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0521481457 - Revelation and Reconciliation: A Window on Modernity

Stephen N. Williams

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This book challenges the interpretation offered by some contemporary theologians of the place of epistemological questions in the turn against Christianity in the West. It shows how the story may be read as an attack on the notion of reconciliation more fundamentally than revelation. It includes discussions of Locke and Nietzsche, Barth's interpretation of the eighteenth century, and the work of the revisionist theologian Don Cupitt. Offering as it does a fresh perspective on theological discussions of modernity, the book should be of interest to both theologians and philosophers.

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REVELATION AND RECONCILIATION

A window on modernity

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Preface

What impels an author when, in the preface, he or she makes the confession that the book now presented to the public started life as another creature altogether? Perhaps it is the urge to project an image: the image of one seated at a desk, overtaken in the midst of industry by the compulsion of the great task. Perhaps it is the unveiled desire to excuse oneself for the absence of the literature that was to be or the presence of the literature that is. Notwithstanding other possibilities, this preface is a version of the latter option. Despite the old saw that *qui s'excuse, s'accuse*, a word of explanation is in order.

Originally, I intended to take an expository and critical look at figures and trends in what may loosely be called 'radical theology' in the United Kingdom with a constructive response in mind. Two things, however, soon became clear. The first was simply that radicalisms were too diverse to admit of a unified treatment on the terms initially proposed. The second was the need to attend to some prominent 'conservative' proposals around, associated especially with the names of Colin Gunton and Lesslie Newbigin, for my own attempt would undoubtedly have been labelled 'conservative' as well. Reading or re-reading their work brought questions of intellectual history to attention, forcing first of all a compromise between an essay on intellectual history and a substantive theological piece and then the virtual abandonment of the latter in favour of the former. Hardly any traces of the dogmatic dreams or slumberings now remain, even in the concluding chapter of the present work.

None of this is intrinsically important, but it contextualizes remarks that must be made about the essay as it now stands. It is

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a disconcerting moment when a theological project bends unbidden in a historical direction in the way it did here. For I can make no pretence to adequate historical scholarship. I have not tried to recast the emergent material as a scholarly work of great detail, although I have had the opportunity in the past and in preparation for this piece to delve reasonably deeply into some of the areas treated. The upshot is that the investigation as it stands is preliminary in nature. Many things have been omitted from this account which could not have been omitted had it been crafted from the beginning as a substantial contribution to intellectual history. As an indication of consistency in this matter, I have also excluded some more detailed material of my own, published elsewhere, although I have alluded to some of it in the notes. An exception is the essay on 'John Locke on the Status of Faith' which appeared in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40.4 (1986), which by kind permission is reproduced in slightly revised form in the first part of the second chapter here. The discussion of Locke in this chapter is a good example of how the selection of figures and themes is markedly parasitic on the interests of others who have sought to argue a case with which I am trying to engage in the following chapters. Accordingly, my exposition of primary texts is governed by the theological interest in their exploration, not the specific state of scholarship on Descartes or Nietzsche, for example, areas where I have little enough competence. This applies to Locke, as well, whose work I know better: it is very much a Locke for theologians.

A word is also in place about the 'window on modernity' advertised in the title; this window is designed along the lines of a porthole, rather than to give a panoramic view. Modernity or postmodernity, sometimes regarded as late modernity, is the intellectual jam-pot of the month in some circles. I am not dealing here with any of the literature which has set the pace, for this essay does not deal with the themes that have occupied Habermas, Grant, Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman and the like. Further, there is but fleeting mention of and no engagement with even those contributions particularly interesting to theologians, such as those of Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Buckley, Charles Taylor or John Milbank. Serious engagement with

