

REVELATION, RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, AND THEOLOGY

Introduction

One of the questions that seem to characterize the scenarios of the contemporary social, cultural, and religious reality, is the possibility or not to know what characterizes Christianity, what is its particular perspective in relationship to the different interpretations that have crossed the twentieth century. The question can appear strange, if not even rhetoric, in the western context (and not only) which is hardly comprehensible without the contribution of ideals, values, forms of relationship and existence offered by Christianity. It is true, that the matter is not new, and that already in the past, especially in the critical moments of transition and of historical upheavals, the question has been set on the essence of Christianity and on its ability to sustain and to nourish man's expectations. Yet, with different forms and modalities, the request to be able to reach the central nucleus of Christianity is very impelling and in need of clarifications.

At the same time, is noticeable to all, the difficulty to justify, within this contemporary age, what Christianity really is. This is a time in which one has the feeling that the empty space left by God or taken away from Him by man, demands other matters and indications for different routes more suitable to the commerce of existence. Beyond any emphases, the time of the post-modernity is without doubt a contradictory age in which the crisis of religion and the return of the sacred coexist together with the declared foolishness of the problem of God and the continuous reposing of the meaning of existence. In short this is a time in which every reality, principle, value appears fluid, fragmentary, discontinuous. In any case, it is a time of difficult interpretation, to the point that the uncertainty of a common orientation is accompanied by a deep gap of meaning in which every system of reference seems to exhaust its own resources in the moment in which it performs its own function.

Nevertheless, the contemporary age constitutes a favourable time for a new meeting between Christianity and culture; for an *enculturation* that knows how to confront itself with the new but still not yet definable of the human history that summons the propositive strength of the Christian message. John Paul II writes, in *Novo millennium ineunte* "In the third millennium, Christianity will have to respond ever more effectively to this *need for enculturation*. Christianity while remaining completely true to itself, with unwavering fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and of the tradition of the Church, will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and it takes root" (n. 40). With a caution: that Christianity, remaining other in comparison to every culture, is capable of letting the energies contained in the anguish of history emerge, and become fellow travellers attentive and available to contribute to build a culture respectful of man and of his desire of happiness.

The appeal and the responsibility that characterize the Christian faith are found precisely in this: in a faith alive in the ability to constantly be in dialogue, aware of the radical difference between God and man. The Christian belief is the reception of a gift, rather of the gift God offers man, with the possibility to welcome something other and different able to answer the whys of the existence, or, at least, able to face them with an original perspective that derives its strength from *the paradox of the Christian experience* of which the theological reflection and the lived faith are a discreet and intelligent echo. This is what is underlined in the pastoral orientations of the Italian Episcopate for the first decade of the 2000, *Communicating the Gospel in a world that changes*, n. 34: "the Christians are men as all the others, who fully participate in the life of the city and of society, in the successes and failures experienced by all men; but they are also listeners of the Word, called to transmit the evangelical difference in history, to give a soul to the world, so that the whole of humanity might set out toward that Kingdom for which has been created."

Here is the central motive for these reflections: to tune in to the unheard and to what God reveals to man in Jesus of Nazareth, a truth not easily believed. This is the provocation that theology introduces in the circuits of history: *the Christian revelation* constitutes the sign of a Presence that cannot be captured like any object or theorem. On the contrary it is inviting man, on the threshold of freedom, to begin an adventure that answers to that nostalgia of the Absolute and of the Infinite that doesn't fade with the flowing of time. In this sense, Christian revelation proposes itself as that *exception* in front of which it is worth to remain reflecting. Such an exception is not at all easy-going or allied to compromise but, on the contrary it represents a paradox, and, as the christian thinker S. Kierkegaard writes, a *scandal* for the cheap solutions.

