

# The Crisis of Religion and the Notion of Revelation in 19<sup>th</sup> century German Thought

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## 0. Introduction

“Religion” and “revelation” are terms thoroughly intertwined in their historical development. In the proper, i.e. historically established sense of these words, we cannot speak of religion without revelation or revelation without religion. One could certainly add the qualification: without revelation in some sense, or without religion in some other sense. Still, in their histories as well as in their present states, religion and revelation, in some sense or other, are complementary phenomena (cf. Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, V, D).

Today both notions are used in a variety of senses, such that their meaning tends to obscure the origins and historical evolution of the terms themselves. Nevertheless, without the proper clarification of the epistemic framework of historical origins we are in a situation similar to what A. MacIntyre describes at the beginning of *After Virtue* (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). We find ourselves among fragments of meaning, which cannot be properly put together without the knowledge of the whole where these fragments originally belong into: in our case, the historically evolving meaning of religion and revelation.

The importance of the history of philosophy, as MacIntyre argued, can be determined with respect to the content certain meanings play in our understanding. Looking into the historical development we can overcome the initial naiveté characteristic of our *prima facie*

approach to central notions of our heritage. More specifically, the knowledge of historical processes helps us to see the structure and content of certain notions such that we can understand better their past, present, and possible future. In what follows, I attempt to explain briefly the importance of some developments in the meaning of religion and revelation with special respect to 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy. (René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, Staten Island, N.Y., Alba House, 1967; Wilhelm Weischedel, *Der Gott der Philosophen. Grundlegung einer philosophischen Theologie im Zeitalter des Nihilismus*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983; Miklos Vetö, *De Kant à Schelling: les deux voies de l'idéalisme allemand*, Grenoble: Million, 1998-2000).

## 1. The Crisis of Religion

When I use the expression “the crisis of religion”, I do not simply refer to the “religious crisis” as often formulated today with respect to the developments of modernity and secularization. (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap 2007) What I more importantly mean is the crisis of the meaning of the term *religio*. As has been remarked many times by important experts, *religio* is a unique development of Western and Western-related languages. (Kerber, Walter, *Der Begriff der Religion*, München: Kindt, 1994; Mezei Balázs, *Vallásbölcselet*, Gödöllő: Attraktor, 2005, I, 2. §) Languages unrelated, either linguistically, historically, or semantically to Classical and Middle Age Latin do *not* possess a term of an equivalent meaning (Max Müller, *Three Introductory Lectures on the Science of Thought*, London: Longmans Green, 1888). Not even Classical Greek had an exact expression of what pre-Roman Latin language users meant by *religio*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek *threskeia* means piety. Some other Greek expressions of the Classical age, such *nomos*, *sebeia*, or

Traditional and speculative etymologies of the word *religio*—as for instance by Cicero, Lactantius, St. Augustine or St. Thomas—offer interpretations which presuppose a historically later meaning of the word.<sup>2</sup> The original meaning, however, was close to what we call “taboo” today. The prefix “re” in *re-ligio* does not refer to the meaning “back” or “again” in this case, but rather to the emphatic confirmation of *ligo*, “to bind.”<sup>3</sup> Thus *religio* was in

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*hodos* describe aspects of what the Latin *religio* came to express. It is interesting to note here that there are languages of European origin in which a term other than a version of the Latin *religio* is used to denote the content of religion. In some Slavic languages, the term expressing a God-relationship is used (Slovakian *náboženstvo*, Czech *náboženství*). In Slovenian, religion is *vere*, which is related to the verb *believe*. In Afrikaans, religion is *godsdienst*, (cf. German *Gottesdienst*, service of God). In Finnish, the word *uskonto* comes from the word *faith* (*usko*). In Hungarian, the meaning of religion is expressed by the word *vallás*, which originates in the verb *vallani*, to confess. Here *vallás* actually means confessing “reality as it is”, in accordance with the best knowledge of the agent.

<sup>2</sup> According to Cicero, *religio* comes from *relegere*, to read again (Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, II, xxviii). For Lactantius, *religio* is derived from *religati* (Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, Paris : Cerf, 1971, IV, 28, 2). Augustine offers more than one etymology, the most famous is *re-legere* (Augustinus, *De civitate dei*, Stutgardiae: In aedibus B. G. Teubneri, 1981, X, 3). St. Thomas’ most interesting and somewhat playful etymology binds the word *religio* to *se ligo*, to bind itself [to God] (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, Parisiorum: Lethielleux, 1967, III, 119). These etymologies were not meant by their authors as genuine explorations of grammatical origin. Rather, these authors wished to suggest a hidden meaning of the word, thereby throwing light on the important core meaning of the word itself.

<sup>3</sup> „Concerning the etymology of this word [*religio*], various opinions were prevalent among the ancients. Cicero derives it from *relegere*, an etymology favoured by the verse cited ap. Aulus Gellius 4, 9, 1, *religentem esse oportet, religiosum nefas*; whereas Servius (as Vergilius, *Aeneis*, 8, 349), Lactantius (4, 28), Augustine (*Retractationes* 1, 13) al., assumes *religare* as the primitive, and for this derivation Lactantius cites the expression of Lucretius (1, 931; 4, 7); *religionum nodis animos exsolvere*. Modern etymologists mostly agree with this later view, assuming as root *lig*, to bind, whence also *lic-tor*, *lex*, and *ligare*; hence, *religio* sometimes means the same as *obligatio*.”... „*Religio* as reverence for God (the gods), the fear of God, connected with a careful pondering of divine things; piety, religion, both pure inward piety and that which is manifested in

pre-Roman Latin language something strictly bound by a higher power. More important than its original meaning is the spectacular development, the historical evolution of the meaning of *religio*—from its totemistic origins to the description of a unique yet universal phenomenon of religion as we understand the word today.

