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Lived Experience:  
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# The Word as Lived Experience: Special Revelation after *Dei Verbum*

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Philosophically speaking, it could be argued that there are *three* basic positions concerning belief (or non-belief) in the existence of a creator God who exists outside space and time: atheism, deism and theism. As the categorical denial of the objective existence of God, *atheism* is fairly straightforward.<sup>1</sup> However, while deism and theism are related, a careful distinction must be drawn between them. *Deism* affirms the existence of a creator, but holds that such a being does not concern itself with the affairs of its creatures; ‘God’, according to this view, does not intervene in the world but merely constitutes a distant ‘first cause’ of the universe.<sup>2</sup> For a *theist*, by contrast, God, although transcendent, has nonetheless elected to reveal God’s self to humanity, and is thus actively involved in the vicissitudes of human history. The Judaeo-Christian tradition strongly affirms the theistic model of the creator.<sup>3</sup> And the Catholic Church holds that such divine revelation falls into (at least) two subcategories: special revelation (the Bible as the ‘Word of God’) and general revelation (the ‘acts of God’ in creation). This brief article concentrates discussion on the *former*.

## THE BIBLE AS THE ‘WORD OF GOD’: A CONTESTED NOTION

While to speak of the Old and New Testaments as the ‘Word of God’ might, on the face of it, appear unambiguous, it is in fact a complex and highly contested claim. Indeed, as the background (and ongoing theological discussion) concerning the Second

- 1 For an excellent analysis of the moral grounds for the repudiation of theism, see Stewart R. Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God: Contemporary Philosophy and the Brothers Karamazov*, Basil Blackwell, 1977.
- 2 See Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, Ignatius Press, 2017, p. 236.
- 3 Karl Rahner SJ, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1978, pp. 153–157. See also Herbert McCabe OP, *God Matters*, Continuum, 2005, pp. 18–20.

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## THE WORD AS LIVED EXPERIENCE:

Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum) (DV)* aptly illustrates, the Church's understanding of what it means to assert that the Scriptures are 'God's Word Written' has undergone considerable theological development in recent decades. And this development has not been without controversy.

### THE CRUCIAL HERMENEUTICAL SHIFT: VATICAN I AND VATICAN II

In order to understand the nature of this shift in theological understanding regarding the Bible as the revealed 'Word of God', it is necessary to focus on some of the key differences between the teaching of the First and Second Vatican Councils.<sup>4</sup> Although the issue of revelation was touched upon by the Council of Trent, Vatican I (1870) was the first council to deal systematically with the character of divine revelation. In the judgement of many of the Fathers of Vatican I, fideism and deism were heresies which had to be challenged. *Fideism* stemmed in many respects from the theology of Martin Luther, and held that it was impossible for the fallible human intellect alone to possess direct knowledge of supernatural realities.<sup>5</sup> *Deism* was largely the product of the rationalism of the Enlightenment; it denied the possibility of divine revelation altogether. As a means of combatting fideism, Vatican I, in *Dei Filius*, built on philosophical arguments adduced by St Thomas Aquinas, decreeing that it was possible for the human mind to apprehend God via unaided human reason.<sup>6</sup> It resisted deism by affirming the objective reality of revelation, and strongly emphasised our dependence on this revelation in order to fully grasp humanity's true *telos* in this world. The accent was primarily on a very abstract and cerebral notion of revelation: the 'deposit of faith' was perceived in propositional terms, and 'doctrine' was presented as a corpus of immutable and trans-historical/trans-cultural truths which had been transmitted through the Bible and then interpreted (and defined) by the Church's Magisterium. What

4 On this point, see John W. O'Malley, *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 242-247.

5 Fideism is also apparent in the thought of Protestant philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), as well as in the work of Karl Barth (1886–1968), arguably the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century. For a scholarly exploration of the philosophical contours of fideism, see D.Z. Phillips and Kai Nielsen, *Wittgensteinian Fideism*, SCM Press, 2005.

