

“Faith and unfaith,” Bultmann argues, are matters not of blind, arbitrary resolve but of understanding affirmation or denial.” For although “the word of proclamation encounters us as God’s word, in relation to which we cannot raise the question of legitimation, but which rather asks us whether we are willing to believe it,” it does this in such a way that, “in calling us to believe in the death and resurrection of Christ as the eschatological event, it opens up to us the possibility of understanding ourselves” (*New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*: 39). Elsewhere, in an obviously parallel passage, Bultmann explains this by saying that, although the faith that believes and obeys the word does indeed “accept something unbelievable [*Unglaubliches*] on authority,” it is “not a blind faith that accepts something unintelligible [*Unverständliches*] on external authority” (*Kerygma und Mythos* 3: 57 f.).

I have two questions about this:

1. Why is what faith accepts on authority “something unbelievable”?—On my understanding, it is because what faith accepts on authority is neither a matter of fact nor a matter of principle (in Leibniz’s terms, neither a “truth of fact” nor a “truth of reason”), but an existential truth, and therefore is “unbelievable,” which is to say, *unbelievable in the ways in which (or on the grounds on which) either truths of fact or truths of reason are rightly taken to be believable*. And this leads to my second question:

2. Why is what faith accepts on authority not “something unintelligible”?—On my interpretation, it is because what faith accepts on authority, being an existential truth, is in its own way (or on its own ground) intelligible, which is to say, *intelligible because acceptance of it is at one and the same time acceptance of our own possibility of understanding ourselves*—by which, I take it, Bultmann can only mean, the possibility of understanding ourselves in the eulogistic sense of “understanding ourselves *authentically*.”

In support of this interpretation, I would appeal to another closely related passage, where Bultmann says, “[T]he possibility of the word’s being understood coincides with the possibility of one’s understanding oneself. What one is asked is whether one is *willing* to understand oneself as the word instructs one to do. In

the fact that one *can* thus understand oneself lies the sole criterion of the word's truth—or better expressed, perhaps, it is to this alone that anybody who asks for a criterion is to be referred" (*Glauben und Verstehen* 1: 284; cf. also, *Christ without Myth*: 86).

As for just how Bultmann's meaning in this passage is to be understood, I take him not to be making the trivial point that, since anyone human has the ontological possibility of somehow understanding oneself, one *can* understand oneself as the word instructs one to do. This would be so far from being anything like a "criterion" of the truth of the word that Bultmann would cut a comic figure in proposing it as such. Therefore, his point, I believe, has to be that the only, and the sufficient, "criterion" of the truth of the word is that it explicitly confronts one with the same fundamental option implicitly confronting one as soon and as long as one is human at all, and thus calls one to accept what one is, ever has been, and ever will be called to accept in every moment of one's existence. From which it follows that any demand for some other supposed legitimation of the word's truth can only be refused in the way in which, according to the gospels, Jesus repudiated the demand of the Pharisees to accredit himself by a miraculous sign (Mk 8:11 f.).

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