This historical development of the meaning of *religio* is both *synthetic* and *dynamic*. The meaning of the word is synthetic as it connects not only various meanings related to *religio*—such as subjective and objective components—but it integrates almost seamlessly separate historical developments into a unified meaning, the meaning of religion. Today one could use the brief formula that

**Religion is the integrated system of subjective objectivity and objective subjectivity in a historical perspective.<sup>4</sup>**

On the other hand, the meaning of *religio* is dynamic as it develops directly from its archaic origins, through Hellenistic political meanings, into the modern and contemporary universal sense of the word. Moreover, even today religion is an open term—open to its further developments and various applications.<sup>5</sup> This fact explains its widespread use today for as different phenomena as the positive religions, such as the monotheistic religions on the one hand, and on the other hand to phenomena related to the religion mentioned e. g. in a song

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religious rites and ceremonies; hence the rites and ceremonies, as well as the entire system of religion and worship, the *res divinae* or *sacrae*, were frequently called *religio* or *religiones*.” (Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon 2002 (1879), 1556)

<sup>4</sup> I use this formula in my Hungarian language *Philosophy of Religion* (Mezei, *Vallásbölcselet*, vol. II. p. 542).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the notion of „open religion” in Balázs Mezei, “Religion after Auschwitz: Jonas, Metz and the Place of Religion in our World Today”, A. Singh—P. Losonczi (eds), *From Political Theory to Political Theology*, London—New York: Continuum, 2009, 111-122.

by R. E. M.<sup>6</sup> In the song “Losing my religion”, as is presented in the exceptionally imaginative video-clip, “religion” appears as the general label of customs, morals, beliefs traditionally accepted in a given circle of society for a given period of time yet losing sense today. “Losing one’s religion” refers to radical changes with respect to the meaning of religion. Instead of the disintegrating parts of traditional systems, the focus today is on the isolated individual seeking his and her place in the place left empty by the disintegration of earlier religious forms.<sup>7</sup>

The crisis of religion—the crisis of the meaning of *religio*—appears as a historical occurrence already present in many developments of the term. One important development was the time around the beginning of our era when *religio* absorbed the meaning of related Greek terms, such as *nomos* (law), *sebeia* (piety), *threskeia* (religiousness), or *homologia* (confession of truth/reality). Another important change occurred with the revival of Western Christianity in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when *religio* assumed a strongly political meaning in accordance with the re-establishing of the idea of the Western Roman Empire. A most significant development came with the Muslim occupation Constantinople in 1453: As is reflected in the writings of Nicolaus of Cusa (especially Nicolaus Cusanus, *De pace fidei*, Frankfurt am Main; Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 2002), the application of *religio* to a non-Christian formation, traditionally denoted merely as a *secta* (school), opened a new horizon in the development of the universal meaning of the term. (cf. Gergely Bakos, *On Faith, Rationality, and the Other in the Late Middle Ages*, Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick 2010)

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it seemed for some decades that a new term could supplant old *religio*. When various branches of the Protestant Reformation denoted themselves as

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwUZVkkfE70>

<sup>7</sup> For a thoroughgoing elaboration of the modern and contemporary use of the word, see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Part IV.

*confessiones*, for a time *confessio* became widely used instead of *religio* both in Catholic (*confessiones* in a pejorative sense) and Protestant (*confessio* in a positive sense) sources. The use of *confessio* signaled a new meaning emerging out of the meaning of *religio*: the meaning emphasizing the role of the free human subject, almost a “person” in our sense today, in the restructuring of traditional religion, in his or her acts with respect to God, Church, doctrines, and tradition. *Religio* thus became “confessional”, something originating not in the cosmos or a meta-cosmic God, but instead in the free human subject, in the subjectivity of the faithful person trusting her life to Christ. However, with the institutional consolidation of Protestant movements, the use of *confessio* replaced again *religio*—even if in a slightly changed meaning of the latter word, a meaning already containing as its center the notion of the individual-personal act of faith.<sup>8</sup>

The crisis of religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be analyzed as a certain crisis of the meaning of the term. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant *confessiones* had become well-established *religiones* in many European countries with robust political, social and economic structures. Rationalism and naturalism had introduced a naturalistic meaning into religion, a meaning expressed in the compound “natural religion” or, just to mention one example, *The Natural History of Religion* by David Hume. The French Enlightenment, nevertheless, strived to delete not only certain features from the meaning of religion, such as the traditional-transcendent or the subjective-immanent, but religion itself in its core meaning. Religion as a mere cult for the masses—this is what retained some sort of meaning for the French revolutionaries who attempted to destroy all kinds of traditional religion and introduced, instead, the “cult of reason”—without religion in the traditional sense. (cf. Thomas Molnar, *The Decline of the Intellectual*, Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1994)

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<sup>8</sup> Some trends in Catholic counter-reformation, such as Jesuitism, were at least as individualistic and person-oriented than Protestant, especially Puritanistic movements.

