Revelation and the Bible

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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.5840/faithphil19896438
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol6/iss4/3
Jesus said to Peter, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” This looks like a noetic miracle which happened in (or to) Peter.

Must all Christians have a comparable miracle in themselves, or does the Bible enable us to apprehend, in some “natural” way, the revelations made to prophets and apostles long ago?

I suggest that we need not have a single answer to this question, and that the “mix” of revelation and reason, natural and supernatural noetic elements, may be different in various believers.

If this paper were a sermon it would have two texts. One of them is from the Bible—mostly the words of Jesus, in fact—so that would be alright. But the other one is from David Hume. So maybe it is a good thing that this is not a sermon after all.

I take the Hume text from the very end of his celebrated discussion of miracles, the section “Of Miracles” in the *Enquiry*. There he says:

So that, upon the whole, we may conclude, that the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.¹

The Biblical text is from the Gospel of Matthew:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”²
There are some very striking similarities between these two texts, all the more striking because they seem to come out of such different world-views. It is, of course, often suggested that the passage from Hume ought not to be taken at face value, and that it is really an ironic or sarcastic jibe at the irrationality and credulity of Christians. Maybe that is so. But in view of Jesus’ words Christians might be well advised not to get their dander up over Hume’s statement. Maybe what Hume thought was sarcasm is just the truth after all, or at least in the same ball-park as the truth of the Gospel. At any rate, I will here eschew any profession of doing Hume scholarship, or of expounding what was really in Hume’s heart and mind. I will take these few sentences just as they stand. Anyone who wishes may construe my comments as referring to some fictional personage named “David Hume.”

The first similarity which strikes me is that both of these statements suggest that there is something unnatural about Christian faith. Or at least, if one objects to the word “unnatural,” it is surely suggested that the characteristic elements of Christian faith are items which would not be accepted (or which in fact are not accepted) on what we might think of as ordinary grounds or in the ordinary way. “Mere reason,” Hume says, “is insufficient to convince us of its veracity.” And Jesus says to Peter, “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you.” Presumably there are a lot of beliefs which we can acquire by mere reason, beliefs for which flesh and blood are sufficient. But not the beliefs which identify the Christian faith, beliefs such as that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. That requires something special.

What is that special thing? Both Hume and Jesus suggest that it is a special act of God. Jesus says that it was the heavenly Father who revealed to Peter the truth about Jesus. And Hume says that whoever assents to the Christian faith is moved to do so by a miracle—apparently not by the evidence of a miracle but rather by the effect of a miracle which “gives him a determination to believe.”

Furthermore, both Hume and Jesus explicitly locate the special divine act in the person who has the Christian belief. Hume does not say that a person comes to belief as the (possibly remote) effect of a miracle somewhere. He says instead that whoever assents to the Christian faith is the subject of “a continued miracle in his own person.” In a similar way, Jesus is not satisfied with suggesting that Peter’s faith must be derived from a divine revelation somewhere, to someone. No, he says to Peter that the heavenly Father has revealed this “to you.”

Now, I expect to return to all these similarities in the course of this discussion. But there is also an important difference between these two texts, a difference which I have so far partially obscured. I want now to bring that difference also into the open. Hume, following a custom common among philosophers, puts his claim as a generalization, in this case a universal generalization. He puts forward a thesis about “any reasonable person” and about “whoever is moved
by Faith” (my emphasis). Jesus’ statement, on the other hand, has no generalization in it at all. It is a singular statement, spoken to a particular man, Simon Peter, who is addressed with the personal pronoun “you.” And much of this paper is concerned with the question of whether we should construe Jesus’ statement to Peter as being generalizable to all believers.

We can also put the question in this way. Peter’s “confession” was that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. It appears that many Christians have shared that faith and that confession with Peter through the centuries which have followed. No doubt many readers of this paper will think of themselves, as I think of myself, as joining Peter in this profession of faith. But how shall we think of Jesus’ response? Would Jesus say to us, as He said to Peter, that this has not been revealed to us by flesh and blood but by the heavenly Father? Or is our epistemic situation somehow deeply different from that of Peter?

This question, it seems to me, is among the most important which we can consider in the field of Christian epistemology.

Now, there are of course a variety of ways in which our situation here in the 20th century differs from that of Peter in the first century A.D. Perhaps most prominently, Peter spent two or three years as a close associate of Jesus, an eye-witness of the physical, bodily, presence of the Son of God. We are not in that situation ourselves. How does that contrast bear on our question?

