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The Veda as Revelation

The faithful of every religion ascribe to their Sacred Scriptures a unique sacredness and authority which distinguish them from every other work, religious or secular. From the very beginnings of Hinduism the Hindus have looked upon some texts of their sacred literature, coming under the name of 'Veda', as possessing such a unique sacredness and authority. The Hindu thinkers have not only considered them as the norm of their faith and the source of their religious practices but they have also vindicated the singular status of these works even among the Hindu religious literature. They have, in short, ascribed to the Veda a position comparable to that which the Christians ascribe to the Bible and the Muslims to the Qur'ān, both of which are considered by their respective faithful as 'revelation'. In this paper we shall study the question whether and in what sense the Veda can be said to be revelation.

1. Some Preliminary Remarks

Before entering into the subject proper, it is necessary to make a few preliminary remarks.

Firstly, by the term 'Veda' we understand only those works which the Hindu thinkers have understood to be such and which are often designated by the term 'Śṛuti' (lit. 'what has been heard'). It comprises the four Saṃhitā-s or 'collections' (the Ṛgveda, Sāmaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda) together with the Brāhmaṇa-s, Āraṇyaka-s and Upaniṣad-s attached to them. Only these works, which are believed to have a transcendent or super-human origin, can claim the title of Veda. All other works-including even the *Bhagavadgītā* which plays in the life of a Hindu a role analogous to that of the New Testament in the life of a Christian-fall outside the category of Veda.

In the second place, the term 'revelation', which can be said to be the keyword of this paper, is not a Hindu or even an Indian concept,

but a Western concept with a Western historical background and having a specific signification in Christian thought. A knowledge of the cultural background is important for the proper understanding and usage of a term; it is even more necessary in the case of the term 'revelation'. No doubt, modern Hindu thinkers, who make use of English as the medium of communication of their ideas, have characterized the Veda as 'revelation'. The classical Hindu thinkers, however, who not only wrote in Sanskrit but also based their speculations on specifically Indian concepts, did not discuss the 'revelation' of the Veda; instead, they spoke about the validity or truth (*prāmānya*) of the Veda, which, in their view, was one form of the means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*) called verbal testimony (*śabda*). Their consideration of the sacredness or authority of the Veda thus becomes a part of their Epistemology, which - be it noted - includes *all* knowledge, whatever its origin or nature, and consequently also knowledge which a Westerner would characterize as 'theological' and which would fall under the category of 'revelation'. Contrary to Western thought, where a separation between Philosophy and Theology took place, Indian thought always maintained a close relationship between the two.

Thirdly, when a Christian undertakes the study of the Holy Scripture of another religion, it is but natural that he studies it by comparing it with his own Holy Scripture. Thus, in studying the Veda as revelation, he studies it by comparing it with the Bible, which is for him the prototype or standard of revelation and which in fact is the only one he is familiar with. He will apply to the Veda the characteristics and criteria of revelation as they are found in the Bible. In doing so, he follows a method of procedure that would be adopted by a Hindu who would undertake a study of the Bible as revelation; for the Hindu would, I imagine, apply to the Bible the characteristics and criteria of the Veda which make it a source of valid knowledge and see how far they apply to the Bible. Both parties are, in a way, justified in adopting such a procedure; for what other way is open to them in order to understand better the Sacred Scripture of the other?

Such a reasoning underlies the method followed in this paper and justifies it, in case a justification is needed. In our study of the Veda as revelation, we shall at first consider the Christian understanding of the Bible as revelation, and thereafter see whether and how far the characteristics of the Bible as revelation can be applied to the Veda. A brief

theological reflexion intended to shed a little more light on the nature of the Veda as revelation will conclude our study.

2. The meaning of the term 'revelation'

Derived from the Latin verb *revelo*, -are (noun: *revelatio*; compare the Greek verb *apokaluptō* with its noun *apokalupsis* as well as *phaneroō* with its noun *phanerōsis*),¹ which signifies 'to remove the veil', 'to manifest', the term 'revelation' means, in the first place, the act of making known to a person something which was earlier 'hidden' and consequently in no wise known to him before; in the second place, it means that which has thus been made known. In Christian theology, the term 'revelation' is used to designate the action by which God freely makes known to man something which was unknown to him and which was inaccessible to him by his own intellectual powers: God makes known to man Himself and the eternal decisions of His will concerning the salvation of men. Such a description of revelation indicates that what is meant here is not a revelation which is given in creation but a genuinely supernatural revelation. It is essentially related to God as its agent and it is a free act on His part.

Primacy of divine action characterizes the Christian conception of revelation. Contrasting the typical forms of religious illumination² in the non-biblical religions with the Christian conception of revelation, Romano Guardini remarks: "At the beginning (of revelation) stands not the effort of a religious man in the course of which he would receive the illumination, but a divine action."³ Likewise, speaking of what distinguishes biblical religions from the other religions, Jean Daniélou observes: "Generally speaking, that which characterizes religions is *the seeking of God by man* through His manifestation in the world . . . With revelation (of the Bible), we enter a world which is absolutely new. It is no longer a question of man's search for God, *but of God's quest for man*. Revelation is not movement by men in search of God, but *act of God coming to meet man*."⁴

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1. For the Hebrew words corresponding to 'reveal' and 'revelation' cf. H. Haag, " 'Offenbaren' in der hebraeischen Bibel", *Theologische Zeitschrift* (Basel), Vol. 16 (1960), pp. 251-258.
 2. As in the case of the Buddha.
 3. R. Guardini, *Die Offenbarung*, (Wuerzburg: 1940), p. 54 (translation mine).
 4. J. Daniélou *et al.*, *Introduction to the Great Religions* (Nôtre Dame, Indiana: 1967), p. 19 (italics are Daniélou's).

