

# ***Ridiculed Revelation and the foundational role of Holy Scripture for Western Civilisation***

Benno A. Zuiddam  
North West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa  
Email: [Benno.Zuiddam@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Benno.Zuiddam@nwu.ac.za)

## **Abstract**

This paper calls attention to the foundational role of propositional revelation in Catholic Christianity. It describes the attachment of the early Church to this concept, as well as the road to its widespread collapse in the present time. The writings of the Greek scholars Celsus and Porphyry establish that attempts towards this collapse were made in the times of the early Church, but firmly resisted by church fathers as Origen, Augustine and Jerome.

**Keywords:** Revelation, Scripture, Porphyry, Celsus

“Christianity can never ignore history because the Christian revelation is essentially historical and the truths of faith are inseparably connected with historical events.”<sup>1</sup>

*Christopher Dawson*

## **1. Propositional Revelation and its Collapse in Western Society**

Revelation means that something is shown to us, which we have no means of knowing otherwise. This may be because of a) boundaries in history, b) geographical distance or c) our limited capacity.

Boundaries in history (a) may exist because we did not exist at the time: for instance the doctrine of creation. Or because it concerns the future; like the return of Christ and the Last Judgement. Geographical distance (b) implies that we are limited bodily, restricted to the location where our body finds itself. For instance: we cannot physically go to heaven as the place of God’s dwelling. There are also limitations to our mental capacity (c). Our understanding is too limited to know, let alone comprehend everything. This implies that in certain areas it is unqualified to ascertain truth. In Theology this extends to God’s nature and character, more particular the doctrine of the Trinity or the two natures of Christ (divinity and humanity). To some extent this is true for the assessment of God’s character as well, e.g. his love and faithfulness and his moral values in general. For all of these areas of human limitation we rely on outside advice, because we haven’t got the ability to test these premises for ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Christopher Dawson, “The Kingdom of God and History,” In: *Christianity and European Culture (Selections from the Work of Christopher Dawson)*, ed. Gerald J. Russello, CUA Press, Washington DC, 1998, pp.200-201: “Christianity can never ignore history because the Christian revelation is essentially historical and the truths of faith are inseparably connected with historical events. The Sacred Scriptures of our religion are not made up of expositions of metaphysical doctrines like the Vedanta, they form a sacred history, the record of God’s dealings with the human race from the creation of man to the creation of the Church. And the whole of this history finds its centre in the life of an historic personality who is not merely a moral teacher or even an inspired hierophant of divine truth, but God made man, the Saviour and restorer of the human race, from whom and in whom humanity acquires a new life and a new principle of unity. Thus the Christian faith leaves no room for the relativism of a merely historical philosophy.”

At some stage in the history of Western civilisation all Christians used to believe that revelation was propositional: a true premise independent on human recognition for its validity.<sup>2</sup> People also believed that revealed knowledge was as certain as the results of experiential science. But this has dramatically changed during the last two hundred years. A recent Oxford textbook for Theology and Philosophy students summarizes this development:

The traditional Christian view of revelation emphasizes the notion that God reveals truths, propositions that human[s] should believe.... This traditional view of revelation as propositional in character was questioned by many twentieth-century theologians... This non propositional view of revelation must be understood in part as an indirect response to historical and critical analysis of the Bible during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The liberal theology that developed during this period basically shared the traditional understanding of revelation as propositional in character, but as a result of critical study concluded that the Bible could not be seen as a divinely inspired, infallible book, as many theologians had thought.<sup>3</sup>

