

**ASIAN
HORIZONS**

Vol. 9, No. 3, September 2015

Pages: 555-572

SEVENTEEN THESES ON DIVINE REVELATION

Gerald O'Collins, SJ[♦]

*Australian Catholic University and MCD University of Divinity,
Melbourne*

Abstract

In the light of teaching from Vatican I (1869-70), developed by Vatican II (1962-65) and St John Paul II, and the best modern theology, this article sets itself to craft seventeen theses about the nature and purpose of the divine revelation given in Christ and through his Spirit. Primarily, revelation means the personal self-revelation of the tripersonal God, and, secondarily, the revealed truths that issue from such encounters. Always a free gift of divine love, revelation brings salvation and has a sacramental character, as communicated through words and deeds. Revelation happens only when it achieves its goal and is received by faith. We need to recognize past or foundational revelation (that ended with the apostolic age), dependent revelation (that happens now), and final revelation (that will come at the end of history). An adequate theology of revelation should distinguish it from and clarify its relationship with tradition and the inspired Scriptures. The divine revelation, which prompts human faith, is available universally, and always depends on the risen Christ and his Holy Spirit.

Keywords: Experience, Faith, Mystery, Revelation, Salvation, Self-communication, Self-revelation

♦Gerald O'Collins, SJ: After receiving a PhD from the University of Cambridge, taught for 33 years at the Gregorian University (Rome) where he was also dean of the theology faculty (1985-91). As well as publishing hundreds of articles in professional and popular journals, he has authored or co-authored sixty published books. The latest include: *Rethinking Fundamental Theology* (Oxford University Press), *Believing in the Resurrection* (Paulist Press) and the first volume of his memoirs, *A Midlife Journey* (Connor Court and Gracewing). He is an adjunct professor of Australian Catholic University and a Fellow of the MCD University of Divinity. Email: ocollins@unigre.it

Two experiences have prompted this article. First, some or even many Christian scholars who contribute to the theology of religions have dedicated much attention to the question of *salvation* for those who follow “other” religions. But they have paid far less attention to the question of divine *revelation* reaching those followers of other living faiths.¹ Yet can salvation ever be available for anyone or for any group without a concomitant revelation? If not, then theologians of religion should also reflect on revelation in its many aspects.

Second, the divine self-disclosure has been treated in several recent books, which set themselves, for the most part, to interpret revelation within the story of Judaism and Christianity and not that of other religions.² Despite their many helpful insights, these works have sometimes left me dissatisfied. For instance, when discussing the historical dimension of divine revelation, Ingolf Dalferth argues that “historical research...will never lead beyond an account of possibilities and probabilities.”³ This is to play down the fact that historians can reach genuine certainties not only about relatively recent events such as the Battle of Waterloo but also about ancient matters such as the achievements and death of Julius Caesar (44 BC). As regards the origins and history of Christianity, convergent evidence often supplies not only high probabilities but also genuine certainties. Thus I would judge it to be historically certain that Jesus died by crucifixion around 30 AD.

This double dissatisfaction made me ask myself: how would I express the nature of the divine self-manifestation, above all, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ? Could I state in the shape of theses those major themes that seem required for an adequate Christian theology

¹An article (“The Faith of Others: A Biblical Possibility”) forthcoming in *The Irish Theological Quarterly* documents this claim. Among those who contribute to the theology of religions, Gavin D’Costa is a welcome exception; see his “Revelation and World Religions,” in Paul D.L. Avis, ed., *Revelation*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997, 112–40; so too is Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World’s Religions*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1994. The great exception is, of course, Karl Rahner, who presented the history of salvation and revelation as co-extensive with the whole of world history; see his *Foundations of Christian Faith*, New York: Seabury, 1978, 138–75.

²William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007; David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination, Revelation and Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009; Ingolf Dalferth, ed., *Revelation, Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, Conference 2012*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014; Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1992; Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1994.

³Dalferth, *Revelation*, 9.

of revelation? This article will be expressed in the form of seventeen theses, which have been shaped by the teaching on revelation coming from the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) and the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and nourished over a lifetime's dialogue with the work of many predecessors and colleagues.⁴

First Thesis: *The divine revelation is primarily the self-revelation of God*

Revelation is not primarily revealing truths about God or even the truth about God; it involves God disclosing the Truth or Reality that is God.