Revelation has often been defined as divine speech (*locutio Dei*). Such a characterization of revelation should not be understood in the sense that revelation consists in the mere communication of some knowledge. Revelation does, in fact, communicate knowledge of some truths that concern man's final end. But to reduce revelation to mere communication of a set of doctrines or propositions is to depersonalize, conceptualize or materialize it. Biblical revelation takes place not only through words but also through the deeds of God in the history of man. And it is right to emphasize the historic aspect of biblical revelation. Nevertheless, one should not go to the other extreme of over-emphasizing God's actions in history at the expense of the revelatory value of God's words, as some of the 20th century theologians, notably Protestant, have done. A. Oepke, O. Proksch, O. Cullmann, G. E. Wright and W. Pannenberg have all stressed the revelation through deeds of God in history, though not all of them have done so with the same degree of emphasis. Pannenberg has gone to the extent of affirming that revelation *is* history and that the divine words have revelatory value only insofar as they express the meaning of the deeds of God.⁵ The God of the Bible is a God who reveals Himself *verbis ac gestis*, through words as well as deeds. Yahweh speaks to Abraham, to Moses and the other prophets, and through these prophets to the people of Israel. In like manner, in the New Testament, Christ, who is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, speaks to the Apostles and to us. In the biblical revelation, word and action thus stand in an intimate mutual relationship. The Hebrew word *dābār*, with its dianoetic (i.e. making things intelligible) and dynamic implications, expresses this mutual relationship better than the Greek *logos* or the English 'word'.

From what has been said it is clear that the Bible cannot properly be called revelation.⁶ Nevertheless, we can, and we do, speak of it as revelation insofar as it *contains* the record of God's self-disclosure through His deeds and words in the history of His chosen people of Israel and of His faithful in the New Testament. The Bible may be called revelation also in another sense. Being written under divine inspiration, not only is the truth of the literary record of revelation

5. W. Pannenberg, *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, (Goettingen: 1963); see also G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: 1952), pp. 12-13.

6. Karl Barth emphasized that Jesus Christ alone is revelation. Cf. J. Baillie (ed.), *Revelation* (London: 1937), pp. 49 and 68.

in the Bible guaranteed but God becomes the author of the Bible and the Bible the Word of God. We shall consider the Bible and the Veda under both these aspects: from the point of view of their contents, and from the point of view of their divine authorship.

3. Bible as Revelation

(a) *From the standpoint of its contents*

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline the history of God's revelation such as it took place in the history of Israel and as recorded in the Bible. Already from the Book of Genesis it is clear that God did not abandon man to look after himself. A close reading of the Bible shows that God seeks contact with man and that gradually He reveals Himself to Israel. Not only does He make Himself known, but He also intervenes in the history of His chosen people. The vocation of Abraham, the covenant of Yahweh with Noah, the promise of Yahweh to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, above all, the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt—these are some of the landmarks of God's intervention in the history of His people. God's acts in the history of Israel are, as stated earlier, also accompanied by words. He speaks to His people through Moses and other prophets. He chastises those who disobey His commands while He blesses those who are faithful to His commands. The long history of God's revelation as recorded in the Old Testament is a gradual preparation for the final revelation of God in the New Testament in the person of Christ, the Eternal Word of the Father. In this revelation in Christ, the revelatory acts of God as recorded in the Old Testament find their fulfilment and completion. God Himself, in the person of Christ, speaks and acts during His life on earth, as recorded in the New Testament.

An analysis of God's revelation, as recorded in the Bible, exhibits certain distinctive characteristics.⁷

Firstly, biblical revelation has its origin in the initiative of God himself. It is not attained by man as a result of his personal efforts in searching to discover God; on the contrary, it springs from a free action of God who condescends to reveal Himself to the people whom

7. Cf. R. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (Allahabad: 1972) *passim*, esp. pp. 38-40; 343-356.

He has chosen to be the receivers of His revelation, at the time and in the manner which He Himself has chosen. It is, in other words, a grace, a free gift of God to man.

Secondly, biblical revelation is a personal communication. It is a personal encounter between God, on the one hand, and human beings, on the other. "If the deity does not communicate with us as persons" observes John L. McKenzie, "he does not communicate at all."⁸ Though the revelation in the Old Testament is addressed historically to His chosen people, it is a preparatory revelation, progressively leading to its culmination in the revelation in Jesus Christ, a revelation intended for all men. God enters into a personal relationship, as two persons do. He addresses Himself to man as a person addresses another person; He invites man to communicate with Him.

Thirdly, and most importantly, biblical revelation is history. The events and words by which God reveals Himself are historical. In other words, the revelation of God through the medium of events in history, such as are recorded in the Bible, actually took place at particular times, in particular places, and with regard to particular persons. The Bible is thus the record of historical divine interventions in the history of man.⁹ Archaeological findings have confirmed the historical nature of the biblical events.¹⁰

(b) *From the standpoint of divine authorship*

The revelatory events recorded in the Bible are true because God, who cannot err and will not deceive, is Himself the author of the Bible. No doubt, He is not the sole author of the Bible; the hagiographers are also its authors in the proper sense of the term. Nevertheless, their authorship is guided, in all the stages of their activity as authors, by the special grace of God called inspiration. Consequently, despite the collaboration of God with human authors, the Bible is said to have a divine origin; it is the Word of God.

8. J. L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: 1974), p. 65. See also O. Semmelroth, *Gott und Mensch in Begegnung* (Frankfurt: 1956).

9. Cf. H. de Lubac, *Dieu se dit dans l'histoire* (Paris: 1974).

10. Cf. for example, W. Keller, *The Bible as History* (tr. from German by W. Neil; London: 1956).

4. Veda as Revelation

As in the case of the Bible, we shall consider the Veda under two aspects: firstly, from the standpoint of its contents, and secondly, from the standpoint of its authorship.

