RUDOLPH BULTMANN

AN INTRODUCTORY INTERPRETATION

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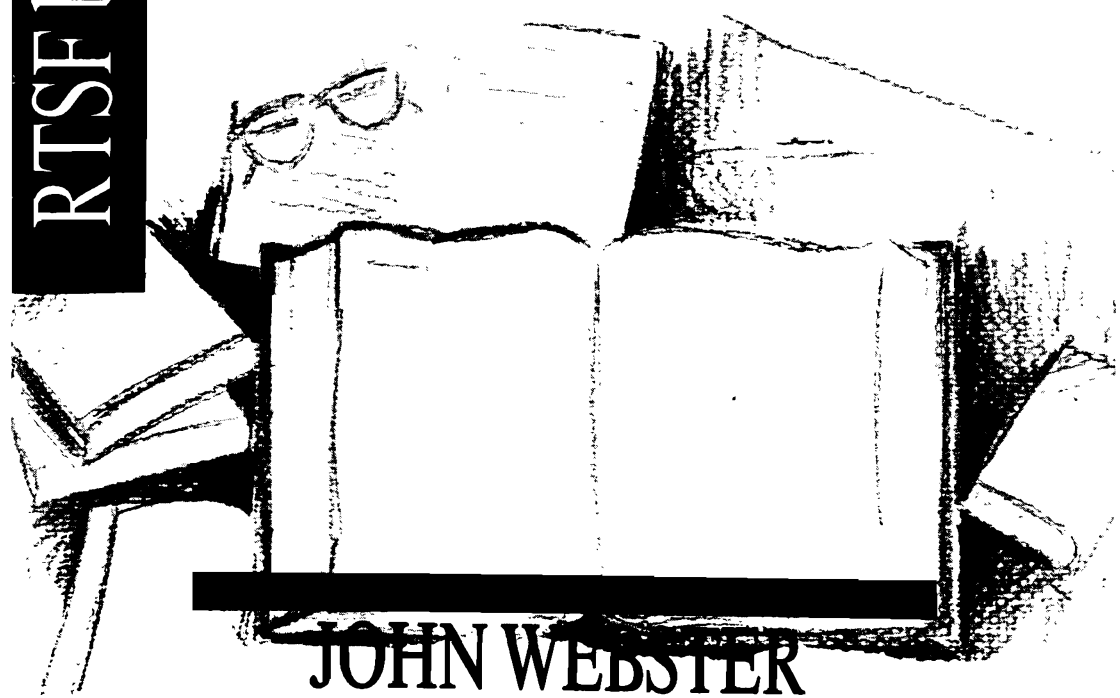

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Published by:

Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship
38 De Montfort Street
Leicester
LE1 7GP

PREFACE

This booklet has a two-fold aim: to offer an account of the overall features of Bultmann's theology, and to give a critique of some of the major trends in his thinking.

Most students get their first taste of Bultmann in the sphere of New Testament studies, either at first hand through his commentaries or historical work on the New Testament background, or - more likely - through lectures and books of those influenced by Bultman: Conzelmann, Hahn, Fuller, Perrin. Given this, it may seem odd that I give a good deal of space to seemingly abstract theological and philosophical issues. But I do so because Bultmann's work on the New Testament - crucially, of course, his programme of 'demythologising' - cannot be understood at all adequately without reference to his existentialism. Failure to grasp this leaves a lot of students in the dark about what Bultmann is doing. This difficulty could be met by an awareness of the larger, theological issues with which Bultmann is dealing, undercutting what has often been an unthinking condemnation of his work by those who have not properly understood what it is trying to do.

The importance of Bultmann's work for anyone reading and thinking about theology in the current climate lies not simply in the sheer volume of his writings, but in the rigour with which he pursues his insights and the consistency which he displays in applying them to many different fields. Bultmann was a rare example of a deeply reflective mind coupled with a phenomenal spread of knowledge, not only about the New Testament and its Jewish and Hellenistic background, but also about classical studies, literature, philosophy and cultural history. One thing that it is easy to overlook is that in reading his work (and not those of his critics!), we are in the presence of something profound.

Bultmann is one of the handful of great theologians of the century: a New Testament critic and historian without peer, an outstanding philosopher and historian of ideas, above all, a thorough-going thinker, whose convictions brought him the censure, not only of the Nazis, but also of the officials of the church. There can be little doubt that Bultmann restored to Christian theology some of the emphases which liberalism had previously obscured; but equally, there can be little doubt that he often pointed theology along a wrong path. Because of this, Bultmann is to be criticised - but the first step to criticism must be understanding what he says. Which is where we begin.

INTRODUCTION

Bultmann's life was of a singularly academic nature, and can be recounted simply. Born in Germany in 1884, he spent his school years laying the foundations of what was to become a quite extraordinary erudition. He studied theology with some of the great representatives of German liberalism - Gunkel and Harnack in Berlin, Jülicher, Weiss and Herrmann in Marburg. It was at Marburg that his teaching career began in 1912, as lecturer in New Testament, and where, apart from a brief spell, he was Professor of New Testament from 1921 until his retirement in 1951. He died in 1976.

It is more than a matter of historical curiosity to look at the background of Bultmann's work. This is because theology does not take place in a vacuum: indeed, very often one of the keys to understanding the work of a theologian may be an appreciation of the personal or extrapersonal circumstances in which his work took place. And this is true even of critical study of the New Testament text. Often exegesis of the Bible is presented as a neutral, purely scientific discipline, in which personal and historical prejudices are suspended in the interests of objectivity. In fact, biblical exegesis is a very sensitive guage of the presuppositions with which theologians work - as we can see easily be comparing a Reformation commentary such as Luther's on Galatians with modern lectures or commentaries on the same epistle. Theology always takes place in a specific context; in the case of Bultmann, too, a good deal of what he has to say reflects the concerns of his era.

To fill in a little of the background. Bultmann was very decisively influenced by liberalism, the dominant theological school in Germany at the beginning of the century, when he received his theological training. Indeed, until the early 1920's, Bultmann saw himself as very much within the liberal tradition. That tradition has been very aptly called 'culture Protestantism' - liberal theologians, that is, tended to see the Christian gospel as harmonious with, and as the fulfilment of, all the great human civilised values: love, toleration, peace, freedom, self-sacrifice, goodness. In a classic liberal text such as Harnack's book <u>What is Christianity?</u> (1900), the essential points of the gospel were summarised as the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the infinite value of the human soul. Christianity was thus given a predominantly <u>ethical</u> interpretation: Jesus, in the eyes of the great liberal thinkers,

was almost more of a dispenser of general moral maxims than a divine Saviour. Whilst it is important to recognise that very rarely is justice done to this older liberal theology - indeed, that it is almost never read - it is difficult to escape the feeling that in the tradition from Schleiermacher, the 'father of liberalism', to Harnack, major components of the Christian gospel were either excluded or interpreted in a way which failed to do justice to the breadth of Christian truth.

At the beginning of the 1920's, Bultmann, like Karl Barth, came to reject this liberal heritage; turning his back decisively on it, he became associated with what was then known as 'dialectical' or 'neo-orthodox' theology. Bultmann came to see that liberalism had made the Christian gospel into little more than the religious counterpart of humanistic European civilisation - a civilisation whose emptiness had been tragically exposed by the events of 1914-18. Liberal theology had ceased to take God seriously; its talk was of man and man's religion or man's ethics. Bultmann came to see that in the New Testament gospel, God and man are not partners in the building of a Christian culture: they are at war.

An excellent example of the direction of Bultmann's thought in this new departure would be his interpretation of the concept of the Kingdom of God. A liberal theologian like Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) interpreted the Kingdom of God in primarily ethical and humanistic terms: the Kingdom is something which men do, it is the organization of humanity through action inspired of love. Bultmann completely rejects this ethical view of the Kingdom, since it fails to appreciate the distinction between God and man which the Kingdom presupposes. He writes in his book Jesus and the Word, which first appeared in Germany in 1926, that the Kingdom of God means 'deliverance for men. It is that eschatological deliverance which ends everything earthly' (p.33), and he adds that 'This deliverance confronts man as an Either-Or' (ibid). The Kingdom is thus not, as the liberals thought, the culmination of all that men consider good: it is 'wholly supernatural' (p.34), opposed to man and his ethical concerns. "The Kingdom of God ... is something miraculous, in fact, the absolute miracle, opposed to all here and now; it is "wholly other", heavenly' (p.34).

But alongside this emphasis on the aspects of the Christian gospel to which liberalism had failed to give due weight, there coexists Bultmann's highly critical stance towards the task of reading the New Testament text. Indeed in approaching the study of the Bible, Bultmann continued to use highly refined versions of the tools which had first been fashioned by the very liberals he was rejecting. Later on we will look

more closely at this important area of the relation between his critical use of the Bible and his theological conclusions; for the present, we need only note that precisely at the time in which Bultmann was coming to question the liberal tradition, he published The History of the Synoptic Tradition (1921) - the classic text of form-criticism. This book analyses the various literary forms of the accounts of the ministry of Jesus in the synoptic gospels (miracle stories, controversy sayings, prophetic uterances, parables, etc.), and seeks to show how these forms have been radically altered, and often created, by the activity of the early church. The conclusion from the book is that the synoptic accounts of Jesus are almost useless as an historical record.