When we think of this contrast it is natural to think of the things which Peter could do and we cannot do. He could see Jesus, in the most literal and straightforward sense of “see.” He could look around and see whether Jesus was in the house, in the boat. He could put out his hand and grip Jesus by the arm. He could listen to Jesus speaking, perhaps paying special attention to the tone of his voice, noticing whether Jesus sounded tired, or sorrowful. And so on. But all of the things we are likely to think of along this line seem to be perfectly natural activities, the exercise of natural human powers (if there are any such powers at all). It looks as though what Peter could do better than we can do—perhaps what we cannot do at all—is to have a natural cognitive contact with Jesus. He was in the right position for that. If there was ever anyone who could have a natural knowledge of Jesus, and in the most direct way, then Peter would seem to be a leading candidate.

In his reply to Peter’s confession, however, Jesus seems to say that the knowledge embodied in that confession was not derived in a natural way. His denial singles out one natural way of acquiring information, the testimony of “flesh and blood.” Perhaps we can read that as intended to cover the other natural modes also. At any rate, the positive part of Jesus’ reply attributes Peter’s faith to a divine act, a revelation from the heavenly Father. No doubt Peter could identify Jesus as a Galilean by noticing his Galilean accent. No doubt he sometimes learned that Jesus had gone into town by being told so by one of the other
disciples. But Peter did not learn that Jesus was the Christ in any such way as these, at least if Jesus’ own account of the matter is correct. Acquiring that belief involves something importantly different. Perhaps we, in the 20th century, are pretty much in the same situation, noetically, as Peter.

We can also, however, think of some things which we can do and which Peter could not do. We can, for one thing, look back on 2,000 years of church history, of Christian experience and testimony, of theological and philosophical reflection on the Christian faith, and so on. We can, that is, appeal to a lot more “flesh and blood” than was available to Peter. And that may suggest that it is possible for us to acquire a natural knowledge of the incarnation of the Son, even if that was not possible for Peter.

There is, however, another interesting—and perhaps more important—thing which we can do and which Peter could not do. We can read, in the Bible, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. We can read it, for example, in the passage which I quoted at the beginning of this paper. But Peter could not do that at the time of his confession, because the relevant parts of the Bible had not yet been written. The Bible has played an important role in Christian life and thought throughout most of the history of the Church. That is a role, however, which it could not play in the lives of the original disciples of Jesus and of the early converts to the Christian faith. How does the fact that we have the Bible, and in particular the New Testament, while Peter did not have it, bear on our question?

That question, we remember, is whether Jesus’ statement to Peter can properly be generalized, whether we should think of Jesus saying the same thing to us that he said to Peter. We should beware, however, of construing this issue too broadly. Jesus said that Peter’s faith was generated by a divine revelation to him, but he said nothing at all about the mode of that revelation, about the “how” of it. And he said nothing at all about the phenomenology of that revelation, of the “feel” of it to Peter—nor indeed about whether it had any special feel at all. If Jesus were to say to us, then, just what he said to Peter, his statement to us would imply nothing about whether the mode of the revelation to us was the same as the mode of Peter’s revelation. But it would, I think, commit him to the claim that there was a divine revelation to us, as well as to Peter.

But would such a claim be true? Or is it rather the case that the Bible is a substitute for revelation, so that we (having the Bible at hand) can acquire the Christian faith without needing a revelation while Peter (not having the relevant parts of the Bible) could not recognize the deity of Jesus without a special divine act? I think that Christians have often adopted an epistemic “scenario” involving the Bible which does, in effect, make the Bible a substitute for revelation in just this way.

For the most part, such scenarios do not reject the idea of revelation entirely,
and they do not hold that the Bible was, or could have been, produced without divine revelation. The idea is rather that the Bible enables me now to get along as a Christian without a revelation to me, without (as Hume would put it) “a continued miracle in my own person.” I can (and must) make do with someone else’s revelation.

This position has indeed a certain attractiveness. If I adopt it, then I need not assimilate my own meager Christian experience to that of Peter, and thus I need not seem to put myself “on the same level” as the most outstanding saints of God. And while I must continue to hold that there have been divine noetic interventions somewhere in the history of the world, I need not claim any such bizarre experience for myself. I need not profess that God speaks to me, for such things belong to a time long past and to a few select people who are now safely beyond the reach of our psychiatrists. Gordon Clark once put it like this:

Of course God’s speech to Moses was revelation, in fact, revelation par excellence, if you wish. But we are not Moses. Therefore, if the problem is to explain how we know in this age, one cannot use the personal experience of Moses. Today we have the Scripture . . . . . .

