

Analytic Perspectives on Method and Authority in Theology

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The Revelation of God, East and West: Contrasting Special Revelation in Western Modernity with the Ancient Christian East

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Abstract: The questions of whether God reveals himself; if so, how we can know a purported revelation is authentic; and how such revelations relate to the insights of reason are discussed by John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, G. W. Leibniz, and Immanuel Kant, to name a few. Yet, what these philosophers say with such consistency about revelation stands in stark contrast with the claims of the Christian East, which are equally consistent from the second century through the fourteenth century. In this essay, I will compare the modern discussion of special revelation from Thomas Hobbes through Johann Fichte with the Eastern Christian discussion from Irenaeus through Gregory Palamas. As we will see, there are noteworthy differences between the two trajectories, differences I will suggest merit careful consideration from philosophers of religion.

Keywords: Religious Epistemology; Revelation; Divine Vision; Theosis; Eastern Orthodox; Locke; Hobbes; Lessing; Kant; Fichte; Irenaeus; Cappadocians; Cyril of Alexandria; Gregory Palamas

The idea that God speaks to humanity, revealing things hidden or making his will known, comes under careful scrutiny in modern philosophy. The questions of whether God does reveal himself; if so, how we can know a purported revelation is authentic; and how such revelations relate to the insights of reason are discussed by John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, G. W. Leibniz, and Immanuel Kant, to name a few. And these discussions continue to shape philosophy of religion today.

What is particularly useful about the modern discussion is it forces these thinkers to articulate the specifics of how they understand God's self-revelation. What may be surprising, however, is that what these philosophers say with such consistency stands in stark contrast with the claims of the Christian East, which are equally consistent from the second century through the fourteenth century. Yet, for all the consideration given to the topic of revelation in the West, little to no attention is paid to this alternative tradition.

In what follows, I will look at the modern discussion of special revelation from Thomas Hobbes through Johann G. Fichte. I will then turn my attention to the Eastern Christian writers, looking at an alternative that spans twelve hundred years. As we will see, there are noteworthy differences between the two trajectories, differences I will suggest merit careful consideration in the philosophy of religion.

1 Special revelation in Western modern thought

Prior to G. E. Lessing, the modern discussion of revelation focused less on the nature of revelation and more on how one verifies a purported revelation is authentic. The consistent rationale in this early dialogue is that one can reasonably ascent to revelation *if* the revelation is authentic. The reason is straightforward: God is omniscient and omnibenevolent; the former ensures that his knowledge is infallible, while the

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latter ensures he cannot lie. As for how one determines if a prophet is authentic, the answer is consistently *miracles*. Miracles that accompany the prophetic voice constitute the “credentials” that verify the speaker speaks for God.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of this (rather standard) position is from John Locke. Locke writes, “Faith ... is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths to men, we call *revelation*.”¹ Locke is clear that reason and revelation cannot conflict—a point we will discuss below. For now, suffice it to say that, by this, Locke does not mean that revelation is a divine articulation of truths that reason might discover on its own. To the contrary, Locke insists that, while God could reveal principles of mathematics, for example, there is no need for revelation in such matters, since “the natural use of their faculties, come to make the discovery themselves.”² For Locke, the lack of conflict between reason and revelation is due to the chain of reasoning summarized above, namely, if the speaker demonstrates his divine authority with miracles, then we can be sure he speaks for God, and because “faith be founded on the testimony of God (who cannot lie),”³ we can trust his report. Locke writes:

Thus we see the holy men of old, who had revelations from God, had something else beside that internal light of assurance in their own minds, to testify to them that it was from God. They were not left to their own persuasions alone, that those persuasions were from God, but had *outward signs* to convince them of the Author of those revelations. And when they were to convince others, they had a power given them to justify the truth of their commission from heaven, and by visible signs to assert the divine authority of a message they were sent with. Moses saw the bush burn without being consumed, and heard a voice out of it: this was something besides finding an impulse upon his mind to go to Pharaoh, that he might bring his brethren out of Egypt: and yet he thought not this enough to authorize him to go with that message, till God, by another miracle of his rod turned into a serpent, had assured him of a power to testify his mission, by the same miracle repeated before them whom he was sent to. Gideon was sent by an angel to deliver Israel from the Midianites, and yet he desired a sign to convince him that this commission was from God. These, and several the like instance to be found among the prophets of old, are enough to show that they thought not an inward seeing or persuasion of their own minds, without any other proof, a sufficient evidence that it was from God.⁴

Locke consistently employs this evidentialist line. As Nicholas Wolterstorff points out, Locke believes that New Testament testimony about Jesus holds up under historical scrutiny. It is for this reason that the testimonies to his miracles vindicate his prophetic authority.⁵ In short, reasonable faith requires “evidence, first, that we deceive not ourselves, in ascribing it to God; secondly, that we understand it right.”⁶

Thomas Hobbes gives a very similar account. Hobbes’ definition of “formed” religion is much like Locke’s definition of faith: “all formed religion is founded at first upon the faith which a multitude hath in some one person, whom they believe not only to be a wise man, and to labour to procure their happiness, but also to be a holy man, to whom God himself vouchsafeth to declare his will supernaturally.”⁷ Hobbes is clear that prophetic authority is derived entirely from God, on whose behalf the prophet speaks.⁸ As for how one scrutinizes prophetic authority, Hobbes offers both positive and negative criteria. Negatively, one may doubt the authenticity of the prophet if he utters contradictory claims or is subject to moral scandal.⁹ Positively, Hobbes, like Locke, appeals to miracles: “the testimony that men can render of divine calling can be no other than the operation of miracles ... For as in natural things men of judgment require natural signs and arguments, so in supernatural things they require signs supernatural (which are miracles) before they consent inwardly from their hearts.”¹⁰

1 Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.xviii.2.

2 Ibid., IV.xviii.4.

3 Ibid., IV.xviii.5.

4 Ibid., IV.xviii.15.

5 See Wolterstorff, “Locke’s Philosophy of Religion.” Cf. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, passim.

6 Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.xviii.5.

7 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.xii.24.

8 Ibid., III.xxxiv.6.

9 Ibid., I.xii.25-6.

10 Ibid., I.xii.26.

The same argument can be found in G. W. Leibniz, who likens the connection between miracles and prophecy to the connection between one who governs a province and the governor's messenger. The messenger must first submit to "cautious scrutiny of his credentials" before he is to be believed by the governor's subjects.¹¹ Here, of course, miracles constitute the credentials of the prophet.

A similar metaphor appears in George Berkeley's *Alciphron* dialogue. Therein, Crito says to Alciphron: "Now I presume you will grant, the authority of the reporter is a true and proper reason for believing reports: and the better this authority, the juster claim it hath to our assent: but the authority of God is on all accounts the best: whatever therefore comes from God, it is most reasonable to believe."¹² Alciphron grants the point but asks how one can possibly prove that the report came from God. The answer, again, is miracles. Crito replies: "And yet are not miracles, and the accomplishments of the prophecies, joined with the excellency of its doctrine, a sufficient proof that the Christian religion came from God?" As the dialogue persists, it becomes clear that, as with Locke, Berkeley is building an evidentialist case. Careful historical investigation will vindicate testimony to the miraculous events that accompanied the prophets, and thus their prophetic authority will be vindicated. Key to the case is the insistence that the investigation of miracles is "of the same kind that we have or can have of any facts done a great way off, and a long time ago."¹³

In light of this line of argument, it is no wonder that the main counter arguments of the day ignore the nature of revelation (i.e., the specifics of how God reveals himself) and focus exclusively on whether miracles are possible. The two main opponents of revelation on this point are Baruch Spinoza and David Hume.

Spinoza's stance on the Judeo-Christian scriptures unabashedly opposes their claim to be revelatory. He writes:

It will be said ... Scripture is nevertheless the Word of God, and it is no more permissible to say of Scripture that it is mutilated and contaminated than to say this of God's Word. In reply, I have to say that such objectors are carrying their piety too far, and are turning religion into superstition; indeed, instead of God's Word they are beginning to worship likenesses and images, that is, paper and ink.¹⁴

This, of course, is why Spinoza advocates analyzing scripture with the same historical-critical method one would apply to any other text.¹⁵ Spinoza's rationale for why he views the Bible this way is plain: He rejects the possibility of miracles and with it the possibility of special revelation; hence the Bible cannot be more than a collection of the writings of men—and a mutilated collection at that. Spinoza rejects as impossible the notion of divinely caused departures from the ordinary course of nature. Every event, regardless of how extraordinary it may appear, has a natural explanation. Put concisely: "Nothing happens in nature that does not follow from her laws."¹⁶

In like manner, David Hume understands his own case against miracles to undermine all purported revelations. Hume writes, "What we have said of miracles may be applied, without any variation, to prophecies; and indeed, all prophecies are real miracles, and as such only, can be admitted as proofs of any revelation."¹⁷ Here we see two reasons for Hume's conclusion. First, he understands full well that, in his own day, the authenticity of a purported revelation was based entirely on the accompanying miracles. If miracles are impossible—or at least so improbable that they should never be accepted as explanations of events over natural explanations—then the evidentialist case fails.¹⁸ Second, Hume understands that special revelation (were it to occur) would itself constitute a divine causal act in our world. In short, special revelation would itself be a miracle. Hence, his case against miracles strikes a blow, not only against the evidence that God has revealed himself, but against the very possibility of God revealing himself.

¹¹ Leibniz, *Examination of the Christian Religion*, 6.4.2362.

¹² Berkeley, *Alciphron*, VI.iii.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. 12, III.159.

¹⁵ Ibid., ch. 7, III.98.

¹⁶ Ibid., ch. 6, III.83.

¹⁷ Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, X.ii.101.

¹⁸ See also Harrison, "Prophecy, Early-Modern Apologetics, and Hume's Argument against Miracles," 241-48.

Now, Hume offers little on what precisely the miracle of God revealing himself might look like, and he is not alone in this. Very little time is paid in this early discussion to the specifics of God's self-revelation. The clearest accounts appear in Locke and Hobbes, respectively.

Locke is careful to differentiate *original revelation* from *traditional revelation*. The former is "that first impression which is made immediately by God on the mind of any man, to which we cannot set any bounds."¹⁹ The latter is "those impressions delivered over to others in words, and ordinary ways of conveying our conceptions one to another."²⁰ In other words, original revelation is what is experienced by the one to whom God reveals himself, namely, the prophet. Traditional revelation is what the prophet conveys to his hearers (or readers); it is the prophetic testimony vindicated by miracles.

Traditional revelation, Locke insists, is limited by the experiences of the prophet's hearers. For, "*no man inspired by God can by any revelation communicate to others any new simple ideas which they had not before from sensation or reflection.*"²¹ The reason is straightforward. Locke understands the mind to be *tabula rasa* that derives ideas from the senses pressing in upon it.²² If the prophet is to speak in a way that is intelligible to his hearers, he must rely on common conceptions from ordinary human experience.

