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# The Concept of History in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann and Reinhold Niebuhr

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THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY IN THE THOUGHT OF  
RUDOLF BULTMANN AND REINHOLD NIEBUHR

by

Joseph H. Bragg, Jr.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree  
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## INTRODUCTION

The question of the nature and meaning of history has become increasingly important in contemporary thought. In theological circles, it has become the central theme of discussion. There are a number of reasons why this is so. The events of the times in which we live have brought about a definite rejection of any knowledge-equals-progress idea of history as well as a call for interpretation of the profound social crises which we confront. The widespread influence of existentialism, with its emphasis on relativism and subjectivism, has brought into question not only the nature of history, in terms of present reality, but also the validity of the historians' pursuits.

For the Christian theologian, the development of higher criticism of the Scriptures has brought the question more to the fore. Literary and historical criticism led the scholars of fifty years ago either to an emphasis on the ethical teachings of Jesus or to a search for the historical Jesus. More recently, form criticism, particularly in the hands of Rudolf Bultmann, has resulted in a shadowing of the occurrences of the past and an emphasis on the events of faith. Inasmuch as Christianity has traditionally claimed to be an historical religion grounded in such events as the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, all of which happened in time but which also involve the dimension of the eternal, the



question of history looms as a critical one. Such ideas as the Kingdom of God, redemption, life after death, and the purposeful Will of God carry within them much concerning the nature and meaning of history, but even more important than these is the fact of the historical basis of the Christian faith.

As a result of this increased interest, a multitude of books and articles have been written in the last twenty-five years, and particularly during the last ten, on the subject of history and, since the question still remains an open one, more can be expected. Christian historians such as Herbert Butterfield, Arnold Toynbee, and Karl Löwith have brought real insight to the question and have attempted to see some patterns of meaning in history from the perspective of faith. Others have been led to the question of history by more indirect paths, but have had tremendous influence on the discussion. Such is the case with the two men whose thought will be our primary consideration; Rudolf Bultmann and Reinhold Niebuhr. Neither is an historian, as such, but both have much to say about history.

Born in 1884 and educated in Germany, Rudolf Bultmann served on the faculties of several universities before accepting a professorship at the University of Marsburg in 1921. There he remained until 1951 when he became professor emeritus. It is as a New Testament scholar that Rudolf Bultmann reaches the question of history.

Like Schleiermacher, Bultmann has seen his task to be that of addressing the modern man and making the Christian Gospel intelligent and relevant to the mind and to the needs of such a man. His perspective is from a philosophical understanding of man that reflects considerable dependence on Heidegger, the existentialist, but his primary concern is man's relationship to God. In this light, he attempts to use the best tools of modern science and philosophical thought, as well as his expert skills as a Biblical scholar and critic.

In 1941, he delivered a lecture which was later published under the title "the New Testament and Mythology." Brief though this lecture is, it brought about tremendous controversy from various Protestant theological positions. Because of his emphasis on the eschatological nature of the Christ-event and his insistence that the Christ of faith be proclaimed with little or not concern for the historical Jesus or his moral teachings, theological liberalism, particularly the Life of Jesus School which preceded him, reacted by labeling him a radical, as did those who stood within the School of the History of Religions. On the otherhand, conservatives, some who rejected all Biblical critical study and others who accepted it within limits, were aghast at Bultmann's claim that the New Testament was filled with myths and must therefore be demythologized in order to be intelligible to modern man. The debates which followed were many. During the early portions of these "vigorous conversations," discussion of his idea of demythologizing was central, but it was not long before most scholars realized that the question of the nature



and meaning of history lay at the base of all of their discussions. It is primarily in this area that the Bultmann debates have continued.

