

Hermeneutics and Revelation

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I sin artikel om hermeneutik och uppenbarelse diskuterar Werner G. Jeanrond, professor i systematisk teologi vid Lunds universitet, hur hermeneutiska insikter påverkar förståelsen av uppenbarelsen. Jeanrond har i flera böcker arbetat med hermeneutikens betydelse för teologin, och även där uppmärksammat den franske filosofen Paul Ricoeurs bidrag till en samtida teologisk hermeneutik.

In this article I wish to consider the relationship between hermeneutics and revelation. What is divine revelation? How do we gain insight into divine revelation? Does Christian knowledge of revelation emerge within the limits of biblical text-interpretation alone? What is the role of the believer in receiving, interpreting and responding to revelation? Is revelation a hermeneutical concept?

No reference to divine revelation is ever free of interest, neither in theology nor philosophy, nor in the church. References to revelation have been made in order to defend certain biblical, theological or ecclesiastical positions. References to revelation have functioned to support, defend or legitimate personal experiences, interpretations and convictions. All talk of revelation occurs in certain contexts, and we have to reckon with the possibility that such talk be influenced by the specific context's concerns and power structure. Hence, from a theological perspective all references to divine revelation require a thorough critical and self-critical examination.

In an article on revelation the Irish theologian Gabriel Daly recalls that the two schools that dominated theological thinking for many centuries, i.e. Augustinian and Aristotelian-Thomistic, had very different agendas when they treated of revelation. Whereas «the Augustinian predisposition to regard revelation as illumination favours attention to revelation as a continuing process; ... Thomism [as a form of Aristotelian thinking] lends itself to the objectivisation of revealed truths».¹ This means that those who interpreted revelation in terms of illumination were motivated to describe the ensuing process of transformation in the individual believer or within the Christian community, while those

who saw revelation as an act of divine support for a given deposit of truths were keen to establish divine sanction for their particular doctrinal endeavours.

These two types of attention to revelation stress the subjective respectively the objective dimension of revelation. They treat of revelation either as an inner event which affects the entire human being or as an external event which contributes to the establishment of a divinely ordered framework for Christian life, and which, at the same time, balances the defects of autonomous reason.

A major difference between both approaches to revelation concerns the relationship between human reason and divine revelation. While the Augustinian school considered revelation as affecting the entire human being, the Thomistic school concentrated on revelation from the perspective of human reason.² The imperfect nature of human reason requires a divine supplement. It is interesting to observe the history of effects of this Thomistic line of thought: Thomas Aquinas wished to establish the autonomy of reason and thus stands in a tradition that more and more radically separated philosophy and theology.

In this article I would like to reflect upon possibilities and limitations of constructing a theological epistemology of revelation. In a first move I shall discuss some current developments in the, theology of revelation with particular reference to Karl Rahner's treatment of our topic. In a second move I shall explore Paul Ricoeur's

¹ Gabriel Daly, «Revelation in the Theology of the Roman Catholic Church», in Paul Avis, ed., *Divine Revelation*. Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1997, 23–44, here 26.

² Cf. *ibid.*, 25f.

contribution to contemporary thinking about revelation. And in a third and final move I shall comment on the hermeneutical nature of revelation and on its implications for Christian life.

Current Trends in the Theology of Revelation

The theological notion of revelation has undergone many changes throughout Christian history. The prominence which revelation enjoys in contemporary theology is a relatively new phenomenon and has to do with the efforts by many theologians to use revelation as the key to the systematic treatment of all theological themes.³

Peter Eicher distinguishes between four main uses of revelation in contemporary theology: Revelation as *qualifier* refers to the entire content of Christian faith. As highest *legimator* it refers to the foundation and coherence of all Christian God-talk as well as universal reality in its divine relation. As *apologetical category* revelation is used in order to draw a strict line between Christian truth and all other religious interpretations of meaning, philosophies and other expressions of reality. Finally, as a key category revelation may function as a *system-building* factor for the respective theology as well as a device that promotes the connection between scripture, theology, church and society.⁴ The latter use of revelation can be found most prominently in Karl Rahner's theology.⁵

This article is, of course, not the place for a thorough treatment of Rahner's transcendental approach to theology. Rather I propose to refer to Rahner's discussion of the concept of revelation in terms of a starting-point or my own discussion of the hermeneutical nature of revela-

tion. Moreover, I must admit that I do find Rahner's treatment of revelation so interesting because, from the start, it tries to avoid a reduction of revelation to either a mere word-event or a mere support structure for any form of biblical or ecclesiastical authority.

