

Bultmann's Understanding of God

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Central to Rudolf Bultmann's theology is his understanding of God. Only when we understand what he believes about God can we hope to understand such terms as "new self-understanding" and "demythologizing." Those who plunge right into the middle of his theology can only see him as the wildest sort of heretic who calls Christian beliefs a string of myths and wants to replace Christianity with Existentialism. But if we first understand his faith in God, all the rest of his work is seen in its proper light. In fact, Bultmann's later and more controversial work in demythologizing and existential interpretation is a natural result of his understanding of God.

As early as 1917, in a sermon appropriately entitled "The Hidden and Revealed God," we see Bultmann "protecting" the mystery of God. God is certainly close at hand in his work in our lives, but he can never become an object to us; he must always remain hidden. Yet not all the mysterious forces which impinge on our lives can be simply identified with God. For instance, the First World War (during which Bultmann wrote the sermon) was "in God," but we must neither be too quick to say that it was God's judgment and punishment or that God had nothing to do with it. The infinite God remains hidden from us, always turning an aspect toward us which we do not expect, continually surprising us. Yet to those who approach life reverently and humbly, God's voice may be heard in the roar of life; what comes to us first as the cacophony of life, filled with meaningless details which overwhelm us, may become a symphony when we are able to discern the fundamental tone which is sounding throughout.

Indeed, what is God, if not the infinite fullness of all the powers of life that rage around us and take our breath away, filling us with awe wonder? What are these powers of life that sustain us and carry us away, that blend us together and separate us, that tear us apart and weld us together, if not the powers of the infinite God, who is full of creative might and joy, of endless forms and riddles?¹

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¹Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Schubert Ogden, Living Age Book, Meridian, New York, 1960, p. 26.

BULTMANN'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

As the fullest human being is never simply known but continues to show new richness and depth every day, so God is never laid out flat before us, but he always comes to us as the unexpected. God must remain hidden and mysterious in order to be God.

Yet if we approach the mystery and majesty of God with reverence and humility, the hidden God becomes the revealed God of grace. Just as the richness of a person can be revealed to another only if he is ready to know him, so God becomes known only to the one who is able to kneel humbly and reverently before him. Only then is God able to send us his Spirit to work in our hearts, to open our eyes. Only then is the mystery and contradiction swallowed up in grace.

One is reminded of the story of Job, who wanted to contend with God face to face, man to man, but who discovered that God was not to be put into words, that he could not be made an object among objects or even a being among beings, but that *man's knowledge of God can only be the experience of grace*, only a nonverbal I-Thou encounter. Throughout his work, Bultmann maintains this Biblical distance of God. God can never be known as an object, but he only comes to us in his gift of grace. We know him because he works in us.

In interpreting the parable of the laborers in the vineyard who were paid equally for unequal work, Bultmann points out several of the "attributes" of God.² As we shall see shortly, all of these are but elements in the grace of God. First God's *goodness* is seen in his willingness to give to those who do not seem as deserving. God's *freedom* is expressed in the fact that the landowner was not compelled by any idea of justice to pay each according to his work. God bestows his *grace* as a free and unmerited gift. He is not compelled by any legal code to fulfill a contract with man. Finally, God's *love* is seen in the concern of the landowner for the welfare of the men who had not been able to find work all day. They needed a day's wage as badly as the men who were able to find work.

It ought not to be surprising that a man who has spent his life as a professor of New Testament should have a Biblical understanding of God, but to those who know only his controversial work, it will be somewhat of a shock to discover that Bultmann's understanding of God is quite Biblical and orthodox. If we may generalize this early, before we enter a more technical treatment, it would be most accurate to say that Bultmann is very close to the Barthian school in his understanding of God. As we shall shortly see, knowledge of God is limited to his revelation in Jesus Christ, where he is revealed as transcendent, having no direct relation with either nature or history.

²Rudolf Bultmann, *This World and the Beyond: Marburg Sermons*, Scribner's, New York, 1960, pp. 178-188.

Knowledge of God

Bultmann has several mystifying and immanentist-sounding statements about the knowledge of God such as "Man's knowledge of God is the same as his knowledge of himself," or "The question of God is the same as man's question of himself," or "Christianity brings man to a new self-understanding." These might easily be taken to mean that Christianity is merely a religion of the inner life and that all talk of "God" is merely a mythological way of speaking about what happens to man as he comes to "authentic existence." But in examining Bultmann's understanding of how man comes to know God, we will see that this interpretation is mistaken, that Bultmann, in contrast to many of his more radical followers, refuses to demythologize God.