The only possibility is that of abandoning an idea of God tied up to the calculation of what is necessary and needed, because the Christian revelation proclaims the God of the Covenant that comes and draws himself near to man not according to the schemes of our representations and our interests. Its entry in history is in the order of the free gift, apparently incomprehensible, but a gift that crosses our existences to disclose us the quality of the way of living. And to show us that this is not only a hypothesis, it suggests to our interpretation to confront us with the objective content of the story of Jesus of Nazareth: a story that, in his determined historicity reveals the truth of God and of man. Here is the *exception* and the *paradox* of Christianity that the believing community of the origins has experienced and testified (cf. Jn 14, 6; Eph 4, 21): that the truth that Jesus communicates and his being - historically-so are inseparable.

The itinerary of this writing is then but an invitation to a discovery, and a rediscovery of the meaning the Christian revelation has for every man, in front of which the scepticism can turn into wonder and the reason can let itself be embraced by the amazement for a truth that humanizes history. It is not the question of something to learn, but of a Someone to be met, whose advent represents the offering of meaning for every person. An offer formulated through three key- words: *word, event, mystery*.

To understand revelation as the Word of God it means to affirm that listening is a decisive experience, without which the existence is incapable to open itself to the encounter with God and with the others: a difficult encounter, certainly, that requires readiness to move and to search, but also a seductive one and rich of promises, because it is capable of transforming the way of seeing life in its reality. The listening breaks man's securities, it contributes to the pregnancy of new and meaningful relationships, it invites man to assume the destiny to which he has being called. But revelation is also a happening that settles in the concreteness of the events and that finds in the history of Jesus Christ its fullness of meaning. The history made of small and great happenings, shows who God is, because only in it God can be perceived as relating to man and man relating to God. If God would not settle in history as Lord of history, He could not be seen as the God free and provident, tender and lover of life, close to man and yet totally other from him. God's self-giving in history represents the proof of its loving attention to man, beside and beyond God's revelation in nature and in the inner experience. The message and the life of Jesus reveal a new and definitive presence of God in virtue of which the human history is directed according to the demands of God's history whose desire is the happiness of man.

For this reason, revelation is a true pedagogy, an education to penetrate in the mystery that constitutes the space in which God gives the appointment to each of us. Revelation marks a change in quality, by which man *learns how to learn*, since it is necessary for him to rediscover over and over again his appointment with God; because the Word that makes himself event is not a ghost but the project of salvation that embodies itself in the circumstance of the daily living turning it into the event of our Christian life. Faced by revelation, every Christian will meet another freedom that challenges its own, a freedom that will show the unpredictable future open by the covenant of God. We will have, in this way, a better understanding of the reality that has characterized the history of Jesus Christ, the revealer of the great mystery of love as the logic of life. This is the truth that "will make us free" (Jn 8, 32): the truth of the Gospel, that is of the fact that God's Love is the principle of our freedom to love, the new law that upsets the false liberties and the half truths.

Chapter I

1. BEYOND THE SACRIFICE OF REASON

What is the meaning of the term *revelation* and what is its novelty in the theological circle? What is the secret of its appeal and, at the same time, of the difficulty that its use provokes in the familiar lexicon with which man tries to read the world? Without doubt, it is a strange word that seems to hint to a reality not controllable by man; or, in any event, normally distant from his vision of things. After all, the organization of one's own existence in the daily living does not ask for other reference than the logic of common sense, which has the task to educate man to know how to manage himself between the disproportion of the expectations and the limits of the experience, even if entertaining dreams and desires that are not satisfied by the obvious and the expected. Life brings out problematic and enigmatic plots that don't authorize flights of imagination or illusion, they, instead, call man to be concrete in his ideals, choices, and functional questions about the quality of his life. To believe that the success of one's own existence is tied up to a relationship with reality according to predefined ideals and models, can result a source of dangerous frustrations, often fed by the conviction that artificial heavens exist, places where to meet answers or cheap solutions. It is not risky, therefore, to affirm that the concept of revelation seems to represent one of these places of escape from the mystery of existence, in which to find shelter in the moment when man perceives that it works; even if it appears inadequate to the complexity of the existence and the necessity of new interpretations of the way of being and acting of man. In short, to resort to the idea of revelation, even in its religious and theological meaning, it might be the declaration of a human weakness, that prefers to surrender itself in front of a necessary sacrifice: the sacrifice of reason, because to take one's mind of the evidence of what is seen and is urgent for continuing the fatiguing struggle of existence, it is a luxury or a false path that the contemporary and post-modern man cannot travel anymore. Unless man, becoming aware of a psycho-social benefit, doesn't know how to distinguish, between reality and fable, where the fable is what it refers to what is possible, to the dream, to something that reveals itself as an extra that nourishes life, while reality is only what we touch and becomes a part of the hard law of concreteness.

