

Chapter IV

Christian Revelation

"RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE" AS AN AMBIGUOUS TERM

In the previous chapter, the term *religious experience* was used ambiguously or in two different senses. One sense was descriptive, the other engaged or evaluative.

a) "*Religious Experience*" as a *Descriptive Term* – In the context of phenomenology of religion, and with reference to the stories of Arjuna and Moses, *religious experience* was intended as a primarily descriptive term. Used in this sense, the term has two implications. First, it means that we recognize in the accounts of Arjuna and Moses a certain conformity to patterns of behavior that we have learned to call religious. We recognize that these accounts should be filed under "religion." Second, referring to the stories of Arjuna and Moses as "religious experiences" doesn't necessarily commit one to the position that Arjuna and Moses really did meet God. This question is left open. With these two qualifications, the term *religious experience* can be used in psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Religious behavior is a fascinating human phenomenon and can be studied from a variety of methodological perspectives. In a general way, we can say that the term *religious experience* is associated with the cross-disciplinary area of study in North American colleges and universities known as "Religion" or "Religious Studies."

b) "*Religious Experience*" as an *Engaged Term* – In discussing the dialectical and analogical approaches to religious experience, and in my story about the angels of Super Thrift, the term *religious experience* was intended in a primarily evaluative or engaged way. In talking about my Super Thrift experience, I wanted to claim, first, that the people I met really were God's angels,

and, second, that on that night God had taken my own little story up into the larger story of salvation.

It is important to emphasize that both senses of the term *religious experience* can be used to refer to the same event, Exodus 3–4, for example. In each case, however, something different is meant. The difference is one of perspective. Each sense of the term implies a different attitude on the part of the speaker. When used primarily for description, *religious experience* puts the speaker in the disengaged posture of an observer, more or less interested, of someone else's religious life. William James, for example, is extremely sympathetic to the accounts he treats in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He never closes off the possibility that what he calls "religious experience" might include experience of a reality other than the self and the world. On the other hand, one never gets the sense that James considers any of the texts he studies religiously relevant to him, except in a most general way.

By contrast, the person who uses the term *religious experience* in the second, or engaged, sense assumes a posture more like that of a participant-observer. This engaged posture implies some degree of self-involvement with the claim, a commitment to its consequences as religiously relevant here and now.

In the modern context, the ambiguity of the term *religious experience* appears deliberate. *Religious experience* is a political term. It functions as a silent peace treaty between "non-believers" and "believers" in the religiously pluralist English-speaking world. In its descriptive sense, it allows non-believers to talk about religious claims and put them on hold without offending believers. The descriptive sense also serves to put the study of religion into a form acceptable to state-supported colleges and universities in the United States. On the other side, the term's ambiguity allows religious people to use it in its engaged sense. "Believers" can talk publicly about their religious commitments without offending "non-believers."

But the very ambiguity required by the political uses of the term renders it unsuitable for theology. When one hears the term *religious experience*, one never knows for sure whether those who use it are intending to talk about God, or simply about what goes on in someone's consciousness apart from any reference to God. "Talking about God" is the literal meaning of the term *theology*.

In theology, therefore, when one wishes to talk about religious experience in our second or engaged sense, the term *revelation* is usually used. *Revelation* makes clear that those who use it are intending to talk about God. The term *revelation* brings the tension between traditional Christianity and modernity into full view. The term *religious experience* appears designed to obscure it. Traditional Christianity is most offensive to modernity precisely at the crucial point where it claims to have been given a revelation from God at a particular time and place. This connection to a particular time and place is often called the "scandal of particularity." The scandal, it should be emphasized, is not only intellectual but also political. To enlightened perceptions, the particularity of religious claims appears exclusionary and, in fact, has often proved threatening to individual political liberty.

In western Christian theology since the enlightenment, therefore, the category of revelation has assumed a pivotal and contested place. Revelation is the key category needed to get any modern Christian theology off the ground. *Revelation* is a technical theological term. Readers should therefore expect it to involve various distinctions and nuances of meaning. This chapter's purpose is to explore the various senses of the term *revelation* in Christian theology.