Bultmann deals with the knowledge of God in many places and for many different reasons, but he comes closest to a systematic presentation in an essay entitled "The Question of Natural Revelation" in *Essays Philosophical and Theological*.³ We shall follow the basic structure of this essay in explicating these mystifying statements about man's knowledge of God.

As the title suggests, the paramount question is revelation apart from Christ. Although we might expect him first to tell us what it means for God to be revealed in Christ, he saves this until the end because it presupposes the limited kind of natural revelation he allows. Nevertheless, the question of other revelation is approached from a Christian perspective, presupposing God's revelation in Christ and judging other revelation by it.

Merely to raise the question of the revelation of a god⁴ means that we have an understanding (or better, a pre-understanding) of what a god is; we understand what we are asking for. This pre-understanding of god, which is given by pagan attempts to understand the nature of deity as well as the Christian tradition and its ancestor Judaism, is the context into which the alleged revelation will be fitted and the foil against which it will be seen and interpreted. This pre-understanding does not limit what can be revealed, rather it provides concepts by which we are enabled to think about revelation.

So we must begin with what men generally mean when they speak of "god." First, god⁴ is usually thought of as *omnipotent*, that is, that person or power upon which one ultimately relies, the One who has power not only over one's whole life and destiny but also over the whole world. Second, god is the *Holy One*; god⁴ is what demands obedience and sacrifice of men and stands over them as *judge*; he demands our entire reverence and worship, excluding worship of all other gods. Third, god is the *eternal* and *transcendent*; god⁴ is

³Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, Macmillan, New York, 1955, pp. 90-118.

⁴For the sake of absolute clarity, "god" with a lower-case g will denote any non-Christian, pre-Christian or natural idea of god. "God" with an upper-case G will be reserved exclusively

differentiated from this world of change and decay; he is beyond all the particularities of our world. Even when god is conceived as immanent in the world, he is always the unchanging eternal which underlies the changing phenomena and as such is still transcendent. god⁴ is not an object of normal experience. He is the infinite in contrast to our finitude; he is the eternal in contrast to our temporality.

We see that this idea of god is not distinctively Christian although it contains most of the elements of the concept of god in the Old and New Testaments. Now Bultmann asks:

Is [man] acquainted with God because he has a concept of god? Not in the least. *In it he has only reached the stage of an inquiry about god;* and the knowledge contained in this inquiry is none other than *man's knowledge of himself*; a knowledge about what he has not and is not, and yet of what he would like to have and to be; a knowledge of the limitations and insignificance of man.⁵

So if man's natural concept of god is not really about God but about himself, what do each of the qualities (omnipotence, holiness, and transcendence) say about man?

First, "the man who speaks of god's omnipotence knows about his own powerlessness."⁶ Man, overwhelmed by his insignificance in the face of the powers which press in upon his life, hypostacizes a god either alongside these powers and stronger than all of them or a god who is behind all these chaotic powers secretly guiding them. To overcome his insecurity, man projects on the heavens the image of a father who is able to protect him in all his trials and guarantee the ultimate triumph of good no matter what happens in any particular period of history.

Second, "man knows about demands being made upon him when he speaks of a demanding god, of god as judge."⁷ Calling god holy is likewise a projection of man's hope in the face of his own unholiness. Man experiences himself as fallen, as less than he ought to be; there seems to be something wrong or incomplete in his existence. He may call this vague sense "guilt" and projects a divine demanding judge before whom he is guilty. The longer this kind of religious tradition lasts, the longer becomes its list of "god-given" rules because as the people learn to fulfill some of the rules, they discover that they still feel guilty and so have to project more rules upon the deity in order still to under-

for the God of grace revealed definitively in Jesus Christ. Quotations from Bultmann have been changed to conform to this convention. It even applies at the beginning of sentences, where normal usage would demand a capital.

⁴Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 95.

stand their guilt as transgression of his laws. Moreover, a holy god is the guarantor that man will one day emerge from his fallen state into the dignity which he feels lacking in himself, as the embodiment of all his ideas. Man's idea of a judging god expresses his sense of guilt and failure; man's idea of a holy god expresses his hope that he will some day emerge from his state of guilt and fallenness.