The context, then, in which Bultmann's theology is to be set, is two-fold. There is his radically critical approach to the reliability of the New Testament as an historical record; and there is his equally strong stress on the unfashionable aspects of the Christian gospel. It is a curious mix, which we cannot explain away easily as inconsistency, and which requires careful study before we pronounce judgement. The way in to understanding is a consideration of the word which more than any other has become inseparably linked with Bultmann - demythologising.

1. EXPOSITION
Bultmann's Theological Programme

What does it mean to 'demythologise' the New Testament? In summary form, Bultmann's answer might run something like this: to demythologise is to realise that the message of the New Testament does not rest in the 'mythological' externals, but in its 'kerygmatic' core. In order to elucidate this, we start with the two notions 'myth' and 'kerygma'.

1. Kerygma and Myth

Bultmann's analysis of the New Testament is made up of two components: kerygma and myth. To start with the latter: Bultmann defines myth thus: 'Mythology is the use of imagery to express the otherworldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side. For instance, divine transcendence is expressed as spatial distance' (H W Barsch, ed, Kerygma and Myth I, p. 10). And the New Testament message is by and large expressed in these mythological terms. As examples, we might adduce the ideas of Christ as Second Adam or Messiah or Son of God; the Virgin Birth or the Second Coming; the interpretation of the death of Christ as a sacrificial atonement - all of these ways of speaking are mythological, since they speak of divine realities in terms borrowed from the human realm. At the outset, it must be understood that Bultmann does not mean that because these ideas are mythological they are untrue. Of course, they are untrue if they are taken at their surface level: for example, Christ will not come again on the clouds of heaven, as the Thessalonian epistles maintain. But these myths are true when they are properly understood, not in and for themselves, but as expressions of the message underneath the myth. The meaning of the New Testament text is not to be found in its external, mythological shell, which is the outdated cosmology of primitive Palestinian and Hellenistic communities, but in the kernel, which is the kerygma.

By the 'kerygma', Bultmann means the essential message of the New Testament for today, once that has been extracted from its mythological setting. The extraction is the work of the process of demytholgising, which is thus the method whereby we interpret the inner meaning of the mythological statements we find in the New Testament.

The relationship between the mythology of the New Testament and its kerygmatic meaning we have already described as that between the kernel and the shell: in order to get to the kernel, we have to get through its outer casing. What Bultmann is doing here is very close to what some of the church fathers did in trying to use the Old Testament. Taking a start from Origen (185-254), many of the church fathers read the historical portions of the Old Testament as allegories - as stories whose meaning lies not in the 'surface' text, but in the hidden message which they exemplify or illustrate. Gregory of Nyssa (330-95), for example, in his Life of Moses, interprets Moses' ascent of Sinai in Exodus 19 as underneath a story about the ascent of the soul to God. So Bultmann: to discover the real meaning of the New Testament we look beneath the plain, surface meaning to the hidden kerygma.

For Bultmann, then, demythologising is a positive, not a negative approach to the New Testament. In his essay in Kerygma and Myth I, entitled 'New Testament and Mythology', Bultmann is at pains to emphasise that he is not jettisoning the message of the New Testament because he finds it unacceptable, but rather he is seeking to find out what is the real meaning of that message. In this he distinguishes himself from the older liberals like Harnack who simply pruned the gospel of those elements which the modern world-view found hard to take. Bultmann does not want to reduce but to interpret - to get to the real message, to the real stumbling-block.

We must keep this firmly in mind when we try to understand the reasons for demythologising. It ought at the outset to be said that Bultmann's aim is not apologetic - he is not trying to make the Christian gospel acceptable before the court of human reason. His aim is rather declaratory - making known what the content of the Christian faith is. Hence it is not true, as is often asserted, that Bultmann introduced the demythologising programme into theology because the scientific outlook of modern man had made the plain meaning of the New Testament text impossible to accept. It is of course true that for Bultmann 'modern science does not believe that the course of nature can be interrupted or, so to speak, perforated, by supernatural powers' (Jesus Christ and Mythology, p. 15)- and hence that mythological ideas of the divine intrusion into the natural realm are not open to modern man. But this modern scientific outlook only serves to show that the real meaning of the New Testament never did rest in its mythology, but in the kerygma: 'To demythologise is to deny that the message of Scripture is bound to an ancient world-view which is obsolete' (op. cit, p. 36). Bultmann does not demythologise in order to make the Christian faith easier or more acceptable to modern man.

Two other reasons for demythologising are more accurate accounts of what Bultmann is aiming to do. First, he claims the the New Testament itself begins the process of demythologising. Paul, for example, demythologises the primitive Palestinian eschatology by speaking (in Galatians 4.4) of the future as already inaugurated. John especially reinterprets the future references in eschatology by making the future judgement a matter of the here and now, and by seeing the earthly work of Jesus as the eschatological event which more primitive traditions put in the future. In other words, within the New Testament itself there is the precedent for demythologising.

With the second, futher reason we are taken to the heart of what Bultmann has to say about the New Testament. The reason is this: demythologising is necessary because mythology speaks of God and man in an illegitimate way. Mythology speaks of God, for example, as a worldly object 'out there' like any other object - whereas for the kerygma of the New Testament, God is a matter of personal concern. It is this - existentialist - starting-point which offers the clue to what Bultmann is doing when he interprets the mythology of the New Testament in terms of its underlying 'kerygmatic' message. Before looking at the point more closely, however, it may be worthwhile to summarise so far by means of the following propositions:

1. The New Testament is composed of kerygma and myth.
2. Myth is the external form of the New Testament.
3. The kerygma is its internal content.
4. We extract the kerygma from the myth by demythologising.
5. Demythologising is not destructive: it is demanded by the New Testament.

2. Existentialism.

At the end of the previous section we suggested that the fundamental reason for demythologising the New Testament is that mythology speaks in an illegitimate way. What this means is that Bultmann's question about how to interpret the mythology of the New Testament is at heart a question about the proper way of speaking about God and man. To understand the kind of issues about which this question inquires, and especially, to understand Bultmann's answer to the question, we need to do a little orienteering in the field of existentialism: once that has been done, the territory should be a little clearer and we should be able to appreciate more of the drift of Bultmann's thought.

When Bultmann was first a professor at Marburg in the

1920's, his colleague in the department of philosophy was Martin Heidegger, one of the leading representatives of what has come to be known as existentialism. Heidegger's thinking is complex in the extreme, for not only does it treat highly abstract philosophical issues, but it treats them in a manner which even to the trained philosopher is at first sight simply baffling, and which demands a great deal of anyone seeking to understand him. Partly this is because of the entirely novel set of concepts and words which Heidegger invents to express his thought. Some consideration of Heidegger is, however, essential to those wishing to understand Bultmann. For a much fuller account of the relation than we can give in this present context, the reader is referred to Professor John Macquarrie's excellent study An Existentialist Theology.

The meeting of Bultmann and Heidegger at Marburg between the years 1923 and 1928 was one of the intellectual events of the century. For Bultmann, the philosophy of Heidegger offered nothing less than a new insight into the heart of the kerygma of the New Testament. In addition, Heidegger provided Bultmann with the stock of concepts whereby he could express his interpretation of the real meaning of that kerygma. What was it, then, that Bultmann found so stimulating in Heidegger's thought, especially as it is found expressed in his book Being and Time, which first appeared in Germany in 1927?

In order to begin to answer that question it may be helpful to give a brief map of the territory of existentialism for the less familiar. A roughly constituted philosophical school, existentialism is to a large extent a 20th century phenomenon, although its roots lie in such 19th century thinkers as Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. Amongst its major representatives are Jaspers and Heidegger in Germany, and Sartre and Camus in France. Existentialism has been of less influence in England, particularly in academic circles where logical and linguistic matters have been the staple philosophical diet for most of the century. Indeed, existentialism is not really an 'academic' movement: by definition, its concern is with reflecting on human existence and human action. Of course, this is not to say that it has not produced serious 'academic' works: Heidegger's Being and Time and Sartre's books Being and Nothingness and Critique of Dialectical Reason are likely to become philosophical classics. But existentialism is by no means exclusively an academic affair: it has strong literary connections: both Sartre and Camus are major novelists and playwrights. And it has a political concern, as might be expected from a view of life which puts such a stress on human action.