REVELATION IN GENERAL IN THE WORLD RELIGIONS

While it would be exaggerating to claim that every major religion of the world has a recognizable and central doctrine of revelation, many religions, especially the scriptural ones, do have some operative and significant notion of revelation. Literally *revelation* means drawing back a veil, the disclosure of what was hidden. In a general sense, revelation is the appearance of the sacred or the self-manifestation of the transcendent. Many religions have holy scriptures (writings) that describe or testify to divine self-disclosures and teachings. In these scriptural religions, the sacred texts are bound up with the sense of divine revelation. The three great western religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all originated in the near east and are centered on the revelation of Abraham's God. The various Hindu scriptures mentioned

in the previous chapter communicate a similar, through not identical, sense of divine self-disclosure.

CHRISTIAN REVELATION IS CHRIST-CENTERED

What makes Christian revelation unique is its Christ-centered nature. God can be known from creation, and spoke, as we profess in the creed, through the prophets. But for Christians, God's self-disclosure comes primarily through Christ. The Christian understanding of revelation is, therefore, a Christ-centered one. This Christocentric nature of revelation is well expressed in the opening lines of the New Testament book known as the letter to the Hebrews:

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe (Heb 1:1-2).

This passage goes on to call the Son "the effulgence of God's splendor and the stamp of God's very being" (Heb 1:3). The great hymn to Christ in the first chapter of the Pauline letter to the Colossians calls him the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). The hymn which begins the fourth gospel calls Jesus God's "word" (Jn 1:1-14). "No one has ever seen God; but God's only Son, he who is nearest to the Father's heart, he has made him known" (Jn 1:18). In Jesus' life and teaching, according to this understanding, we find God revealed. We find what God has to say to us.

Christianity's emphasis on a Christ-centered understanding of revelation is almost a matter of definition. It is Christ who specifies Christianity and differentiates it, both empirically and theologically, from other religions. If God's self-disclosure or revelation in Christ is full and sufficient, then we need not expect any new revelation. The revelation of God that took place in Christ becomes normative, i.e. it provides the terms, for future Christian experience of God. Thus Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* calls Christ "both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation" (Paragraph 2).

The Christian dispensation is the new and definitive covenant. It follows that it will never pass away, and that no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Tm 6, 14 and Tt 2, 13). (Paragraph 4)

CHRISTIAN REVELATION IS GOD'S OWN SELF-COMMUNICATION

It has pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the secret purpose of his will (see Eph 1,9). This brings it about that through Christ, God's own Word made flesh, and in his Holy Spirit, human beings can draw near to the Father and become sharers in the divine nature (see Eph 2, 18; 2 Pt 1, 4). (Paragraph 2)

This text underscores the idea that it is God's very self that is communicated in Christ. During one of the farewell discourses that appear in the second half of St. John's gospel, the apostle Philip is said to interrupt Jesus with the request, "Lord, show us the Father and we ask no more." Jesus answers that "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). The word God spoke in Christ is quite literally a living word, God's own self-expression. Jesus' revelation of the Father is not just in his teaching but in his very being, in everything he says and does. Citing John 14:9, Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* goes on to say:

To see Jesus is to see his Father (see Jn 14, 9). This is why Jesus completes the work of revelation and confirms it by divine testimony. He did this by the total reality of his presence and self-manifestation—by his words and works, his symbolic acts and miracles, but above all by his death and his glorious resurrection from the dead, crowned by his sending the Spirit of truth. (Paragraph 4)

God's revelation in Christ, therefore, is not simply a transfer of information, but deeply personal. Revelation involves that "existential," or self-involving, kind of knowing spoken of in Chapters 1 and 2. In knowing and experiencing Jesus of Nazareth, his

followers came to know and experience God. Those who would know God in later generations must make Jesus' life and teaching their own, steeping their imaginations in his image to such an extent that their very structures of experience are reshaped. So transformed, they are prepared to meet Jesus in the scriptural word, proclaimed or read in private; in the church's sacraments, especially the eucharist, or the breaking of the bread; in Christian fellowship; and in corporal and spiritual service to those in need.

CHRISTIAN REVELATION IS A "UNITY OF WORD AND DEED"

As Christian theology has developed in the modern west, various ways have arisen for conceiving and talking about the basic doctrine that God has made a definitive self-communication in Christ. Some Christian theologians, both Catholics and Protestants, have treated revelation as primarily a body of truths or doctrines.

As something of a reaction to this modern view, an alternative understanding of revelation as event or history developed in the twentieth century. According to this interpretation, the emphasis in speaking about revelation would be on what God has done, rather than on what God has said. We find examples of God's saving deeds in the exodus or the life of Christ.