This indicates a major shift in worldview, which has also affected our view of God. Instead of a powerful God who managed to transcend his message into human history by means of effective revelation, mankind was left with the impotent god of two world wars, filtered out of reality by the materialistic worldviews of the French Revolution and Darwinism. This god, if we had not killed him altogether, Nietzsche's "Wir haben ihn getödtet"<sup>4</sup>, only managed to get through some words by means of an otherwise clouded and disturbed wireless connection.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.1. The Church of Rome strongly confirmed the reliability of historic revelation through Sacred Scripture up till Leo XIII (*Providentissimus Deus*, 1893) and Pius X. Cf. Karim Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II: A Redaction History of the Schema De Fontibus Revelationis (1960-1962)*, Volume 41 of Brill's Series in Church History, Brill, Leiden 2010, pp.26-27 "Exegesis aimed at "sensus litteralis as conveying the meaning of the scriptural text as it was intended by its divine author.""(27)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. C.S. Evans, "Faith and Revelation" In: William Wainwright ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion (Oxford Handbooks series)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, chapter 13.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche concluded that mankind had eliminated God from its thinking. One can look for God, but he is nowhere to be found as he was only a manmade construction. After accepting the death of God, people have to take on the high calling of becoming their own god, but without the assistance of knowledge and values. Cf. *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* („la gaya scienza“), Verlag von E. W. Fritsch, Leipzig 1887, p. 125. "Der tolle Mensch. — Habt ihr nicht von jenem tollen Menschen gehört, der am hellen Vormittage eine Laterne anzündete, auf den Markt lief und unaufhörlich schrie: „Ich suche Gott! Ich suche Gott!“ — Da dort gerade Viele von Denen zusammen standen, welche nicht an Gott glaubten, so erregte er ein grosses Gelächter. Ist er denn verloren gegangen? sagte der Eine. Hat er sich verlaufen wie ein Kind? sagte der Andere. Oder hält er sich versteckt? Fürchtet er sich vor uns? Ist er zu Schiff gegangen? ausgewandert? — so schrieten und lachten sie durcheinander. Der tolle Mensch sprang mitten unter sie und durchbohrte sie mit seinen Blicken. „Wohin ist Gott? rief er, ich will es euch sagen! Wir haben ihn getödtet, — ihr und ich! Wir Alle sind seine Mörder! Aber wie haben wir diess gemacht? Wie vermochten wir das Meer auszutrinken? Wer gab uns den Schwamm, um den ganzen Horizont wegzuwischen? Was thaten wir, als wir diese Erde von ihrer Sonne losketteten? Wohin bewegt sie sich nun? Wohin bewegen wir uns? Fort von allen Sonnen? Stürzen wir nicht fortwährend? Und rückwärts, seitwärts, vorwärts, nach allen Seiten? Giebt es noch ein Oben und ein Unten? Irren wir nicht wie durch ein unendliches Nichts? Haucht uns nicht der leere Raum an? Ist es nicht kälter geworden? Kommt nicht immerfort die Nacht und mehr Nacht? Müssen nicht Laternen am Vormittage angezündet werden? Hören wir noch Nichts von dem Lärm der Todtengräber, welche Gott begraben? Riechen wir noch Nichts von der göttlichen Verwesung? — auch Götter verwesen! Gott ist todt! Gott bleibt todt! Und wir haben ihn getödtet! Wie trösten wir uns, die Mörder aller Mörder? Das Heiligste und Mächtigste, was die Welt bisher besass, es ist unter unseren Messern verblutet, — wer wischt diess Blut von uns ab? Mit welchem Wasser könnten wir uns reinigen? Welche Sühnfeiern, welche heiligen Spiele werden wir erfinden müssen? Ist nicht die Grösse dieser That zu gross für uns? Müssen wir nicht selber zu Göttern werden, um nur ihrer würdig zu erscheinen?"

Subsequently cryptographers from the field of Biblical studies were called in and in majority concluded that the connection was so bad that only messages on certain topics could be trusted. The topic of God's expertise, forgiveness continues to be a popular one, as Heinrich Heine said: "*Dieu me pardonnera, c'est son métier.*"<sup>5</sup>

These materialistic philosophies have not only eliminated the God of Christianity, but also radically changed the way society regards the human race, ethical values and personal moral accountability.<sup>6</sup> For many, the human soul has become an illusionary mental construction.<sup>7</sup>

Those who hold the Catholic view from before the paradigm shift, are considered out of touch with scientific realities, as: "critical study concluded that the Bible could not be seen as a divinely inspired, infallible book, as many theologians had thought."