Third, "man knows about his transient nature when he speaks of god's eternity and transcendence."⁸ Exactly the same is true of man's natural belief in an eternal and transcendent god; it does not tell about God but about man's hopes. When man believes in a transcendent and eternal god, he is expressing his perception of his own life as limited, finite, decaying, and passing away. Man knows himself to be dying so he projects a god who will either be able to overcome death or at least in whom there is ultimate meaning for the life he lives in this world of change and decay. Man, seeing himself to be limited in every way, projects a god in whom the problem of his finitude is overcome.

This is one-half of the meaning of the puzzling statement that the knowledge of God is the same as man's knowledge of himself; what man thinks he naturally knows about god is really not knowledge of God but about himself in his need for a god. Man can know by natural means he is finite and limited in every way, but even though he may express this apprehension in terms of a god, it is not true knowledge of God, but only an inquiry about god. This inquiry about god is common to all religions because it arises from the human condition. Not even Christian natural theology can provide knowledge of God; this only comes from God himself as an act of grace, particularly, as we shall see, in Jesus Christ.

Christianity criticizes the "knowledge of god" possessed by other religions not because it is accurate knowledge of man's need for a god but because it claims to be knowledge of God. The pagan quest for a god is genuine, but the answers provided by other religions are all illusions.⁹ Why, according to Bultmann, must Christianity reject all the pagan deities?

First, concerning pagan answers to the quest for an omnipotent god, Christian belief says that man's quest for an omnipotent god cannot be fulfilled by any god who confronts man in the world, as in Stoicism. Stoicism attempts to understand nature as the ultimate within which man has a derived life. He is a part of the cosmos; but Christianity will not accept this because man is an historical being, a being subject to forces and powers which are beyond nature. He is certainly subject to the powers of nature, but these do not have ultimate power over him and they do not constitute an omnipotence to which he can submit himself and in which he can put his ultimate trust. Man is physically finite, but he is also free within this finitude. Nature brings him his death, but he still has a will to live

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 98.

which nature cannot conquer. Nature is not the divine power which frees man from himself. So the Stoic answer to the need for an omnipotent god and all other answers like it are inadequate and illusory.

Second, concerning pagan answers to the quest for a god who is a holy judge, Christian belief asserts that a god who is too easily identified as the source of morality and history is inadequate. Pagan religions properly express the demand for morality, but this is only knowledge of man's finitude. "Christian belief asserts . . . *that man does not in the least know God even in the demands to which he knows he is subject*, and that the voice of conscience which he hears is still not God's voice at all."¹⁰ In other words, religions such as certain segments of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam which merely hypostatize god out of their moral law have genuinely responded to man's fallenness, but they have not yet found the God of grace who really makes demands. Christians, who are people who have received the grace of God, are not merely obedient to an external law as is the case with other religions, but their obedience is an obedience of *will*. In a calculating, external obedience, there is always room for self-will; the individual can always find a way both to fulfill the rule and act in his own best interest. But under grace, this self-will is eliminated because God's grace evokes man's complete obedience, the radical obedience of his will to the will of God. This is why pagan conceptions of a demanding god are inadequate.

Pagan ideas of a holy god are also inadequate for a similar reason: they make their holy god too much a part of the objective world. He becomes an element in history, thereby guaranteeing the triumph of man's hope for an escape from his finitude. Christian belief cannot simply assert the revelation of God in history. Pagan history-controlling gods truly reveal man's quest for salvation from his condition, but they do not find the answer which Christianity asserts comes only in the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We shall return later to the Christian view of the relation of God to history, but here we must criticize the pagan views. According to the Christian faith, God's revelation in history does not mean that we see God's nature in individual heroes of history. Nor is it a kind of predestinarianism:

If we mean by [God's revelation in history] *God's sway is revealed in the forces of history*, that every single happening is integrated into a meaningful unity of the whole in accordance with a fixed plan, and that it directs the whole toward a predestined goal, this consideration is also an illusion. For the unity and significance of the historical event is not even at all clearly visible, and where one person thinks he perceived some significance, the other sees only a hotchpotch of error and violence. And in that case history confronts us as little really as a totality as does

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 102.

the world itself. It appears as a totality only to the aesthetic eye, which sees it in detachment.¹¹

In this case the pagan view (and Calvinism qualifies as pagan here) of the holy god as the director-general of history is rejected on the grounds that history objectively understood does not show this quality. The Christian God is Lord over history and history stands under his judgment, but we should not understand these affirmations too literally. The past provides the alternatives from which the future must be fashioned, but we cannot merely read off God's will from the past because history is always ambiguous. God does not *control* history. Man makes his own sinful history under God. Man knows the demand of God and his judgment, but what God wills for the future must remain veiled.