Put very baldly, the common theme or way of approach which unifies all the diverse aspects of existentialism might be stated thus: 'Existence precedes essence' (Sartre). What, we may ask with justice, does that mean, and how does it have the remotest connection with the New Testament gospel? In order to grasp the concerns of existentialism, we look at one specific issue to which existentialist thinkers have constantly returned: what is man? In looking at the way in which Heidegger answers that question, we shall hopefully be able to discover some of the main themes of existentialism, and then move on to see the use made of them by Bultmann in interpreting the Christian faith for today.

When Heidegger asks the question 'What is man?', the most important word in the question is the verb: 'What is man?'. That is to say, he asks about the fact that man is, about man's 'being', about the 'is-ness' of man. Put technically, his concern is to inquire after what it means to attribute 'being' to man. When we ask 'What is man?', what do we mean by 'is'? At first sight that may seem a pointless question - do we not all know what we mean when we say the word 'is'? But on closer inspection the question is very fruitful: one of Heidegger's major concerns has been to show that there are many different answers to the 'question about being', especially when we ask it in the form 'What is man?'

These answers can be put into roughly two groups. The first answer or group of answers is predominantly that given by the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, but followed, with modifications, until the end of the 19th century. This answer sees man in primarily static terms. A good example of what is meant here would be the way we talk about human nature. In talking this way of man we suggest that man's being is something fixed, something constant, something universal which obtains everywhere. According to this picture of man, a man is his nature, and this nature can be described in terms of some of its unvarying characteristics - man is social, he is rational, he makes tools, he possesses the gift of language, he is religious. All these qualities are seen as the constants of man's nature. In other words, this picture of man defines man by what he is essentially. To invert the words from Sartre, 'Essence precedes existence'.

To give a concrete example, we might look at Plato's idea of man. For Plato, there is a difference between what man is outwardly, and what he is inwardly. Man's outer life - his external action, his existence - is less important than his inner life. And if we wish to inquire what man really is, we do not look to the external existence, but to the essential part of man, the inner life of which the external action is only a shadow of little real importance. Plato is a good

example of this first picture of man: man has a fixed nature which he inherits as part and parcel of being human. It is a definition of man which is essentially static.

The second answer to the question 'What is man?' is that offered by Heidegger himself. He reverses the direction of Plato's thought by stressing 'existence' over 'essence'. What is most important about man is his external existence, and not some supposed eternally static, fixed and preprogrammed nature which he possesses in virtue of being a man. Man makes himself. By that Heidegger means to say that man's 'being' is created every time man engages in an act of exisitng. It is man's actions, man's concrete life in the present which makes his being into what it is. To take a specific example, we might ask what it means to say that 'man is free'. On the first, static model of man, man's freedom would be an attribute which he has because he is a man, and which he would then exercise in specific acts of freedom. But for the second, more dynamic picture of man, man's freedom can only be derived from specific acts of freedom. Man is free only as he acts freely. It is a man's acts which determine his being.

Because of this, Heidegger places great weight on the notion of decision. Because man is not fixed, as the Greeks and later thinkers maintained, but must make himself, then what he does matters. The all-important thing about a man is his acts. For Heidegger, the most important act is the act of decision. By deciding, we become ourselves. Deciding is the way of self-realisation, of making ourselves into ourselves, because in deciding, we choose between one thing and another and thus decide to be something specific. Put tersely: man is his decisions about himself. According to the first picture of man, man's decisions are determined by what he essentially is - a man chooses to be free because he is free. Heidegger once again reverses the direction: a man is free because he chooses to be free.

This leads to the distinction which Heidegger makes between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' existence. This very odd-sounding way of talking about man follows on simply from what we have said about the contrasts between the two pictures of man.. 'Inauthentic' existence is existence which runs away from making decisions. If it is true, as Heidegger proposes, that man becomes himself by deciding, then the refusal to decide is the refusal to exist properly as a man. A man is his decisions, he comes to be in specific acts of choice. The refusal to decide may take many forms: it may be clinging to one specific way of acting in the face of the demand to change; it may be keeping the world and all its threats and questions at a distance, avoiding the need to respond; crucially, for Heidegger, it can be the refusal to face

up to the fact that all men will one day die. All these are examples of running away from decision, of clinging to security rather than running the risk of exposure to choice. And that means running away from 'authentic' existence.

For authentic existence accepts the exposure to the demand to decide - and in so doing, becomes proper existence. If inauthentic existence is not being yourself, authentic existence is being yourself, since your self is your decisions about yourself. Descartes' famous dictum which provided the starting-point for the whole of his philosophy was 'Cogito, ergo sum' - 'I think, therefore I am'. For Heidegger the equivalent might be 'I decide, therefore I am'. Or to put it another way: on the first picture of man, man's being (the 'is' of the question 'What is man?') is a quality which he possesses; on Heidegger's picture man's being is an event, something which happens when man decides to exist in an authentic manner.

What is the relation of all this to Bultmann's interpretation of the New Testament?

3. An Existentialist Interpretation of the New Testament.

From our brief look at Heidegger, it should by now be a little clearer what the statement 'existence precedes essence' means. The specific example of the way Heidegger talks about man sought to show that man's 'being' is to be discovered in actual moments of existing, in man's acts, rather than in some 'essential human nature'. It is precisely this which Bultmann seizes upon. For him, Heidegger's existentialism is nothing other than a rediscovery of the message of the New Testament kerygma. It thus offers not only a possible, but a necessary means of interpreting the Christian gospel. This - and not, as is often said, an unwillingness or inability to accept the surface meaning of the New Testament - is the fundamental motive at work in the programme of demythologising.

We said earlier that Bultmann's basic problem with the mythology of the New Testament is that it speaks of God and man in an illegitimate way. We can explain the point he is trying to make here by distinguishing, as Bultmann does, between 'objectifying' and 'non-objectifying' language.

'Objectifying' language speaks about its subject-matter as it were at one remove. It speaks from outside: impartially, disinterestedly, without any real engagement with the subject-matter. That is why it is called 'objectifying' language: it

makes the matter of which it speaks into an object 'out there', so to speak, an object which is apart from us and which does not touch our inmost being.

The opposite of this is 'non-objectifying' language. This way of speaking talks about its subject-matter from within personal concern. The things of which it speaks are seen as matters touching the very existence of the speaker - they are matters of urgent concern, and so cannot be spoken about in a way which keeps them at a distance: the subject-matter is thus no longer an object 'out there', but something which cuts into my existence in the present.

When we come to look at the actual shape of what Bultmann sees as the central message of the New Testament, we shall be able to give some concrete examples of the distinction between 'objectifying' and 'non-objectifying' language as applied to God; but some initial unclarity may be cleared up by a couple of non-theological examples. The first, rather trivial, would be the way we would describe a hammer. 'Objectifying' language would describe its constituent parts, its materials, its shape, size, weight and so forth: but we would never get to the real point if we failed to go on to describe the hammer as something to be used by us in accomplishing certain specific tasks. This latter description would be non-objectifying. A more sober example: we could speak of death in objectifying terms by describing the clinical processes involved; but non-objectifying language about death would treat it as a matter which involved me personally - as one bereaved, as one fearing his own death. To speak adequately of death, we cannot speak about it without bringing our own existence into the centre of concern.

For Bultmann, the problem with mythology is that it is objectifying language. A mythological way of speaking holds matters of concern at one remove, it speaks about them from a safe distance. And this is precisely why the mythology of the New Testament has to be interpreted if the underlying kerygmatic message is to emerge. The mythology is 'objectifying': the kerygma is 'non-objectifying'. Bultmann writes in his essay 'New Testament and Mythology' that 'Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially' (p. 10); and he goes on to say this: '...the importance of the New Testament mythology lies not in its imagery but in the understanding of existence which it enshrines' (p. 11).

From this perspective, we can begin to see why Bultmann wants to interpret the mythology of the New Testament writers. Demythologising is not a destructive process, not the jettisoning of certain elements of the Christian gospel because modern

man cannot believe them. Rather, it is the way of getting to the heart of what the New Testament has always said and still says; for the matters of which it speaks are not abstract issues of which we may speak with impartial detachment: they are matters of existential concern. Our next task is to take a look at some of the results of this sort of interpretation by examining some of the major themes which Bultmann treats.

a. Bultmann's Method

From what we have said so far, it should be clear that Bultmann's existentialism leads him to interpret the message of the New Testament in non-objectifying terms - in terms which seek to express that message as a matter of personal concern in the practical business of making decisions about our existence. In his little book Jesus and the Word, he writes that his fundamental way of approaching the mythology of the New Testament is to look underneath the mythology for the 'conception of man which in the last analysis underlies it' (p. 47). And that phrase could serve as a neat summary of the way in which Bultmann sets about the task of interpreting the gospel message. He makes the same point in his book Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting, when he says that what the book aims to give is an interpretation of the 'understanding of human existence' (p. 12) in the early Christian gospel.