(a) From the standpoint of its contents

As already stated in the preliminary remarks, the Veda consists of the four Saṃhitā-s or Collections – the Ṛgveda, the Samaveda, the Yajurveda and the Atharvaveda – to each of which are added a certain number of works grouped under the classes of Brahmaṇa-s, Āraṇyaka-s and Upaniṣad-s. For our present purpose, we need only a general view of the contents of each of these groups.

Among the Saṃhitā-s, Ṛgveda is undoubtedly the most important. Its 1028 hymns (*Sūkta*) in 10,462 stanzas are of diverse nature and content. However, we may say in general that these hymns consist of praises, invocations and invitations of gods, prayers to them, legends, history, magic, speculation and the like. More prominent among them are the hymns wherein gods—personified powers of nature—such as the Sun (*Sūrya*), Moon (*Soma*), Fire (*Agni*), Heaven (*Dyaus*), Wind (*Vayu*), Storms (*Maruts*), Dawn (*Uṣas*) are invoked, praised and prayed to in order that they may confer on the worshipper the benefits desired, notably material prosperity in the form of long life of a hundred autumns, abundance of sons and cows. We also find there a few hymns devoted to *Viśvakarman*, “the all-maker” (X.81 and 82) and *Prajapati*, “the Lord of creatures” (X.121). But these divinities, conceived as the makers of the universe, play only a very minor role when compared with that of the other Vedic gods. No less than two hundred and fifty hymns are dedicated to *Indra*, the most prominent god of the Ṛgveda who, strengthening himself with the intoxicating *Soma*, vanquishes with his thunderbolt the demons of drought, especially *Vṛtra*, and liberates the water which is held captive or enclosed in a mountain. Among the religiously most elevating hymns of the Ṛgveda are undoubtedly those addressed to *Varuṇa*, the lord of the waters, who is said to be all-knowing and powerful. Being omniscient, he detects even the most hidden sins of men; as the upholder of cosmic and moral order, the *Ṛta*, in the world, he punishes the sinners with misfortunes, especially dropsy, while forgiving those who, with a contrite heart, humbly approach him and beg his pardon. In some of

these hymns addressed to Varuṇa (such as V.85; VII.86-89; VIII, 41) we find penitent worshippers asking pardon for their sins. It is no wonder that scholars like Leopold von Schroeder and M. Winternitz find in these hymns to Varuṇa certain analogies with the Psalms of the Bible.

Samaveda and Yajurveda are liturgical collections meant to be used by the Udgatṛ-priest and the Adhvaryu-priest, respectively, and most of the verses can be traced to the Ṛgveda. Samaveda consists of hymns which are to be sung, while the Yajurveda mainly contains prayers and sacrificial formulas, some of which are charms and imprecations similar to those found in the Atharvaveda.

The Atharvaveda—with its 731 hymns in about 6000 verses about one-fifth of which are taken from the Ṛgveda – contains for the most part magical spells and incantations meant for a variety of purposes: to recover from sicknesses such as fever, jaundice, leprosy; as antidote against poison; to win a man's or woman's love; to get abundant rain; to beget sons, and the like. A few of the hymns are speculative—theosophical or cosmogonical—in nature, while others are connected with penitential ceremonies.

Concerning the Samhitā-s in general it can be stated that, whether these were composed for liturgical use or not, the hymns and the formulas were used in rites.

The Brāhmaṇa-s are voluminous prose texts containing, for the most part, explanations of the origin, meaning as well as reasonings justifying ceremonies that are prescribed in them. The “prescriptions” (*vidhi*) as well as the “explanatory passages” (*arthavāda*) — the two main divisions into which classical Hindu thinkers are wont to classify the content of the Brāhmaṇa-s—are all focussed on the one and only theme of sacrifice. Moreover, sacrifice becomes here no more a means to an end but an end in itself. It becomes a power that excels even the power of the gods themselves, operating independently of the gods as a mechanical blind force, when the sacrifice in question has been performed without any imperfection. Even though Prajāpati is mentioned in the creation-legends of the Brāhmaṇa-s as the maker of the world and of the beings, his role is an insignificant one, and in some passages he is said to be self-created. Many of the sacrifices are meant to procure material benefits for the sacrificer while some are intended

to bring destruction to one's enemies. In these texts there are very few passages which deal with morality. M. Winternitz observes that "the Brāhmaṇa-s are a splendid proof that exceedingly much religion can be combined with very little morality."¹¹ If one can speak of a moral act, it is in terms of the ritual. As S. Lévi puts it, "The authors of these priestly compilations see and measure the facts only from the ritual angle. Good act is the act in conformity with the prescriptions of cult; bad act is the act which goes against these prescriptions."¹²

The Āraṇyaka-s, which form the transitional literature between the Brāhmaṇa-s and the Upaniṣad-s, contain mostly mystical and symbolical explanations of sacrifices.

The content of the Upaniṣad-s is of a varied nature. There are psychological and metaphysical discussions, philosophical speculations on the origin of the world, mystical speculations on the holy syllable Om, theories on the nature and destiny of the soul along with doctrines of *Karma* and rebirth. The main doctrine of the Upaniṣad-s is that the universe is Brāhmaṇ and that the Brāhmaṇ is *Ātman*, a doctrine that received a classical formulation in the famous statement, "Thou art That" (*tat tvam asi*). The emphasis in these texts is not so much on the practice of moral virtues as on the attainment of the liberating knowledge through the removal of ignorance. It is this knowledge of the identity of the individual soul with Brāhmaṇ that puts an end to the repeated births and deaths. With the subordination of the ritual acts to speculation and knowledge, gods become unimportant and almost fade away, except in the theistic Upaniṣad, Śvetāśvatara. The practice of moral virtues, where taught, is considered only as a condition or prerequisite for acquiring the liberating knowledge. The intense yearning for knowledge is typified not only in the story of Naciketas as related in the Kaṭhapaniṣad, but also in other episodes wherein Indra is said to serve Prajapati for one-hundred-and-one years as a disciple, kings are said to donate thousands of cows to the Brahmins who will teach them the true doctrine of *Ātman*, and Brahmins are said to go humbly to the Kṣatriya kings, and the rich to the poor beggars, who possess this knowledge.