6 See Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. E. Quinn, Collins, 1980, pp. 510-514. See also Brian Davies OP, *Thinking about God*, Wipf and Stock, 2011, pp. 244-245; D.C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013, pp. 262-264; Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait*, Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 105-6, 108-12, 115-17.

is particularly striking is that very little emphasis was placed on Jesus Christ as the source of divine revelation.<sup>7</sup>

In dramatic contrast, *Dei Verbum* represented a key hermeneutical shift in the Church's understanding of how the Bible is perceived as God's revealed Word. Indeed, as scholars such as Joseph Ratzinger have observed, there is a marked difference between the first draft of the Vatican II decree, produced in 1962, and the final text, submitted and approved for promulgation in 1965.<sup>8</sup> While the *first* draft placed the same stress as Vatican I on revelation as a corpus of static, ahistorical verities, the *final* document perceived revelation in a radically new way. Although it stressed continuity with the spirit of Vatican I, the final version of *Dei Verbum* perceived revelation in much more dynamic, concrete and personalist terms. Revelation was the progressive self-disclosure of God to His people in the history of salvation, a self-disclosure which reached its supreme consummation in the person of Christ – and in his life, death and Resurrection. Ratzinger, who as Pope Benedict XVI was at pains to stress the 'hermeneutic of reform in continuity' between Vatican I and II (as opposed to the 'hermeneutics of rupture') was nonetheless driven to refer to the clear shift in theological thinking between the first and final drafts of *Dei Verbum* as 'one of the most important events in the struggle over the Constitution on Revelation'.<sup>9</sup>

The *contrast* with Vatican I is thus palpable. Moreover, as Dermot A. Lane has argued in this connection, 'revelation [in *Dei Verbum*] no longer appears simply as a body of supernatural truths contained in Scripture and taught by the Church'. On the contrary, the document firmly emphasises God's personal disclosure (*revelatio*) to human beings as opposed to the mere vouchsafing of eternal, propositional truths (*revelata*).<sup>10</sup> This is summed up in *Dei Verbum*'s statement that revelation is, in essence, an expression of the abundance of divine love: it is God's will that humanity, through Christ, the Word made flesh, should 'become sharers in the divine nature' (*DV 2*). Revelation thus also has an unmistakably Trinitarian dimension: God the Father discloses God's self through the Incarnation of the Logos – and then sends the Holy Spirit as a means by which human beings can be brought ever closer to the Divine self (*DV 2*). Notwithstanding Gerald O'Collins's contention

7 Dermot A. Lane, *The Experience of God: An Invitation to do Theology*, Veritas, 2003, p. 66.

8 Joseph Ratzinger, 'Revelation Itself', in H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II. Volume III*, trans. W. Glen-Doepel, Burns and Oates, 1969, p. 170.

9 Ibid. An intriguing evaluation of Ratzinger's commentary on *Dei Verbum* is offered by Robert Royal, *A Deeper Vision: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Twentieth Century*, Ignatius Press, 2015, pp. 266, 317.

10 Lane, *Experience of God*, p. 67.

that *Dei Verbum* did not constitute a rejection of Vatican I's account of revelation, few theologians would wish to contest the claim that Vatican II stressed the personal, Christocentric (and Trinitarian) nature of biblical revelation in a way that the First Vatican Council had singularly failed to do.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Vatican II strongly underscores the universal character of revelation. As Lane observes, *Dei Verbum* 'recognises a line of continuity between universal revelation, Judaic revelation, and Christian revelation'.<sup>12</sup> In this vein, the Council document refers to the majestic sweep of salvation history, as recorded in the biblical text, and recognises the significant stages on this soteriological journey. Beginning with God's revelation to our first parents, and continuing through our post-lapsarian state – most notably with the call of Abraham, the era of the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets – Scripture articulates the fact that God, through the formation of Israel, worked diligently to prepare a people for the eventual coming of their Saviour (*DV* 3).

Moreover, while Vatican I regarded the Bible as containing propositional truths which required intellectual assent, *Dei Verbum* stressed the holistic, integrative (nay, gestalt) nature of biblical revelation, and insisted on the centrality of a response by the whole person (*DV* 3).<sup>13</sup> The person of Christ and the promptings of the Holy Spirit move both the mind *and* the heart; accordingly, both the 'notional' and the 'real' assent (as John Henry Newman called them) are vital.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most significant innovation on the part of *Dei Verbum* was its endorsement of the role of *experience* in the reception, and discernment, of biblical revelation.<sup>15</sup> This was a very important development. The experiential aspect in the interpretation of Scripture had been championed by 'Modernists' such as Alfred Loisy, Baron Friedrich von Hügel and George Tyrrell in the early twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> However, it had been vociferously condemned

11 Gerald O'Collins SJ, *Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 13.

12 Lane, *Experience of God*, p. 69.

13 Robert Murray SJ, 'The Human Capacity for God, and God's Initiative', in M.J. Walsh (ed.), *Commentary on the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, pp. 6-31.