Karl Rahner described the relationship between natural revelation and authentic (*eigentliche*) revelation like this: Natural revelation allows some insight into the presence of the divine mystery in our world, while authentic revelation has the character of an event. The latter, i.e. authentic revelation, is dialogical and personal because in it God addresses the human being directly.⁶ It is interesting to note that for Rahner the entire history of humankind provided the framework for his reflection upon divine revelation. «History is always and everywhere history of salvation and revelation.»⁷ Moreover, Rahner distinguished between people who have seen God's specific self-communication in Christ, i.e. Christians, and people of good will who have not or not yet seen God's special or authentic revelation in history, i.e. the so-called anonymous Christians. In spite of all the critique of Rahner's concept of «anonymous Christianity» we might wish to appreciate Rahner's universal focus on revelation. For him revelation means God's communication with human beings. All talk about revelation must by necessity consider the experience of God's grace which finds expression in all religions and which opens up possibilities for salvation.⁸

In the theological language of today one could rephrase Rahner's theological concerns in terms of «relation»: Revelation provides insight

³ See «Offenbarung V. Theologiegeschichte und Dogmatik», *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 25. de Gruyter, Berlin and New York 1995, 146ff.; and Peter Eicher, *Offenbarung: Prinzip neuzeitlicher Theologie*. Kösel, München 1977.—More recently, an increasing number of Christian theologians have turned towards trinitarian reflection in order to establish their theological method. Hence, a paradigm shift might be under way in theology.

⁴ Eicher, *ibid.*, 48–57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 352.—For Rahner's concept of revelation, and for its development, see Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*. 2nd ed. Kösel, München 1963; idem, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych. Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1978), 138–175. For a most concise summary of Rahner's approach to revelation see Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch*, 8th ed. Herder, Freiburg i.B. 1971, 265–269.

⁶ *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch*, 266.

⁷ *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch*, 267: «Die Geschichte ist also immer u. überall Heils- und Offenbarungsgeschichte.» See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 146.

into the particular kind of relationship to which God has invited all human beings. Moreover, God's revelation provides the possibility for human beings to relate personally to God under the conditions of their own creatureliness. Hence, revelation does not only mediate information and insight into the mysterious presence of God, rather it manifests the presence of the divine mystery in the world and invites human participation in this creative and redeeming mystery. Revelation thus creates the conditions for a lasting relationship, that is a relationship which the gospels, esp. John's gospel, term «eternal». Moreover, revelation is a sign for God's respect for the human being and the human being's possibility of relating to God—though, of course, under the conditions of human life and its limitations of time, space and language.

Repeatedly, Rahner stressed the need to connect the revelational character of human thinking about God (a priori revelation) and the event of God's specific self-communication in salvation history (authentic revelation), culminating in the person of Jesus Christ, i.e. in the advent, life, proclamation, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This specific event of revelation manifests God's presence directly, a presence which exposes human sinfulness in order to forgive it and not in order to destroy the human person. In the hypostatic union of the incarnation the specific history of revelation reaches its culmination within the universal history of revelation. In this hypostatic union of Christ God and the human being have become one, though not the same.⁹

Rahner thus considers revelation in terms of both God's gracious self-manifestation in history and God's will to enter into relationship with human beings, however not in terms of a model of instruction according to which God

communicates a number of propositions to humankind which cannot be known by reason alone and which demand unqualified intellectual assent.

Hence, for Rahner faith appears as a relational act, and not as mere intellectual assent to supernatural truths. Moreover, the framework for Rahner's theology of revelation is the general religious history of humankind. In that sense, one can see an elective affinity between Rahner and Mircea Eliade, the late historian of religion. All relationships in which human beings are involved can become occasions for divine revelation or *hierophanies*, to use Eliade's terminology.¹⁰ The human being's relationship to nature, to other people, to the ultimate mystery and to herself or himself as well as to his or her history and tradition provides the occasion for divine revelation to take place. Rahner clearly affirms a model of revelation that we today might call epiphanic and relational.

