

Some Reflections upon Rereading Jesus (17-20 May 2006)

1.1. What does Bultmann understand by "[an] authority"?—My hypothesis is that he understands the concept/term very much as I do, even if his understanding never becomes fully explicit. He uses it, for the most part, in the sense of "executive" authority, although I see nothing in what he says to make me think he couldn't or wouldn't use it in the sense of "nonexecutive" authority as well; indeed, I see every reason to think he would be quick so to use it—just as he analyzes and uses "doctrine" in the sense of "indirect," as well as "direct," address. In any case, his understanding of what is required to grasp "the real essence of history," namely, a "real encounter" with it, which takes place only in "constant dialogue," is all tied up with such other notions as that "history should really speak," that one must be ready "to hear the *claim* of history," to "really *question* history," and "to hear history as [an] authority" (8 f.; history does not speak, Bultmann says, "if one claims a neutrality toward it, but only if one comes to it moved by questions and wants to learn from it").

1.2. A closely related distinction that Bultmann explicitly makes with respect to "[an] authority" is that between "a formal," or "a purely formal," "external," authority, on the one hand, and an authority based on "content," whose commandments are "intelligible" (*einsichtig*), on the other (66 ff.). On his interpretation, "the basic idea of Jewish ethics," including Jesus', is "obedience." But whereas, for Jewish ethics generally, the obedience called for is purely formal, indeed, "blind," obedience to scripture as a purely formal, external authority, for Jesus, the "obedience" God calls for is "radicalized," is "radical obedience." "What is God's will is therefore not what an external authority says it is, so that the content of the commandments would be indifferent; rather, it is entrusted to human beings and expected of them to see for themselves what is demanded of them. Hence God's demands are valid as intelligible [*Gottes Forderungen gelten also als einsichtig*]" (68). "By contrast with the scribal view, which regards all scriptural passages as equally binding and composes contradictory passages, Jesus plays one scriptural passage off against another [as, for example, in Mk 10:2-9]. . . . Thus it is clear that it is not formal authority that binds human beings, but rather that, if they can make such distinctions [*sc.* as Jesus makes] in scripture, they are credited

with the insight of themselves knowing what is demanded by God. Also clear is that the content of the commandment is not indifferent, but rather decides whether a word of scripture is what God commands. . . . So it is clear that the formal, external authority of scripture is given up" (67 f.). Reflecting on such reasoning, one can only ask whether Bultmann's express distinction between purely formal, external authority, on the one hand, and authority based on intelligible content, on the other, far from being merely a "closely related" distinction, isn't really his way of explicitly distinguishing, after all, between "executive" and "nonexecutive" authority. My judgment is that, at the very least, it confirms that the last thought in his mind is ever to separate the two senses of "[an] authority," as distinct from properly distinguishing them. Any authority, if valid, is so because, and only because, its commandments are intelligible.

1.3. This seems to me only confirmed by other things Bultmann says. I'm thinking especially of how he deals with the objection of "anthropomorphism" to thinking and speaking about "God as person" (173 f.). The standpoint from which this objection is made, he says, is "the spectator's standpoint." But when Jesus thinks and speaks of God as person, "the spectator's standpoint is abandoned." "Human beings are seen in their existential being, precisely in the life that moves through the decision-filled moments of the here and now, and that therefore cannot be grasped with a general description of the essence of human beings. One does not at all dispose of this existential being of the I in one's thoughts, since one cannot stand alongside it and observe it, but rather *is* it. Naturally, no one can ever prove that one has such an existential being; for then, again, the spectator's standpoint would be required. But one can know oneself, in this one's real being, to be encountered, claimed by a thou. Indeed, this claim is in truth what first gives one one's existence as an I. And that one, awakening to the I, knows oneself claimed by an inescapable thou means that one speaks of God, and of God as person, who speaks to the I as thou. But then one can as little observe this thou as a spectator from the outside as one can observe one's I, and the charge of anthropomorphism has lost its sting." In this connection, Bultmann goes on to say "that, in Jesus' opinion, one as a human being is claimed by an authority outside oneself and is called to decision in one's concrete here and now," or, in other words, that God demands obedience

from one" (175). God is here clearly said to be "an authority," even "an authority outside oneself" (*eine außer ihm befindlichen Autorität*). But I take it that God as an authority outside oneself is to be distinguished from what Bultmann speaks of earlier as "*die formale, äußere Autorität der Schrift*" (67), even though he nowhere distinguishes explicitly between "an authority" and "a source of authority," to say nothing of distinguishing between "implicit" and "explicit" sources of authority and between "primal," "primary," and "secondary" authorizing sources. As for the other things Bultmann says that likewise support my hypothesis, they're the subject of the following reflections on christology.