Hence I consider inadequate William Abraham's statement: "He [Jesus Christ] operates as the final, definitive access to the truth about God."⁵ Rather Christ is in person the revelation of the Truth that is God. In a later thesis below, the use of "definitive" will be questioned and qualified. But here the issue is rather: the language of "access to the truth about God" waters down the startling Christian claim, made, for instance, in John's Gospel, that Jesus, even (or especially?) on the cross, is the self-disclosure of God in person (Jn 8:28).

Rudolf Bultmann rightly read the Fourth Gospel in the key of revelation.⁶ We might translate the first-order language of witness used by John into the second-order language of theology. Primarily, the divine revelation proclaimed by John is nothing less than the self-revelation of God in person. Jesus Christ is *the face* and *the voice* of God; he is "the speaking image" or self-presentation of God (see Col 1:15).

Second Thesis: *Secondarily, the self-revelation of God involves some (new) knowledge of God*

While primarily being the self-disclosure of God, revelation is secondarily a disclosure about God. The Scriptures record many specific episodes in which the self-revelation of God brings human

⁴Those who have helped shape my thought on revelation include Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Avery Dulles, Jacques Dupuis, Gerhard Ebeling, Eberhardt Jüngel, René Latourelle, Jürgen Moltmann, H. Richard Niebuhr, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Karl Rahner, Paul Ricoeur, Alfred Singer, and Jared Wicks. My own views of revelation have been developed in the following books: *Theology and Revelation*, Cork: Mercier, 1968; *Foundations of Theology*, Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1971; *Fundamental Theology*, Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981; *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993; *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁵W. J. Abraham, "Revelation and Reason," in Dalferth, ed., *Revelation*, 31.

⁶See O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 68–70.

beings to know something new about God. Then the whole story of the Son of God's life, death, resurrection and ascension, together with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, reveals the triune God.⁷ The self-manifestation of the truth that is God necessarily entails revealing truths about God: above all, that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For the first Christians encountering (or knowing) God revealed in the person of Christ and so coming to know that God is tripersonal involved a dramatic change in their knowledge about God. Thus Paul split the Jewish confession in the *Shema* (Deut 6:4–5), glossing "God" with Father and "Lord" with Jesus to put Jesus as Lord alongside God the Father: "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor 8:6). Here the title "one Lord" (and the explanation added to it) expanded the *Shema* to contain Jesus. In the light of what Paul now knew through revelation and using the classic monotheistic text of Judaism, he recast his perception of God by introducing Jesus as "Lord" and redefining Jewish monotheism to produce a new, Christological monotheism.⁸

When contemporary Christian believers recite the Creed on the occasion of a baptism, they may experience in a fresh way a sense of the Holy Trinity and feel the presence of the tripersonal God. God speaks to them and is disclosed to them. Such revelatory moments involve something "cognitive," but not a cognitive change. They are knowing once again what they have already known and confessed. Hence in stating this second thesis I put (new) in brackets. While at the origins of Christianity, the cognitive change effected by the divine self-revelation was, in part, dramatically new, in the ongoing life of Christian faith the cognitive change will take the form of remembering and experiencing freshly what has already been known.

In general, Joshua Kina states well the distinction between the primary and secondary meanings of revelation:

Revelation, in a primary sense, is the revelation of God in Godself. It is God's self-presentation and is an inherently relational idea. Revelation can also be used in a secondary sense as revelation of something about

⁷O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 120–28. Of course, one should avoid being anachronistic by reading the revelation of the Trinity too clearly and fully out of the whole story of Jesus. Nevertheless, we find there the starting point for what would be deployed in later church teaching.

⁸See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, 631–38.

God, which is primarily a cognitive idea...knowing God in Godself appears to require knowing something about the divine self.⁹

My only qualification here would concern stating more emphatically that knowing God in the primary sense of revelation always requires or at least always implies knowing something about the divine self. A completely non-cognitive revelation of God, in which nothing is known either before or during or after the revelatory event would seem an oxymoron. I am not talking about an elaborately understood and interpreted cognitive content. But a revelation that remains totally non-understood and non-interpreted seems like an oxymoron.

