

Divine disclosure in the modern scientific age: towards clarifying the question.

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Abstract

Enquiry into the relationship between divine disclosure and scientific discovery concerns itself with the range of human freedom in relation to the world in which we find ourselves. It is because this life is necessarily a common one that the modern question about revelation generates the energy it does: what one believes affects another. Addressing the question of revelation in the modern age, then, requires that the political dimensions (in the broadest sense) of human life be part of the attempt to describe and, to the extent that it is possible, resolve the question of the relationship between divine revelation and scientific discovery. In this paper it is argued, first, that there is an unfounded tendency to presume that scientific discovery and divine revelation are the same kind of things, and an attempt is made to distinguish them. Second, it is argued that the politico-religious character of all human existence creates a more significant problem for common claims about scientific worldviews than does science, properly conceived, create for divine revelation.

Key words

Revelation, politics, ethics, scientific method, information, facts, interpretation, worldview

Introduction

This paper enquires after the relationship between divine disclosure and scientific discovery, a relationship that is typically explored as a question of epistemology – how we know what we know, and what confidence we can have that what we know is reliable. More deeply and more concretely, however, questions about this relationship are about the range of human freedom in relation to the world in which we find ourselves. They concern

not only what can be known but also how this knowledge impacts upon the life we live in this world. It is because this life is necessarily a common one that the question about revelation generates the energy it does. We live in one world, impacting upon each other. What one believes, then, affects another. The question about revelation, because we live together, is therefore finally a *political* one, in the broadest sense. It concerns life together – life in the ‘city’, the ‘polis’. If this life is to be harmonious then questions of what we know and how we can know it inevitably become pressing. Addressing the question of revelation in the modern age, then, requires that the *polis*-itical dimensions of human life themselves be part of the attempt to describe and, to the extent that it is possible, resolve the question. In this paper I will argue, first, that the apparent challenge which modern science presents to divine revelation arises not so much from the conflicting statements each apparently makes about the same worldly realities, but from the tendency to presume that scientific discovery and divine revelation are the same *kind* of things. Second, and in contradiction of this presumption, I will distinguish and contrast the kinds of things which scientific discovery and scriptural revelation are. And, third, I will argue that the politico-religious character of all human existence creates a more significant problem for common claims about scientific worldviews than does science, properly conceived, create for divine revelation.

Divine revelation understood as scientific information

I will begin by considering the idea of scriptural revelation which operates to produce the perceived crisis for revelation in the scientific age. The crisis which the age of science seems to pose for scriptural revelation occurs because both science and the Scriptures apparently make quite different pronouncements on the same things. The differences in the declarations of science and the Scriptures on various matters are well-known. These are, of course, due to the different methods of knowing. The Scriptures have been received by tradition, to varying degrees, as a statement of the will and character of God, and the corresponding character and responsibilities of God’s human creatures. In contrast, scientific method actively seeks to divest itself of such traditional influences and approaches the world on the assumption that the world is comprehensible of itself here and now and will yield up information about itself to the enquiring mind.

It is the contradictions between scientific discovery and revelation which give rise to the questioning of revelation. I want to draw particular attention, however, not to the differences in the specific declarations about the world but to the similarity of the ideas of revelation and discovery which typically operate in these two approaches. In particular: in the case of the Scriptures treated as a repository of revelation, and in the case of the scientifically-treated world as the storehouse of discoverable truth, the thing which is considered to be revealed or disclosed is predominantly a matter of *information*. The Scriptures deliver such information as that we are created by God in God’s image, that God

loves us, that God calls us to live our lives in this or that way, that God once stopped the sun in its movement across the sky and several times parted the waters, and so on. Science delivers comparable (if contradictory) information: we evolved by natural selection, the earth is four billion years old, the earth revolves around the sun and momentum must be conserved. The ideas of revelation and discovery operating here are that both the scriptural record and the scientific method deliver to us *facts* about ourselves and the world, even if these facts are contradictory.