2.1. What is important in Bultmann's argument for an adequate critico-constructive christology?—One thing, certainly, is that it leaves no doubt whatever that Jesus (as well as "his disciples") appeared with the consciousness of having been sent. Bultmann makes explicit reference to this on the first page of his exposition of Jesus' proclamation (27 f.); and he concludes his exposition, as well as the whole book, by explicitly returning to this very point. The question that Jesus leaves for his hearer to decide, he says, is "whether his word is truth," which is one and the same with the question, "whether he is sent from God" (182). But what is it to be sent from God if not to have authority, or to be an authority, just because one represents the divine claim on human beings? Speaking of the event that gives a human being the right to speak of forgiveness, Bultmann says: "it can only be an event that encounters one, that comes to one from outside, an event that attests itself as God's act in that it encounters one as the authority that represents the divine claim on one, the divine claim that attests forgiveness as also divine in that it is the pure gift that lifts one up by judging one" (177). The event Bultmann has in mind in saying this, of course, is Jesus, or, more exactly, "Jesus' word(s)," of which he goes on to say: "To be sure, the earliest community did hold [Jesus] to be the Messiah. But in doing so, it did not ascribe to him some special metaphysical being that gave his words authority, but rather confessed thereby that God had made him king of the community on the authority of his words" (180). Nor is his point any different when he goes on: "There is, to be sure, one estimate of [Jesus'] person that corresponds to his own intention—not insofar as he is a 'personality,' but insofar as he is

sent by God, insofar as he is bearer of the word. In this sense, he says, 'Blessed is one who takes no offense at me!' (181; cf. 29: 'Jesus' message is sustained by this certainty: *the rule of God is coming, is coming now!* And for him and his own, his activity in word and deed is the sign: the rule of God is breaking in. . . . In this last hour, the hour of decision, he is sent with the last, decisive word. Blessed is the one who understands it, who does not take offense at him! [Mt 11:6]. For now's the time to decide for or against him: 'Anyone who is not with me is against me, and anyone who does not gather with me scatters' [Mt 12:30]. . . . Soon, when the rule of God breaks in, when the judge of the world, the 'Son of man,' comes, Jesus will be justified, and 'everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but anyone who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God' [Lk 12: 8 f.]). Incidentally, an important further confirmation of my hypothesis concerning Bultmann's understanding of authority is that his explanation of what attests Jesus' claim to decisive authority—namely, his message (29)—corresponds, point for point, to what he says about its "content," far from being "indifferent," deciding whether or not a word of scripture is God's commandment (67 f.).

2.2. It's clearly implied by Bultmann's whole approach that, for Jesus and his own, i.e., the earliest community, Jesus himself, or Jesus' word(s) as actual event, is the exact counterpart of the law for Judaism otherwise. Speaking of the latter, Bultmann says, "The law of this people and the unconditioned obedience of the pious make the Jewish people the *chosen* people" (20). But, given Bultmann's interpretation, one could obviously say equally truly that "The Jesus whom the earliest Christian community speaks of as the Messiah and the obedience of faith of the faithful make this community the chosen people in the sense of the new, eschatological community called out in the last days." In other words, in both cases, we have what Bultmann himself speaks of simply as "authorities," but what I should call, using distinctions he nowhere makes, "explicit, primal, ontic *sources* of authority," this phrase identifying the exact role or function of the law and of Jesus in their respective communities. It's only to be expected, then, that Bultmann would make exactly the same point about the authority belonging to both sources, i.e., that it is not a purely formal, external authority, but an authority dependent on, and deriving from, its "content," which, being

"intelligible" (*einsichtig*), can validly claim, not merely "blind obedience," but "radical obedience." There is nothing in the least odd or inconsistent, then, in what Bultmann says about "revelation" in his much later reply to Karl Jaspers. On the one hand, he argues, "the faith that acknowledges the claim of revelation is not a blind faith that accepts something *unintelligible* on external authority," because "one can understand what the word of revelation says, since it offers one the two possibilities of one's self-understanding." On the other hand, he insists, "it is also to be said that faith accepts something *unbelievable* on authority," because the possibility of living out of the grace of God is not something generally standing at my disposal, only to be "recalled" and laid hold of, but is given as a concrete event, demanding decision.