Beyond question, God always remains the "absolute mystery," the "ineffable One,"¹⁰ that is to say, too great and too mysterious ever to be partially, let alone comprehensively, described in words. Nevertheless, even if only a minimal description is possible, something can be known and said about the human experience of the divine self-revelation — what led up to it, what it was like, and what it led to afterwards.

Below we will come to the thesis of revelation being understood as God speaking and the word of God. This interpretation of revelation entails the consequence: if God has spoken or speaks to human beings, they can, in some sense and to some degree, know and speak of God. Naming revelation as *locutio Dei* or *Verbum Dei* necessarily entails acknowledging some cognitive dimension in revelation.

Third Thesis: *The self-revelation of God is a free act of love*

Never to be understood as a human discovery, as the insights achieved by spiritually sensitive persons, or, in general, as the outcome of some human quest for ultimate knowledge, revelation is always freely initiated by God. Hence all revelation is genuinely "supernatural," in the sense of being a free disclosure and an unmerited gift coming from God.

God could have remained silent. Even if we can argue for a kind of antecedent "probability" — after freely and lovingly creating human beings, God might be expected to take steps to emerge from the divine mystery and enter into a personal relationship with them — nevertheless, God was under no strict obligation to do so by revealing himself.

⁹J. Kira, "A Response to Stephen T. Davis," in Dalferth, ed., *Revelation*, 71; a later thesis in this article will propose "reciprocal" rather than "relational."

¹⁰Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 119–20.

Karl Rahner wrote of the divine self-communication as “absolutely gratuitous,” “an act of God’s highest personal freedom,” and “an act of the most free love.”¹¹ In another thesis we return to the rich meaning of “self-communication,” which expresses not only the free self-disclosure of God but also the way in which the divine “giver in his own being is the gift...in and through his own being the giver gives himself to creatures as their own fulfilment.”¹²

However we express the gratuitous initiative of God that always characterizes revelation, from start to finish this divine self-disclosure depends on God. Hence it can be misleading to speak of “our possessing” revelation.¹³ The revelation of the self-revealing God — to put it personally — “possesses us,” and not vice versa.

Fourth Thesis: *Far from taking away the mystery of God, revelation enhances it*

God may be called the *mysterium absconditum et revelatum* (the hidden and revealed mystery), provided we realize that the divine revelation itself leaves God even more mysterious.

Here the story of Moses meeting and being called by God (Ex 2:23-4:17) remains paradigmatic. When Moses asks who is commissioning him, God reveals “the name which is not a name,” providing it in three forms: “I AM WHO I AM” (or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE”), “I AM,” and “YHWH” (which could mean “he who causes to be”) (Ex 3:14–15). The ambiguity persists and enhances the mystery of Israel’s God.

One can appreciate why, when writing in the light of the full account of revelation recorded and interpreted in the entire Bible, Rahner, nevertheless, describes human beings and, in particular, Christians as living “in the presence of Absolute Mystery.”¹⁴

Fifth Thesis: *Accepted revelation brings salvation, and without revelation there can be salvation*

Whether expressed as word, truth, or through other terms, the Scriptures constantly witness to the way divine revelation redemptively changes human beings.

¹¹Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 123.

¹²Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 120.

¹³Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*, 5; see Abraham, “Revelation and Reason,” in Dalferth, ed., *Revelation*, 32, 37.

¹⁴Dalferth, ed., *Revelation*, 44–89.

Thus the call to repentance which concludes Second Isaiah draws conviction from the firm assurance that God's word is always effective and fruitful:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that comes out of my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isa 55:10–11).

John's Gospel links "word" and "truth," when Jesus promises the Jews who believe in him: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Freed from the slavery of sin, they will become sons and daughters of God (Jn 8:31–36). Mark's Gospel presents Jesus as opening his ministry of public proclamation by revealing that "the time is fulfilled" and "the kingdom of God has come near." Repenting and believing in this "good news" will re-orient the lives of his hearers and renew Israel (Mk 1:14–15).