But what of original revelation? Might the prophet himself have experiences that go beyond our ordinary mental limitations? Although Locke says "we cannot set any bounds" on original revelation, his account consistently applies the bounds of his empiricist epistemology. Locke suggests that the prophet may well come to know things beyond the reach of ordinary experience, but he is clear that this extraordinary knowing must come to the prophet through the senses. Locke's comments on the point are worth quoting at length:

Thus whatever things were discovered to St. Paul, when he was rapt up into the third heaven; whatever new ideas his mind there received, all the description he can make to others of that place, is only this, That there are such things, 'as eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive.' And supposing God should discover to any one, supernaturally, a species of creatures inhabiting, for example, Jupiter or Saturn, (for that it is possible there may be such, nobody can deny,) which had six senses; and imprint on his mind the ideas conveyed to theirs by that sixth sense: he could no more, by words, produce in the minds of other men those ideas imprinted by that sixth sense, than one of us could convey the idea of any colour, by the sound of words, into a man who, having the other four senses perfect, had always totally wanted the fifth, of seeing.²³

In short, if God is to reveal things beyond ordinary experience, God must give the revealee empirical sensations that impress upon the mind new ideas not found in his ordinary experiences.

Hobbes offers the same conclusion, though with more systematic detail. He suggests that God may reveal himself through a direct affecting of the person in *visions*, *dreams*, or *eminent graces*. Or God may reveal himself to a person through sensation of substances external to the subject, namely, *apparitions* or *angels*. Regarding the former, Hobbes, like Locke, is clear that the workings of the mind, whether in imagination, dreams, or visions, employ only "those things which have been formerly perceived by the sense."²⁴ The natural cause of dreams, according to Hobbes, is that our inward organs continue in motion even when we sleep; hence, dreams are merely an extension of our waking imagination that remains active when we are at rest.²⁵ In the case of revelatory knowledge conveyed by dreams or visions (e.g., foreknowledge of the future), the revelatory vehicle is still the motion of the imagination, utilizing memory of things impressed upon the senses; yet, when revelatory, the motion has an extraordinary external cause, namely, God.²⁶ As for *eminent graces*, Hobbes insists that this does not involve *inspiration*—that is, a spirit or phantasm moving through a person.²⁷ To the contrary, "it is an easy metaphor to signify that God inclined

¹⁹ Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.xviii.3.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., II.i.

²³ Ibid., IV.xviii.3.

²⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.ii.4.

²⁵ Ibid., I.ii.5-6.

²⁶ Ibid., III.xxxiv.6 and 25. Hobbes discusses imagination as memory of sense experience, or "decaying sense," in I.ii.3.

²⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, III.xxxiv.25.

the spirit or mind of those writers to write that which should be useful in teaching, reproof, correcting, and instructing men in the way of righteous living.”²⁸ In other words, Hobbes understands *eminent grace* to signify God stirring the natural faculties to produce insight, understanding, or zeal.²⁹ Hobbes does not speculate about the mechanism by which God stirs the faculties, but regardless of the *how*, *what* eminent grace signifies for Hobbes is nothing more than God causally redirecting the natural faculties.

Aside from direct causation on the revealee, God may employ substances external to the person. Much like Locke, revelation in this form follows usual empirical procedures: substances impress themselves upon the mind via the senses. The claim that angels, for example, might produce sense experience is an easy one for Hobbes, since he is a thoroughgoing materialist. Thus, if a thing exists, then it has some level of corporeality.³⁰ Hobbes writes, “They [angels] are substances, endued with dimensions, and take up room, and can be moved from place to place, which is peculiar to bodies; and therefore are not ghosts incorporeal (that is to say, ghosts that are in *no place*; that is to say, that are *nowhere*; that is to say, that seeming to be *somewhat*, are *nothing*).”³¹ Here, we see Hobbes’ distinction between figments of the brain—what appears to be something but corresponds to no substance—and permanent substances.³² The distinction goes to the two modes of revelation. Visions or dreams are figments of the brain that God uses to reveal certain truths, while angels are substances that, though typically elusive to our senses due to their subtlety, may manifest to the senses to serve as revelatory agents.³³ And so it is, suggests Hobbes, with other substantial manifestations, such as a voice, a humanoid appearance, or a pillar of cloud or fire. These are not figments of the brain, but substances that impress themselves on the senses.³⁴

The general understanding of God’s self-revelation is thus relatively consistent in this early discussion. Special revelation consists of God conveying truths to a person, who in turn carries that message to other people. The mode of revelatory conveyance is empirical in nature: God either exposes the revealee to a substance—be it an angel or theophany—that impresses the divine message upon his senses, or God stirs ideas already present in the mind to produce visions or dreams. The verification that God has in fact done one of these is the production of miracles, which vindicate the revealee as an authentic prophet of God.

If there is a division amongst advocates of revelation in this early discussion, it concerns the relationship between reason and revelation. Two camps emerge on the issue. The first insists that revelation does not offer insights that we can arrive at through a proper use of reason. Special revelation concerns only those things that are “above reason.”

Locke is amongst the clearest on the point. He insists that reason is (natural) revelation. As noted above, truths of a mathematical kind, for example, have already been revealed by giving to humanity rational faculties.³⁵ What, then, does special revelation offer? It speaks to matters above reason. To be sure, Locke does not mean things that contradict reason.³⁶ A truth is above reason if it is beyond the determination of reason or contrary to the probable conjectures of reason. Locke offers the example of whether God will one

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., III.xxxiv.6-7.

³⁰ See Ibid., I.xxxiv.2. Hobbes does, in fact, carry this point to its logical conclusion, insisting that even God is a material entity. This idiosyncrasy is sometimes used to interpret Hobbes as a closet atheist, whose theology is disingenuous. See, e.g., Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, 5; Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 2. Against the pessimistic reading of Hobbes, see Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time*, 160; Martinich, *Hobbes; The Two Gods of Leviathan*; and “Law and Self-Preservation in Leviathan: On Misunderstanding Hobbes’s Philosophy, 1650-1700.” As for divine corporeality, while Hobbes is most certainly outside of the pro-Nicene Christian tradition on this point (see Jacobs, “On the Metaphysics of God and Creatures in the Eastern Pro-Nicenes”), Hobbes is not without precedence in the history of ideas. See, e.g., Tertullian, *Adversus Praxeum* 7 (PL 2.161b-162c); Stead, “Divine Substance in Tertullian”; Griffin and Paulsen, “Augustine and the Corporeality of God,” 101ff.; Verbeke, *L’évolution de la doctrine du pneuma, du stoicism à s. Augustin*; and Chrysippus in Cicero, *De natura deorum*, i. Citations of “PL” refer to the volume and column number of *Patrologia Latina*.

³¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, III.xxxiv.15.

³² Ibid., III.xxxiv.18.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., III.xxxiv.19-22.

³⁵ Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.xviii.5.

³⁶ Ibid.

day raise the dead to give account for deeds done in the flesh. There is no inherent contradiction in the notion, so it is logically possible, but how is one to determine if it is so? Without God offering insight into the matter, reason is impotent to make a determination.³⁷ This first camp—which includes not only Locke and Hobbes, but also René Descartes³⁸—sees itself as incapable of scrutinizing the claims of revelation, except to whatever extent the claims might prove logically impossible. Yet, so long as a revelatory claim passes the minimum bar of logical possibility, then the question falls entirely to the veracity of the miracles that vindicate the prophetic testimony.

The second camp, represented by Leibniz, is resistant to too strong a divide between reason and revelation. By way of context, Leibniz sees the fideism of his interlocutor Pierre Bayle as heading in a dangerous direction, not only affirming a divide between faith and reason, but often claiming an opposition between the two.³⁹ Leibniz suggests that religious faith requires some support from reason, which is part of what lends it credibility. He thinks it is no coincidence that we see a convergence of pagan philosophy around conclusions that look strikingly Christian in many respects. The groping of human reason toward many essential Christian truths is thus its own evidence for the beauty and wisdom of the Christian religion.⁴⁰

The claim that divine revelation has a rational shape that constitutes its own authentication marks the beginning of a shift in thinking about special revelation in modernity. This shift becomes most evident in G. E. Lessing.⁴¹ Written in response to Johann Heinrich Ress' *The Historical Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, which attacks the historical “proofs” for Christianity, Lessing's *A Rejoinder* argues that Christianity does not in fact rest on authenticating miracles or on the accuracy of its historical record. Contrary to the evidentialist accounts of revelation, Christianity is a faith with a rational *a priori* core, and its historical dimensions are mere scaffolding for the erecting of this rational system. Attacking the alternative, Lessing writes:

How strange that people are so rarely satisfied with what they have before them!—The religion which triumphed over the pagan and Jewish religions through the message of the risen Christ is *there*. And are we to suppose that this message was not credible enough at the time when it triumphed? Am I to believe that it was not considered credible enough then, because I can no longer prove its complete credibility now?⁴²

Lessing concedes, alongside critics of the prevailing view, that historical “facts” are an unsure foundation for metaphysics. But Lessing thinks this should be of no concern to the Christian religion. For Christianity does not hang on historical “facts.” It hangs on reason.⁴³

Lessing goes so far as to claim that Christianity is in no way dependent upon its historical foundations. As Lessing puts it, “The Christian religion could exist even if the Bible were to become entirely lost, if it had long ago been entirely lost, if it had never existed.” This provocative claim would ignite his dispute with

³⁷ Ibid., IV.xviii.8. This is not to say that no argument can be offered in defense of the resurrection unto judgment apart from special revelation. At least two Kantians have attempted such a defense. (See Bunch, “The Resurrection of the Body as a ‘Practical Postulate’”; and Firestone, “Rational Religious Faith in a Bodily Resurrection.”) The point here is that Locke himself sees no such argument, and thus considers the future resurrection of humanity to be a suitable example of a truth “above reason.”

³⁸ For Hobbes' statement that revelation concerns things above, but not contrary to, reason, see Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.xii.25. On Descartes' affirmation that truths of revelation are above reason, see René Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VI.8; on his affirmation that true philosophy cannot conflict with revelation, see VII.581; and on his affirmation that belief in revelation is based on divine authority, see VIII-1.329 and IX-2325.

³⁹ On this point, see Bost, “Pierre Bayle: A ‘Complicated Protestant’.”

⁴⁰ See Leibniz, *Leibniz: Discourse on Metaphysics*, 37. See also *Preliminary Discourse on the Conformity of Faith with Reason* in his *Theodicy*, in *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* 6:49-101.41.

⁴¹ References to Lessing's works are based on *Lessings sämtliche Werke*. Quotations of *A Rejoinder* are based on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*; quotations of *The Education of the Human Race* are based on *Lessing's Theological Writings*. Given the brevity of many of Lessing's writings (often no longer than a few pages), citations will refer to the pagination of the English translations, unless standardized section divisions are available.

⁴² Lessing, *A Rejoinder*, 104-5.

