

Skating on Thin Ice: Revelation and Theology

Elizabeth Thomas

Jane: So how's the theology course going?

Chris: Fine, though it's not exactly what I had expected.

Jane: How so?

Chris: I guess I was expecting exactly what Franke says theology should *not* be: a grid through which to interpret and apply Scripture.¹

Jane: What's wrong with that? Sounds like a good system to me. If more people agreed on reasonable interpretations of Scripture, we would have a lot less fights between groups of Christians. We might even be able to unite the whole body of Christ into one denomination! Wouldn't that be great?

Chris: Ummm, I'm not so sure. The problem is that 'reasonable interpretations of Scripture' as you say, sounds like we can use pure logic and the force of our own minds to decide which bits of Scripture are 'reasonable' and which are not. Heard of the 'Jefferson Bible?'

Jane: No, what is it?

Chris: It is what happened when one 'reasonable man' tried to do exactly what you are suggesting, and pruned Scripture back to only include the 'reasonable' parts. Problem is, he ended up pruning out an awful lot—all the miracles, including the resurrection, for a start.

Jane: Well obviously we can't do that.

Chris: Right, because the essence of the Scriptures is that they are *revelation*—they are records of God speaking to men of himself. We have to accept that revelation as something spoken into our lives from outside, something we could never deduce for ourselves from pure reason but which God condescended to tell us. The initiative is not with us, but with God.² After all, if we could have reasoned it out on our own, we wouldn't have needed the revelation.

Jane: If everything is through revelation, what good is theology then? Why study when it is all just 'revealed?'

Chris: Well, for a start, theology isn't something that stands above Scripture and tells people how to interpret it. Theology can only ever seek to clarify and understand the revelation in Scripture. It can't go beyond revelation that has been given. At the same time, study is important because as we think through the layers of the revelation we have been given, we can come to new conclusions about how the revelations affect our lives.

Jane: I was hoping you might have the answer to how to understand Job.

Chris: No, sorry. I'm doing First Testament studies next year. Besides, what made you think that theology would hold the key to understanding and interpreting Scripture?

Jane: I think it was you that thought that. I thought theology was a waste of time that would have been better spent in actual prayer, good works or whatever.

Chris: Oh yes, that's right. Well I'll tell you anyway—I guess I was hoping that theology would be a human system of lenses which, when I looked through them, would make everything in Scripture clear, and I would know what to think and how to live. Fortunately or unfortunately (I haven't really decided yet) that turned out not to be the case. Theology is more a case of working out the implications of what is said in the Scriptures of

God, but being the study of God, theology is necessarily unlimited and infinite in scope. We seek to limits of what revelation is given to us, but we can never actually reach the limits of God.

Jane: So I'm right—you should give up theology and go do works of charity.

Chris: No, I should do works of charity *without* giving up theology! It is only through the work of the theologians of the past that I know, firstly, that I should do works of charity, and secondly that my works are a response to God's grace and not a means of salvation. It is only through theology that I come to a correct understanding of what it means to live the Christian life, and also how to do it.

Jane: You could equally get that by reading the Bible.

Chris: Yes and no. I can read the Bible, but without the guidance of theologians of the past I can also get caught up in arguments of the past without realising it, and come to a fundamentally flawed understanding of God. Don't tell me you've never seen that happen!

Jane: Of course I have—I was talking with Tina just the other day about whether Jesus was wholly human and wholly divine. She says it's not there in Scripture.

Chris: She's right you know.

Jane: What do you mean? Everyone knows that Jesus was wholly human and wholly divine! That's the heart of Christian belief!

Chris: Yes, but it doesn't come directly from any particular Bible verse. Tina's right about that. It comes from theologians of the past struggling with the various combinations of divinity and humanity, and the implications of these for our faith. If Jesus were not fully divine, his death would not have the power to save us. If Jesus were not fully human, his death would not mean the same as our deaths. To short-change either aspect of Jesus is to cheapen the full meaning of grace. But that's a metanarrative—an understanding that comes out of the revelations we have been given, not a part of the direct revelations themselves.

Jane: You're kidding me.

Chris: Don't forget that Scripture is not *itself* revelation—it is a record of revelations given to witnesses of the past. Scripture is not the 'Word of God' in the same sense that the incarnate Christ is.

Jane: I suppose not, but it is special—not like just reading Philip Yancey or something.

Chris: No, the Bible is special, and is often the vehicle of revelation. Haven't you ever been reading the Bible and have some spiritual insight just 'come to you' or you understood something you had read before in a different way?

Jane: Yes, I think most Christians have.

Chris: Well, that's because the Bible can act as a vehicle of revelation—you come to it open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and with the expectation of learning, and thus the Holy Spirit is able to speak to you and give you a direct experience of revelation as you are reading.