Amongst these theologians who used to believe that the Bible was a reliable book in all respects were all church fathers.<sup>8</sup> And later doctors of the church, for that matter. This was connected to their firm belief that the author of the Scriptures, and everything in it, was God himself.<sup>9</sup> To their mind, the Father almighty was able to use human writers in such a way that they did not commit any error into writing their sacred task.



For early Christianity the Scriptures were literally inspired by God. Rembrandt (1606–1669), *Matthew the evangelist and the angel* (1661).

<sup>5</sup> The German writer Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), see. Alfred Meißner, *Heinrich Heine. Erinnerungen*, Hamburg, Hoffmann und Campe, 1856, p. 259. A fuller quote (p.258-259): "Gleich nach seinem Eintreten richtete er an Heine die Frage, wie er mit Gott stehe. Heine erwiderte lächelnd: Seind Sie ruhig! Dieu me pardonnera, cést son metier! So kam die lezste Nacht heran, die Nacht vom 16. Februar. "

<sup>6</sup> John Anthony Burgess Wilson foreshadowed this brave new world, its dilemma's and the surrogate moral role of the state in *A Clockwork Orange*, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth 1972.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Tom Wolfe, "Sorry your Soul has just died," *The Independent*, Sunday 2 February 1997: "Thereupon, in the year 2006 or 2026, some new Nietzsche will step forward to announce: "The self is dead" - except that being prone to the poetic, like Nietzsche I, he will probably say: "The soul is dead." He will say that he is merely bringing the news, the news of the greatest event of the millennium: "The soul, that last refuge of values, is dead, because educated people no longer believe it exists." Unless the assurances of the Wilsons and the Dennetts and the Dawkinses also start rippling out, the lurid carnival that will ensue may make the phrase "the total eclipse of all values" seem tame."

<sup>8</sup> Cf. B.A. Zuiddam, "Holy letters and syllables: The function and character of Biblical authority in the second century," *Dutch Reformed Theological J.* XXVIII.3(1997), pp.180–191; "Λόγιον in Biblical Literature and its implications for Christian Scholarship," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 19 (2008), pp.379–394; "Early orthodoxy: the Scriptures in Clement of Alexandria," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 21.2(2010), pp.257–268. "New perspectives on Irenaeus: Scripture as oracular standard," *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 93.2(2011), pp.288–308.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.1.10: Quia vero sensus litteralis est quem auctor intendit, auctor autem Sacrae Scripturae Deus est.

This view, which was until fifty years ago the official view of Western Christianity,<sup>10</sup> is articulated by Augustine in one of his letters to Jerome:

Only to the books of the Scriptures, which are now referred to as canonical, have I learned to offer this respect and honour, as I most firmly believe that none of their authors have erred concerning anything in writing. And if in these writings I stumble on anything which appears against the truth, I do not doubt that either the manuscript is faulty, or that the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or that I myself have failed to understand it.<sup>11</sup>  
(*Author's translation*)

To Augustine and the early fathers this meant that, unlike other religious books,<sup>12</sup> Scripture did not contain any errors, factually or doctrinally.

Today this view is considered untenable by mainstream theology. It is ridiculed by scientific celebrities and journalists alike.<sup>13</sup> Our times are not the first to evaluate tenets of traditional Christianity in this way. What we now know as the Catholic view of Holy Scripture, reliable propositional revelation, came under heavy fire in the days of Early Christianity, particularly from the second to the fourth century.

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<sup>10</sup> Vatican II confirmed the validity of the traditional Christian view on Sacred Scripture and revelation (DV11), cf. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, St Pauls, Homebush 1994, p.31. But at the same time Dei Verbum effectively created a legitimate position for those who questioned the propositional character of revelation. This was done by restricting the clause “without error,” -which formerly applied to all contents of Scripture - to truth which “God wanted to put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.” See: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum, Paul VI (1965), chapter 3.5. Online:

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html) For the encouragement of private Scripture reading, cf. David Schultenover, *50 Years On: Probing the Riches of Vatican II*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 2015, p.370-380.