⁴³ See Ibid., 109.

the Rev. Goeze in Lessing's *Necessary Answer to a Very Unnecessary Question of Herr Haupt-Pastor Goeze in Hamburg* and the *Anti-Goeze* writings to follow. The claim summarizes Lessing's position that the core of the Christian religion (a core Lessing thought to be summed up in the *regula fidei* of the Church fathers) is fully rational, embedded in reason (or *a priori*), and bound to emerge regardless of whether any revelatory events had intervened on humanity's religious journey.

In 1777, Lessing published the first fifty-three sections of *The Education of the Human Race*. Therein, Lessing compares special revelation to education, by which a student learns truths that he could, in principle, come to on his own, but the instruction helps the student come to these truths quicker. Lessing writes:

Education gives man nothing which he could not also get from within himself; it gives him that which he could get from within himself, only quicker and more easily. In the same way too, revelation gives nothing to the human race which human reason could not arrive at on its own; only it has given, and still gives to it, the most important of these things sooner.⁴⁴

Lessing would later publish the remaining forty-seven sections, which offer a revised stance on the relationship between revelation and reason. The revision is captured in the later-added §77, which reads: "And why should not we too, by means of a religion whose historical truth, if you will, looks dubious, be led in a similar way to closer and better conceptions of the divine Being, of our own nature, of our relation to God, which human reason would never have reached on its own?"⁴⁵ Notice that in §4 Lessing says that revelation helps humanity come to certain truths more quickly than reason alone could. Yet, in §77 Lessing suggests that humanity would not have come to these insights without the revelatory catalyst.

It is difficult to discern Lessing's own position, but, for our purposes, it matters little whether Lessing advocates the position of the deists (revelation adds nothing to natural religion) or something closer to §77 (revelation awakens truths otherwise dormant in reason). What matters here is that Lessing evidently intended to change the nature of the discussion about special revelation. And as Chadwick points out, Lessing's attempts were largely successful: "The theologians of the Enlightenment did not reject the Bible; they found in it only natural religion."⁴⁶

We see evidence of Lessing's success in Book 4 of Immanuel Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. There, Kant identifies the several stances (in his day) that one might take on special revelation.⁴⁷ According to Kant, one can deny the very possibility of revelation and be a naturalist. Or one can accept its possibility and be a rationalist. As for how the rationalist views revelation, Kant identifies two positions: that of the pure rationalist and that of the supernaturalist. Kant's explanation of these positions makes clear that the former is the position Lessing presents in §4 of *The Education*, while the latter is the position of §77.⁴⁸ In other words, the pure rationalist maintains that revelation is possible, but if it were to occur, it would contain only *a priori* truths that could be discovered through the mere use of reason; revelation only hastens the discovery. The supernaturalist, by contrast, maintains that the revelatory catalyst is, for whatever reason, required to awaken certain truths, even though the truths, once discovered, can be demonstrated *a priori*.⁴⁹

The rationalist turn in the modern discussion of revelation has an unexpected result. This turn shifts attention from the authenticating miracles surrounding revelation to the nature of the revealing act itself. Yet, here we encounter a very different kind of objection to special revelation in Immanuel Kant. Kant

⁴⁴ Lessing, *The Education of the Human Race*, §4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, §77.

⁴⁶ Chadwick, "Introduction to Lessing," 45, in *Lessing's Theological Writings*.

⁴⁷ Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:155. All Kant citations refer to the German *Akademie* pagination, which can be found in the margins of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (eds. Guyer and Wood). Translations of Kant's work are taken from the Cambridge edition.

⁴⁸ For a detailed exposition of this passage, see Firestone and Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, ch. 8, §1.

⁴⁹ On the supernaturalist school, see Dorner, *History of Protestant Theology*, vol.2, bk.2, div.2, pt.3, ch.1ff.; and Hirsch, *Geschichte der Neuern Evangelischen Theologie*, vol.1, pt.1, chs.47 & 48. The position was evidently so popular that it found a following in the United States. See Nevin, *My Own Life: The Early Years*, 117.

objects, not to the possibility of special revelation (an objection concerning miracles), but to its recognition (an objection concerning epistemology). Unlike Hume and Spinoza, Kant has no objection to the idea that God might reveal himself by some miraculous event. Quite the contrary, Kant insists that we never discount the possibility of special revelation.⁵⁰ However, Kant is just as insistent that were such revelation to occur, it could not be recognized as such.⁵¹ How are we to understand this new position?

While it may be counter intuitive, Kant's insistence that no one can discount the possibility of revelation is best understood in the context of his *attack* on theological dogmatism. Kant makes clear that his philosophical program is meant to silence the dogmatist, and his attack on the proofs for the existence of God are an obvious facet of that campaign. Yet, Kant's remarks on theology demonstrate that he has no objection to common assertions about the nature of God, and thus understands the classical idea to be coherent and descriptive of a possible being. Hence, in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, though Kant denies that God's existence can be demonstrated, he still defends the coherence of the idea against Hume's attacks, arguing that Hume's criticisms are based on anthropomorphisms that are irrelevant to the God of the deists.⁵² In fact, Kant's writings indicate his consistent advocacy of perfect being theology—that is, the commitment that if God exists, then he must be thus, given that he is the highest being.⁵³ What Kant rejects is that this *a priori* description of God can result in an existential conclusion. This comes through most clearly in his well-known attack on the ontological argument that existence is not a predicate. In other words, existence adds nothing to the idea of God and thus is not rightly counted amongst the *a priori* predications of deity.⁵⁴

In this light, Kant leaves the classical idea of God intact but insists that knowledge of God's existence requires something beyond the idea. It requires something synthetic: The idea must find suitable concepts in the understanding that meet with a sensible object of experience, thereby yielding knowledge that God exists by an empirical judgment. The problem, of course, is that by granting the classical idea of God, Kant makes it a foregone conclusion that such an experience is impossible. For such a judgment, in Kant's system, requires that the object experienced be conditioned by space and time—the pure forms of intuition—and determined in respect to one of the logical functions of judgment—namely, the twelve categories. But Kant is well aware that such stipulations are incompatible with God classically understood. Classical theology denies that God is circumscribed by space and time; shares essential properties with other species, per the category of Unity; is subject to the category of Limitation, and so on.⁵⁵

Kant knows this full well, regularly naming God the “highest being,” the “being of all beings,” etc. And, for this reason, Kant suggests, “I have to ascribe to him [i.e., God] every reality which can be predicated of him as a thing.”⁵⁶ According to Kant, to experience such a being, one would need to experience an empirical infinity, which is impossible given the inherently limiting nature of the forms of intuition and the Categories. Thus, no appearance can possibly be adequate to the idea of God, since this idea requires something that the senses can never supply.

Though this may sound like a rather impious conclusion, there is something ironically pious about it. We might characterize Kant's concern about purported revelations as a concern about idolatry. In other words, Kant insists that we never call something “God” that is unworthy of the name. Hence, if something were to appear to us and claim to be God, this something must not fall short of what we know God to be (if

⁵⁰ Kant, *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, 28:119; *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*, 8:142; and *Religion*, 6:169.

⁵¹ Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 7:63.

⁵² Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, 4:356.

⁵³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A578/B606; A579/B607; A621/B649; A631/B659; and 29:945.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, A598/B626–A600/B628.

⁵⁵ E.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 6.15 (PG 9:344b); Athanasius, *De sententia Dionysii* 20 (PG 25:509a); Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus de sancta et vivifica Trinitate* 28 (PG 75:1188c); Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentarius in Is.* 9.6 (PG 24:152d); Gregory of Nyssa, *Epistula* 24; 101 (PG 46:1089c; 37:177b); Leontius of Byzantium, *Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos* 1 (PG 86:1284c); Leontius of Hierosolymitanus, *Adversus Nestorianos* 1.1 (PG 86:1408d); Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula theologica et polemica* (PG 91:57c); John of Damascus, *Homiliae* 4.29 (PG 96:632a). Citations of “PG” refer to the volume and column of *Patrologia Graeca*.

⁵⁶ Kant, *Lectures on Religion*, 28:1020.

he is) *a priori*. Anything less must be rejected as unworthy of the name, lest we corrupt our understanding of God. The *a priori* idea is thus the litmus test for every purported revelation.⁵⁷

The difficulty for revealed religion, however, is that any investigation into whether an appearance is divine is doomed to failure. Kant is clear that the idea of God demands an empirical infinity, and he is equally clear that no such offering is possible, given the nature of the forms of intuition and the Categories. No appearance can hope to overcome this problem, be it a flaming bush, a pillar of fire, or a Jewish rabbi. To the contrary, Kant argues that if we were to embrace such an appearance as an appearance of God and graft it (with its inevitable finitudes) into the *a priori* idea of God, this would only corrupt the idea. For, to arrive at the *a priori* idea of God, we must *remove* all finitudes.⁵⁸ Therefore, while Kant insists that we are right to test every purported revelation by the rational idea of God, it is a foregone conclusion, for Kant, that no appearance will pass this test.⁵⁹

While the foregoing is obvious in its attempt to silence theological dogmatism, we should not miss that it also silences dogmatic atheism. Kant's opposition to *a priori* demonstrations of the existence of God in no way opposes the idea of God as impossible; it merely opposes that a positive existential determination follows from the idea. Kant himself continues to employ and advocate the idea of God, even if the idea supplies no certainty that God exists. Determination of God's existence requires a synthetic judgment based on a suitable appearance, but Kant knows that no appearance can be suitable to the idea. So does this commend atheism? According to Kant, *No*. We are instead left with agnosticism. We might think of the matter this way. Let us say that extensive research into sound waves leads us to posit a unique sound signature yet undiscovered. The idea of the sound signature is contradiction-free, but it is of such a kind that it could only be determined to exist by means of sensory experience. Yet, we can demonstrate from the idea alone that our sense of hearing is such that it could never detect this sound even with the help of various hearing assistants. To conclude from this inability that the sound is absent would be epistemically unjustified. Instead, we would be left to conclude that both the sound's presence and absence is beyond our ability to determine. So it is with God in Kant's account. Being incapable of making either an analytic determination or a synthetic determination, we can make no dogmatic determination about the existence of God, positive or negative.

While we might expect such a conclusion to result in shelving theology, for Kant such dogmatic agnosticism is the foundation of deism. Kant cannot know whether God exists, but this does not mean that God's existence is irrelevant to human persons. Far from it, Kant sees God as supremely relevant to matters of morality, for example.⁶⁰ So, if one cannot determine whether God exists and not even God can grant someone knowledge that he exists, what are we to do with questions to which God is supremely relevant? Kant turns to practical, aesthetic, and teleological considerations. Such considerations never succeed in making God an object of knowledge, since they can never supply existential content to the idea. However, they can commend *belief* in God. If we find, as Kant does, that reason has inherent instabilities whose remedy requires God, then we have a rational basis for believing in God. Such belief, as a stabilizer of reason, rises above empty opinion, even though it does not rise to the level of knowledge. It is a rational belief.⁶¹

Now, we must be careful to not read too much into Kant's advocacy of rational belief in God. Kant's dogmatic agnosticism works as a dam, ensuring that rational faith never wades into the waters of theism but remains forever outside it in the pools of deism. The essential trait of deism I have in mind here is the one highlighted by Allen Wood: "Essential to any deism is the view that there is such a thing as rational or natural religion, religion based on natural reason and not on supernatural revelation."⁶² Key here is

⁵⁷ See Kant, *Orient*, 8:142-43.