For the purposes of clarifying the nature of our question about the relationship between the Scriptural revelation and the revelations which are apparently given through scientific method, it is important to observe that we typically presume that 'discover' in the scientific realm corresponds to 'reveal' in the theological realm or, at least, that what is discovered corresponds in kind to what is revealed, whether or not there is agreement between the two. Science discovers or unveils the character of the world, as do the Scriptures. The differences between what is respectively discovered and revealed are what catch our attention. Yet these differences are only significant on the assumption that we are nevertheless dealing with the same *kind* of thing. It is this assumption which enables the two can be compared in the way they usually are: as contrasting facts about the world and ourselves, between which we must make a choice. An obvious case here is the differing cosmogonies of Genesis 1 and modern science, understood as both being cosmogonies. The effect of this assumption is that the debate is decided before it begins. The terms of the debate are set by the understanding of what kind of thing is revealed or discovered within the scientific method, and not from a scriptural understanding of revelation.

Recasting the problem: revelation on revelation

A constructive contribution to the revelation-science debate can be had by looking at the operation of revelation within Scripture. Christoph Schwöbel (1992) helpfully summarises the scriptural process of revelation in the following way:

'A' discloses in the situation 'B' the content 'C' for the recipient 'D' with the result 'E'.

We may put this more fully thus: the revealing agent (for our purposes, God) reveals in a particular historical context (say, Babylon, 6th century BC) some theological truth (God's justice and faithfulness) for a recipient (the exiled people of God) with some intended result (the creation of hope in spite of appearances). The specifics of the revealing agent, the historical context and the subjects to whom the revelation is directed, of course, complicate the revelatory process enormously. For our purposes of clarifying the status of divine disclosure in the modern scientific age and, more to the point, distinguishing between 'revelation' as it operates theologically and in modern science, we can, in contrast, summarise the scientific understanding of the disclosure of the character of the world as follows:

'G' discovers 'F'.

This is, of course, a stark reduction of the actual historical processes by

which scientific discoveries are made, but the how of a particular discovery-disclosure is not the point here so much as what is happening in the disclosure. The differences in process between the revelation in Scripture and discovery in science which matter here are twofold. First, historical context is critical to the specific content of scriptural revelation. While every scientific discovery has a history, once the discovery is made its truth has an independence of historical context which does not apply with scriptural revelation. A divine 'word' is revealed to particular persons in a particular historical situation and its content does not necessarily carry over to persons in different situations. Second, the revealing agency posited in the theological account of revelation differs: God reveals to human beings, as distinct from the scientist as the agent who uncovers the world to himself or herself. On the assumption that there is a God who reveals, scriptural revelation involves a second personal agency who discloses in such a way as to require a response.

The important point is that a scientific discovery-disclosure, in contrast to scriptural revelation, is *of itself* mute. While scientific methods have their own internal logic and the scientific account of the world coheres with those methods, scientific discoveries about the world are given 'voice' (socio-cultural meaning) not by the method of discovery or by the discoveries themselves but by the non-scientific cultural and linguistic context within which they occur. It is this context which determines the application of what has been discovered – its *meaning*.

By contrast, the revelations described in the Scriptures have the specific form of an address from one identity to another which presupposes a particular socio-cultural context, proposes a reading of that reality and demands a verdict on that reading. The revealer lays forth not disinterested information about himself or the world but presents himself and the world in such a way that the addressed individual or community must make a response. In this way the significance or meaning of what is revealed is carried in the revelation itself. Scriptural revelation *is* revelation when it does this; it is not revelation when it does not. For the case to be other than this would be to reduce revelation to mere information about God or the world, which is precisely the problem in most debates about the relationship between scientific discovery and revelation. What is made known about God in scriptural revelation is not just information but is intended to effect change by affecting the hearer; this intention reflects the character of the revelation as *address*.