Using different terms, Second Isaiah, John, and Mark converge in witnessing that the divine revelation, when accepted, changes human beings and brings a new redeemed and graced relationship with God. This change may entail a radical re-orientation of a person's life and a bridge to a remarkable new future, as happened with those who responded positively to what Jesus disclosed. Or the change may be a quieter, less dramatic affair, as happens when a Sunday homily throws new light on a person's daily challenges.

In short, the divine self-revelation always aims at changing and saving human beings. In the language of John's Gospel, the "light" of revelation is inseparable from the "life" of salvation. In the First Letter of John, revelation is called "the word of life," the word that brings life or the word that is life (1:1). Without revelation (and the faith that responds to it), there can be no salvation. As we might say, *extra revelationem, nulla salus*. And conversely, the life of salvation always entails some form of divine self-revelation and some form of knowing God.

This justified the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) using, more or less interchangeably, revelation and salvation. The opening chapter shuttled back and forth between the two terms. Take this passage from article 2:

This economy of *revelation* takes place through deeds and words, which are intrinsically connected with each other. Thus the works performed by God in the history of *salvation* manifest and bear out the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works and elucidate the mystery they contain. The intimate truth, which this *revelation* gives us about God and the *salvation* of human beings, shines forth in Christ, who is both the mediator and fullness of all *revelation*.

As far as Vatican II was concerned, the history of revelation is the history of salvation and vice versa.

Here we could follow Rahner by adopting the language of divine self-communication.¹⁵ This integrates God's activity of revelation and salvation. Together they constitute the history of divine self-communication to human beings.

Sixth Thesis: *God's self-revelation enjoys a sacramental character, coming through "deeds and words"*

Vatican II expressed this sacramental character of revelation in the passage just quoted from *Dei Verbum*. In article 17, the same document interpreted sacramentally what Jesus achieved: "Christ himself established on earth the Kingdom of God [and] revealed (*manifestavit*) his Father and himself by deeds and words."

An earlier document from Vatican II, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), spoke not only of the Eucharistic "mystery of faith" involving both "sacred action" and "instruction by God's word" (art. 48) but also of the act of "celebration" and the "words" that constitute the other sacraments (art. 59). The liturgical document prepared the way for the sacramental language of *Dei Verbum*, which applied to the broader reality of revelation what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* had already enunciated about the liturgy.

In the long history of the Jewish people, God was made manifest in a network of divine actions that reached their highpoint in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Often these actions came about in, with and through the "natural" order. Sometimes, as with the miracles of Jesus and his being raised from the dead, we need to recognize what should be called special divine actions rather than special "interventions," a term which can too easily and falsely suggest an "outsider" God coming actively on the scene for the first

¹⁵See Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116–37.

time. Whether we consider special divine actions or the “ordinary” actions of God, who is the primary or first cause of everything that happens, a fully deployed theology of revelation occurring through “deeds and words” would need to explore what could and should be said about God as agent, significantly active in various events of history.¹⁶

Likewise, proposing that God’s self-revelation comes through deeds *and* words calls for some account of how God speaks, how human language can embody divine revelation, how the word of God can be present in the words of human beings, and how language can not only speak about revelation but also convey or “speak” revelation.¹⁷ Any such account would examine the prophetic claim to communicate “the word of God” and Jesus’ (implied) claim to speak with divine authority,¹⁸ as well as reflecting on what happens today when the word of preaching and the proclamation of the Scriptures can be called “the word of God.”

That revelation comes sacramentally, through deeds and words, may look like a straightforward thesis. But it could call for a book-length study of both components.

Here let me at least point out how the revealing word (as, for example, a promise or prediction) may not only precede some event or accompany the event (as was the case of Jesus’ preaching accompanying his miraculous deeds) but also follow the event. Thus the meaning of the passion and death of Jesus was communicated more fully to the imagination and heart of early Christians when they remembered the story of the crucifixion together with the fourth “Servant Song” (Isa 52:13–53:12). Words about the Servant, whose cruel suffering brought blessings to innumerable others, illuminated the meaning of a horrifying event, the crucifixion of Jesus. A spectacular ancient example of such words subsequently illuminating this event comes from the late first-century writer, St Clement of Rome. He did not offer in his words any explanation of the crucifixion but simply quoted the fourth “Servant Song” from Isaiah (1 Clement 16).