14 See John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent*, Assumption Press, 2013 [1870], pp. 27-66. See also in this connection David G. Bonagura, Jr., 'The Relation of Revelation and Tradition in the Theology of John Henry Newman and Joseph Ratzinger', *New Blackfriars*, Jan. 2020, Vol. 101, 67-84.

15 George Weigel elaborates on this point in *The Irony of Modern Catholic History: How the Church Rediscovered Itself and Challenged the Modern World to Reform*, Basic Books, 2019, pp. 152-155.

16 See Gabriel Daly, 'Theological and Philosophical Modernism', in D. Jodock (ed.), *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 107-112. See also Lester R. Kurtz, *The Politics of Heresy: The Modernist Crisis in Roman Catholicism*, University of California Press, 1986, pp. 156-157.

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as heresy by Pope Pius X in his encyclical letter *Pascendi Dominici gregis* (1907). So the fact that the Vatican II decree now gave its imprimatur to the role of experience in theological reflection was little short of revolutionary. It suggested, *pace* Vatican I, that the human individual was not a passive receptacle into which immutable supernatural truth was breathed. On the contrary, revelation was an active, interpersonal, dialogical *encounter* with the divine, which was ineluctably conditioned by the contingencies of time, place, language and socio-historical context.

### ONGOING THEOLOGICAL DEBATE

So far, so good. However, much of the theological debate and ideological tension in the Church *today* is characterised by the adoption on the part of both ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’ of the two differing positions regarding the epistemic status (and interpretation) of biblical revelation articulated by Vatican I and Vatican II respectively. A recent case in point is the debate concerning the reception of communion by the divorced and remarried, which dominated the Synod of Bishops in 2014 and 2015. While Rowan Williams has claimed that very few contemporary theologians would accept a propositional account of revelation, this does not seem to hold true for many in the Catholic Church.<sup>17</sup> Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke, for instance, appears to possess views regarding revelation which are, at the very least, quasi-propositional. He objects to any modification of the Church’s pastoral practice (and hence, perhaps, doctrine) concerning communion on the grounds that it would contradict the clear teaching of Christ revealed in the Gospels.<sup>18</sup> For Burke and many others, Christ has spoken, and His eternal Word is immutable and infallible.

‘Progressives’ such as Walter Cardinal Kasper disagree, however, and condemn this stance as ‘theological fundamentalism’.<sup>19</sup> Instead, they argue in favour of a *dynamic* model of biblical

17 Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000, p. 131.

18 Raymond Leo Burke, ‘The Canonical Nullity of the Marriage Process as the Search for the Truth’, in R. Dodaro (ed.), *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church*, Ignatius Press, 2014, pp. 210–242.

19 Mark Brumley, ‘Cardinal Kasper Resorts to the “F” Word in Addressing Critics’, *Catholic World Report*, 4 October 2015, <[http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/4228/cardinal\\_kasper\\_resorts\\_to\\_the\\_f\\_word\\_in\\_addressing\\_critics.aspx](http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/4228/cardinal_kasper_resorts_to_the_f_word_in_addressing_critics.aspx)>. This point is also echoed by Timothy Radcliffe OP in his book *Alive in God: A Christian Imagination*, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019: ‘We shall only infect people with the contagious freedom of the “dogmatic imagination”’, he writes, ‘if they see that Christians are unafraid to engage with complex questions to which they do not know the answer, to learn as well as to teach, to entertain views that they had not considered. Faced with mindless fundamentalism and its consequent violence, the best response is to think’. See p. 147.