There are two consequences of this method which we ought to take a look at before we go on to see the concrete results of the method. The first is that it lends a certain urgency to all Bultmann's writings (the exception being the highly technical approach of The History of the Synoptic Tradition). Bultmann, that is, does not see his work as exclusively an academic affair, an abstract exercise with very little to say to the practical concerns of the life of faith. The things which he treats are matters demanding decision, cutting to the marrow of human existence. Hence the earnestness of Bultmann's prose style is not simply a matter of literary taste: it points to how he sees his task as a theologian.

The second consequence, of greater importance, is that 'anthropology' becomes the main concern of all theological statements. By anthropology we do not of course mean the scientific study of (usually primitive) civilisations, but something much more general - the study or view of man (in the sense, that is, in which we use the word in the phrase 'theological anthropology'). Bultmann, we saw earlier, interprets all mythological statements, such as those we find in the New Testament, in terms of the view of man which underlies them. That is to say, he interprets them anthropologically.

And more than this: all theological statements are interpreted anthropologically or existentially. A good example of this is the section on the theology of Paul in the first volume of his New Testament Theology. In his preliminary remarks, he says that 'Pauline theology is not a speculative system. It deals with God not as he is in himself but only with God as he is significant for man, for man's responsibility and man's salvation' (pp. 190f). And he goes on to say 'For this reason and in this sense Paul's theology is, at the same time, anthropology' (p. 191). The exposition of Paul which follows these remarks bears out the line of approach, as it divides the whole of Paul's thought into reflections on man prior to the revelation of faith and on man under faith. Theological statements have significance only insofar as they refer to man's existence now.

Bultmann takes this point further when he rejects the idea of 'general truths' as applied to the Christian gospel. By a 'general truth' he means much the same thing as an objectifying statement: a statement which remains meaningful independent of any 'existential significance' it might have for men. The Christian kerygma does not speak in a general way at all - it speaks existentially, for the here and now. A couple of examples will show that his rejection of 'general truths' is an important component in his method of approaching the New Testament.

First, the example of ethics. For Bultmann, the New Testament does not present us with general moral principles, but with concrete demands to act in specific ways in specific situations (this, indeed, was one of the main areas of disagreement between Jesus and contemporary legalistic Judaism). For general moral principles can only be regarded with the attitude of the spectator, and not with that of one actively involved in getting on with the job. When we talk about the ethical demands of the gospel, those demands must be seen as particular and actual - they cannot be deduced from general moral truths. Bultmann writes: 'The crisis of decision is the situation in which all observation is excluded, for which Now alone has meaning, which is wholly absorbed in the present moment. Now must man know what to do and have undone, and no standard from the past or the universal is available. That is the meaning of decision' (Jesus and the Word, p. 68). To give an example: the commandment to love one's neighbour in the New Testament is not a general moral principle; it is meaningless apart from the concrete situation of man's being in community with other men. To put it formally: ethics are existential.

The second example of the rejection of general truths is

Bultmann's interpretation of miracles. According to him, we do not believe in miracles in the same way that we believe in the theory of relativity - as things which may, indeed, take place, but which do not affect our existence. Miracles are only meaningful if they affect us now. He writes that 'If Jesus' belief in miracles is understood as a general conviction that certain happenings, which we today are accustomed to attribute to natural causes, depend upon some higher, divine cause, then the belief is understood as the expression of the faith that God's will is not in general visible but reveals itself in special and particular events, then it belongs of necessity to his idea of God' (Jesus and the Word, p. 127). We do not believe in 'miracles in general': such a belief has no meaning unless it is underneath an expression of actual encounters between God and man.

These two examples show well what we mean by existential interpretation at work. Closely connected with this is another aspect of Bultamnn's method which has received a good deal of attention in recent years. This aspect we could describe by using the title of an essay by Bultmann first published in 1957: 'Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?' (the English translation is to be found in his collection Existence and Faith).

It is commonplace in exegetical work on the Bible - or, indeed, in any other sphere of historical investigation - to regard the work we do in a purely detached, scientific manner. It is not the task of the investigator to bring his personality into the matter (hence dull commentaries!): his personal and extra-personal circumstances should, indeed, be suspended, lest they be allowed to influence the account which he gives of the object of his investigation. Thus, for example, in presenting what the New Testament has to say about baptism, we should not allow our churchmanship to colour our account of the Biblical data.

Bultmann, of course, accepts this sort of objectivity as necessary - though it is a matter of debate whether he is as impartial as might be wished in presenting some of this evidence. But there is another sort of objectivity which he does reject outright in the essay we have just mentioned. That sort of objectivity is what we might call anti-existential: it does not allow the subject-matter to be of personal concern to the investigator. All we have said so far should make it clear that it is just this sort of neutral attitude towards the subject-matter of the New Testament which Bultmann wants to avoid at all costs. And this is why he claims that exegesis cannot be without presuppositions - unless it is done by someone less than human. No-one can read the New Testament without a sense of its importance as a document

for him as a person. If we are to encounter what the New Testament says, we cannot suspend our subjectivity; rather, we must take that subjectivity to the text and allow it to be questioned by the message we find there. As Bultmann puts it in slightly more technical language: presuppositions are a fruitful way of approaching the text because in order to understand it, we must stand in a 'life-relation' to it.

To sum up this first aspect of Bultamnn's existentialist reading of the New Testament: the New Testament is to be interpreted existentially, by looking for the understanding of man which is expressed through the mythology. This means that there we do not have to do with general truths, but with existential truths - which means the attitude of 'scientific neutrality' is excluded.

b. The Nature of Man.

We now turn to look at some specific examples of this method in action. First, the doctrine of man.

From what we have seen of Bultmann so far, especially in his analysis of New Testament ethics, it should be evident that he sees man in existential terms: a man is his acts. He writes that '...what a man has done and does - his decisions - constitute him in his true nature... he is essentially a temporal being' (Essays, p. 9). Man's essence is nothing other than his existence in the here and now, in history. That is why he is a 'temporal' or 'historical' being: he is never outside time and change.

And this existential definition of man Bultmann traces to Jesus himself. He writes that '...the nature of a man for Jesus is not determined by his human quality or the character of his spiritual life, but simply by the decision the man makes in the here-and-now of his present life' (Jesus and the Word, p. 46), that is 'Only what a man does now gives him value' (Ibid). Not only is this truth found in the (carefully demythologised) teaching of Jesus; it can also be found in the Old Testament view of man (see Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting, Pt 1, Ch 3) and, most especially, in the theology of Paul (see Theology of the New Testament, vol 1, Pt 2).

As a concrete example, we might cite Bultmann's interpretation of what it means for man to be a sinner. Sinfulness is not a 'state' in which man exists. Alienation from God cannot be thought in a static way at all, since it is only in specific acts that a man has being. Bultmann says that 'Sin is disobedience against the demand of the here and now' Primitive Christianity, p. 58): it is not a state of rebellion against God, but acts of rebellion. A clear instance of this

view of man is his analysis of the nature of sin in the Gospel of John. Bultmann writes that 'When a man commits himself to fallenness, he surrenders his authentic possibility... Man is at all times called to decision, to risk himself. The world rejects such decision - and in the rejection it has already made the decision and has cut off its existence as potentiality-to-be is to have a future' (Faith and Understanding, pp. 170f). To elucidate the rather complex language here: what Bultmann earlier called 'authentic existence' he calls here 'potentiality-to-be' - that ability to be open to decision and thus to be open to make oneself by making decisions. The result of such openness is having a future (not in the sense of a temporal future', but rather a 'future filled with meaning'). Sin cuts itself off from this possibility of authentic existence, which is only opened up again in faith: 'Only in listening to the revelation of the Word does faith exist. Only in such listening is the possibility of the future opened' (Faith and Understanding, p. 179).

c. The Nature of God.

About God as he is in and for himself, we cannot speak, nor should we wish to do so. One of the major emphases of the earlier work of Bultmann was on the notion of God as 'Wholly Other': God is not at our disposal, cannot be domesticated and brought down to our level. Partly this was because of his rejection of liberal theology, which he - along with Karl Barth - believed to have jettisoned the fact that 'God is other than the world, he is beyond the world' (Faith and Understanding, p. 40). Like Barth, Bultmann maintains an 'absolute contradiction' between God and the world, so that the relation of the gospel to the world cannot be one of 'completion' but only of 'abrogation'.

But the hiddenness of God should not lead us to conclude that God is not our concern. If we cannot know God as he is in himself, such knowledge is not our concern. Our concern is with God as he affects the here and now of our existence - anything beyond that is simply not our business. Once again, we see how the underlying existentialism is at work - God is not a 'general truth', but something which cuts into our existence at specific points.

Put simply: we cannot speak of God without also speaking of man. 'Theology speaks of God because it speaks of man as he stands before God' (Faith and Understanding, p. 52). In another essay, 'The Crisis of Belief" (in Essays), Bultmann says that 'knowledge about the power which creates and limits our being is not theoretical knowledge but it is knowledge which breaks in on us in critical moments of our being itself' (pp. 6f). In other words, knowledge of God is not a 'general truth', but an insight which is grasped in the challenge of

the moment, won in the moment of decision.