What God said to Moses is written down in the Bible; the words are identical; the revelation is the same.6

The scenarios I’m thinking about go roughly as follows. A long time ago (“in biblical times”) God revealed Himself, His will and commandments, some divine mysteries, etc., to prophets and apostles. These people wrote out their accounts of these revelations (perhaps under the impetus and guidance of another divine gift, inspiration). These writings were eventually collected together in the Bible, and they have been preserved and transmitted to us. The Bible comes now into our hands in some ordinary way—e.g., we buy it in a book store. We read it and think about it by the exercise of ordinary human capacities. And, according to our judgment, we may come to believe what is said there about God, Jesus, the human condition and human destiny, and other such matters. Thus we can now avail ourselves of the content of what was long ago revealed to Peter and other prophets and apostles. We can share their beliefs without sharing their experiences. In particular, we need not share whatever experiences of theirs constituted the divine revelation to them, and we need not have any different revelatory experiences of our own. We are in radically different epistemic circumstances.

A philosophical version of this scenario is provided by John Locke. He says that “revelation is natural reason enlarged by a new set of discoveries communicated by God immediately, which reason vouches the truth of, by the testimony and proofs it gives that they come from God.” A little earlier, contrasting faith and reason, he had said: “Faith, on the other side, is the assent to any proposition,
What seems clear in the first statement is that the acceptance of the content of revelation depends upon reason. Locke reiterates this point later in the same chapter: “I do not mean that we must consult reason and examine whether a proposition revealed from God can be made out by natural principles, and if it cannot, that then we may reject it; but consult it we must, and by it examine whether it be a revelation from God or no; and if reason finds it to be revealed from God, reason then declares for it as much as for any other truth, and makes it one of her dictates.” That is, the proper acceptance of any revealed truth, p, depends on a judgment that p has been revealed by God. But once we have that judgment, there appears to Locke nothing remarkable in our acceptance of p. For Locke has the principle that God can neither deceive nor be deceived, and that therefore whatever is revealed by God is true. This principle, however, along with the judgment that p has been revealed by God, entails that p is true. And having this argument that p is true, we go on in a perfectly natural and ordinary way to accept p—“reason then declares for it as much as for any other truth, and makes it one of her dictates.”

John Baillie, the 20th century philosopher-theologian, puts forward a sharply contrasting scenario, largely in terms of a personal testimony.

What I must do is ask myself how the knowledge of God first came to me . . . . Unless my analysis of my memory is altogether at fault, the knowledge of God first came to me in the form of an awareness that I was ‘not my own’ but one under authority . . . . I cannot remember a time when I did not know that my parents and their household were part of a wider community which was under the same single authority. Nor again, can I recall a time when I did not know that this authority was closely bound up with, and indeed seemed to emanate from, a certain story. As far back as I can remember anything, my parents and nurses were already speaking to me of Abraham and Isaac and . . . of the culmination of the story in the coming of Jesus Christ . . . . It was, then, through the media of my boyhood’s home, the Christian community of which it formed a part, and the ‘old, old story’ from which that community drew its life, that God first revealed Himself to me. This is simple matter of fact. But what I take to be matter of fact in it is not only that God used these media but that in using them He actually did reveal Himself to my soul . . . . That God should have revealed Himself to certain men of long ago could not in itself be of concern to me now . . . . What is it to me that God should have commanded David to
do this or that, or called Paul to such and such a task? It is nothing at all, unless it should happen that, as I read of His calling and commanding them, I at the same time found Him calling and commanding me. If the word of God is to concern me, it must be a word addressed to me individually.\textsuperscript{10}

In the Baillie scenario, the Bible is not a substitute for revelation; it is rather one of the "media" of revelation. In Baillie’s view, the Bible does not permit him to get along without having a revelation himself. Instead, it enables him to have just such a revelation. And Baillie seems deliberately to assimilate his own experience to that of the biblical saints, rather than contrasting those experiences. “We are not Moses,” Gordon Clark said. But here it is said that just as God commanded David and Paul, so also does He command John Baillie. Baillie seems to think of his own epistemic circumstances, \textit{vis a vis} religious matters, as being not much different from that of the biblical heroes of the faith.

It certainly looks therefore, as though Baillie should have little difficulty with the Humean passage which I quoted earlier. He professes to be “conscious” (to use Hume’s terminology) of a divine noetic intervention in his own life, a revelation addressed to him “individually.” And he makes no profession of having determined the truth of the Christian religion by “mere reason.” It seems rather to be the divine revelation, addressed to him individually, which has given him a “determination” to believe.

