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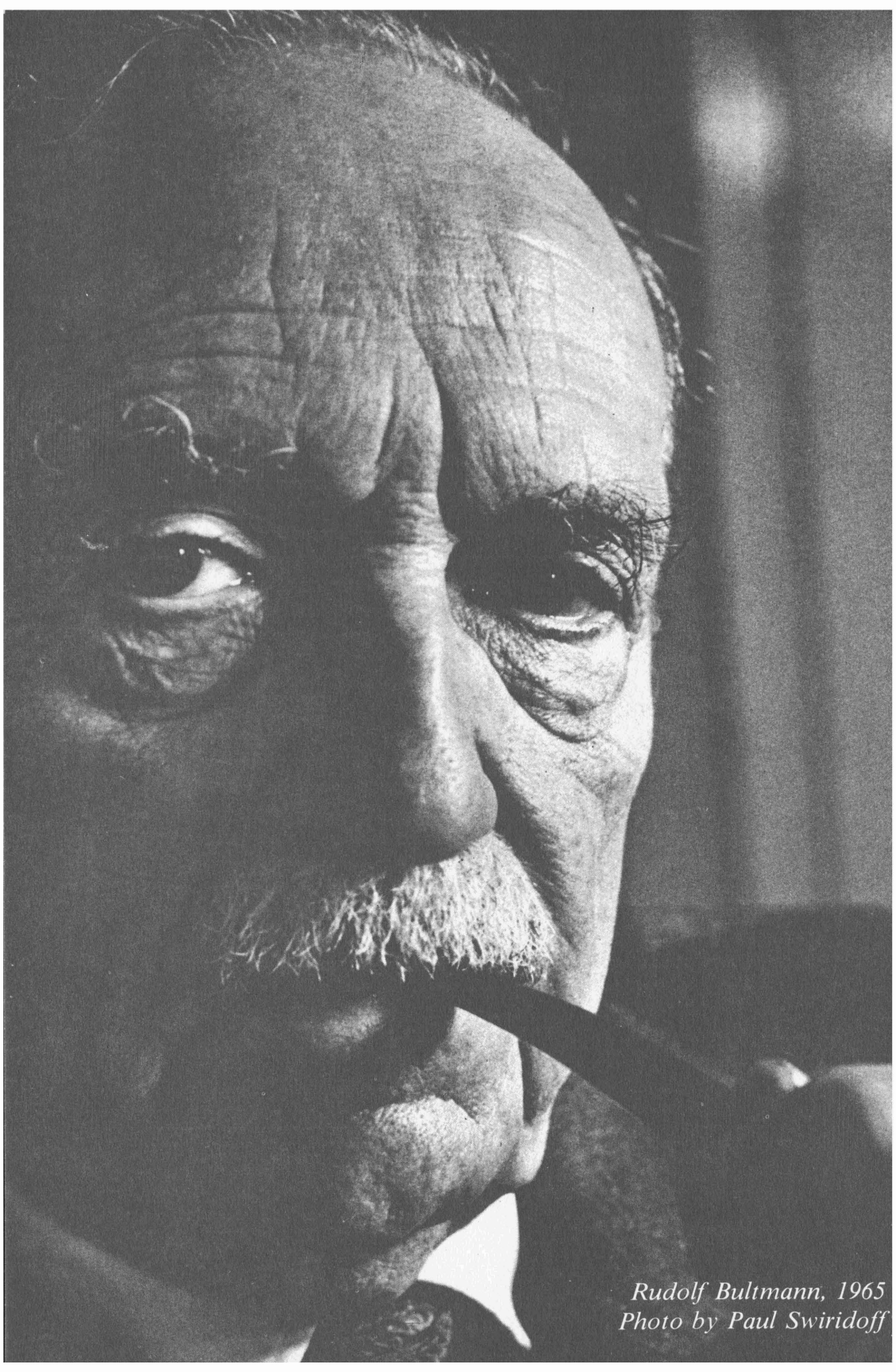
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The
Ernest S. Bird Library
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*Rudolf Bultmann, 1965
Photo by Paul Swiridoff*

Rudolph Bultmann at Syracuse

by Gabriel Vahanian

I

The most distinguished Visiting Professor Syracuse University has had through its Department of Religion (1958-59), Rudolf Bultmann, born in 1884, still dominates the field of New Testament Studies. The University can take exceptional pride in having conferred upon him an honorary doctorate. In addition, the University Library is now the richer for being the recipient of a vast collection of materials originating from Professor Bultmann's eminent public career as well as from his personal life. The correspondence henceforth treasured by the Manuscripts Department of Syracuse University Library contains letters to and from the young promising theologians of the sixties as well as one, among others, from the already world-famous theologian — physician, Albert Schweitzer, in which he explains his decision to turn down a chair at the University of Leipzig in order to practice medicine in Africa.

