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Propositional Revelation and the Deist Controversy: A Note

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One of the most passionate debates in Early Modern British and Irish thought concerned divine revelation. The debate, also known as the Deist controversy, lasted from 1690s to 1730s and focused on the issue of whether Christian religion is a revelation from God and contains supernatural truths that transcend the human intellect.¹ The truths in question include the Christian mysteries such as the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the resurrection of the dead. A number of unorthodox thinkers who came to be known as deists or freethinkers claimed that natural or rational religion is in fact the only true religion and Christianity — the purported revealed religion — does not add anything substantial to our rational knowledge of God and his relation to us. The deists held that all genuine religious doctrines are clear, comprehensible and accessible to the human intellect. They often regarded religious rituals and institutions as redundant and effectually reduced worship to the observation of moral duties. Far from forming a homogeneous group, they all expressed views that many proponents of the established church regarded as hostile towards religion in general and dangerous for the whole society. Accordingly, defenders of the established church and religion published apologetic responses to those unorthodox views

¹ For overviews of the controversy, see e.g. P. Byrne, "The Deists"; B. A. Gerrish, "Natural and revealed religion"; L. Stephen, *History of English Thought*; M. A. Stewart, "Revealed religion: the British debate".

aiming to demonstrate the truthfulness and usefulness of the doctrines as well as practices of the Christian religion.

The controversy involved discussions of certain philosophical issues including the issue of the meaning of religious language. More specifically, the answer to the question of whether or not Christianity was a revelation from God turned partly on whether biblical and doctrinal terms and sentences supposedly expressing that revelation could be regarded as meaningful. Some of the deists — notably the Irishman John Toland — seemed to indicate that discussion on the Christian mysteries was, in effect, nonsense.² Some proponents of the revealed religion in turn made efforts to explain how the discussion of such mysteries can and does have a meaning.³

To use a contemporary term, the philosophical debate in question concerned *propositional revelation* as distinguished from other kinds of revelation. Propositional revelation is thought to be a revelation of truths by means of language. The Christian mysteries, on this understanding, are communicated to us from God by means of words in the Bible. God revealed those mysterious truths to certain individuals who delivered them to all mankind in written form. There are other putative ways in which divine revelation may occur. For example, in a miracle God may appear to somebody in a visual form without using any words. Furthermore, in the traditional Christian view, God has revealed himself by becoming human. The eminent philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne explains the distinction between propositional and non-propositional revelation in Christianity as follows:

Divine revelation may be either of God, or by God of propositional truth. Traditionally, Christianity has claimed that the Christian Revelation has involved both of these: God revealed himself in becoming incarnate (i.e. human) as Jesus Christ, and by the teaching of Jesus and the Church which he founded God revealed various propositional truths.⁴

The question I want to address in this short paper is how the thinkers involved in the Deist controversy conceived propositional revelation (of the Christian mysteries). The answer to this question partly hinges on what one means by “proposition”. Swinburne, being a contemporary analytic philosopher, takes proposition to be that what a declarative sentence expresses or means. Propositions as meanings are not located

² See J. Toland, *Christianity not mysterious*. For thorough discussions of Toland’s views, see R. E. Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist controversy*; S. H. Daniel, *John Toland: His methods, manners, and mind*.

³ See P. Browne, *A letter in answer to a book entitled Christianity not mysterious*; L. Jaffro, G. Brykman and C. Schwartz (eds.), *Berkeley’s Alciphron*, dial. VII.

⁴ R. Swinburne, *Revelation*, p. 1.

in human minds or constituted by mental entities.⁵ Thus, on his view, the content of propositional revelation is not mental in character. The Early Modern thinkers, by contrast, typically used the term “proposition” to mean a declarative sentence. They held that the meanings of declarative sentences are constituted by certain ideas, notions, concepts or images in the minds of those who speak and understand the language to which the sentence belongs. Sentences delivering divine revelation were interpreted accordingly.

