

Nature and the Word of God in Inter-religious Dialogue

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at generating discussion about “nature as revelation” among LSI participants from different faith traditions. All three monotheistic faiths — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — articulate (with varying degrees of explicitness) the idea that God is knowable both through creation and through revelation as transmitted by scriptures. Western Christianity has developed this idea most explicitly in the Patristic and medieval metaphor of the book of God’s word and the book of God’s Works, which flourished in the seventeenth century but has for some time been in moderate to rapid decline.

Theologies of binary or pluri-form revelation carry a number of interesting challenges for our interdisciplinary and interfaith dialogue. What constitutes revelation? Whose sacred texts are regarded as sources of such revelation? Can we allow for multiple scriptural revelations as we have multiple interpretations of nature by the sciences? The paper will broach some of these problems and propose lines of discussion on the topic of revelation for our interreligious conversations.

Biography

Peter M. J. Hess earned his M.A. in philosophy and theology from Oxford University in 1984, and his Ph.D. in historical theology from the Graduate Theological Union in 1993. His scholarly work focuses on the interaction between science and religion in early modern Europe, particularly on the appropriation of the developing sciences by theologians during this period. He currently teaches historical theology at Saint Mary's College in Moraga, and serves as a member of the steering committee for the Local Societies Initiative of the Metanexus Institute.

I. The Metaphor of “God’s Two Books” in the Christian Tradition

In the Christian West the relationship between religion and science has frequently been expressed in terms of models and metaphors. The simplistic but popular “warfare model” dominated interpretation of these very different realms of human knowledge for at least a century. Now, however, we are seeing something of a renaissance of a far more ancient metaphor, that of God’s self-revelation through a pair of complementary books, the book of nature and the book of scripture. Pope John Paul II has recently proclaimed that “From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator (Wisdom 13:5). This is to recognize as a first stage of divine Revelation the marvelous book of nature, which, when read with the proper tools of human reason, can lead to knowledge of the Creator.” *Fides et Ratio* (1998), 19.

Origins of the “Two Books” Metaphor

The origins of the “two books” metaphor are embedded in the conviction of the Abrahamic faiths that God is knowable through revelation. The Hebrew Scriptures and

the New Testament were understood to be transmitting the word of God — whether immediately or as mediated through human experience — and thus the “book” became of paramount importance in their respective traditions. The *Psalms* and the *Book of Wisdom* both clearly proclaim God as knowable (see section II below). The New Testament *locus classicus* for the natural knowledge of God is the Pauline declaration in *Romans*: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” (*Romans* 1:19-20). Paul elsewhere describes the visible worlds as “images of the invisible.” (*Heb.* 11:3).

It is in Patristic literature that we find the first full expression of the metaphor. Elements may be found as early as the second century in Justin Martyr's adoption of the Stoic idea of the *logos spermatikos* (*Second Apology*, Ch. VIII), and in Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202) idea of the works and the word of God (*Adversus haereses* IV.20). Tertullian prefigured it in his anti-heretical argument that because Marcion has eviscerated scripture, he cannot provide a counterpart in revelation to the knowledge of God we derive from nature. (*Adversus Marcionem*, V.5). Athanasius (c.296-373) offered a proto-statement of the theme in his claim that nature and scripture are the sole sources of our knowledge of God (*Vita S. Antoni*, 78).

The clearest Patristic statements of the metaphor of “the book of nature” were offered by John Chrysostom (c.347-407) and Augustine of Hippo. Chrysostom declared that “If God had given instruction by means of books, and of letters, he who knew letters would have learnt what was written, but the illiterate man would have gone away without receiving any benefit... This however cannot be said with respect to the heavens... Upon this volume the unlearned, as well as the wise man, shall be able to look, and wherever any one may chance to come, there looking upwards towards the heavens, he will receive a sufficient lesson from the view of them... (*Homilies to the People of Antioch*, IX.5, 162-63). Augustine proclaimed that “there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that? Why, heaven and earth shout to you: “God made me!” (*City of God*, 11:22). But although these passages establish the complementarity of natural and revealed theology among the Fathers, the metaphor would only reach full articulation with the progressive rediscovery of Aristotelian natural philosophy, when the “two books” would become a primary model for expressing a mature binary epistemology of revelation.