In the light of Rahner's model we may rule out a number of classical reductions in the theology of revelation:

- (1) Revelation must not be reduced to supernatural propositions.
- (2) Revelation must not be treated in terms of mere instruction requiring assent.
- (3) Revelation must not be reduced to reason alone (as for instance in G. E. Lessing's way of thinking¹¹).
- (4) Revelation must not be reduced to the Bible alone, although the Bible offers a record of human testimony to God's self-communication in history. It does so with the help of different genres and on different levels of theological reflection.
- (5) Revelation must not be reduced to Jesus of Nazareth alone, although in him—according to Christian experience, interpretation and belief—God has ultimately made known his loving, creative and redemptive offer of relationship to the world.

⁸ Cf. Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie* IX, 2nd ed. Herder, Freiburg i.B. 1972, 498–515; and idem, *Schriften zur Theologie* X. Herder, Freiburg i.B.: 1972, 531–546.—See also Werner G. Jeanrond, «Anonymes Christentum», in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th ed. Mohr-Siebeck, Tübingen 1998, 510–511.

⁹ *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch*, 268. Cf. *Foundations*, 211f.

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York and London 1959), 11.

¹¹ See Werner G. Jeanrond, «The Significance of Revelation for Biblical Theology», *Biblical Interpretation* 6 (1998), 243–257, esp. 247f.

(6) Revelation cannot be reduced to the Christian church alone, because God may well have communicated through other religious traditions and movements than the Christian, although all such possible and actual revelations will be interpreted by the Christian church in the light of its own particular witness to the revelation of God's cosmological presence in Christ. That is why Rahner felt perfectly justified to speak about «anonymous Christians» when from an inner-Christian perspective appreciatively considering the religious experience of people, Christians and non-Christians alike.

(7) And finally, revelation must not be identified exclusively with verbal communication, although any critical reflection upon revelation will need to employ the means of verbal communication. But it seems to me to be crucial to maintain that revelation can occur also in experiences of love, ritual, nature, icons, encounters, fellowship, silence, music, art and other non-verbal occasions. Therefore, the logos within the term theology needs to be seen in much wider dimensions than mere speech acts.¹²

Two major shifts characterise Rahner's and other related contemporary theologies of revelation (e.g. Edward Schillebeeckx, Dermot Lane, Gabriel Daly, David Tracy et. al.) over against the various forms of Christian orthodoxy, Protestant and Catholic alike: The first shift concerns the medium for revelation, that is to say the new role for human experience in revelation. Revelation does not occur in spite of or against human nature and experience. Rather revelation is a result of a relationship between God and human beings that manifests itself through the medium of human experience and that may be expressed and critically examined through the medium of language.

The second shift has to do with the focus of revelation. Reason and incompleteness are no longer the primary focus, neither is the assent to

¹² Cf. Paul Ricoeur makes a similar point when he calls «to guard ourselves against a certain narrowness of any theology of the Word which only attends to word events.» Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge. Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1980, 80.

a body of truths; rather faith and salvation, or expressed in a different mode, the possibility of eternal relations between God and God's creation are the focus of revelation.

The first shift, that is the new role which human experience plays in the process of revelation, somewhat complicates the statement found in the Second Vatican Council's document on revelation according to which «we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ» (*Dei Verbum* 4). For we must ask: How can the process of interpreting past revelation and of expecting future revelation be separated from the dynamic character of the process of revelation itself? Does not the new attention to human experience, as the medium of revelation (which Rahner and like-minded theologians introduced at the Council) run the risk of suicide if it is made to subordinate human experience anew to ecclesiastical power, as is the case in the second chapter of *Dei Verbum* where the transmission of revelation is considered?

