, more than any other, relates to an area in which the difference between the OT and the NT would have been expected to be at its greatest. Such was the opinion of the Judaizers of Paul's day.<sup>91</sup> They considered that Paul taught something that was contrary to their OT scriptures. And yet this feature shows in a most remarkable manner that what

<sup>88</sup> Cf. F.F. Bruce's work under the pertinent title *This is That: The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes*, Exeter, 1968.

See the fine monograph by J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, London 1970, pp. 1984.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. the role of the Spirit in man's conversion in Dunn's discussion, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, *passim*.

<sup>91</sup> See Paul's argument against the Judaizers in his epistles to the Galatians and Romans.

appears to be new is actually very old! Paul turns the tables on the Jews by showing that Abraham, too, was pronounced righteous on account of his faith and thus became the first recipient of justification by faith, and the father of all believers!<sup>92</sup> It is Paul's contention that justification by faith and salvation by grace is not something new, but has been God's intention from the beginning. This is a promise and a testament which cannot be annulled by the parenthetical law-giving of Mount Sinai (cf. Gal 3:6-25 and Rm 4:1-17). It is not without interest, too, that the promise given to Abraham includes all mankind. Paul uses "many", which represents the Hebrew *hamon* = 'multitude',<sup>93</sup> in an all-inclusive sense, of "all men".<sup>94</sup> In this way, Paul shows not only the continuity and coherence of God's revelation with regards to salvation, but also its relevance and applicability to all human beings inclusively.

## 2. *The Incarnation as God's Self-revelation*

In the OT the revelation of God comes by installments. Moreover, it is often given with the help of metaphors, similes, etc. Thus, in Ps 103:13 God's mercifulness is described in terms of the pity which a father shows to his children, while in Dt 4:24 the wrath of God is set forth by describing him as a "consuming fire".<sup>95</sup> The NT too has its metaphors and similes, although God is there described more directly, as when it is said that God is love (1 Jn 4:8), or that God is Spirit (Jn 4:24). Nevertheless, the most concrete form which God's revelation of himself takes is the Incarnation. The NT authors in their various ways let us understand that the Incarnation constitutes the fullest and most authentic revelation of God to man. Thus, Jn 1:18 can say: "No one has ever seen God; the only (or only begotten)

<sup>93</sup> On the Hebrew term, see Baumann, *Article* חַמָּה (*hamah*), *TDOT* III, 414-18.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. J. Jeremias, *Article* πολλοί (*polloi*) *TDNT* IV, 539: "Rabbinic exegesis of the v. shows that this means 'the whole world of the nations'," and 542: "That in so doing he" (i.e. Paul) "adopted the universalist understanding ... which later Judaism found here ... is shown with a high degree of probability by R. 4:11 ... v.16 2 C. 1:11 ..."

<sup>95</sup> Cf. 9:3; 32:22, and also 5:25.

Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known". Similarly, Mt 11:27: "No one knows the Son except the Father; and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him".<sup>96</sup> It is on the strength of this that John can describe the love of God and the revelation it implies in terms of the giving up of God's only begotten Son for the salvation of the world (Jn 3:16). In this way the love of God receives its most authentic definition. This act of giving depicts God in his innermost Nature.

The term 'Incarnation', as used here, relates to Jesus' entire event. The life, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus constitute, according to the NT, God's definitive revelation of himself, his will and his salvation. The finality with which Jesus spoke about God and about himself, although unheard of in the history of religions, left his disciples in no doubt that he was the final One in both senses of the word. After Jesus no one comes! This conclusion is secured exegetically. And in light of this, the attempt by e.g. Paul Knitter<sup>97</sup> to reduce Jesus to "one of many" or by Rosemary R. Ruether<sup>98</sup> to move Christ away from the center to the edge, where he is a mere herald of the future, or by others to make Christ irrelevant for the salvation of Jews,<sup>99</sup> show the failure of Universalists to deal with the biblical data in a credible and convincing manner. Hence, too, their 'exegesis' of the biblical texts is likely to cause more than a smile to biblical scholars.

### *3. God's Eternal Purpose: The Mystery of his Will*

Perhaps no other single text in the NT does more to set the Incarnation Event at the heart of God's eternal purpose and attribute to it cosmic signi

<sup>96</sup> See also Lk 10:22.

<sup>97</sup> *No Other Name?*, e.g. 117, 188 and 230.