<sup>11</sup> Augustinus, Epist. 82 ad Hier. 1.3: Solis eis Scripturarum libris, qui jam canonici appellantur, didici hunc timorem honoremque deferre, ut nullum eorum auctorem scribendo aliquid errasse firmissime credam. Ac si aliquid in eis offendero litteris, quod videatur contrarium veritati, nihil aliud, quam vel mendosum esse codicem, vel interpretem non assequutum esse quod dictum est, vel me minime intellexisse, non ambigam.

<sup>12</sup> Augustinus, Epist. 82 ad Hier. 1.3: Alios autem ita lego, ut quantalibet sanctitate doctrinaque praepolleant, non ideo verum putem, quia ipsa ita senserunt; sed quia mihi vel per illos auctores canonicos, vel per probabili ratione, quod a vero non abhorreat, persuadere potuerunt. Nec te, mi frater, sentire aliud existimo: prorsus, inquam non te arbitror sic legi tuos libros velle, tanquam Prophetarum, vel Apostolorum: de quorum Scriptis, quod omni errore careant, dubitare nefarium est. Absit hoc a pia humilitate et veraci de temetipso cogitatione; qua nisi esses praeditus non utique diceres.... [As to all other writings, in reading them, however great the superiority of the authors to myself in sanctity and learning, I do not accept their teaching as true on the mere ground of the opinion being held by them; but only because they have succeeded in convincing my judgment of its truth either by means of these canonical writings themselves, or by arguments addressed to my reason. I believe, my brother, that this is your own opinion as well as mine. I do not need to say that I do not suppose you to wish your books to be read like those of prophets or of apostles, concerning which it would be wrong to doubt that they are free from error. Far be such arrogance from that humble piety and just estimate of yourself which I know you to have, and without which assuredly you would not have said....] (Transl. J.G. Cunningham, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 1, Master Christian Library, Albany 1997, p.679.)

<sup>13</sup> E.g. R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Transworld Publishers, London 2006, p.284: “Notwithstanding his somewhat dodgy family values, Jesus’ ethical teachings were – at least by comparison with the ethical disaster area that is the Old Testament – admirable; but there are other teachings in the New Testament that no good person should support. I refer especially to the central doctrine of Christianity: that of ‘atonement’ for ‘original sin.’”

## 2. Christian propositional revelation ridiculed in the days of the Early Church

Greek scholars charged Christians with gullibly putting their trust in Jewish fables and unreliable Gospel accounts.<sup>14</sup> In the second century, Celsus published his *Real Truth* about Christianity and its teachings,<sup>15</sup> while some time later Porphyry wrote a series of fifteen books *Against the Christians*.<sup>16</sup>

### 2.1 Moses and the Prophets

They devoted much of their attention to criticizing the Scriptures. Celsus rejected Christianity's claims that Jesus was the fulfilment of a long tradition of prophecies. "[You Christians] quote prophets as foretelling facts about Jesus' life before they happened, ... but those prophecies could be much better applied to thousands of other people" (*Contra Celsum* II.28). For Celsus the Old Testament contained many implausible stories, like the barbaric folktale about Lot and his daughters (C.C.IV.45).<sup>17</sup> Jonah's adventures with the big fish were just preposterous fiction; as was Daniel and the lion's den (C.C.VI.53).