Refusing to accept one of these positions to the exclusion of the other, the Second Vatican Council insists on balancing the two. The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* speaks of God's plan of revelation as being realized "through deeds and words bound together by an inner dynamism." This inner unity is described in the following way:

... God's works, effected during the course of the history of salvation, show forth and confirm the doctrine and the realities signified by the words, while the words in turn proclaim the works and throw light on the meaning hidden in them. (Paragraph 2)

All of this is said in the context of the opening affirmation that God's revelation to us communicates God's own self. Speak-

ing of revelation as primarily word or primarily event, or an inner unity of both, illustrates the felt human need to elaborate on the bare assertion that God has made a self-communication to us. Recalling what was said about analogy in Chapter II, it is clear that the meaning of "God speaks to us" or "God acts in history" is not immediately self-evident. Such language cries out for interpretation. Does God have a voice or a body? Perhaps so, but if not, then we have to admit that God neither speaks nor acts in precisely the way that we do. In any case, the scriptural and confessional (worship) statements about God speaking and acting require some interpretation. Theologians must therefore do more than simply repeat them.

The question of how God makes the self-disclosure to us, how the common ground is established on which the divine and the human can meet, is most difficult. In the end it will elude a completely intellectually satisfying answer. The attempt to get at what the phrases "God speaks" and "God acts" refer to involves much biblical and philosophical reflection. The preference expressed in the previous chapter for conceiving of God's action as manifestation rather than as intervention indicates the direction of my own reflections on the matter. In his excellent survey, *Models of Revelation*, Avery Dulles has mapped out the territory very clearly. Dulles' "symbolic" model of revelation is closely akin to what has been called above an "analogical" approach to religious experience.

CHRISTIAN REVELATION IS APOSTOLIC

The creed that Catholics and other Christians use to profess their faith refers to the church as "apostolic." *Apostolic* is a term that recurs in statements about Christian self-understanding. Christians describe their faith as in some sense the faith of the apostles. The term can be applied to revelation in a similar way. Jesus' twelve apostles and the others who were the first Christian missionaries and evangelists play a key role in the Christian understanding of revelation. They are the ones who received God's saving self-communication in Christ and who preached the "gospel," or good news, about it. The New Testament, called in the

beginning the “apostolic writings,” bears witness to the faith of this apostolic generation and is closely bound up with the Christian understanding of revelation. In the next chapter, on the Bible and the church, we will consider how the apostolic faith in God’s saving revelation in Christ is communicated to later generations. It has been a common Christian claim that revelation ended with “the death of the last apostle.” This is true enough as long as we stipulate that future generations must appropriate for themselves God’s self-communication in Christ. For Catholics, this usually implies a sense that revelation unfolds and develops in the life of the church. But saying that revelation ended with the apostolic generation could imply that God is no longer active among us. This line of thought raises some questions that usually go along with the Christ-centered, apostolic understanding of revelation.

TWO QUESTIONS AND THREE DISTINCTIONS

If Christian revelation is understood in the Christ-centered way explained above, two questions usually arise. First, if revelation ended with the passing of the apostolic generation, does that mean that God is no longer revealed to us except in testimony from the past? Does God no longer work among us? Do we no longer experience God? Second, if revelation is Christ-centered, what about the unevangelized who have never heard of Christ? Does a Christ-centered understanding of revelation imply that those who are without an explicit knowledge of Christ cannot know God in a saving way? The tendency to generate distinctions is typical of the general process of questioning and reflection. Christian theologians have often approached these two questions by distinguishing among various senses of the term *revelation*.

REVELATION AND revelation

To begin we can distinguish REVELATION (upper case) from revelation (lower case). REVELATION refers to God’s self-disclosure in Christ or REVELATION in the strict or proper Christian theological sense. Revelation (lower case) refers to our own Spirit-led personal and historical appropriation of REVELA-

TION. This is our unfolding and developing understanding of what God has made known to us in Christ.

In this loose or extended sense, we can speak meaningfully of God’s ongoing self-manifestation to us even now in the events of our lives. This is revelation too. The point of this distinction between upper and lower case revelation is to remind us that daily Christian experience takes place in the categories provided by the foundational Christian story of Jesus’ life, especially the cross and resurrection. Our contemporary Christian experience is in some way dependent upon or derived from the apostolic experience.

My “Angels of Super Thrift” story is a good example of such dependence. The biblical story of God’s involvement with Israel and with Jesus has shaped my sense of what God is like and my expectations about the kinds of things God will do. My experience took place, therefore, in the context of the biblical tradition. It provided the terms in which my experience made sense. My own little personal story was taken up into the Big Story of salvation.

