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Revelation, History, and the Dialogue of Religions: A Study of Bhartrhari and Bonaventure, by D. Carpenter

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The current awareness of religious diversity makes it impossible for Christians to mount a complete and satisfactory theology of religions. The latest attempt at such a theology, the pluralist model championed by John Hick and others, has been undermined convincingly by cogent philosophical, theological, and historical arguments. Very recently, there have been ingenious, but in the end unsuccessful, attempts to revive forms of exclusivism and inclusivism. I take the (admittedly not widely held) view that comparative theology should be seen as an alternative to the theology of religions in any of its forms. Nowhere is my position more difficult to sustain theologically than in the question of revelation. At the foundation of any theology of religions (including pluralist theologies) lies the issue of revelation. Theologies of religion, in fact, may be said to rise from theologies of revelation as oaks from acorns. In order to place the theology of religion in abeyance in the interest of addressing religious diversity comparatively, theologians will have to find new ways of approaching the issue of revelation. In this regard, David Carpenter's book will be of great service.

Carpenter argues that, although revelation has been much investigated philosophically and theologically, rarely has this religious phenomenon been addressed historically. Claims about revealed truths as the basis for universal religious claims are not unique to Christianity. In fact, such claims are widely diffused. Thus revelation can also be investigated comparatively by the historian of religion. Carpenter offers a concrete example by comparing Bhartrhari with Bonaventure. Bhartrhari (ca. 450–500), a Brahmin grammarian in the tradition of Panini and Patañjali, played an important role in the Hindu revival of the Gupta period in India. Bhartrhari's notion of revelation is opened up by means of a careful reading of his *Vakyaṭpadiya*. Bonaventure (c. 1181–1226) is appreciated

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as a scholastic theologian, church leader, and heir to the spirituality of Francis of Assisi. His notion of revelation is gleaned from the *Itinerarium*, the *Commentary on the Sentences*, various sermons and Gospel commentaries, and most especially, from the *Collations on the Six Days*.

Carpenter's work is based on a doctoral dissertation which has been updated to include very recent material pertinent to his subject. Although generally speaking the revision is successful, sometimes the argument wanders into the woods with unnecessarily technical discussions of purely grammatical aspects of the texts under discussion, and at other times the author throws around Sanskrit with daunting abandon (a glossary would help). On the other hand, Carpenter's intimacy with his subject matter is indicated by the fact that he uses his own translations of Bhartrhari.

This book is not at all bashful about raising sticky methodological issues for its readers. Theologians, at least exclusivists and inclusivists, will not be accustomed to thinking about revelation as a multireligious phenomenon. Pluralist theologians will be troubled by Carpenter's refusal to acknowledge that the evident similarities in Bhartrhari's and Bonaventure's understanding of revelation indicate a common religious essence. Carpenter brackets the notion of revelation as a *norma normans non normata* in order to make it an object of historical-critical inquiry. He defamiliarizes the concept by locating it within the history of religions in the interest of contributing theologically to the furtherance of interreligious dialogue.

Carpenter's approach will ruffle not only theological feathers. Historians of religion have traditionally been suspicious of revelation due in no small way to the origins of their discipline in the European Enlightenment. Revelation typically is seen as a theological category related to the need of religions to affirm the truth and universality of their doctrinal claims. But Carpenter argues convincingly that revelation is as much a phenomenon of religion as sacrifice, shamanism, or sacred kingship with the result that "this kind of historical-critical study of revelation blurs the boundaries between the 'neutral' approach of the historian of religions and the confessional approach of the traditional theologian and makes clear the need for a continued rethinking of the nature of religious truth" (p. 13).

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