Jane: But that would make the Bible no different from any other devotional book.

Chris: Not necessarily. The writers of the Bible were much closer to the actual source of revelation than any writer today. Even Paul who never met Jesus during his earthly life was living and writing very much in Jesus' time and under his influence, much more closely than is possible today. Also, the Church ...

Jane: Which church?

Chris: Not a denomination, the Body of Christ, as guided by the Holy Spirit. The Church has set apart these writings as authoritative. Theoretically other books could be added, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Jane: Philip Yancey would like that!

Chris: But realistically, this is not likely to happen. The Bible has also been called *biblical revelation*³ which refers to its particular Judeo-Christian nature, and to distinguish this tradition from other kinds of revelation.

Jane: Such as those given to other religions?

Chris: Those would also be other kinds of special revelation—specific words from God.

Jane: Except for Buddhist revelations, I suppose, since they don't acknowledge the existence of a god. Would they have revelations at all then?

Chris: I guess not. The term *revelation* implies that God is revealing himself—in the absence of a god I don't think you can have any revelation, which is presumably why Buddha called his insights “enlightenment” rather than revelation. More coffee?

Jane: Sure, thanks. How about other kinds of revelation then? If these are all *special revelations*, meaning specific to certain gods or religions, are there any less-special revelations?

Chris: Of course there's also general revelation—what we can learn about the nature of God by observing the patterns of nature and the created world.

Jane: Not much, then.

Chris: What do you mean? Looking into the heavens, don't they declare the glory of God? Doesn't the order of nature and the amazing variety of Creation speak to you of a Creator?

Jane: Sure, to me it does, because I'm looking at the world through Christian lenses—and so are you, and so have been most of the theologians who wrote about revelation, I'm sure. But that doesn't prove anything. That just demonstrates that we are all starting with the same set of assumptions. It is not good science to assume something and then say that your observations prove what you already assumed.

Chris: Are you calling Decartes a bad scientist?

Jane: If that is what he said, then—yes. Just ask Richard Dawkins or Stephen Hawking—both great scientists and still atheists. They know more about the ‘order of nature’ as you say, than both of us put together, yet they still manage to miss this *general revelation* you are going on about. Face it; it doesn't exist!

Chris: You think you're so smart, but this isn't the first time such a point has been made. Don't forget that medieval theologians described the ‘natural knowledge of God’ that comes from reflecting on the nature of the world around us as a subset of ‘reason,’ and not really revelation at all.

Jane: Don't dodge the point—you said yourself at the beginning that the definition of revelation was revelation of *God*,⁴ not of a body of knowledge. Revelation you said was a gift which brings “saving knowledge,”⁵ so I don't think the general wonderment at the ‘unknown God’ really counts, and you still haven't explained why Dawkins is an atheist.

Chris: I don't know why—there certainly are marks of the Creator in the creation, and Paul himself says in Romans that because God is visible in creation that we are without excuse if we deny the existence and goodness of God.

Jane: You see? You prove my point again—your so-called knowledge of God from general revelation is secondary to and dependent on your special revelation. You see God in nature because God already told you that he is there. Without that previous assumption, the whole general revelation thing falls apart.

Chris: Then how do you explain the fact that throughout time and cultures, nearly everyone has always assumed the existence of God? Doesn't that say something about how the presence of God is written into the fabric of the universe?

Jane: Not really. I think it says a lot about human society and psychology—why do you think that so many cultures have gods appearing as father and mother who take care of people in the afterlife, or gods as judges

who render ultimate justice? The gods are designed to fill the gaps in what people are looking for in life, such as fairness, explanations of death or missing sovereigns or parent-figures.

Chris: But God made human nature—don't you think it is likely that God made us to search for something more than we can find in this earth? That we are made with a sense of eternity in our souls?

Jane: Maybe, but that's a totally unprovable. You can't convince anyone who doesn't already believe in God by going in circles like that. All the other religions are in the same boat—they are all looking from the point of view of their own special revelations. To really see general revelation on its own, you need to ask the atheists, but you already know what their answer will be, so I say again: I don't believe in general revelation.

Chris: How about human love? Generosity? Altruism? These are not features that are explainable by 'natural processes.' The only reason humans ever act altruistically is the call of the conscience, which is placed there by God.

Jane: It is true that psychology and evolutionary biology have difficulty accounting for altruistic behaviour, but that's to do with human nature, not the rest of the world, which you were saying tells us about God. I'm just saying you can't look at the world and deduce the presence of God unless you start by assuming God's existence.

Chris: But as created beings, humans are part of the created world. Our nature tells us about God's nature, and exploring the character of God also tells about ourselves.⁶

Jane: Very pretty—are you suggesting that all psychologists must be deists? I can tell you for a fact that it ain't so.⁷ Anyway, even if I did believe in general revelation, I don't think I really approve of it.

