

PART I

The Problem in Context

CHAPTER I

*Introduction to the Book***Introduction**

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ He asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’ Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Luke 24:13–35 (NRSV-CE)

The story of the disciples on the Road to Emmaus after the death of Jesus is often understood to be a story about sight – and the lack of it. Readers are invited to wonder why Cleopas and his companion cannot *see* that it is Jesus who accompanies them on the road, and the text is equivocal: ‘their eyes were kept from recognizing him’. For reasons that are not made clear, except in the hypotheses of various commentators, something prevents the disciples from seeing Jesus *as* Jesus there with them as they walk. It is only later, when he sits at table with them and breaks the bread, that their eyes are opened. Jesus reveals himself to them, and they recognise him for who he is. The movement of not-seeing and then seeing is replicated at the cognitive level in relation to Jesus’ death and resurrection: for much of the journey the disciples can make no sense of what has happened; Jesus explains the scriptures to them and finally, once they welcome him in, they realise that he is risen from the dead. On this way of reading the story, Jesus the divine teacher and healer comes to address the disciples’ blindness: ‘The two disciples are moving from arrogance to humility, from sadness and despair to abundant joy, from blindness to vision, from hosting a stranger to becoming guests at the Messiah’s table.’¹ It is striking, then, that at the very point when the disciples do come to see, Jesus disappears. Once the disciples can see, Jesus is not to be seen. God’s self-revelation in Jesus is first covered and then ‘momentarily’ uncovered, before being covered again.²

The Problem of Revelation

When we use the phrase in a theological register, what sense can we make of ‘divine revelation’ in contemporary, Western societies?³ If we consult

¹ Bogdan G. Bucur, ‘Blinded by Invisible Light: Revisiting the Emmaus Story (Luke 24, 13–35)’, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 90, no. 4 (2014): 688.

² Bucur discusses the theory that Jesus cannot be (continued to be) seen in his ‘glory’ (690).

³ I use ‘contemporary’ here in the same sense that I will use ‘modern’, to mean ‘Modern; of or characteristic of the present period; *esp.* up-to-date, ultra-modern.’ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), s.v. ‘contemporary, adj. and n.’

The Problem of Revelation

5

the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first two meanings listed for revelation are: ‘the disclosure or communication of knowledge, instructions, etc., by divine or supernatural means’, and ‘an instance or experience of this; something disclosed or communicated by divine or supernatural means’.⁴ Revelation is redolent with the idea of the miraculous; moreover, if it is considered at all, it is often dismissed as implausible in educated contexts. Culturally and philosophically, revelation has become unintelligible, unbelievable and unimaginable – a remnant of a past way of being in the world that was subject to immense, uncontrollable powers – invisible forces of good and evil.⁵ Even Christians – for whom revelation is evidently not considered impossible *tout court* – frequently understand revelation to be something belonging primarily to the past. Centred on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and identified with the canon or events of the Bible and often with long, authoritative tradition/s of interpreting these books, God’s revelation is something to be believed – or not. Atheists, on this account, are persons who do not believe. Much ink has been spilled over whether belief in a transcendent divinity who reveals is reasonable or even responsible to hold for those of us who live in the modern world.⁶

I appreciate that the whole notion of something like revelation sometimes seems to make little sense in modern life in the West. At the same time, I argue that this is because it is invariably considered first as a matter of belief/s rather than as a question of experience. That is not to say that belief is irrelevant to the question of revelation, but only to suggest that when the issue of belief becomes primary, the possibility of revelation can too easily be placed out of bounds in advance of all questioning. Belief or lack of belief becomes an obstacle not only to the possibility that God has spoken, but also to the far more engaging and existentially important possibility that God speaks *now*. In fact, the Christian witness is to a God who communicates – and not only communicates but is in dialogue with humanity. This point is underscored by the theologians of Vatican II: ‘Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘revelation, n.’

⁵ In Chapter 2, I will examine this claim in relation to the work of Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap / Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁶ For but a sample of views such as these, see David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1748, 2020); Denis Diderot, *La Religieuse* (Paris: UPublisher, 1796, 2016); Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian: And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1910, 2004); Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961); A. C. Grayling, *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14–15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.⁷ If we begin with the question of whether or not to believe in God, or with what should or should not be believed, then the idea of revelation has little purchase in experience. To use a pale but perhaps helpful analogy: to determine in advance whether one believes in love is of no significance until one finds oneself loving or being addressed in love.⁸ This is why the question of belief in God – or beliefs about God – cannot be the *first* question, even if it is not the last question.