The *Aufklärung* or German Enlightenment, nevertheless, did not share many aspects of the period of *Les lumières* in France.<sup>9</sup> Among the most influential representatives of the *Aufklärung* hardly anyone was a confessed atheist or a materialist (in the coming generations, the materialism of a Feuerbach was again of a very peculiar, I would say mystical kind). Rather, German *Aufklärung* was in many ways religious, thus preparing the way for German Romanticism. That was possible because religiosity, in the Protestant territories of the German Empire, was not strictly bound to traditional liturgical and hierarchic forms. Pietism as a widespread and free-spirited movement offered a religion close to subjective spirituality and definitely distanced itself from established cultic forms. Goethe appears to have been fairly open to non-Christian forms (and in freemasonry that was a perfectly viable option), but he refused superficial atheism. Not only was he deeply mystical, but a certain piety imbues his works, as mirrored for instance in the famous end piece of the 2nd part of the *Faust* (“Woman eternal draws us on high.”) Schiller, the first in the line of the great German idealist philosophers (Rüdiger Safranski, *Schiller als Philosoph*, Berlin: Siedler, 2005), breathes the air of a deeply religious spirituality, such as in his famous *The Walk*. (*Spaziergang*, c. f. Safranski, *Schiller oder die Erfindung des deutschen Idealismus*. München: Hanser, 2004) The style of 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy remains similarly mystical, sometimes paradoxical, even though well defined and apparently important elements of religiosity may be missing in the work of influential figures, such as Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, M. Stirner, or F. Nietzsche.<sup>10</sup>

In a pregnant sense we can say that what occurred in German philosophy between, and

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<sup>9</sup> This can be seen for instance in the correspondence between Goethe and Schiller, cf. Liselotte Dieckmann, *Correspondence between Goethe and Schiller 1794-1805*. New York: P. Lang, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> To speak of Nietzsche’s religiousness may appear contrary to Nietzsche’s sometimes strong empiricism. However, just the figure of Zarathustra shows the fact how deeply Nietzsche was aware of the significance of a kind of religiousness, a new kind indeed yet still a phenomenon related to the tradition of *religio*.

including, Kant and Nietzsche was in many ways a *reaction* to the crisis of religion as developed out of the Protestant Reformation. German philosophy in this period may be rightly called, with an expression of J. N. Findlay, “German Theology.” (J. N. Findlay, *The Discipline of the Cave*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1966) As Nietzsche famously remarked, “The Protestant pastor is the grandfather of German philosophy.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, London: Solar Books, 2007, ch. 10). This remark is so much true that we can add: Nietzsche himself came from an old family of Protestant pastors. German culture was theologically inclined and resulted in surprisingly new theological and religious proposals even in the arts, as shown for instance by Richard Wagner’s metaphysically audacious works, such as the *Parsifal*.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever is the future of the term of *religio*, we can clearly see its historical dynamism. It can be seen too that the contemporary, widespread and many-sided use of the term, while gradually leaving behind its historical origins, opens new possibilities in its semantic development. These possibilities point beyond the historical scope of *religio* and open fundamentally new vistas in our cultural history.

## 2. Religion and Revelation

The notion of divine revelation has been central to the concept of religion as construed on Christian principles. However central the notion was in the theological sense, yet the first tractate concentrating specifically on the notion of revelation did not appear before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As R. Latourelle suitably points out, the theological doctrine of revelation was

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<sup>11</sup> In the original libretto of the *Parsifal*, the final lines read: “Miracle of supreme salvation! Our Redeemer redeemed!” Here we find Wagner’s stage description: “A beam of light: the Grail glows at its brightest. From the dome a white dove descends and hovers over Parsifal’s head.—Kundry slowly sinks lifeless to the ground in



eclipsed during the first millennium by the debates and clarifications of other doctrines, such as those of Christology and Ecclesiology. In the First Scholasticism, most importantly in the works of Thomas Aquinas, we find many passages on the notion of revelation—even though, for St. Thomas, the basic meaning of *revelatio* is prophetic inspiration (Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 170). In the general sense it can be said that our contemporary idea of revelation, as e. g. John Baillie pointed out, had only a fragmentary presence in the theological literature before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. (John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1956)

The most important reason for this situation was the unchallenged validity of a world-view in which a certain notion of divine revelation appeared self-evident. The very possibility of the existence of some higher power, gods or a god, was taken for granted, and the suitable communication of such beings was naturally considered as given in so many forms: in dreams, visions, hallucinations, in the sound of tree-leaves or in the flight of birds, or again in the authority of old, mystery-laden writings. That is to say, some natural notion of revelation, the communication of higher powers to human beings, was so deeply wired into the consciousness of pre-modern humanity, that a thorough-going elaboration of this piece of natural knowledge must have seemed superfluous. Almost all the central pieces of Classical literature, from Greek poetry through the Septuagint to Christian theology, presupposed this understanding of the universe where “revelation” in a fundamental sense was not only possible but, in some sense, generally actual. The question was not the possibility of revelation; it was rather the concrete form one could accept as genuine, that is to say coming not from lower deities of “demons” but from the head of the spiritual world, God.