Chris: What do you mean?

Jane: Just that general revelation could be very ambiguous, non-specific and completely impervious to critique.⁸ Dangerous stuff in my opinion! Anyone can read anything they like into it, and no-one else can say it isn't so. I could say that in the hawk eating the field-mouse I see a licence from God for the bigger and stronger to prey on the smaller and weaker. Without appealing to special revelation, you can't say I'm wrong. I could found a whole religion on 'might makes right' and claim that God revealed it to me in the make-up of the world, and manipulate my followers to believe likewise. As I Christian, I wouldn't do that, but someone else might. So I say we're better off without general revelation. Stick to the revealed God in the Scriptures and Christian testimony—that's the only God I'm interested in. Give up the idea of the God you can 'deduce' from nature—it's far too risky a proposition.

Chris: I can't believe you are suggesting that the fingerprints of God in nature are some kind of psychological self-deception.

Jane: Think about it—all the theologians and Renaissance scientists you have been reading come from an assumed Christian point of view, don't they?

Chris: Well, yes. Not many atheists write theological papers.

Jane: So all these people writing about your so-called *general revelation* are coming from an assumed Christian point of view, and are pontificating about other religions which they don't really understand. Even the non-Christian theologians are writing from their own preconceived position of the existence of the god or gods of their specific revelations. Except for the Buddhists once again—their religion doesn't see a God in nature either.

Chris: Uh...

Jane: I reckon it's a bit of an 'Emperor's New Clothes' kind of thing. The first theologian says "I see God in nature" so then everyone else says "Oh, yes, I see God in nature too!" No-one dares admit he *can't* see God in nature or he will be accused of being some kind of heretic and burned at the stake.

Chris: Now that's a bit unkind! Theologians aren't some kind of Spanish Inquisition you know!

Jane: Not anymore anyway. In days gone by though, to make the kinds of points I'm making now could have been to risk a lot.

Chris: Besides, the Emperor's New Clothes weren't really there. I don't think you can say that all the theologians and Christians through the ages were in some kind of cahoots to pretend something was there that wasn't. The concept appears in the Old Testament too, you know.

Jane: No, you're right. It's not quite as bad as that. People aren't pretending to see what isn't there. It's more unconscious than that—people's assumptions have agreed on this topic for so long, that everyone is convinced that general revelation exists. Since everyone writing on the topic is from the Judeo-Christian tradition, their assumptions agree and no-one realises that everyone is just patting everyone else on the back. It reminds more of the Wizard of Oz in his Emerald City, really, and everyone is wearing green-tinted glasses so that the city appears Emerald. All we need is one Dorothy to take off the glasses and see that the city is really white to spoil the illusion.

Chris: And that's you I suppose?

Jane: Not really—I'm a Christian too, so the world around me *does* appear to me to confirm the existence of God. What I wonder is if someone not wearing 'God-tinted glasses' would see God in the natural world. I suspect not, and what that means is that your so-called 'general revelation' is really a subset of 'special revelation'—Christians see God in nature only because we are already *told* that God made it all. Or to put it the other way around, it is the presence of the Holy Spirit within us that opens us to see the truth around us—without His action, no-one can teach us to see God.⁹ What your theological journals need is for an atheistic natural scientist to co-author a paper with a theologian denying the existence of general revelation.

Chris: Are you saying I should go find an atheist and write myself a paper?

Jane: Only if I get a footnote credit.

Chris: You make it sound like God is only to be found in the Bible, and that the world around us has nothing to say about God.

Jane: Not really—only that the content of faith can never be deduced by reasoning from the nature of the world around us. We would never know that God loved us, cares for us or wanted to be one of us without special revelation—that's really where it all happens. Revelation and faith are inextricably intertwined. There can be no revelation without faith, and no faith without revelation.¹⁰

Chris: OK. Now that is solved, what do you want to do next?

Jane: I was thinking of going ice-skating—want to come?

Chris: Sure.

[Sadly for theology, shortly after this conversation Jane Torvill and Christopher Dean discovered ice-skating and went on to win Olympic gold medals and the first perfect scores ever recorded in that sport. Their further conversations about theology, however, have been lost to posterity...] *reo*

Endnotes

1. J. R. Franke, *The Character of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 9.
2. G. S. Dicker, "Faith with Understanding," Melbourne: *JBCE* (1989) 27.
3. Bradley C. Hanson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 12.
4. Dicker, "Faith with Understanding," 30.
5. D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 23.

6. Stephen Curkpatrick, "CT111.15 Course notes," *Churches of Christ Theological College* (week 11.Semester 2.2007)
 7. The mother of the author of this paper being a case in point.
 8. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 32.
 9. V. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology, An Introduction* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001) 17.
 10. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (Crossroad, New York, 1990) 28.
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