Third, concerning pagan answers to the quest for an eternal and transcendent god, Christian belief affirms that these gods also are illusions. They are merely wish-fulfilling projections of man's awareness of his finitude. In them there is no experience of the grace of God, which frees man from himself, from his *angst*, and from his finitude.

And so there remains for man *only the inquiry about god*, only a looking out for divine grace, in which the Eternal, Transcendent One frees us from ourselves. In saying this Christian belief is still not saying anything specifically Christian. It only does so when it speaks of the act of God, in which God makes a gift of his grace, and transforms us and the world.¹²

This is the conclusion we have come to concerning natural theology: It can only give man knowledge of himself—his need for divine grace to overcome his condition, which he is powerless to correct. When we say that there is no revelation of God outside of Christ, we are saying that man does not naturally have any means of grace. Man can somewhat recognize his predicament, but he has no power to extricate himself. This is where the Christian revelation enters.

In Jesus Christ God has made his grace appear. In him he has reconciled the world to himself, has granted the gift of justification, sanctity, and freedom. In Jesus Christ God is made manifest as the Omnipotent, Holy, and Eternal One by virtue of the fact that the grace which he bestows is the forgiveness of sins. Man's bondage to himself had prevented him from seeing God, the Omnipotent, Holy, Eternal One. But now God's grace has set man free from himself. Because he experiences being set free, God is all-powerful to him. Because he experiences his condemnation and God's forgiving grace at the same time, he knows that God is holy, that he is a demanding judge who is also able to grant what he demands. Because man is freed from his bondage to the world and

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 109.

enters a new creation, an eschatological existence, God is known as eternal and transcendent. Man's life is no longer transient; self-glorification ceases; man looks away from himself toward God's act in Christ. Worldliness is resigned and yet the things of the world are gained back in a new way to be fulfilled in love (an echo of Kierkegaard?). God's forgiving grace frees man from *angst* so that he can live for others; through the power of love his actions in the world gain ultimate significance.

And so it is that *Christian belief* speaks of *God's revelation* in Christ as the forgiving grace of God by which he as the Omnipotent Holy Eternal One shows himself and thereby liberates man from himself also teaching him to understand God in his grace.¹²

We notice from the preceding paragraph that Bultmann has a tendency to speak about the grace of God in mythological terms, but he does it with enough completeness to let us know what he means. And insofar as the condition of man which God overcomes in his grace is expressed in mythological terms, it is probably most appropriate that the answer be expressed in similar terms. Bultmann lets us know that the condition of man revealed by natural theology, namely his finitude, powerlessness, anxiety, guilt, self-will, and death, is overcome by the grace of God. He does not tell us in detail how he conceives the working of this grace, but only that it leads us into a new life which is not conditioned by the finitude experienced by natural man. It may strike us as strange at first that Bultmann equates the revelation of God with the reception of his grace, but when we see the role of natural theology as revealing not God himself but only man's need for a god, then it becomes clear how the grace of God which meets man's need leads us to what we call "knowledge of God." The attributes we assign to the God who comes to us in grace depend not on what God is in himself but on the way we understand him to be working in our lives. No propositions about God are revealed; we have only the reception of the grace which we so sorely need. *Our understanding of the nature of our need leads us to speak of God as fulfiller of these needs.* For instance, if man conceives his condition as possession by demons, he naturally speaks of the source of the grace which frees him as a liberator, savior, or demon-destroyer.

This is the second half of the meaning of the mystifying statements about man's knowledge of God being identical with his knowledge of himself and the purpose of Christianity being that of leading man to a new self-understanding. We have already seen the first half: What man thought was his knowledge of a god, namely natural revelation, was actually man's knowledge of his need for a god, but it was not yet the fulfillment of this need except in hypostacization of his wish. Now we see that when man receives God's grace, he still only has

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 112.

knowledge of God in the form of knowledge of himself. What he really knows is what has happened in his life because of God's act in Jesus Christ. He understands what God has done *for him* in terms of his understanding of what was previously wrong with him. He has been led not only into a new self-understanding, but actually into a new selfhood by the grace of God. He knows about God only insofar as he understands what has happened to him "in Jesus Christ."