The explanation of the natural meaning of revelation is to be sought in what I call the cosmo-theological understanding of reality. According to the cosmo-theological view, the

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front of Parsifal, her eyes uplifted to him...” Cf. <http://www.rwagner.net/e-frame.html>

universe is a *plenum*—a place where there is no vacuum. The importance of the doctrine of *plenum* (*Aristotelis Physica*, Oxonii: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1966, IV, 8) however, was not merely in its physical significance. The underlying idea is that the universe is a living being (*zoon*), which is composed not only of physical elements, but also of ether, that is to say something god-like or spiritual. Such a universe is full of spiritual beings (“demons”, later angels and related kinds). These beings uphold a continuous communication among themselves and human beings. In this universe of ongoing communication, higher beings know more than lower beings and are thus in a position of instructing the latter. Communication, in this hierarchical sense, is a continuous instruction, the final destination of which is the human world. A cosmos of revelation, it realized a complicated structure of instructions, teachings. Our ancestors lived indeed in a universe of *paidea*, in a pedagogical cosmos. Cosmo-theology expresses the idea that human beings find themselves in such a spiritual universe where they belong to a hierarchical strictly defined position. The visible universe, especially the planets, the stars and the constellations are the expression of the spiritual hierarchy. Human beings are part of this living whole where revelation—the communication of higher beings to lower ones—is the basic form of communication.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> My expression cosmo-theology originates in the term „cosmo-theism” coined by H. von Glasenapp (Helmuth von Glasenapp, *Die fünf grossen Religionen*, Düsseldorf: E. Diederich, 1951) and further analysed by J. Assmann (Jan Assmann, *Monotheismus und Kosmotheismus: Ägyptische Formen eines "Denkens des Einen" und ihre europäische Rezeptionsgeschichte*, Heidelberg: Winter, 1993). According to cosmo-theology, the basic structures of reality become accessible especially in the phenomena of the sky (sun, moon, planets, stars, constellations etc.), that is in their movements and relationships. The cosmo-theological pattern determines theistic and monotheistic schemes of earlier and later religious forms, such as that of Christianity, and thus imbues human consciousness in a fashion that remains effective in various ways even in the age of science. The contemporary human impetus to know ever more of the starry sky (distant clouds, exoplanets etc.) originates, historically as well as mimetically (R. Dawkins), in the ancient human desire to dialogize with the stars or gods and become similar to (Plato) or even unified with (Aristotle) these heavenly entities.

Based on the cosmo-theological construction of reality, the writings of the Old and the New Testament offered formulas—those of God’s locutions to humans—which made the impression of unchallengeable self-evidence on the then contemporary readers. The widespread use of extra-canonical writings in and around the first Christian communities showed the influence of the genre of *gala*, a Hebrew term which was translated into Greek as *apocalupsis*. The content of a *gala* was prophetic communication of God to an elected one with the task of transmitting the message to others, existing at the threshold of the annihilation of the world. Such a *gala* we find already in the Old Testament, in the visions of Ezekiel or Daniel, and most importantly in the New Testament, in John’s *Revelations*. The Latin *revelatio* was a simple translation of *apocalupsis*, with the basic meaning “removing of cover.”

Every word of the Gospels in the New Testament strictly presupposes first the schema of *gala*, second the cosmo-theological construction of the universe, the pedagogical cosmos. Jesus appears as the embodiment of God’s communication, as His Word; Jesus’ deeds, words, even his life and death were seen as a *gala par excellence*. Just as the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars reveal their genuine nature by moving through the sky and associating themselves with various heavenly entities, so too the Jesus of the Gospels move around in a geographical area—in an age when geography always had a stellar equivalent—and becomes associated with various figures. Jesus reveals his genuine nature to these actors and groups of actors between the starting point of birth (signified by conspicuous heavenly occurrences, such as the Star of Bethlehem) and the end point of death (signaled again by exceptional meteorological events, such a full eclipse of the sun). Jesus’ death nevertheless points to his rise again after three and half days, that is after the period during which the moon, seen geocentrically, remains invisible. (For more detail see Arthur Drews, *Der Sternhimmel in der Dichtung und Religion der alten Völker und des Christentums*, Jena: Diederichs, 1924)

A different aspect of *apocalupsis* was its mysterious character. This character may have been originated in Hellenistic mystery cults of Egyptian, Greek, and Asian origins. (R. Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen nach ihrer Grundgedanken und Wirkungen*, Leipzig-Berlin: Teubner, 1927; László Kákosy, *Fény és káosz: A kopt gnóosztikus kódexek*, Budapest: Gondolat, 1984) The point in a mystery cult was, precisely, that it wasn't public; it offered experiences and teachings retained for the few elects who were prohibited to speak of these mysteries on the burden of death.<sup>13</sup> Still, a metaphorical description of the mysteries was allowed, and this feature lent the literary form of *apocalupsis* an overemphasized role of metaphors and analogies—as we can see not only in John's *Revelations* but also in the parables of Christ, which were explained exclusively to the elect ones as “secrets” (τὰ μυστήρια, *enigmata*) hidden from the masses (cf. Matthew 13:11).<sup>14</sup>

Accordingly, the central form of divine revelation in Hellenistic religions, as well as in the New Testament, was divine *locution* to the elect in a mysterious and pedagogical form. For Irenaeus, revelation is knowledge in accordance with the apostolic tradition. For Clement of Alexandria, revelation is God's inner voice in the soul. Origen writes of God's living and self-revealing word. Although for St. Augustine, *revelatio* is no central expression, he knows of God's speaking, even in audible voice, to a human individual. For St. Bonaventure, God's revelation is his unification with the soul. For Thomas Aquinas, as mentioned, revelation can be supernatural knowledge, but centrally it is prophetic revelation, *revelatio prophetica*. (For more detail see Latourelle, *ibid.*)

The rapid development of mathematics and engineering during the 14-16<sup>th</sup> centuries

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance the introduction of Claudianus to *De raptu Proserpinae*: Claudianus, *Works*, London: W. Heinemann, 1922.