⁵⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A639-640/B667-668. In his *Prolegomena*, 4:355-56, Kant models how one goes about removing all finite predicates in an attempt to imagine God, as well as how this process inevitably arrives at something wholly beyond the bounds of human understanding.

⁵⁹ E.g., Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, 29:945; *Lectures on Religion*, 28:1022; and 28:1118.

⁶⁰ E.g., Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, 29:778.

⁶¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A828/B856.

⁶² Wood, "Kant's Deism," 7.

the conjunction: Deism advocates religion based on reason *and* not on supernatural revelation. The theist may advocate natural religion but not to the exclusion of special revelation. Yet, the deist, even if granting that divine revelation is possible, discounts its value to true religion, which it takes to be synonymous with natural religion. This is most certainly Kant. Having discounted the possibility that divine revelation might be recognized as such, he has undermined (or sought to undermine) the foundation of every revealed religion that makes demands beyond what practical reason alone commends. True religion, according to Kant, is based on the offerings of practical reason of which any rational being can be convinced by the mere use of reason, while those religious rituals and practices that have no rational justification outside of a purported revelation Kant labels “counterfeit service” (*Afterdienst*). Kant is convinced that God cannot hold someone accountable for performing certain deeds unless that someone can know he ought to perform them. Since one cannot know (a) whether God exists or (b) whether he has revealed himself, one can never be held culpable for duties that can be known only by means of special revelation. Hence, Kant’s God, if he exists, can only call us to account for religion within the limits of reason alone.

Kant’s position naturally raises the question of what room, if any, is left for revealed religion. How best to interpret Kant’s philosophy of religion on this point is a matter of increasing controversy.⁶³ Since the jury is still out amongst Kant scholars, and so as to not muddy the waters by favoring my own reading of Kant, I close this section by looking at a figure who offers one embodiment of how the post-Kantian discussion of special revelation shifts. I have in mind here Johann G. Fichte.⁶⁴

Fichte, like Kant, sees a divide between the theoretical and the practical—that is, between facts and values. Fichte’s solution is similar to Kant’s: one bridges the divide by postulating God as the underlying, and therefore unifying, cause of both the theoretical and the practical.⁶⁵ Much like Kant, this is an act of rational belief based on the needs of reason, not on a dogmatic assertion that God exists. As Daniel Breazeale puts it, postulating a common principle on which the theoretical and practical are dependent “provides us with an a priori warrant for viewing certain appearances *within* nature as at once ‘freely produced’ (whether by God or by our own free will, as mediated by God’s providential arrangement of the natural order) and yet fully in accord with the laws of nature. The same event can therefore be viewed, from the perspective of practical reason, as morally necessary and freely produced, and from the standpoint of theoretical reason, as part of nature’s causal web.”⁶⁶ Rational faith, for Fichte, is thus reducible to belief in God as the providential organizer of nature and as the source of the moral law. Such a stance is not surprising in the wake of Kant.

63 A shift began in Kant studies with the publication of Allen Wood’s *Kant’s Moral Religion* and Michel Despland’s *Kant on History and Religion*. These works began a revisitation of Kant’s philosophy of religion with a more robust theology. Contributors to the trend included Ronald Green, Ann Loades, Stephen Palmquist, Bernard Reardon, Adina Davidovich, John Hare, and Elizabeth Galbraith. This steady flow of work marked the beginning of a divide in Kant studies. See the editors’ introduction to *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*. A second major shift occurred in 2008 with the publication of Firestone and Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant’s Religion (IDKR)*. *IDKR* highlights the history of interpretation of Kant’s *Religion* and the numerous “conundrums” identified throughout as a basis for dismissing the text as irrelevant to Kant’s philosophy (see part 1 of *IDKR*). *IDKR*, by contrast, attempts a problem-driven reading of the text in which the conundrums determine the hermeneutic journey, only permitting paths that resolve the conundrum at hand. The results are well summarized by Nicholas Wolterstorff: “What emerges is a Kant very different from the one we thought we knew, more metaphysical, more willing to engage in speculative theology, less dismissive of actual religion...” (“Foreword,” in *IDKR*). *IDKR* drew a great deal of attention. In 2010, the Society of Christian Philosophers dedicated their session of the American Academy of Religion to an “Authors Meet Critics” panel. The proceedings were published in a symposium edition of *Faith and Philosophy*. A flood of publications followed that focused on Kant’s *Religion* and sought to revisit the text with the help of a Kant who is less strange. The most notable contributions since 2008 include the respective monographs of James DiCenso, *Kant, Religion, and Politics* and of Lawrence Pasternack, *Kant’s Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: An Interpretation and Defense* (2013), followed by Gordon Michalson’s *Kant’s Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Critical Guide* (2014). We have also seen a trio of the self-proclaimed commentaries on *Religion* in English, coming from DiCenso (2012), Pasternack (2013), and Palmquist (2015), respectively. For more on this recent history, see the latest installment in this ongoing controversy, *Kant and the Question of Theology* (eds. Firestone, Jacobs, Joiner).

64 Citations of Fichte’s *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* refer to pagination in *J.G. Fichte – Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, vol. I.

65 Fichte, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, 2nd ed., 71.

66 Breazeale, “‘Wishful Thinking’: Concerning Fichte’s Interpretation of the Postulates of Reason in His *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* (1792),” 46.

With rational faith reduced to morality plus the divine postulate, what role, if any, can special revelation play? The answer, for Fichte, is that revealed religion plays (or should play) the same role as the postulates. Religion at its best helps to unify humanity's bifurcated sensible-rational nature, assisting man to behave morally. Some arrive at this unification through a proper use of practical reason, while others have a peculiar moral weakness that the symbols of revealed religion help address. This brings us to Fichte's understanding of revelation. According to Fichte, special revelation is "the concept of an appearance produced in the sensible world by the causality of God, through which he proclaims himself as a moral lawgiver."⁶⁷ And again, "The concept of revelation is therefore the concept of an effect produced by God in the sensible world by means of supernatural causality, by means of which he proclaims himself to be the moral lawgiver."⁶⁸

Like other modern discussions about revelation, Fichte understands special revelation to be an empirical experience. It involves an appearance or event in the world that is of a peculiar enough sort that it is believed to originate (causally) with God. Yet, unlike earlier discussions, Fichte, with Kant, rejects the notion that revelation offers truths that are above reason.—After all, God can hold us accountable for only that which is verifiable through reason alone.—And though Fichte believes, with the rationalists, that the offerings of revelation are *a priori*, these *a priori* truths are of a very specific sort. The purpose of revelation (should it occur) is solely to proclaim that God is the moral lawgiver and thus supply the underlying principle of unity between theoretical and practical reason, so that rational beings might embrace their moral obligations. The proposal is clever. As an empirical event, revelation belongs to the theoretical; but in proclaiming God as lawgiver, the event conjoins the theoretical with the practical.⁶⁹ In other words, revelation offers the very connection sought by practical reason in the postulates.

Such a view of special revelation combines the various stages of the discussion before it. Fichte retains the empiricist account of revelation found in the evidentialists. Yet, he finds in revelation only *a priori* truth, as advocated in the rationalist shift of Lessing. However, with the Copernican turn of Kant, Fichte sees only one *a priori* truth to be revealed, namely, God as cause of both the theoretical and the practical.

2 Divine vision in the Christian East

Ironically, the Eastern discussion of the unveiling of God begins in some ways much closer to Kant than to the Western proponents of divine revelation. The history of the East sees a very real problem in the claim that God reveals himself, and the problem the Eastern fathers articulate is not entirely unlike the Kantian one.⁷⁰

The context for the Eastern problem is the biblical insistence that God is beyond the cognitive reach of creatures. The apostle John states plainly, "No one has ever seen God" (1 Jn 4:12). Such a statement could be read in the soft sense that God can be seen but has not been. However, Paul eliminates this interpretation, advocating the stronger claim that God cannot be seen by man: "[God] lives in unapproachable light; no man has seen him or can see him" (1 Tim 6:16). These claims find precedent in the Old Testament declarations that man cannot see God and live (Exod 19:21; 33:20-3; Judges 6:22; 13:22; Isa 6:5; Ps 139:11-12).⁷¹

For this reason, the Eastern Church fathers see the revelation of God as problematic, for God is, by very nature, "above intelligence" (*hyper dianoian*).⁷² Irenaeus, appealing to the passages noted above, says that God is incomprehensible.⁷³ Origen repeats the same, noting our very limited grasp of angelic beings;

⁶⁷ Fichte, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, 48.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 47.

⁷⁰ I exposit this comparison in Jacobs, "Kant and the Problem of Divine Revelation: an Assessment and Reply in Light of the Eastern Church Fathers."

⁷¹ For a complete treatment of the biblical tensions with which the Eastern Church fathers wrestle in their dealings with divine vision, see Lossky, *The Vision of God*, ch. 2.

⁷² Basil of Caesarea, *Epistola* 234.2 (PG 32:869b-870c). See also Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes* 28.29 (PG 36:67b-70a), 28.31 (PG 36:69d-74a); Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Moysis* (PG 44:376-77); Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* 1.1 (PG 3:997-998); John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 1.4 (PG 94:797b-801c).

⁷³ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 4.20.5 (PG 7:1034c-1036a).

how much more limited is our grasp of God, who is infinitely superior to these?⁷⁴ The matter becomes even more pointed in the Cappadocians. Basil of Caesarea not only identifies God as *incomprehensible* and *above intelligence*, he insists that the essence of God is utterly unknowable, and if anyone claims to know the essence of God, he proves his ignorance of God.⁷⁵ Gregory of Nyssa declares that the divine essence transcends all acts of comprehension; it is veiled in darkness; there is no technique for grasping it; it is invisible and cannot be seen.⁷⁶ Likewise, Gregory of Nazianzus writes, “What God is in nature and essence, no man ever yet has discovered or can discover”; “it is impossible to express him, and yet more impossible to conceive him.”⁷⁷ And these same claims appear in Pseudo-Dionysius on through John of Damascus and beyond.⁷⁸

While the claim is unquestionably rooted in the teachings of the prophets and apostles, there is also a philosophical rationale to it. For the latter, we must grasp (a) the Eastern patristic distinction between *noesis* and *epinoia*, and (b) their insistence that God is *hyperousios* and thus never an object of *noesis*.