Man committed to the effort to interpret, transform and make life and the world liveable, seems to perceive in the idea of revelation a point of view that is unrelated to his own, a reading criterion fixed in an imaginary show if compared to his realm of knowledge. Why, then, should we linger on such matters that seems to tame man instead of spurring him to assume the responsibilities of his own autonomy? A culture that sympathizes with themes and contents related to religion and to its claim of revelation is still believable?

2. RELIGION: AN UNEXPECTED GUEST IN THE POST-MODERN CULTURE

Yet, the contemporary cultural and social reality doesn't seem to have operated a clear choice, an indicative and consequential position in regard to religion and religious experience. A complex and variegated typology in the perception and in the evaluation of the religious experience is, in fact, emerging.

First of all, there is the conviction that religion is an inconvenience for a civilization that vindicates a greater autonomy. The *suspects* that weigh on revelation, and consequently on religion, are well known. They are an expression of inconvenience or of a condition of an intellectual and ethical minority of men. They are the declaration of a fragile, insecure identity, which needs Someone that tells man how to behave, what rules to respect, what choices to operate to sail in life. With the excuse to free man, it binds him to obedience and a will imposed by the outside. In this perspective, the only possibility is to accept totally the announcement of the death of God, meaning

the affirmation that God and religion are a useless hypothesis for the life of man, a reality that, in conclusion results to be meaningless. F. Nietzsche (1844-1900) an important philosopher for understanding the contemporary age, writes -that atheism is “a final victory, laboriously conquered by the European conscience, by the fact that is the act with the richest consequences of a bi-millenary education to the truth, that in its conclusive moment forbids itself *the lie* of the faith in God [...] We can see what was victorious over the Christian God: the same Christian morality, the concept of truthfulness taken with always greater rigor, the subtlety from fathers confessors of the Christian conscience, translated and exulted in the scientific conscience, in the intellectual cleansing at any price.”¹

Contemporary culture, having seen the fragility of the great ideologies, invites man to live according to *the nihilistic condition*, that is, to live with the mature awareness that his life has no goals, with values that can continually be changed, free from the conceitedness of those matters known as inspired by tradition. It is by now time to entrust oneself to a way of thinking that, having done away with God, it represents the choice of the mature man that wants to measure up to his role, to operate a revolution and transformation of those values that have fed the culture for many centuries. The secret consists in taking possession of the image of God so that man *can become god*: emancipated, independent, free in an unconditional way, capable, that is, to redeem himself from an atavistic subjection. In a word, man has thought to inherit from God the omnipotence and the dominion on all things.

Secondly, it is noticed how *the non pertinence of the faith in God* is perceived as a normal datum, in harmony with what results to be reasonable for the contemporary man. It is difficult to define the contours of such phenomenon, even if someone speaks of *religious indifference*, interpreting it as a symptom of a deep crisis of meaning that it invests the religions in their function to offer an ultimate explanation of the meaning of history and of the destiny of man. Faced with the claim laid by the religions to rise themselves as a unique criterion of life, it is preferred to proclaim the liberation present in the theories of the cultural and religious polytheism, whose intent is to welcome the entry of the plurality of those values and principles that organize life. Reality cannot be thought as one and monolithic, but rather as the confluence of a multiplicity of images, informations, opinions, forms of life that don't tolerate a reductionism of freedom anymore in name of a some absolute principle, as it could be faith in God. The opportunity offered by the indifference is to take dismissal from the principles, above all those that pretend to rationalize and to frame life, and to submit oneself to the magic of myths that represent a more suitable form of thought to some circles of experience, a form less traumatic for the human subject who has become more aware of the frailty and temporariness of things. It is useless to wonder if the myths serve to explain the world or rise from the urge of certain innate sensations like fear insecurity, desperation.