Understanding God's revelation as his grace also gives us the key to understanding the exclusiveness of the Christian revelation. There is no way the Christian can prove to anyone outside the faith that God is revealed only in Jesus Christ, or even that he is revealed there at all. The natural man thinks he already has a god through the means of natural revelation, but as we have seen, this is only an inquiry about god. It is not revelation because he has not received the real grace of God. If he would truly know God, he must give up his self-assertion and accept the Word, which is the witness to the revelation of God in Christ. God is able to speak to this person through the Bible and preaching only if he is ready to hear, that is, only if he is ready to resign all and be completely transformed. Then and only then will he be able to receive the grace of God in Christ. For the Christian, the one who knows God's grace in Jesus Christ, there is no further question about the revelation of God in other places and in other ways. Once this grace has been received there is no further quest for it.

But, it will be argued, even Paul speaks of the revelation of God in nature (Romans 1:18-32). Yes, says Bultmann, but this is not the revelation of God's grace, but of his wrath, his demand, and his judgment, all of which we saw as elements of natural theology, which is really man's knowledge of his own condition in this world. This is the revelation not of God's grace but of man's finitude and creatureliness. Man is told of his endowment and the demand that comes with it. This is knowledge concerning man's own natural existence, not about God and his grace. Only the man who has already received the grace of God in Jesus Christ is able to meet God's grace in nature and history. For him the world has ceased to be a problem; nothing in all creation can separate him from the love of God.

But what about the revelation of God in the Old Testament? Bultmann says this too is primarily the revelation of man's creatureliness and dependence. There are occasions, however, in which the grace of God is seen, showing that man's natural quest for a god is not always deluded and distorted. The Old Testament man is primarily aware of the power and majesty of the world, but sometimes he is able to see through to a good and gracious God. But even in the Old Testament, we realize that God is revealed as gracious only to the man who is aware of his own creatureliness and dependence, only the man who is utterly broken. Thus we *can* speak of God's revelation in nature and history in the Old Testament, but the question is *should* we? This was the only revelation to the Hebrews at that time, but should we as Christians consider this revelation for us? For

a Christian to look for God's grace in nature and history is for him to fall away from the grace he has already received in Jesus Christ, for him to step back from the stage of fulfillment to a preliminary state of expectation and hope. If our sins have really been forgiven in Christ, if we have really entered an eschatological existence, why do we look for additional grace available through nature and history? However, there is a sense in which even the Christian receives the revelation of God in nature and history and this is the same as the natural revelation spoken of earlier. The Christian continually tends to slip from the grace he has been given in Jesus Christ, he tends to depend on himself once more. When this happens, nature and history can once again make him aware of his creatureliness and finitude and set him once again in quest of the grace of God. Nature and history constantly shatter our self-assurance, continually remind us that we do not *possess* the grace of God, that we are nothing in ourselves. Thus we are referred back to Christ, in whom we have found grace and upon whom we must eternally depend. For us there is no revelation apart from Christ.

God's Relation to Nature and History

Bultmann's understanding of the revelation of God as his grace which comes to us only through Jesus Christ and his rejection of natural theology as a means of knowing God except in the sense of a preliminary knowledge of our need for a god does not give us any grounds for supposing that God has any relation to nature or history at all.

There are no doubt moments in our lives when we believe that we become aware of the guidance and government of God the Creator; moments in which His miraculous action strikes us with powerful impressiveness. Such moments arise when for example we see scenes of great and sublime natural beauty, when we are deeply moved by a noble work of art, or when our experience convinces us of divine graciousness, or when we are shattered by a momentous historical event in which we feel compelled to see a manifestation of divine judgment. And we are right at such times to feel deeply aware of the wonder-working action of the Creator of all things. But we must admit at the same time that there are other men who see and experience the same things but who view and interpret them differently; who are unable to detect in them evidence of God's rule, or to hear in them God's voice.¹⁴

Christians believe in God as Creator and as Lord of History, but they cannot identify him with either nature or history because these phenomena are always ambiguous. God's presence in them is hidden to all eyes except the eyes

¹⁴*This World and the Beyond, op. cit.*, pp. 159-160.

of faith. Only by our faith do the beauty and grandeur of nature as well as its ugliness and destructiveness and the good and bad fortune of history become God's gifts and judgment. We cannot speak of God's relation to nature and history in general but only *for us*.

