

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE THEOLOGY OF RUDOLF BULTMANN, by Walter Schmithals. SCM Press, London, 1968. 334 pp. 45s.

Dr Schmithals has done a great deal of hard work and put together an admirably lucid account of Bultmann's theology. This is a worthwhile labour. The greatness of Bultmann's contribution to our present understanding of the New Testament proclamation has too often been obscured by the anxious flappings of those who have quite misunderstood the meaning of 'demythologizing', or by the incommunicative jargons of those who would require us to enter the Heideggerian maze as an essential ordeal before arriving at the *existentiel*. Dr Schmithals makes clear that Bultmann is, like every great New Testament exegete, saying that the New Testament is about precisely what we all knew it to be about: us now.

Bultmann swings a good cudgel against all who think of 'Revealed Religion' as a datum. There is no time for talk *about* God if we are to live 'the life he kindles in us'. The distinguishing characteristic of the New Testament message is that it announces a new understanding of man as the ongoing possibility of his existence. Whereas the Greek understood himself as 'a particular instance of the general, and understands the enigmas of his existence in understanding the conformity of the whole to law' and thus strove to escape the restrictions of the particular and the transitory and enter 'the sphere of timelessness and eternity', the New Testament shows 'that is the very way in which I evade my authentic existence. I do not achieve my existence in the sphere of the abstract, but in a concrete situation, in the here and now, in my individual responsibility and decision, where in hazarding myself I can gain or lose myself.'

Faith, for Bultmann, is the condition of authentic existence. It is the realization that we are now, at this moment of our historical existence, free for the future which God will give. He is fond of quoting in this connexion T. S. Eliot's lines:

Time past and time future

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

In this present we recognize the gift of God in the event of Christ. When the New Testament speaks of the love of God it does not, or does not primarily, mean the attitude of love, but love as action, as event, as the Christ event graciously occurring now, and known now through the proclamation of the Word of

God in the community.

What distinguishes the Christ event from all other history? How is it recognizable as a special event at all? Both in his discussion of the Pauline preaching of Christ crucified and risen, and his commentary on John's Gospel, Bultmann stresses that the saving event is seen only in faith. We should not expect it to be otherwise. God's presence is not to be objectified and scrutinized from an observation tower. We cannot stand back from God *and* recognize him. 'The divinity of Christ is revealed in the event in which we are given a place by the message of the gospel, which proclaims him as the grace of God made manifest to us.' We have nothing from ourselves upon which to base our faith. The ground and object of faith are identical.

We have simply to proclaim the Word of God in our world. For Bultmann the connexion of saving event and apostolate which can be seen in Paul's teaching does not relate to a particular apostolic authority but to the priesthood of all believers. Each of us has to look at the other 'conscious of his responsibility to make God's grace so plain by practice and precept that the question of faith is really put to this other man'. Hence the concern with exegesis and demythologizing for 'the importance of the New Testament mythology lies not in the objectifications which make up the content of its ideas but in the understanding of existence expressed in these ideas'. Thus, for example, the statement that God is in his heaven expresses 'in a crude manner' our belief that God transcends the world. We have to make such things clear if we are to show men the presence of Christ now.

We manifest the presence of Christ unmistakably in our assembling for worship, for 'the proclamation of the Word and an answering confession of faith, faith which celebrates the saving act'. The community 'of those among whom God creates life' is a participation in the saving event itself and makes us ready for anything in the free future.

Bultmann bids a short farewell to the ordered design of 'providence' and the teleology of 'natural law'—few will regret either of them, I suppose—and rejoices in the Word of God that we shall 'do greater works than these'.

Dr Schmithals demonstrates by his doing just what an 'introduction' should be.

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