Unlike Bultmann, Reinhold Niebuhr arrives at the question of history from the paths of a parish minister and a professor of Christian ethics. Born in Wright City, Missouri in 1892, the son of a German Evangelical minister, Niebuhr attended college and seminary in the Mid-West and received his Bachelor of Divinity and Master of Arts degrees from Yale. Upon graduating, he became minister in a newly-organized parish in Detroit at the time when that Michigan city was rapidly becoming the automobile capital of the world and one of the chief industrial centers of the nation. It was during his thirteen-year ministry in this parish that he became vividly aware of the irrelevancy of the moralistic idealism which his liberal theology made tantamount to the Christian faith. The crises of personal lives and the social ills of an expanding technical society, not to mention the tragic events of World War I, crowded up around him, forcing him to a rejection of the unrealistic optimism of liberalism and to deep and searching questions about the nature of the Gospel and its meaning for the everyday lives of people.

In 1928, he became professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary. It was here that he began to clarify his thoughts and formulate his ideas concerning the relationship of the Christian Gospel to the life of men in their personal and social lives. This led him quickly to



the basic question of the nature and meaning of history. As early as 1932, he dealt specifically with the Christian interpretation of history in a book entitled Beyond Tragedy, but it was in his published Gifford lectures of 1941 and 1942, The Nature and Destiny of Man, that the subject received full treatment. An elaboration of these ideas was published in 1949 under the title Faith and History.

Niebuhr, like Bultmann and perhaps all theologians, has his share of critics, but it must be admitted that his works have brought about far less controversy than have Bultmann's. Those of the liberal persuasion, both secular and Christian, have been among his most vocal critics, attacking him mainly at three points: (1) what they consider his preoccupation with the negative aspects of man's nature, that is man's basic sinfulness; (2) his denial of any idea of the perfectability of man and therefore of the inevitable progress of history; and (3) his criticism of liberal culture from an admittedly Christian perspective (obviously, "scientific" inquiry can never go to empirical evidence holding presuppositions, particularly religious ones!). From other critics of the Barthian persuasion came words of concern about his relationship of faith to reason. Niebuhr has responded to some of these criticisms in later writings, particularly The Self and the Dramas of History, published in 1955.

Beginning from the point of Christian ethics and giving considerable attention to the nature of man, Niebuhr develops his concept of history quite differently from Bultmann. It will be the task of this paper to examine the idea of history

in the thought of each of these men and then, through a critique and comparison, evaluate each in terms of their strengths and weaknesses as well as their similarities and differences.

## CHAPTER I

### RUDOLF BULTMANN: CONCEPT OF HISTORY

The meaning of history lies always in the present, and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning of history is realized. Man who complains: "I cannot see meaning in history, and therefore my life, interwoven in history, is meaningless," is to be admonished: do not look around yourself into universal history, you must look into your own personal history. Always in your present lies the meaning in history, and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions. In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it.<sup>1</sup>

With the above statement, Rudolf Bultmann concluded his Gifford Lectures in 1955 on the subject "History and Eschatology." Until these lectures, this German theologian had said very little about the subject of history directly, though implicitly he had said a great deal. As we have noted earlier, his writings stem from his work as a New Testament scholar and deal primarily with that aspect of form-criticism known as demythologizing. At the core of all of his writings, however, lies his understanding of the nature and meaning of history. Indeed, it has been to these concepts, that many of his critics have aimed their heaviest blows. The result has been one of the most active theological struggles of this century.

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<sup>1</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, History and Eschatology (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1957), p. 155.



Bultmann's concept of history and its meaning is intimately tied up with the presuppositions which he makes for historical study. This is true to the extent that any discussion of one includes the other and thus our presentation will, in effect, jump from one to the other, though making some attempt to list his presuppositions.

Let us begin, however, with one statement regarding his understanding of history. "History is understood as the history of mind. But mind is not realized otherwise than in human thoughts, and human thoughts are ultimately intentions of individuals. The subject of history is therefore humanity within the individual human persons; therefore it may be said: the subject of history is man."<sup>2</sup> We will return to this later for further discussion, but, keeping this in mind, let us now consider some presuppositions which Bultmann makes for historical study.