<sup>14</sup> “He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.”

gradually directed the attention of scholars from the supernatural sources of revelation to eternal verities accessible for the unassisted human mind. The discovery of new continents, peoples, cultures, and religions raised the question concerning the relationship between natural and supernaturally revealed knowledge. St. Thomas expressly said that certain pieces of knowledge, such as moral imperatives, may be reached by our natural faculty, yet they are revealed in the Bible so that we can learn them more easily. (Latourelle, *ibid*, 153 sq.) David Hume was not the first thinker to ask whether we need any sort of revelation inaccessible for the natural mind. For, as he argues, the contents of revelation cannot contradict human reason; the occurrence of supernatural revelation as a miracle is less than probable. (David Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions: The Natural History of Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007) Hume could refer to the standpoint of John Locke, for whom supernatural revelation as illumination cannot contradict reason *without* risking the danger of enthusiasm—a frightening danger for a genuine Englishman of the 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries (John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Glasgow: Urie (s. a.), On Enthusiasm 4). Revelation in the old sense appeared to be in a crisis in that age; for if it contradicted natural reason it was seen dangerous; if it did not contradict natural reason, it appeared superfluous.

The crisis of religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was at the same time the deep crisis of revelation; since however the Church, with its stable and complicated structure of institutions, was not directly involved in then contemporary scientific and philosophical debates, the growing implausibility of the notion of revelation did not immediately affect its central doctrines. Leading theologians, such as Melchior Cano or Francesco Suarez discussed in sophisticated tractates the problem of revelation (Melchior Cano, *De locis theologicis*, Graz: Styria, 1994; for Suarez cf. Latourelle *ibid*, 189 n. 13). They and other authors too contributed to the emergence of the fundamental theological *tractatus* entitled *de revelation*. Their central point was deeply cosmo-theological as revelation was for them the collection of propositions,

even sentences in the strict sense. Beyond the sometimes ambiguous writings of mystical thinkers, who did not play an important role in official theology, there was no theoretical attempt to challenge the propositional understanding of revelation. It was first in Classical German Philosophy when a number of authors emerged, who were at the same time accomplished theologians and philosophers yet, in their own ways, mystical minds too. (cf. Balázs Mezei, “Two Models of Revelation: Propositional vs. Radical” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 2009, 1, 99-121)

### 3. Some Words on Kant’s Influence

Kant’s importance in the development of modern theology and philosophy is immense; this is valid for his role in the development of revelation too. The Kantian critique of philosophical theology in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952, B 6111/A583 sq.) is far from being of merely logical importance. Rather what he deeply—but from the logical point of view dubiously—criticized was an overall understanding of the notion of God as an unjustified prolongation of everyday objective experience. The Kantian criticism of the predicate of being, as something we cannot freely attribute to the mere notion of God, is rooted in the underlying criticism of the kind of being traditional theology credited to God. Indeed, it was the *nature of being* of God, which Kant so sharply criticized; and the Kantian moral argument offered, at the same time, a different kind of being as compatible with God, that is to say being as a moral postulate. Being as a moral postulate—in contradistinction to narrow interpretations—opens up a more central notion of being, in which human freedom and moral fulfillment are necessarily synthesized.

In a different sense, Kant’s critique was based on a re-evaluation of human

experience—even though bound to some narrowly understood operative terms, such as the definition of experience purely as sense-experience. The re-evaluation of human experience started with the exploration of the *a priori* realm of knowledge and culminated in the moral experience of God as necessarily presupposed or postulated. Being is far from being reducible to the being of naïve objective experience. Rather, being has a higher or central realm, which embraces free human activity. Thus, divine being cannot be analyzed in terms of the being of objective experience. Such a being, however, belongs to the necessary and *a priori* realm of experience. Yet this *a priori* realm does not exist in the real sense as its function is to make possible experience. Genuine being is moral being; if God has some genuine being, it must be of the moral kind. God is thus morally postulated by free human action; it is moral experience that is constitutive of the kind of being we rightly attribute to God. (Weischedel, *Der Gott der Philosophen*, 191 sq.)

It is emblematic that Kant compared his idea of philosophy to the discovery of the heliocentric view of the universe by Copernicus. For indeed the Kantian critique attempted to surpass the scope of the entire tradition of thinking in terms of the visible universe geocentrically conceived—the long tradition of cosmo-theology. This thinking did not only influence “science” in the older sense, but determined philosophy and theology too; thus it is legitimate to use the term cosmo-theology for the description of pre-Kantian philosophical and theological thinking. At the same time, some central tenets of cosmo-theological thinking do not necessarily collapse if the tradition is unmasked. For many aspects of cosmo-theology, for instance the very notion of reality as manipulable, are rooted in the tradition of cosmo-theology and remain decisive even after the Kantian criticism, for instance in the contemporary notion of the natural sciences.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Heidegger’s criticism of technology expresses a similar notion. “Philosophy” reached its end inasmuch as it has been dissolved in the specific sciences. Yet modern science in general and technology in particular remained

By seriously damaging the soundness and logical structure of the traditional proofs for the existence of God, Kant prepared the soil for a new understanding of divine communication; thus a new understanding of revelation too. In Kant's work God as a necessary idea of the mind reintroduced an epistemic immediacy, as opposed to the mediate character of the traditional proofs of God, the ontological proof included, between the human mind and notion of God.<sup>16</sup> This immediacy overwrote the traditional theology of distance, which was construed cosmo-theologically, i.e. on the grounds of a geometrically and geocentrically measurable physical distance. On the other hand, God as a morally unavoidable, necessary *postulate* of moral consciousness or practical reason defined a new understanding of God's existence, not in the cosmo-theological terms of empirical existence, but in terms of moral postulation (*Voraussetzung*) which placed God immediately into the heart of moral action. The most direct form of this step in Kant was his formulation of the categorical imperative as the factual motor of human morality. For a postulate of moral action denotes not only a logical necessity; it is rather of genuine ontological importance, a condition of human existence.