<sup>98</sup> *Faith and Fratricide*. For criticism of Ruether's position see A. B. da Silva, *Is There a New Imbalance in the Jewish-Christian Relation?*, Uppsala 1985, 84ff.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Stendahl's views. In his discussion of the theological problem of Rom 9-11, Gräßer, "Zwei Heilswege?" in *Der Alte Bund im Neuen*, 229, comes to the conclusion

ficance than the mighty Eulogy of Eph 1:3-10.<sup>100</sup> In this Eulogy as well as in the hymn of Col 1 is set forth what is understood as a revelation of the mystery of God's will. The first thing to note is that God's purpose is conceived from all eternity. The second thing is that the revelation is made possible through the Christ Event, and we note that God's purpose is bound up with Christ in a superlatively exclusive way. Thirdly, God's purpose is described in the most universalistic, indeed, cosmic manner. It relates not only to all mankind without exception, thus bringing together the two incompatible elements of humanity, Jews and Gentiles, but it also includes the invisible powers of heaven. In these Epistles the dimensions of the Incarnation Event burst all earthly bounds and Christ is portrayed as the One with whom the destiny of the Universe is bound up.<sup>101</sup>

Finally, a brief comment on the idea of a Cosmic *Anakephalaiosis*. The Colossians text, by its use of three prepositions (ἐν (*en*), διά (*dia*), and εἰς (*eis*)) in connection with the verb for 'create', presents Christ as the Ground, Agent and Purpose for the creation of everything visible, or invisible, on earth, or in heaven. And the Ephesian Eulogy finds its climax

that "Es bleibt ein theologischer Widerspruch, wenn Paulus in Kap. 9 die Verheissung auf das eschatologische Volk bezieht, während er in Kap. 11 die Vorzüge des historischen Israel als *bleibend* anerkennt. Daraus darf aber nicht der Schluss gezogen werden, Gott hielte *zwei* Heilswege offen, den der Tora und den des Evangeliums. Vielmehr heisst es gerade innerhalb der Israel-Kapitel, dass Christus definitiv das Ende des Gesetzes als Heilsweg ist (10,4). Einen 'Sonderweg' zur Rettung kennt Paulus also nicht" and cites Kummel, who calls the "Sonderweg zur Rettung Israels" "eine äusserst gefährliche Missdeutung des textes" (*Heilsgeschehen und Geschichte 11, Gesammelte Aufsätze 1965-1977*, ed. E. Gräßer - O. Merk, Marburg 1978, 257).

<sup>100</sup> For this delimitation of the Eulogy and for an analysis of its thought, see C. C. Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mysterion: Meaning and Content* (CB:NTS 8), Lund 1977, 45-52; 78-96.

<sup>101</sup> The biblical view of the 'cosmic' Christ is quite different from modern syncretistic or pluralistic conceptions of him. For example, Panikkar speaks about Christ as the Logos, but the only thing that Panikkar's Logos has in common with the Johannine Logos is simply the name. According to John the Logos became flesh, i.e. Jesus Christ. For pluralists like Panikkar, Samartha and Knitter the Logos is not co-extensive with Jesus, but is to be found also in the 'saviors' of other religions.

in the *anakephalaiosis*, the summing up, of everything in Christ. This summing up, as the continued discussion shows, involves the joining of the Church, the Body, to Him as Head, as well as the subjection of the rebellious powers under his feet.<sup>102</sup>

Over against such superlative presentations of the place, role and function of Christ in God's eternal plan according to the biblical records, stand the modern minimizations or relativizations of Christ by some theologians to the advantage of non-Christian religions. 1 Cor 15:28 "When all things are subjected to him (i.e. the Son), then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all", often cited in the interests of Theocentrism *contra* Christocentrism,<sup>103</sup> hardly allows such a relativization of Christ along other 'saviours', but seems to be entirely in line with those many texts that speak of the obedience or subjection, etc. of the Son to the Father.<sup>104</sup>

In the final analysis, divine revelation according to the NT is concerned with God's revelation of his mystery: through Christ "He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in him in order to administer it at the fulness of time, namely, to sum up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:9-10). Here we reach the bedrock of biblical universalism and the universality of the Gospel.

<sup>102</sup> For the different relations of the Church and the Powers to Christ as envisaged in the *Anakephalaiosis*, see Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mystery*, 143-46.

<sup>103</sup> E.g. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 165ff.; 171ff. Cf. Dorothy Sölle's description of Christology as "Christofascism"! The modern relativization of Jesus reflects the current tendency in some soteriological thinking. The original NT position of *No salvation outside Christ* (cf. e.g. Acts 4:12: no other name!), substituted by the Roman Catholic Church with *No salvation outside the Church*, is now in pluralist circles giving way to a new doctrine, the colorless proposition of *No salvation outside God*, thus banishing Jesus from his unique place in the plan of God, which the NT ascribes to him.

<sup>104</sup> See e.g. Jn 5:19-20; 10:18; 14:28; Phil 2:5-11; Heb 5:8; 1 Cor 3:23.