

Revelation through Scripture

(Please note: These are rough notes for a lecture, and should not be reproduced or otherwise used verbatim.)

The idea that God's will can be directly revealed through scripture is an extremely dangerous one. It is an idea that has led to the deaths of countless people, not just within the Christian religion, but also through Judaism and Islam.

Many religious fanatics, in carrying out acts of terror, justify their actions on the basis of scripture, quoting verses from the Bible, the Jewish Scriptures or the Qur'an. (On the basis of biblical claims, the ancient land of Palestine has become a battlefield many times, and is still a running sore of hate and resentment. Websites show Muslim terrorists reciting verses from the Qur'an before beheading their hostages. On the relative authority of Church and Scripture, Europe has been torn apart by wars of religion, that have led to the deaths of thousands. On the authority of scripture, witches and others have been tortured and burned to death. On the basis of scripture, crusades have been launched.)

In the argument between religious and secular thinkers, the authority of the scriptures is a key issue, for if scripture provides a direct revelation of God's will, it will take priority – for the religious person – over human reason.

This has ethical implications. A religious person, acting on the basis of the authority of scripture, may do something that would be deemed wrong on the basis of a secular ethical argument – e.g. utilitarianism or virtue ethics. But the religious conviction is such that, in the name of God, or Allah, things can be done that would be impossible to justify if done on purely human authority. We need to examine this...

- What does it mean to claim that God is revealed through scriptures?
- Can that claim be justified rationally?
- What is it that makes scriptures so important for believers?
- What is 'revelation' anyway? How does it relate to religious experience?

Let me take an extreme example. The book of Deuteronomy claims to set out the laws that God gave, via Moses, to the Children of Israel at the point at which they are to come into the Promised Land. He makes a careful distinction between the treatment of cities that are distant and those that are part of the land that they are to live in. Let's consider the distant ones first... (Deuteronomy 20: v 10 onwards)

'When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labour and shall work for you. If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock

and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord your God gives you from your enemies. This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby. However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them – the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites – as the Lord your God has commanded you.’

Here we have Divine authority for both ethnic cleansing, the mass killing of men and the systematic enslavement of women and children, and – of those whose cities were to be taken over – genocide. And the reason – because the people of the cities followed the wrong religion, and contact with them might corrupt the Children of Israel.

Rabbinic tradition sanitised the text, by suggesting that the commands should not be taken literally, or military force used against those of other faiths. Similarly, most Christians and Muslims – would argue that one should not take everything in their scriptures literally.

The fundamental problem, however, is this:

IF you believe that the scriptures are revelation - the words of God – then it is difficult to know how you should decide which bits to take literally and which not. IF it is all equally valid as revelation, then Deuteronomy gives you a mandate for genocide. BUT, IF you want to avoid that, you have to find some meaning of ‘Revelation’ that is compatible with human reason and ethics, and which is able to embrace all scripture as somehow relevant to what people take to be the key features of their religion.

And the danger is that different people interpret scriptures differently – and yet (through the idea of Revelation) claim Divine authority for what they do. Hence my statement at the beginning that this is one of the most dangerous and important issues in the world today. For there are many fanatics who might seek to justify what they do through scriptures and the idea of Revelation.

What authority does scripture have?

Suppose something is revealed, what then?

The following is from Thomas Paine (1737-1809) – best known for his political work ‘*The Rights of Man*’. He believed in God, but was very suspicious of revelation: ‘Every national Church or religion has established itself by pretending some special mission from God, communicated to certain individuals. The Jews have their Moses; the Christians their Jesus Christ, their apostles and saints; and the Turks their Mahomet; as if the way to God was not open to every man alike.

‘Each of those Churches show certain books which they call revelation, or the word of God. The Jews say that their word of God was given by God to Moses face to face; the Christians say that their word of God came by divine inspiration;

and the Turks say that their word of God (the Koran) was brought by an angel from heaven. Each of those Churches accuses the other of unbelief; and, for my own part, I disbelieve them all.

‘As it is necessary to affix right ideas to words, I will, before I proceed further into the subject, offer some observations on the word *revelation*. Revelation, when applied to religion, means something communicated *immediately* from God to man.

‘No one will deny or dispute the power of the Almighty to make such a communication if he pleases. But admitting, for the sake of a case, that something has been revealed to a certain person, and not revealed to any other person, it is revelation to that person only. When he tells it to a second person, a second to a third, a third to a fourth, and so on, it ceases to be a revelation to all those persons. It is revelation to the first person only, and *hearsay* to every other; and consequently they are not obliged to believe it.’

(from *The Age of Reason*, Part I)

In other words, whatever might have been the case for the person who originally received it, if anything is revelation, it does not preclude us from examining any accounts of it with the same seriousness and critical eye that we should apply to any other document. And – following the philosopher Hume – we should proportion our belief to the evidence we have for it. The more unlikely the event that comes to us as a revelation through scripture, the more likely we are to assume that the account was wrong, and has either been exaggerated, or misreported, or misunderstood, or whatever.

[To fall in love is one thing, to read and believe accounts of falling in love is quite another – as any frustrated romantic can testify.]

But revelation ends up as scripture, so let us look at the nature of religious language.

