



The Dynamics of Faith and Revelation

Sara Fairbanks, O.P., Ph.D.

Introduction

Theology is first and foremost grounded in the dynamics of faith and revelation, that is, in humanity's history-long encounter with the Holy. As discussed in the last chapter, the Christian tradition teaches that *revelation* is God's self-communicating love mediated through creation, human experience, and salvation history, culminating in Christ and continuing into the present through the power of the Holy Spirit. In turn, *faith* is our dedicated and joyous response to God as we commit our human freedom to the love of God and neighbor as self. Faith and revelation are intimately interconnected. The mystery of God is "given" to faith, breaks in upon it, unveils itself, and draws us out of ourselves in a conscious commitment to something greater than ourselves. God's self-revelation, however, cannot be envisioned apart from the openness and response of the person in faith. If God's gift of self is never acknowledged or responded to, it is almost impossible to say that the process of revelation has actually occurred. Thus, in Christian theology we speak about the dynamics of faith and revelation in order to highlight the mutual or reciprocal relationship between the two.¹

Theologians, philosophers of religion, and anthropologists tell us that from the dawning of civilization, human beings seem to have lived with a deep awareness of an awesome, transcendent power. They experienced this numinous presence as both *transcendent*, that is, beyond this world, and, at the same time, *immanent*, that is, within this world. They sensed that their lives were influenced by real, yet unseen forces which they could not control but with which they could be in harmony. They did this through the development of a variety of structured religious activities representing the advent of religion. As theologian *Elizabeth A. Johnson* writes, "Particular configurations of stories and songs, symbols and rituals, dedicated sacred times and sacred spaces, ethical practices, and priestly hierarchies and charismatic seers orchestrated peoples' relationship with divine presence in different cultural milieus."² The complex history of religion traces this development of peoples' relationship with Holy Mystery. A classic study conducted by Rudolf Otto in the early twentieth century reveals three elements that characterize the encounter between humanity and divinity. Johnson elucidates Otto's basic assertion that

we experience the Holy, as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, that is, a *mystery* at once *awesome* and *attractive*. Johnson explains:

- *Mysterium* refers to the hidden character of the Holy, beyond imagination not just because of our own intellectual limits but because of the very nature of the subject. Far from being a pessimistic experience, however, encounter with the Holy as mystery is laced with the promise of plenitude: more fullness exists than we can grasp.
- *Tremendum* denotes the awesome character of this mystery insofar as it is beyond our control. We cannot domesticate the power of the Holy. This gives rise to a feeling of reverence akin to fear, an earthshaking dread: we are so small in the face of this majesty.
- *Fascinans* expresses the attractive character of this mystery insofar as it is overwhelmingly gracious. Experienced as love, mercy, and comfort, the Holy makes us blissful. People hunger with an immense longing for this goodness, which gives the Holy the power to entrance, entice, and lure our hearts.³

The exuberant quest for the Holy, at once awe-inspiring and attractive, is at the heart of every religion. People who are members of a religion are initiated into a particular faith tradition of relationship with Holy Mystery. The community of faith through the ages, having encountered the Holy in their own lives, expressed this reality in sacred writings, ceremonies and practices that described what they experienced and understood to be true. By actively participating in the faith life of the community, believers discover in their own lives the presence and

action of the Holy handed on by their ancestors. In turn, their own life-giving relationship with this tremendous and fascinating mystery, developed through the challenges of their own historical circumstances, keeps the process going for generations to follow.⁴

The On-Going Quest for God as Witnessed in the Bible

Revelation, the genesis of our relationship with God, is pure gift. As Karl Rahner explains, the gift of God's very self in relationship to a creature "must necessarily be understood as an act of God's highest personal freedom, as an act of opening *Godself* in ultimate intimacy and in free and absolute love."⁵ God initiates the relationship and makes possible our free and loving response in faith. God, who is love, "gives *Godself* to creatures as their own fulfillment."⁶ The New Testament makes clear that God's unconditional love for us empowers our quest for God: "God is love"⁹ . . . In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us . . . We love, because [God] first loved us" (1 John 4: 8, 10, 19).