Beginning with (a), *noesis* constitutes the direct apprehension of a form. Here we must contrast the realism of these ancient writers with the nominalism of the modern empiricists. In modern empiricism, such as Locke’s, the object outside the mind is one thing and the mental replica of the object is a second thing. The two objects have similarities, such as their respective densities (primary qualities), but they also differ in areas, such as color (secondary qualities).⁷⁹ Ancient realists, by contrast, see the properties of an object and the mental abstraction of these properties as isomorphic. As realists, the Eastern fathers understand *form* to be a singular property that can reside in multiple entities. Hence the red in the ball is the same red in the car, in the shirt, and so on. And for this reason, this same redness can also take up residence in the mind in the act of perception. Such direct apprehension of form constitutes empirical knowledge, or *noesis*.

The epistemic difficulty we face is that objects we encounter consist of more than just forms. There is, for example, the enduring subject (*hypostasis*) that sits beneath these forms as well as the substratum of prime matter in which these forms take up residence.⁸⁰ When thinking on such things, the mind finds itself at a loss; it gropes through its catalogue of forms for something on which to lay hold but comes up empty. Hence, it must rely on comparisons to generate an intelligible concept. For example, prime matter, being a substratum of pure potential with no properties of its own, is *like* a shapeless bit of fabric that receives shape from objects around which it is draped. But it is *unlike* fabric insofar as fabric has properties of color and density, while prime matter has no innate properties of its own. Such positive and negative comparisons move into a mode of concept forming about things inaccessible via *noesis*. Such concept forming is called *epinoia*.⁸¹

When the Eastern fathers say that God is above intelligence, they are insisting that God is not an object of *noesis*, nor can he be. Here, we arrive at the second key point, namely, God is *hyperousios* (above form).⁸² Although the Eastern fathers identify The Good with God, they resist the notion that God is or has form.⁸³ Their rationale is robust, but the most basic version is this. It is a matter of metaphysical necessity that

⁷⁴ Origen, *De principiis* 1.1.5 (PG 11.124a-c).

⁷⁵ Basil of Caesarea, *Epistola* 9.1; 234.2; 233.2 (PG 32: 267c; 869b-870c; 865c-868b).

⁷⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus* (PG 44.1268b-1272c).

⁷⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes* 28.4; 28.17 (PG 36:29c-32a; 48c-49a).

⁷⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* I (PG 4.592); John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 1.4 (PG 94:797b-801c); Lossky, *The Vision of God*, 99-102; 112; 124-27.

⁷⁹ Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, II.viii.

⁸⁰ On the Eastern patristic view of subjects, see Zhyrkova, “John Damascene’s Notion of Being: Essence vs. Hypostatical Existence”; and Zhyrkova, “Hypostasis—The Principle of Individual Existence in John of Damascus.” On the Eastern patristic view of prime matter, see Jacobs, “Are Created Spirits Composed of Matter and Form?” 81-90; and Jacobs, “On the Metaphysics of God and Creatures,” 4-13.

⁸¹ See Basil of Caesarea, *Adversus Eunomium* 1.6 (PG 29.521a-524c); Stead, “Logic and the Application of Names to God”; and Bradshaw, “The Concept of the Divine Energies,” 114-15.

⁸² Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 1.1; 1.4 (PG 3.588b; 3.592a); Pseudo-Dionysius, *Epistula* 4 (PG 3.1072b); Anastasius Sinaita, *Hodegus sive viae dux*. 2 (PG 89.53b); Synesius of Cyrene, *Hymni* 1.62 (PG 66.1589); Modestus Hierosolymitanus, *In dormitionem BMV* 8 (PG 86.3297b); Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula theologica et polemica* (PG 91.128c); Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* (PG 91.1049a; 91.1409d); Gregory of Agreghentius, *Explanatio supra Ecclesiasten* 4.5 (PG 98.936d); John of Damascus, *Homiliae* 8.1 (PG 96.700b); John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 1.4 (PG 94:797b-801c); Arethas of Caesarea (Cappadocia), *Commentarius in Apocalypsin* 1.8 (PG 106.512c).

⁸³ E.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 5.12 (PG 9.121b); Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 1.360-69, 2.69-70.

creatures are circumscribed (*perigraptos*), while God is uncircumscribed (*aperigraptos*).⁸⁴ For example, God is eternal, wholly uncircumscribed by time, while creatures come into being and are thus circumscribed by time, having a definite origin point.⁸⁵ The circumscribed-uncircumscribed divide requires that creatures bear form but God transcends form. The reason is that forms are the very things that provide intelligibility to entities by giving them definite (i.e., circumscribed) traits of unity (i.e., *genera* and *species*) and delineation (i.e., *specific difference* between genera and species).⁸⁶ Circumscription thus indicates a nature from amongst the forms, while God's uncircumscription indicates that he is above form, transcending such boundary lines. God is *hyperousios*.

When considering that divine transcendence includes transcendence of form, we can see why the Eastern fathers insist that God is beyond intelligence. *Noesis*, as an apprehension of form, can never grasp that which has no form. The divine essence, being *hyperousios*, has no defined or delineated content on which our faculties might lay hold. Thus, God cannot be circumscribed by the intellect.

I said at the beginning of this section that the Eastern fathers begin their thoughts on revelation much closer to Kant than other modern writers. Though the respective epistemologies of the Eastern fathers and Kant are quite different, given Kant's turn to the subject, their reasons for insisting that God cannot be an object of knowledge are rather similar: What reason tells us about God makes clear that he is beyond the reach of our rational faculties. For the Eastern fathers, this means God has no form—the object of *noesis*. For Kant, this means God is beyond the forms of intuition and the Categories. Yet, whether the limitations of reason are external to the mind (the forms) or internal to the mind (the forms of intuitions and the Categories), the result is the same: God is of such a kind that he is incompatible with the limits of human knowing.

Now, in Kant, this conclusion marks a turn away from special revelation toward practical reason. Yet, for the Eastern fathers, it marks the beginning of right thinking about special revelation.

Alongside the biblical insistences that God has never been seen nor can be seen, there is another theme that creates what we might call (in honor of Kant) an antinomy. This second theme is that the pure in heart will see God (Matt 5:8). The connection between purification and seeing God is crucial to how the Eastern fathers understand God's unveiling. Lest any readers suspect a NeoPlatonic solution is afoot, given the appeal to purification of the soul,⁸⁷ rest assured that the Eastern Christian understanding of this connection is far too Incarnational and Trinitarian to suffer such a charge.

The connection between purification and divine vision appears as early as Irenaeus. Irenaeus conjoins the purifying work of the Son and the Holy Spirit with the seeing of God. Key to Irenaeus' connection is that the preparation of man and the leading of him to the Father involves man partaking of the divine nature.⁸⁸ Here, of course, we encounter the Eastern doctrine of *theōsis*, or deification.⁸⁹ We will look in greater detail at this doctrine below, but for now, let it suffice that Irenaeus understands something of the divine nature to be communicable to creatures. Though a creature may never become a member of the Holy Trinity, bearing the divine essence, a creature may participate by degrees in the divine glory or paternal light that issues

⁸⁴ On creaturely circumscription, see: Basil of Caesarea, *Epistola* 8.2 (PG 32:249); Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 1; 8; 9 (PG 45:368a; 793c; 812d); John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 2.3; 1.13 (PG 94:868b; 852c-853b). On divine uncircumscription, see Clement of Alexandria, *Fragmenta* 39 (PG 9:769c); Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 6.15 (PG 9:344b); Athanasius of Alexandria, *Fragmenta in Job* (PG 27:1345a); *De sententia Dionysii* 20 (PG 25:509a); Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus de sancta et vivifica Trinitate* 28 (PG 75:1188c); Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentarius in Is.* 9.6 (PG 24:152d); Gregory of Nyssa, *Epistula* 101 (PG 37:177b); Gregory of Nyssa, *Adversus Apollinarem* 18 (PG 45:1160a); Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula theologica et polemica* (PG 91:57c); John of Damascus, *Homiliae* 4.29 (PG 96:632a); John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 1.13 (PG 852c-853b).

⁸⁵ For a systematic breakdown of the Eastern fathers on the metaphysics of God and creatures, and the respective metaphysical necessities they apply to each, see Jacobs, "On the Metaphysics of God and Creatures."

⁸⁶ E.g., Plato, *Philebus* 17a-e.

⁸⁷ Cf., e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.6.5-6, and 6.9, in *The Loeb Classical Series*, nos. 440 and 445.

⁸⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 4.20.5; 4.37.7; 4.38.3 (PG 7.1034c-1036a; 1103c-1104c; 1107b-1108c).

⁸⁹ Historical treatments of the patristic understanding of *theōsis* include Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in Greek Patristic Theology*; Partakers of the Divine Nature: *The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (eds. Christensen and Wittung); *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (eds. Finlan and Kharlamov).

from God. In this way, the creature partakes of the divine nature and transcends creaturely limitations.⁹⁰ According to Irenaeus, this vivifying of humanity with paternal light is the very purpose of the Incarnation. The Son of God took on flesh “that the paternal light might meet with and rest upon the flesh of our Lord, and come to us from his resplendent flesh, and that thus man might attain to immortality, having been invested with the paternal light.”⁹¹ The putting off of corruption and the putting on of divine incorruption, or immortality, is the most obvious fruit of this participation in God. However, Irenaeus draws an additional connection between partaking of divine light and seeing God. He writes:

He shall also be seen paternally in the kingdom of heaven, the Spirit truly preparing man in the Son of God, and the Son leading him to the Father, while the Father, too, confers [upon him] incorruption for eternal life, which comes to everyone from the fact of his seeing God. For as those who see the light are within the light, and partake of its brilliancy; even so, those who see God are in God, and receive of His splendor. But [His] splendor vivifies them; those, therefore, who see God, do receive life. And for this reason, He, [although] beyond comprehension, and boundless and invisible, rendered Himself visible, and comprehensible, and within the capacity of those who believe, that He might vivify those who receive and behold Him through faith.⁹²

Notice that Irenaeus does not suggest that eternal life and divine vision are two unrelated byproducts of the same thing. Instead, Irenaeus identifies a reciprocal relationship between seeing God and attaining immortality. Incorruption comes from us seeing God, for one can only see God if he is in God and has been vivified by God. The claim is very much in keeping with how the Eastern fathers understand immortality generally. Immortality is not a gift given to humanity by divine *fiat*. Rather, God alone is immortal, as Paul says (1 Tim 6:16); thus, creatures attain immortality by partaking of God’s immortality.⁹³ So in the same manner, God alone can behold God. Hence, Irenaeus understands the perfecting work of the Son and the Holy Spirit to have as its goal us beholding God, which is only possible if we bear in our person some share in the only nature that can behold God, namely, God’s own. Therefore, in attaining divine vision, we also attain divine incorruption, since divine vision is only possible if we partake of the very same divine nature that communicates to us incorruptibility.⁹⁴

We find a similar theme in Origen. Of course, we must be cautious. As Vladimir Lossky notes, Origen’s notion of spiritual ascent and descent involves “a purely spiritual primitive existence and its degradation or physical deformation as a result of a fall. The vision of God was the true existence of spiritual beings created in the Logos; God was the content of this perfect spiritual life. In abandoning it the spiritual beings ceased to be what they were.”⁹⁵ Origen’s notion of ascent and divine vision is thus the return of the soul to a pure spiritual state.⁹⁶ Given such idiosyncrasies, we should not draw too close a connection between Irenaeus’ position and Origen’s. Nonetheless, there are some general similarities of note. Origen affirms that God is beyond the grasp of human intellect;⁹⁷ yet, he sees in the beatitudes a promise that the pure in heart will see God, not with eyes, but with the intellective function of the heart.⁹⁸ As for what is meant by purity, Origen, like Irenaeus, interprets purity, or purification, as synonymous with deification. *Theōsis* is the means by which a creature comes to behold God.⁹⁹ What is most noteworthy about Origen’s contribution, however, is his distinction between God’s essence and his providential energies.¹⁰⁰ Origen is clear that what is seen by the pure of heart is not the divine essence as such.—This remains beyond knowing.—What is seen

⁹⁰ E.g., Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 4.20.2, 20.4; 4.28.2 (PG 7.1032b-1033b; 1034a-c; 1061d-1062b).