11. M. Winternitz, *Geschichte der indischen Literatur*, Vol. I (Stuttgart: 1968), p. 180.

12. S. Lévi, *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brāhmanas* (Paris:1966), p. 100.

The foregoing brief survey of the contents of the Vedic texts makes it sufficiently clear that they are quite different from the contents of the Bible. The Bible narrates events in the history of man through which the Person of God is revealed. The Veda comprises, on the contrary, hymns to gods, formulas to be used in sacrifices, explanations of sacrifices, speculations on the Ultimate Reality and the like—all of which may be characterized under the general category of “doctrine”, rather than “person”. No doubt, the Bible has a few books — such as the Book of Psalms, the Song of Songs, and the so-called Wisdom Books — where prayers, reflections and doctrines play a dominant role. Nevertheless, there is a single historical theme running throughout the Bible, from the Book of Genesis to the New Testament, the actual history of man’s origin and his salvation worked out by God through his interventions.

Let us now briefly consider how far the characteristics of revelation, which we discovered in the Bible, can be traced in the Veda.

Firstly, the divine initiative that characterizes the revealing acts of God in the Bible is not found in the Vedic texts themselves. In the Veda we do not read about a God who condescends, on his own initiative, to reveal himself to man; we find rather records of man’s endeavours to get into contact with gods who, pleased with his gifts, may fulfil his desires; or of the efforts of man to obtain the fulfilment of his desires by means of sacrifices, even independently of the gods; or again of man’s search after the Ultimate Reality behind the visible world. In the Veda it is not so much God who speaks or acts as man who speaks to God and acts or reflects in order to get into contact with God or the Ultimate Reality.

Secondly, if we analyse the contents of the Veda there is hardly any account, if at all, of a personal encounter with the gods or a God. The gods are invoked and invited to partake of the sacrificial offerings, but there is no real personal encounter with them, as we see in the biblical accounts, where God speaks to man and enters into alliance with man as two persons do, makes promises to man, proclaims his laws, forgives his people when they go against his commands, and guides their history. In response to the personal self-communication of God to man, which constitutes revelation, man submits himself to the divine revelation in confident self-surrender by an act of faith. The

Vedic concept of *śraddhā*,¹³ which is often brought forward as a counterpart of the Christian concept of faith, has a different significance. The Vedic concept of *śraddhā* consists in the firm belief in the efficacy of ritual action. It is not so much faith in a *person* as in a “doctrine”.

Thirdly, we come to the most important characteristic of biblical revelation, namely, its historical character. Going through the Vedic texts, one does not find a single thread of history running through the whole, as we find in the salvation history of man recounted in the Bible. “The holy books of the biblical religions”, observes J. Daniélou, “the Old and New Testaments, are essentially histories, whereas the holy books of the pagan religions are basically myths. The essence of the Bible is sacred history, that is, the covenant of God with Abraham, the liberation of the people of Israel by Yahweh, His dwelling in the temple. These are interventions by God in the world of men.”¹⁴ What Daniélou says of the holy books of the non-biblical religions in general can be validly applied to the Veda. In the Veda, myth takes the place of history; as myth transcends time and is independent of it, it transcends also history. Mythological time is an eternal present, which Mircea Eliade termed *illud tempus*.¹⁵ The mythological events recounted in the Veda (such as the fight between Indra and Vṛtra) do not take place in historic time, but rather in the mythological time.¹⁶

13. Cf. P. Hacker, “*śraddhā*”, *Wiener Zeitschrift fuer die Kunde Sued-und Ostasiens*, 7 (1963), pp. 151-189; G.S. Pendse, *The Vedic Concept of śraddhā* (Poona: 1978).

14. J. Daniélou *et al.*, Introduction to the Great Religions, p. 19; also *Essai sur le mystère de l'histoire* (Paris: 1953), pp. 109-110.

15. Cf. M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: N. J., 1971), *passim*, esp. pp. 17ff. See also R. Panikkar, “Le mythe comme histoire sacrée”, *Archivio di Filosofia* (Roma: 1974), pp. 243-315.

16. In an illuminating paper: “The Status of the Scriptures in the ‘Holy History’ of India”, *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures* (Bangalore: 1974), pp. 280-299, R. De Smet analyses “the whole trajectory of India’s religious development, from the Vedic sacrificial hymns to the decisive encounter with Christ of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and other pioneers of Indian Renaissance” (p. 280) and discovers in it a “holy history”. It is a study based on theological principles [“it reveals itself to the eyes of a Christian” (p. 280); “as perceived through the eyes of Christian faith”, (p. 281)] and it covers the whole scala of Indian philosophico-religious thought. In my present paper, we are considering “holy history” as traceable only in the Vedic literature, and that too by an analysis of its contents.

For the majority of Hindu thinkers, who accept the Veda as eternal, historicity of the few events recounted in the Veda would pose problems. For, if they are to be understood as having occurred to particular persons at a particular time and in a particular place, it would imply that the Veda was composed thereafter and thus do away with the eternity of the Veda. Hence, they deny that the names of persons mentioned in the Veda refer to individual, concrete—and thus historical—persons, but to the species (*jāti*) which is eternal. The Vedic exegetes try in various ways to explain that the events recorded in the Veda are not historical. Space does not permit us to enter into these explanations here.