In her book, *Quest for the Living God*, Elizabeth Johnson points out that humanity's passionate search for God is a perennial theme running throughout the various books of the Hebrew Scriptures. She draws our attention first to the Psalms:

O God, you are my God;
early will I seek you;
My soul thirsts for you,
My flesh longs for you,
Like a dry and thirsty land
without water. (Ps 63:1)⁷

The quest for God continues as a response to what people perceive as a call from God to do so:

Thou hast said, "Seek ye my face."

My heart says to thee, "Thy face Lord do I seek."

Hide not thy face from me.
(Ps 27: 8-9)⁸

Moving next to the books from Moses through the prophets, she further explains that God's command to seek is joined with the promise of joyful finding. Despite Israel's infidelity to God, Moses offers them hope of God's mercy: "From there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul" (Deut 4:29). Centuries later, as the disaster of exile in Babylon approaches, the prophet Jeremiah offers them the consolation of God's tender care:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me. (Jer 29:12-14a)

Even with their sure knowledge of God's covenantal love, the people of Israel persevere in their quest for God, seeking for ever deeper understanding, closer union and greater fidelity in justice and peace.⁹ Lastly, Johnson highlights that in the Jewish understanding of humanity's relationship with God, there is an extravagant

mutuality in the quest, each side energetically seeking the other. She writes:

While promising that "*those who seek me diligently find me*" (Prov 8:17), **Wisdom**, a female personification of the God of Israel, herself walks through the marketplace seeking those who will listen to her loud cries of instruction; she sends her maidservants out to invite everyone to feast at her table and to walk in the way of insight. (Prv 9:3-6)¹⁰

As for those who refuse to heed God's voice and go astray, she calls our attention to the prophet Ezekiel who likens the God of Israel to the shepherd going after lost sheep: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak . . . I will feed them with justice" (Ezek 34: 15-16). As witnessed in Jewish Scripture, our relationship with the living God is never static, dull and predictable but an eventful adventure in mutual love and companionship. Sharing our life with God in faith and love brings new and wonderful discoveries as we face the challenges of our changing world.¹¹

These same lively dynamics of divine-human encounter found in Jewish Scriptures are equally prevalent in Christian Scriptures where themes of seeking and finding—or, disappointedly, not finding—are woven throughout the gospels. Johnson draws our attention to the fact that in Jesus' first recorded sermon—the famous *Sermon on the Mount*—Jesus exhorts his disciples to seek God, "strive first for the

kingdom of God" while putting aside the daily worries about food and clothing (Mt 6: 33). With this imperative comes a promise of fulfillment:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Mt 7:7-8)

Jesus' promise of fulfillment takes on flesh and blood reality in his ministry with the people, especially with the poor and outcasts of society.¹²

This human hunt for God is met with joyful fulfillment in the various physical and spiritual healings Jesus performs. In one instance, when Jesus is preaching to a large crowd at his home in Capernaum, four people expectantly approach him carrying their paralytic friend on a mat. They are seeking a cure, but they fail to get near Jesus because of the crowd that surrounds him. With brash determination, they climb to the top of his roof, cut a large hole and lower their friend down to the spot inside where Jesus is standing. Jesus marvels at their faith and generously rewards it: "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home" (Cf. Mk 2:1-12). Equally bold is the woman known in her town to be a sinner (Lk 7:36-50). She shamelessly crashes a dinner party that Simon the Pharisee is having for Jesus. Fer- vently seeking the forgiveness of God, she kneels before him, weeping, her total attention and affection focused on the feet of Jesus. She washes them with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them with her mouth and anoints them with

perfume. When Simon sees this extravagant display he says to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner" (v. 39). Unperturbed by Simon's response, Jesus fulfills her heart's desire: "Your sins are forgiven. . . . Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (vv. 50-51).