From nature to history: dirtying scientific knowledge

The contrast between mute scientific discoveries and revelation-as-address is important for re-visioning the perceived problem divine revelation has in a scientific age. Part of the argument that science deals only with the discovery of 'facts' about the world is the corollary that the interpretation or application of those facts necessarily comes from somewhere else – from the quite non-scientific (which is not necessarily *unscientific*) domain of culture and politics by which nature becomes

history. The ability to split an atom can yield either an almost inexhaustible source of energy or constitute an unprecedented threat to human existence through militarisation of the technology. The facts about mass and energy, and the technology to manipulate these physical realities, do not determine the application; this comes from somewhere else. By contrast, scriptural revelation discloses no 'fact' about God or the world without at the same time indicating the difference that fact should make. In contrasting the discoveries and revelations possessed by science and religion, we are comparing apples with oranges. This is not to appeal to the argument that each has its own specific realm, such that science describes the natural realm and religions the realm of the person and the spirit. This would be to re-invent the ancient Greek distinction between matter and spirit, with all its problems. The difference between scientific discovery and scriptural revelation, is that, on the one hand, science yields data, information and knowledge which remains static until it is taken up into a political reality where it either becomes the basis for new technology or is set aside as not (yet) of use. On the other hand, scriptural revelation is already one such political discourse, touching directly on matters of our identity and being in our interaction with the natural and cultural worlds. The 'thing' which is revealed is revealed as changing the world for the hearer. In this way, scriptural revelation is already historically engaged; this is what gives it its particular character as revelation. Whereas a scientific discovery increases the pool of potentially useful data which may or may not affect the discoverer, scriptural revelation has affect as its intention.

In more fundamental terms, the difference between scientific data and scriptural revelation is that the latter is an address of subject to subject which seeks a response. Scientific data *per se* is mute although, of course, it might be highly useful. Such utility, however, presumes a prior address or question which springs not from the data itself but from elsewhere. This address may be as basic as an individual's survival or reproductive instinct, a perceived economic need or a fully-fledged social ideology. It is not necessary here to identify the particular address or question in any instance but enough simply to note that it is ever-present and that it is non-scientific, even as it appropriates scientific conclusions. What is important about such data-absorbing addresses and questions for our purposes is that they are not themselves amenable to hypothetical falsifiability. Any such worldview might be false but this is not our immediate concern. Our concern is rather that, in the end, the intentionally neutral and value-free accounts of the world yielded by science are at the mercy of unavoidably value-laden socio-political worldviews. Discussion with respect to science gets 'dirty', we might say, as soon as we begin to react to the bare scientific findings.

This unavoidable dirtying of the science constitutes a problem for broad-sweeping claims made for the scope of 'the scientific worldview'. Or, rather, it is a significant political and ethical problem that popular scientism tends to operate as if the absorption of scientific observation into non-scientific worldviews does not take place, as if there were a social and political logic continuous with the specific logic of scientific discovery

and description. At the level of the comparison and checking of specific facts about the world, science appears as vastly superior to scriptural revelation, and many believers agree that it is. The utilisation of scientific discovery, however, is a different question altogether. It is also a matter which the scriptural revelation is much better placed to address because scriptural revelation is concerned not only with what the world is but, more importantly, with how this world is to be taken up: the way in which the world is or ought to be 'absorbed' by socio-political concerns, the way in which nature becomes history. As an address calling the creation into right relation to the creator, revelation names the inappropriate take up of the natural order into human existence.

Misappropriation of the world – the world such as science might describe it – is what Scripture calls idolatry. Such idolatry is a social construction by which parts of the world are necessarily and non-scientifically absorbed. We may cast the dynamic of the 'take up' of scientific knowledge, then, as a theologically charged process, insofar as that 'take up' privileges some applications of the data and not others. Scriptural revelation understands our engagement with the world – including the worlds of culture and language – as necessarily theological, although not necessarily appropriately theological. Thus the scriptural question is not the pseudo-scientific one, 'Is there a god?' as if God were part of the natural world and subject to investigation. The Scriptures ask, rather, 'Which god is your god?' Modern (and ancient) attempts to eliminate God do not exempt themselves from this question, because the social and ethical dimensions of human existence cannot be avoided. From a Christian theological perspective, a worldview implies a kind of 'god', which god is manifest in the social order of a community, of a *polis*. Even in an intentionally atheistic society built upon 'the scientific worldview' nature would be transformed to history via a particular historical, social and political existence which precedes scientific description. While the scientific account of the world may alter the society and politics into which it is absorbed, the social up-take remains non-scientific.

