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# Epistemology Underlying Bultmann's Biblical Theology

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The justification for the title of this article is derived from Bultmann's statement in which he asserts, 'our radical attempt to demythologize the New Testament is in fact a perfect parallel to Paul's and Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from the works of the Law, or rather, it carries this doctrine to its logical conclusion in the field of epistemology'.<sup>1</sup>

Bultmann, the New Testament exegete and theologian, conceives his task as being comparable to Paul's and Luther's but also distinctive from theirs in the light of the special needs and circumstances of the present age. Just as Paul and Luther expounded that man cannot depend on anything human and in the matter of his salvation cannot take anything for granted, but is wholly and solely dependent upon the grace of God; so also Bultmann maintains that in carrying through the radical task of New Testament interpretation to our present age nothing can be presupposed.<sup>2</sup> Criticism is to be pursued perseveringly and radically till we reach the point where existential encounter takes place. As a matter of fact Bultmann conceives his task so radically that 'the theological investigator obviously cannot presuppose his own faith as an epistemological instrument and make use of it as a presupposition for methodical work'.<sup>3</sup> He is really proposing a presuppositionless theology. He does this with utmost seriousness and we ought to take him seriously.

The epistemology which he presents is critical in the sense that it follows with the utmost vigour the method of criticism of the historical-critical and history-of-religion schools; but corrects their mistakes by combining the act of thinking with the act of living.<sup>4</sup> Epistemology so described becomes intentional or existential. And knowledge becomes believing or saving knowledge, i.e. faith.

<sup>1</sup> *Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 210, 211.

<sup>2</sup> *Theology of New Testament*, Vol. II, p. 251.

<sup>3</sup> *Theology of New Testament*, Vol. II, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

## ESCHATOLOGICAL EXISTENCE

The subject-matter or 'object' of this believing knowledge is not the world of common-sense experience. The cosmos of natural processes is *delimited* or bracketed. It is human history with which this knowledge deals. But this history of human affairs, of nations and peoples has to be dehistoricized. Secular history is to be desecularized. In this way we reach the area of concrete personal human life. Here again the process of further reduction is continued where one security after another that individual man can depend upon is discarded or slips away and having reached the point of no return man stands at the 'brink of the End'. Here the world of sin, death and nothingness face man; but life and truth and God can also face him. Here is present at once the possibility and impossibility of human self-understanding. This is eschatological existence to which believing knowledge is directed. However, inasmuch as this eschatological existence is just beginning and has negative and positive possibilities, faith as believing knowledge and unfaith are equally relevant.

The delimitation and desecularization which takes place with respect to the world also applies to God. He cannot be conceived with regard to eschatological existence either as supernatural, supra-historical or supra-temporal. Just as the world is not understood spatially but eschatologically and temporally, so also God is to be thought of in temporal and eschatological terms. Bultmann says, '... God is "desecularized" by understanding His dealing eschatologically; He lifts man out of his worldly ties and places him directly before His own eyes. Hence the "dehistoricization" or "desecularization" both of God and of man is to be understood as a paradox (dialektisch): precisely that God, who stands aloof from the history of nations, meets each man in his own little history ...'<sup>1</sup> This meeting of God and man takes place in inner temporality or the eschatological NOW. Here what is said about God can be said about man and vice versa. In other words theology and anthropology are interchangeable.

### THE ESCHATOLOGICAL OCCURRENCE IN JESUS

In the eschatological existence as described above there takes place an eschatological occurrence. Insofar as this occurrence is constituted by the encounter between the saving Word of God and a man called Jesus of Nazareth, the eschatological existence will take on a Christian designation. To Jesus the cross stands for complete delimitation from the world and human securities. He overthrows all enslavements and positively enters upon the path of radical obedience to the Kerygma of encounter. This radical obedience is his responsiveness as well as responsibility freely accepted. The grace and power of the Word of God

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<sup>1</sup> *Theology of New Testament*, Vol. I, p. 25.

which had become flesh in Jesus make him a 'new creation'. He is now the Son of God. This is the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus and is inseparably connected with the cross. The old Adam is dead and a new Adam is constituted who is a radically new creation. It is immaterial, says Bultmann, whether Jesus of Nazareth knew himself to be the Kerygma. What is of significance is what happened in him.

#### THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CONGREGATION

The next question is how the same thing can happen to and in others. The problem is of transsubjectivity. Here Bultmann introduces the idea of the eschatological congregation. The transition is effected by analogical means, by each faithful individual's decisive encounter with the Word of God, by the fellowship of one faithful with another and by the presence of the Spirit in eschatological congregation. Except in the very beginning when the immediate disciples were in close proximity in time and space the event of Jesus the Christ is not datable. It is an event no doubt, but only in inner temporality in the sense of the eschatological Now, and not chronologically and historically datable.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact according to Bultmann Jesus was a bearer of the Kerygma and not the Kerygma himself. Therefore even to the earliest disciples this event was not datable.