⁹¹ Ibid., 4.20.2 (PG 7.1032b-1033b).

⁹² Ibid., 4.20.5 (PG 7.1034c-1036a).

⁹³ See Jacobs, “Created Corruptible, Raised Incorruptible: The Importance of Hylomorphic Creationism to the Free Will Defense.”

⁹⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 4.37.3; 4.38.3 (PG 7.1102a-c; 1107b-1108c).

⁹⁵ Lossky, *Divine Vision*, 49.

⁹⁶ See Origen of Alexandria, *De principiis* 2.8.3 (PG 11.222-23).

⁹⁷ Ibid., 1.1.5 (PG 11.124a-c).

⁹⁸ Ibid., 1.1.8-9 (PG 11.128a-130a). On the Eastern patristic understanding of “the heart,” see Bradshaw, “The Mind and the Heart in the Christian East.”

⁹⁹ Origen of Alexandria, *De principiis* 1.3.4; 1.3.8 (PG 11.148b-150a; 154b-155c).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 1.1.3; 1.1.6; 1.2.12 (PG 11.122c-123a; 124c-126c; 143a-c).

by creatures is God's energies (*energeiai*).¹⁰¹ As we will see, this distinction proves crucial to subsequent discussions in the East.

In the Cappadocians, we reach an increasingly clear sense of the epistemic connection between participating in God and seeing God. The clarity is due in part to their dealings with the Eunomians. Lossky summarizes the point of contention:

For Eunomius there are two types of names which designate objects of knowledge. First, invented names, conceived by human thought, by reflection (*kat'epinoian*), imagined names, conventional signs having no objective value, giving no knowledge of the object itself.... But there are other names which are not at all the product of human reflection. These are objective names, so to speak, expressing the very essence of objects; they are rational name-revelations. The concept revealing the intelligible content, i.e. the essence of things, is found by analysing these names. Since the true name is that which expresses the essence of a being, only God gives such names to things.¹⁰²

The challenge this view created is an extension of the Arian dispute. The Eunomians took *ungenerate* to be indicative of the essence of the Father, and thus argued that the *generate* Son is of a different essence than the Father.¹⁰³ While the dispute primarily concerned the *homoousios* doctrine, it brought to light several specifics of Eastern patristic epistemology, including divine vision.

Basil of Caesarea's rebuttal consists of several components. First, we find in Basil insistence that there is an existential depth to reality that defies creaturely understanding. The point is captured in Basil's letter to Eunomius: "The man who glories in his knowledge of the really-existing ought to tell us ... about the nature of the ant.... But if your knowledge has not yet been able to apprehend the nature of the insignificant ant, how can you boast yourself able to form a conception of the power of the incomprehensible God?"¹⁰⁴ Putting aside the question of *divine* vision, Basil insists that we do not fully grasp the essence of creatures—elsewhere admitting his ignorance of even his own essence.¹⁰⁵ Basil is not denying that we can formulate definitions based on genera and specific difference, as per Aristotelian logic.¹⁰⁶ Instead, Basil is admitting that the essence of a creature is far more complex than such a cursory definition admits. He appeals to medical studies reveal that our bodies are filled with complexities that we cannot hope to exhaust, and these complexities are no doubt essential to our nature. Hence, what we grasp of essence is quite limited.¹⁰⁷ Such epistemic humility should be kept in mind when considering God, who is infinitely greater than creatures.

Second, Basil redirects from knowledge of essence to knowledge of individuals. I noted above that the Eastern fathers have an Incarnational and Trinitarian emphasis that distances their account from NeoPlatonic notions of ascent. It is noteworthy that NeoPlatonism hopes to ascend to the abyss of divine essence. Yet, as we saw in Irenaeus (as well as in Origen), the Eastern fathers hope to be deified by the Son and the Spirit that they might participate in *paternal* light and see *The Father*. Basil redirects in the same manner, suggesting that his ignorance of essence does not make him ignorant of a person having that essence. Basil writes,

The quibble is just as though any one were to say, *Do you know Timothy? Oh, if you know Timothy you know his essence. Since you have acknowledged you know Timothy, give me an account of Timothy's nature.* Yes; but I at the same time both know and do not know Timothy, though not in the same way and in the same degree.... I know him according to his shape and other properties; but I am ignorant of his essence.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 1.1.6; 1.2.12 (PG 11.124c-126c; 143a-c).

¹⁰² Lossky, *Divine Vision*, 63.

¹⁰³ See Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 1.33 (PG 45:395b-6c).

¹⁰⁴ Basil of Caesarea, *Epistola* 16 (PG 32:279b-281a).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 235.2 (PG 32:872c-873a).

¹⁰⁶ General plus specific difference is the standard Aristotelian method for formulation of a definition. See Aristotle, *Analytica priora et posteriora*, 97a23.

¹⁰⁷ Basil of Caesarea, *Oratio* 1: *De hominis structura*, 1 (PG 30:9a-12c).

¹⁰⁸ Basil of Caesarea, *Epistola* 235.2 (PG 32: 872c-873a).

The point captures the balance of the Eastern patristic position. On the one hand, the Eastern patristic hope of divine vision is never a hope that creatures might come to know the unknowable essence of God; there is no *volte-face* on this point. On the other hand, the Eastern fathers do not share the Platonic exaltation of essence above persons. Thus, while *what* God is remains ever beyond creaturely knowledge, the knowledge of the Persons of the Holy Trinity is higher than the knowledge of their essence. Hence, as we have already seen, the hope of vision is not the hope of seeing *God* in the abstract, but of seeing *The Father*. With this balance, we also find the rejection of a binary view of knowledge, as if one either grasps fully and knows or grasps in part and does not know. Instead, there is an acceptance of authentic knowing in part. As Epiphanius of Cyprus argues, one who sees the sky through a crack in the roof both sees and does not see the sky.¹⁰⁹ Yet, this raises the question: If the essence of the Persons is unknowable, what of the Persons is grasped in divine vision?

The answer brings us to the essence-energies (*ousia-energeiai*) distinction noted in Origen.¹¹⁰ The term *energeia* is not an invention of Origen or the Eastern fathers. The term originates with Aristotle.¹¹¹ In his early usage, it corresponds to the category distinction between *having a power* and *using that power*, referring to the exercise of a capacity in contrast with its mere possession.¹¹² As Aristotle develops the concept, however, he juxtaposes *energeiai* (operations) with *kinēsis* (motion).¹¹³ The contrast is between acts that involve successive change and are incomplete at any given moment (such as the act of building a house) and operations that are perfect and fully actual at each moment (such as the act of seeing).¹¹⁴ The concept of non-mutative operations would become crucial to Aristotle's theology, which requires a mover that is supremely active without successive change (i.e., is immutable).¹¹⁵ Aristotle's God thus moves the world not by successive imperfect motions but by fully perfect operations, or *energeiai*.

The Eastern fathers, taking their cues from the apostle Paul, employ this same terminology when speaking about God's providential activities (see Phil 2:12-13; Col 1:29; 2:12; Eph 1:19; 3:7). And just as we come to understand something of a person from their operations towards us, so with God, we come to know him from his operations (*energeiai*) in creation.¹¹⁶ Basil writes:

For he who denies that he knows the essence does not confess himself to be ignorant of God, because our idea of God is gathered from all the attributes which I have enumerated. But God, he says, is simple, and whatever attribute of Him you have reckoned as knowable is of His essence. But the absurdities involved in this sophism are innumerable. When all these high attributes have been enumerated, are they all names of one essence? And is there the same mutual force in His awfulness and His loving-kindness, His justice and His creative power, His providence and His foreknowledge, and His bestowal of rewards and punishments, His majesty and His providence? In mentioning any one of these do we declare His essence? If they say, yes, let them not ask if we know the essence of God, but let them enquire of us whether we know God to be awful, or just, or merciful. These we confess that we know. If they say that essence is something distinct, let them not put us in the wrong on the score of simplicity. For they confess themselves that there is a distinction between the essence and each one of the attributes enumerated. The operations are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.

In this passage, several points become evident. First, we see that, unlike Aristotle who conflates God's essence and energies,¹¹⁷ Basil distinguishes the divine essence from the operative powers of God that "come

¹⁰⁹ Epiphanius of Cyprus, *Panarion* 70.7-8 (PG 42.349-53).

¹¹⁰ For a comprehensive survey of the term *energeia*, its development, and its reception in Eastern Christian theology, see Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹² E.g., Aristotle, *Topica*, 1.15 106b19-20.

¹¹³ Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 7-12, esp. 12.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-23, esp. 22.

¹¹⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, 12.7 1072a.

¹¹⁶ In Basil's letter to the philosopher Maximus, he lays the groundwork for this point (i.e., we come to know God by his operations) by expressing his gratitude for getting to know Maximus from his letter, just as one comes to know a lion from his claws. Basil of Caesarea, *Epistola* 9.1 (PG 32:267c).

¹¹⁷ Aristotle concludes that God's nature is operative power (*hē ousia energeia*). See Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, 1071b20.

down to us.” Second, it is noteworthy that Basil’s discussion of divine attributes indicates that these are not properties of the divine essence as such. Instead, loving-kindness, justice, creative power, providence, and the like are all *operations* of the divine essence. The essence is simple, but the articulations of it are many. The point is crucial. For it clarifies what can be known of God. *What* God is remains beyond knowing, but *that* God is just, loving, provident, all-knowing, and the like can be known; for these, and other operations, are the numerous ways God freely articulates his nature amongst creatures.