This is a very significant theme in Bultmann's work, for it shows how far his existentialism penetrates into his interpretation of some crucial aspects of the Christian faith. In this respect, his essay 'What Does it Mean to Speak of God?' (in Faith and Understanding) is of great importance: first published in 1925, it might almost be called the hinge on which the whole of his thought moves. At the outset he rejects any speaking of God which makes him into an object of thought (if we talk of the reality of God we have already lost the reality of God). Only those truths about God are meaningful which refer to the existential situation of the speaker. He says that '...it is not legitimate to speak about God in general statements, in universal truths which are valid without reference to the concrete, existential position of the speaker' (p. 53). Or as he puts it more tersely, 'It is therefore clear that if a man will speak of God, he must evidently speak of himself' (p. 55). This does not mean of course that we speak of man instead of speaking of God, but rather that in talking of God we must also talk of man because God is only known in man's situation.

A good example of Bultmann's point here is his interpretation of the notion of the transcendence of God. God's transcendence is only known from within our situation. When we speak of God as transcendent, we must also speak of what he transcends, if our talk is truly to be non-objectifying. God as 'Wholly Other' is only meaningful as a reality which determines our existence. As he puts it in an early essay, 'God is the mysterious, enigmatic power that meets us in the world and in time. His transcendence is that of someone having power over the temporal and the eternal: it is the transcendence of the power which creates and sets limits to our life...' (Essays, p. 9).

Bultmann, that is, has an existentialist doctrine of God: God is meaningful only as a concern for men and not as he is in himself. In a telling phrase he says that 'The reality of God is not that of the idea but of the concrete happening' (Essays, p. 16). And once again he finds this insight in the kerygma of the New Testament, particularly in the demythologised teaching of Jesus. 'Jesus speaks of God not in terms of general truths, in dogmas, but only in terms of what God is for man, how he deals with man... It is impossible to speak of God in Jesus' sense without speaking of his activity' (Jesus and the Word, p. 110). In more technical language, Bultmann says that 'God is not a given entity' (Faith and Understanding, p. 45). He cannot be spoken of in the same way that we speak of worldly objects, but only as he affects our existence now.

Because of this, Bultmann has a distinctive idea of the nature of revelation. Revelation is in no way to be seen as the imparting of knowledge about an otherwise-unknowable God. For Bultmann there can be no notion of 'revealed truth', because this would make God into something 'out there'. Revelation is rather to be seen as an encounter with God, as my meeting with God in my present existence. Revelation is God's acts as they are directed towards men, and so 'God's revelation does not make him known in the sense of intellectual knowledge' (Faith and Understanding, p. 45).

Similarly, Bultmann gives a fresh interpretation of the meaning of God as creator. Usually when we talk of God as creator, we refer to specific acts which he accomplished at a certain time in the past, and which are the basis of his lordship over creation in the present. For Bultmann this makes God into an object: God's creatorhood is seen as something apart from us. Hence we talk of God's creatorhood on the analogy of a workman: God is the cosmic artist, fashioning the heavens and the earth. Such a way of thinking Bultmann regards as a Greek intrusion into biblical-existential thinking. To speak of God as the creator is to speak of God as an existential truth: the truth that man and the world stand every moment in the hands of God. 'Faith in the creator is not a philosophical theory or a world-view that one has in the background of his concrete experience and action, but rather something which we realize precisely in our experience and action as obedience to our Lord. That God is the creator means that man's action is not determined by timeless principles, but rather by the concrete situation of the moment' (Existence and Faith, p. 159).

This is why Bultmann claims that the doctrine of providence has no place in biblical faith. Providence sees God in remote terms as a person or thing outside man, outside the universe, sustaining it from afar like a kind of cosmic mechanic: it is a foreign intrusion from Stoicism. God's sustaining power which is at work in the creation is not a 'general truth' but one which we experience afresh in each moment of dependence on God: 'To believe in God is not simply to believe in his existence, but meekly to submit to his will and wait upon him in quietness and confidence' (Primitive Christianity, p. 36).

Finally, the will of God is interpreted in existential terms: this point has already been touched upon in looking at the interpretation which Bultmann gives of New Testament ethics. God's will meets us in specific situations where we find the demand to act, rather than in a legal code which specifies moral principles. God's will is discovered in

encountering my neighbour, since in such encounters we are faced with the demand to love; 'For Jesus...God's distinction from and transcendence over the world mean that he is always the God who comes. He meets us not only in the future judgement, but already here and now in daily life, with all its challenges and opportunities. In the same way, man is distinct from the world in the sense that he has no security in it. He cannot trust in any tangible reality. His real life consists in his encounter with his neighbour and his response to the claims of God' (Primitive Christianity, p. 93).

d. Christology and the Kerygma.

Anyone with even the sketchiest acquaintance with modern New Testament study will know that one of the central questions is that of the historical reliability of the gospel records. Two questions in particular are significant. The first is the question of just how much history the gospels contain: are they accurate accounts of what happened, or are they largely theological reflections which fit the facts to the theology they wish to put across? The second is the question of whether accurate historical knowledge is necessary for faith: if the gospels are not by and large historically accurate, then does this matter for faith in Jesus?

Bultmann gives a negative answer to both these questions. We can, indeed, know very little about the events of Jesus' ministry: once the gospels have been passed through the filters of form-criticism, there is very little left in the way of solid historical data. He writes that 'There is no historical-biographical interest in the gospels, and that is why they have nothing to say about Jesus' human personality, his appearance and character, his origin, education and development... the gospels lack any interest of a scientific-historical kind' (The History of the Synoptic Tradition, p. 372).

For Bultmann, however, this lack of interest is something positive, and that is why he gives a negative answer to the second question. Faith in Jesus is not dependent upon historical data, and hence Christology does not have any historical interest. We know almost nothing about the historical Jesus, and we need to know almost nothing. Bultmann tries to support this from within the New Testament itself by looking at the interest shown in the historical Jesus by Paul. In his essay 'The Significance of the Historical Jesus for the Theology of Paul' (in Faith and Understanding),

ne writes that 'Jesus' teaching is - to all intents and purposes - irrelevant to Paul' (p. 223). If this is true, what is the importance of Jesus for Christology?

Jesus is not significant as an historical person: of that person we know almost nothing. And moreover, attempts to rediscover the personality of Jesus simply reflect the presuppositions of the interpreter - as in the liberal 'Lives of Jesus', by men such as D. F. Strauss. Nor is Jesus important because of his teaching: once again, we know almost nothing about that. We cannot even say that Jesus' significance for us can be stated in terms of the formulations made about him by the early church - by seeing Jesus as the Messiah or the Son of God or the Lord. Even these more explicit Christological affirmations are not important today, since they are expressed in the mythological language of an obsolete religious view of the world.

There is, then, nothing objectively significant about Jesus. What matters is Jesus as he meets us in the here and now. The way in which Jesus meets us is through the kerygma: through the word of Christian proclamation, when carefully stripped of its mythological dress. Jesus is only of importance because he is the 'occasion' of the proclamation which challenges us to decide. Speaking of the meaning of the deity of Christ, for example, Bultmann says that 'in the New Testament...the pronouncements about Jesus' divinity or deity are not...pronouncements of his nature but seek to give expression to his significance; pronouncements which confess that what he says and what he is do not have their origin within the world, and are not human ideas nor events in the world, but that God speaks to us in them and acts towards us and for us' (Essays, pp. 280f). When we say 'Jesus is God', that is, we are not talking about Jesus as he is in himself - for Bultmann that would be meaningless objectification. Rather, we are speaking of the significance of Jesus for me.

To ask about the meaning of Christology is to ask about the meaning of the kerygma, not about the historical Jesus or about the enthroned Son of God. About the historical Jesus we cannot know; the enthroned Son of God is simply a figment of the theological imagination. What is the place of Jesus in this kerygma?

Bultmann puts this last question thus: what is specifically Christian about 'Christian belief'? What does it have to do with Jesus Christ? His answer is this: 'Christian belief has its peculiar character in speaking of an event that gives it this right (to talk to God), in saying that it hears a Word which demands that it should recognise God as standing over against man' (Essays, p. 11). Christian faith is Christological,

that is, because of the Word which we hear now - a Word which for Bultmann is (somehow) linked with Jesus. As an historical or mythological figure, Jesus is lost to us today: his significance is that in the kerygma, we meet the challenge to decide. As our critique of Bultmann will point out, this inability to root Christian faith in Jesus has provided one of the areas of strongest disagreement over his theological proposals.

e. The Nature of Faith.

If historical facts are of little importance for Christology, they are similarly of little importance for faith. To Bultmann's notion of faith we now turn.