Medieval thinkers employed the model of a two-fold revelation with great plasticity. For Alain of Lille “*Omnis mundi creatura / Quasi liber et pictura / Nobis est et speculum*” (Every creature is to us like a book and a picture and a mirror.) Hugh of St. Victor regarded both the creation and the Incarnation as “books” of God, and compared Christ as primary revelation to a book. Bonaventure's (1217-74) model of revelation included three volumes: sensible creatures are “a book with writing front and back,” spiritual creatures are “a scroll written from within”, and scripture is “a scroll written within and without.” (*Collations on the Hexaemerion*, 12.14-17). Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* likewise speaks about a threefold knowledge that humanity may have of divine things: ascent through creation by the natural light of reason; descent of divine truth by revelation; and elevation of the human mind to a perfect insight into

things revealed. For Dante, for whom the book in which everything is contained is the Godhead, perfect insight is eschatological in Paradise, where everything that has been scattered throughout the entire universe like loose pages, is now “bound in one volume.” (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 82ff.)

Raymond of Sabunde offered the fullest late-medieval articulation of the metaphor in *Theologia Naturalis* (1436): “Hence there are two books given to us by God, the one being the book of the whole collection of creatures or the book of nature, and the other being the book of sacred scripture. The first book was given to human beings in the beginning, when the universe of creatures was created, since no creature exists that is not a certain letter, written by the finger of God, and from many creatures as from many letters is composed one book, which is called the book of the creatures. Within this book is included humanity itself, and human beings are the first letters of this book. But the second book, Scripture, was given to human beings secondarily to correct the deficiencies of the first book, which humanity could not read because it is blind. The first book is common everyone, but the second book is not common to all, because only clerics are able to read what is written in it.” (*Theologia Naturalis sive Liber Creaturarum*, 35-36). Sabunde’s incautious exaltation of the book of nature and his insistence that the book of scripture is less accurate led to the condemnation of the work as heretical in 1595.

Early Modern Variations on the Theme

The “book of nature” enjoyed its greatest currency in the early modern period. The Reformers’ emphasis on the literal sense of scripture cut through the profusion of “meanings” and “signatures” found by medieval scholars in nature, and reinforced the idea of there being two books. However, the book of nature was clearly subordinate to biblical revelation in Calvin’s theology, who held scripture to be a necessary corrective to the deficiencies of nature (*Institutes*, I.6.1). The Reformed tradition retained this Calvinist interpretation of the two books in the *Belgic Confession* adopted by the Dutch Reformed Church. In contrast, Paracelsus suggested an empirical approach: while scripture was to be explored through its letters, the book of nature had to be read by going from land to land, since every country was a different page.

The metaphor was affected in the seventeenth century by both the elaboration of natural theology and the development of the sciences in novel empirical and theoretical directions. Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) saw purpose in all of nature, and suggested that if Descartes wanted to prove the existence of God, he ought to abandon reason and look around him, and that the two books were not to be kept on separate shelves. Although Francis Bacon seems in practice to have kept the two books distinct, he articulated their essential complementarity: “the scriptures reveal to us the will of God; and the book of the creatures expresses the divine power; whereof the latter is a key unto the former: not only opening our understanding to conceive the true sense of the scriptures, by the general notions of reason and rules of speech; but chiefly opening our belief, in drawing us into a due meditation of the omnipotency of God, which is chiefly signed and engraven upon his works.” (*The Advancement of Learning*, VI, 16). Bacon set the tone for the seventeenth-century scientific enterprise in his redirection of the “two books” metaphor toward the improvement of the human estate.

Galileo argued that the book of nature is written in the language of mathematics, not only implying that mathematics is the sublimest expression of the divine word, but *de facto* restricting its full comprehension to those who are appropriately educated: “And to prohibit the whole science [of astronomy] would be but to censure a hundred passages of holy Scripture which teach us that the glory and greatness of Almighty God are marvelously discerned in all his works and divinely read in the open book of heaven... Within its pages are couched mysteries so profound and concepts so sublime that the vigils, labors, and studies of hundreds upon hundreds of the most acute minds have still not pierced them, even after continual investigations for thousands of years. (*Letter to Grand Duchess Christina*). Galileo’s famous dictum that scripture teaches us “how the heavens go and not how to go to heaven,” should be interpreted in light of his conviction of the complementarity of the two books.