This human quest for God is exceeded only by God's relentless search for the ones who are lost. Jesus' parables of divine mercy portray God the Redeemer as the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to go after the lost one until he finds it, or like a woman who diligently searches for her valuable coin until she retrieves what she lost (Lk 15:3-10). Jesus compares God to the forgiving father who throws a party at the return of his prodigal son who had left home and squandered his whole inheritance on degenerate living. As he explains to his loyal son, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Lk 15:31-32). Lastly, Johnson points to Jesus' own encounter with "short, rich, cheating Zacchaeus."¹³ This tax collector experiences such a deep conversion of mind and heart that he pledges to give half his wealth to the poor and to repay anyone he has defrauded fourfold. Joyous that salvation had come to this house, Jesus proclaims, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Lk 19:10).

The human quest for God, as so beautifully portrayed in the Bible, is alive and flourishing today. The robust faith response to the revelation of God's presence and action among us is a never-ending dynamic in Christianity. As *August-*

tine of Hippo described this dynamic, "God is sought in order to be found more sweetly, and found in order to be sought more eagerly."¹⁴

Why the Quest?

Elizabeth Johnson names three factors for why the history-long search for the living God can never be concluded. *First*, God is an indescribable mystery beyond words, profoundly incomprehensible, unfathomable and unlimited. God's utter transcendence means that God cannot be possessed or contained by anything in this world. Regardless of the heights of our intellectual achievement, the human mind can never capture in words, definitions, concepts, or doctrines the infinite reality of God, who is inexpressibly Other. *Second*, the search persists because of the insatiable longings of the human heart. The passionate quest for something more drives the human exploration in all fields. When it comes to matters of religious faith, she writes:

[The] human spirit cannot rest in any one encounter but, intrigued by the glimpse already gained, continues to hunger for more. People keep on journeying through beauty and joy, through duty and commitment, through agonizing silence and pain, toward greater meaning and deeper union with the ineffable God, to their last breath.¹⁵

Third, human culture and the way we view the world is constantly changing. Revelation is always mediated through particular, concrete historical channels. When life circumstances change, new discover-

ies about God inevitably emerge. As Johnson states, "Images, intellectual constructs and rituals that mediated a sense of God in one age often do not make sense in the next with its change of perceptions, values, and lifestyles." A reformulation of our Christian faith and traditions is necessary if they are to open up new ways of relating to God in prayer and praxis that are meaningful in this new era.¹⁶ Theology is the process whereby the dynamics of faith and revelation are given fresh interpretation in light of our new discoveries of God present and active in our world today. God's challenge to the prophet Isaiah is one that theologians and communities of faith need to attend to with all seriousness: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa 43:19).

The dynamics of this age-old quest for the living God is explored more thoroughly in the next two sections of this chapter. The first section discusses the nature of faith as a universal dimension of human experience. From this perspective it elucidates the characteristics of religious faith, and its relation to knowledge and to beliefs. The second section considers the universality of revelation as well as the historical mediation of revelation that exuberantly manifests itself in the plurality of world religions.

Faith as a Dimension of Human Existence

Human faith is a response, an attitude, an act, characterized by an intense personal commitment on many levels: physical, intellectual, emotional, volitional and spiritual. Human faith engages the whole person. Faith is a universal human

phenomenon rooted in *freedom*. Freedom here does not mean merely the power to make choices or exercise free will. As Karl Rahner puts it, "freedom is rather the capacity to make oneself once and for all."¹⁷ Faith is inextricably bound to the process of *self-actualization*. Psychologists who specialize in human development tell us that self-actualization is the achievement of two basic tasks: *autonomy* and *communion with others*, including the natural world. In the lifelong process of becoming human the longing for autonomy is the yearning to be independent and self-sufficient, to act intelligently, reasonably and responsibly in the dedication of one's self to a life full of purpose and meaning. The seemingly opposite desire for communion with others is the yearning for belonging and connection, to be part of, close to, joined with, to love and be loved, to commit one's self to the well-being of another and the flourishing of community and the earth. Because this two-fold task of self-actualization is fraught with uncertainty and risk, if not the threat of disaster and death, faith is a constitutive part of human existence. In our life's journey we, in a sense, "walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7).