¹⁶See G. O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2009, 112–18.

¹⁷See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

¹⁸On revelation as word and event, see O’Collins, *Christology*, 59–62; see also O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 79–83.

Seventh Thesis: *The mediators of divine self-revelation and the means through which God conveys revelation can be indefinitely varied.*¹⁹

The Scriptures witness to the endless variety of people used by God to mediate the divine self-revelation; from Abraham and Sarah, Moses, the major and minor prophets, Mary of Nazareth, the apostles, and the supreme case, Jesus himself.

The history of Christianity (and of other religions) shows a constant line of men and women who conveyed God's saving words to others: saints, founders of religious movements, prophetic figures, church leaders, and the rest. Nor should we pass over the innumerable lesser known or ordinary mediators: from Christian parents in Korea to catechists in Africa, from parish priests in India to the Little Sisters of Jesus in Papua New Guinea.

Mediators of divine revelation may also include unexpected and even hostile and murderous figures, such as the high priest Caiaphas, who presided over the Sanhedrin, the highest leadership in Jerusalem. John's Gospel reports him as prompting the decision to kill Jesus rather than tolerate a situation which might lead to the Romans "destroying our holy place and our nation": "it is better to have one person die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." John reflects on what Caiaphas said: "He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who had been scattered" (Jn 11:47–52).

Just as there seems to be no limit to the divine choice of mediators, so the means and experiences that convey God's revelation can stretch from what is utterly common (such an experience of sickness) to what is stunningly new and even unique (the crucifixion of the incarnate Son of God). The Jewish and Christian Scriptures warrant that conclusion: all manner of experiences can mediate God's saving revelation. The divine purposes can be served by all manner of means — from the remarkable language of Second Isaiah and the impact of outstanding religious music to the casting of lots (e.g. Lk 1:8–20; Acts 1:15–26) and the dull words of some preacher in the twenty-first century.

In theory and even more in practice, many Christians are slow to admit that episodes of suffering rather than flourishing, of hatred rather than love, of sin rather than virtue can become the channels of

¹⁹On means and mediators of revelation, see O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 74–79, 83–92.

God's saving revelation. Such experiences appear to be destructive rather than redemptive, confusing and threatening rather than illuminating, alienating from God rather than connecting with and disclosing God. Nevertheless, the Scriptures and repeated Christian experience agree: evil, including sin, may become the means by which divine revelation is communicated. The light of divine love can shine through the darkness of human suffering and sin. When King David committed adultery and murder, his sin occasioned some profound moments of truth about his state before God and future destiny (2 Sam 11–12).

Sir Alister Hardy (1896–1985), the Linacre Professor of Zoology at the University of Oxford, founded in 1969 the Religious Experience and Research Centre, now housed at the University of Wales, Lampeter. He and his colleagues put together a vast database of personal reports of spiritual experiences provided by a wide range of ordinary people. Over and over again these people witnessed to the way painful, and even tragic, episodes had triggered a vivid sense of God's loving presence. A comforting revelation of divine support and love came through, even (or especially?) at times when many felt themselves afflicted and tortured by evil.

Eighth Thesis: *Divine revelation happens only when it is received in (human) faith, and can be, at least in some minimal sense, understood and interpreted*

Above, in the course of expounding the Second Thesis, I quoted Joshua Kira's words about God's self-revelation being "an inherently relational idea." It would be more accurate to use the word "reciprocal." Some relations can be unilateral, but revelation is always reciprocal. There is no revelation without a recipient of revelation. For the event of divine revelation to occur, it must be received or accepted through responding to God in faith. Being accepted in faith, revelation is open to being, at least in some sense, understood and interpreted.