Faith is often seen as a species of knowledge: by faith we know certain things to be true - for example, that God is three-in-one - which we cannot know naturally, by unaided reason. This definition of faith is very far from what Bultmann wishes to put in its place. Faith is not knowledge about certain things, in just the same way that revelation is not revelation of certain things. Faith is not intellectual, it is existential. That means to say that the meaning of faith rests not in the grounds of faith, but merely in the fact of faith's existence. Faith is not meaningful because it is faith in certain things, but because it is an act of man, a decision in obedience to the call of the kerygma.

Because of this, faith has no grounds. It cannot be 'proved' by looking at its basis - for example, its historical basis. It is not possible to argue that a man can have faith in Jesus because from the gospels we know certain facts about him which demand faith. Faith is an act without guarantee. Bultmann writes of the "free act" of faith: 'It cannot be offered for investigation as something "to be proved". For in that case we should be objectifying it and putting ourselves outside it. A free act can only be done and in so far as we speak of such doing, the possibility of it can only be believed' (Faith and Understanding, p. 63). More simply: 'Only in act is it sure' (Ibid, p. 65). Faith is an act of man's existence, not to be grounded by any data or proved by any methods.

That is why faith is not a possession. We cannot, that is, speak of 'having' faith, for that would make faith into something 'out there'. Faith is an act, to be done afresh in each moment of decision rather than clung on to as a means of security: 'Belief in God is never something we can have as a possession. On the contrary, it implies

a decision to be taken' (Essays, pp. 14f). Bultmann explains his point by saying that faith is like love; we cannot 'have' love, but only exercise it in specific acts. In contrast to such definitions, Bultmann proposes this; 'Adherence to the gospel message is called "faith", and faith involves a new existential understanding of Self. In it man realizes his creatureliness and guilt. It is an act of obedience in which man surrenders all his 'boasting', all desire to live on his own resources, all adherence to tangible realities, and assents to the scandalous fact of a crucified Lord' (Primitive Christianity, pp. 238f). Faith is a new self-understanding on the part of man, and ceases to be faith when it is grounded by something outside itself, such as historical facts: 'Historical research can never lead to any result which could serve as a basis for faith' (Faith and Understanding, p. 30).

It is this which explains Bultmann's assertion that his highly critical reading of the New Testament does not affect faith in the slightest, since he rejects any attempt to validate faith by proving the historical reliability of the biblical data. This rejection is for two reasons. The first reason, the nature of faith as an existential act without grounds, we have already looked at. The second is the nature of history. For Bultmann, the establishment of a body of historical data by the approved methods of critical research gets us nowhere. What we would come up with after such an investigation would not be 'history', but an objectified scientific reconstruction. Bultmann's view of history stresses not its 'objectivity', but its importance now, its meaningfulness for my present existence. The proper attitude to history is not that of objective observation but dialogue with history, as a 'living complex of events in which he (man) is essentially involved' (Jesus and the Word, p. 11. For the whole question, see Bultmann's book History and Eschatology). And he goes on to say that 'History...does not speak when a man stops his ears...when he assumes neutrality, but speaks only when he comes seeking answers to the problems which agitate him' (Ibid, p. 12). History is only of importance if it affects us now, and so cannot ground faith.

If that is so, then critical scholarship, inquiring into the historical reliability of the biblical texts, can neither undercut nor support faith, for faith is entirely free from such grounding, and history does not offer it. To look highly critically at the gospel records cannot disturb faith for faith rests on personal, existential decision. 'The truth of Christianity, like that of any other religion or philosophy, is always a matter of personal decision, and the historian has no right to deprive any man of that responsibility.

Nor, as is often asserted, is it his business to end up by assessing the value of what he has been describing. He can certainly clarify the issues involved in the decision. For it is his task to interpret the movements of history as possible ways of understanding human existence, thus demonstrating their relevance today. By bringing the past to life again, he should drive home the fact that here tua res agitur: this is your business' (Primitive Christianity, p. 12).

From the account of the shape of Bultmann's interpretation of what the New Testament has to say about some major themes - man, God, Christ and faith - the profundity with which he has thought through the implications of his existentialism is obvious. Our next job is to offer some critical reflections on what must be for some a most startling account of the Christian faith.

2. CRITIQUE
The Gospel and Existentialism

Our critique of Bultmann will look at the positions analysed in the first part in reverse order: we examine, first, his conclusions with regard to the New Testament, and then, second, we go on to look at the relation between Christian faith and existentialism in a broader perspective.

1. An Existentialist Reading of the New Testament.

What we wish to show is this: that the critical positions which Bultmann adopts over the New Testament are often not proven, and sometimes in need of serious revision. This means that the support from the New Testament which Bultmann claims to underlie his thought is in some cases not there, or not there as strongly as his conclusions might suggest. Bultmann wishes to show that the precedent for demythologising lies in the New Testament itself - but if it is true that the New Testament does not sit loose on the 'mythology' as he claims, then his interpretation of the text at those points will be all the weaker, and sometimes invalid.

a. Critical Problems.

Bultmann's interpretation of the New Testament message in existential terms depends upon answers to critical problems which are not beyond debate. To examine whether this is true, we look at a test case: his account of the development of Christology in the New Testament. As we saw earlier, one of the motives in the demythologising programme is that Bultmann claims a lack of interest in the historical Jesus by the later, more 'Christological' strands of the early church. Not only does this mean a gap between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith': it means in addition that the growth of Christology is to be seen as growth away from Jesus towards mythological elaboration. Such mythology cannot and need not be ours, and so we look underneath it for the kerygma.

Whilst this 'evolutionary' account of the development of Christology is often buttressed with a wealth of historical and critical evidence, other equally plausible accounts have been given. We cannot hope in this space to give even the briefest report on the exegetical and historical work which has been done; but it may well be true, as C.F.D. Moule argues in his book The Origin of Christology, that the most apt analogy may not be the emergence of a new species, but rather the opening of the flower from the bud. In other words, the discontinuity between Jesus and later Christology which is one of the main features of Bultmann's reading of the New Testament may well not be there.

To focus the issue on a couple of areas of debate. First, Bultmann argues that one of the strongest influences on the growth of New Testament Christology was Gnosticism, which provided some of the central concepts used, especially in the Johannine writings (see, for example, his Theology of the New Testament, I, para. 15; Primitive Christianity, Pt 4, Ch 4; and his commentary The Gospel of John, e.g. pp. 24ff, on Jn 1.1f). The problem here is that the dating of the Gnostic evidence which is supposed to parallel or influence the New Testament is almost insuperably difficult, and Bultmann's dating is one among many options. The details are out of our scope here, but a very good survey of the issue is provided by Edwin Yamauchi in his book Pre-Christian Gnosticism. After a careful review of the evidence in detail, he concludes that 'we have seen how the imposing scholarly edifice of Reitzenstein's (an early Gnostic scholar) and Bultmann's pre-Christian Gnosticism is but little more than an elaborate, multi-storied, many-roomed house of cards, whose foundations have been shaken, some of whose structures need buttressing and others have collapsed, leaving a mass of debris with but few timbers fit for use in reconstruction' (pp. 184f).

A second example would be the account of the growth

of New Testament Christology in terms of a three-stage growth. Stage one is Early Palestinian Christology (the very earliest stage); this is followed by Jewish Hellenistic Christology (e.g. Paul), and finally by Gentile Hellenistic Christology (the very latest stage). This sort of schematisation has been offered in such books as F. Hahn's study The Titles of Jesus in Christology, or (in less radical form), by R. H. Fuller in The Foundations of New Testament Christology; it is also a strong influence on the exegesis of many commentaries. Such an account owes its origin to Bultmann, and it is a clear logical development of some of the critical positions which he laid down earlier in the century, claiming that as Christology develops, it is less influenced by Jesus and more by its religious environment.

This kind of thesis can, of course, only be tackled with the thoroughness it deserves by exhaustive critical work. Much of what has been done on the problem recently tends to revise the conclusions of Bultmann and his followers. From a specifically evangelical perspective, I. H. Marshall's recent book The Origins of New Testament Christology is a helpful introduction to the question which provides useful accounts of the major works in the field, as well as offering a cogent alternative. At a somewhat more technical level, mention ought to be made, not only of Moule's book mentioned above, but O. Cullmann's study The Christology of the New Testament and M. Hengel's little book The Son of God. All these argue in a scholarly way that the three-stage account is simply inadequate in the face of the evidence.

In other words, Bultmann's work on the critical problem of outside influence on the development of the early church's view of Jesus is not at all definitive. Wolfhart Pannenberg gives a timely warning against the ease with which modern historians of the New Testament chase up parallels and make them into influences: 'The history of ideas is not a chemistry of concepts that have been arbitrarily stirred together and are then neatly separated again by the modern historian' (Jesus - God and Man, p. 153). Bultmann's chemistry of concepts in particular seems to have been somewhat clumsily handled.