Human faith engages the whole person: body, mind, heart, and will. In our drive for self-determination, we desire to gain a deep understanding of our world, discover our origin and destiny, seek solutions to seemingly irresolvable problems, and find the meaning of life. Brennan R. Hill describes how faith engages the mind:

Humans are unique in that they are driven to search for meaning. We want to make sense

of things, find purpose, and plan. We desire to understand the "why" of tragedies, the "how" of happenings. Faith is in one sense the human capacity to believe that the truth of the matter is somewhere out there to be discovered.¹⁸

In faith, we commit ourselves to education and professional training in order to develop our gifts, talents and passions with the hope of making a contribution to our world. We use our observations, perceptions, powers of analysis, and critical reason to discern the course of action most beneficial to ourselves and others, in our personal, professional, and communal lives. Yet even the best laid plans can go awry, leaving us bewildered and bereft, without direction or a clear vision of the future. Here faith gives us a sense of conviction and perseverance to stay the course, while remaining ever open to new emerging possibilities.

The path to self-actualization is never a venture made in isolation, but always involves a diverse and intricate network of relationships—family, friends, peers, teachers, mentors, co-workers—that hopefully provides us not only with loving attention, acceptance and support, but also with the challenge and encouragement of new growth in the emergence of self throughout our human lifespan. This nurturing environment must be able to meet our basic needs and, at the same time, be willing to let us go, to grant us autonomy, while accepting the losses which inevitably come with personal growth and change. In the process of self-actualization, we, too, learn the art of loving and help to create

nurturing environments for others. Integral to this process, human faith is the ability to form trusting and affectionate relationships, to give and receive love so essential for the vitality of our lives. Faith, then, involves more than the mind, it is also a matter of the heart, and includes a myriad of feelings. When we are with someone we love, we feel any number of feelings: comfort, pleasure, safety, security, trust, confidence, esteem, joy, deep inner peace. Faith in another is a commitment to the well-being and happiness of the person as well as trust that the relationship will grow and develop in mutual love into the future.

Human faith is grounded in *trust*, which is so basic to the process of self-actualization. Hill emphasizes how trust is the bedrock of faith:

Human faith is based on trust, which is our ability to have reliance on something or someone. Trust is our willingness to have confidence in the reliability of a thing, or of the truthfulness and integrity of a person. Such trust is quite basic to human living. Without a degree of trust in ourselves, we would be reluctant to make decisions, reach out in friendship, or make plans for the future. Without trust in other people, we would no doubt be afraid to even leave our homes, associate with others, or be open to relationships. If we were not able to put trust in people, it is unlikely that we would be willing to reveal ourselves to others or open our lives to others in any way.¹⁹

Trust enables us to set goals and go after our dreams at the risk of failure and vulnerability before others. Most of us have encountered the stark reality that people hurt. We have no doubt suffered some form of betrayal, rejection, abuse or neglect. We all have experienced our own limitations, personal incompetence, failure, or defeat. Life's hurts can fill us with self-doubt, convincing us that we are unlovable, inferior, and incapable of making it in this world. We can come to believe that no one can be trusted, genuine human intimacy is an illusion, and relationships are simply not worth the effort. Faith opens us to the marvelous potential within us for healing life's hurts, reconciling with others, and overcoming setbacks that stand in the way of our happiness and human flourishing. As writer Albert Camus so poetically writes, "In the midst of winter, I finally learned there was in me an invincible summer."²⁰