To God's speaking (*locutio Dei*) there responds the human hearing of faith (*fides ex auditu*). Human hearing, like human experience in general, always and everywhere implies some measure of interpretation. Non-interpreted hearing seems as implausible as non-interpreted experience.²⁰

²⁰On experience always being interpreted, see O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 49–50.

Some, like Kira, want to distinguish between objective and subjective revelation. He maintains: "there are ways in which revelation appears to be revelation regardless of whether it is [actually] recognized or [whether even] the possibility of recognition exists." Specifically and "objectively, Christ is the revelation of God simply by the fact that God sent him in an act of revelation."²¹ But, if as Kira points out, the heart of revelation is "uncovering," always and from the outset, there is an uncovering or disclosure *to someone*. Revelation cannot, so to speak, hang in the air. It always involves answering the question: revelation to whom? Elsewhere in theology the distinction between the objective and the subjective enjoys many uses, but not here. Non-recognized and non-received revelation would be an oxymoron. The very language of "revelation" implies reception and the establishment of a reciprocal relationship: God reveals Christ to those who accept this revelation and respond in faith. Before that response occurs, the divine revelation does not, so to speak, go through; without reaching and triggering its goal in the human response the act of revelation does not happen.

This holds true of the way in which the media uses the language of revelation. Every now and then newspaper headlines or TV bulletins announce "Startling Revelations," or "The Real Truth of the Railway Link Revealed." Investigative journalists can claim to have uncovered for the public some deals that may embarrass the current government. Such non-theological use of "revelation" illustrates how it always implies X (here the journalists) reveals Y (some financial irregularities) to Z (the readers of the paper).

This eighth thesis shows how a fully fledged theology of divine revelation calls for reflection on its recipients: that is to say, it requires the development of a theology of faith, which would set out the internal and external factors involved in coming to faith as one accepts the self-revelation of God (see Theses Ten and Eleven below).

Ninth Thesis: *There is no self-revelation of God without a concomitant revelation of those receiving in faith that revelation*

By disclosing God to them, revelation also reveals human beings to themselves. The disclosure of the mystery of God is also the revelation of the human mystery. Knowing God in a new way necessarily leads to knowing oneself in a new way.

²¹Kira, "A Response to Davis," 66.

A now classic passage from Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) states:

it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of human beings truly becomes clear...Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals human beings to themselves and brings to light their most high calling (art. 22).

The revelation of God in and through Christ is simultaneously the revelation of the true nature and final destiny of human beings.

Tenth Thesis: *An inner working of the Holy Spirit and their own graced predisposition enable human beings to accept in faith the self-revelation of God*

The first requirement should be uncontroversial. When the message of the divine revelation in Christ is presented, an interior divine illumination accompanies it. The Book of Acts tells the story of Paul's first convert in Philippi, a woman called Lydia; "the Lord opened her heart" as she listened to the apostle's words (Acts 16:14). The apostle himself writes of the Holy Spirit "revealing" interiorly "the things of God," enabling us to interpret them (1 Cor 2:10–13), and giving people the capacity to share the vision of faith (2 Cor 3:17–18). It is when God "shines" in the hearts of human beings that they can know "the glory of God on the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). The "inner" testimony of the Holy Spirit opens people to accept the "outer" word of witness to revelation. It is always due to the divine initiative when revelation comes and lets human beings experience the presence of the living God (see Mt 16:17).

The second requirement raises the question: has God, despite their sinfulness, gifted human beings with a predisposition that preconditions the way their cognitive capacities and freedom are exercised and opens them up for a possible divine self-communication? Controversially, Rahner proposes a supernatural existential — that is to say, a graced fundamental openness that predisposes them existentially to be hearers of the divine word who accept the revealing and saving self-communication of God.²²

²²Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 126–33. Karl Barth and others, for instance, in the Calvinist tradition do not accept that God's saving revelation is something for which we are existentially disposed; see Paul Helm, "John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis* and the noetic effects of sin," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 43 (1998) 87–107.