It is true that in its first chapter *Dei Verbum* offers a broader horizon for the consideration of divine revelation. Avery Dulles correctly concludes that «[i]n comparison with Vatican Council I, *Dei Verbum* is more personalistic, trinitarian, and christocentric».¹³ But from Chapter 2 onwards this broader view recedes in favour of what Rahner later referred to as the «special, official salvation history» [die «besondere, amtliche Heilsgeschichte»]¹⁴ whose particular administrative requirements are discussed in the subsequent chapters of *Dei Verbum*. I wish to quote just one example from Chapter 2, 10:

... the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in

¹³ Avery Dulles, «Faith and Revelation», in Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, eds., *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*. Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1992, 89–128, here 93.—With regard to the Second Vatican Council I make some use here of material previously published in Werner G. Jeanrond, «The Significance of Revelation for Biblical Theology», *op. cit.*, 249–50.

¹⁴ Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, eds., *Kleines Konzilskompendium*, 10th ed. Herder, Freiburg i. B. 1975, 362.

the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devoutly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith.¹⁵

The problem with the Second Vatican Council's understanding of revelation lies then in the hermeneutical conflict which arises between the Council's affirmation, on the one hand, of a universal context for God's revelation, and its affirmation, on the other hand, of a magisterial prerogative that defends ahistorical propositions of faith.¹⁶ Walter Schmithals identified this contradiction most succinctly with regard to the Council's willingness to affirm historical-critical exegesis while at the same time defending the propositional nature of revelation: «Ultimately, the problem is that one cannot acknowledge the historicity of the revelatory documents without at the same time treating the revelatory truth itself consistently as historical.»¹⁷ In other words, the problem of the Second Vatican Council document on revelation has been that it affirms the experiential and therefore historical nature of revelation only half-way. Moreover, the Council affirmed the need for interpretation of all testimonies to revelation, but defends an older a-historical rationality that curtails the demands of a critical hermeneutics. However, a half-hearted recognition of the historical conditions for human experiencing and reflecting can only lead to a half-hearted hermeneutics. But a half-hearted hermeneutics can never be sufficiently critical.

Even Rahner's approach to divine revelation has been criticised on at least two accounts. Johann Baptist Metz accused Rahner of locating

his theological approach predominantly on the level of theoretical reflection and thus forgetting about the actual human experiences of suffering, poverty and oppression that form the context for the human reception of God's revelation. Against a transcendental idealist paradigm in theology Metz called for a post-idealist paradigm which he himself has since developed under the heading of a new political theology.¹⁸

A second critique of Rahner's concept of revelation concerns the absence of a critical text-hermeneutics in his work.¹⁹ The connection between transcendental revelation and categorical revelation, that is between universal revelation and historical revelation, must remain problematic as long as the linguistic mediation of revelation cannot be properly considered. Thus, not only the Second Vatican Council lacked a thorough commitment to critical text-hermeneutics. Rahner, one of its chief advisers, had not promoted such a critical hermeneutics either.²⁰

Now I wish to turn to the work of Paul Ricoeur who has richly contributed to the reflection on both text-hermeneutics and the concept of revelation.

Paul Ricoeur's Contribution to a Critical Theology of Revelation

Paul Ricoeur has repeatedly stated his conviction not to mingle philosophy and theology. He wants «to remain faithful to the old pact [he] had made that the nonphilosophical sources of [his]

¹⁵ *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. Costello Publishing Company, Northport, NY 1988, vol. 1, 755–756.

¹⁶ Cf. Peter Eicher, *Offenbarung, op. cit.*, 542.

¹⁷ Quoted in Eicher, *ibid.*, 543 (my translation).

¹⁸ Johann Baptist Metz, *Zum Begriff der neuen politischen Theologie: 1967–1997*. Grünewald, Mainz 1997, 105.

¹⁹ Eicher, *Offenbarung, op. cit.*, 405: «Rahner fehlt eine Hermeneutik des Textes.»

²⁰ Cf. also Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson. Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1988, 6–8—To be fair to Rahner, it must be said that he was aware of this problem later on. This became clear to me during the one conversation I had with him in 1978 in my native Saarbrücken. There he encouraged me to continue my own studies in language and text-hermeneutics, saying that he unfortunately had not undertaken such a work himself.

conviction would not be mixed together with the arguments of [his] philosophical discourse». ²¹ Hence his interest in the concept of revelation was not theological by nature, but according to his autobiographical reconstruction had to do with his «intermittent incursions into the field of biblical exegesis». ²² These incursions originated in his interests in the question of narrative. One might wish to argue that Ricoeur's high regard for the tasks of exegesis and, dare I say, somewhat lower regard for systematic theological discourse, has to do with his keen interest in the language of faith and its various literary genres found in the discourses of the Bible.