We should also expect Baillie to think that Jesus’ words, addressed originally to Peter, apply equally well to him. God, he says, “actually did reveal Himself to my soul.” And he seems to think that this is what happens to anyone who is a believer at all.\textsuperscript{11} Presumably he would accept the universal generalization of Jesus’ response to Peter’s confession.

Anyone who adopts a position such as that of Baillie will no doubt face an immediate objection. Baillie gives us his testimony about “how the knowledge of God first came to me.” But even if we do not doubt the sincerity of his account we are not bound to accept its truth. We can be mistaken about many features of our own biographies, even about the time and place of our own birth. Perhaps Baillie was mistaken about his own noetic and spiritual biography, and about the birth of his faith. He says that it is a “simple matter of fact” that God spoke to him personally. Perhaps, however, that is not a fact at all, but only Baillie’s misreading of the situation.

It is useful, I think, to distinguish two versions of this general sort of objection. One sort of objection might be called “global.” Objections of this sort would be raised against \textit{any} revelation claims, regardless of who made them or of who they were made about. It would be plausible for an atheist, for example, to reject Baillie’s testimony about God’s revelation of Himself to him. But the atheist
would presumably reject in the same way any claim that Moses or Paul had been the recipients of a divine revelation. If there is no God, and never has been, then God has never revealed anything to anyone—neither to Moses, nor to Paul, nor to John Baillie. Atheism provides a ground, or an apparent ground, for the global rejection of revelation claims. And so also would any theory of the divine nature which entailed that God, even if He exists, is either unable or unwilling to communicate with human beings.

“Local” objectors, however, reject some revelation claims without rejecting others. The Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, says,

... it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased. 12

Someone who accepted Westminster might (depending on how they interpreted the last clause quoted above) reject Baillie’s account of his own faith without rejecting the claim that God had spoken to Moses and to Paul. Baillie, they might say, just lived in the wrong time—he was born two thousand years too late for his account to be true. Gordon Clark would seem to be just such a thinker, and he has a lot of sympathizers.

Local objectors, however, cannot very well make common cause with global objectors. For the bases of global objections count just as much against what the local objectors want to accept as against what they want to reject. Local objectors must find their own independent bases for their objections to someone such as Baillie.

I, of course, reject the global objections to a divine revelation. I think that I could not be a Christian unless I believed that there was a revelation, a divine self-disclosure, somewhere in the history of the world. I do not accept the atheist reading of reality, nor do I think that God is unable or unwilling to communicate with human beings. But here I will be content with merely asserting these things, without exploring or supporting them further.

I suppose that local objections have more chance with me. The fathers of Westminster described the former ways of God’s revelation as “being now ceased.” Why should we suppose that they have ceased? Reasons for this, it seems to me, fall again roughly into two categories—theological and experiential. The theological reasons assert it to be a revealed truth itself that the divine mode of action in the world has changed, that revelation ceased with the end of the
apostolic age, or some such thing. Experiential reasons assert that we simply find, as a matter of fact, that the sort of thing that happened to Moses and to Paul does not happen to anyone today.

In my opinion the theological reasons are inconclusive at best, and probably that is to treat them too generously. But about them too I will say no more here. Against the experiential reasons, however, there stands a strong counter-claim. And that is that there are testimonies, and have been through the history of the church, that essentially the same sort of thing which happened to Moses and Paul does continue to happen. There is, for example, the testimony of John Baillie, just quoted.

Of course, what Baillie says about himself is not bound thereby to be true. On the other hand, it is an apparently sincere testimony of a thoughtful man about what happened to himself, about his own spiritual experience. Such a testimony, we might say, makes a sort of prima facie case. Unless we have some strong positive reason against it, it would seem that we should count it as a live and legitimate possibility. (I hope to argue soon that the conviction that it didn’t happen that way to me is not a positive reason for my rejecting Baillie’s testimony.) And, of course, there may well be some of us who find Baillie’s account illuminating for our own experience, as that experience appears to us, and who will therefore feel themselves to have an additional reason for accepting something like Baillie’s account. In the face of testimonies like these, it seems to me to be rash (to say the least) to assert that we know that such things do not happen today.

If a Christian does not accept something like Baillie’s account of his or her own spiritual knowledge and faith, then what alternative is open? I suppose that the most plausible alternative is some version of that proposed by Locke. The noetic miracle, the divine revelation, happened in some other time and place, but the noetic content of that miracle has been preserved and transmitted, most notably in the Bible. By some rational process we determine that this content was indeed revealed by God. And therefore (having a powerful confidence in the veracity of God) we go on to accept the substance of that content itself.