The metaphor flourished in the natural theological climate of seventeenth-century England, particularly in the “physico-theology” of the Boyle Lectures, where the idea was used by many divines as shorthand for the assumed validity of the design argument. But its two terms were not always held in comfortable balance. The dissenting theologian Richard Baxter, for example, argued that “nature was a ‘hard book’ which few could understand, and that it was therefore safer to rely more heavily on Scripture.” (*The Reasons for the Christian Religion*, 1667). In contrast, Newton saw nature as perhaps more truly the source of divine revelation than the Bible, although he spent decades of his life investigating the prophetic books. It has been argued that in virtually abolishing the distinction between the two books, which he revered as separate expressions of the same divine meaning, Newton was attempting to keep science sacred and to reveal scientific rationality in what was once a purely sacral realm, namely, biblical prophecy. (Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, 49). By the early eighteenth century there was a significant faction within the Royal Society opposed to any mention of scripture in a scientific context.

Decline of the Metaphor

The “Two Books” metaphor declined in currency in the nineteenth century for a complex of reasons, which I have detailed elsewhere.¹ Suffice it to say that the revolutions in geology and biology eroded longstanding traditions of a young earth and an immutable creation, and wore away the bedrock beneath a coherent “book of nature” that was temporally coextensive with the “book of scripture.”² Parallel to the “historicization” of geology and biology, the development of an historical critical approach to study of the scripture challenged the profoundly rooted tradition about the Bible as an integral and timeless record of the Word of God. The modern period also witnessed the erosion of confidence that we can easily interpret natural processes teleological, as Paley had once argued. The discovery of extinction in the fossil record disproved the ancient assumption of the immutability of species, rendering it increasingly difficult to read the “book of nature” as self-evidently revealing the divine plan, or at least as a plan worthy of admiration. Additionally, the metamorphosis of “natural philosophy” or “natural history” into the variety of sciences as we know them today undercut both terms in the metaphor of “God’s Two Books.” As each new scientific discipline developed its own sphere of study, the “nature” underlying the “book of

nature” lost its metaphorical coherence, and the replacement of science as commentary on authoritative texts by the empirical investigation of the natural world essentially removed the “book” from the “book of nature.”

Nature and scripture in Jewish tradition

The Hebrew scriptures stand at the root of the idea of nature as a book, even if the conditions were different from those which encouraged the elaboration of the Christian metaphor. *Psalm 19:1* majestically articulates a theme that would remain common currency throughout the history of natural theology: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.” The *Book of Wisdom*, composed in the middle of the first century BCE, articulates the idea that God is known through the divine works, even by gentiles who have not enjoyed the benefit of revelation. The argument is essentially a privative one, removing excuse from non-believers, who may, by analogy with a human author, contemplate the author of creation through the grandeur and beauty of creatures.¹ This privative argument initiated a tradition persisting at least until the time of Calvin, in whose theology humanity is regarded as standing without excuse before the awesome justice of God.²

While later Judaism was never as explicit on nature as a book as was the Christian tradition, the theme of nature as revelation was never far below the surface. Dr. Noah Efron of Bar Ilon University quotes the brilliant 16th century theologian and exegete, Judah Loew b. Bezalel (Maharal of Prague, to whom, generations later, the Golem was attributed):

The Torah is the order of the universe. ... That they said in the midrash that God "looked in the Torah as he created the world" [Bereishit Raba, Ch. 1], that meant that the Torah itself is the order of everything, and thus when the Blessed Name wanted to create His universe and order it, he would look in the Torah which is the order of everything [in order to] create His universe.³

Noah Efron notes that this sort of modified Jewish Neo-Platonism was a quite well developed tradition in the early modern period. One exemplar of the neoplatonic sort of literature is Abraham Ibn Daud (1110-1180), who wrote that “It sometimes happens that one who investigates the sciences but slightly, lacks the strength to grasp two lamps with his two hands: with his right hand the lamp of his religion and with his left hand the lamp of his science.”⁴

In a fascinating study of sixteenth-century philosophy of nature, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson considers the extent to which the study of nature was a hermeneutical exercise. For some scholars the Torah was in effect a scientific text, so that the scientific

¹ *Book of Wisdom*, 11:6-9; see also Sirach 17:8.