In reply to this line of criticism, Bultmann would obviously say that even if the later strands are organically connected to the earlier strands - even if, indeed, they go back to Jesus himself - they remain mythological and are not necessary for faith in Jesus, since what matters is the challenge of the moment and not some 'objective' facts. That this is not an authentic representation of the thought of the New Testament, we now turn to discover.

b. The New Testament and Objectivity.

By 'objectivity' we refer to those things which remain

true and meaningful in and for themselves, independent of any meaning they may have for our 'subjectivity'. Bultmann, we recall, rejects such objectivity as 'general truth'. But how true is this rejection to the New Testament? We will turn to the larger theological aspect of this question in the second part of our critique. For the moment it will suffice to look at the New Testament itself to see whether it does display the lack of interest in the objective which Bultmann claims, or whether it does, in fact, emphasise objective elements.

The first area to look at is the importance of the historical Jesus. Bultmann claims that the person and teaching of Jesus are almost entirely absent from later Christology. What matters about Jesus is not what he was but that he was. The details are not important - all that is necessary is the mere fact of his existence as a jumping-off point for the call of the kerygma.

A good deal of work has been done on this issue in recent years, especially by those who have been influenced by Bultmann, and in general the conclusion has been that the historical Jesus is of much greater importance as an 'objective fact' for the later parts of the New Testament than Bultmann allowed. Thus there has arisen what has been called the 'new quest' of the historical Jesus, which seeks to inquire into just how significant he is and just what continuity there is between Jesus himself and the Christ proclaimed by the early church. I. H. Marshall's book I Believe in the Historical Jesus is a helful introductory report on the problems raised, but most useful is James Robinson's The New Quest of the Historical Jesus, which shows in detail how the conclusions about 'objectivity' at which Bultmann arrived have been subjected to telling criticism.

One particular area could perhaps be mentioned in a little more detail. In looking at Bultmann we saw that he proposes that Paul shows almost no interest in facts about Jesus. However, the disjunction between Jesus and Paul is better seen from the standpoint of the growth of salvation-history and in terms of the differing interests of each, as both H. Ridderbos and F. F. Bruce argue in their books on the issue, both entitled Paul and Jesus. One study, G. N. Stanton's book Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching, is a model of exegetical work on the objective facts about Jesus in the kerygma of the later church. On the relation of Paul and Jesus, for example, he writes that 'Paul's references to the character of Jesus provide support for the rejection of the view that the Pauline kerygma included no more than the mere Dass ('that') of the historical existence of Jesus. What happened between

the birth and death of Jesus and what Jesus taught were both deeply rooted in his whole theological thinking' (p. 110).

This must mean that Bultmann's ideas on the lack of objectivity in the New Testament must be heavily qualified. And it means futher, that his notions of revelation and faith are to be subjected to criticism, for in both these areas Bultmann denied an objective element. Revelation is not revelation of...: it is the call to decide; faith is not faith in...: it is an existential act. Yet Paul's summary of his preaching in Corinthians 15.3-8, for example, gives us a clear objective framework for the Christian gospel: the major theological points of Paul's message are given objective grounds, which are the historical facts which Paul adduces as support. It is to these historical elements which we now turn.

c. The Gospel and History.

Our review of the 'objective' elements in the gospel suggests a much stronger interest in history than Bultmann would allow. In recent years, largely through the influence of parallel work in the Old Testament field, the notion of 'salvation-history' has been applied to the New Testament. 'Salvation-history' is a term which is used to show that the God of the Bible reveals who he is through his acts in history: we know what God is like because he has done certain things on the plane of historical experience which reveal his character. Examples of such 'mighty acts of God' would be the deliverance from Egypt, the conquest of Canaan, the deliverance from exile or - most especially - the ministry of Jesus, culminating in his Resurrection. Such an approach to the New Testament we find in the work of Oscar Cullmann, whose books Christ and Time and Salvation in History are important studies of the place of history in the gospel. Another German thinker, Wolfhart Pannenberg, puts even greater stress, not only on 'salvation-history' but also on secular history as the locus of God's revelation, not only in the Old and New Testaments, but today also. His ideas are set out in a book which he edited under the title Revelation as History, and are applied to Christology in his very weighty Jesus - God and Man. Over against Bultmann, both Cullmann and Pannenberg, whilst in many respects different, have emphasised that God is known, not in private, existential moments of decision, but in his concrete self-revelation by his historical acts.

Evangelicals have been eager to use the insights here,

especially those of Pannenberg, with his championing of the historicity of the Resurrection. It is certainly true that salvation-history is of value in bringing theology back to the objective basis of which the New Testament speaks and which Bultmann neglects. But there is a danger: that of reducing the Christian faith to a species of rationalism, in the following way. Whilst it is true that faith in the Bible is faith in certain historical facts, simply observing those facts without faith will not yield a revelation of God. If we do not say that the facts have to be viewed with faith, we are in effect saying that unaided reason is able to deduce God's revelation from historical data. But faith is not so self-evident: the objective elements of the New Testament are only grounds of faith - they do not render faith superfluous. This danger could be illustrated from the work of Pannenberg. But, given the danger, it remains important to realise that faith does need what Macquarrie calls an 'empirical anchor' (The Scope of demythologising, p. 95).

Christian faith is faith in a God who acted in history, definitively in Jesus. Both 'faith' and 'history' are important components, and Bultmann's exclusion of history means a reduced account of the Christian gospel. And it means, further, that the gulf between 'objective history' and 'existential encounter' of which Bultmann speaks, is an unnecessary and unjustified account of what the New Testament says.

2. Existentialism and Christian Faith.

From our conclusions about Bultmann's reading of the New Testament - particularly his insufficient emphasis on its objective grounds - we now go on to see how this relates to the theological use of existentialism as a framework or set of concepts for stating the Christian gospel. We saw in our exposition that for Bultmann, existential interpretation means that only those theological statements are valid which refer to the existential situation of the speaker. How far is this valid? How far, that is, is it true to say that 'non-objectifying' or 'existential' language is the only legitimate way of speaking of God?

At the outset, we must agree with Bultmann that there is some existential reference in all theological language, especially biblical language. Biblical language about God is not language which simply describes or gives information: it does not offer a catalogue of the attributes of God. Rather, it is language which, whilst describing who God actually is, challenges the situation of the hearer. If we read the prophetic books of the Old Testament, it is clear

that the way in which those writings speak of God - for example, his character as holy judge - is a way which is meant to affect us now. Macquarrie is thus right when he says (An Existentialist Theology, pp. 14-22) that existentialist thought does have a certain insight into the authentic thought-world of the Bible, particularly as it speaks of the 'living God', who is no philosophical abstraction, but active among his people. The question goes much deeper than this, however - as MacQuarrie would acknowledge. It is not whether existentialist readings of the Bible are a fruitful approach to the interpretation of certain parts of it, but whether they give - as they claim - a full account of the biblical data.

To answer that question, we look at two issues. First, the question of whether in existentialist theology 'God' is simply a label which we use to describe the subjectivity of the man of faith rather than an objective divine being. Second, an alternative to Bultmann's account of the nature of God's objectivity. It will be seen that the test-case in both issues is that of the doctrine of God.

a. Reducing God to a cipher.

By asking whether Bultmann reduces the word 'God' to a cipher, what we are asking is this. When Bultmann talks of God, is all 'objective reference' lost? Does he speak of God in such a way that the objectivity which we found in the New Testament is dissolved, since all theological statements come to have an existential reference? According to Bultmann God is only known in the act of decision in obedience to the kerygma. If that is true, then does God remain an objective being, independent of man? Or is the word 'God' simply the label which we give to certain states of human existence, a label which does not refer to any real content outside man?

For those to whom this way of interpreting the word 'God' may seem unfamiliar, we could cite a parallel. In Homer, the great hero Achilles is described as a 'lion'. Clearly in so talking we do not mean that Achilles was actually a lion: we mean that he was like a lion, because of his bravery or fierceness. The word 'lion' does not have any 'objective reference' in the phrase 'Achilles is a lion'. Is the same true in speaking of God? When Bultmann speaks of God, does he mean the word in a literal sense, or in a non-literal sense, as a way of talking of certain human attributes?

Bultmann's problem is very much a real one for all Christian theologians: how can we speak of God in such

a way that he is real? It is all too easy for doctrines of God to fail to speak of God in a sufficiently concrete way, and thus to cease to challenge us, in the way that we saw biblical language challenges its hearers. God is easily lost in conceptual abstractions, so that it is often difficult to recognise the God of the proclamation of the prophets or the teaching of Jesus. How can we speak of God in such a way that he remains real?

In answer, Bultmann safeguards the reality of God by saying that God can only be spoken of from within the existential situation of man. God is real when he is spoken of, not in objectifying terms as a being 'out there', but in existential terms. He sums up this way of safeguarding the reality of God when he writes that 'God is not a given entity' (Faith and Understanding, p. 45). There are two ways of reading what Bultmann says there: the difficulty is deciding which one he means!