There is another point which should be touched upon here. The biblical concept of history is based upon a linear or continuous conception of time, according to which the events are not subject to repetition. Thus Christ died for men once (*hapax*) and it will not recur (*pollakis*). In other words, those events which are recorded in the Bible are unique and irrepeatable. The Indian conception of time, on the other hand, is cyclic; in other words, events repeat themselves or are subject to “eternal return” in the course of repeated dissolutions and re-creations of the world.¹⁷ Consequently, even if one were to argue that the events related in the Vedic texts were historical, they would nevertheless lack the uniqueness and irreversibility which characterize the historical events recorded in the Bible.

The above brief consideration of the contents of the Bible and of the Veda shows that there is a basic difference in the contents of the two Holy Scriptures. This difference consists mainly in the fact that, in the Bible, there is a single thread of man’s history of salvation, commenced and worked by the initiative of God, while such a type of history is not found in the Veda.

(b) *From the standpoint of authorship*

For this part of our study we base ourselves on the views of the thinkers of the six classical systems of Hindu thought.

17. On the Indian conception of time see R. Panikkar, “Towards a typology of Time and Temporality in Ancient Indian Tradition”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 24 (April, 1974), pp. 161-164; *Idem*, “Le Temps et l’Éternité dans la pensée indienne”, *Mensch und Zeit, Eranos-Jahrbuch*, 1951 (Zuerich:1952) pp. 219-252; S. Schayer, *Contributions to the Problem of Time in Indian Philosophy* (Cracow: 1938).

Concerning the authorship of the Veda, we can distinguish two main views among the Hindu thinkers. According to one view, the typical representative of which is the school of Mīmāṃsā, Veda is self-existent or eternal (*nitya*) and authorless [*apauruṣeya*: lit. 'not having a person (as author)']. The other view, the main proponent of which is the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school, considers the Veda as non-eternal (*anitya*) and having an author (*pauruṣeya*). An intermediary position is taken by the Vedānta schools. The reasons why these different positions were taken by various schools and how they defended their respective positions lie beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁸

The question that interests us here is whether the Hindu classical systems recognize a divine authorship of the Veda. A close study of their texts furnish us with the following results.

In the case of the Mīmāṃsā system, its conception of Veda as eternally self-existing makes any kind of authorship, divine or human, unnecessary and superfluous. In other words, no causal influence of any person is required for the coming into existence or origin of the Veda. The system does not need to assume a God even as the proclaimer or propagator of the eternally existent Veda at the beginning of every new creation, as some other systems postulate; for the Mīmāṃsā does not accept the theory of periodical dissolutions (*pralaya*) and creations (*sarga*), as held by all other Hindu systems. Moreover, any divine authorship of the Veda is excluded by the fact that the Mīmāṃsā, at least in its classical form, is decidedly atheistic.

Unlike the Mīmāṃsā, the Sāṃkhya considers the Veda as non-eternal (*anitya*); for there are Vedic passages that speak of the Veda as having origin. Nevertheless, like the Mīmāṃsā, the Sāṃkhya maintains that the Veda has no author (*apauruṣeya*). But this agreement with the Mīmāṃsā is merely formal. Whereas the Mīmāṃsā

18. For the Mīmāṃsā position, cf. M. Biarreau, *Théorie de la connaissance et philosophie de la parole dans le brahmanisme classique* (Paris: 1964), pp. 68-100; F. X. D'Sa, "Offenbarung ohne Gott". Also see *Offenbarung, Geistige Realität des Menschen*, ed. by G. Oberhammer, (Vienna: 1974), pp. 93-105; for Advaita-Vedānta position, cf. K. S. Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta* (Waltair: 1959; reprint Delhi: 1974). For the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika position, see G. Chemparathy, *L'Apologie du Veda selon les Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, shortly to be published by the University of Louvain.

conception of the authorlessness of the Veda is based on its eternity and the consequent needlessness of an author, what the Sāṃkhya means by 'authorlessness' is that the Veda is not produced by the conscious activity of an intellectual being. An origin of the Veda in an unconscious manner - in other words, without the active intellectual activity of the author of a book—is not thereby excluded. Two views are found in this system to explain the origin of the Veda at the beginning of every new creation. According to one view, the Veda is said to be "remembered" (*smaraṇasambhava*) by the Primeval Sage, Kapila, at the beginning of each new creation. The Sāṃkhya believes that Kapila, who emerges as the first being at the time of every new creation, is endowed with an abundance of *sattva-guṇa*, that constituent of the Prime Matter, Prakṛti, which is the principle of light and knowledge. Thanks to this attribute, he is able to recollect the Veda of the past creation, exactly as it was then learnt, just as a person, waking up from sleep, is able to recollect the things he knew before he went to sleep. The second view maintains that the Veda comes into being by itself (*svayam*) from the self-existent Being (*svayambhū*), even without his being conscious or aware of it (*abud-dhipūrvika eva*), like breath, through the power of the deeds (*karma-vaśāt*).¹⁹ In both these views there is no conscious intellectual activity put forth by an author and hence one cannot speak of an authorship. Anyway, neither of these explanations of the origin of the Veda indicate any role of God as its author. In fact, being atheistic, Sāṃkhya cannot ascribe a divine origin to the Veda. It is the first being that comes into existence at the time of new creation—whether this being is said to be Kapila or Svayambhū (lit. 'one who comes into being by oneself')—to whom the origin of the Veda is ascribed, without however any preceding conscious intellectual activity on his part.