² However, this *Wisdom* idea of an inescapable revelation seems not to be a characteristically Hebrew notion, but rather a borrowing from Hellenistic Greek philosophy, the *Book of Wisdom* being a work designed to address the fascination of the author’s fellow Jews with the cultural life of Alexandria. *Jerusalem Bible*, Introduction to *Wisdom*, 1004.

validity of any hypothesis had to be read in light of that ultimate authority. For others, such as Hasdai Crescas writing around 1500, The Torah was not a byproduct of Moses' human perfection, but rather a "direct, intentional intervention of God into the natural order."⁵ Tirosh Samuelson concludes that for the Jews there was only one book, the Torah. "So long as Jewish thinkers adhered to these beliefs [that only Jews could interpret the signs], they could not adopt the scientific mentality that presupposed a qualitative distinction between the Book of Nature (written in universal, mathematical characters) and the Book of Scripture (written in particular, linguistic signs)."⁶

Nature and the Qur'an in Islamic Tradition

Although I have received conflicting testimony on the part of Muslim scholars with whom I have consulted, the general consensus is that Allah does reveal himself in nature. Dr. Bruno Guiderdoni suggests that while there is obviously no mention of the formula "God's two books of nature and scripture" in the Qur'ān or the Hadith, there are nevertheless many passages in the Qur'ān that do suggest a quite similar idea, with some interesting differences. For example, "It is the same word (ayah, plural: ayat) that is used to name the Qur'ānic verses and God's 'signs' in the world. Therefore the believer 'reads' the world as much as he 'travels' in the Book."⁷

Professor Abdul Majid writes more definitely that the Qur'ān does indeed consider nature as another book of revelation and that there are many verses which directly and indirectly point towards that. All creation in as manifest in the cosmos has been taken as signs of Allah, the Almighty. Even *Homo sapiens* as a species, and human physiology as a system, have been read as being signs of Allah.⁸ As an example of revelation through nature we find the following:

"So verily I call to witness the planets — that recede, go straight, or hide, and the night as it dissipates; and the dawn as it breathes away the darkness — verily this is the word of a most honorable messenger, endued with power, with rank before the Lord of the Throne, with authority there, an faithful to his trust. And (O people) your companion is not one possessed...neither doth he withhold grudgingly a knowledge of the unseen." (Surah 81:15-24)⁹

Islam recognizes the progressive character of revelation, corresponding to the developmental nature of humanity to whom it is directed: "It is a Qur'ān which we have divided (into parts from time to time) in order that thou mightest recite it to men at intervals: We have revealed it by stages." (17:106)

The cosmos bears witness to Allah: "Do they not look at the sky above them? How we have made it and adorned it, and there are no flaws in it?" (50:6) The obvious design of the universe — in this case a Ptolemaic model — negates the possibility that blind chance could serve as a sufficient explanation for the universe. Other natural phenomena serve as signs: "Seest thou not that Allah makes the clouds move gently, then makes them join together in a heap...It is Allah Who alternates the night and the day: verily in these things is an instructive example for those who have vision." (24:43-44)

Dr. Ibrahim B. Syed, Ph.D. suggests that Islam and its revelation can appropriately be compared to nature:

The profound book of nature is so rich in content and meaning that if the history of human thought continues forever, this book is not likely to be read to its end. The Qur’ān, too, is like the rich and profound book of nature, with the difference that the Qur’ān is articulate and eloquent while nature is silent. But its content and resources are equally inexhaustible, and will ever remain as fresh and novel.¹⁰

But it seems arguable that the silence of nature should be read in Qur’ānic perspective as demonstrating its complementary character rather than its insufficiency. Each has a role: “And we sent down the Book to thee for the express purpose that thou shouldst make it clear to them those things in which they differ, and that it should be a guide and a mercy to those who believe. And Allah sends down rain from the skies, and gives therewith life to the earth after its death: verily in this is a sign for those who listen.” (16:64-65).

William Chittick notes that a major source for such readings of nature is Ibn Arabi, who derives most of his relevant terminology from the Qur’ān and the Hadith. Arabi speaks of the underlying stuff of the cosmos as “the Breath of the All-merciful,” within which are articulated the letters, words, etc., which are the creatures.¹¹

III. Theological Challenges

A. What is “Revelation”?

Theologies of binary or pluri-form revelation carry a number of interesting challenges for our interdisciplinary and interfaith dialogue. First, what constitutes revelation? While it has rarely been claimed that the Hebrew scriptures were meant to serve as an exhaustive text about the world, there was a time when alternative sources of knowledge were much slimmer. The Pentateuch afforded a comprehensive perspective on what was most important to the evolving Hebrew nation: a cosmogony testifying to direct divine oversight; a history of salvation of a particular people; and a set of cultic and social norms that governed everything from worship to ethics.