First, it is presupposed that the historian will not approach his task for the purpose of supporting conclusions which he has already drawn. Such prejudice will not allow his research to speak freely to him, and in fact, will render his work of questionable value even before he begins.

Secondly, it is presupposed that the historical method of research will be employed and will make use of all available scientific data in approaching the material. In studying written works, for example, the rules of grammar, the meaning of words, the individual style, the language of the time, as

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 143.



well as the historical setting, must be given appropriate attention and understanding. This is no less true with Biblical exegesis than with other literature.

A third presupposition is that "history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect."<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that the process of history does not include free decisions of men whose actions affect historical happenings, but it does mean that even these decisions are not without causes and motives. It is the historian's task to come to know the causes and the motives of actions and events and thus to understand the whole historical movement as a closed unity. An implication which is obvious in such a presupposition is that there can be no intervening supernatural powers, no effects without causes, no miracles for which there are no causes which lie within history. As a science, historical research cannot perceive of such an occurrence and, should it find one, must discount the act or event as without historical reality.

It is also presupposed that within the continuum, historical phenomena are many-sided and complex. The French Revolution, for example, may be viewed in economic or political terms, in religious or social terms, etc. Historians will vary in their assessment of these forces and will, in fact, be guided by some particular point of view. His interpretation may be from an aesthetic interest, a psychological

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<sup>3</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?", Encounter, vol. 21, no. 2, Spring, 1960, p. 196.

interest, a political interest, or what-have-you, but he will mandatorily have some specific way of raising questions and interpreting data. This implies that the historian must have certain understandings of his particular interest in the matter being studied. That is, to approach a certain matter from the aesthetic interest requires, for example, that the historian must have knowledge of art, its technique and essence, etc. Or if the interest is psychological, the historical scholar must have knowledge of psychical phenomena. Bultmann calls this "pre-understanding" and sees it as an unavoidable and necessary presupposition to historical study.

A fifth presupposition grows out of this to say that the historian must stand in a life relation to the subject matter. Specifically, this means that only he who lives in a state and in a society can comprehend the social and political phenomena both of the past and the present. And only he who has a life-relation to music can understand research material that deals with music. Generally, it may also be seen to mean that only he who recognizes himself as standing within history and taking part in it can adequately approach historical research. This "existential encounter" with history causes the historian to participate excitedly in history and in his study and thus to be able to hear the claims of history.

Because this is so, a sixth presupposition arises to require that there always be an open-endedness to historical study that recognizes the importance of continued and continual historical research. With the claim which historical

phenomena make both upon the "now" and upon the historian the study must never be closed, but reviewed, evaluated and renewed in every generation.

The question that immediately arises from all of these presuppositions is whether objectivity in the knowledge and interpretation of historical phenomena is at all attainable. Indeed, historical research can establish as fixed and objective certain items within the historical process: dates, locality, etc.; those occurrences which happened in a certain place and at a certain time. But history cannot be seen as limited to such chronologically and geographically determinable events and actions. History is really concerned with the interpretation, the meaning and the significance of events and actions and these cannot be established objectively in the sense of absolute ultimate knowledge nor in the sense of purity. Because of the historian's viewpoint, because of his existential encounter with history, because the historical phenomena speak to the historian in the present, the subjectivity of the historian is involved. In terms of his viewpoint and pre-understanding, it is just the recognition of this that gives his research objectivity. Only if he makes his viewpoint absolute, is his research subjective. In terms of his life relation, however,

. . . the demand that the interpreter must silence his subjectivity and extinguish his individuality, in order to attain to an objective knowledge is, therefore, the most absurd one that can be imagined. . . . The most subjective interpretation

is in this case the 'most objective,' that is, only those who are stirred by the question of their own existence can hear the claim which history makes.<sup>4</sup>