Because freedom is not really freedom until it is exercised in action, human faith involves freedom in action. Faith is the power of our will to make commitments, to meet responsibilities, to face challenges, to change our direction in life, and to dedicate ourselves to a particular goal, value, person, group or community. The quest for self-actualization and the flourishing of human community reveals our search for ultimate goodness, beauty, and truth. These positive strivings of human existence show up most strikingly against the background of lethal threats to human meaning and existence. For example, each person lives with the reality of their own imminent death and the fact of worldly extinction. This screaming threat to our very survival is magnified by the history of innocent

suffering all around us. The prevalence of military violence and our capacity for nuclear annihilation overshadows our promise of tomorrow. Our industrial economy brings ecological degradation to our air, water, and soil and, if not checked, will mean the devastation of our planet. We live in a global community of rampant pluralism which calls into question every tradition and the concept of truth itself. Faced with the myriad of competing values that attracts human commitment, it seems impossible to coordinate human effort for the well-being of all peoples. In light of the precariousness of human existence, theologian Roger Haight concludes that, "The sheer fact that these experiences constitute threats to human existence indicates a human dynamism to overcome them. The quest for salvation, then, has been inscribed into the very structure and dynamic of human freedom in action."²¹

Yet when humanity searches within the finitude of human existence for the answer to the human predicament, it cannot be found. When we search the vast treasury of this-worldly truth and value, nothing presents itself, salvation eludes us. As Rahner puts it, humanity "is the question to which there is no answer."²² This question which humanity is must be understood as the very condition which makes hearing the revelatory answer possible. From the Christian perspective, God is the only answer to the human question. Human freedom, then, is a graced capacity for God. In the search for salvation, however, where will human beings place their faith? Haight articulates the cutting-edge issue in the decision of faith:

The ultimate issue in the question of faith does not deal with yes or no, faith or unfaith. Rather the point at issue is always which faith to choose: Which faith makes most sense? . . . The question of faith is the question of salvation. But it also asks what object, which value, what supreme reality is most worthy of the dedication and commitment of human freedom.²³

The only real question, then, is not whether or not we have faith, but rather what "supreme reality" engages all of our human energies and powers? What is most important to us? What do we really live for, guide our lives by, and place our trust in? What commitments are shaping the persons we are becoming for all eternity? These questions point to the basic direction and underlying attitude that guide the important decisions of a lifetime, or what is called our *fundamental option*. Many theologians assert that in the sum total of important decisions that shape our lives, each of us makes a fundamental option which forms the central core of our personal identity. It expresses a radical "yes" or "no" to self, others, and, ultimately, God. There is a very real possibility that we might freely will our own self-destruction, the hateful rejection of others and the final denial of God.

The Nature of Religious Faith

Because religious faith seeks God alone, theology speaks about the *object of religious faith* as being strictly transcendent. Many people may well invest their whole loyalty and dedication in objects that are

less than absolutely transcendent. As Haight points out, "The phenomenology of trust and commitment to nation, power, and wealth displays the manner in which these can easily take on religious dimensions; they can function as God-like substitutes for a genuine object of faith."²⁴ The object of authentic religious faith involves transcendent mystery, as its only real fulfillment. As St. Augustine exclaims, "Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in thee."²⁵

Religious faith is our freely committed and lived out "yes" to God who approaches us in unconditional love and mercy. Authentic faith entails both a *passive* and an *active* dimension. Because it is God who first loves us and initiates the relationship, faith consists in an open receptivity to the presence and action of God in our lives, as well as a submission of the self to God's saving will. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus' own anguished struggle with faith as he faces death by crucifixion exemplifies the self-surrender of obedient love for God: "Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death. . . .'²⁶ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'" (Mt 26: 38-39). The commitment of faith involves a kind of dependence and a being filled with the grace of God working in and through us for others. Jesus explains this human dependence on God and the possibility of divine union by speaking about himself as the "true vine": "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15: 5).

Faith also involves a dynamic commitment of the whole of our freedom in action, expressed in the love of God and the service of one another. Haight writes, "Faith is central and centering: central because it emerges out of the center of one's free being; centering because it unifies, integrates, and holds together all aspects of the personality."²⁶ Of course, faith becomes central and centering only when we put our faith into practice. Faith is formed by our actions; not by what we say, but by what we do.