In spite of this somewhat restricted point of entry into the discussion of revelation, Ricoeur's philosophical-exegetical treatment of the concept of revelation seems to me to be of great significance not only for new and more critical forms of biblical theologies, ²³ but also for the central systematic theological reflection upon revelation.

As a theologian I do not submit to the same restrictions which Ricoeur acknowledges concerning the relationship between philosophy and theology. Not having to react to the internal debate characteristic of the 20th century approach to religious questions in France, I may freely benefit from philosophical examinations and clarifications for my further theological explorations without fearing for the integrity of my intellectual enterprise. ²⁴

Already in the 1970s, Ricoeur sought «to recover a concept of revelation *and* a concept of reason that, without ever coinciding, can at least enter into a living dialectic and together engender something like an understanding of faith». ²⁵

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, «Intellectual Autobiography», trans. Kathleen Blarney, in Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, The Library of Living Philosophers XXII. Open Court, Chicago and La Salle 1995, 1–53, here 50.

²² *Ibid.*, 41.

²³ Cf. Jeanrond, «The Significance of Revelation for Biblical Theology», *op. cit.*

²⁴ For a brief discussion of Ricoeur's attitude to theology within his French context see Olivier Mongin, *Paul Ricoeur*. Seuil, Paris 1994, 200–204.

²⁵ Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, *op. cit.*, 73.

For Ricoeur, revelation is neither a purer, more primitive stage of reason, nor is it eventually to be swallowed up into some super-concept (as in Hegel's absolute spirit). Rather revelation must be treated *sui generis*. As such it is seen to belong to the discourse of faith or the confession of faith. ²⁶

Ricoeur discusses five examples for this discourse of faith, namely five forms of biblical writing: prophetic, narrative, prescriptive, wisdom, and hymnic discourse. He hastens to add «that the literary genres of the Bible do not constitute a rhetorical façade which it would be possible to pull down in order to reveal some thought content that is indifferent to its literary vehicle». ²⁷ Both form and content are important for the particular text-expression. Therefore one cannot reduce the different forms of biblical texts to a single category of revelation culminating in the filtering out of a certain propositional content. Instead one has to acknowledge a «polysemic and polyphonic concept of revelation». ²⁸ Revelation is not a monolithic concept but is pluralistic, polysemic, and at most analogical in form. ²⁹ Thus, it would be wrong to speak of «the biblical revelation». ³⁰

Ricoeur rejects all quick reductions of revelation to propositional forms. But this is not to say that he in turn subjectivizes or psychologizes revelation. Rather the opposite is the case: He wishes to discover the objective dimension of revelation, but this can only be discovered if revelation is not quickly identified with ordinary knowledge. ³¹ To speak of the objective dimension of revelation does not imply that one has simply to equate revelation with knowledge. Rather divine revelation is a kind of limit knowledge because «[t]he one who reveals himself [God] is also the one who conceals himself». ³² Therefore Ricoeur suggests to speak of revelation in terms of a «limit-idea». ³³

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 93.

³² *Ibid.*, 93.

³³ *Ibid.*

With reference to Exodus 3, i.e. Moses' meeting with God at the burning bush, Ricoeur has warned repeatedly against passing from a theology of the name into an onto-theological identification of God's existence «in which the meaning of narration and of prophecy was sublimated and rationalized. The dialectic of the hidden God who reveals himself—the nuclear dialectic of revelation—was thereby dissipated into the knowledge of being and the comprehension of providence.»³⁴ The point of this warning, however, is not to eliminate all traces of the verb «to be» from the translation of Exodus 3: 14 («I am who I am»), and as a result from any thinking about God, as is the case in Jean-Luc Marion's work *God Without Being*,³⁵ but to appreciate the polysemic nature of «to be» in any appropriate translation and related thinking about God.³⁶ Moreover, Ricoeur stresses that «to say that the God who reveals himself is a hidden God is to confess that revelation can never constitute a body of truths which an institution may boast of or take pride in possessing».³⁷ Ricoeur rejects all attempts to instrumentalise revelation for the sake of other interests. Instead he wishes «to carry the idea of revelation back to a more original level than that of theology, the level of its fundamental discourse.»³⁸

