

Revelation in the Three Monotheistic Religions Response

Thanks to all speakers.

In listening to our three speakers I am struck by the fact that the question of revelation touches upon another central question to our three monotheistic religions: the question of boundaries. In fact, I would suggest that explicitly and implicitly the speakers have touched upon both the horizontal and vertical boundaries that mark us out as people of faith and as Jews, Christians and Muslims. As I have been asked to briefly respond to the extremely illuminating talk of Rabbi Marmur, I will talk about boundaries in relation to his paper but I think my comments are relevant with regard to the papers of both Father McGarry and Dr. Abu Sway as well.

First of all, one of the major theological questions implicitly raised in speaking of revelation concerns the boundary between God and man, the horizontal boundary. Is it not true to say that a God who reveals Himself is a God who “transgresses” the absolute boundaries of otherness between God and man? To what extent do our traditions present revelation as an act by which God emerges from His otherness? To what extent do our traditions then insist that after the revelation event God “withdraws” into His total otherness? What is crystal clear from Rabbi Marmur’s talk is the remarkable plurality of voices in the Jewish tradition. We, Catholics, used to the centrality of papal authority, often hunger for a similar structure in our dialogue with Jews and Muslims, attributing to this rabbi or that sheikh the magisterial authority of a Supreme Pontiff.

I would like to take up the same Jewish figure used by Rabbi Marmur to pose the question of boundaries, particularly that of the horizontal boundary between God and man. Rabbi Marmur’s paper uses Abraham J. Heschel as a guide. It was with Heschel that Rabbi Marmur took us from revelation as “presence” (in the Abraham saga) to revelation as “will” (in the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, through Moses). Rabbi Marmur only intimated that Heschel was in fact concerned also with a third form of revelation experience, which Heschel defined as “pathos” (in the prophetic experience). In fact, Heschel was passionately concerned with the prophetic experience and consecrated much reflection and writing to it. In his masterpiece, *The Prophets*, Heschel points out: “The God of the prophets is not the Wholly Other, a strange, weird and uncanny Being, shrouded in unfathomable darkness, but the God of the covenant, Whose will they know and are called upon to convey. The God they proclaim is not the Remote One, but the One who is involved, near and concerned. The Silent One may be the antithesis of man, but prophecy is God meeting man” (*The Prophets*, 227). In addition to affirming His presence and revealing His will, God seeks out in man an intimate friend, dare we even say an errant child. In this form of revelation the prophet is neither passive (before the divine presence) nor compliant (before the divine will) but rather passionate. In a short description of the prophetic pathos, Heschel depicts the Biblical prophet as an empowered “you” in relationship with the divine “I”. “When the secret revealed is one of woe, the prophet does not hesitate to challenge the intention of the Lord ... when the lives of others are at stake, the prophet does not say: Thy will be done, but rather: Thy will be changed” (p. 22). What impertinence! But this too is revelation and this magnificently conjures up Abraham, Moses, Habbakuk confronting God or even Jonah, the prophetic anti-prophet refusing to submit obediently to the divine. This *hutzpa*, this divinely inspired impertinence, so powerful in the Old Testament seems to me a fundamental part of any discussion of

revelation. It also suggests that the boundaries between God and man in the intimacy of the revelation relationship are at best blurred. It is here that God is indeed not so much the Wholly Other but a loving parent, a passionate partner.

However, this covers only one aspect of the boundaries question that the subject of revelation raises. Another and no less important aspect is the question of vertical boundaries, the boundaries that separate us as Jews, Christians and Muslims. What divides us is not the content of our religious teaching with regard to morals or ethics. The Catholic Church has been affirming this for the past four decades. In the other traditions, Jewish and Muslim first and foremost, Catholics can identify many shared themes and concerns. What divides us however is the actual experience of revelation.

For Catholics a major question in recent times is: can I affirm the validity of that which is specifically revelatory in another religion and which is not part of my own experience of revelation? Does God also reveal Himself in another “language” to someone else – an idiom to which I have no immediate access? Father McGarry’s discussed this particular problematic in the conclusion to his paper. Vatican II identified the positive aspects of the other religions. This was major progress as before, by definition, other religions had little or nothing to say about truth and revelation. Father McGarry’s illuminating definition of dialogue as “I have something to say and I have something to learn” is indeed helpful in this context. However, what does it say specifically about revelation – God’s self-disclosure to my Jewish and Muslim brother and sister in terms that are foreign to me? Is there a revelation that is not accessible to me and yet whose validity I can affirm? I think that this is one of the central problems of Catholic theology today – and some of my own Jesuit confreres have run into serious problems with the Vatican because of it.

As a Catholic, Jesus Christ is the key to revelation and thus I have no direct access to revelation beyond Jesus Christ. Or do I? In asserting, as does Father McGarry, that dialogue is the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church in our times, a way is opened beyond simple incommunicability. In the dialogue with my brothers and sisters who are not Christians, I can begin to make sense of the revelation they speak of. When they speak to me of the intimacy of their relationship with God, I certainly grow in intimacy with them. But what of the fundamental truth question regarding the revelation of which they speak? Ultimately the only criterion I have for discerning the truth of what they say of revelation is in the relationship between us. In their witness, in their relationships and in their actions, they illustrate to me what I cannot access directly. Ultimately, it is through their lives as people of faith that I can hear, understand and see the revelation they proclaim. We, more than the texts we read and cite, are signs of the revelation we proclaim. Saying this, I realize that I too am called to ever-greater fidelity to the relationship I build up with my non-Catholic brothers and sisters. They too have access to the truth, light and life of my relationship with God through Jesus Christ only in the fruits that emerge in the world we share. In fact, this too is a fundamental prophetic insight. The Biblical prophets and Jesus too insist that the strict separation of the horizontal and vertical dimensions is illusory. God is revealed in the face of the brother and sister we meet in truth. Thus, I might conclude by saying that inter-religious conversation about revelation in our different traditions has, in fact, the potential to be revelation too. We might also discover (or should I say uncover) God in the face and the living voice of the Jewish or Muslim brother or sister whom we meet in dialogue.