As opposed to the Mīmāṃsā, the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika systems maintain that the Veda is non-eternal and that it has an author in the proper sense of the term. A close study of the text of these schools shows that, at an earlier stage, their followers considered the sages (*ṛṣi*) as the authors of the Veda, but that, at a later stage, when the doctrine of God (*Īśvara*) had become firmly established in their system,

19. See Vācaspati on Sāṃkhyakārikā 5 and Vijñānabhikṣu on Sāṃkhyasūtra V. 50.

they made God the author of the Veda. They claimed that, at the beginning of each creation, this God temporarily assumes a body so that he may possess the organs and powers of speech, and proclaim the Veda to the newly created persons.

A similar conception is found also in the Yoga system which, unlike its sister-system Sāṃkhya, admits a God. The main function of this God is that of a teacher; he is in fact the Primeval Teacher; "the teacher of even earlier (teachers)" (*pūrveṣām api guruḥ*), who, out of compassion, instructs the newly created human beings in *Dharma* and other things they need to know in order to reach their ultimate end.²⁰ He is, in other words, the teacher of the Veda.

As stated earlier, the Vedānta system takes an intermediary position between the two opposing Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika views. On the one hand, the Veda can be said to be eternal (*nitya*) and authorless (*apauruṣeya*), but in a sense different from what the Mīmāṃsā understand by those expressions. The Veda is eternal only in the sense of a beginningless series which exists in each new creation exactly as it existed in the previous creation. It is authorless in the sense that it is not the work of a person who *independently* composes it or brings it into existence. On the other hand, the Vedānta agrees with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika view in maintaining that the Veda has an author, but not in the sense in which the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika understands authorship. While the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika conceives of God as the author of the Veda in the sense in which Kalidasa is said to be the author of *Raghuvamśa*—in other words, as a person who composes the Veda *independently* of the Veda of the previous world-cycle—, according to the Vedānta, God (*Īśvara*) can be said to be the author of the Veda only in as much as he proclaims or repeats the Veda at the beginning of each new creation exactly as it was in the previous creations and *in dependence upon* the Veda of the previous creation.

The conception of revelation especially in the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara poses certain problems, some of which may be briefly mentioned here. Revelation, as understood in the Christian sense,

20. Cf. *Yogasūtras* I. 25-26 with Vyāsa's commentary. On the role of *Īśvara* in Yoga see G. Oberhammer, "Gott, Urbild der emanzi-pierten Existenz im Yoga des Patañjali", *Zeitschrift fuer katholische Theologie*, 86 (1964), pp. 197-207; G. M. Koelman, *Pātañjala Yoga* (Poona: 1970), pp. 57-66.

implies a real distinction between the revealer and the persons to whom the revelation is made, in other words, an essential distinction between God and man. In the Advaita Vedānta, the distinction between the Ultimate Reality, Brahman, and the individual souls (*jīva*) belongs only to the domain of empirical reality which has no absolute validity. And the revealing God himself belongs to the domain of empirical reality. In short, the revealing God, the persons to whom the revelation is made and the revealed Veda—all these belong to the domain of empirical reality and not to the absolutely true reality.

Summing up the question of divine authorship of the Veda we can say that classical Mīmāṃsā and Sāṃkhya systems deny it altogether, while the Vedānta schools admit it partially or in a certain sense in as much as they assign to God the function of manifesting or proclaiming the Veda to the first human beings at each new creation *in dependence upon* the Veda of the previous creation. In the case of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and (probably) Yoga, God is not only the manifesting agent of the Veda but also its author (*Kartā*) in the proper sense, just like the author of any literary work.

In the case of the Bible, God is said to be the author in as much as he inspires the sacred writers to write what he wants to be written, so that the words of the Bible are the words of God. Nevertheless, God makes these hagiographers also real authors of the Bible so that the Bible is the Word of God in the words of men. Thus divine inspiration of the sacred writer as well as an active contribution of the sacred writer are essential aspects of the Bible as the Word of God.

Is there any such or similar idea in the Hindu conception of the authorship of the Veda?

If we analyse the Vedic texts themselves, we can trace therein two views concerning the authorship of the Veda.

On the one hand, there is the view that the Veda has a super-human or divine origin—an idea expressed in different ways. Thus Ṛgveda X. 90. 9 speaks of the Ṛcs, Sāmans, Chandas and Yajus (= the Veda) as originating from the Primal Person, sacrificed by the gods. In Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad II. I. 4 the Veda is said to originate from Brahman. The Brāhmaṇa-texts speak of the Veda as originating from the gods: Fire (Agni), Wind (Vāyu) and Sun (Āditya); we find there

also the idea that the Veda is created by Prajāpati. In the Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad II. 4. 10 and IV. 5. 11 we read that the Veda was breathed forth (*niḥśvasita*) by the Great Being, the Brahman. Finally, the theistically oriented Śvetāśvatāra Upaniṣad VI.18 tells us that the Great Lord (*maheśvara*), having created Brahmā, bestowed on him the Veda. In all these passages a superhuman being is conceived as the source of the Veda.

On the other hand, there are passages in the R̥gveda, where the hymns are said to be composed by the Vedic poets or sages (*ṛṣi*). The hymns of Maṇḍala-s II–VIII are, respectively, ascribed to sages Grtsamada, Viśvāmitra, Vāmadeva, Atri, Bharadvāja, Vasiṣṭha, and Kaṇva (and their families), while those of the other Maṇḍalas are attributed to various sages.²¹

The later Hindu thinkers have tried to combine these two views. Though the Veda has a superhuman or divine origin, they argued, it was first “seen” by the sages (*ṛṣi*), who thereafter transmitted it to the other living beings. Thus Yāska quotes the view of Aupamanyava, who derives the name *ṛṣi* from “seeing” and states that they “saw” the hymns and then transmitted them to those who had not the power of “seeing” them (Nirukta II. 11 and I. 20). Vedāntins like Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and Madhva maintain that, at the time of the new creation, the sages were enabled to “see” the Veda exactly as it was in the previous creation, thanks to the power conferred on them by God (*maheśvarānugr̥hīta*, *parameśvarānugrahāt*, says Śaṅkara).²²

In these explanations one may find a conception analogous in some respects to biblical inspiration.²³ A closer study will show that the analogy is more formal than real. In the Vedānta view, where God is said only to proclaim an eternally existing Veda, the alleged divine

21. Cf. J. Gonda, *The Vision of the Vedic Poets* (The Hague: 1963); V. G. Rahurkar, *The Seers of the R̥gveda* (Poona: 1964); G. Gispert-Sauch, “The ‘Dogma’ of the Inerrancy of the Vedas”, *Indian Ecclesiastical Studies* 4 (April, 1965), pp. 79-92.

