

*Introduction to*  
**The Sources of Religious Insight**  
*Address to the Yale Theological Club 1910*

Josiah Royce (1855-1916) gave the address, *The Sources of Religious Insight*, to the Yale Theological Club on 14 May 1910. The same address was previously given to Smith College on 18 April, and would serve as the groundwork for the Bross Lectures delivered to Lake Forest in November 1911.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Royce would later publish the Bross Lectures in book-form with the same title as the Yale Address in 1912. The address, therefore, represents Royce's early stages of thinking on the topic of religious insight, especially on the nature of revelation. The manuscript of the address is located in Box 78c of the Harvard Archives Royce Papers (HARP), which contains two related documents.<sup>2</sup> The first, in HARP Box 78a, is an envelope clipping entitled '1910 Notes for Address Before Theological Club.' The title of the clipping presumably refers to the outline of the Yale Address in HARP Box 78b, the second document. The outline is a two-page handwritten manuscript with the heading 'Topics,' followed by a list of six- numbered points: (1) Revelation, (2) Interior Light and Mystic Insight, (3) Modified and Attenuated Mysticism, Values, Religious Insight reduced to merely human terms – Humanism, Pragmatism – triviality, this is not religious insight, (4) Reason, (5) Morality and Religious Insight, and (6) The Loyal Spirit as the source of Religious Insight. Finally, the Yale Address is a twenty-one page handwritten manuscript, yet in terms of content, covers only the first-numbered topic on revelation. Hence, the manuscript of the Yale Address appears either incomplete or was left unfinished.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Clendenning, John. *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press. 1991: 334.

<sup>2</sup> Oppenheim's Comprehensive Index, see entry 287.

<sup>3</sup> No additional information was found on the circumstances of the address or why the manuscript is incomplete.

The complete text of the first-numbered point, in the outline for the address, specifies that the topic of revelation principally concerns the difference and correlation between God's external revelations and the inner revelations of faith. The question, according to Royce, is whether faith alone is the true source of religious insight. The Yale Address correspondingly has the same type of structure: As a source of religious insight, the concept of revelation traditionally designates the external expression of God's will; but Royce, after dialectically developing the traditional concept of revelation, elevates the modern emphasis on inner faith. Then the analysis turns toward the way these two modes relate, and whether God's will or inner faith, or some combination, is the source of religious insight. But, first, Royce defines the key terms.

At the beginning of the address, Royce assumes that religion is "any genuine and valuable personal intercourse with a real and significant spiritual world" (1910: MS 2). Given the focus of the lecture is not specifically on the nature of religion, Royce offers a common-sense definition at a degree of generality sufficient to his purposes. But he is careful to note the pragmatic dimension of this common view on religion, as "what sustain us in our conflict with fortune, helps us solve the problems of life, support us in our efforts to do right, and win us over to what is better than our own natural selves" (1910: MS 2). The definition therefore prefigures, as stated in the first chapter of the Bross Lectures, Royce's concern with what is common to religion in general, rather than the focus on the dogmas and practices of some religion in particular, and how the purpose of religion is to aid humanity in attaining 'what is better than our natural selves.'<sup>4</sup>

The definition of religion is, for the present purposes, sufficient for limiting the scope of the address to a treatment of the sources of religious insight. For Royce's emphasis on a "personal

---

<sup>4</sup> Royce, Josiah. *The Sources of Religious Insight*. The Catholic University Press of America: Washington D.C. 2001: 3-4. Royce will eventually reject such a broad definition of religion as being practically useless; instead focusing on humanity's need for salvation as the common feature of every religion and what this entails, Royce 2001: 7-8; 11-12.

intercourse with a [...] spiritual world” seems to specify some type of contact by the faithful to the object of faith, this contact presumably being religious insight. As religious insight is “any genuine knowledge of religiously important truth or realities,” (1910: MS 4) and therefore is a religiously-qualified type of contact with, for example, a “real and significant spiritual world” by the faithful. Royce does not expand on the constituent notion of insight, so the precise function of religious insight is left rather vague, and does not receive systematic treatment until the Bross Lectures.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Royce attempts to illustrate the meaning of religious insight by citing the form of religious knowledge predominant in tradition. For traditional religious doctrine, the primary source of religious insight is God’s revelation “of himself and of his will, through his inspired Word, then through the present working out of his Spirit, in the church, or in the hearts of the faithful” (1910: MS 5-6). Royce, despite the general nature of the inquiry, is clearly appealing to the religious tradition familiar to his Christian audience. But even for his audience, this account is insufficient in the modern age because the overemphasis on God’s revelation diminishes the role and significance of the inner revelations of the faithful.