Although I do agree both with Ricoeur's definition of revelation as a limit-concept marked by polysemic, pluralistic and analogical dimensions, and with his insistence not to dissolve biblical genres into systematic theological notions, I have a difficulty with his notion of theology. How can we isolate a pre-theological discourse in biblical texts? Is not the entire spectrum of biblical expressions itself a testimony to the great variety of theological thinking in the Bible? May be the kind of theology against

which Ricoeur wishes to protect the fundamental discourse of faith is the sort of monolithic theology (e.g. Neo-Thomist) from which most critical theologians today also would like to free the genuine discourse of faith? I fail to see why the discourse of faith should be separated from its reflective dimensions, which are manifest, for instance, in the very narrative of Moses at the burning bush. Is not the handling of the polysemic power of language precisely the triumph of good theology, a theology that thinks about the testimonies to God's manifestations in history and that does not forget (a) the historical nature of such thinking and (b) the dialectic of revelation and concealment when it refers to God's manifestations? After raising this soft question mark against Ricoeur's understanding of theology I wish to return to his examination of the concept of revelation.

As we have seen revelation happens at the boundary or the interface between faith and reason. It also discloses a broader understanding of truth beyond the traditional concept of truth as mere adequation and verification. The truth which revelation discloses is the truth of manifestation. Ricoeur examines revelation as manifestation by looking at the function of poetic discourse in the act of reception of the biblical texts. He underlines the fact that the poetic function of language

... points to the obliterating of the ordinary referential function, at least if we identify it with the capacity to describe familiar objects of perception or the objects which science alone determines by means of its standards of measurement. Poetic discourse suspends this descriptive function. It does not directly augment our knowledge of objects.³⁹

Thus, rather than adding to our list of facts, poetic language alone restores to us a new relationship to reality, a relationship which Ricoeur describes in terms such as «participation-in» or «belonging-to» an order of things «which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to subjects».⁴⁰ Poetic language transforms our relationships in the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 94f.

³⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995.

³⁶ See Paul Ricoeur and André LaCoque, *Penser la Bible*. Seuil, Paris 1998, 370f.; and Ricoeur, *Lectures 3: Aux frontières de la philosophie*. Seuil, Paris 1994, 355–366.

³⁷ *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 95.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 100f.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

world in so far as it allows us to see anew what shows itself to us. «It is in this sense of manifestation that language in its poetic function is a «vehicle of revelation».⁴¹

An arch-enemy of such a manifestation is the human striving for self-creation or self-constitution.⁴² The point of manifestation is then that it demands a hermeneutical strategy which allows the reading (or hearing) subject to become a self through the transformations occurring in the act of reading (or hearing) the poetic and therefore potentially revelatory texts of the Bible.

At an earlier occasion Ricoeur had defined the fundamental theme of revelation as

this awakening and this call, into the heart of existence, of the imagination of the possible. The possibilities are opened before [men and women] which fundamentally constitute what is revealed. The revealed as such is an opening to existence, a possibility of existence.⁴³

The American theologian Kevin Vanhoozer comments on Ricoeur's concept of revelation as follows:

Though Ricoeur sounds Barthian [i.e. following the theologian Karl Barth] in his insistence that philosophy begins by listening to a prior word, his belief that poetic language «reveals» worlds betrays Barth's deepest intent. ... By attributing to the poetic word the sacramental function of manifesting transcendence, Ricoeur erases the very distinction between nature and grace that was so important to Barth.⁴⁴

Vanhoozer goes on to accuse Ricoeur of the ultimate crime Neo-Barthian theologians can think of, namely of succumbing to *analogia entis* and

this in two ways: First, Ricoeur ties revelation to the narrative form itself, and, secondly, Ricoeur interprets biblical narratives as disclosing a world always already filled with the divine presence, hence «sacralizing secular hermeneutics».⁴⁵ I wish to comment briefly on both accusations.