The picture is more complicated, however. John Locke, the philosopher whose vocabulary and conceptions in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* set the scene for the controversy, distinguished between verbal and mental propositions (*Essay*, IV.V.2-6).⁶ The former are declarative sentences, composed of words, the latter are compositions of ideas in the mind of the language user. The two sorts of propositions are closely connected. Verbal propositions are verbalisations of mental propositions. The meaning of a verbal proposition is constituted by a corresponding mental proposition. Each categorematic term in the meaningful verbal proposition stands for an idea in the mental proposition. The ideas in turn may or may not stand for real things. Both words and ideas are signs and proposition is defined as, “the joining or separating of signs” (*Essay*, IV.V.2). A proposition is true if signs in it are joined or separated in accordance to the agreement or disagreement between, “the things signified by them” (*ibidem*). Locke holds that ideas are subjective mental entities, they are not identical in different human minds. Consequently, the meanings of terms and sentences are, in the final analysis, subjective and mental (See *Essay*, III.I-II).⁷

These clarifications are useful to keep in mind when reading the passage where Locke introduces another important distinction between different kinds of propositions:

1. According to reason are such propositions, whose truth we can discover, by examining and tracing those ideas we have from sensation and reflection; and by natural deduction, find to be true, or probable.
2. Above reason are such propositions, whose truth or probability we cannot by reason derive from those principles.
3. Contrary to reason are such propositions, as are inconsistent with, or irreconcilable to our clear and distinct ideas. Thus the existence of one God is according to reason; the existence

⁵ For Swinburne’s explication of the relevant terms, see *ibidem*, pp. 7-26.

⁶ References to Locke’s *Essay* cite book, chapter and paragraph number.

⁷ See H. Dawson, *Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy*, pp. 186-197. I take it that Locke’s account of signification is a theory of linguistic meaning. See M. Lososky, “Language, meaning, and mind”, p. 292.

of more than one God, contrary to reason; the resurrection of the dead, above reason.⁸ (*Essay*, IV.XVII.23)

The passage implies that monotheism is rational, polytheism is absurd, and there is some room for revealed religion. For Locke, unlike for the deists, there are certain revealed propositions that are, “above reason”. If we have adequate reasons to think that these propositions come from God, we can reasonably assent to them (*Essay*, IV.XVI.14). At the same time, he thinks that propositions, “contrary to reason” should not be taken as revelations from God (*Essay*, IV.XVIII.5). The question to be asked in view of propositional revelation is how Locke conceives it. Does he think that God’s revelations to prophets involve verbal or mental propositions, or both? Locke distinguishes between *original* and *traditional* revelation:

By the one, I mean that first impression, which is made immediately by God, on the mind of any man, to which we cannot set any bounds; and by the other, those impressions delivered over to others in words, and the ordinary ways of conveying our conceptions one to another. (*Essay*, IV.XVIII.3)

As an example of original revelation, he refers to St. Paul’s perception of divine things that the apostle could not express otherwise than in the following words: “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him”⁹. In this case, the original revelation consists of certain ineffable ideas rather than of words. However, the distinction does not exclude the possibility that an original revelation involves words uttered by God to a human being. Words are articulate sounds, after all (*Essay*, III.I.1). God may produce ideas and words in human minds as he pleases, given the cognitive faculties we have. He may reveal both mental and verbal propositions to certain individuals who then deliver the message in written form.

Locke thinks that while words can be used publicly, their meanings are, ultimately, confined to individual minds. One can explain to another in words what ideas and combinations of ideas one has in one’s mind, but ideas themselves cannot be transported from one mind to another. The meanings of revelational terms and sentences are, accordingly, constituted by subjective mental entities. Whether any mental propositions concerning the Christian mysteries correspond to supernatural realities

⁸ The expression “the resurrection of the dead” appears in the fourth edition of the *Essay*. In the earlier editions, Locke speaks of “the resurrection of the body after death”.