22. See Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja on Brahmasūtra I. 3. 29-30; Madhva’s *Viṣṇu-tattvanirṇaya* (ed. Madras: 1969), p. 252.

23. For an illuminating study on the question of inspiration in non-biblical scriptures, especially in Hinduism, *from the standpoint of a theologian* see I. Vempeny, *Inspiration in the Non-Biblical Scriptures* (Theol. Publ. of India, 1973).

role is not an "inspiration" which has to lead to the composition of the Veda, but only its propagation or proclamation. The role of the sages, where admitted, is too passive and not comparable to the active contribution of the hagiographers of the Bible. In the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika conception of the origin of the Veda, God has indeed a real causality in the origin of the Veda, but the role of the sages as human authors is made superfluous and done away with.

Space does not permit me to enter into the opinions of modern Hindu writers like Vivekananda and S. Radhakrishnan. Suffice it to note here that, though they speak of the Veda as revelation, they not only minimize, if not abandon, the traditional Hindu conception of the Veda as eternal or as having a divine author, but they also often degrade the Veda to a record of "the intuitions of the perfected souls" or "the spiritual experience of souls strongly endowed with the sense of reality"—expressions that characterize the Veda more as a human product than superhuman or divine.

In conclusion, we may say that revelation, as applied to the Bible, always means the Word of God. But Śruti (or Veda) is not always considered to be the Word of God. Even when a divine origin is ascribed to it, it is not the Word of God in the sense in which the Bible is.

5. Veda as revelation based on a theological reflexion

The above considerations show that the Veda is not revelation *in the sense in which the Bible is said to be revelation*. But are we to conclude therefrom that the Veda cannot at all be spoken of as revelation?

In his penetrating study of the Word in the experience of revelation in Qur'ān and Hindu Scriptures, Ary A. Roest Crollius distinguishes (following K. Rahner) two aspects in revelation: the transcendental aspect which is always and everywhere active, and the predicamental expression of it which is historically transmitted.²⁴ The foregoing considerations of the Veda were based on its being a predicamental expression of the universal transcendental revelation as historically transmitted by the Hindus. To put it differently, our study of the Veda

4. Cf. Ary A. Roest Crollius, *Thus Were They Hearing* (Roma: 1974), p. 6.

in as much as it is a religious phenomenon—and indeed one of the basic facts of religion—is based on the response of the Hindu religious souls to the universal transcendental revelation. From a phenomenological study of religion, one can reach only this aspect of revelation. For an adequate answer—if an adequate answer is at all possible—to the question of revelation in the Veda, or the Veda as revelation, we must go beyond or behind its data by means of a theological reflexion.

A Christian, interested in studying the question of the Veda as revelation, should apply some of the principles of the theology of non-Christian religions. The most basic of these principles is the universal salvific will of God, the *locus classicus* for which is I Tim. 2:4 wherein St Paul says that God “wants every one to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth.” This implies that divine grace is offered to every man, Christian as well as non-Christian. Theologians have shown that Christ is present and active in the non-Christian religions²⁵ and that there is also an active presence and enlivening influence of the Holy Spirit in the religious life of the non-Christians.²⁶ Ever since the creation of man, God has been working out in his own way his plans of salvation of man. Looked at in this light, man’s religious quest, however imperfect and mingled with errors it might be, is not a purely human quest; God works in and through him. In this sense, one can speak of a certain revelation—genuine, though not in the biblical sense—in all religions, a fact which, though vehemently denied by the followers of the Dialectical Theology of the early decades of this century,²⁷ has now found general acceptance among theologians as well as historians of religions.²⁸ If there is thus a certain revelation

25. Cf. K. Rahner, “Christ in the Non-Christian Religions”, *God’s Word among Men*, ed. by G. Gispert-Sauch (Delhi: 1973), pp. 95-104; R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: 1964; revised and enlarged ed. 1981); J. Dupuis, *Jesus Christ and His Spirit* (Bangalore: 1976), pp. 167-179.

26. J. Dupuis, *op. cit.* pp. 181-209 and 211-227.

27. Cf. G. Chemparathy, “Dialectical Theology and Non-Christian Religions”, *Journal of Dharma*, VI, 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1981), pp. 399-416.

28. From the vast literature on this may be mentioned: J. Neuner (ed.), *Christian Revelation and World Religions* (London: 1967); K. McNamara, “Is there a Non-Christian Revelation?”, *Service and Salvation*, ed. by J. Pathrapankal (Bangalore: 1973), pp. 183-192; K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: 1978), pp. 138-175; J. Wach, “General Revelation and the Religions of the World”, *The Journal of Bible and Religion*, 22 (April, 1954), pp. 83-93.

in all religions, it is legitimate to infer that also their Scriptures, which contain the records of the experience of that revelation, are not purely human products; they contain *semina Verbi*, "seeds of the Word", however hidden or mingled with untruth it may be. *In this sense*, from a theological consideration of religions, the Scriptures of all religions may be said to be revelation.