When it comes to revelation, the question of the nature and extent of the relationship between belief and experience is not new. It is mirrored in the discussion of the human response to revelation as faith: faith as assent to particular articles of belief (*fides quae*) or faith in God as a relationship of trust (*fides qua*). In his now classic review of the theology of revelation – first published just after the conclusion of Vatican II – René Latourelle argues that revelation is considered throughout Christian history in one of two modes: the mode of immediacy (where the emphasis is on ‘the illumination of the mind’) and the mediate mode (where revelation is seen to be ‘the proposition of divine truths through envoys’).⁹ At various periods in history, the relationship between the modes is held well in balance; however, as an explicit theology of revelation develops, differing emphases emerge. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the emphasis in the Catholic tradition tends to be on revelation thought propositionally, that is, as a set of doctrinal expressions that constitutes the ‘deposit of faith’. Vatican II, then, heralds a watershed return to revelation understood first and foremost as what unfolds in the lives of persons and communities who respond to God’s initiative and presence in their lives. This is not only reflective of a revised approach to the theology of revelation but is also symbolic of a recognition of God’s intimate

⁷ Vatican II Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Dei verbum* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vatican, 1965), section 2.

⁸ ‘There is in the world, as it were, a charged field of love and meaning; here and there it reaches a notable intensity; but it is ever unobtrusive, hidden, inviting each of us to join. And join we must if we are to perceive it, for our perceiving is through our own loving.’ Bernard J. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 290. I am thankful to Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer for reminding me of this reference to Oliver Rabut by Bernard Lonergan.

⁹ René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation: Including a Commentary on the Constitution Dei Verbum of Vatican II* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 243.

engagement with human beings in the actual circumstances of the modern world.¹⁰

After Vatican II, however, the encounter between the church and modernity does not lead to the adoption of a dialogical approach more broadly, with teaching often expressed in unyieldingly propositional terms and without reference to human experience. The publication of *Humanae vitae* in 1968 and the infamous ‘Charles Curran Affair’, for example, show a church unable to dialogue with the modern world.¹¹ For lay people within the Catholic Church, the decision in *Humanae vitae* about the use of artificial means of contraception is largely ignored.¹² If the use of contraception raises any concern, it is dealt with in reference to the dictates of personal conscience, despite ecclesial efforts to claim conscience as an instrument of obedience to the Magisterium rather than an expression of personal integrity. Writing in *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) in response to the apparently diminishing moral authority of the church, Pope John Paul II observes,

[T]he authority of the Church, when she pronounces on moral questions, in no way undermines the freedom of conscience of Christians. This is so not only because freedom of conscience is never freedom ‘from’ the truth but always and only freedom ‘in’ the truth, but also because the Magisterium does not bring to the Christian conscience truths which are extraneous to it; rather it brings to light the truths which it ought already to possess, developing them from the starting point of the primordial act of faith. The Church puts herself always and only at the service of conscience, helping it to avoid being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine proposed by human deceit (cf. Eph 4:14), and helping it not to swerve from the truth about the good of man, but rather, especially in more difficult questions, to attain the truth with certainty and to abide in it.¹³

¹⁰ As is reflected in the opening lines of *Gaudium et spes*:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds. (Vatican II Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et spes* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), s. 1)

¹¹ See the chapter with this title in Mark S. Massa, *The American Catholic Revolution: How the Sixties Changed the Church Forever* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹² See Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, ‘The End of the Affair? “Humanae Vitae” at 50’, *National Catholic Reporter Online*, May 21 2018.

¹³ See Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vatican, 1993), especially part II, ss. 58–64. See also the comments in George Pell, *God & Caesar: Selected Essays on Religion*,

The surrounding culture has already shifted by this time, however. Western culture since the 1960s is far less tolerant of appeals to external authority than previously, and far less prepared to be told what to believe.