Against this alternative Baillie seems to have two complaints. First, he claims that the content which is thus transmitted is not particularized enough to the specificities of his own circumstances to serve his own spiritual needs. He can read about what God commanded Abraham to do, and David, and Paul, and . . . But Baillie wants to know what God commands him to do, hic et nunc. He wants to know what to do about his son (if he has a son), whether he is to go as a missionary, and so on. And information of that specificity, about him, is not contained in the biblical texts.

Second, Baillie claims that unless God speaks to him personally he cannot determine whether God really did reveal Himself to the Biblical authors and
heroes. After all, he says, the alleged biblical revelations happened a long time ago. How are we supposed to determine now, twenty or thirty centuries later, that those things really did happen as they are described? Just what is that rational process after all, the one I referred to a few paragraphs back?

This question of Baillie's seems to me to be really important, and one which Christians ought to face for themselves, regardless of whether they feel like replying to the challenges of unbelievers. I propose to set aside, temporarily, Baillie's first complaint in order to explore this one a little more fully.

Locke, it seems to me, treats this sort of question in a curiously casual way. He says that God authenticates His revelations with "marks which reason cannot be mistaken in." Unfortunately, he isn't explicit about what infallible marks we can look for at the present time. The biblical characters themselves, he says, did not rely solely on any internal conviction or feeling for their judgment that they were the recipients of a divine revelation. No, they had better evidence, external evidence available to sense perception, in form of miraculous signs. And he cites the experience of Moses and of Gideon. Thus they had reason for their judgment that God was speaking to them.

Well, perhaps Moses and Gideon did have reason in this way. Maybe the sense experience of a burning bush or of a sheepskin wet with dew is stronger, epistemically, than any non-sensory experience (though why that should be, I don't know). But even so, how could that help me now? Of course, if I could now see a burning bush myself, a bush which was not consumed, and if that miracle was plausibly linked in some way with the Bible, then maybe I would have reason to believe that the Bible was inspired, reliable, authoritative, and so on. But if that were so, then it would seem that Locke and Clark and the fathers of Westminster would be mistaken. I would be in much the same epistemic position as Moses. I would have essentially the same sort of reason for accepting the revealed content as he had—i.e., a miraculous sign from God. And it would turn out to be Hume, or someone not far from Hume, who was right after all about Christian epistemology.

Alternatively, if I knew that Moses had seen genuine divine miracles then I might have reason to believe that Moses was the recipient of genuine divine revelations, and that could give me at least a start on a confidence in the Bible as the repository of revealed content. But that doesn't seem to be very helpful. For the problem of determining that Moses really was a witness of genuine divine miracles seems to be much the same as the problem of determining that he received genuine revelations. The Mosaic miracles, just like the revelations, happened a long time ago if they happened at all. It is not at all clear that I now have any access to them by way of ordinary reason.

The Westminster Confession seems also to address something similar to Baillie's problem, and perhaps more realistically than Locke. We read there that
We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.  

This passage begins by reciting a body of evidence for the special character of the Bible. These “arguments” might well be thought to belong to the field of natural human reason, or (in Jesus’ words) to the domain of flesh and blood. But it is pretty clear that the fathers of Westminster did not think of these arguments as being the bottom line in Christian epistemology. No, that role seems to belong to something quite different, the “inward work” of the Holy Spirit. The whole paragraph, in fact, has a decidedly Humean flavor about it. No doubt Westminster is more sanguine about the evidences than was Hume. But it seems to share with Hume the realization that these evidences are not sufficient to generate and sustain Christian faith. That must be done by a special “inward work” of a divine agent “in our hearts.” Would not Hume recognize in this passage his own description of the believer who “is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person”?  

How would Westminster cohere with Baillie? There are at least two interpretations of the content of the assurance mentioned by Westminster. We can think, on the one hand, of a person who reads one thing after another in the Bible, and who is assured (by the work of the Holy Spirit) of the truth and authority of each doctrine, command, etc., as he reads it. Alternatively, however, we can think of a person in whom the Spirit generates an assurance of some general thesis about the Bible—that it is infallibly true, or authoritative, or some such thing. Such a person might then go on to rely on particular biblical pronouncements without the need for any further special divine action.  