Faith in God the Creator

In a sermon of this same title, Bultmann tells us just what it means for a Christian to have faith in God as the creator of the natural world.

The first thing that is expressed by the Christian idea of God as the Creator is that *God stands beyond all the great powers of nature and history and of national and spiritual life . . .* Here, in *this* realm, God is not to be found! If we serve these powers we do not yet thereby serve God.¹⁵

For God to be the creator of the world means that he is distinct from it. The world is not God nor is he to be found in it. Bultmann clearly does not believe that God is immanent in the world. We know about him only because of his revelation in Christ. God comes to us in his grace in order to reveal to us that he is distant, that he is entirely other. We do not conclude that God is not in this world because there is no objective way of perceiving him here (although the belief in God's transcendence is a good apologetic against natural science) but because the grace which comes to us, comes from beyond.

Secondly, god's creation is a creation out of nothing; and to be god's creature means absolutely and in every present to have one's source in him, in such a way that were he to withhold his creative will the creature would fall back into nothing. Thus to be god's creature means to be constantly encompassed and threatened by nothingness.¹⁶

Although there is little or no Biblical basis for it, the Christian doctrine of creation has always been a doctrine of creation out of nothing. It is revealing that Christians have chosen to express their faith in this way. We need not concern ourselves with conceiving the process of creation out of nothing or with reconciling this with science because the doctrine is an expression of faith rather than an objective understanding of the world. As we saw in dealing with the natural knowledge of god, man perceives himself to be creaturely, finite, always threatened with dissolution. This consciousness has found its expression in the idea that god created out of nothing; our existence is closely akin to nothing;

¹⁵*Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Schubert Ogden, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 175.

we possess it only as a gift. If god were to stop giving, that is upholding, his creation, it would immediately fall back into nothingness. The doctrine of creation out of nothing is man's way of expressing his awareness of himself as creaturely and dependent.

Bultmann refuses to affirm a naive view of God as world-maker because there is no way that man could ever know anything of this sort. The Old Testament talk about creation in Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, etc. does not claim to be based on any objective investigation into the origins of the world. Rather it is man's attempt to express his relationship with God. Whether the God of grace was the objective cause of the world is beyond all possible human knowledge because we only know God through our knowledge of ourselves—first in our awareness of our need for a god and second in our awareness of what God has done for us when we receive his grace. In faith we know God as something beyond, something more ultimate, more significant than the powers of this world. Faith in God the creator is not an understanding of the origin of the stuff of the universe but an answer to the question, "Whom will you serve?" God as creator means only that God is worthy of our highest service and greatest honor.

God is revealed as the Creator to the Christian only in the grace given in Jesus Christ:

There is a mediator between God and the world who brings God near to us, in whom God becomes evident to us, and through whom the world becomes God's creation for us. . . . He is an individual man like us in whose action God acts, in whose destiny God is at work, in whose word God speaks. He has died on the cross—for us; and he now lives in eternity—for us! And only when we understand this do we understand that God is the Creator; and so it is through him that the world becomes God's creation—for us! ¹⁷

Christian faith in God as the creator is not about heaven and earth but about man's relation to God. The world is not God's creation in itself but only becomes so *for us* when God is revealed in Jesus Christ. Talk about "God's relation to the world" is really about God's relation to us expressed in terms of the world. Those who first affirmed belief in God as creator may have taken it literally to be about the world, but the existential faith upon which the statement was based was an awareness of their own creatureliness before God. The world is not the creation of God in itself nor is Christ divine except by the "eternally contemporaneous" working of God to make him the Christ *for us* and to make the world the creation of God *for us*.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

The Meaning of God as Acting

It is not a large step from understanding God's relation to nature to understanding his relation to history because the two are on a continuum. Belief in God's action in history is usually linked with the belief that he created this world, in which history is made. But as has become clear by now:

The affirmation that God is creator cannot be a theoretical statement about God as *creator mundi* in a general sense. The affirmation can only be a personal confession that I understand myself to be a creature which owes its existence to God.¹⁸

If we thus understand "God's relation to nature" as a way of expressing our own creatureliness, we can not proceed straight-forwardly from a preconceived dogma of creation to an uncritical doctrine of the Providence of God. As creation becomes God's creation for us only by faith, so the events of history become events within God for us only by faith.