The tension between belief and experience has also been played out very practically in the arena of Catholic religious education. Much has been made in anglophone countries of the ‘error’ of the 1970s and 1980s of seeking to connect faith with the life experience of students, and there are voices outspoken in pressing the apparent need to go back to basics in providing catechetically inspired instruction.¹⁴ It is true that the particularity of Christian faith cannot simply be induced by experience. Yet the instinct that faith somehow must connect with experience was not misguided. It is not a question of making faith ‘relevant’ to experience, which has often consisted in dressing up rigidly expressed beliefs in more flexible clothing (old words being set to new music, for example, or old words translated into newer words), but of learning to find God within the experience of a plural context.¹⁵ The deepest insights of those known as saints – Francis of Assisi and Ignatius Loyola amongst them – remain valid: experience is the place where God is to be found. As a theologian, I do not presume by this statement to overlook the primacy of divine initiative in revelation, but to accept that if God is to reveal Godself, such revelation relates to human experience and is difficult to consider apart from human experience.¹⁶ I argue that theology today must begin within the experience of being in the world, as Emmanuel Falque affirms: ‘We have no other experience of God but human experience.’¹⁷ In the West, this is an

Politics, & Society, ed. M. A. Casey (Bacchus March, VIC / Washington, DC: Connor Court Publications / Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 160. On *Veritatis Splendor*, Cardinal Pell observes, ‘This specifically Catholic view rejects the mistaken primacy of conscience doctrine and clearly asserts the primacy of truth.’ See also Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001), 167ff.

¹⁴ See, for example, Kenneth D Whitehead and Michael J Wrenn, *Flawed Expectations: The Reception of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996); The Bishops of NSW and the ACT, ‘Catholic Schools at a Crossroads’ (Sydney: Catholic Education Office, 2007); Christine Wood, ‘Catechesis: Why the Plenary Needs to Embrace it’, *The Catholic Weekly*, 22 November 2019.

¹⁵ For the theological origins of this insight, see the discussion in Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, trans. Brian Doyle (New York/London: Continuum, 2007), chapter 2. For its application, see Boeve’s *Theology at the Crossroads of University, Church and Society: Dialogue, Difference and Catholic Identity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

¹⁶ Jean-Yves Lacoste, *The Appearing of God*, trans. Oliver O’Donovan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 48/33. Where possible, in particularly important translated works, I first cite the page number in the original, as here.

¹⁷ Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 14.

experience that is frequently understood to be without God – not because it is against God (although this may sometimes be the case) – but because the idea of God just no longer seems to make any sense.

Experience

An important matter to clarify straight away, then, is how we are to understand ‘experience’ in this book. In current English usage, experience can be understood in terms of ‘the actual observation of facts or events, considered as a source of knowledge’; ‘the fact of being consciously the subject of a state or condition, or of being consciously affected by an event’; or ‘knowledge resulting from actual observation or from what one has undergone’.¹⁸ These usages reflect aspects of a diversity of meanings encountered in the etymology of the word ‘experience’, which, in other languages, is more visible as a range of words available to express what English has to convey with just one.

Now, it is quite common in popular culture for personal experience to be taken as the measure of all that is true or worthwhile: this is demonstrated, for example, by the appeal to personal experience in arguments against climate change, the dangers of vaccines or any number of other conspiracy theories. The strong belief claims for which personal experience is the measure are amplified by the use of the Internet and social media, where any view can have an audience. Nevertheless, I am not proposing that we think of experience along these lines. What critics of an experiential approach in theology might say is that proceeding on the basis of what one has personally experienced can produce an attitude that ignores the value of the understanding and testimony of others, especially others who should be granted authoritative or expert status. This is wonderfully illustrated in Avery Dulles’ 1974 discussion of the work of Gabriel Moran, where Dulles complains,

Moran’s rejection of the notion of [specifically] Christian revelation is closely connected with ... the primacy of experience over authority. He polemicizes against a ‘divinized authority image’ as though the special respect due to any particular persons, documents, or offices could produce only repression, domination, and paternalism; as though it tended, by its very nature, to inhibit personal development and insight. Experience, Moran contends, must be the final arbiter of truth. Every statement and document must in the end be tested against experience.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘experience, n.’

¹⁹ Avery Dulles, ‘The Problem of Revelation’, *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 29 (1974): 95.

In this book, experience does not simply mean ‘my opinion’ (as it sometimes does in a colloquial sense). While I consider the belief–experience distinction is a problem for a fundamental theology of revelation that also holds true at the level of common life, here I employ a technical notion of experience. I use ‘experience’ first to refer to *what happens at the point of opening in the world which is a given instance of life*, and second, to refer to *conscious reflection on that experience as it is lived*. These two senses of experience can be designated using the German words *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*.

