

Granted (1) that any way of "reading" the Bible that meets the requisite conditions may be properly called an "interpretation" of it; and (2) that, in the case of the Bible, any number of proper interpretations are possible, including a theological interpretation, is this the most that can be said for "theological interpretation of the Bible"? Is such interpretation simply one way among others of properly interpreting the Bible?

I do not think so, provided, at least, that "theological interpretation of the Bible" is correctly understood.

If one holds, as I do, that theological interpretation of the Bible can only be a special case of existentialist interpretation of the Bible, the above question is really the question whether existentialist interpretation of the Bible is no more than one proper way of interpreting it among others. But to this question, the answer clearly seems to be no. For while an existentialist interpretation is indeed one way of interpreting the Bible among others, it is not simply that—any more than religion, understood as the primary form of praxis and culture through which human beings explicitly ask and answer the existential question, is simply one of many forms of praxis and culture, coordinate in importance with all of the other so-called secular forms. Just as religion, though one form of praxis and culture among others, is the only form through which the existential question at least implicitly asked and answered by all forms is also asked and answered explicitly, so an existentialist interpretation of the Bible, though one way of interpreting it among others, is the only way of interpreting it that one could fail to choose only by giving up the hope of adequately interpreting it for what it really is.

There are two reasons for saying this. The first is that any historical document, including the Bible, expresses or implies some understanding(s) of human existence and, therefore, always can and should be made the subject of existentialist interpretation. Whatever else human beings may be doing by all the different things that they think, say, and do, they are always addressing at least implicitly the existential question about their own authentic possibility of self-understanding, which all of us ask and seek to answer just as and because we are human beings. Consequently, we but take them at their own word and deed when we interpret the documents they leave behind by

asking the existentialist question about the possibilities of self-understanding that these documents express or imply. But if this is true of human documents generally, it must also be true of the Bible, whatever other questions we may also have good reasons to put to <sup>it</sup> in other ways of properly interpreting it.

The second reason for saying that existentialist interpretation of the Bible, though one way of interpreting it among others, is not simply that is that the Bible is a document of religion and, like any other religious document, is distinguished as such not only by asking and answering the existential question, but by doing so explicitly. The only way to interpret it as such, then, in terms of the question to which it itself is explicitly addressed, is by asking the existentialist question about the understanding of existence that it expresses or implies in addressing the existential question.

The essential point here is evidently the same point I have made elsewhere in suggesting how **studies of religion** can and should be distinguished from **religious studies**, properly so-called. Although any proper study of a religion may be said to be a way of studying it for what it really is, as distinct from what it appears to be or is said to be, only a religious study in the proper sense of the words studies a religion as itself an answer to a human question that makes or implies a claim to truth (*On Theology*: 113 f.). *Mutatis mutandis*, we may say that, although any "reading" or understanding of the Bible that satisfies certain stipulated conditions is a proper interpretation of it, only an existentialist interpretation of the Bible interprets it as itself an answer to the existential question that claims to be true and, therefore, can and should be critically validated.

Of course, any (actual or prospective) adherent of a religion for which the Bible is acknowledged as authoritative—normatively and/or causatively—as well as any theologian of any such <sup>a</sup> religion has yet a further reason for thinking of existentialist interpretation of the Bible as more than simply one way of interpreting it among others. This is true, at any rate, if it is with respect to its answer to the existential question that the Bible is understood to be authoritative. On that understanding, existentialist interpretation of the Bible is the necessary condition of the possibility of its

actually functioning as the authority it is acknowledged to be. But, as Bultmann rightly recognizes, this further reason is unlike the other two in having force only relatively, for only some individuals or groups (*NTMOBW*: 106).

I conclude, then, that theological interpretation of the Bible is more than simply one way among others of properly interpreting it. Because it is a special case of existentialist interpretation of the Bible, and because existentialist interpretation of the Bible, for its part, is not simply one way of interpreting it among others, but the only way of interpreting it that is appropriate to it as the kind of document it itself really is, theological interpretation of the Bible may also claim to be uniquely appropriate. And this can only appear the more certain to anyone acknowledging the Bible's own claim, and / or the claim that others make for it, to decisive existential authority.

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