Finally, the open field of history seems to have found a new figure of salvation: *technology*. It is not an effortless task to individualize the energies contained in the transforming potentialities of technology, as it is childish to point out only its negative dimensions; but it is certain that it represents the ambiguous desire of man to continually remove the limits of his knowledge to ransom the time from the blackmail of the unknowable and of the insuperable. It is a different form of the temptation that crosses man's will for the power in an absolute knowledge able to free him from the anguish of partial knowledge and marked by the conflict of its interpretations. In other words, it is the revenge of a permanent *Gnosticism* that announces the salvation of the self without appeal to other divinities if not that of the technology and of the techniques. “And here no «God can save us», as the allusion of Heidegger would say, because technology was born really from the corrosion of God's throne. Technology was strengthened by religion, that had prepared the ground

¹ F. W. Nietzsche, *La gaia scienza*, in *Opere*, a cura di G. Colli e M. Montinari, Adelphi, Milano 1969, V/2, p. 357.

to associate it in its project of salvation, but technology has brought religion to its twilight and, with religion, the history that was born from the religious vision of the world.”¹

In this presumed overturning of roles, it would seem that religious search is at an end or relegated to the borders of the social life. Paradoxically, the experience of the absence of God, instead of dissolving the enigma of the world and of man's reality, it seems to strengthen it to underline the presence of something unfathomable. It might appear strange, but our contemporary age seems to express a troubled and not always coherent search of a religious experience, in which a datum is perceived: the meaning of the existence itself is implied in religion, above all if existence is assumed as task and project. Certainly, many are the elements that contribute to the reevaluation of religion in the contemporary society, above all the western one. The motives are: the excessive weight assumed by the rationality, which has invested on logics of exchange and on a play of interests towards successful objectives, without assuring values able to motivate the subjects in their respective social roles; an evident *deficit* of cultural models sprung by a globalization that has flattened and conformed the social motivations and the systems to which they belong; a need of values that might express, in the crisis of the political ideologies and the social models, an idea of affiliation.

The Italian philosopher G. Vattimo writes that the rebirth of religion can be generated by fear “for the loss of the meaning of existence, from real boredom, that seems to inevitably accompany consumerism. It is above all the radicalism of these risks, that seem to threaten the existence of mankind and his very «essence» (the genetic code can be modified...), what evokes and makes again actual that « too extreme hypothesis » that, for Nietzsche, was God. Also that way of coming back of the religiousness that is often expressed in the violent search and affirmation of the local, ethnic, and tribal identities, it can be brought back, in the majority of cases, to a refusal of the modernization seen as the cause of a destruction of the authentic roots of the existence.”²

The doubt remains if such a way to intend religion takes as its point of reference the relationship with God or a nostalgic desire of man and of its search for happiness. It is sure, however, that in the actual interpretation of religion three models stand out, as it is underlined by M. Seckler³: first a traditional one, that makes reference to God as a criterion and model of behaviour; a second model is translated in an attitude of opening to the transcendent, in which the term God doesn't appear; a third one is characterized by an anthropological tension, for which religion is functional to man, to its general search of meaning, of totality, of salvation.

Within these coordinates of reference, two modalities *of the return of religion* stand out

The first one is describable as a particular experience of the sacred, experience that might be a residual thirst of religiosity or a substitutive form of a disenchanted *neo-paganism*,⁴ that finds its point of attraction in making itself spokesman of a *divine figure without God*, of an anonymous divinity that inhabits the regions of life without the strength of salvation, but with the persuasion to be able to offer oasis of comfort and happiness. Typical in this respect is the religiousness of the *New Age*, with its mystical-experiential characteristic of the Self, in which the demand for the rediscovery of the inner self is united to the increasing desire to create the best from the possible worlds. It is the proposal of an alternative way to an image of a world dominated by scientific

¹ U. Galimberti, *La tecnica e il crepuscolo della religione*, in *Parola Spirito e Vita* 41 (2000) 263-264.