⁹ 1 Cor 2: 9.

we cannot find out by inspecting our ideas and relations between them. What we can and should do, according to Locke, is to find out if there is sufficient evidence to think that relevant verbal propositions concerning the mysteries are pieces of traditional revelation.

Thus, both for Locke and Swinburne, propositional revelation ultimately takes the form of meaningful declarative sentences, but the meanings of the sentences are construed very differently by these two thinkers. Locke's ideational theory makes the meaningfulness of the sentences in question contingent on the contents and capabilities of the human mind.

The deist Toland made use of Locke's vocabulary and theory of meaning to show that the Christian religion, properly understood, does not contain any mysterious doctrines or incomprehensible revelations. Toland did not reject divine revelation as such, but he claimed that it is a means of giving clear and comprehensible information. God's revelations are neither contrary nor above reason. God has revealed, in the Bible, a number of truths or matters of fact that were previously hidden to mankind. But now these things are known and understood, even if not in detail.¹⁰ Furthermore, the teachings of Christ, as stated in the New Testament, are clear and intelligible. According to Toland, "there is nothing mysterious, or above reason in the Gospel"¹¹. True Christian religion is fully rational.

While Toland did not employ the subtle distinction between verbal and mental propositions, he generally adopted Locke's understanding of ideas as meanings of terms and sentences. He suggested that one cannot reasonably assent to propositions that do not express (clear and distinct) ideas. God does not reveal meaningless propositions and does not require of us to believe in nonsense. For Toland, belief in mysteries is like a belief in the existence of something called "Blictri".¹²

Toland's attack on the mysteries provoked a number of critical responses from thinkers who aimed to protect revealed religion. In some of those responses, elaborate philosophical theories were introduced and developed in order to grant meaning to the terms and sentences expressing the Christian mysteries. Both in his direct response to Toland and some later works, Peter Browne purported to show how our ideas and conceptions of natural things can represent supernatural realities.¹³ While he rejected much of Locke's philosophy, he nonetheless

¹⁰ J. Toland, *Christianity not mysterious*, pp. 40-43, 74-87.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 128.

¹³ See P. Browne, *A letter in answer to a book entitled Christianity not mysterious, The procedure, limits, and extent of human understanding and Things divine and supernatural*.

held that meanings are constituted by certain subjective mental entities. George Berkeley worked out a novel theory of meaning laying emphasis on other functions of language beside the signification of ideas. Thus he talks about such functions as, "raising certain passions, dispositions, and emotions in our minds"¹⁴. The theory combines ideational and non-ideational aspects of meaningfulness to show that propositions concerning divine mysteries can be assented to despite our limited understanding of what they express. Yet for Berkeley too, unlike for Swinburne, the linguistic meaning of the declarative sentences in question is located in human minds rather than outside of them.¹⁵

To sum up, the Deist controversy included a philosophical debate on the meaningfulness of terms and sentences expressing the Christian mysteries. The debate turned on a specific conception of linguistic meaning that is characteristic of the time: both the critics and defenders of revealed religion held that meanings are constituted by subjective mental entities. Accordingly, they analysed the content of propositional revelation in terms of such entities.¹⁶

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¹⁴ L. Jaffro, G. Brykman and C. Schwartz (eds.), *Berkeley's Alciphron*, dial. VII, sect. 8, p. 244.

¹⁵ For a detailed account of Berkeley's theory, see K. Williford and R. Jakapi, "Berkeley's theory of meaning". I have abandoned my earlier interpretation of Berkeley according to which the meaning of terms and sentences concerning the Christian mysteries is known to God, but not human beings. See R. Jakapi, "Faith, truth, revelation and meaning", pp. 31-32.

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Summary

In this short paper, I address the question of how propositional revelation was understood by thinkers involved in the Deist controversy in Early Modern Britain and Ireland. I argue that, characteristically for the time, they relied on ideational theory of meaning and, accordingly, explained the content of propositional revelation in terms of subjective mental entities.

Keywords

Deism; revelation; meaning; John Locke; John Toland; Peter Browne; George Berkeley