

According to Bultmann, understanding reports of events as acts, or the act, of God presupposes "a preunderstanding of what in general can be called God's act—as distinct, say, from the acts of human beings or from natural events" (NTMOBW: 87). Such a preunderstanding is possible because our existence is moved, consciously or unconsciously, by the question about God, and thus about God's act. "There is an existential knowledge of God present and alive in human existence in the question about 'happiness' or 'salvation' or about the meaning of the world and of history, insofar as this is the question about the authenticity of our own existence" (87).

But what preunderstanding of God's act do and must we in fact have? We preunderstand God's act to be: (1) "an act in a fully real, 'objective' sense," as distinct from being simply a way of speaking pictorially about our subjective experiences; and (2) a phenomenon in the world that one can perceive as God's act only in being existentially affected by it, and that one can talk about, therefore, only in that one oneself, as the one affected by it, is also talked about." To talk about God's act means to talk at the same time about my own existence" (110). Because human life is a life in space and time, God's act can only be an event in the particular here and now. "This event of being addressed, questioned, judged, and blessed by God here and now is what is meant by talk about the act of God" (110).

God is not a phenomenon within the world that can be objectively established. On the contrary, "God" refers to "a reality which lies beyond the reality that can be objectified, observed, and controlled, and which is of decisive significance for human existence," being "the reality that means for us salvation or damnation, grace or wrath, and that demands of us respect and obedience" (160). Thus, being human, "we are forced to recognize that we are not lords of our own life, and we become aware that the world and our life have their ground and limit in a transcendent power that lies (or powers that lie) beyond whatever we can reckon with and dispose of" (161). Therefore, we can talk about God's act, as

the act of this transcendent power, only if we at the same time talk about our own existence as affected by God's act. Being affected by God's act, however, cannot be established or proved objectively. Of course, every such existential encounter with God's act takes place in a concrete situation, and it is easy, or, so to say, natural for the person encountered by God to refer this situation also to God's act. This is perfectly legitimate, provided only that originating in God's will is not confused with the causality accessible to an objectifying view.

To speak of God's act, then, is to qualify an event or processes that, at one and the same time, for an objectifying view, can be established as an event or processes within the continuum of natural and historical happenings. Thus such an act of God is a "wonder" in which the continuum of natural and historical processes in the world is, as it were, sublated.

The peculiar thing about Christian faith is that it sees an utterly special act of God in a certain historical event which can be objectively established as such. This is the appearance of Jesus Christ, who is seen to be "the revelation of God that calls everyone to faith" (162). Thus the Christ event is the eschatological event through which God has put an end to the world and its history.

In Bultmann's view, then, to say of an event or process that it is an act of God, insofar as this is intended as in some way a differentiating statement, can only mean that it is and by right ought to be decisive for my self-understanding before God, that in it God Godself confronts me with the gift and demand of my authentic existence.

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