² G. Vattimo, *La traccia della traccia*, in *Annuario Filosofico Europeo, La Religione*, a cura di J. Derrida e G. Vattimo, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1995, pp. 76-77.

³ M. Seckler, *Il concetto teologico di religione*, in W. Kern – H. J. Pottmeyer - M. Seckler (a cura di), *Corso di Teologia Fondamentale. 1. Trattato sulla religione*, Queriniana, Brescia 1990, pp. 203-228.

⁴ Cf. S. Natoli, *Dio e il divino. Confronto con il cristianesimo*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1999. Si veda anche G. Mura (ed.), *Una «rilettura» di Dio nella cultura contemporanea*, Città Nuova, Roma 1995.

knowledge and power, in which is at home intimacy, concealment, and ineffability in view of meditation.

The second modality fits in the wave of a new religious interest favoured by the meeting with other religions, above all those of the East. They express the wealth of pluralism and of the different proposals of every religious tradition, signalling, at the same time, a need: in the post-modern society it is very strong the desire of knowing by experience and the need of a meaning that embraces the totality of life, from the working to the affective side, especially in joining the physical comfort, with success and realization. In the collective imagination the oriental religions seem to satisfy such demands and indemnify the damages of religiousness too rational and too worried about a civil ethics, proper of the western religion. Here it is taking shape that movement of *post-Christianity* that is becoming a relevant cultural factor. It is not the end of Christianity, exception made for the traditional one, but it is the cultural change of the recipients who experience that Christianity doesn't represent any more the horizon and the support of a common feeling.

This is not the place to make an in debt evaluation, but only to signal the articulated morphology of the contemporaneity that doesn't seem at all to have gotten rid of the presumed heaviness of religion to the advantage of the thoughtlessness of life. Rather it struggles to search for spirituality above all religions, a *world religion* without name or face characterized as a *sacred science* that proposes a new syncretistic religious horizon in which the original affiliations or the socio-cultural differences don't count. Following what has already been said it can be affirmed that today to believe is more connected or substituted with to suppose or also «to believe of believing». It is a belief that it is inversely proportional to the «reasons» of the traditional faith. Naivety and credulity are at the base of the new faces of the sacred in scenery of fragmentation and irrationality that involves every aspect of faith and makes it more and more incoherent and confused. Even if a similar attitude seems to cultivate an ancient hope: to track dawn new itineraries of that nostalgia of the totally Other that worries the days of our lives.

3 IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE MYSTERY OF EXISTENCE: THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Faced with the problematic and contradictory scenerio of a return and strengthening of religion, even if intended with new modalities in comparison to the past, it is difficult not to recognize the discreet presence of *figures* that, without rising to the role of great stories, are narrating *the need of transcendence*. The talk is about figures because they conduct the reflection to move beyond the surface of the data, and of the facts, to try to realize from where they originate, and fix the beginning and the way the search should follow. These are figures that help to decipher man and his fundamental questions, to understand how he can build his own dignity within the personal self-awareness: “the more human beings know reality and the world, the more they know themselves in their uniqueness, with the question of the meaning of things and of their very existence becoming ever more pressing” (*Fides et Ratio, I*). In other words, the contemporary world itself invites us to keep into account, even with all the different interpretative points of view, the reality of the *religious experience* as the space for understanding the appeal and the mystery of the existence. To look at such experience, it means to become aware of what the religious sciences agree to define as a structural, inalienable and conclusive dimension of the human experience.

Religious experience is part of that deep perception that man has of the truth and of the sense of his being and existence, of what he does and of the global destiny of his history. A perception of inhabiting the world and the history that conceals a *meaning*, a *truth* that cannot be reduced to how much a person can succeed in perceiving, but pursues him so that in the care of himself, of the world, of the other, he might start a journey, make an exodus, called by the Mystery that innervates reality. In the original context of the religious experience, man doesn't live the dream of knowledge

as simple control of what is different, whose result can consist either in the magic manipulation of such knowledge or in the declaration of the not pertinence to his existence. Rather, the religious experience allows an *open relationship* that produces a different way of being and existing, because it puts man at the heart of reality itself, from an angle of observation in which the things themselves appear supported by other perspectives in comparison to the only human logic.