Eleventh Thesis: *Evidence makes the recognition of divine revelation a reasonable, credible, and free decision*

When human beings move to accept in faith the self-revelation of God in Christ, evidential considerations play their role. There is a case to be made for accepting, for instance, that central event in the history of divine self-revelation, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Ancient Christian writers like St Augustine of Hippo and such modern authors as C.F. Evans, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and N.T. Wright have developed such a case.²³

The self-revelation of God does not coerce the response of faith; it leaves room for cognitive and moral freedom. In his preaching and activity, Jesus never forced people to believe. They remained free to decide for him or against him. Significantly, however, John's Gospel sometimes portrays Jesus as saying to his audience: "if you do not believe me, believe my 'works'; they provide evidence/testimony for me" (Jn 10:25; 10:38). In some sense faith's response to revelation can appeal to evidence, while going beyond the evidence. Faith is not "a leap in the dark" that disdains any reasons drawn from history, philosophy, personal experience, or any other source. It is a free *and credible* commitment.²⁴

Issues of faith and reason open up not only in the making of faith but also in living out such faith. Secular critics, sometimes alarmed by the violent irrationality of religious fundamentalists, charge commitment to revelation with suffocating the life of reason and even worse. However, accepting in faith genuine divine revelation means accepting a truth that nourishes and expands the life of reason and that should always respect human dignity, rights and responsibilities.

To use an analogy, the deep commitment that outstanding teachers of dramatic literature bring to their discipline involves them in regularly attending the theatre, sharing in drama festivals, and participating in the community of playwrights, producers, actors, and critics. This practice, by nourishing and expanding their lived knowledge of drama, makes them more effective in teaching the work of William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and other classical dramatists. A deep commitment to drama flourishes in healthy

²³See O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 156–59; see O'Collins, "St Augustine as Apologist for the Resurrection of Christ," forthcoming in *The Scottish Journal of Theology*.

²⁴See O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 166–89.

practice, just as a deep commitment to the divine self-revelation should always support and enhance a reasonable, life-giving practice rather than irrational violence.

Twelfth Thesis: *We should distinguish between foundational revelation (which reached its fullness with Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit), dependent revelation (which continues today and embodies the apostolic witness to foundational revelation), and final or definitive revelation (which will be the second coming of Christ and the end of history)*

The Book of Revelation names God as “the One who is, who was, and who is to come” (Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8). As foundational, revelation was; as dependent, it is; and as final, it is to come.

Whatever language we finally adopt, we need a terminology that distinguishes between revelation, (1) inasmuch as it reached an unsurpassable, once-and-for-all climax with Christ and his apostles, (2) inasmuch as it continues and in a living encounter with God calls people to faith, and (3) inasmuch as it will be gloriously consummated at the end of history and in the life to come. In one sense revelation is past (as “foundational”), in another it is present (as “dependent”), and in a further sense it is a reality to come (as “future” or “eschatological”).²⁵

The claims of final or eschatological revelation (e.g. 1 Pet 1:5,7,13; 1 Jn 3:2) mean that we should avoid the common error of calling the foundational (1) revelation in Christ “definitive.” That would imply that there is nothing further to come, thereby playing down the final, glorious self-manifestation of God that the end of history will bring. Foundational revelation is full and, insofar as it can be, complete and perfect, but not definitive.

Thirteenth Thesis: *Over many centuries, events of revelation shaped the tradition of the Jews, just as foundational revelation shaped Christian tradition. In both cases, the complex reality of tradition not only gave rise to episodes of revelation but also to the writing of inspired Scriptures, which ended with the close of foundational revelation (that more or less coincides with the end of the apostolic age)*

Experiences of revelation interpret and modify tradition, as we saw above in Thesis Two: the apostolic experience of Christ and the Holy Spirit modified, but certainly did not destroy, traditional

²⁵On revelation as past, present, and to come, as well as suggestions from Paul Tillich and others about the appropriate terminology to apply, see O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 128–35.

monotheistic belief. In its turn, tradition is a reality that is prior to and wider than the composition of Scriptures. Once written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures have been handed on as the normative response in writing (as both record and interpretation) to the full revelation of God in Christ and through the Spirit. Tradition transmits, interprets, and applies the uniquely special inspired texts, but it also transmits much more beside: ways of worshipping, living, and believing in the whole community. What tradition transmits can provide the occasion for experiences of God's self-revelation: this happens, for instance, in well conducted liturgical services or in such "works of mercy" as nursing the sick, caring for refugees, and burying the dead.