Yet, there is another layer to the doctrine of the divine energies as developed in the Eastern fathers. The development of the *energeia* concept required a logical distinction between the nature of a thing (*ousia*) and the operative powers (*energeiai*) of that nature. For example, the operative powers of fire include heating and lighting, and these *energeiai* can be communicated to metal. In this communication, the metal participates in the nature of fire (via its operative powers), but the metal remains metal. We have already seen Basil employ this logical distinction between God’s essence and energies. Yet, the additional notion that operative power can be communicated from one entity to another proved especially useful in explaining the synergy between human persons and spirits. The apostle Paul laid the groundwork for this in his talk of being energized by God,¹¹⁸ and thus it became the most natural way of interpreting Peter’s talk of partaking of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). Much like metal that is transfigured by its communion with the operative powers of fire, so we are to be transfigured through our communion with the operative powers of God. Such is deification.

Basil most certainly advocates deification in this sense. The divine energies do not simply “come down to us” in historical events external to us. Rather, they come down to us that we might be transfigured by them. Just as we saw in Irenaeus, Basil suggests that we, as icons of God, are to be purified by the Holy Spirit, so that we might behold God, who is our archetype. Basil writes,

And He [the Holy Spirit], like the sun, will by the aid of thy purified eye show thee in Himself the image of the invisible, and in the blessed spectacle of the image thou shalt behold the unspeakable beauty of the archetype. Through His aid hearts are lifted up, the weak are held by the hand, and they who are advancing are brought to perfection ... Just as when a sunbeam falls on bright and transparent bodies, they themselves become brilliant too, ... so souls wherein the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves become spiritual, and send forth their grace to others. Hence comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden, distribution of good gifts, the heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, abiding in God, the being made like to God, and, highest of all, the being made God [*theon genesthai*].¹¹⁹

In this passage, Basil indicates that the aid of the Spirit has as its final end the perfection of the believer and the “being made God.” As striking as this statement is, it is not unique to Basil. We find similar claims prior to him, such as Athanasius’s famous phrase, “[The Word of God] was made man so that we might be made God [*theōpoiēthōmen*]”;¹²⁰ and statements to this effect continue in later fathers.¹²¹ The claim is not that Saints become additional members of the Holy Trinity—evident in Basil’s insistence that the divine essence as such remains forever beyond our grasp. What the Saints participate in is the divine *energeiai* that issue from God’s essence. This energizing of a Saint is what transforms him to be made God.

Notice that, in the above passage, Basil makes a connection between the metamorphosis of the deified Saint and the Saint’s knowledge of mysteries, apprehension of things hidden, and foreknowledge of the future. Such extraordinary knowledge is obviously beyond the common operations of the human mind. So what is Basil describing? Much like other extraordinary products of deification, the Saint here participates

¹¹⁸ Paul is the first among the Christian theologians to utilize *energeia* in this way. In particular, he utilizes the concept to explain how he can do things that humans should not be able to do, such as heal the sick or raise the dead: *It is not me but God who energizes me* (e.g., Phil 2:12-13; Col 1:29; 2:12; Eph 1:19; 3:7). In more ominous passages, Paul also speaks of the children of wrath being energized by the Devil (e.g., Eph 2:2). This notion of spiritual operative powers operating in subjects that are themselves operative became the basis for Pauline synergism (e.g., Phil 2:12-13). See Bradshaw, “The Concept of the Divine Energies,” pp. 93-120, esp. pp. 104-6; Bradshaw, “The Divine Energies in the New Testament,” 189-223.

¹¹⁹ Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto* 9.23 (PG 32:109b-c). Cf. *Epistola* 236 (PG 32:875b-886a).

¹²⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Oratio de incarnatione Verbi* 54 (PG 25:192b).

¹²¹ E.g., Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* (PG 91:1088).

in operative powers that are alien to human nature but have taken up residence in him, namely, the operative powers of God. While it may be evident that a Saint who performs a miracle, such as healing the sick or raising the dead, does so by means of divine energy flowing through him, we should not miss that miraculous knowledge is also due to a foreign operative power at work in the Saint. Revelation of the extraordinary kind Basil describes is not a hearing with the ear. It is the Saint bearing in his person the divine attributes. The Saint participates in *God's* knowledge of mysteries, *God's* apprehension of things hidden, and *God's* foreknowledge of the future. And so again, the beholding of God is possible because the Saint is energized by the only nature that can behold God, namely, God's own.

So as to not get bogged down in the Cappadocians, I will not rehearse the similar insights of Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, except to identify two additions. Beginning with Gregory of Nyssa, we saw in the above quote from *On the Holy Spirit* Basil draw an image-archetype connection between humanity and God. Building on this same connection, Gregory of Nyssa offers an interpretation of divine vision that is self-reflexive, focusing primarily on the fact that deification involves the energizing of the icon itself. Gregory writes,

It is not the vision of God face to face which seems to me to be proposed here for the one whose soul's eye has been purified. What is proposed to us in this magnificent formula is perhaps what in clearer terms the Word expressed to some others when he said "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you"; that we might learn that having purified our heart of all creatureliness and carnal disposition we will see the image of the divine nature in all its beauty.... Just as those who look at the sun in a mirror, even though they cannot gaze at the sky itself, see the sun in the shining of the mirror no less than those who look at the solar disc itself; so too if you have been dazzled by the light (of God), in so far as you recover the grace of the image deposited in you at the beginning, you possess what you see within you. Divinity is in fact purity, impassibility, the removal of all evil. If this is what you are within, then God is within. When your spirit is untainted by any evil, free from passions, separated from all uncleanness, you are blessed with clearness of sight. Being purified, you know what is invisible to the impure. The carnal fog having been raised from the eyes of your soul, in the clear air of the heart you contemplate the glorious spectacle as far as the eye can see.¹²²

We should not misread Gregory as denying divine vision. To the contrary, Gregory's interpretation takes very seriously that what deifies the Saint is the energies of God. Therefore, the one who has "been made God," need not search outside himself for divine vision. Rather, the icon, having been filled with divine light from its archetype, sees God (i.e., the energies that issue from God's essence) within himself. In defense of the point, Gregory notes several places in which to *see* means to possess or have, and this type of seeing, Gregory argues, far exceeds *theōria*. It is a knowing of God by having been made God.¹²³

Gregory of Nazianzus' comments on divine vision are generally in line with what we find in Irenaeus and Basil. He echoes the insistence that God's essence cannot be conceived or discovered,¹²⁴ and he too identifies purification as the road by which one comes to behold God.¹²⁵ Yet, Gregory introduces a notion that each comes to see God according to his capacity. Gregory conjoins this claim with the notion of purification. Thus, *capacity* does not indicate ontological capacity or capacity of intellect or education. Rather, one's capacity to see God is proportionate to "to the value of his purification," and thus our capacity is something that progresses with our partaking of the divine nature.¹²⁶ This claim becomes a common staple of the doctrine in subsequent writers.¹²⁷

Following the Cappadocians, we encounter one of the clearest statements on divine vision in Cyril of Alexandria. Much like the Cappadocians, this clarity is prompted by a controversy, namely, the Nestorian dispute. Nestorius attempts to draw on passages from Chrysostom and Irenaeus, respectively, that interpret

¹²² Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus* (PG 44.1272bc; see also PG 44.1268b-1272c).

¹²³ Lossky, *Divine Vision*, 72-74.

¹²⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes* 28.4; 28.17 (PG 36:29c-32a; 48c-49a).

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.3; 28.9 (PG 36:13c-16b; 36c37b).

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.2 (PG 36:28a-29a).

¹²⁷ See, e.g., Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechism* 6.2 (PG 33:540); John Chrysostom, *De incomprehensibili Dei natura* 3.3 (PG 48.722); Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *In Col.* 1.15 (PG 66.52); Cyril of Alexandria, *On St. John* (PG 74.541); *Relic* 34 (PG 75.598).

vision of God face to face as fulfilled in the Incarnation.¹²⁸ Nestorius uses these passages to justify his faulty Christology, arguing that it is Christ's humanity that gives a face (*prosopon*) to the divine nature; hence, this seeing refers to Christ's humanity only.¹²⁹ This interpretation forces Cyril to clarify the very points about divine vision noted above.

Cyril begins with the point concerning capacity, made by Gregory of Nazianzus. Yet, Cyril is careful to dispel any notion that capacity might mean innate ontology. As he points out, all creatures are equally alienated from divine vision; angels are no more capable of seeing God than humans. Capacity concerns, not our innate intellect or faculties, but our capacity to partake of the divine nature.¹³⁰ Deification is the only road by which any creature can hope to see God. As Cyril states plainly, the Son knows the Father because they share the same nature. Without this nature, no such knowing would be possible. Therefore, it is right to say that the Incarnation makes it possible for humanity to see God. But Nestorius misses the point when thinking this possibility is rooted in the fact that the Son took on a human face. The Incarnation makes divine vision possible because it enables humanity to partake of the very nature that allows the Son to know the Father.¹³¹ Lossky summarizes Cyril's position as follows:

To participate in the divinity of the Son, in the communal divinity of the Trinity, is to be deified, to be penetrated by divinity—just as the red-hot iron in the fire is penetrated by the heat of the fire—allowing the beauty of the inexpressible nature of the Trinity to shine in us. We are deified by the Holy Spirit who makes us likeness of the Son, the perfect image of the Father. We become like the Son—"sons by participate"—by participating in the divine nature, by being united to God in the Holy Spirit. We are deified by the Son in the Holy Spirit.... The perfect knowledge of God which is attained in the age to come is no longer the ultimate goal, but one aspect of the final deification... We shall know Christ who will shine in us by the Holy Spirit, because we shall have "the mind of Christ" (*nous christou*) of which St. Paul spoke, and this mind of Christ is the Holy Spirit present in us.¹³²

Notice that, as we saw in Basil, divine vision is not concerned with unraveling the darkness that surrounds the divine essence. Rather, the aim of deification is to commune with the Holy Trinity, being transformed by the work of the Son and the Spirit in order that we might see the Father. Cyril not only redirects from the divine essence to the divine Persons, but he elevates such knowledge above knowledge of essence. He states rather profoundly,

He is called Father by One who is best and most worthy, i.e. by the Son. He is called God by slaves, by those who are least; so great is the distance between the Master and the slave, between the Creator and the creature. Just as the word Father is related to the Son, so the word God is related to slaves and those who do not have the same nature as God, whatever that nature may be.¹³³

Cyril here dismisses the pagan preoccupation with the abyss of divine essence by noting that the one who is above all of creation and knows God as he is (i.e., the Son), knows God as Father. Hence, we should not think divine vision is a settling for something less than the divine essence; rather, it is a superior thing to

¹²⁸ I will forego a separate treatment of John Chrysostom, except to say here that we find in Chrysostom the same teachings noted thus far. Chrysostom affirms that God's essence is never an object of vision (*De incomprehensibili Dei natura* 5.4 [PG 48.740]); the divine essence is equally inaccessible to all creatures, angels included (*On St. John* 15.1 [PG 59.98]); because the Son and the Father are of the same essence, one is no more visible in essence than the other (*On St. John* 15.2 [PG 59.100]); what can be seen of God is not his essence but his condescension to creatures (*On St. John* 15.1 [PG 59.98]); and this condescension is via his energies, which communicate what can be known of the divine essence (*Ad Theod. Laps.*, 1.11 [PG 61.292]); yet, this seeing is proportionate to one's capacity, or "poverty" (*astheneia*) (*On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* 3.3 [PG 48.722]).