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these and others would have led the way to an entirely different book, charting modern waters deep and wide. An example from the very first chapter illustrates just what this could amount to. In that chapter I touch on Descartes and Montaigne, taking up Charles Taylor's point about alternative sources of modernity. An entirely different angle of approach to Descartes and Montaigne is adopted by Laurence Lampert in his recent study of *Nietzsche and Modern Times: a Study of Bacon, Descartes and Nietzsche*.¹ Lampert unfortunately does not discuss Taylor's work. But he dissents to some extent from the judgement offered by Stephen Toulmin on the relationship between Montaigne and Descartes in Toulmin's *Cosmopolis*, a study of modernity which appeared shortly after Taylor's.² If one were to do no more than read these three accounts just on the question of Montaigne and Descartes, one's work would be fruitfully cut out in evaluating significant variations on a significant question in relation to the significant themes of modernity. If this can be said about the first historical figures encountered in the following pages, how much more would need to go into a useful investigation of modernity which took in other stars in the firmament, none twinkling more brightly than Hegel, one of the great historical absences from the present investigation? Actually, one could be fully and usefully occupied by a comparative study of the works by Taylor, Lampert and Toulmin taken as a whole – a random choice dictated simply by the fact that their names have just come up. It happens that I regard Taylor's work as a massive direct or indirect support for the line taken here; Toulmin's as an ambiguous endorsement of elements in what follows; Lampert's as potentially grounding a challenge to it. But I mention them just to underline the point that although the present essay angles a window on modernity, it is not a book about modernity as such.

It is thus important both to get clear what is being claimed and not to claim too much in what follows. As regards the first,

¹ Publication details of books are given in these notes only if they do not appear in the bibliography.

² See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Lampert's reference is found on p. 211, n. 4.

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we are roughly concerned to replace an account which focusses on the epistemological objections to revelation with one which focusses on the anthropological objections to reconciliation. For more on this, see the argument of the book itself. As regards the second, we can only give a rough answer at this stage. The impression could easily be given that in this essay one master-story is being substituted for another. Alternatively, one might not be clear whether this were so and require clarification. At risk of landing in the middle of Act Two before the curtain has come up, let us pose this question. On the terms of this essay, would it be possible in principle for another account to be offered, say with an interest in social theory or political philosophy, arguing that they furnish considerations that go deeper than the ones discussed in this essay, just as the essay argues against assuming the fundamental nature of epistemological issues?

The argument as set out indicates a positive answer to this question. In arguing that epistemological issues have been given undue prominence in relation to fundamental anthropological or soteriological issues, the case has been made in relation to a limited set of claims with the aid of a limited spread of texts and on a number of tacit assumptions. There are at least two places in the chapters that follow where issues of political philosophy (to take up the example in the question) could certainly have been profitably broached, their weight in the formation of modern times duly confessed. First, in the second chapter, there is brief reference to Locke's *Third Letter on Toleration*. The reader may assume *e silentio* or for some other reason that the political context of Locke's ruminations on religious epistemology is regarded as unimportant. That would be a false assumption. One clear impression gained from a reading of Richard Ashcraft's massive study of *Revolutionary Politics and Locke's Two Treatises of Government* is that the political impetus to the formation of Locke's religious thought and the direction of such thought to political ends is crucial.³ Nothing in my account militates against this, but silence might well mislead. Secondly,

³ R. Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

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in the subsequent chapter, we report Barth's characterization of the eighteenth-century *Zeitgeist* as 'absolutist', due to his conviction that that century is best viewed as a whole from the political angle. It prompts scrutiny, as does much of Barth's thought from before the 'dialectical' phase right through to its maturity, of the extent to which Barth wants to emphasize the political determinants or political bearing of theological thought. I should wish to allow for the possibility of a wider context for analysis in principle and the fruitful occasion for that at particular points like these.⁴ So we are not attempting a master narrative on anything. My case is formally argued *vis-à-vis* a particular alternative, not against all alternatives.