The Kantian understanding of God contributed to the historic change in the notion of God, traditionally conceived as a form of natural perfection, to the notion of God permeating concrete human existence in its core. Kant thus conceives moral reality and the existence of

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under the spell of a notion of being, which was derived from Greek *ousia*. *Ousia*, however, is just an aspect in genuine being, *Sein*, which is consistently misinterpreted if viewed in the perspective of *ousia*. Cf. The Question concerning Technology, in Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Writings*. Ed. by David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> The ontological proof for the existence of God is based on the recognition of divine presence in the human mind. Yet this presence is construed as expressing something fundamentally different from the mind, "that than which a greater cannot be thought" or, for Descartes, the notion of infinity. In both cases, as in further versions of the ontological argument, epistemic immediacy is eclipsed by infinite distance.



God as complementary terms; God, in this sense, loses his objective-natural distance from a human person and assumes a structural and dynamic immediacy in human “existence” (which already Fichte termed *Dasein*). On the basis on this immediacy are we able to understand Kant’s almost prophetic utterance in the *Religion within the limits of reason alone*. God’s future intervention into history is foretold on the basis of reason in the Kantian sense (*Vernunft*); that is to say, according to the Kantian argument, a certain kind of revelation, consonant with Kantian reason, is to be conceived in philosophical terms. (Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, New York: Harper, 1960, part III)

For Kant, revelation (*Offenbarung*) is fundamentally *historical*; it is historical in the sense that history is bound to the empirical and the empirical is opposed to the spirit of reason. Thus, revelation stands beyond, or before, reason yet it requires reason for initial plausibility. The religion of reason or *Vernunftsreligion* of the future is to be based on *God’s new kind of revelation* reasonable and supernatural at the same time; historical yet perennial, and intellectual yet ethical-practical. Still, even for Kant, the highest form of revelation is non-empirical but intuitive: it is given in the form of illumination.

**The basis for the transition to that new order of affairs must lie in the principle that the pure religion of reason (*reine Vernunftsreligion*) is a continually occurring divine (though not empirical) revelation for all human beings. (Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, III, VII)**

From what I summarized above it is evident that Kant didn’t want to dispose of the notion of divine revelation. What he proposes is in fact a revolutionary change in the meaning of the notion, yet a change not fully disconnected from earlier features of the notion. Kant’s use of the term “history” received a thoroughgoing criticism among others in the works of Schelling and Hegel; and revelation as a fact is understood in an unambiguous way by Fichte.

Still, without Kant's seminal influence the notion of revelation as history and fact could not develop into its post-Kantian philosophical and theological forms, such as the historical understanding of revelation by W. Pannenberg. (Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Revelation as History*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1979)

#### 4. Schelling and the new reality of revelation

Instead of describing the notions of revelation as conceived by Fichte and Hegel, let me choose another perspective: that of the *nature of revelation*. It was the effects of the Second Scholasticism, and especially of F. Suarez, that divine revelation was seen emphatically, almost exclusively, as strictly embodied in divine statements or propositions. What we call the propositional understanding of revelation originates in Scholastic thinking and became articulate in the theological literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The notion of the propositional understanding of revelation presupposes a realist notion of God as an extra-terrestrial being governing the sun, the stars, and the earth—the cosmo-theological scheme. One of the most important effects of the Kantian criticism of the traditional notion of God was the challenge it posed for the purely propositional understanding of revelation. For if God is not a natural perfection, along the lines of an Aristotelian biologism, then his revelation cannot be conceived of as an external locution, in the form of well-defined propositions that are to be believed by the faithful on the authority of the Church. While Kant opened the way to a new understanding of revelation, his basic understanding did not fundamentally differ from the earlier, propositional view. Schleiermacher's passionate reaction to Kant's philosophical theology was a clear statement of the implausibility of propositional revelation. Schleiermacher in fact introduced the universal notion of divine-human encounter based and the religious experience of human beings, their feeling. (Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On*

*religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994)<sup>17</sup>

However, the most important reinterpretation of the traditional notion of revelation, shortly after the Kantian turn, was offered by Schelling. Already Origen uses an expression, which may be seen as a forerunner of the later notion of self-revelation. (Origen, *Quae extant*, New York: Paulist, 1979, ch. II)<sup>18</sup> And one of the tacit presuppositions of Patristic Christology was again the recognition that God the Father reveals or expresses himself in the person of Christ—even though all the central expressions involved here (revealing, expressing-himself, person) had a significantly different meaning in Greek, Platonizing Christianity. Yet divine self-revelation attained a genuinely central role only in the work of authors, who changed the traditional notion of God as a natural perfection (the cosmo-theological view) for a dynamic and monopersonal understanding where the meaning of “self” gained a new significance.<sup>19</sup> As soon as the “self”, that is core reality, is conceived as a historically and morally constituted, dynamic and genuinely personal identity, the meaning of

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<sup>17</sup> See the paper by Balázs Mezei, „Two Models of Revelation: Propositional vs. Radical”.