The distinction between the Big Story of salvation and our little personal stories is another way of illuminating the difference between REVELATION and revelation. REVELATION is the Big Story, the biblical story. Revelation (lower case), our own present “religious experience,” is what happens when our own stories become part of the Big Story. Christians are people who have, by grace, been taken up into the story of Jesus and who actually experience life in the terms provided by his story.

Public Revelation and Private Revelation

Catholic theology has a related distinction that pertains to the church’s devotional life. This is the distinction between public revelation (REVELATION) and private revelations (a more dramatic form of revelation in the loose or extended sense above). From time to time, people claim more dramatic revelations than normal mediations of Christ in daily life. These include religious visions involving Christ, Mary and the saints, claims to prophetic inspiration, and other ecstatic phenomena such as we find described in the Pauline letters to the Corinthians.

Although Christians have often argued over whether such ecstatic phenomena or dramatic religious experiences ceased with

the end of the apostolic age, Catholic theologians have generally agreed that in principle such revelations are possible. They have nevertheless approached them cautiously and with some of Jesus' reserve toward those who demanded a sign. (See *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, paragraph 12.) Claims about such experiences are usually referred to as "private revelations." *Private* doesn't imply that they are not in some way ordered to the service of the community. But they are not "public" because they are not intended in principle or necessary for all Christians. They are not an original part of the Big Story. They are instances of the Holy Spirit's ongoing guidance of the church. They are examples of people being taken up into the Big Story in particularly dramatic ways.

Christian mystics such as St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), St. Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373), and St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) have often claimed to have had revelatory visions. In recent times, *Showings*, written by the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, has become increasingly popular as a source of contemporary spirituality.

The best-known or most popular examples of private revelations are the Marian apparitions or reported appearances of Mary the mother of Jesus. From medieval Walsingham to contemporary Medjugorje, Christian people, often children, have claimed that the Blessed Mother appeared to them. Many of these apparitions occurred during the great devotional revival of Catholicism in nineteenth century France. Among the most famous Marian apparitions are the one to St. Catherine Labouré (1830), involving the so-called "miraculous medal," LaSalette (1846), Lourdes (1858), and Fatima, Portugal (1917). These apparitions usually involve a call to repentance and prayer. In many cases, local bishops or other church authorities have, upon investigations, found these claims to revelation to be obvious frauds. In other cases, such as the ones mentioned above, church authorities have encouraged such devotions in various ways. As in the cases of Catherine Labouré and Bernadette Soubirous of Lourdes, some claimants have been canonized as saints. Some of the recommended devotions have been subsumed into the liturgical calendar. Sometimes such devotions are encouraged by official declarations that nothing in these revelations is contrary to faith or morals and that

information about them can be published without harm to the faith. When private revelations teach spiritual principles that we do not find in scripture or church teaching, or when they seem to pander to the kind of popular craving for the sensational upon which supermarket tabloids thrive, they have been rejected.

Private revelations cannot add anything to the fullness of God's revelation in Christ. No new church doctrines can be taken from them, for example. They cannot be forced on any Christian. Nevertheless, in addition to their fascination as cultural phenomena, the Marian apparitions have contributed significantly to the devotional lives of many Christians. Those who might be inclined to scoff at them ought to choose carefully the grounds on which they choose to do so. An objection in principle to such phenomena logically involves a rejection of the unusual phenomena associated with the originating Christian revelation described in the New Testament. If private revelations encourage morbid curiosity, a desire for signs and wonders associated with religious sensationalism and magic, they are religiously useless. If they lead people to Christ, they are of the Spirit of God. In any case, they are not REVELATION. Like their more ordinary counterparts in daily life, they occur in terms of the basic Christian story. Mary is Jesus' mother. As we are his disciples and the church is his mystical body, Mary is in some sense the mother of Christians.

General and Special Revelation or Natural and Revealed Religion

The second question deals with the ramifications of a Christ-centered understanding of revelation for the way we think about those who have never heard of Christ. Christian theologians in the modern period have generally approached this question by distinguishing special revelation (REVELATION) from general revelation, or revealed religion (REVELATION) from natural religion. Since scripture clearly teaches that God can be known from creation, e.g. Romans 1:20, and the human heart, e.g. Romans 2:14–15, it is not difficult to argue that in the near universal human religious practice we find, mixed with error, various human responses to "general revelation." This would be "natural religion." Religions based on symbols drawn from the

natural world (nature religions) could be seen as responses to God's revelation in creation. Ethical or prophetic religions could similarly be interpreted as responding to God's revelation in the human heart or conscience. Modern Christian theologians, whether Catholic or Protestant, have generally been hesitant to say that natural religion or general revelation could be sufficient for a saving relationship with God. This had to come explicitly through Christ.