The first of these interpretations, it seems to me, fits quite well with Baillie’s testimony, if we continue to ignore, for the moment, Baillie’s concern with specificity. To whatever extent the content of what is revealed to Baillie is a content which can be found in the Bible itself, this interpretation provides a model for the claim that God really does reveal Himself “to my soul,” but through the medium of the “old, old story.”  

The second interpretation fits less well. It recognizes, indeed, that there is
something which is revealed directly to me. But that something might turn out to be only a single piece of information, a generalization about the reliability or authority of the Bible. Everything else which is revealed at all might be revealed to other people long ago, and not to me at all. I would have only the report of these revelations, along with a principle which would justify me in accepting these reports as true. But that scenario would seem to lack most of the directness of the divine communication which Baillie stresses so much.

While the scenario embodied in the second interpretation would not seem attractive to someone like Baillie it may well have been attractive to the fathers of Westminster. At any rate, it seems to me the most natural reading of the Westminster text. I said earlier that Baillie appears to give us a sincere testimony about his own experience. Might we also think of Westminster as fundamentally testimonial, the testimony of the divines (or the preponderance of them) who drew up this document? Does it also make a prima facie case?

Here I want to suggest a sort of cognitive strategy. Suppose that we consciously and deliberately set aside the assumption that we must have a single epistemology which shall account for every case of Christian faith. Instead, we will recognize the possibility of “different strokes for different folks,” including different divine strokes for different folks within the single household of faith. And after all, why shouldn’t we set aside the universalistic assumption? Why should we suppose that the divine approach to each person must follow a single pattern?

Setting aside that assumption amounts to taking seriously the difference which I noted early in this paper, the difference between Jesus’ statement and that of Hume. Hume’s is a universal generalization, while that of Jesus is a singular statement addressed to a particular man, Simon Peter. Perhaps the truth is not that Jesus’ statement should be generalized but rather that Hume’s should be particularized. On this reading, we would say that Hume may well be right about some people—about Peter, for example. But perhaps he is not right about everyone.

And why should not both John Baillie and Westminster be right, even on the second interpretation of the latter? Of course, on this conjecture neither Baillie nor Westminster could be right about everything. For both of them appear to generalize their views to cover the genesis and maintenance of all Christian faith. But while Baillie’s account of his own experience can be construed as a testimony, surely his extension of that account to the whole household of faith cannot be a testimony. That must be a theory, a theory which could be mistaken even if the testimony is true. And similarly for the fathers of Westminster. So there might be some people who, armed with a general principle about the reliability and authority of the Bible, proceed from there by the ordinary canons of reason. And there might be others who find each particular element in their faith much more directly given to them by a special divine grace.
We might say a similar thing about the specificity which seemed so important to Baillie. It certainly seems plausible to suppose that if God really did command a certain woman to go as a missionary to Peru (and not to Brazil) then that command could not have been derived by any ordinary rational process from the text of the Bible. It looks as though that must have been a divine command addressed individually to her. But perhaps not every Christian is the recipient of a divine command of that specificity. Perhaps, that is, there are Christians to whom God gives only those commands which are rather general and which are to be found in the biblical text. God does not command them to take up one line of work rather than another, to live in one city rather than another, and so on. Those Christians would not need a specificity which requires a special word addressed to them. And that is not to deny that there are others for whom such a specificity is essential.

Perhaps the most radical question along this line would be this. Might there be a Christian to whom nothing is divinely revealed, neither the particular tenets of the faith, nor a general thesis about the Bible, nor a specific command for his life, etc.? Put in the Westminster terms, this would be a Christian in whom there was no “inward work” of the Holy Spirit at all—or, more carefully, no inward work of the Spirit which had a noetic effect. Perhaps such a person is simply “moved and induced by the testimony of the Church,” in a perfectly natural way, either to accept various features of the faith or to accept some general principle about the Bible. Or perhaps he just works through the “arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God,” using nothing but ordinary human faculties. Could such a person be a Christian?

I must confess that I find a resistance in myself against this suggestion. But I cannot think now of a strong reason against it. Perhaps it too is a possibility which we should countenance.

NOTES

3. Early in this section Hume had “accurately defined” a miracle as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the intervention of some invisible agent.”
5. For an extended argument to the effect that Christianity does not involve a revelation at all see F. Gerald Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* (London: SCM Press, 1964. 315 pp.)


11. See, for example, Baillie, *ibid.*, pp. 3 ff.


14. *Idem*.


17. *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Ch. 1, sec. V.

18. This paragraph in the confession may not be fully consistent with the passage which I quoted earlier. But I will not explore that problem here.