Origen, writer of  
*Contra Celsum*

It was not by accident that the Greek scientists attacked the prophets Jonah and Daniel in particular. With Porphyry, assaults on Old Testament prophets function as attacks on Christ, because Jesus made direct comparisons between Himself and Jonah (Matt. 12:40). He also saw some of Daniel's prophecies as things yet to be fulfilled (Matt. 24:15). Chapters 8–12 of Daniel contain a lot of information that points to a future arrival of the Messiah in the time of Jesus. For this reason Porphyry came up with the idea that the whole book of Daniel was really a fake, produced by a pseudo-graphic author in the second century BC, hundreds of years after Daniel died. It described contemporary events as alleged prophecies.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. B.A. Zuiddam, "Old Critics and Modern Theology," *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal* XXXVI.2 (1995), pp.256–266.

<sup>15</sup> Chadwick, H., *Origen: Contra Celsum*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980. One century earlier, Th. Keim reconstructed Celsus' book on the basis of materials found with Origen: *Celsus' wahres Wort*, Orell, Zürich 1873. See also J.W. Hargis, *Against the Christians, the rise of early anti-Christian polemic*, Peter Lang, New York 1999. M. Borret, "Celsus: a pagan Perspective on Scripture," In: Blowers, P.M. ed., *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity*, UND Press, Notre Dame (Ind) 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Porphyry's criticism of the Scriptures was collected by Adolf von Harnack, *Porphyrius, "Gegen die Christen"*, 15 Bücher: Zeugnisse, Fragmente und Referate, Abhandlungen der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: Jahrgang 1916: philosoph.-hist. Klasse: Nr. 1, Berlin, 1916. Can also be found online at: [archive.org/details/HarnackPorphyrius-GegenDieChristen](http://archive.org/details/HarnackPorphyrius-GegenDieChristen). Porphyrian material is also found with the Church Father Macarius Magnes in his book *Apokritikos* (edn used Fougart, P., *Apokritikos*, Blondel, Paris, 1876). English readers are referred to the edition of Crafer, T.W., McMillan, London, 1919: [www.tertullian.org/fathers/macarius\\_apocriticus.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/macarius_apocriticus.htm). R.J. Hoffmann published an updated translation in Porphyry's *Against the Christians: The Literary Remains*, Prometheus Books, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Cf R. Dawkins, resembles Porphyry's criticism, *The God Delusion*, p.172: "If this dysfunctional family was the best Sodom had to offer by way of morals, some might begin to feel a certain sympathy with God and his judicial brimstone." In mainstream theology today the story is generally considered an aetiological myth, an unhistorical folktale to discredit the origin of the nation of the Ammonites. Cf. Van Seters, J., *Prologue to history: the Yahwist as historian in Genesis*, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1992; Sutskov, T., "Lot and his Daughters (Gen. 19:30–38), further literary and stylistic Examinations," *Hebrew Scriptures* 11:1–11, 2011.

Hieronymus (better known as Jerome) preserved much of Porphyry's criticism in his *Commentary on Daniel*.<sup>18</sup> From his prologue:

“Porphyry wrote his twelfth book against the prophecy of Daniel, denying that it was composed by the person to whom it is ascribed in its title, but rather by some individual living in Judaea at the time of the Antiochus who was surnamed Epiphanes.”<sup>19</sup>

Today Porphyry's theory in some form is embraced by many, if not all prominent Old Testament scholars.<sup>20</sup> The technical device is called *vaticinium ex eventu*. This is Latin for a ‘prediction from the event’. For instance, we say that Daniel prophesied about the “abomination that makes desolate” (Dan. 11:31;<sup>21</sup> 12:11<sup>22</sup>). But this did not happen of course, it was in fact someone laying these words in Daniel's mouth hundreds of years later, when the sanctuary was actually defiled by a Syrian king. The words were only attributed to Daniel to lend them credibility. So Jesus was wrong: it wasn't Daniel and the abomination had already taken place, so it wasn't a prophecy for the future at all (see Hieronymus, *Commentary on Matthew*, 24:16).<sup>23</sup>

## 2.2 Life of Jesus: incarnation, passion, resurrection

After the Scriptures of the Old Testament, it was the life of Jesus that came under scrutiny. Celsus and Porphyry denied and discredited Jesus' incarnation, his teachings and his Passion & Resurrection.<sup>24</sup>