Contemporary discussion of Christ and the world religions has moved beyond the previous modern discussion of revelation in terms of natural and revealed religion. Vatican II's *Declaration on the Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions* offers the beginnings of a framework for this new discussion. Reaffirming the church's mission to preach Christ as "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6), it also pledges the church's openness to what is "true and holy" in other religions, and urges Catholics to dialogue and cooperation with those of other faiths. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism are mentioned explicitly (paragraphs 2-4).

At this time in history, honest and hopeful openness to interreligious dialogue is preferable to abstract theories, Christian or otherwise, about how all the religions and their respective saviors might be related. Until some fuller time, Vatican II's documents (those on the church, religious freedom, the church's relationship to non-Christian religions, and the church in today's world) have made some important Christian theological statements about those who have never heard the gospel.

Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this paschal mystery [Christ's redemption] in a manner known to God. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in Today's World*, paragraph 22. See also the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, paragraph 16.

FAITH

In Christian theology, revelation and faith are correlative terms. There can't be revelation without someone to believe in it.

VATICAN II ON ISLAM

The church also looks upon Muslims with respect. They worship the one God living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to humanity and to whose decrees, even the hidden ones, they seek to submit themselves whole-heartedly, just as Abraham, to whom the Islamic faith readily relates itself, submitted to God. They venerate Jesus as a prophet, even though they do not acknowledge him as God, and they honor his virgin mother Mary and even sometimes devoutly call upon her. Furthermore they await the day of judgement when God will require all people brought back to life. Hence they have regard for the moral life and worship God especially in prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Although considerable dissensions and enmities between Christians and Muslims may have arisen in the course of the centuries, this synod urges all parties that, forgetting past things, they train themselves toward sincere mutual understanding and together maintain and promote social justice and moral values as well as peace and freedom for all people. *Declaration on the Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions*, paragraph 3.

There can't be faith without a disclosure of God to believe in. Faith, therefore, is our believing response to God's self-communication. As the *Constitution on Divine Revelation* puts it:

In response to God's revelation our duty is "the obedience of faith" (see Rm 16, 26; compare Rm 1.5; 2 Cor 10, 5-6). By this, a human being makes a total and free self-commitment to God, offering "the full submission of intellect and will to God as he reveals," and willingly assenting to the revelation he gives. (Paragraph 5)

Since the terms *revelation* and *faith* are interrelated, what we say about revelation also applies to faith. Faith can be described,

therefore, as: a Christ-centered, personal response to God's self-communication, a unity of word and deed, and apostolic.

FAITH AS A CHRIST-CENTERED, PERSONAL RESPONSE TO GOD'S SELF-COMMUNICATION

God's revelation in Christ appeals not only to the head but also to the heart. It is addressed to the complete person. As the above citation from Vatican II affirms, therefore, Christian faith involves "a total and free self-commitment to God." Since revelation is God's own self-communication, our faithful response must involve our own deepest selves. It must be personal. Christian faith, therefore, involves one in a personal relationship with Christ. Christians love and trust Jesus. A faith that is personally believed will also be lived out in daily imitation of Jesus' example. This doesn't mean that Christians are perfect. But if Christ is really alive in them, his example will have some effect on the way they live. Christian faith, like revelation, will reflect an inner unity of word and deed.

FAITH AS APOSTOLIC

If Christian faith has what we might term a strong affective dimension, we cannot deny to it a cognitive or intellectual dimension as well. One cannot have any sort of personal relationship with someone about whom one knows nothing. As a result of God's revelation in Christ, Christians generally believe that there are some truths that can be affirmed and others that have to be denied. This concern for the truths of "the faith" is seen in the creedal fragments, perhaps from baptismal liturgies, that we find in the New Testament, and in the emphasis of the pastoral epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) on keeping the apostolic faith intact. "Take as your norm the sound words that you heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard this rich trust with the help of the holy Spirit that dwells within us" (2 Tim 1:13-14). We can therefore speak of "assenting to the truths God has revealed" as long as this assent is not, in the spirit of modern

rationalism rather than in accordance with tradition, mistaken for the kind of assent we give to the theorems of Euclidian geometry.