This challenges the assumption that scientific method can yield a means of being in the world which is somehow free of the non-scientific dirtiness which political life brings as it takes up the world. The argument here is not that science gives us the facts and religion is necessary to guide us ethically. There is, rather, a more radical challenge to attempt to construct scientific worldviews. This is that all human existence, informed by modern science or not, is already ethically engaged and so, by extension, already 'religious' in form. This religious character of human existence may even involve an explicit rejection of the gods, but the point here is sociological and not doctrinal or credal, so that even the explicit denial of the gods does not diminish the point.

Conclusion

The question of our conference theme – the status of divine disclosure in our scientific age – typically arises on the part of faith as an anxious response to the impressive authority of modern science. This authority,

unquestioned for many believers in relation to such things as cosmogony, threatens not only those specific parts of the scriptural revelation which relate apparent transgressions of scientifically described natural law but, by extension, the authority of divine revelation of the Scriptures as a whole. This is an unavoidable crisis, to the extent that the scriptural revelation is conceived to be a collection of fact-statements about the world, some of which have been shown to be close enough to impossible to be rejected as plain wrong.

I have argued, however, that the treatment of scriptural revelation as being akin to scientific discovery misconstrues the nature of revelation. In so doing, it masks the inability of science to extend itself *scientifically* beyond mere description of the world into ethics and politics, despite claims regularly made for the social or ethical significance of a particular scientific discovery. Scientific authority challenges scriptural revelation on non-political aspects of the scriptural narrative, such as miracles. The effectiveness of this challenge, however, then suggests to many that if the Scripture is unreliable in its account of the natural world, so also might it be unreliable on the moral world, and other moral authorities must be sought. There then typically kicks in a proposed 'scientific worldview' which presumes to extend the success of science in *describing* the world to a confidence in *interpreting* it for social and political ends. This is to over-extend the purview of scientific method.

The true impact of science upon the concept of revelation, then, is not the impact of scientific results themselves but the imposition of the scientific notion of discovery on the scriptural notion of revelation. This is followed by the impact of a political and social reading of the world which mistakes itself as scientific when it is, in fact, as historically-conditioned, self-interested and non-scientific as any other account of the world, including revealed accounts. The principal challenge to scriptural revelation is not a different account of what the world is and how it works but a different and non-scientific understanding of how we are to experience and respond to it.

This observation does not necessarily make the work of engaging with modern scientific worldviews any easier, but at least it enables a distinction to be drawn between the neutral, matter-of-indifference accounts of the world yielded by scientific investigation and the value-laden interpretation of those accounts for particular social, moral and political ends, under the guise of being 'scientifically informed'. The employment of scientific discovery for social and political ends involves stepping out of the neat and necessary principles of the falsifiability of hypotheses into the very messy and non-scientific world of ethics and politics. This is the natural sphere of operation of scriptural revelation, as revelation is always concerned with how we are to be in the world. As such, faith does not need to apologise for its relative messiness in comparison to the neatness of scientific description. The dialogue between science and faith is not one of comparing the facts declared by each but should rather be re-conceived as a dialogue between social and political worldviews – between the outlook of Scripture and outlooks which purport

to draw logical social and ethical conclusions from scientific observation but in fact are unavoidably laden with non-scientific concerns.

In the end, whether we consider ourselves religious or scientific, we are social, ethical, political animals, such that it is not the facts but our interpretation of them through our lives together that is the pressing question. Our true engagement is not with 'the facts' of science and revelation but with each other, working out how it might be possible to live together in a liberating way in this one world.

Reference:

Schwöbel, C 1992, *God: action and revelation*, Kok Pharos, Kampen, p. 87.