To start with Jesus' *incarnation*—Christ taking on the body of an unborn baby, this was shameful and preposterous in the eyes of the Greek scientists. It was not appropriate for a god to enter this world as a baby.<sup>25</sup> Celsus thought the idea of a conception without visible involvement of a man was borrowed from the Greek myth about the god Zeus changing himself into golden rain to impregnate one of the beauties he fancied (C.C.I.37). The Virgin

<sup>18</sup> Hieronymus, *Commentariorum in Daniele*, Pars I opera exegetica 5 (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina LXXV-A), Brepols, Turnhout 1964.

<sup>19</sup> Hieronymus, *Commentariorum in Daniele*, prologus 1-5, p. 771: “Contra prophetam Daniele duodecimum librum scribit Porphyrius, nolens eum ab ipso cuius inscriptus est nomine esse compositum sed a quodam qui temporibus Antiochi, qui appellatus est Epiphanes, fuerit in Iudaea, et non tam Daniele uentura dixisse quam illum narrasse praeterita.”

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed treatment, see: Zuiddam, B.A., The shock factor of Divine Revelation: a philological approach to Daniel 8 and 9, *Scandinavian J. the Old Testament: An International J. Nordic Theology* 27(2): 247–267, 2013. Since the 1820's OT scholars (Bleek, Von Gall, Wellhausen, etc.) generally opt for a Maccabean date for Daniel, three centuries after its alleged authorship. Hill, A.E. and Walton, J.H., *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 571, 2009: “It seems that the presuppositional rejection of supernaturalism is often partly responsible for the rejection of a sixth-century date for the book.”

<sup>21</sup> Hieronymus, *Commentariorum in Daniele*, *De antichristo in Dan.xi:30-31*, p.921. Jerome translates the end of verse 31 as “et dabunt abominationem et desolationem,” but subsequently refers to it in his treatment of the text as ‘abominationem desolationis’.

<sup>22</sup> Hieronymus, *Commentariorum in Daniele*, *De antichristo in Dan.xii:11-12*, p.942-944.

<sup>23</sup> Hieronymus, *Commentariorum in Matheum (Pars I, opera exegetica, corpus Christianorum, Series Latina)*, Brepols, Turnhout 1964, pp.226-227.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. C. Hitchens, *God is not great, how Religion poisons everything*, Allen & Unwin, New York 2007, p.111: “However, he [Maimonides] fell into the same error as do the Christians, in assuming that the four Gospels were in any sense a historical record. Their multiple authors –none of whom published anything until many decades after the Crucifixion- cannot agree on anything of importance.”

<sup>25</sup> The idea of shame culture in Greek antiquity is worked out in Dodds, E.R., *The Greeks and the Irrational*, University of California Press, Berkeley(CA) 2004, p. 26: “The application to conduct of the terms καλὸν and αἰσχρὸν seems also to be typical of a shame-culture. These words denote, not that the act is beneficial or hurtful to the agent, or that it is right or wrong in the eyes of a deity, but that it looks ‘handsome’ or ‘ugly’ in the eyes of public opinion.”

Conception was just a cleverly devised tale to mask Jesus' illegitimate birth as the result of a liaison between Mary and a Roman soldier. "The mother of Jesus was rejected by the carpenter to whom she was engaged, because she was found guilty of fornication, and had a child of a certain soldier called Panthera" (C.C.I.32).<sup>26</sup>

Not surprisingly for these Neo-Platonist critics, some of the better elements of Jesus' teachings were dependent on Plato—for instance, Jesus' teachings on riches and the parable of the rich man and the needle (Matt. 19:24). Plato taught that it is "impossible for an extraordinary good man to be extraordinarily wealthy" (C.C.VI.16).