Religious faith is distinct from human faith, but is deeply rooted within it. As Hill states, "human faith provides the structure within which religious faith can operate and develop. Consequently, defects in human faith can affect our capacity for religious faith."²⁷ For example, lack of trust in people or in the goodness of reality can affect faith in God and in God's word. Our inability to love and serve others can affect our ability to love and serve God or the community of faith. As John the Evangelist puts it, "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 Jn 4: 20). On the flip side, defects in human faith can be repaired and restored through religious faith. Experiences of God's healing love, forgiveness and call to discipleship can recreate our personal identity and enable us to give to others what we ourselves have received. The prayer of *St. Francis of Assisi* expresses this human desire to be a channel of God's gifts to others:

Lord, make me an instrument of your
peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so
 much seek to be
 consoled as to console;
 to be understood as to understand;
 to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
 It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
 And it is in dying that we are born to
 eternal life.²⁸

Christianity further teaches that there is a unity in the love of God and the love of neighbor. When our consciousness has been awakened to God's personal offer of friendship, the question naturally arises: How do I respond in friendship to the God I cannot see? Whereas this question is addressed more thoroughly in Chapter Six on prayer and spirituality, we highlight one aspect of the answer here. As we learned in the last chapter, God's presence is always mediated through all that God has created. In his parable of the Last Judgment, Jesus teaches us that whenever we reach out in care for the least of our brothers and sisters, we are meeting and loving God, whether we recognize it or not:

When the Son of Man comes
 in his glory . . . the nations will
 be gathered before him . . .

³⁴Then [he] will say to those at
 his right hand, "Come, you that
 are blessed by my Father, inherit
 the kingdom prepared for you
 from the foundation of the
 world; ³⁵for I was hungry and
 you gave me food, I was thirsty

and you gave me something to
 drink, I was a stranger and you
 welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and
 you gave me clothing, I was sick
 and you took care of me, I was in
 prison and you visited me."

³⁷Then the righteous will answer
 him, "Lord, when was it that we
 saw you hungry and gave you
 food, or thirsty and gave you
 something to drink? ³⁸And when
 was it that we saw you a stranger
 and welcomed you, or naked and
 gave you clothing? ³⁹And when
 was it that we saw you sick or in
 prison and visited you?" ⁴⁰And
 the king will answer them, "Truly
 I tell you, just as you did it to one
 of the least of these who are
 members of my family, you did it
 to me." (Mt 25: 31-40)

In emphasizing this classic teaching of Jesus that the love of God and the love of neighbor are really one, *Dominican Saint Catherine of Siena*, was fond of saying that: "Just as we need two feet to walk, we need two feet to walk in the way of God: one foot is the love of God and the other foot is the love of neighbor."

Faith and Knowledge

Because the object of religious faith is God, who is ultimate mystery, nameless, incomprehensible, something we cannot capture in our concepts and creeds; faith is not knowledge. The knowledge referred to here is the ordinary knowledge of finite reality that people can grasp, quantify, comprehended, publicly verify by empirical evidence, and control through a mastery of the data. The ob-

ject of knowledge is this-worldly reality, while the object of faith is transcendent reality. What people passionately commit themselves to in genuine religious faith, they do not know because the object transcends this-worldly verification. Therefore, the object of faith, the mystery of God, must be given to a person, it must be revealed. Revelation produces a different kind of knowing, the knowledge of religious experience. Haight cautions, however, that "although the differences between faith and knowledge can be clearly shown on the basis of their objects, the distinction between them does not mean the isolation of one from another."²⁹ Faith and knowledge interpenetrate, and mutually influence each other.