Religion, therefore, fits in the marvellous and progressive dialogue between the questions and the answers. A dialogue that gives taste to the flowing of days, in that project of salvation inscribed in the heart of every man and that finds its initial formulation in the rising of the *whys*. In the document of the II Vatican Council *Nostra aetate*, n.1 we read,: “men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence .The problems that weigh heavily on the hearts of men are the same today as in the ages past. What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behaviour, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death? What is judgement? What reward follows death? And finally, what is the final mystery beyond human explanation, which embraces our entire existence, from which we take our origin and towards which we tend?”

It should not cause surprise, consequently, the fact that within the religious perspective of man the biblical-Christian revelation presents itself with traits of originality and with a project for man that gives origin to a new way of reading the world and life. It certainly breaks that presumed psychological familiarity of man with the figures of the transcendence, because it provokes him to go beyond them. Man then becomes the interpreter of these figures which can represent some kind of *intersections* on the path of man’s meeting with God and with himself. Rather, revelation as an event of God meeting man represents a *problem* for man, who is called to choose between to be sheltered in the labyrinths of what is the insoluble or to try to individualize paths of reflection that appraises the novelty expressed in the dynamism of revelation. “The central reality of faith rests on the fact that the ignored, the not experienced God, goes out of himself toward man to become God-for-me. This is the revelation! It is an openness of God in the history of humanity, a progression of God. This revelation also demands that man continues his movement of openness toward God [...] If this double movement of revelation and faith is not realized, then the data of faith become extraneous to life, or God becomes to a large extent the image conceived by the «projection».”¹.

4. THE THREEFOLD MEANING OF THE CONCEPT OF REVELATION

Having affirmed that the Christian revelation produces an original perspective, it must be pointed out that it cannot be deduced from the relational openness of the religious experience. It is true that such experience inscribes the desire of man in his paradoxical search. Such search, while affirming the human self-sufficiency (or human autonomy) to find a sense for his existence, it tells in the meantime that man, in the attempt to find his own identity, cannot shape its itinerary just one way. But it is also true that the religious experience and the movement of faith signal a different reality that shows the meaning of the availability for man to entertain further horizons of meaning, for which it is fascinating to set out searching. In such optics, revelation has an essential pedagogic function, in as much as it educates man to set himself on the traces that God has disseminated along the course of history. Revelation *tells itself* because it invites man to go beyond the threshold that marks the border, and therefore unites and divides, between the *problem* of the existence and the *mystery* of it, in order to be able to meet that God that comes to meet man. As R. Guardini (1885-1968), who is one of the greatest figures in the cultural and theological European history of the XX century, writes “The first proposition of every doctrine on Revelation is this: what revelation is, it can only be said by itself. It doesn't represent a step in the succession of the natural openings of the sense of the existence, but it comes purely from the divine initiative. It is not even a necessary self-

¹ A. Vergote, *Liberare Dio liberare l'uomo*, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi 1977, p. 23.

communication of the Supreme Being; on the contrary it is an action of the free and personal God. In order to understand such an event the thought has to go to the teachings of Scriptures, and it has to face more willingly the risk to understand God «humanly» more than philosophically.”¹