The Rudolf Bultmann Papers include not only manuscripts of his own works but also notebooks dating from student days when he was attending the lectures of famous theologians of that time, such as Harnack and Jülicher. There is no doubt that with such an extraordinary collection the Library will play a significant role in furthering scholarship; Rudolf Bultmann, indeed, belongs to the future.

As his recently published correspondence with Karl Barth (the other theological giant of the century) already demonstrates, Bultmann's thought has survived both the collapse of church-based Christendom and dogma-capped Christian faith. Oddly enough, the correspondence with Barth begins in the days when Bultmann offered his collaboration to Barth in his gigantic effort to reappraise and redefine the nature of faith and ends with an exchange of views dealing with Bultmann's article on the death of God issue published under the title "The Idea of God and Modern Man." This ending of their correspondence is quite telling, it is symbolic: on the one hand, there is Karl Barth getting himself as it were locked up in the church in order to face *Dr. Vahanian is Eliphalet Remington Professor of Religion and Director of Graduate Studies in Religion at Syracuse University. Among his publications is the controversial The Death of God, 1961, as well as Wait Without Idols, 1964, No Other God, 1966, and La Condition de Dieu, 1970.*

the enemy – atheism – but forgetting how unrecognizable the enemy has become; on the other hand, there is Bultmann meeting the enemy's attack by seeking to unmask him in order to let him stand naked in front of his own problem, the problem of God. For nothing less, Bultmann has consistently been arguing, nothing less than the self-understanding of an atheist is what man, according to the New Testament, needs in order to be able to exclaim, "I believe, help thou my unbelief." And by the same token, the world of the Bible, so dear to Barth, also encompasses our own post-Christian world. The Bible is not for Bultmann a document from the past. Nor does the New Testament, as Bultmann put it in one of his lectures while at Syracuse,¹ concern itself with relating an historical event which would *ipso facto* be misunderstood if it were understood "as a simple episode of the past which took place once upon a time, almost two thousand years ago."

No, the New Testament is not merely a documentary of past events, of by-gones characteristic of a past still lingering on in our conscious and unconscious religio-cultural heritage. Rather, the New Testament as such makes sense only if it is itself attested by the on-going inventory of things to come, of the life ahead to which man, regardless of the circumstances and the epochs, remains bound. Indeed, the man of faith is not merely confronted with his past. He is also faced with the possibility of a new future, and the question to which he must answer is whether he will seek for this future elsewhere rather than where it lies open for him to step into it – right here and now.

II

The last point leads us straight into the heart of Bultmann's thought. At the core of his work we find him wrestling with three problems, actually three aspects of one and the same problem – that of man's relation to God (i.e., anthropology and theology) understood in terms of that single context (i.e., christology) which alone aims at preventing either the reduction of theology to anthropology, of God to man, or the elevation of man to God, the resorption of anthropology into theology. Indeed, according to traditional theological reflection, the doctrine of God is what constitutes an ellipse of which the doctrines of Christ and of man are, so to speak, the foci. Christ and man are thus understood in terms of God. Accordingly, God was seen as the supreme hypothesis, a principle through which everything else was explained. The problem with such a God of the reason is that he soon becomes, in Archibald MacLeish's phrase, a God who is himself nothing but "reasons." And inevitably, this God who is "reasons" simply becomes my own *raison d'être*, that of which I take possession. But, as Bultmann himself puts it in the Humanities Lecture delivered at Syracuse on a related topic,²

¹ "What Alienates Modern Man from Christianity."

² "The Concept of Freedom in Classical Antiquity and Christianity."

Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung

Auf alle Fragen zu antworten, die an mich gerichtet worden sind, seitdem mein Aufsatz "NT u. Mythologie" ["erschienen ist"], und auf alle kritischen Äußerungen einzugehen, ist mir nicht möglich.¹⁾ Aber ich will versuchen, die Fragen zu klären, die mir als die wichtigsten erscheinen. U. zwar möchte ich zunächst, um einige Mißverständnisse zu beseitigen, möglichst einfach die Grundanliegen der Entm. deutl. zu machen, wie ich sie damit z. T. schon gesagt wiederhole²⁾.

L 1941 zum
1. mal

I. über die Art des Mythos u. der Entmythol.

Was ist dieses Grundanliegen? Es besteht einfach darin, die Aussagen der Bibel u. der christl. Verkündig. dem Menschen von heute verständl. zu machen. Das jene Aussagen - zumal solche über Gott u. sein Handeln - erscheinen für das Denken des modernen Menschen weiterhin als mythisch. Aussagen. Die Entmythol. besteht nun nicht darin, daß solche Aussagen beseitigt, sondern daß sie

1) Natürl. gibt es auch Äußerungen, auf die eingegangen nicht ist. Die Aussagen selbst sind aber, daß ich & viele hier nicht mit dem Gen. fürcht. Aufg. v. Olden zusammenhängen.

- 1) In "Offenbarung u. Heilsgesch." (Beitr. z. evg. Theol. 7), München 1941. Wieder abgedruckt in "Kerygma u. Mythos", hrsg. v. H. W. Bartsch, Hamburg 1948.
- 2) Sie benutzt dabei das als eines Rundfunkvortrags, den ich auf Auforderung des Bayer. Rundf. im April 1950 gehalten habe.

grace — i.e., the believer's *raison d'être* — is nothing to be possessed by man: "There is no possession of grace." Just as Christ abolishes the Law, so also is abolished that problem of God which is defined by moving from reason to faith. And just as it is not the Law which can create freedom, but freedom which testifies to the Law, so is also the problem of God altered and radicalized when it is seen arising from within the context of that faith which is constitutive of human reality. And consequently, christology will provide the foci of anthropology and theology with their proper ellipse.

We did not mean, however, to lose sight of the three problems around which Bultmann's theological reflection has revolved. On the contrary, in the light of the intervening comments, these problems can be stated in a more pregnant manner. The *first* problem is dealt with under the rubric of the mythological character of the language with which the New Testament speaks both of God and of man: as a believer, the theologian is today confronted with the necessity of demythologizing such a language if this language can still have a chance of speaking to the scientifically-oriented contemporary world. The *second* problem, a much more technical one in appearance, deals with the relation between history and eschatology: even at the risk of slightly disfiguring Bultmann's thought, we shall simplify this problem by saying that it deals with the contention that the believer's destiny is one which is at long last emancipated from the Law, i.e., both from a self-sufficient nature and a self-fulfilling history. The end of the Law, Christ, is what articulates the condition of that man whose existence attests the reality of God. Which leads us to the *third* problem: its most deceptively simple formulation consists in saying that, no longer knowing Christ according to the flesh, the believer is likewise no longer caught between his past and his future, between an "already" and a "not yet," between "Jesus" and the "return of Christ," or between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith."

Before trying to focus on the common denominator of these problems, we must further clarify and specify the issues involved in each of them.

III

The etiology of the first problem can be put into evidence fairly simply. The fact is that the universe of the New Testament is composed of three stories: heaven, earth, and hell; and man is seen as a battlefield between God and Satan. These supernatural powers intervene not only in the course of a man's life but also in the unfolding of natural events. In such a context, God is spoken of in human terms and man in divine terms. Mythological and supernatural, this view of the world is basically alien to contemporary man's self-understanding which is informed by science and technology. The conflict which then arises between myth on the one hand and contemporary man's pre-understanding of the world into which he is thrown, as well as of himself, can only be resolved by means of interpreting the former in the light of the latter, by interpreting the myth according to the existential categories of

today. Time and again, Bultmann has said that such an approach aims not at liquidating the myth but at interpreting it. In the now classic 1941 lecture³ in which Bultmann expounded these views, he added that the task of demythologizing the gospel was not necessitated exclusively by our present image of the world, but is a demand inherent in the New Testament itself inasmuch as the gospel is nowhere in it ever thought to be tied up with a particular conception of the universe. Obviously, then, what Bultmann is saying is not merely that religious language is the language of the inner man. He is also saying that such a language is iconoclastic of its own clichés and dogmas and cannot proclaim the truth of the gospel unless by assuming – like the Word become flesh – the contingencies of man’s present language about himself. The Word has no other words than our own through which to become flesh. Nor is the Incarnation merely an historical phenomenon; above all, it is eschatological.