Fourteenth Thesis: *The Scriptures constantly trigger moments of revelation but, as written texts, are not to be identified with the revelation, which is always a living, interpersonal event*

The books of the New Testament, together with the inspired writings of the Old Testament, do not as such coincide with revelation. The difference between revelation and Scripture is the difference between a living reality and a written and inspired record.

Fifteenth Thesis: *For foundational revelation to be remembered and reliably interpreted, God can be expected to provide some kind of permanent and authoritative means of interpretation*

It does not seem plausible to represent God as revealing himself in Christ and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, but then "stepping back" and failing to provide ongoing assistance towards remembering, interpreting, and applying to action the foundational revelation and the closely related scriptures. To be enduringly effective, foundational revelation calls for some kind of "magisterium" that will preserve and formulate it in creeds and further forms of official teaching.

Sixteenth Thesis: *Since God wishes all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4) and since salvation without faith is impossible (Heb 11:6), it follows that the divine revelation to which faith responds must, in some sense or another, be available to all people*

As Rahner puts matters, faith necessarily involves "an encounter with God revealing himself personally."²⁶ He also argues that "the history of salvation *and revelation*" is co-extensive with the whole of

²⁶Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 152.

world history."²⁷ In other words, the divine self-revelation happens everywhere and can produce faith everywhere.

We could express what Rahner says in equivalent terms. Any genuinely *religious experience*, like any *authentic prayer*, brings an encounter with the self-revealing God and so counts as revelation. What such experience and prayer are like in the lives of those who practice different living faiths calls for long and detailed research. But at least Rahner's basic claim should be clear: divine revelation and human faith are universal realities.

That universality takes nothing away from our Third Thesis: everything depends on the free initiative of God's love. Or, in Rahner's words, human beings "can never even begin to have anything to do with God or to approach God without being already borne by God's grace."²⁸ While revelation is universal, it always remains a supernatural gift.

Moreover, the universality of revelation does not exclude holding firmly that the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ is "the unsurpassable climax of all revelation."²⁹ The Christo-centric character of revelation and salvation can and should be held, together with the recognition that revelation and salvation also occur elsewhere. It is not a question of "all or nothing," as if everything were offered by knowing Christ and nothing at all available otherwise.

Seventeenth Thesis: *We can distinguish between the history of general revelation and that of special revelation*

Rahner writes of "a special," or "a particular and official history of revelation within the universal history of salvation."³⁰ I have distinguished the "special" history of revelation (or the historical revelation to the Jewish and Christian people) from the "general" history of the revelation (and salvation) found in the whole story of the human race.³¹ Like Rahner,³² I find it misleading to speak of the latter as "natural revelation." Wherever it is found, the divine self-revelation, as we emphasized in the Third Thesis, is always supernatural, being an utterly free gift of God's love that leads human beings to an unmerited, supernatural destiny.

²⁷Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 142–152.

²⁸Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 146.

²⁹Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 174.

³⁰Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 159, 175.

³¹O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 56–95.

³²Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 170.

When Rahner published the German original of *Foundations of Christian Faith* in 1976, the boundaries between the “special” and the “general” history of revelation (and salvation) had long become porous. The Christian Bible, for instance, was already the most widely disseminated book in history. Directly or indirectly, followers of other faiths could hardly escape the impact of that inspired text, which, primarily but not exclusively, reports and interprets the special story of God’s self-revelation. Since the mid-1970s, the technological (e.g. the internet) and economic (e.g. globalization) revolution have brought all peoples together in new and remarkable ways. It is more difficult than ever not to be faced with the divine revelation to which Christians and Jews witness through internet and TV programmes.

Conclusion

A sense that the theme of God’s self-revelation in Christ, while utterly central, has not been receiving the attention it deserves motivated the writing of this article. I hope that its seventeen theses, despite their summary form, may help to throw light on what is entailed by the majestic proclamation: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:1).