<sup>18</sup> “Our Saviour, therefore, is the image of the invisible God, inasmuch as compared with the Father Himself He is the truth: and as compared with us, to whom He reveals the Father, He is the image by which we come to the knowledge of the Father, whom no one knows save the Son, and he to whom the Son is pleased to reveal Him. And the method of revealing Him is through the understanding.” (Origen, *De principiis*, *Quae extant*, Ch. II)

<sup>19</sup> The notion of a monopersonal God does not exclude the traditional notion of God’s Trinity, according to which God is one essence in three persons. The monopersonal notion of God emphasizes that God Himself is a person in a central and important sense: not a fourth person beyond the three persons of the Trinity, but the common personal core of the three persons. For the proper understanding of a monopersonalistic view of God, we need to see clearly that the traditional notion of God’s persons (*hupostaseis*, *personae*) did not express accurately the personhood modern age has realized as something central to an individual. The traditional notion of *personae* is closer to the meaning of outlook, appearance, or mask, than to the modern notion of personal identity. With the emergence of the latter, a new understanding of God’s personhood is to be developed.

“self-revelation” changes too. This change was completed by Schelling.

In Schelling’s understanding, divine revelation is the meta-historical process of God’s self-constitution, his genuine “actus.” God’s original reality is disclosed into its negation by the principle of denial, evil, or femininity. Through this denial does it become possible that God realizes his full identity and completes the process of universal disclosure or self-revelation. This meta-historical, yet truly historical process is represented in the development of mythological forms, religious formations, where Christianity embodies the transition into the fullness of divine self-constitution. (F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung* 1841/42, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977)

The difference between Hegel’s universal history of Spirit and Schelling’s *Offenbarungsphilosophie* (philosophy of revelation) can be found, in my view, in the latter’s stronger emphasis on a historical process not strictly identical with chronological history but representing a deeper, genuine layer of historicity. (Peter Koslowski, *Philosophien der Offenbarungen*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001) In Schelling’s thought, the notion of revelation, emerging from its modest sources of history, reaches an unparalleled height in the age of Christianity, especially in modern Christianity. Revelation becomes the universal manifestation of God’s genuine self, a never-ending yet complete self-disclosure, beginning in the archaic forms of mythology and leading, through the phases of Christian realization, to the ultimate age of positive philosophy. The content of God’s self-revelation is a renovation of the being of God by the cooperation of the human spirit. Human beings have as their core task to participate in God’s self-fulfillment, in the process of revelation.

The German word for revelation is *Offenbarung* (“laying bare”, “disclosure”). If an unknown medieval author had not invented this German word as the translation of the Latin *revelation*, later generations of German thinkers may have not found the way to the notion of a universal *Selbstoffenbarung Gottes*, God’s self-disclosure. Indeed, what we find in modern

German philosophy—in Nietzsche as well as in M. Scheler and M. Heidegger—can be seen as variations and further developments of Schelling’s ingenious thesis about the process of divine self-revelation. Given the Catholic Church’s adamant insistence on the propositional model of revelation, it is an irony of history that the notion of self-revelation found its way into the document *Dei Filius* of the 1<sup>st</sup> Vatican Council at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The text speaks emphatically of God’s “revealing himself”, *revelare seipsum*. And while the origin of this expression goes back to the *Letter to the Ephesians* (1:9), yet it gains a new meaning in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

### 5. Kierkegaard’s Decisive Turn

Although Kierkegaard main target in his writings is Hegel, his thoughts in matters of religion and revelation are in many ways close to those of Schelling. We cannot speak of a direct influence, although here and there one can surmise the reflections of Schelling’s thought. It was especially the later Schelling, whose famous Berlin lectures Kierkegaard attended, whose positive philosophy, the philosophy of mythology, and especially the philosophy of revelation must have been known to Kierkegaard. (Tonny Aagaard Olesen, “Kierkegaard und Schelling. Eine historische Einführung“ J. Hennigfeld and J. Stewart, *Kierkegaard und Schelling*, Berlin: W. de Gruyter 2003, 1-103.)

In the context of what I have suggested above, Kierkegaard’s importance in the history of religion and revelation during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century can be delineated as follows. The notion of historicity, a central thought of the second and later Schelling, makes itself visible in

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<sup>20</sup> “Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself.”—See also my paper on the relationship between a human person and revelation: Balázs Mezei, “Divine Revelation and Human Person”, *Philosophy and Theology*, vol. 18, number 2, 337-354, 2008.

his analysis of freedom, the history of mythology, and especially the historical-theistic process of revelation. For Schelling, positive philosophy goes beyond the synthesis of Hegel, for the latter was not able to grasp—according to Schelling—the really concrete, the genuinely existing, that is God’s being.<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard’s general position against Hegel implies a number of aspects, which can be seen as closely related to the latter Schelling’s thought. First, Kierkegaard emphasizes the genuinely existing subject, the concrete human person in his and her life and death. Second, Kierkegaard refuses the possibility of a monistic (as he often calls, “naturalistic”) synthesis of reality in which God and humans, the transcendent and the worldly could be impeccably integrated. Third, Kierkegaard emphasizes God’s unlimited power above and beyond the world and especially human beings, a power impossible to contradict or even to rationally conceive. Fourthly and consequently, a human person’s position vis-à-vis God is by definition paradoxical. Finally, the only way to know about God’s being and orders is to take cognizance of His unconditionally sovereign revelation.

As Johannes Hirschberger writes,

**Marx meant the socialist subversion of the tranquil and authoritative civil world of Hegel. Kierkegaard meant the Christian subversion. We have to see this parallelism. (Johannes Hirschberger, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, Freiburg i. B.: Herder 2008, 492)**

Kierkegaard’s “subversion” sought to acknowledge the genuine existence of a concrete human being, who has grown out not only of the hierarchical world of Catholicism but also of the customary pietism of standard Protestantism. Kierkegaard’s importance in opening up an entirely new vista in the history of philosophy, a view focusing on a concrete

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<sup>21</sup> Feuerbach and the Left Hegelians followed a similar kind of criticism, though not with respect to God, but with respect to being, and especially human being.

human being, cannot be overestimated. By depicting a human being at the crossroad of “either-or”, Kierkegaard highlighted human freedom in its extreme and paradoxical inappropriateness. For his understanding of human freedom is at the same time central and peripheral. It is central in his urging a human being to choose between God and the world, and it is peripheral in emphasizing God’s unconceivable omnipotence over human freedom.

