

### *On Bultmann's View of Western History*

Bultmann's view of Western history is characterized, above all, by his judgment that it has been shaped by the two great traditions stemming from Graeco-Roman antiquity, on the one hand, and Christianity, on the other. Christianity, in turn, presupposes and further develops—in a "radicalized" form—the Old Testament-Jewish tradition. The "radicalization" here consists in Christianity's continuing to assume with the Old Testament-Jewish tradition, over against the other tradition stemming from Greece and Rome, that history constitutes a sphere of life distinct from nature, but also insisting that the history that is decisive is not the history of Israel and of the other nations, but the history that each and every individual person experiences (*GV*, 3: 102).

Bultmann is quite clear that these two formative traditions are very, very different. To this extent, he recognizes that his is more a typically Protestant than a typically Roman Catholic way of looking at Western history. On the other hand, he allows that his view is rather more Lutheran than Reformed in that the Graeco-Roman tradition is very definitely of positive value to him (*GV*, 2: 136 f.). Particularly important is his insistence, over against Christians and theologians who would too simply dismiss the humanistic-idealistic tradition or make it responsible for our contemporary crisis, that the two traditions stand together over against all subjectivism, with its relativistic and, eventually, nihilistic implications. This kind of subjectivism he understands to have appeared already in antiquity, in the kind of sophism for which the collapse of the traditional myth meant the disappearance of all authority and which interpreted the slogan, "Man is the measure of all things," in the sense of radical subjectivism. But, then, he understands humanism to have originated precisely in the struggle against this kind of sophistic subjectivism (*GV*, 2: 145 f.; 3: 66). Far from affirming that human beings are a law unto themselves, the humanistic tradition has insisted that human beings are bound to obey the law constituted by the norms of the true, the good, and the beautiful. In other words, they have distinguished the merely apparent freedom that consists in doing what one pleases and the real freedom that requires one to do only that which is worthy of being done.

The other judgment that is important to Bultmann's overall view of Western history is that, in the nineteenth century, both of these formative traditions were more and more displaced by another and very different outlook. In the earlier part of the century, this outlook took the form of a naively optimistic faith in historical progress, encouraged by the development of science and technology and the control of nature and destiny of which they seemed to give promise. The philosophical attitude corresponding to this optimistic faith Bultmann calls "positivism," by which he presumably means the kind of view represented by Comte (*GV*, 3: 62 f.). In any event, the course of the nineteenth century saw the development of relativism and, finally, nihilism, and thus the loss of the assurance—fostered by both of the formative traditions stemming from Graeco-Roman antiquity and Christianity—that a human being is a person with dignity, and so an end in her- or himself, not merely a means to other ends. In a world that was becoming more and more technically controlled and politically organized, human beings more and more came to be used as mere means to ends and as mere cogs in the great machine of economic and political organization—witness the term "manpower" (= *Menschen-Material*). In the course of the twentieth century, then, under the influence of the two world wars, the earlier naively optimistic faith in progress ceased to satisfy, either becoming quite incredible or else assuming the grotesque form of the totalitarian state.

Also at work in the rise of totalitarianism, however, was the *ressentiment* of human beings who had lost confidence in their dignity as persons. Totalitarianism grew out of such *ressentiment* and appealed to it, even while it undertook systematically to kill the last remnant of any consciousness of oneself as a person by making one utterly and completely a means for the ends of the state (*GV*, 2: 147 f.).

At bottom, then, the inhumanity of our century is connected with the failure of modern men and women to continue to be guided by the two formative traditions of Western history (*GV*, 3: 58 f.). By the same token, adherents of both traditions must recognize that they stand together against all subjectivism, relativism, and nihilism, in affirming the dignity of each

and every person and the possibility of objective truth, goodness, and beauty and a human life lived in accordance with them (*GV*, 2: 146 ff.; 3: 67 ff.. 74 f.).

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