Further, in its original sense, the term *apostle* refers to one who is sent. In this sense, the apostolic faith is by nature contagious. Those who live in Christ will want to share with others what they have found in him. This leads to the missionary or evangelical aspect of Christian faith. Christians have different approaches to the missionary task in the twentieth century.

FAITH AND QUESTIONING

In the long history of Christianity, the term *faith* has often been abused. Young people questioning what they are taught have been told that they must accept it "on faith." Faith functions here as a kind of magic, substitute source for knowledge, completely discontinuous with reasoning. Many modern Christians have unwittingly accepted the dripping sarcasm with which the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume ended his essay "Of Miracles":

Our most holy religion is founded on *faith*, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is by no means fitted to endure.

This passage should be an insult to any intelligent Christian. If it is true, then "faith" can be used to paper over obvious absurdities and one must abandon one's intelligence in order to "have faith." If it is true, one must choose between faith and reason, religion and science. The Catholic tradition, by contrast, is committed to the belief that faith and reason cannot in the end conflict because they come from the same God.

Faith and reason cannot be so easily separated. Faith is not knowledge, but it is not irrational. It is especially not like geometrical or mathematical knowledge. It is a personal commitment that one can come to and hold intelligently, even if it involves matters that can't be proven or logically demonstrated.

Faith is the lifelong process of learning to trust God. It is very

much like being married. Like a commitment to another human being, the decision of faith has highs and lows, moments of consolation and desolation. It grows, is sometimes sorely tested, and is not immune to questioning.

If the biblical story is any indication, the process of learning to trust God is usually a struggle. As we have seen, the great biblical heroes of faith—Abraham, Moses, Jacob—all argued with God. They questioned God's ways. The story of Jacob's struggle with the angel (Gn 32:23–31) indicates that the very name Israel embodies the idea of struggling with God. Mary questioned the angel of the annunciation, and her question was quite an intelligent one. Though their questions were not always so intelligent, the disciples questioned Jesus regularly. Peter struggled to follow him. Though he rarely let on, perhaps Paul did too.

If faith did not admit of the struggle of intelligent questioning, then faith would be theoretical knowledge or some magical substitute for it. It may as well have been invented by people who were afraid that Hume was right, and that faith could not stand being exposed to the reasoned arguments of its critics. When struggling reason finally gets down on its knees in faith, the decision need not be irrational. Pascal, paraphrasing St. Augustine, has put it well: "Reason would never submit unless it judged that there were occasions when it ought to submit. It is right, then, that reason should submit when it judges that it ought to submit" (*Pensées*, 174).

The act or assent of faith, the decision truly to believe in God and God's saving work in Christ, is an "existential" or self-involving one. It commits those who make it to certain personal positions on the ultimate questions. It means that the last reality with which we have to deal is not the indifferent universe but the living God of Jesus Christ, that human nobility and human suffering cannot in the end simply not matter, that death does not have the last word. To live in Christ by faith is to begin to experience life in terms of the story of Jesus and to act accordingly.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. Clearly explain the difference between the descriptive and engaged senses of the term *religious experience*.

2. How does the term *religious experience* function in a modern English-speaking context to avoid conflict?
3. Apply both the descriptive and engaged sense of *religious experience* to the story of Moses and the burning bush in Exodus 3–4.
4. What is unique and different about the Christian understanding of revelation?
5. What does Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation* mean by calling God's revelation a "unity of word and deed"?
6. "Revelation ended with the death of the last apostle." Discuss.
7. Explain the difference between:
 - a) REVELATION and revelation;
 - b) public revelation and private revelations;
 - c) general revelation and special revelation.
8. In each of the above pairs (a, b, c), one of the terms refers to the same thing. Identify the three terms that mean the same and explain the common reality they all refer to.
9. What is the role of questioning or struggle in faith?

For Writing and Reflection

Read Chapter 1 of John Shea's *Stories of Faith*. Write an essay about a "revelation-faith experience" that you have had or could imagine.

For Further Reading

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation in Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. II, pp. 971–81. This is one of the council's key documents, essential for understanding the Catholic Church's authoritative teaching on the matters discussed in this chapter.

Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1983). Provides a clearly written and comprehensive survey of contemporary theological literature on the topic of revelation.