Royce, in developing the concept of revelation, distinguishes two modes, the external and internal modes of revelation. In external revelation, such as, for example, the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai or the divinely-inspired messages given by the prophets, “God in one way or another shows his presence, first by physical signs, secondly by words which express his will” (1910: MS 10-11). And yet the external revelations are not a sufficient source of religious insight alone. For if faith is lacking, no one will receive the prophet’s message nor will anyone recognize signs of the divine in nature. The necessary condition for the recognition and reception of external revelation is

---

<sup>5</sup> Royce 2001: 5. “Insight is knowledge that unites a certain breadth of range, a certain wealth of accumulation together with a certain unity and coherence of grasp, and with a certain closeness of intimacy whereby one who has insight is brought into near touch with the object of his insight.” Where *religious* insight is breadth, coherence, and intimacy of view into the way and the knowledge of objects conducive to salvation, see Royce 2001: 8-9.

therefore the inner revelation of faith: “Only the devout could have the inner enlightenment that enabled them to discern the true prophets from the false...and they alone could know for certain what the marks of a genuine revelation from God were.” (1910: MS 15). Such inner revelation is neither an act of intellectual intuition nor a judgment in any ordinary sense, but rather is a genuine miraculous moment. For in order to miraculously receive, and so recognize, an external revelation, then “an internal miracle must already have been performed,” the miracle “whereby the finite being should be prepared to recognize God” (1910: MS 18). Hence, the concept of revelation began as merely external, and dialectically develops into the internal mode of revelation that recognizes and properly receives the external mode of revelation expressed by God’s will.<sup>6</sup>

Royce then asks, how could I know the true God from another one, “who actually worked wonders vast enough and often repeated” (1910: MS 20), to convince us of being divine? Suppose we had contact with the inhabitants of Mars. Suppose further that they have a prophetic tradition, and supernatural powers, giving and providing messages and signs from a deity wholly different from our own. How could we know whether ours or the Martian deity is the one true God? What Royce is trying to identify in this thought-experiment is the following. If external revelation is the sole source of religious insight, and there are multiple deities capable of revealing themselves in and through nature and prophecy, then there is no reliable way to decide which among them is the one true God. So, how could we ever reliably decide? “The witness of the spirit,” Royce answers, “must be, at least in its deepest essence, an internal witness.” (1910: MS 20-21). The inner faith of the believer must, in its deepest essence, bear witness to the wonders of the one true God and his external revelations, if the latter are to qualify as a source of religious insight. Otherwise, people of

---

<sup>6</sup> Royce 2001: 20-25. The need for the inner revelations of the faithful to recognize God’s external revelations later is referred to as the paradox of revelation. Hence, instead of treating revelation as a source of religious insight, in the book Royce uses the paradox as the foundational problem for why religious insight is needed; so, this ‘interior light’ that recognizes the ‘divine signature’ is the basis for the transition to the first source — individual experience.

the faith are not in a “personal intercourse with a real and significant spiritual world” but with a false idol. Royce concludes, “the spirit [that] bears internal witness” (1904: MS 21) is the true source of religious insight.<sup>7</sup>

The dialectic of the concept of revelation began with the God’s external revelation, as is done in traditional religious doctrine, then Royce distinguishes between the external and internal modes and speaks of their correspondence as the source of religious insight. Finally, the dialectic passes completely over into the revelation of God that is chiefly internal, the internal witness of the spirit that recognizes and receives, and therefore properly knows, the wonders of the one true God. Thus, the internal witness of the spirit is the form of religious insight that brings the faithful into personal contact with the spiritual world as a religiously known truth and reality. But, as the outline indicates, this is not the end of the dialectic of revelation. The conclusion only prepares us for the next stage in the search for the source of religious insight. For now our religious insight, as revelation develops from the merely external into the chiefly internal, becomes an “inner memory of the lost home which arises within the spirit, and which tells us what signs and words and deeds are really worthy to be viewed as expressions of the divine truth regarding that home” (1910: MS 21). Having wandered away from our spiritual home with God, we must recollect – through faith, grace, intuition, etc. – the religiously important truths and realities about that lost home. But if the inner workings of the faith become the sole source of religious insight thereby, then how could we ever know God as anything other than an inner memory? We may therefore plausibly predict that, using the outline to anticipate, the one-sided nature of the inner spirit lays the groundwork for – as the traditional emphasis on external revelation led to the primacy of internal revelation – complete

---

<sup>7</sup> The miraculous character of internal revelation, mediated by God’s will, and its bearing witness to God’s external revelation, harkens to St. Paul’s verse in Romans 8:16, “The Spirit Himself testifies to our spirit that we are God’s children.” Oppenheim’s Comprehensive Index, see entry 287.

withdrawal into the spirit, and so for the dialectic to pass onto the next source of religious insight:

Interior Light and Mystic Insight.

Written by Joseph Dillabough

Edited by David Pfeifer

December 2017