The etymology of the word itself suggests a dynamics of such kind, where the meaning must be understood in a particular polarity. To reveal, (from the Latin *revelare* and from the Greek *apokalyptein*) it initially points out the removal of a veil that is the unveiling of something that is hidden and that can come to light and be communicated to men only through revelation. But, at the same time, to reveal also points out to a thickening of the veil, because what is disclosed asks for a different way of looking, able to penetrate what is open before the understanding of man. To think it over, it would seem that revelation and concealment are mutually exclusive: concealment precedes revelation, which should put an end to concealment. Actually, it is not so, because revelation doesn't remove concealment in its entirety, but points it out as mystery, which by revelation, is perceived and experienced as mystery. It is that “mystery hidden from centuries, but now manifested” (Col 1, 26, cfr. also Rm 16, 25) that suggests to man the wisdom of the listening in the awareness that “Now we see indistinctly as in a mirror, than we shall see face to face. My knowledge is imperfect now than I shall know even as I am known” (1 Cor 13, 12). For this reason the revealing act shows itself with a more articulated range of dimensions that constitute the whole of it: to show, to appear, to say, to offer signs, but also to see, to perceive, to be listening, to know how.

In the wake of such indications, three meanings of departure of the concept of revelation can be distinguished: aesthetical, religious and theological.

1. The *aesthetical* meaning of revelation recalls a fundamental datum: it points out the event of a something that doesn't depend on me, on the subject, a something that throws a light and opens horizons that give a new form to questions, situations, and ways of seeing things. It is like reading a book, seeing a film, listening to music, such experiences stimulate a revision of our world, in which people and things acquire new meanings and relationships. In conclusion, a person really goes out modified in as much as the *to take-with* is, primarily, a *to let to be taken*, a to let to be captured and to be seduced by a beauty that throws a different truth on all things. Objective evidence helps the subject to live a correct and legitimate interpretation giving him the possibility to penetrate the truth and the meaning of such evidence through a fatiguing and appealing dialogue. “The concept of revelation is not necessarily limited to the religious circle [...] In its ampler meaning, revelation means an event of which one cannot dispose of: it ignites in me an idea, an emotion, an intuition, that I cannot discursively grab, or it is given to me as a vision that illuminates confused situations and it gives figure to an indistinct feeling. This aesthetical concept of revelation has a close relationship with feelings and with individuality. But to gather its inner tension one needs to ask oneself in which way what is individually carried out and felt, and as such it is not transferable, can be nevertheless communicated and to become even accessible to all.”²

2. The *religious* meaning underlines, on its part, the break-in of the divine and the sacred as totally other, an awful and fascinating mystery that sets in evidence something that is not assimilable in the normal vicissitudes of the daily living. Such meaning expresses, beyond the readings that reduce religion to a psychological, social, linguistic, artistic, etc. fact, the conviction that the religious experience shows a something irreducible, a difference in level when compared with the daily living it calls man to a choice: either to live the dynamics of listening or to protect himself from the questions that demand an authentic search. The reason is in the fact that, unlike a style of life and a way of thinking that is modelled only on the expectations of the human subject,

¹ R. Guardini, «Rivelazione» come forma del vivere, in *Fede – Religione – Esperienza. Saggi teologici*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1995², p. 169.

² G. Ebeling, *Dogmatica della fede cristiana I. Prolegomeni. La fede in Dio creatore del mondo*, Marietti, Genova 1990, p.304.

religion points out a project of life that originates from an Other and suggests a different horizon within which to organize one's own history. For this reason revelation is an event that moves man to a new situation in comparison to his convictions. "Revelation in the religious sense has the privilege of the genuine linguistic use because in the relationship between the divine and the human it emerges in the most acute way that tension that constitutes the premise of the concept of revelation: the break-in of a totally Other, the unavailability and the strength of what has happened, the amazement up to being overwhelmed, to be touched to the root of the existence, the meeting with an unconditional reality that envelops every thing, whose becoming figure and word has an extraordinary power to mould history."¹