But as for Jesus' prophecies and the Gospel portraying him as someone who knew the future (Matt. 17:22, 20:18); this was all invented by the disciples and Gospel authors. Of course Jesus did not know the future. This was just a tribute in hindsight by his followers, who wanted the world to think about Jesus as a prophet. "Because the disciples couldn't reconcile themselves to the facts, they made up this plan to say that He had known everything before" (C.C.II.15). No, this Jesus was profoundly unsuccessful, attracted low social class people from Galilee and never had a proper job or position in life (C.C.I.62), while his teachings were rejected by anyone who counted in society and religious life at the time.

That in his *Passion* Jesus took on Himself the sins of the world<sup>27</sup> was just a way of his followers making sense of his disgraceful rejection by society. It was attributed and in the mind of the beholder, but the fact of the matter was that Jesus died a cruel and shameful death, and that his life wasn't a success story. Celsus showed himself a real psychologist in explaining away the Resurrection of Jesus. This was a story invented by his disciples, who suffered from severe grief and hallucinations, finding it extremely hard to come to terms with the death of their master (C.C.II.55). Yes, they may have experienced profound spiritual impressions, but this should not be regarded real in any scientific sense (C.C.II.61).

For Porphyry the Resurrection stories were part of a cover up. It was easy to allege that Jesus appeared to an inner circle of followers. As these followers of Jesus were biased, who was to say this really happened? If Jesus had really come back from the dead, he should have appeared to Pilate and the Jewish leaders (*Apokritikos* II.14).

### 2.3 Apostles discredited

Both Celsus and Porphyry went to great length to discredit the Apostles and their teachings. Much of what they wrote in this regard comes under the header 'character assassination'. Matthew was completely negligent in leaving his responsible job as tax collector on the spot, to follow Jesus (Matt. 9:9).<sup>28</sup> The Apostles were unlearned men, not even able to recognize normal astronomical phenomena like a sun eclipse (Matt. 27:45).<sup>29</sup> Otherwise the Apostles did not really know their Scriptures properly: amongst other mistakes, they misapplied prophecies to make them refer to Jesus.

<sup>26</sup> Apart from possible Roman army reference, 'Panthera' translates as 'predator of all'.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.284: "This teaching, which lies at the heart of New Testament theology, is almost as morally obnoxious as the story of Abraham setting out to barbecue Isaac, which it resembles - and that is no accident"; After firmly rejecting the OT idea of original sin as ridiculous, Dawkins continues to describe the Christian doctrine of atonement, p.285: "New Testament theology adds a new injustice, topped off by a new sadomasochism whose viciousness even the Old Testament barely exceeds."

<sup>28</sup> Celsus regarded their master as "a pestilent fellow who told great lies and was guilty of profane acts ... Jesus collected around him a group of tax collectors and boatmen, wicked men, from the lowest level of society"; see S. Benko, *Pagan Rome and the early Christians*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (Ind) 1986, p.150.

<sup>29</sup> Hieronymus, *Commentationum in Matheum*, p. 273-74.

They also wrongly ascribed quotes (*Apokritikos* III.33, cf. Hieronymus *On the beginning of Mark*). As with Jesus' alleged prophetic giftedness, there is a huge difference between what His followers wrote down and what really happened. The book of Acts is a misleading account. The Apostle Peter actually murdered Ananias and his wife Sapphira for their money (*Apokritikos* 3.21, cf. Hieronymus, *Ep. 130 ad Demitrius*).

The Apostles' expectancy of a bodily resurrection after this life, also evident from early versions of the Apostles Creed,<sup>30</sup> was incompatible with the worldview of the Greek science of the day. Porphyry said in so many words that this was a ridiculous and unwarranted expectation. To illustrate this, he gives the example of someone who drowns, is eaten by fish, which are, in their turn, consumed by fishermen. These men ultimately die a violent death themselves and are eaten by dogs or wolves, which, in their turn, are devoured by vultures. How can the original body be resurrected as it was part of so many different bodies, Porphyry sneered (*Apokritikos* 4.24).