revelation which is far more akin to *Dei Verbum*. Kasper holds that, when we look at the message of Christ in the New Testament holistically, rather than attempting to deduce everything from one isolated ‘proof text’, it becomes impossible to sustain any form of legalism or pharisaical rigidity in pastoral practice.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the *lived* experience of many divorced and remarried Catholics, who have wrestled greatly with their consciences, tells us that allowing them a ‘second chance’ (perhaps along the lines of the Eastern Orthodox practice of *oikonomia* – understood as ‘mercy’) is the compassionate and Christ-like response to their particular situation. While such a move might entail the rejection of the teaching of Pope John Paul II on this matter, it would nonetheless constitute a legitimate and much-needed form of *aggiornamento*.<sup>21</sup>

There are clearly strengths and weaknesses in both these approaches to biblical revelation. The more propositional approach has the advantage of presenting the faith as an unchanging set of axioms which can be deduced *a priori* in the manner of logical syllogisms.<sup>22</sup> This offers *certainty* in a postmodern world plagued by corrosive anomie. On the other hand, this approach is clearly counter-factual: it *cannot* be denied that the Church has changed its view on positions taken in Scripture – for example, on usury and slavery. Moreover, it is very difficult to square this static approach with the findings of historical-critical scholarship, not to mention the entire epistemological world we now inhabit.<sup>23</sup>

20 Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, Paulist Press, 2013, p. 177. For a shrewd examination of Kasper’s position, see Ross Douthat, *To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism*, Simon & Schuster, 2018, pp. 90-93. Similarly, while Avery Dulles SJ apparently remained attached to received dogmas and traditional formulations, he nonetheless stressed the importance of a dynamic view of dogma reformable in the light of further manifestations of God. See Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, Orbis Books, 1992, pp. 226–227.

21 John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (22 November 1981) explicitly prohibited divorced and remarried Catholics from receiving Holy Communion (see paragraph 84). However, in his controversial post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (The Joy of Love), dated 19 March 2016, Pope Francis appeared to leave open the possibility that divorced persons who have remarried, as well as others living in ‘irregular unions’, might, following a process of accompaniment and discernment, be given access to the sacrament of the Eucharist. See especially chapter 8 of Francis’ exhortation. For a thorough and rigorous investigation of the theological, moral, and juridical questions raised by this issue, see Matthew Levering, *The Indissolubility of Marriage: Amoris Laetitia in Context*, Ignatius Press, 2019.

22 See Martijn Blaauw, ‘The Nature of Divine Revelation’, *The Heythrop Journal*, Jan. 2009, Vol. 50, 2-12, 3; and Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 2.

23 These matters are addressed in James G. Murphy SJ, ‘Contemporary Jesuit Epistemological Interests’, in A. Abram, P. Gallagher and M. Kirwan (eds.), *Philosophy, Theology and the Jesuit Tradition: ‘The Eye of Love’*, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2017, pp. 139-157.

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The more dynamic, inductive and experiential model also has merits. It takes seriously the fact that culture and history play a crucial role in both the production and reception of biblical texts. It adopts a more ‘critical realist’ model which holds that, although God’s revelation is an ontological fact, the data of that revelation is always *mediated* through the prism of human experience and culture. It humbly acknowledges, with St Paul, that – at least this side of eternity – we are condemned to ‘see through a glass darkly’ (1 Cor. 13:12). Its detractors, however, warn of the dangers of relativism, subjectivism and historicism, which they perceive as inevitable corollaries of the ‘experiential’ approach.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Is a *modus vivendi* (or *via media*) between these two competing models possible? If, as *Dei Verbum* claims, there is continuity between the teaching of Vatican I and II concerning biblical revelation, then the answer is surely *yes*. What might it look like? Would Newman’s notion of doctrinal development succeed in holding together the forces of stability and change?<sup>24</sup> Perhaps. But, as the bitter debates over the issue of Church reform which are currently raging among the bishops on the German Synodal Path show, even if one were to give Newman the benefit of the doubt and assume that the notion of doctrinal ‘development’ is a coherent one, the question of what might or might not constitute *sound* doctrinal development will continue to vex the minds of both conservative and liberal theologians for many years to come.

<sup>24</sup> This question is carefully considered by Ian Ker in his fine study *Newman on Vatican II*, Oxford University Press, 2014. See especially chapter 2: ‘The Hermeneutic of Change in Continuity’, pp. 40-71. A detailed discussion of Newman’s ideas concerning the development of doctrine is furnished by Nicholas Lash in *Newman on Development: The Search for an Explanation in History*, Patmos Press, 1975.