- The Logical Positivists argued that language was only meaningful if it could be justified with reference to evidence, taking scientific language as the model. On this basis, scripture cannot be revelatory, because there can be no direct evidence of God. (God is a word that appears in scripture, and which gives authority to scripture – but that authority is internal to the text, unless you can give some evidence for God independent of the text. It’s rather like a notice ‘No tipping of rubbish’ by order of the Council. You are entitled to ask What Council? And unless you can point to the local borough council and its officers, who have responsibility for keeping an area clean, the ‘by order’ makes no sense, and carries no authority. ‘By order of God’ only makes sense in the context of belief in God – and (said the logical positivists) that is something for which we have no evidence.)
- The later work of Wittgenstein showed that language gains its meaning through its use (language being like the rules of a game that people play). On this basis, the authority of language is the authority of the community of people who use it. The authority of scripture cannot therefore go beyond the authority of its writers and the religious experience and community they represent. On that basis, it is

revelation because the religious community that preserve those scriptures have decided that, for them, it is revelation. Again, to break out of that closed loop, you need some sort of external guarantee of the existence of God.

- Once you move into the realm of analogy, symbol and myth as a way of explaining religious language, you have then to ask what it means to say that something is revelation and also myth – does this image, this story, claim to point towards the nature of God? Someone may be convinced that it does, but where does that conviction come from? Clearly, it cannot come from the story itself – ‘I believe in it because it tells me I should believe in it’ makes little sense. The conviction that a symbol, myth, or analogy works and ‘reveals’ something of God, can only make sense if the person claiming it has his or her own personal understanding or experience of what he or she means by God. If you don’t know anything about God, how can you claim that something is a symbol or an analogy?

What authority can such religious experience have?

- For the person who is convinced that he or she has had a direct or indirect experience of God, the authority is **absolute**. If it were not, that person would not believe that it was God they had encountered.
- For a person reading or hearing an account of that religious experience, its authority depends on two things: the trustworthiness of the person concerned; the degree to which what is ‘revealed’ in that experience agrees with a person’s own convictions and understanding of the world.
- Religion has generally invoked both of these. It has argued that the religious authorities should be obeyed, and has punished those who challenged them. It has also presented rational arguments to justify its beliefs.

What can be ‘revealed’ in a religious experience?

- Schleiermacher described the consciousness of a religious person as ‘sense and taste for the infinite.’ It is seeing the whole in and through the particular; seeing the eternal in and through the changing moment.
- Otto highlighted the weird feelings when confronted with something that horrifies or threatens us. Religious experience is an encounter with the ‘numinous.’
- Buber pointed to the personal nature of religious encounter. It is as if we are encountering a universal ‘thou’, not some impersonal element.

How can these experiences – of the infinite, the terrifying and the personal – translate into words?

- Literal language is inadequate to describe God.
- Analogy gets closer to what is needed, since the literal term (e.g. wise) which normally applies to limited things, is modified (e.g. infinite) when applied to God.
- Symbols are self-transcending: they point beyond themselves, and mediate the power of that to which they point (Paul Tillich)

The process of writing scripture

- Some believe that every word of scripture is directly given by God. That is a belief that is used to interpret scripture; it is not a conclusion from the study of scripture.
- Muslims believe that the words of the Qur'an were given directly to Muhammad to recite, and are therefore free from error and from literary criticism.
- In the case of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, Biblical study shows the way in which a variety of texts, often from different periods, have been put together (Source Criticism), and that the original context in which a piece of text was used (in worship, in teaching) shaped the way in which it was written down (Form Criticism). The finished result is far from simple, and needs careful study to appreciate how it came to its final form.

So, from the standpoint of academic study, we need to recognise that it is not enough, looking at scripture, to consider particular words, as though they appeared out of nowhere. They have a history – their meaning and context are important; we would be unwise to take them literally, and out of context. That context – including the general views and attitudes of people at that time – needs to be taken into account.

If you want to argue that scripture reveals God's will, then you have to decide whether that overrules the human elements in the way that the scripture was put together. If you believe in God, you need to ask yourself – Is the God I believe in one who works in and through human beings, or is he (or she) known through things done independently of human action? If through human beings, then why not accept that the fallibility of those human beings influences what is known of God? If not, then you have the problem of defining what you mean by God and by his or her actions. For if these cannot be things in which humans are involved, or for which a natural explanation can be given, then much of what presently passes for God's action (as presented by the world's monotheistic religions) can be discounted. You are left with what is known as 'the god of the gaps' – namely a God that only appears to do what nobody else is doing, or to give an explanation for what has no other explanation. And that view is unpopular with religious believers, who want to see God's actions everywhere.

So you have a fundamental problem with the idea of revelation through scripture, which does not take into account the human elements in putting that scripture together.

But there is a final problem that the idea of revelation has to face...

If God is eternal, infinite etc, he cannot be accurately presented in a form of words. The attempt to take words themselves and treat them with absolute authority is therefore a form of **idolatry**, exactly as it would be idolatry to take a religious image and to worship it as if it were God himself.

We therefore need to distinguish between the literal words used, and the insight that those words try to convey. The former may lead to idolatry; the latter may be sensitive

to religious experience. Many would argue that God cannot be described literally, and the scriptures cannot therefore be revelatory if taken literally.

But sadly, as religious fanatics throughout the centuries and even today prove, it is the ability to take scripture literally that enables it to justify their actions.

Revelation through scriptures is therefore not a safe and rather introverted topic at A-level, of interest mainly to the most traditionally religious, it is key to some of the most wonderful and horrific acts that people have ever engaged in.

Scripture has inspired acts of selfless devotion and heroism. Scripture has also been used to justify the darkest horrors. Where you stand on this issue is crucial.

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