

Just as understanding any text is understanding something historical and literary and, therefore, requires following historical- and literary-critical methods in questioning it, so understanding any text is understanding something existential and, therefore, allows for, even if it does not require, existentialist interpretation of it.

By "something existential" here I mean something that expresses or implies some understanding(s) of human existence. Since whatever else a human being may express or imply, she or he is always also expressing or implying some such understanding(s), any text is something existential in this sense and, therefore, may always be made the subject of existentialist interpretation, understood as interpretation guided (not by the existential, but) by the existentialist question about the understanding(s) of existence that the text expresses or implies.

Recognizing this, one can understand without difficulty why Bultmann speaks of such interpretation as interpretation "in the ultimate and highest sense" (*New Testament and Mythology*: 85). One can also understand why Bultmann's theory and praxis of interpretation, both in general and in the special case of biblical interpretation, are anything but arbitrary or idiosyncratic.

Characteristic of his theory and praxis is the distinction between two steps that he speaks of respectively as following "the hermeneutical rules," or "the method of historical-critical research," and questioning the text in the manner of "existentialist interpretation." If the first of these steps is generally recognized as indeed necessary to any adequate theory and praxis of interpretation, the second is commonly supposed to be something peculiar to Bultmann and those who happen to follow him, or to be followed by him, and, therefore, merely contingent and at best optional. Indeed, interpreters and critics of his theory and praxis often represent them as at this point dependent upon an existentialist philosophy that any interpreter is entirely free to accept or reject according to her or his own philosophical predilections.

But aside from the fact that this familiar representation quite fails to reckon with the real character and claims of any existentialist philosophy that

Bultmann can be fairly charged with depending on, it ignores the special importance of what he means by "existentialist interpretation" among the many proper ways of interpreting any text, to say nothing of its irreplaceable importance for interpreting religious texts generally and the Bible in particular. Call it what one will, what Bultmann means by "existentialist interpretation" is not simply one way among others of interpreting a text, but is the way that is always appropriate to any text and indispensably appropriate to any properly religious text such as the Bible. Not to interpret the Bible in the way of existentialist interpretation is simply not to take the Bible for what it itself purports to be—namely, *the* answer to our existential question about our own authentic possibility, which as such demands to be understood existentially, and thus to be made the subject of existentialist interpretation.

9 February 1995