### Conclusion

We have to conclude. This paper concerned itself with the question: Is the Catholic view on propositional revelation and the Sacred Scriptures a valid one? Until roughly 1789 both the Roman Catholic and Protestant branch of Western Christianity united on this issue: "Of course it is!" The acceptance of reliable propositional revelation was a core building block of Western civilisation, foundational for the *communio sanctorum*. In the words of Christopher Dawson: "Christianity can never ignore history because the Christian revelation is essentially historical and the truths of faith are inseparably connected with historical events."

However, worldview and theology have dramatically changed since. Some might say that Western civilisation has collapsed with the decline of faith in propositional revelation. The theological paradigm has shifted in favour of Celsus and Porphyry: Scripture is riddled with error, possibly only relevant for some moral and metaphysical issues. For the more radical exponents of the Brave New World<sup>31</sup> there almost certainly is no God, not one who makes any practical difference in this world anyway. For the controlling forces of the new paradigm there used to be something like God and an infallible Holy Bible, but only in the minds of the people at the time. And if the new Savages emerging from the remnants of Western Civilisation dare ask: "Why don't you give them these books about God?" The dismissive answer is "For the same reason as we don't give them Othello: they're old; they're about God hundreds of years ago. Not about God now."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> E.g. Symbolum Romanum: credo carnis resurrectionem (Rufinus of Aquileia); Πιστευω σαρκος αναστασιν, ζωην αιωνιον (Marcellus of Ancyra); credo in carnis resurrectionem et vitam aeternam (Melchior). Cf. Nicea: Προσδοκῶ ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν, καὶ ζωὴν τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. D.G. Izzo & K. Kirkpatrick, *Huxley's Brave New World: Essays*, McFarland, Jefferson 2008, p.36: "It must stand as an extraordinary coincidence that the religious ceremonies in *Brave New World* employ much of the same vocabulary used by Freud to describe a theory propounded by one of his correspondents (who turned out to be none other than the French writer Romain Rolland): I had sent him my small book that treats religion as an illusion and he answered that he entirely agreed with my judgment upon religion... The quasi-spiritual rituals of "atonement" in *Brave New World* rely heavily on imagery very close to Freud's here."

<sup>32</sup> A. Huxley, *Brave New World*, Vintage, London 2007, pp.157-158.

This brave new world is with us presently. *Etsi deus non daretur*<sup>33</sup> has become the general principle at all levels of education.

“Imagine there's no heaven; It's easy if you try  
No hell below us; Above us only sky...”<sup>34</sup>

Should orthodox Christians surrender to this new paradigm? And be satisfied with a private God illusion for personal purposes? Perhaps compromise with the new paradigm to prevent the ark of Scripture from falling,<sup>35</sup> as one seeks to improve the Church's standing and credibility? I suggest not.

If Celsus and Porphyry were essentially right, then one should opt the honourable way out, and admit that the Church has been following cleverly devised fables<sup>36</sup> for most of its existence.

But if early Christianity was right in its claim that it wasn't, there remains an obligation to the *communio sanctorum*. If the saints who from their labours rest faced similar rough weather and did not abandon ship, but decided to trust God's revelation and subsequently survived intellectually; then perhaps we should stay on board as well, in faith, serving God with all our mind.<sup>37</sup> As St Paul said: “Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us” (NRSV, 2 Tim 1:14).

*Bonum depositum custodi per Spiritum Sanctum.*<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Etsi deus non daretur* points to the principle which explain everything from the premise that there is no God. What was considered an exceptional exercise (etsi: even if) has become commonplace and taken on its present meaning.

<sup>34</sup> John Lennon, *Imagine*, from the album *Imagine*, released 11 October 1971, recorded May–June 1971 at Ascot Sound Studios, Ascot Record Plant East, New York.

<sup>35</sup> 2 Samuel 6:1-7 and 1 Chronicles 13:9-12.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. 2 Peter 1:16.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Deuteronomy 6:5 and Matthew 22:37.

<sup>38</sup> 1 Timothy 2:14, Vulgata Clementina.