This last statement provides the second problem with its setting. Here, the simplest approach could consist in saying that Bultmann begins by adopting Albert Schweitzer’s thesis of 1910⁴ that the fundamental characteristic of the New Testament lies in the eschatological hope, in the imminence of the Kingdom of God. But whereas Schweitzer then saw in history the frustration of this hope or, to put it differently, the dissolution of the “Christ of faith” into the “Jesus of history” – a Jesus, however, all the more unavailable to historical knowledge – Bultmann, so to speak, reverses steam and contends that the paradox of faith lies precisely in the fact “that an historical event is an eschatological event.”⁵ Instead of surrendering to the historicization of eschatology, Bultmann views eschatology as iconoclasm of history and, hence, as the liberation of history from its own determinism. In other words, the new and ultimate – i.e., the eschaton – is not what lies in some mythological or, for that matter, cosmological *beginning* but is what always lies ahead of all that which is past, renewing and opening it to a new future.

Although faith and history are not compatible,⁶ Bultmann’s point is precisely that just this incompatibility is what is overcome in and through the believer’s existence. Or to use Bultmann’s phrase, believing existence is eschatological existence. As a principle inherent in the New Testament itself, demythologization meets at this point and honors as well the exigencies implicit in every man’s pre-understanding, regardless of the extent to which its postulates and other premises are heterogeneous with the existential implications of the gospel itself.

³Published subsequently as “New Testament and Mythology,” *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch, New York, 1961.

⁴*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*.

⁵“What Alienates Modern Man from Christianity.”

⁶What does it mean, for example, to believe in God on the basis of an event which took place 2000 years ago?

Dies ist dann mein Abschied von der wissen-
schaftlichen Theologie. Den zweiten Teil
meines Lebens verbringe ich am Congo, als
Arzt für die armen Schwarzen, um alle
meine kritischen Sünden zu büßen. Die
Manuskripte der neu. Forschung begann ich
am Tage nach meinem Mediz. Staatsexamen,
die bearbeitet betriebe ich seit Jahren. B. II
ist fertig.

Mit vielen herzlichen Grüßen

Dr. Albert Schweitzer

The final paragraph of a letter dated July 24, 1912, from Albert Schweitzer to Rudolf Bultmann, written in reply to a review by Bultmann of Schweitzer's *Paul and His Interpreters*, Vol. I. "I do hope that the next volume will answer those questions which you found left open in the first volume. This second volume will be my Goodbye to theological scholarship. I want to spend the second part of my life in the Congo, as physician to the natives. With this decision I hope to repent from all my sins of criticism." (Here Schweitzer refers with tongue in cheek to the reaction his books caused among the orthodox theologians of the early twentieth century.) "I began to write 'Paul and His Interpreters' the day after I passed my final examinations at medical school. The preparation goes back many years. Volume two is now concluded." From the Rudolf Bultmann Papers in the Manuscripts Department of the Library.

One can see now why the third problem deals with christology. Two things must briefly retain our attention here: on the one hand, christology is here to be understood not as a doctrine about Jesus alone but as that eschatological mode of being in the light of which God is what articulates the experience of the human reality. In other words, theology and anthropology belong together indissolubly and without the former being dissolved in the latter or the latter being swallowed up by the former. And, in the last analysis, it is christology which prevents eschatology from being either historicized — as is the case when, for example, the kingdom of God is identified with the church — or relegated to a realm wholly beyond the realm of this world.

On the other hand, just because Bultmann's christology thus proceeds neither from a futuristic eschatology nor from a realized eschatology but from a radicalized eschatology, it does not follow that the once-for-all-ness of the Christ-event is impaired, as critics tend to point out. On the contrary, the eschatological concentration which governs Bultmann's christology is alone capable of securing the contention that salvation *takes* place once-and-for-all in the Christ-event. Indeed, contrary to common assumptions, no fact is unique *per se*. What is unique is the fact of interpretation, even if, to be sure, such a fact is itself unique only insofar as it is legitimated by one's own situation. Otherwise, the so-called historical Jesus would only be the historicization of the eschatological symbol of the Son of Man: he would be an idol. And salvation would be reduced to an historical process. The merit of Bultmann's theology has consisted in his unsurpassed attempt to maintain the biblical claim that salvation is not an historical but an eschatological occurrence. It does not lie between an event which has *already* taken place and another which has *not yet* happened. In Christ, *here and now*, man becomes a new creation.