The eschatological congregation (the *ecclesia*, the body of Christ, the people of God) is enlarged by the proclamation of the Word by the apostles (and others duly called) and by the acceptance thereof in faith and radical obedience by those who hear. Just as those who hear come to join the congregation, so also the Apostle-proclaimer of the Word becomes part of the eschatological occurrence or event. The entering into the congregation is by baptism.

In the eschatological congregation, the history-of-salvation reaches its culmination. The life of this congregation is characterized by 'peace' and 'joy' and the 'possession' of the Spirit which is 'the power within the Church which brings forth both knowledge and the proclamation of the Word'.<sup>2</sup>

In relation to the world the Church can be negatively described as being delimited from the world. Positively it is 'the Church of those whose existence is eschatological, those whose freedom from the world and sin is founded upon their relation to Jesus as the Revealer'.<sup>3</sup>

'It is not through a discipline of abstention from the world, an ascetic conduct of life, or a sacramental cult that this Church seeks to achieve its eschatological character, for it is the Church of the Word, the Word from which it lives, the Word which is

<sup>1</sup> *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> *Theology of New Testament*, Vol. II, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

also its commission to the world. Its life is impelled by the living Spirit within: it is the power which brings forth both knowledge and the proclamation of the Word.<sup>1</sup>

We have made a serious attempt to understand Bultmann on his own terms and trust that the essential core of his theology has been presented without prejudice. It is now time to look at his thesis critically. We shall restrict our criticism to two points only: one pertaining to his method and the other to the content of his theology.

#### BULTMANN'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Students of Bultmann's theology will recognize that behind his method lies Heidegger's method of transcendental analysis of the structure of human *Dasein* as it actually is in relation to the things (human and non-human) in the bracketed or delimited world. And Heidegger's method immediately presupposes, with suitable modification, Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method of transcendental reduction. It is difficult to go into further discussion of this method at this time. The point, however, is that whereas philosophers following Husserl have made a definite distinction between his method and the content of his philosophy; in existential theology method is constitutive of the content of theology.<sup>2</sup> The epistemological method of Bultmann being existential is, therefore, constitutive of his theology. You cannot in this case choose his method and leave his theology aside or vice versa. It is, therefore, not possible to assert with Gogarten that Bultmann's method does for our day and age what an older method did for an earlier age, the content of theology in both cases remaining the same.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE CONTENT OF BULTMANN'S THEOLOGY

This leads us to the content of Bultmann's theology. Since his method is constitutive of his theology, the *delimitation* of the world of ordinary experience on one side and the delimitation of the transcendent God on the other is not methodological but substantive. This rules out at once theology proper and a consideration of nature from the scope of Bultmannian theology. It operates between the limits of the transcendental in contrast to the transcendent on the one hand, and culture in contrast to the world of common-sense experience on the other. It is here that theology and anthropology become interchangeable. As a matter of fact, anthropology has the upper hand. And an acknowledgement that in this context he uses anthropology in the sense of Feuerbach is indeed disturbing to say the least.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Theology of New Testament*, Vol. II, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> M. Farber, *The Foundation of Phenomenology*, pp. 511, 520, 536.

<sup>3</sup> F. Gogarten, *Demythologizing and History*, pp. 7-9, 85.

<sup>4</sup> *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 107.

Bultmann does not deny the realm of the transcendent but it has only the value of an 'as if' for him. It is not necessary. It is dispensable. It is here among other things of similar nature that Bultmann has the utmost difficulty of relating the Word of the Kerygma to Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth lies outside of the line of delimitation and the Kerygma lies inside the line of delimitation. The word *Jesus* can be put in inverted commas or substituted.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is not inseparably connected with the Word. He is not himself the Word. It is clear that the objections of men like Schniewind regarding the once-for-allness, finality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ have not been answered and as a matter of fact cannot be answered. The same unanswerable difficulties arise when the relation of the eschatological existence of the ecclesia is discussed in relation to the world, society and the transcendent God.

One cannot be absolutely sure, but it appears that Bultmann has landed himself into some form of Idealism.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jesus and the Word*, p. 14.



## AN APOLOGY

We regret that in our last number we failed to mention, in our reviews of books published by Longmans, Green & Co. of London, that these books are obtainable from their local agents, Orient Longmans (Private) Ltd., 17 Chittaranjan Avenue, Calcutta 13. The three books published by Longmans, Green & Co., and reviewed by us in our last number, were :

E. Carpenter: *The Protestant Bishop*.

L. J. Radcliffe: *Making Prayer Real*.

H. F. Rall: *Religion as Salvation*.