As societies gradually became more complex than the tribal life exemplified by ancient Israel, the sources of knowledge expanded greatly. In the twentieth century, when not only is our knowledge of the world derived from a vast array of sciences and other disciplines, but these disciplines in turn critique the sacred texts according to a multiplicity of parameters, we are left with the question, “What is or remains of revelation?”

B. Which Revelation?

Second, whose sacred texts are regarded as sources of such revelation? The dawning Western recognition over the last two centuries that the human community embraces a plurality of religious faiths has had the effect of relativizing the Bible as a source of revelation. The “two books” metaphor truly functions only if the claim can be defended that the Bible is *the* book of scripture.

Do we choose as our revealed text the Hebrew Bible? The Talmud or the rabbinic and post-rabbinic developments of the Middle Ages? The New Testament? The Qur’ān? The Hadith? It would seem inadmissible for educated people in a rapidly pluralizing culture to choose one text exclusively at the expense of all others. This brings the science and religion dialogue into fascinating interface with the long-standing conversation between the sacred traditions of the world.

C. Pluriform Revelation?

Third, could we allow for multiple scriptural revelations, parallel to the way we have multiple interpretations of nature by the sciences? That is, just as physics, biochemistry and genetics have very different but complementary perspectives to offer on the functioning of mitochondrial DNA, might it make sense to say that the claims of different religious traditions are complementary? Might it make sense to say — in the context of an interfaith discussion between the Abrahamic traditions, each of which claims exclusivity of revealed truth — that God speaks authoritatively to different peoples, but not exhaustively to people?

This could only be done, of course, at the expense of our exclusive claims to the truth. Different traditions — and different factions within those traditions — would have quite contrasting things to say about this. And some might fear that giving up a hold to the uniqueness of one’s faith will inevitably degrade the authoritativeness of that tradition. For some of us, that would not be a bad thing, but for others it might stand as a diriment impediment.

IV. Conclusion

We have seen that there is no easy congruence between the Abrahamic traditions in terms of the metaphor of the “two books.” However, we have noted a common set of assumptions about the knowability of God, which no doubt transcends the utility of a particular way of expressing it. Perhaps the book as a bound volume will one day be regarded purely as an archaic artifact, hardly worthy of supporting a guiding metaphor.

But even if this rhetorical device cannot be rehabilitated in a world of historical critical interpretation of all sacred scriptures — and in which evolutionary or developmental models hold sway in scientific disciplines ranging from cosmology and geology to biology and neuroscience — all is not lost in our interfaith and interdisciplinary discussion. The changing fashions of metaphor cannot mask the conviction of believers that God does speak to God’s creatures in pluriform ways: through religious traditions, through immediate intuition, through personal relationships, and through the revelations found in sacred writing and in nature.

¹ “God’s Two Books: Special Revelation and Natural Science I the Christian West,” in *Bridging Science and Religion*, ed. Ted Peters (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 123-140.

² See Martin J. S. Rudwick, “The Shape and Meaning of Earth History,” in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *God and Nature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 296-321.

³ Judah Loew b. Bezalel (Maharal), *Netivot 'Olam, Netiv ha-Torah*, p.3. Graciously provided by Noah Efron.

⁴ Abraham Ibn Daud, *Emunah Ramah*, p. 3. Efron notes that Colette Sirat follows the theme in her *History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge UP, 1985), pp. 57-111.

⁵ Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, “Theology of Nature in Italian Jewish Philosophy,” in *Science in Context: Judaism and the Sciences* (Cambridge, 1997), 544-545.

⁶ Ibid., p. 561.

⁷ Private correspondence with Bruno Guiderdoni, 22 April 2004.

⁸ Private correspondence with Abdul Majid, 19 March 2004.

⁹ All quotations from *The Holy Qur'ān*, are from the translation by Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Alī (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corporation, 1989).

¹⁰ Ibrahim B. Syed, “Educational Reform: Balancing Values and Skills,” Internet article, at <http://www.irfi.org>

¹¹ See passim, William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (SUNY: 1989) and *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (SUNY Series in Islam, 1997).