It is correct that Ricoeur ties revelation to language, but it is not correct to state that he ties revelation only to narrative forms. As I pointed out above, Ricoeur acknowledges the revelatory possibilities in at least five forms of biblical discourse. Secondly, Vanhoozer is correct that Ricoeur sees an essential connection between an insight into revelation and hermeneutics, though I fail to see how Ricoeur «sacralizes secular hermeneutics». Rather I do note with approval Ricoeur's repeated insistence that biblical hermeneutics is dialectically related to general hermeneutics and ought never to claim a special sacred status. As such Ricoeur does insist that no form of theology can claim a sacred status or an extra-hermeneutical prerogative or a direct road to God without accepting the detours through the linguistic condition which all humans *volens volens* share.

Thus, according to Ricoeur, two, appeals to revelation must be rejected as uncritical: First the direct appeal to God's revelation that wishes to bypass the hermeneutical condition of humankind. Secondly, the appeal to the human self's power to disclose truth from texts without at the same time being prepared to be transformed in the act of reading itself.

In his numerous works on hermeneutics and most significantly in *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur has reflected upon the world disclosing power of texts in the act of reading⁴⁶; and in his more recent work *Oneself as Another*, he has considered a hermeneutics of the self.⁴⁷ Without being able to go into a detailed discussion of

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴³ *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart. Beacon Press, Boston 1978, 237. The essay in question entitled «The Language of Faith» dates from 1973.

⁴⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, 180.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁴⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. Kathleen Blarney and David Pellauer. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984–88.—For a brief discussion of the development of Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory see Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*. SCM, London 1994, 70–77.

these works within the framework of this article, I wish at least to emphasise two results of Ricoeur's reflections: In the act of reading the reader is involved in a number of related moves which culminate in the experience of <refiguration>. Refiguration means that the reader's world is transformed in the act of reading, and, as a result, has to be reorganised following the invitation of the text.⁴⁸ In this way the reader of a text becomes the reader of oneself.⁴⁹ In *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur has considered this process of *Selbstwerdung*, of becoming a self, more closely. He distinguishes between the ego and the self. The self can become authentically, self only as a result of a complex journey in the course of which the self becomes an other.

For a theological reflection upon divine revelation Ricoeur's philosophical reflections on revelation, reading, narrative identity, and *Selbstwerdung* are of great importance. Because they demonstrate the mediated nature of all divine revelation. Revelation as an experience of God by the self has a price: All text-interpretation invites the reader to see his or her world in the light of a new experience of reality mediated by the text in the act of reading. This applies even to texts that promise to witness to previous experiences of divine revelation, such as the biblical texts. All testimonies to revelation, textual or otherwise, need to be interpreted, and that means they need new interpreters willing to invest their subjectivity into an act of interpreting that may transform the very subjectivity thus invested. Reading biblical texts requires readers that open up their selves in order to become new selves, other selves in the act of meeting the testimony to God's presence.⁵⁰ Hence, like all hermeneutical activity, revelation through biblical reading has both a necessary subjective dimension and an objective dimension, both of which must meet in order to release

an insight into new ways of being in the world in God's presence.⁵¹

The Hermeneutical Nature of Revelation

In this article I have tried to show that contemporary Christian theology puts a great emphasis on revelation as a key category for its own reflection upon God's presence in the world. We have seen that Karl Rahner distinguished between natural revelation and authentic revelation. He saw the entire universe to be graced and all relations within it to be potential pointers to God's self-communication in history. However, the specific or authentic revelation has occurred in the salvation history which began with Israel's vocation and which culminated in the event of Jesus Christ through which Christian believers assess all other possible experiences of God's revelation in the world. In the Bible Christians encounter the record of testimonies to God's revelation in history.

However, neither Rahner nor the Second Vatican Council have reflected sufficiently upon either the hermeneutical conditions for appropriating the biblical testimonies to God's revelation or the hermeneutical conditions for the development of a Christian self-understanding confronted with the <detours> of the revelational process. Here, Paul Ricoeur's thoughts on both the hermeneutics of texts and the hermeneutics of self have offered a most valuable contribution. Moreover, in spite of his reserve vis-a-vis theology, Ricoeur has reflected upon both the concept of revelation and the relationship between biblical hermeneutics and general hermeneutics. For Ricoeur biblical revelation «is a feature of the biblical world proposed by the text».⁵² Thus, the process of biblical revelation follows the same hermeneutical rules as any other act of text-interpretation. Moreover, any act of text-interpretation may become an occa-

⁴⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992.