¹²⁹ Lossky, *Divine Vision*, 78-80.

¹³⁰ Several passages exist in which the Eastern fathers grant that angels and archangels may well have clearer divine vision than man. Yet, such passages do not disconnect holiness from divine vision, and the fathers are clear that angels are holy because they partake of divine holiness. Hence, these passages are in no way a threat to Cyril's point. See, e.g., Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechism* 6.2 (PG 33:540); John Chrysostom, *On St. John* 15.1 (PG 59.98); Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *In Col.* 1.15 (PG 66.52); Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes* 28.4 (PG 36:29c-32a).

¹³¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *On St. John* (PG 74.541); *Relic* 34 (PG 75.598).

¹³² Lossky, *Divine Vision*, 81. Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *On St. John* (PG 74.284-5).

¹³³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Relic* 5 (PG 75.65-8).

know God as Father. And it is because of the Incarnation that we too become “sons by participation.”¹³⁴ As Lossky points out, “The ‘divine darkness’ or knowledge through ignorance has no place in the thought of Cyril.”¹³⁵ If there is a darkness that surrounds the divine essence, it is meant to be filled with divine light:¹³⁶ “with uncovered face and untrammelled thought we shall have in our intellect the beauty of the divine nature of the Father, while contemplating the glory of the One who has shone forth from him.”¹³⁷

While we have seen in Irenaeus and the Cappadocians that it is the work of the Son and the Spirit that draws man into divine light, Cyril clarifies the precise means by which this work is accomplished. His answer is overtly sacramental. In baptism, one receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, and it is the Spirit who illuminates the soul.¹³⁸ Yet, the body too is meant to partake in divine light. Just as Christ transfigured his flesh, so that it was made incorruptible, so our mortal bodies are also to be transformed by incorruption. Such is the primary aim of the Eucharist, namely, to enable our body and blood to be changed by Christ’s body and blood, which has been filled with divine, life-giving energy. Cyril writes, “[The body of the Word] in its own nature has been enriched with the Word who is united to it. It has become holy, life-giving, full of the divine energy. And in Christ we too are transfigured.”¹³⁹ The end goal of this transfiguration is divine vision.

In the eighth century, the connection between deification and divine vision continues in the works of John of Damascus. I will forego retracing the numerous echoes of points already discussed and focus simply on the John’s treatment of the quintessential example of divine vision, namely, the Transfiguration. The story is familiar, appearing in all three synoptic gospels (Matt 17:1-8; Mk 9:2-8; Lk 9:28-36). Christ leads Peter, James, and John (brother of James) to the top of Mount Tabor, and there Christ and his garments are transfigured, shining with unnatural brightness, and appearing alongside him is Moses and Elijah. The moment is followed by a declaration from the Father of the Son’s sonship. John of Damascus’s interpretation is in keeping with what we have seen of the Eastern understanding of divine vision. It is not that divine realities changed to make themselves accessible to the senses. To the contrary, what changed was the disciples: “In the Transfiguration Christ did not become what he was not before, but appeared to his disciples as he was, by opening their eyes, by giving sight to those who were blind.”¹⁴⁰ And John carries the point through to his treatment of the eschatological vision of God. In his exposition on the Orthodox faith, John continues to connect our partaking of divine glory with our seeing of God: “the righteous and the angels will shine like the sun in eternal life, together with our Lord Jesus Christ, eternally seeing him and eternally being seen by him, drawing from him an unending joy, praising him with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the ages of ages.”¹⁴¹

I would be remiss if I closed my discussion of divine vision without mention of Gregory Palamas. In the 14th century, divine vision again took center stage in the East due to the dispute between Palamas and Barlaam.¹⁴² Barlaam argued that the divine essence is both knowable and can be explicated through natural theology. In reply, Palamas reiterates the teaching of the Eastern fathers that God is *hyperousios* and thus beyond creaturely knowledge. He then distinguishes natural knowledge about God in the philosophers from the Christian knowledge of God by spiritual ascent and deification.¹⁴³ It is noteworthy that Gregory’s argument is not a defense of an abstract doctrine, but of the practices based on the Eastern view of divine vision in the hesychast tradition, which stretches back to the days of Diadochus of Photice (5th century) and

¹³⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, *On St. John* (PG 74.541); *Relic* 34 (PG 75.598).

¹³⁵ Lossky, *Divine Vision*, 82.

¹³⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, *On Malach.* 4.2-3 (PG 72.360ac).

¹³⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, *On St. John* 16.25 (PG 73.464b).

¹³⁸ Cyril of Alexandria, *On Ex.* 2 (PG 69.432a).

¹³⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Quod unus sit Christus* (PG 75:1269). See also Cyril of Alexandria, *On St. John* 6.54 (PG 73.577b-8a).

¹⁴⁰ John of Damascus, *Homiliae* 1.13 (PG 96.564c).

¹⁴¹ John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 4.27 (PG 94.1228).

¹⁴² For a brief synopsis of the Palamas-Barlaam dispute, see John Meyendorff, “Introduction,” in *Gregory Palamas: The Triads*. See also Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, ch. 9.

¹⁴³ Gregory Palamas, *Triads* 3.1.34. Translations of *The Triads* are taken from the edition noted above. For a critical edition of the text, see Grégoire Palamas, *Défense des saints hésychastes*.

John Climacus (6th-7th century).¹⁴⁴ Based on the patristic teachings about divine vision, the hesychasts sought to purify the soul of passions and raise it up to God by constant prayer. Thus, just as Christ transformed human nature by uniting it with divinity, so the soul, by uniting itself perpetually to God, is also deified with Christ.¹⁴⁵

Additionally noteworthy is that the hope of divine vision within this tradition was based on the reported success of many of its adherents. Thus, it is not simply the teachings of the fathers that Gregory relies on when he insists that divine vision is not simply an apophatic clearing away of the senses: “One sees, not in a negative way—for one does see something—but in a manner superior to negation. For God is not only beyond knowledge, but also beyond unknowing.”¹⁴⁶ This talk of God being beyond both knowing and unknowing, again, goes to the essence-energies distinction. As Gregory points out, “The divine nature must be called at the same time incommunicable and, in a sense, communicable; we attain participation in the nature of God and yet he remains totally inaccessible.”¹⁴⁷ The divine essence is incommunicable in the sense that no creature can bear the divine essence the way members of the Holy Trinity do, and yet, the energies that issue from God’s essence make it possible for creatures to participate in some measure in God’s essence: “Illumination or divine and deifying grace is not the essence but the energy of God.”¹⁴⁸

In the East, the trajectory of divine vision defended by Gregory Palamas was received and ratified by two successive council endorsements at Constantinople, as well as further council decisions in 1347 and 1351, respectively.¹⁴⁹ Thus, it is not an exaggeration to identify this understanding of divine vision as *the* understanding of the Christian East.

3 Some conclusions

There are unquestionably significant differences between the discussion of special revelation in Western modern philosophy and the discussion of special revelation, or divine vision, in the Christian East. As we saw, the modern philosophers consistently employ an empirical understanding of divine revelation. God reveals himself by appearing to the eyes or speaking to the ears; God sends an angel to appear and speak; or God manipulates a material substance, such as a cloud, which appears to the eyes. Even when talk of dreams or visions is utilized in the modern philosophers, it assumes a mechanical stirring of content in the mind. Such processes are purely natural processes of imagination that are extraordinary only in their causal origin, namely, God’s manipulation of them. The view remains consistent throughout the modern philosophers, such that even in more complex discussions of special revelation in Kant and Fichte, we still find the very simplistic definition of revelation, namely, it is a sensible appearance that is deemed so peculiar that it must have divine causal origins.

The Eastern approach to God’s unveiling is entirely different. Rather than suggesting that God might manifest himself to our natural faculties, there is an acceptance that no such unveiling is possible; God is entirely beyond the grasp of creatures, full stop. There is only one nature capable of divine vision, and that is God’s own. Hence, if a creature is to experience divine vision, the creature must participate in the divine nature. Revelation involves neither a change in God, so as to become sensible, or a change in the natural world, so as to act so strangely as to be moved by God; revelation involves a change in the subject, such that he is raised above himself by participating in God’s own knowing of mysteries and things hidden. The two views could not be more different.

The views are also considerably different on the matter of authentication. As we saw, the modern view roots authentication of revelation in the historical veracity of the account and the verification of the accompanying miracles, which constitute the credentials of the prophet. In the East, something very

¹⁴⁴ Meyendorff, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁴⁵ Gregory Palamas, *Triads* 1.3.38.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.3.4.

¹⁴⁷ Gregory Palamas, *Theophanes* (PG 150.932d).

¹⁴⁸ Gregory Palamas, *Physica, theologica, moralia et practica* 68-89 (PG 150.1169).

¹⁴⁹ Meyendorff, “Introduction,” 6-8.

different happens. First, there is a priority of purity or sanctity or holiness over miracles. Miracles do tend to accompany holiness. Yet, this is because the Eastern fathers understand holiness, like immortality or divine vision, to be something that belongs to God alone, and thus holiness is acquired only by participating in God's holiness. Hence, as one is purified and becomes holy, one participates in that nature from which comes holiness, divine vision, and miracles. In short, miracles may be a byproduct of the purity that makes room for divine vision, but holiness is far more crucial to the vindication of divine vision than miracles. Even demons can produce oddities in nature.

Second, the Eastern understanding of divine vision is such that the primary verification of revelation is a firsthand experience of it, not a secondhand report. Because divine vision is the goal of human existence, every human person is invited to be cleansed, illuminated, and partake of the divine nature through the Holy Spirit and the Son in order to taste and see God firsthand. Though God's self-revelation may first come to us by report, there is nothing *special* about such revelation; it is the proper end of every human person to experience divine vision for him or herself. Thus, there is an existential component to the Eastern view, which beckons individuals to not simply scrutinize the credentials of the reporter; the report itself invites the hearer into a journey of participation and ascent in order that he or she may taste and see this very same revelation firsthand.

Regrettably, despite the robust Eastern history of ideas (and practice) on divine vision, the contemporary discussion of religious epistemology tends to ignore this history, taking its cues almost exclusively from the Western discussion. Yet, given the very real and fundamental differences between the two perspectives on divine revelation, philosophers of religion would be well advised to take pause and consider what fruit might come from considering the alternative of the Christian East.¹⁵⁰

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¹⁵⁰ For one example of how the Eastern alternative may be used in responding to issues arising from the Western discussion, see my response to Immanuel Kant's argument against special revelation: Jacobs, "Kant and the Problem of Divine Revelation."

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