3. The *theological* meaning is placed in the specificity and originality of the biblical-Christian revelation for which the mystery named by man as God, makes himself in unexpected and free way, next to man in the concreteness of a people, up to the event of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The great novelty lies here: the revelation is an event, a happening that makes objective the Mystery, a *unique and unrepeatable* event to the point of being decisive for the authenticity of the human existence. But considering things well, by the very fact that the mystery draws near to man, it appears as distant and separate. Such alterity is called *holiness* by man, as the experience of the prophet Isaiah narrates (6, 1-13). It is an alterity and qualitative difference between God and man that doesn't authorize any reductionism of the event of revelation, but it allows man not to remain in an empty space without orientation for the search. To a condition: that man lets himself to be informed by the novelty of such an event. In this optics revelation shows how its importance and centrality it is not established a priori by man, but is inviting him to a constant search. Each person is called to walk the way that leads to the truth which only in the going is disclosed as truth. In the perspective of the person of Jesus Christ, revelation is, at the meantime, itinerary and destination (cfr. Jn 14, 6), because He "is the way, he doesn't *point it out*; He is the truth, he doesn't *teach it*; He is the life, He doesn't *communicate it*. Jesus doesn't lead to something for which one is or *one has*; a person turns to him not *to have* the revelation, but *because He is* the revelation."²

5. REVELATION, THE STARTING POINT OF THEOLOGY

At the beginning of the *Summa Theologiae* s. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) reflecting on the nature and scope of theology, sets a question in appearance rhetorical: if it is necessary to admit a knowledge different from the philosophical one, because also philosophy affirms the possibility of knowing God. The conclusive answer is in the individualization of the *principle of revelation*, from which theology derives and of the *perspective of salvation*. He writes (I, q. 1, and a 1): "to the question I answer saying that, for the salvation of man, a doctrine deriving from revelation is necessary, a doctrine distinct from philosophy that is elaborated by reason. The motive is in the fact that man is destined to reach God in a way that surpasses the rational understanding. In effects, the prophet Isaiah says, «The eyes have never seen, outside of you o God, what you have prepared for those who love you». Now it is necessary that men know in precedence this goal of theirs to be able to direct towards it their intentions and their actions. That's why a divine revelation regarding the things that surpasses the human reason was necessary for the salvation of man."

The assumption of such principle has its foundation on the event of the meeting between God and man, that in Jesus Christ "as man" (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2) it assumes a definitive and normative form; which means that the Christological event has in itself the evidence that calls man to a new intelligence, in which the freedom to answer and to understand is an attitude that, at the

¹ G. Ebeling, *Dogmatica della fede*, p. 305.

² R. Bultmann, *Enciclopedia Teologica. Introduzione allo studio della teologia*, Marietti, Genova 1989, p. 77.

same time, it takes root in his existence and it produces a widening of his knowledge. With an expression of the theologian P. Rousselot (1878-1915), it can be affirmed that revelation demands a particular empathy, that *of the eyes of faith* which are able to put in movement and to render explicit a different cognitive logic, suitable, as far as possible, to the pretension of truth that the revelation advances in relationship to the last meaning of existence and of history. The event of believing, in substance, it globally involves the person by reason of a truth that surprises: God comes to meet man, beyond his representative schemes and his interests. Revelation, therefore, expresses the alterity and the gratuitousness of God: an alterity that is never definitely possible to seize and that always calls the human existence to an exodus and to that permanent going which is life. A gratuitousness that must not be understood as reassurance for man, but on the contrary as a provocation to keep oneself in wonder, because without it the meeting with God is difficult and a theological reflection unthinkable.

That's why revelation hurts the cognitive spontaneity of man: it meets the ways of the human research soliciting them to *a deeper* interpretation and understanding, in virtue of the fact that it is always greater than what can be contained in human words. In such sense, revelation is the original and peculiar foundation of the theological discourse. Theology in its process of following the traces of God's revelation breaks reality's wall of silence and constitutes itself as a perennial temptation for man, since it challenges him while instructing him in his own questioning. Faced with the event of revelation, man and the world become a part of a history whose meaning is hidden in God and by Him disclosed to man, in a new way never previously known. "The category of revelation itself, therefore, requires that a content radically new be recognized and be communicated *by revelation* and not by simple reflexive activity of the subject."¹

¹ R. Fisichella, *Che cos'è la teologia*, in R. Fisichella – G. Pozzo – G. Lafont, *La teologia tra rivelazione e storia. Introduzione alla teologia sistematica*, EDB, Bologna 1999, p. 45. Cf. J. Wicks, *Introduzione al metodo teologico*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1994.