Thus a new understanding of divine revelation is delineated in Kierkegaard’s works. It seems indeed that what Kierkegaard suggests is just a version of fundamentalist Biblical theology, a traditional emphasis on God’s absolute sovereignty, a piece of Kierkegaard’s anti-Hegelian rhetoric. In fact, however, the context of Kierkegaard’s other ideas, especially his point on God’s power over a fragile human being, changes the apparently traditional view of revelation. Most importantly, the emphasis on the paradoxical nature of God’s revealing himself challenges the traditional view of revelation as something accessible to the rational possibilities of a human being. As Kierkegaard writes:

**Merely to obtain the knowledge that God is unlike him, man needs the help of God; and now he learns that God is absolutely different from himself. But if God and man are absolutely different, this cannot be accounted for on the basis of what man derives from God, for in so far they are akin. Their unlikeness must therefore be explained by what man derives from himself, or by what he has brought upon his own head. But what can this unlikeness be? Aye, what can it be but sin; since the unlikeness, the absolute unlikeness, is something that man has brought upon himself... The consciousness of sin, which he indeed could no more teach to another than another could teach it to him, but only God—if God consents to become a Teacher. But this was his purpose, as we have imagined it. In order to be man’s Teacher, God proposed to make himself like the individual man, so that he might understand him fully. Thus our paradox is rendered still**

**more appalling, or the same paradox has the double aspect which proclaims it as the Absolute Paradox; negatively by revealing the absolute unlikeness of sin, positively by proposing to do away with the absolute unlikeness in absolute likeness. (SKS, PS, Ch. 3)**

Kierkegaard thus proposes revelation as an absolute paradox. He attained this view by simultaneously emphasizing human and divine concreteness; and by focusing on a human person in his and her most concrete life and death. No other author before him was able to zoom into this double ultimacy in such a fashion. Kant maintained a balance between the noumenal and the phenomenal, and positioned God into the integral moral perspective of a human agent. Fichte tried to dissolve the tension between God and human beings by focusing on the focal point of the I. Hegel offered his rational yet mystical synthesis of the universal process, which is at the same time God's absolute self-realization; thus a human being is a decisive moment in God's reality. Schelling on the other hand offered, in his positive philosophy, a historical view of the universe, which is the history of God too, where a human being takes place as a personal moment of this history. Yet Schelling emphasized the existential aspect of divine reality by maintaining negativity in the historical reality of God. Kierkegaard, however, never aspired to such high knowledge of God and history; his insistence to the core Christian views, the Bible, and traditional piety led him to realize what Schelling wanted to see in God, that is the paradoxical nature of God and humans.

That is Kierkegaard's last word on this central problem of Classical German Thought. The history of reflection, however, did not end with Kierkegaard. Nietzsche, Scheler, Heidegger and his followers continued this work and opened new possibilities in the understanding of revelation (Koslowski, *Philosophien der Offenbarung*, 833 sq; Mezei "Two Models of Revelation: Propositional vs. Radical").



## 6. Some consequences

What is the importance of the notion of revelation as reshaped in Classical German Philosophy? Protestant theology offered a vivid rebuttal to these philosophical developments, a reaction reaching even the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the—quite different—works of Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Tillich, or Pannenberg. Catholic theology was more cautious during the 19<sup>th</sup> century: instead of a dialogue with contemporary philosophers, Rome chose first Neo-Aristotelism and later Neo-Thomism, thereby silencing such important initiatives as the Catholic Tübingen Circle or Anton Günther of Vienna. Only during the 1930s there opened the way to an understanding of revelation in Catholic thought, which considered important a number of different *models* of revelation. We may say that the work of K. Rahner or H. U. von Balthasar aimed at a renewed understanding of divine revelation. Avery Dulles, the late New York cardinal was too among the important authors of Catholic provenience who have been able to influence the discussions on the possibilities of rethinking the traditional models of divine revelation. The most promising direction of this work, which continues not only the legacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century German thought but rather the entire history of the notion of revelation, can be summarized with the words of Keith Ward:

**Divine Revelation cannot be separated out and contrasted with human reflection and experience. (Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 231)**

Can we say that Keith Ward's point is a return to a pre-Kierkegaardian position by excluding the absolute paradox in the notion of revelation? My answer is negative. For even the absolute paradox of human-divine relationship in Kierkegaard's thought belongs to this

*relationship*, to this tension, which has kept and will keep busy philosophers and theologians throughout the centuries. As again Kierkegaard writes:

**The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think. This passion is at bottom present in all thinking, even in the thinking of the individual, in so far as in thinking he participates in something transcending himself. (SKS, PS, Ch. 3)**

Yet, as we could promptly say, what one cannot think one in fact thinks. Otherwise it would be impossible to think anything about what one cannot think. By reaching this paradoxical point, contemporary philosophy of religion may become able to completely close the history of a cosmo-theological understanding of revelation and open a new chapter in which revelation appears as attentive openness to not yet seen possibilities of human existence. (Cf. Balázs Mezei, “Religion after Auschwitz: Jonas, Metz and the Place of Religion in our World Today”)