Haight provide three examples of how faith interacts with ordinary knowing. First, the rich and diverse faith experiences of God are interpreted through the human power of imagination which draws upon our knowledge of this world to construct a myriad of images, metaphors, and symbols of God that shape our concepts of the transcendent Holy One. Second, faith's experience of God sheds new light on our understanding of the world and how we ought to live our lives in this world. For example, experiencing the presence of God mediated through nature and other human beings, gives one a deeper appreciation of the sacredness and dignity of all creation, which then must be protected and cared for with all reverence. Third, faith in God and our knowledge of the world mutually interpret each other because revelation is always mediated through the concrete particulars of history. When our historical situation changes, our understanding of the world expands and

our faith experience opens up to new discoveries of God working among us. This experience of on-going revelation calls for fresh articulation of religious traditions.³⁰

Faith and Beliefs

It is helpful to make a distinction between our relationship with God and the expressions of that relationship in beliefs. Faith as the loving surrender and dedication of the whole person in their commitment to God far transcends although it includes believing. Beliefs refer to the rich and diverse ways in which people use words, stories, images, symbols, concepts, and propositions to express and interpret their experience of God. As the expressions of faith, beliefs are indispensable to the growth, development, and handing on of faith through the ages. When faith has been communicated in the form of public beliefs, it builds and unites the community of faith. People initiated into the faith community are formed in the beliefs and traditions of that community. At some point in the process, people experience a conversion or a kind of personal awakening to the presence of God, through which passively accepted formation is appropriated and made their own, if it is not discarded for another belief system. The rock of faith on which we stand and give witness cannot be someone else's experience; it has to be our own. Because we are social by nature, it is important to share our faith, values, moral beliefs, worship, and commitments to peace and justice with one another in community.

While faith and beliefs mutually influence each other, the distinction is im-

portant because people can conclude that they are losing their Christian faith when, in fact, they are merely questioning some of their beliefs. In our earlier discussion of the three factors that keep our quest for God ever active, we recognized that (1) our belief statements about God are always incapable of expressing Holy Mystery; (2) our human longings for union with God are insatiable; and (3) the historicity of all of our beliefs and doctrines means that they are limited and relative. For these three reasons our faith in God can remain constant and one, even while our beliefs change and allow for a plurality of diverse expression. As we saw in the last chapter, for example, there is a plurality of different portraits of Jesus found in the New Testament. Critical reason can be the ally of faith by critiquing beliefs that seem to obscure true faith or seem incoherent in any contemporary culture or society. Critical reason more positively can serve as a constructive agent in rearticulating beliefs in a way that is intelligible and credible to the community of faith. Hill points out that our exploration of belief as well as dealing with doubts can be handled in two ways: one that is destructive of faith and one that is constructive:

The destructive path goes the way of cynicism and rebellion, where there is little openness to the discovery of new understanding . . . The constructive approach, on the other hand, sincerely searches for deeper understanding, is open to new data and fresh interpretations, and is prepared to respectfully listen to other points of view.³¹

Dealing with our questions and doubts constructively can actually strengthen and revitalize our faith in God. Just such a process of constructive theology occurred in the contemporary Christian understanding of revelation.

Revelation as Universal and Historically Mediated

Two important questions arose out of modernity which sparked the creative reformulation of our understanding of revelation and faith for contemporary times. The first question to be addressed was: How can Christianity as a particular and historically conditioned revelation be the bearer of salvation for all of humanity? The question presumes that the Creator-God is the God of all, who plans the salvation of all and acts in a consistently just and fair manner. Can such a God condition salvation on the acceptance of Christianity, a revelation not accessible to all but only a portion of humanity? The second question deals with the historicity of revelation. The expansive history of religious missionary activity shows that no one religion has proven its superiority or been able to convert the others. In light of this history, how does Christianity view the host of other world religions? The Christian response to these challenging questions led to the theological affirmation that revelation is universal, pluralistic and historically mediated.