IV

Our conclusion may now be briefly stated. The common denominator of these three problems with which Bultmann's theology has been concerned consists in the way in which eschatology permeates not only christology but also theology and anthropology. Put another way, it permeates man's being *tout court* as well as language itself. Speaking, just like being, is an eschatological phenomenon — that phenomenon through which man has access to faith as eschatic existence. Bultmann likes to define such an existence by quoting Saint Paul: “. . . as deceivers and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.”⁷

⁷2 Corinthians 6, 7-10.

In existentialist literature, freedom is not uncommonly defined as that to which man is condemned, and decision often turns into forlornness, while innocence evinces all the stripes of a fraud. Kafka's K in *The Trial* is guilty even before he appears in court; in fact, he is all the more guilty because he has no idea whatever of the nature of his guilt.

In the sermon he preached in Hendricks Chapel of Syracuse University on the 26th of April, 1959, Bultmann took as his text the so-called Last Judgment passage of Matthew 25. The point he makes in that sermon is simple. Bultmann notes that whenever one asks, "What shall I do?" the question comes too late. The real decision has already taken place. The Kingdom does not lie on the other side of the judgment, but on this side, or else man would, indeed, be forlorn and his guilt compounded by his ignorance of it. Nor is the resurrection what the believer is supposed to hope for after death, but is — this side of death — the only life worth living.

V

Still in the process of being arranged and inventoried, the Rudolf Bultmann Papers at Syracuse contain, besides numerous letters such as those mentioned earlier in this article, all kinds of documents which should delight an eventual researcher. Among the papers, special attention should be drawn to the following:

A. Manuscripts:

- 1) *Griechentum, Judentum, Christentum* (a lecture series of 1930 from which was published *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, 1949).
- 2) Eight lectures on the concepts of life and death in primitive religions (ca. 1917-1920).
- 3) *Das Verständnis der Geschichte in Griechentum und Christentum* (1960). This document comprises a) the entire manuscript, b) the typescript, c) a radioscript, d) the galley proofs of the final text as published in *Glauben und Verstehen*.
- 4) The Gifford lectures on *History and Eschatology* (1957).
- 5) *Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung* (n.d.).
- 6) *Das Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus* (1960), comprising a) manuscript, b) typescript, c) galley proofs, d) correspondence.
- 7) A life of Luther (unpublished, n.d.).
- 8) Bultmann's dissertation (unpublished Habilitations Thesis, 1912) on *Die Exegese des Theodor von Mopsuestia*.

B. Lecture notes taken while he was a theological student. These extensive notes include:

- 1) Karl Müller: *Symbolism* (1904), Tübingen.
- 2) Hermann Gunkel: *Theology of the Old Testament* (1904-05), Berlin.

- 3) Adolf Jülicher: A seminar on Church History and lectures on Galatians, Philippians, Thessalonians (1905-06), Marburg.
 - 4) Adolf von Harnack: History of Protestantism in the XIXth century (1905), Berlin.
 - 5) Johannes Weiss: The Main Problems Concerning the Study of the Life of Jesus (1905-06), Marburg.
- C. Various unusual documents:
- 1) The letter of September 8, 1940, from Hermann Diem inviting Bultmann to give his lecture on "New Testament and Mythology." The reverse side of the letter constitutes page 30 of Bultmann's *Comments on Wilhelm Kamlah's "Christianity and Self-Assertion"* (1940).
 - 2) The questions-and-answers script of a television documentary with Bultmann (1970).
 - 3) An abridged article on Christian education published in *Syracuse 10*.
 - 4) A term paper written by Bultmann as a student on *The Theology of Herakleon Based on the Fragment of His Commentary on John 4*, with the instructor's annotations.
 - 5) Comments on the dissertation of his student, Ernst Fuchs.

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Rudolf Bultmann's dedication to Syracuse University of his book, *Glauben und Verstehen* (Faith and Understanding), 1960: "To the most illustrious University of Syracuse in the State of New York, for the supreme honor of a Doctorate in Sacred Theology conferred upon him, this book, with both a grateful and a devoted heart, Rudolf Bultmann."