On the other hand, I have also invoked at times what seems to be *the* deep issue at stake here and there, and have given theological reasons for regarding this or that feature as fundamental. So despite the disclaimer in the preface and the design in the text, a reader might be forgiven the suspicion that from beneath a protective cover, insinuations are being made to the effect that the most potent force in the formation of modern rejection of traditional Christianity (and ergo *a* potent force in the making of modernity) is the force of a sensibility that finds the notion of divine reconciling action through Christ repugnant. To this we can say two things. The first is that if anything in the text strictly entails a comprehensive judgement on modern rejection of Christianity or on modernity, one must go responsible for that. But the tests of entailment must be extremely rigorous and the concluding portions of the fourth chapter will indicate relevant limitations. The second is that I do indeed briefly draw attention to the way the Christian Scriptures offer an explication of our human attitude to what is fundamental – God – in the context of a kind of *sacra historia* and one might dub that a 'master narrative'. If we are in the business of appealing to 'entailment', does this not entail the possibility of a comprehensive judgement on modern or any other times and the possibility

⁴ For example, there is no reason in principle why our trawl should lead into collision with the non-trawler heavily armed vessel which is John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) with its peculiar slant on intellectual history, including Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*.

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of articulating such a judgement? Our answer to this must seize on the phrase 'or any other times'. One may certainly be caught entertaining some claim about the human condition or disposition *per se*; if so, one is offering a judgement about modern times inasmuch as one does it of all times. But as for what makes modern times *modern*, the scope of the book should make clear that no comprehensive judgement is brought to bear on this. The essay is best read *au pied de la lettre*.

Even these prefatory comments may sound quaintly pre-modern. Certainly, angles on modernity can quickly get behind the times. Martin Rumscheidt, commenting on Helmut Thielicke's lengthy treatment of *Modern Faith and Thought*, published in 1983, reported that it was 'a typical example of that tradition, now in its twilight, to which the matter of doubt and theodicy was so central'.⁵ If this is well said, the sun has set on great tracts of contemporary British theology, which sets the scene for our discussion, and its practitioners do not know it. And my response to them risks being no more illuminating than the further reaches of the twilight zone. However, it is a truism that the theological scene is characterized by fragmentation. As it is, this makes generalization about it along Rumscheidt's lines difficult. Analytic philosophy of religion in the English-speaking world is a relatively booming industry, wherein both manufacture and trade flourish in articles on epistemology and theodicy. The tradition is not to everyone's taste and just what is theological and what is philosophical in it is disputed. Still, it is sufficiently lively on the theological scene for us to have to modify Rumscheidt's judgement on the point of fact. The fact is in any case that the defence of one's set of theological preoccupations as matters of contemporary worth or one's set of intellectual presuppositions as culturally relevant is frequently, though not inevitably, a demanding matter. Taken across the board, the theologians in our global village constitute a society partly, indeed largely, composed of intellectual strangers. At least, it looks that way. Unless one proposes to preface every endeavour with a meta-theological treatise, one must just get on with the

⁵ I have lifted Rumscheidt's comment in the *Religious Studies Review* from the cover of H. Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

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issues as one sees them. I have tried to do that here. Emphatically it applies in the case of the final chapter of the book.

Two bodies deserve special gratitude for help with this book. The aid goes back some time because a variety of factors, for which the author takes a good share of the responsibility, conspired to cause a longish delay between the bulk of the preparation and the production of this manuscript. The Board of the United Theological College, Aberystwyth, granted me two terms of sabbatical leave in what turned out to be my final year there in order to do the spadework for this book. It was made possible by financial assistance from the Whitefield Institute in Oxford, at which I was subsequently based for a short term while the book was completed.

Three individuals also deserve special thanks. The first is Professor Oliver O'Donovan for great and literally painstaking help along the way. I shall no longer dismiss as a polite convention the oft-expressed prefatory sentiment that the merits of the book are those of others, the faults the author's own. The second is Alex Wright of Cambridge University Press, admirable in patient encouragement over a period of time. The third is my wife, Susan. Her consistent and practical support for this project is so typical that the stark dedication conceals rather than reveals my gratitude to her. For a variety of reasons, this book was written under rather trying circumstances. On her account the work of writing was the more congenial. And that is to say the least.