Revelation as Universal

Christianity asserts that revelation is a universal phenomenon based on what was already discussed in the theology of

faith, namely, that human freedom is ultimately the capacity for God. The human quest to achieve new being or self-actualization reveals an even deeper search for permanent or absolute being. In the human drive for salvation, we are both impelled and drawn toward God, who is the only real answer to the human question. Whether or not we explicitly recognize this dynamism, Haight observes, "it is operative as a condition, inner law, and a priori deep dimension of the human actions of knowing, willing, striving, and achieving."³²

In response to this restless quest for salvation is God's promise of fulfillment in the gift of God's very self given for all people. Christian faith testifies that God chose to be more than transcendent holy mystery in an eternally distant horizon, but also to be the center of our existence in free, personal, and universally gracious love. As Rahner so poetically writes, "[We] experience rather that this holy mystery is also a hidden closeness, a forgiving intimacy, [our] real home, that it is a love which shares itself, something familiar which [we] can approach and turn to from the estrangements of [our] own perilous and empty life."³³ God, who is love, seeks out and encounters human existence for the salvation of all. From the Christian perspective, the God revealed in Jesus Christ is the God of all, who loves all equally and unconditionally. This Creator-God not only desires the salvation of all but provides the effective means whereby God's grace is universally operative in human life through the presence and activity of God's Spirit. "In metaphor, Spirit is like the breath of the wind; although invisible its presence

is energy, a principle of life, a creative power and force that inspires to activity beyond the ordinary powers of human beings."³⁴ Through God's Spirit, God is present to human personhood and the dynamics of freedom, calling human beings to go beyond themselves in a self-transcending movement toward God. The Spirit of God may remain anonymous and that which is experienced may be given many different names in the plurality of world religions.

The revealing process of God, therefore, is a universal phenomenon. Christianity proclaims that the God of Jesus Christ is the God of all people, and, therefore, revelation is not limited to the historical mediation of Jesus. The Spirit of God is present and active everywhere in the world and can never be contained or confined by any one of the world religions. Revelation as a consciousness of God's presence and activity is accessible to all. While revelation is as common a human phenomenon as faith is, we do not observe a common revelation in history, but a pluralism of many and various understandings of transcendent, holy mystery. This leads us to an examination of the historical mediation of revelation.

Revelation as Historically Mediated

Since human beings are by nature embodied spirits, all human consciousness is bound to the physical world and the empirical data of the five senses. While human knowing transcends sense data through the faculties of reason and faith, "all human knowing is influenced and in some measure determined by particular

sense data, a specific social situation, a definite language system, as well as other structures that shape the particular space and time of conscious human action."³⁵ The implications of this basic anthropology suggest that all revelation, by necessity, is historically mediated. A *medium* refers to any tangible, concrete piece of this-worldly and historical reality which channels a religious experience of the transcendent. All experience of God is historical, that is, mediated by particular historical circumstances, people, and events that make up the being-in-the-world of any specific group. Haight concludes that "revelation is a common human phenomenon, but it can only be received in particular, concrete, specific, finite, and relative historical forms."³⁶

All religions share in the universal dimension of revelation where the human quest for transcendence meets the loving and gracious presence of God. At the same time, each world religion is rooted in a unique experience of God which is determined by the concrete particulars of its historical mediation. There is a growing appreciation that all religions are founded upon some real encounter with God that was initiated by God out of God's gracious will for the salvation of all. Given this affirmation, one should acknowledge that the world religions are

worthwhile, God-given, and mediate revelation to their members. Furthermore, this Christian understanding of the plurality of revelation calls for the necessity of dialogue with world religions.

Trusting in the basic goodness and validity of the revelation grounding any other religion, Christianity encourages dialogue which seeks mutual understanding and peace among religions. As Catholic theologian *Hans Küng* asserts, "There can be no peace among nations unless there is peace among religions."³⁷ While all religions, including Christianity, can exhibit demonic, fanatical and imperialistic characteristics, we should work together to build up the transcendent values and ideals of the various world religions. A growing number of people in the different world religions are recognizing the need to join together in a collaborative effort to confront and resolve the reality of global human suffering and the ecological crisis that threaten the welfare of humanity and the planet. Through dialogue and mutual cooperation the world religions could make a substantial contribution toward the greater peace, justice and unity in this world. What better way to make present in our world the Holy One who is Love!