

REVELATION OF A PERSON v. REVELATION OF TRUTHS—A NOTE

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‘And so the Council produced the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*. In this document the Council emphasised that revelation is above all God’s self-communication, and is not to be reduced to a communication of truths’, remarked the Editor in the Autumn 2012 edition of *Compass*.

The quotation is a summary of his brief report on an important change from (a) the account of the nature of divine revelation which dominated theology in the period prior to the Council to (b) that contained in *Dei Verbum*. Seeing that others have made the same point, I thought it worthwhile to explore what this claim is worth.

What two versions of revelation are being contrasted? On the one hand, revelation is God’s self-communication. That is the Council’s teaching, the Editor asserts. On the other, revelation consists in communication of truths. So it looks as if God’s self-communication does not consist in the communication of truths only, but truths and something else. What might this be?

The answer becomes clear by considering a necessary condition of communicating. In both the specified kinds of communication, communication occurs only if the recipient comes to have beliefs. It does not make sense to say, ‘God communicated with me but did not bring about any beliefs in me.’ At the least, I would have to come to believe that God was doing the communicating, that he intended to communicate, and that there is a content to the communication, e.g., ‘I created the cosmos.’

Now the content of a belief is commonly called a proposition. If God reveals himself then he necessarily reveals truths about himself—through God’s action I come to believe facts about God.

Facts are the contents of true beliefs and beliefs are said to be ‘true’ in that their contents are true propositions. Indeed, the only things which are literally true are propositions. Here I use ‘true’ with the sense it has in, say, *It is true that the Earth is round*. Of course, a denial can be true, as in, *It is false that the Earth is triangular*.

I take it that when God reveals, either by his actions which give reason to believe certain propositions, say, that he cares for humans or he declares that certain propositions are true. His declarations can take many forms, such as uttering words through a prophet or angel or uttering them directly to the recipient. Such acts of revealing always involve revealing something about himself—thus he is self-communicating, as is the case when a human communicates. At the least he would reveal that he is a communicator and that he has intentions of communicating but that is incidental to his revealing a truth of a proposition more substantive. Indeed, if God does not reveal that certain propositions are true, then he fails to reveal anything, for even a revelation of himself would have to consist of propositions in order to qualify as the contents of beliefs about him.

I find untenable a distinction between God’s revealing himself and his communicating truths. Even in the case of God’s communicating truths, one is believing him because he says so and that is inter-personal communication.¹

¹For an explication of the concept of believing someone, see G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘What Is It to Believe Someone’, in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, edited by C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 141-151.