In the last chapter of *Jesus Christ and Mythology* entitled "The Meaning of God as Acting," Bultmann distinguishes the "mythological" and "analogical" understandings of God as acting. Mythology always speaks of the gods as objective forces which interrupt and/or causally effect the processes of nature and history. When God's "action" is understood analogically, however, we think of him as acting "in" and "through" ordinary events. Having rid ourselves of a naive view of God's objective effects upon objective history, we can freely admit that it is the human element of understanding and interpretation which makes history God's action for us. Only the eye of faith sees the events within the secular world as the acts of God. If this is still mythology, says Bultmann, at least it is not a mythology which makes God into an object.

Faith understands naturally explicable events (either in nature or history, if we distinguish them) as the punishment or gift of God not because of a preconceived doctrine of God's providence and not because there is anything objective about the events which say "God" to us, but because faith sees the events on an entirely different level:

In faith I deny the closed connection of worldly events, the chain of cause and effect as it presents itself to the neutral observer. I deny the interconnection of worldly events not as mythology does, which by breaking the connection places supernatural events into the chain of natural events; I deny the worldly connection as a whole when I speak of God. I deny the worldly connection of events when I speak of myself, for in this connection of worldly events, myself, my personal existence, my own

¹⁸Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, Scribner's, New York, 1958, p. 69.

personal life, is no more visible and capable of proof than is God as acting.¹⁹

It is important to notice that Bultmann is not here expressing an anti-rational view, denying the validity of scientific investigation of the world, but he is saying that *in faith* this understanding does not apply. When we speak of God's acts, we are on an entirely different level of understanding, which has little to do with physical and historical understanding. This protects Christianity both from pantheistic tendencies, which suppose in advance that all events are the work of God because God is immanent in the world, and from scientific challenges to talk of God's action. God's action does not in any way interrupt the causal chain of worldly events nor deny its validity within its own limits, but God's action is in an entirely different category, the same category as man's knowledge of himself. This is why there is no speaking of God's action in nature or history apart from faith.

This is the paradox of faith, that faith "nevertheless" understands as God's action here and now an event which is completely intelligible in the natural or historical connection of events.²⁰

We could underline the word *understands* above and say that God enters only the *interpretation*, only the subjective side of the event, only on the level of *personal existence*. This is the sense in which God is always acting in the "here and now." Even events which are objectively long past can become the action of God as faith reflects upon them. For instance, the significance of the Exodus grew for the Israelites as the years went by. As they remembered this event it became more and more the decisive event by which God created them as a people. Faith is able to see the action of God in history not from a detached, objective point of view but only because it is personally involved in the history even if it is objectively past. Bultmann says:

I cannot speak of God's action in general statements: I can only speak of what He does here and now with me, of what He speaks here and now to me. . . . God as acting does not refer to an event which can be perceived by me without myself being drawn into the event as into God's action, without myself taking part in it as being acted upon. In other words, to speak of God as acting involves the events of personal existence.²¹

Bultmann's whole understanding of God is summed up in this single sentence from *Jesus Christ and Mythology*:

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 65.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 66, 68.

ONLY SUCH STATEMENTS ABOUT GOD ARE LEGITIMATE
AS EXPRESS THE EXISTENTIAL RELATION BETWEEN GOD
AND MAN.²²

God remains hidden and mysterious to man except to the degree in which he reveals himself to man through his grace given in Jesus Christ, which is received as a new self-understanding. Only in man's existential understanding of his need for a god and of what God has done for him in Jesus Christ is it legitimate to say anything about God. God has no objective relation to nature or history as far as man knows, although events in nature and history may serve as occasions for God to speak to man. Bultmann's understanding of God as known only existentially is the root of his demythologizing. Mythology always speaks of God's relation to something other than man's existential life and consequently is illegitimate. The only true meaning it could have is the existential dimension of what is affirmed. *All statements about God must be seen as really expressing man's existential relation to God no matter what other elements are present in the expression.* But because mythological statements must be interpreted as statements about man's existential relation *to God*, God himself can never be demythologized. This would only leave statements about man's existence. And Bultmann's firm belief in a "personal" God (because he acts on us as persons) whose grace we receive in Jesus Christ would never allow this.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 69. (Capitals added.)