The first (charitable) interpretation would say that Bultmann means that God cannot be spoken of from a position of neutrality, but that he must be spoken of as one who challenges me. If Bultmann simply means this - that God is not a remote object - then that is a profoundly biblical insight. But there is another (less charitable) interpretation which says that Bultmann means that God is not an entity at all: the word 'God' simply describes the challenges we meet in existence. The difference between these two interpretations of what Bultmann is saying is that between existential and atheistic interpretation.

'Atheistic' interpretation of the word 'God' may sound strange to many: but that it is a latent danger within existentialist theology can be seen from the work of two thinkers who have consciously taken Bultmann's insights further.

The first is the New Testament scholar Herbert Braun, who has sought to develop Bultmann's notion that God is only known in the challenge of the here and now. Braun pushes this idea to its extreme by saying that all talk of God's objectivity as an independently-existing being is to be set aside. He writes that 'God is not to be understood as the one existing for himself... I can speak of God only where I can speak of man, and hence anthropologically... For even according to the New Testament, God in the final analysis, i.e. all inadequate objectifying of the doctrine of God set aside, is where I am placed under obligation, where I am engaged... God would then be a definite type of relation with one's fellow-man' ('The Problem of a New Testament Theology', Journal for Theology and Church 1,

pp. 182f; cf his essay 'The Meaning of New Testament Christology' in vol. 4 of the same journal). Again, in his recently-translated book Jesus of Nazareth. The Man and his Time, he writes that 'When Jesus says 'God', he is thinking of repentance, of radical obedience, of absolute grace' (p. 128) and thus that 'About God one can only speak in reference to the carrying out of certain actions, the actions of obedience and humility' (Ibid). Not only is God only met in the challenge to obedience and repentance: he *is* obedience and repentance.

Similar conclusions are to be found in the work of the systematic theologian and philosopher Fritz Buri. He sees faith, for example, in purely existential terms as a way of understanding man with no reference to any objective God: 'It is the primordial intention of faith to discover the meaning of our existence and to enable us to act in such a way as not to miss this meaning' (Thinking Faith, p. 13). Christology is given a similar non-objective interpretation: 'Christ's reality emerges for us when we live and act, when we perceive it in practice around us' (Christian Faith in Our Time, p. 13) 'God' thus becomes, not a person in himself, but the label which we give to our experience of acting responsibly towards other persons: 'For our personhood God himself is personal in the voice which summons us to responsibility' (Thinking Faith, p. 95)

It should be clear from our brief look at the New Testament data that 'objectivity' is one of the central components of the structure of what it says about God. Whilst God *does* affect me here and now, he only does so as an objective, independent being. The weakness of Bultmann's programme of translating of gospel into non-objectifying terms is that God's independence is lost - a danger we see clearly in the work of Braun and Buri.

It is important to recognise that this danger is only latent in Bultmann: he himself clearly tries to avoid allowing existential interpretation becoming atheistic interpretation. This is clear from chapter 5 of his book Jesus Christ and Mythology, entitled 'The Meaning of God as Acting'. Here Bultmann sets out his familiar assertion that God's action can only be spoken of from *within* worldly action: theology must abandon mythical ways of talking about the action of God as something which comes from outside (for example, in miracles). But Bultmann goes on to say that this does not mean that God is identical with the world, or that he has no independent being apart from the world. This he calls the paradoxical 'nevertheless' of faith. Faith,

whilst it accepts that 'there remains no room for God's working' from outside (p. 65), says 'nevertheless'...; it is nevertheless permisible to speak of God as more than the here and now. And so whilst Bultmann says that 'only such statements about God are legitimate as express the existential relation between God and man' (p. 69), this does not mean atheism: 'From the statement that to speak of God is to speak of myself, it by no means follows that God is not outside the believer' (p. 70). The ambiguity of Bultmann over this point makes clear how easily his insights could be developed into the atheistic conclusions of Braun and Buri.

b. The Objectivity of God.

Bultmann's answer to the question of how we can safeguard the reality of God in existence leads him into ambiguities which he can only reconcile by the paradoxical 'nevertheless' of faith. What other answer is there to the very real problem he is trying to solve?

A solution might perhaps be found from the perspective which sees that the way in which Bultmann asks the question is itself false. Bultmann always speaks in terms of an irreconcilable polarity between talking of God in 'objective' terms and in 'existential' terms. We cannot for him talk of God as an object and also talk of him as something which cuts into the quick of our present existence; we cannot talk of God in existential terms and still retain his objectivity. But this polarity is surely false. God's objectivity and his significance as an existential concern of men are not mutually exclusive opposites. The question could be more fruitfully approached by saying that God is only of such existential significance because he is over and above all that a free, independent being.

As an example we could look at the account of the revelation of God to the people of Israel at mount Sinai in Exodus 19 and 20. In reading the account, there is an unmistakable element of God's significance: God here is a God who confronts his people in a highly concrete way. And yet he only does so as the free God who is apart from his people. This would be pointed to by God's self-description in Exodus 20.2: 'I am the Lord your God'. The words 'I am the Lord' point to God as free, self-existing, sovereign - objectively independent. Yet the phrase goes on 'I am the Lord <u>your God</u>': God's freedom as the objective God is a freedom which he exercises in choosing to be our God, in choosing to be God alongside men. In this way, his freedom

and his existential significance are not contradictory, but are rather the same truth. The objective God is the God who meets us - this is the theological meaning of covenant.

Moreover: it is not true that to speak of God's objectivity is to objectify God. That would, of course, be true if God were not an object in and for himself. And it would also be true if our talking of God makes him into a remote object towards which we can adopt a neutral attitude. But it would not be true of the biblical God: for there we meet with a God who can be spoken of in 'objective' (not objectifying!) terms because he presents himself as such. This is the meaning of revelation: to say that God shows himself to us as an object is neither to deny his objectivity nor his significance for men. It is to say that the God who meets us is one who cuts into our existence now.

CONCLUSION

Space does not permit a fuller critique of Bultmann's thinking. But it is hopefully clear that from the standpoint of our conclusions with regard to objectivity, it should be posssible to think through what Bultmann has to say about many themes: faith, creation, providence, ethics, the nature of truth, the nature of time and history. It may well be true, then, that in taking as one of his central concerns the nature of God as object, Bultmann has pierced to the heart of an area where our thinking needs to be precise and - above all - biblical.

Bultmann's exploration of this area brought into play all his immense gifts of scholarship and reflective power: all this is abundantly clear for anyone who sits down and actually reads what he has to say. Yet it is also clear that the map which Bultmann makes of his findings is only partially reliable, and at times, positively misleading. All of which is an ilustration of an aphorism from Bultmann's favourite thinker, Heidegger: 'He who thinks on the grand scale makes grand mistakes'.

For futher reading.

This is a fairly full list, giving some idea of the scope of work that is available in English. Brief comments are added where they may help. But remember - read Bultmann first!

1. Works by Bultmann available in English.

Essays, Philosophical and Theological
Existence and Faith
Faith and Understanding
(the above three books collect essays by Bultmann on a wide variety of topics)
The Gospel of John (a full-scale commentary showing Bultmann the exegete at work)
History and Eschatology
The History of the Synoptic Tradition (the classic of form-criticism)
Jesus and the Word (a classic existentialist account of Jesus)
Jesus Christ and Mythology (on demythologizing)
The Johannine Epistles
'New Testament and Mythology' in H. W. Barthsch (ed), Kerygma and Myth I.
The Old and New Man in the Letters of Paul (3 exegetical studies)
Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting (the fruit of Bultmann's work on the background of the New Testament)
Theology of the New Testament (his major work of N.T. analysis)
This World and the Beyond (a collection of sermons)

A small selection is available in E. J. Tinsley (ed), Rudolf Bultmann

2. Works about Bultmann in English

F. Gogarten, Demythologizing and History
H. Gollwitzer, The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith (excellent but very difficult)
I. Henderson, Myth in the New Testament
" , Rudolf Bultmann (both short, lucid, knowledgeable)
P. E. Hughes, Scripture and Myth
G. V. Jones, Christology and Myth in the New Testament
C. Kegley, The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann
L. Malevez, The Christian Message and Myth (a Catholic treatment).

J. Macquarrie, An Existentialist Theology
" , The Scope of Demythologizing
(both excellent)
S. M. Ogden, Christ Without Myth
H. P. Owen, Revelation and Existence (sober, logical critique)
R. Roberts, Rudolf Bultmann's Theology (recent, highly critical)
W. Schmithals, An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann
B. H. Throckmorton, The New Testament and Mythology
N. J. Young, History and Existentialist Theology

3. Works on the Background to Bultmann.

H. J. Blackham, Six Existentialist Thinkers
R. A. Johnson, The Origins of Demythologizing (brilliant)
J. Macquarrie, Existentialism (a very good introduction)
" , Martin Heidegger (short but useful)
G. Steiner, Heidegger


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