⁴⁸ *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, *op. cit.*, 100 *passim*.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ricoeur, «Intellectual Autobiography», *op. cit.*, 47.

⁵⁰ On Ricoeur's hermeneutics of testimony cf. *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, *op. cit.*, 119–154.

⁵¹ For a discussion of the concept of the presence of God see Werner G. Jeanrond, *Guds närvaro: Teologiska reflexioner 1*. Arcus, Lund 1998.

⁵² Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Revelation*, *op. cit.*, 107.

sion for such a radical new seeing of the world so that Ricoeur would want to speak of <revelation>.⁵³ The question of how to determine which new disclosure of text, world and self has become an instance of Christian revelation can, of course, only be decided in relation to the Christian tradition of testimony to God's self-revelation in Israel, Jesus Christ, and the church. That is why Ricoeur recommends a hermeneutics of testimony as a necessary ally to any hermeneutics of revelation.⁵⁴

In a number of essays Ricoeur has especially reflected upon the biblical testimony to the nature of God's self-communication and the relating attempt to name God. In particular the narrative of Moses' meeting with God at the burning bush has attracted Ricoeur's attention. What does it mean to name God? And how does this naming of God relate to 1 John's statement that God is love? Ricoeur does admit that the naming of God in both instances already implies «an authentic speculative thought».⁵⁵ I find this insight comforting for my understanding of theological thinking.

With regard both to general and specific revelation as well as to how they are connected, Rahner's and Ricoeur's concepts of revelation are very closely related, though, as we have seen, they differ in hermeneutical awareness.

Finally, I would like to ask how different experiences in the communities of readers might affect the process of revelation. Political theologians, liberation theologians, feminist theologians, ecological theologians, gay and lesbian theologians, Vatican theologians, neo-orthodox

theologians, neo-Barthian and post-liberal theologians, global dialogue theologians, postmodern theologians, confessional theologians, ecumenical theologians, correlational theologians, post-colonial theologians and many other theologians emphasise particular and contextual experiences of the world and the particular circumstances in which they relate to God's self-communication. The plurality of contexts and experiences (what at times Ricoeur calls <prefiguration>) has already offered many new trajectories of appropriating both the biblical texts and other phenomena in our world. The decision which all of these theologians face is whether they wish to go the long road of meeting God's disclosure and concealment in the Bible and our world and the disclosure and concealment of their own selves and communities, or to cut short their pursuits and insist that any given revelation was final in every respect. The price for the latter decision is high: the closure of revelation respectively the closure of appropriating past revelation implies a closure of self and community against further development—and hence it ultimately implies some form of death. The former alternative, the long and detoured road, implies a messy and pluralistic approach to past, present and future revelation as well as always new attempts to become human in a world graced by God's presence.

Revelation shows new ways of relating: to God, to other men, women and children, to nature, to history, and to oneself. It deserves to be understood as one of the key concepts of Christian theology. Moreover, the implications of such a hermeneutical understanding of revelation for the spiritual life and organisation of the Christian church are far-reaching and worth to be explored in greater detail elsewhere.⁵⁶



⁵³ On this issue see the very thorough treatment of Ricoeur's approach to revelation and biblical hermeneutics in the doctoral dissertation by the Finnish scholar Björn Vikström, *Verkligheten öppnar sig: Läsning och uppenbarelse i Paul Ricoeurs bibelhermeneutik*. Åbo Akademis Förlag, Åbo [= Turku] 2000. The book contains a lengthy English summary.—Vikström argues that Ricoeur's notion of revelation is based on his religious preunderstanding of the world as God's good creation.

⁵⁴ For an assessment of the significance of Ricoeur's notion of <testimony> see Lewis S. Mudge's introduction to Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, *op. cit.*, 1–40. See also above note 50.

⁵⁵ Ricoeur, *Lectures 3*, *op. cit.*, 364.

⁵⁶ For an initial consideration of a hermeneutical approach to revelation see Werner G. Jeanrond, *Call and Response: The Challenge of Christian Life*. Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1995.