

On Bultmann's Essential Point

F. R. Tennant says that "theistic religion . . . is the adoption in practical life, by way of emotional response and as determinative of volitional conduct, of the theistic world-view" (*Philosophical Theology*, 2: 241). Hence Christ, on his view, is "the religious genius of theism." Or, again, Whitehead says that "a religion, on its doctrinal side, can . . . be defined as a system of general truths which have the effect of transforming character when they are sincerely held and vividly apprehended" (*Religion in the Making*: 17). Or, still again, I myself say that, "Although we agree with the liberal theologians that the only 'objectivity' about Jesus of which the New Testament itself intends to speak is one that has its basis in the word he proclaims and is, we want to make much clearer than they generally did that this proclamation is not a body of timeless truths, but an *existentiell* communication demanding decision. . . . What confronts us in Jesus is not, in its first intention, a 'world-view' addressed to our intellects, but a possibility of self-understanding that requires of us a personal decision" (*Christ without Myth*: 162).

But now, against all this—my own view no less than Tennant's and Whitehead's!—Bultmann insists that "*genuine faith in God* is to be sharply distinguished from what is customarily called a *world view*. . . . [G]enuine faith in God is *not a general truth* that I acknowledge, of which I dispose, and which I apply. On the contrary, it is what it is only as something that constantly grows up and is laid hold of anew" (*Glauben und Verstehen*, 2: 6 f.). This insistence that genuine faith in God is not a world view includes the insistence that it is also other and more than "the adoption *in practical life* . . . of the theistic world-view," or the transformation *in character* that is the effect of sincerely holding or vividly apprehending "a system of general truths." For, clearly, the old liberals would be unfairly arraigned by any implication that they failed to recognize the essentially "practical" character of religion, and so on. But Bultmann's insistence cuts against my own view just as sharply because, as he argues, the scandal of the Christian proclamation is the same for the existentialist as for anyone who would secure his existence by objectifying thinking, "insofar as he secures himself—not, to be sure, by objectifying thinking, but—by his free resolve" (*Barth-Bultmann Briefwechsel*: 176).

In sum: Bultmann's essential point is not caught simply by recognizing the "practical," or even the "existential," character of faith, but only by recognizing that faith is always and only an *event* in response to *the always prior event of God's grace*, of which faith as such is the obedient reception. In this sense, faith is, in Karl Barth's terms, an "impossible possibility," or a "possible impossibility." That this entails, as Bultmann infers, the kind of exclusivistic christocentrism that he more or less consistently defends may be just as questionable as I hold it to be. But from my side, the acknowledgement is certainly in order that Christian faith as authentic faith *in* God's grace, i.e., in the *act*, or *event*, of God's grace, is crucially other and more than "theistic religion," or "a religion," in the senses in which Tennant and Whitehead use the terms, or even what I speak of as "a possibility of self-understanding that requires of us a personal decision." (To what extent some such acknowledgement is at least implied by most, if not all, of the things I've written since *Christ without Myth* is certainly worth asking. I say, "at least implied," although there is one passage in *Christ without Myth* itself where I explicitly dissociate what I say from the mistaken suggestion that the possibility of faith "literally 'belongs' to man, in the sense of something he possesses independently of his relationship with God, and so is able to dispose of as and when he pleases." "The truth," on the contrary, "is that this possibility is not man's own inalienable possession, but rather is constantly *being made possible for him* by virtue of his inescapable relation to the ultimate source of his existence. To be human means to stand *coram deo* and, by reason of such standing, to be continually confronted with the gift and demand of authentic human existence" [140; italics in the original]. But I wonder whether I've explicitly acknowledged Bultmann's point as often and as emphatically as I could and should have done—even in my most recent writings [e.g., "On Revelation"].)

I have three further reflections:

(1) Just as Bultmann insists that genuine faith in God is crucially other and more than a "practical," or even an "existential," attitude merely as such—namely, *the obedient response* to God's always prior act of grace—so he also argues that what is properly meant by "sin" is crucially other and more than what a philosopher may interpret as "inauthentic existence" (*Kerygma und Mythos*, 1: 38). Sin is indeed inauthentic existence, but only *as the disobedient*

response to God's always prior act of grace. In other words, sin as well as faith, is an *event*, a matter of "the moment," that is constituted solely by God's always prior act of grace, of which sin as such is the refusal, even as faith as such is its acceptance. But this is simply to take seriously that sin, like faith, is a transmoral, transreligious, even, in a sense, transexistential—in short, "impossible"—possibility

(2) This means, I judge, that Mr. Wesley's essential point in "The Almost Christian" is not different in its logic from Bultmann's, insofar as Wesley argues that one remains but an "almost Christian" even when one's beliefs and actions are right and one is "sincere" in so believing and acting. For Wesley, even as for Bultmann, faith and sin alike "transcend the sphere of consciousness" (*Existence and Faith*: 150). They alike are functions of the always prior act of God's grace, to which they are respectively the obedient response of acceptance and the disobedient response of refusal. But where Wesley has something essential to contribute to a critical appropriation of Bultmann's point is his doctrine of "prevenient grace," which can be more consistently elaborated than he succeeds in elaborating it only as the doctrine of *the original, implicit grace of God*, the ever-renewed gift of which is constitutive of every moment of human existence as such, so that, as Wesley puts it, "no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath."

(3) All this also throws light, I think, on Bultmann's—at first sight, strange—comment that he cannot understand the proclamation of Jesus otherwise than as "the proclamation of the law" (*Barth-Bultmann-Briefwechsel*: 185). If what has been said is correct, there is no difference between law and gospel so far as their *content* is concerned; gospel differs from law only in that it is the *event* of God's grace, which *alone* is the ground of the possibility both of the obedience of faith and of the disobedience of sin. But Jesus' proclamation is only implicitly the *event* of God's grace, in contrast to the Christian kerygma, which attests his proclamation explicitly—in its "*that*," in its being as *event*—as the prior act of God's grace to which faith and sin are the obedient and the disobedient responses respectively.