Erfahrung (French *expérience*) refers to what is undergone, borne, endured or gone through. It best approximates what the *OED* defined as ‘the actual observation of facts or events, considered as a source of knowledge’. *Erfahrung* is related to the verb *erfahren*, which is translated by the French *experimenter*, and with the English ‘to test or examine’, or ‘to experiment’, which the *OED* expresses as ‘knowledge resulting from actual observation or from what one has undergone’. Experience as *Erfahrung* is always and already enworlded. In contrast, the German *Erlebnis* (French *vécu*) is intentionality, which means it takes place as a ‘consciousness of’, although it is not only a ‘consciousness of’ that is intellectual,thetic or discursive: intentional experience can also be affective, volitional or axiological, for example. And while experience is thus inherently related to consciousness, I do not mean to imply that consciousness through its acts of constitution precedes the world.

For both *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, it is possible to speak of experience in a prepredicative sense. Edmund Husserl speaks of prepredicative experience as ‘receptive’, and ultimately as the experience of ‘the life-world’.²⁰

20

All predicative self-evidence must be ultimately grounded on the self-evidence of experience. The task of the elucidation of the origin of the predicative judgment, of establishing its relation to a foundation and of pursuing the origination of prepredicative self-evidence in that of experience, turns out to be, in conformity with our elucidation of the essence of experience, the task of the retrogression to the world as the universal ground of all particular experiences, as the world of experience immediately pregiven and prior to all logical functions. The retrogression to the world of experience is a retrogression to the ‘life-world’, i.e., to the world in which we are always already living and which furnishes the ground for all cognitive performance and all scientific determination. (Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 41)

For non-intentional experience, Lacoste gives the example of the self’s experience of being flesh, and the experience of pain.

We ‘are’ a flesh and our best experience of ourselves is the very simple experience of ourselves as making the tiniest bodily effort. The self therefore is not a ‘*cogitatum*’. The self is ‘felt’. This feeling is not intentional ... The phenomenon of pain, or the parallel

Evidently, this is still intentional experience since consciousness is still ‘directed towards’ something. Husserl nevertheless allows for ‘non-intentional’ experience, which would consist in sense-data such as pain.²¹ In contrast, rather than thinking of experience primarily in terms of intentional processes – including in this prepredicative sense that incorporates perception, for example – Martin Heidegger begins with *Dasein*’s ‘being-in-the-world’. He explains,

in every case *Dasein*, as Being-in-the-world, already dwells alongside what is ready-to-hand within-the-world; it certainly does not dwell proximally alongside ‘sensations’; nor would it first have to give shape to the swirl of sensations to provide the springboard from which the subject leaps off and finally arrives at a ‘world’. *Dasein*, as essentially understanding, is proximally alongside what is understood.²²

Being-in-the-world, *Dasein*’s fundamental ‘situatedness’, already brings existential capacities for understanding (*Verstehen*), affection (*Befindlichkeit*) and speech (*Rede*).²³

As formulated by classical theism, God is neither part of the world nor an object of consciousness; to speak of God’s revelation requires us to think carefully about how revelation and experience might engage. One could consider revelation to be experiential in that it is endured or gone through, even if its meaning becomes apparent only later. The biblical narrative of Jacob wrestling with the Angel (Gen 32:22–31) offers a rich example. After day breaks, Jacob exclaims, ‘I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved’ (Gen 32:30b). The perfect tense (‘I have seen’ [יִרְאֶה]) underscores the fact that Jacob’s recognition of God’s having come to him in the angel takes place only after the angel is gone. In other words, Jacob only saw God for as long as he did not recognise God mediated by the angel. Similarly, Gerard Manley Hopkins writes in ‘Carrion Comfort’ of the sudden realisation: ‘That night, that year / of now done darkness

phenomenon of joy, is not (primarily) pain of something or experience of something joyful. Such experiences, if we pay them the attention they deserve, *put no object into play: they put me into play, they disclose me to myself (as a suffering self, as a joyful self, etc.)*. (Jean-Yves Lacoste, ‘Marginal Remarks’ (paper presented at the The Contemplative Self After Michel Henry, Symposia online, 10.9.2017), §§ II and IX)

²¹ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, 2 vols, vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 1970/2001), Sixth Logical Investigation, §15.

²² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 164/207.

²³ See the formidable analysis in Claude Romano, *At the Heart of Reason*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), chapters 15 and 16.