What has just been said about the non-Christian religions and their Scriptures in general is applicable to Hinduism and its Holy Scripture, the Veda. No doubt, from the Christian theological point of view, the application of the presence of the *semina Verbi* is valid not only to the Veda but also—in fact, even to a greater degree—to other scriptures of Hinduism specially the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* in its different local versions, the scriptures of the Āṭvārs and other saints of Hinduism. But, for our present purpose, we restrict the application to the Veda because only these texts have been accorded something like "canonicity", however unofficial it may be, by the classical Hindu thinkers. The Veda can thus be said to record the inner experience (*anubhava*) of the Hindu sages concerning the Divine or the Other-Worldly.²⁹

Moreover, despite the differences between the Bible and the Veda as revelation, there are nevertheless certain considerations, drawn from the unique position of the Veda among the Hindu religious literature, which seem to legitimize the use of the term 'revelation' for the Veda.

Firstly, like the Bible which alone enjoys among the rich religious literature of Christians an incomparably unique position as the Word of God or as having divine authorship, the Veda stands out alone among all the rich religious literature of the Hindus as having a degree of authority and sacredness unequalled by any other literary work. As we saw, some Hindu systems ascribe a divine origin to the Veda either as its author or as its first proclaimer to the newly created beings. Even those systems, which do not ascribe to it any divine origin, attribute to it a transcendent nature, a non-human origin. All the Hindu systems of thought are unanimous in sharply distinguishing the Śṛuti (or Veda) from all other works, including those works called Smṛti,

29. Concerning revelation as *anubhava*, see T. Manickam, " 'insight' as Inspiration and 'anubhava' as revelation in the Hindu Scriptures", *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures*, pp. 325-339.

which are second only to the Veda as authority. Even the Vedānga-s (“limbs of the Veda”), which are closely related to the Veda, do not belong to the category of the Veda since, like the Smṛti works, they are ascribed to human authors. The Śṛuti was always held to be of non-human origin while all other works were considered to have human authors. Such a sharp distinction, maintained all through the Hindu thought, indicates the special position which the Vedas occupied in the eyes of the Hindu thinkers, a position analogous to that of the Bible for the Christian thinkers.

Secondly, the unique position given to the Veda among the Hindu religious writings is also evidenced by the fact that, alone among the Hindu religious literature, the Veda was believed to be free of all error, or to use a Christian term applied to the Bible to indicate the same quality, “inerrant”. This “inerrancy” of the Veda is explained in two ways. Those who admitted a divine origin to the Veda accounted for its inerrancy by the fact that God, being absolutely trustworthy (*āpta*), cannot communicate what is untrue. Those who did not attribute to the Veda a divine origin but held it to be eternal and authorless argued that, in the absence of a person as author, who alone could be the source of error in verbal testimony [*śabda*], all errors are necessarily excluded from the Veda. Anyway, all that is said in the Veda is to be accepted as true. Statements in the Veda which are contradictory or erroneous are so only apparently and at first sight; when such passages are interpreted in the proper manner, all such contradictions and errors would disappear. No doubt, these interpretations were various, depending upon the philosophy of the system in question,³⁰ but they served to defend the absolute validity or truth of the Veda. Not only is the Veda valid or true, but the validity or truth of the Smṛti works is based on that of the Veda.

Thirdly, as a consequence of the unique sacredness ascribed to the Veda, we see that these texts have been handed down with special care. This is especially manifested in the different methods—the different *pāṭha-s*³¹ and the Prātiśākhya-s used in order to assure the verbal accuracy of some of the Vedic texts, especially the Ṛgveda.

30. For a sample of such interpretation from the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika standpoint, see G. Chemparathy, “The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas as interpreters of Śṛuti” *Journal of Dharma*, III, 3 (July-Sept. 1978), pp. 274-294.

31. Cf. J. Gonda, *Vedic Literature* (Wiesbaden: 1975), pp. 16-18.

Finally, the classical Hindus maintain that the objects dealt with in the Veda are not knowable by ordinary human means of knowledge such as sense preception and inference; they are knowable only through the Veda. Here we have a conception analogous to the Christian idea that, although the existence and attributes of God can be inferred by human reason in as much as these are manifested in the creation itself, the self-disclosure of God in his innermost nature as well as his salvific plans for men, as recorded in the Bible, is inaccessible to pure human reason and are known only through revelation.

6. Conclusion

At the close of our inquiry concerning the Veda as revelation, we may formulate our conclusion as follows :

A comparative study of the contents of the Bible and the Veda as well as of what the Christian and Hindu thinkers say about the origin of their respective Sacred Scriptures leads us to the conclusion that the Veda is not revelation in the sense in which the Bible is. The principal difference between the Bible and the Veda consists in this that, while in the Bible one can trace, from the Book of Genesis to the Gospels, a gradual but progressive self-disclosure of a divine Person by means of acts accompanied by words, in the framework of the history of man, in the Veda we do not have such a self-disclosure of a divine Person, but rather liturgical prayers, formulas, speculations and doctrines. To put it differently, in the place of a Person, it is "Doctrine" that forms the object of "revelation" in the Veda. As a matter of fact, in the historical development of the Vedic literature, even the gods who played an important role in the hymns of the R̥gveda fade away in the later Vedic literature except for a certain theistic trend noticeable in the Śvetāśvatāra Upaniṣad. Nevertheless, theological considerations compel us to see hidden "seeds of the Word" scattered in the Veda. In the Bible we see the history of God's search after man; in the Hindu Vedic scripture we can trace the expressions of man's search for God, a search initiated and sustained by God. We find, moreover, that the Hindus have set apart for the Veda a position unequalled by any other literary work, thereby indicating its specially sacred and authoritative character as well as its non-human origin. On the basis of all these considerations, it seems right to apply to the Veda the term 'revelation' in a broad sense.