In his introduction to Jesus and the Word, Bultmann deals with this matter of subjectivity by pointing out that man cannot observe history in the same way in which he observes nature because of his essential involvement. Thus, every time man says something about history, he is saying something about himself. He can encounter history only as he enters into dialogue with it and he can hear its demands only as he comes seeking answers to the questions of his own existence. This does not end in complete relativism if the observer is willing to place even the subjectivity of his position under his interrogation of history and is willing to listen to history as an authority. This is the point at which there may be found an objective element which is really present in history.<sup>5</sup>

Returning to our earlier reference to Bultmann's understanding of history as man, we can now go further in discussing what is the meaning of history. The core and subject of history is man and the concern of history is, therefore, the field of human actions. It is Bultmann's contention that human actions are caused by their purposes and their intentions and that, therefore, human life is

<sup>4</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, Essays (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1955), pp. 255-56.

<sup>5</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus and the Word (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. 3-15.



always future directed. Man is always "on the way" and each moment contains within it not only the past but also the future.

All that man does and undertakes in his present becomes revealed only in the future as important or vain, as fulfillment or failure.<sup>6</sup>

Every present situation grows out of the past and yet, because it is also a situation of decision which concerns the future, it contains both the past and the future.

The relativity of each present moment, rightly seen by historicism, is therefore not relativity in the sense in which any particular point within a causal series is a relative one, but has the positive sense that the present is the moment of decision, and by the decision taken the yield of the past is gathered in and the meaning of the future is chosen.<sup>7</sup>

This leads Bultmann to the second of his major conclusions regarding the meaning of history (the first being that history is the history of man) and that is that the relativity of every historical situation is understood as having a positive meaning.

### Christianity and History

Because Bultmann's concept of history is so entwined with his understanding of the meaning of the Christian faith, we turn now to a discussion of Christianity and history. Throughout all of his writings in this area, there are many implications concerning his concept of history though they are rather difficult to determine at points, particularly in any organized way.

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<sup>6</sup>Bultmann, History and Eschatology, p. 140.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with Bultmann's distinction of myth, historisch (objective-historical), and geschichtlich (existential-historical). Bultmann sees these three elements as evident in the New Testament and in the early Church.

The term "myth" has been used with great frequency in recent theological conversations, often with variant meaning. According to Bultmann's formal definition, myth is a way of expressing "the other worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side."<sup>8</sup> By the way in which he employs the terms, however, he appears to broaden the definition to include the expression of a world-view which is untenable to modern man. Perhaps the two may be seen as one in the light of what he sees the purpose of myth to be: "The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives."<sup>9</sup> To this end, then, while it may appear that man is describing his world, he actually is describing his own existence. Any primitive cosmology which proclaims the existence of demons, for example, would not so much describe the objective world as it would man's realization that his life has limitations which are beyond his control.

It is Bultmann's position that in the New Testament the Christian Gospel is couched in a first-century world-view and

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<sup>8</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, et al, Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate (London: SPCK, 1953), footnote 2, p. 10. (The ensuing analysis of Bultmann's treatment of myth is based primarily on this essay.)

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

in the mythology of Jewish apocalyptic and the Gnostic myths of redemption. To get at the core of the Gospel, which is for all time and all people, and make it intelligible to modern man, the New Testament must be demythologized and the kerygma laid bare. Veiled in all of its mythological finery, it is not apt to lead man to decide for God.

In laying his foundations for demythologizing the New Testament, Bultmann cites a number of aspects of this mythological framework which are totally unacceptable to modern man. Obviously, the Babylonian cosmology of a three-story universe which places a flat earth in the center with heaven upstairs and hell in the basement is a world view which is impossible for any modern man seriously to hold. Belief in spirits, whether good or bad, as well as belief in miracles are contradictory to what we now know about the forces and laws of nature and natural causation as well as to man's understanding of himself as a rational being and as essentially a unity. Any mythological eschatology that includes the parousia of Christ in literal terms, as the New Testament expects, is further unacceptable. That death is the punishment of sin or that a doctrine of atonement that makes one sinless man's death an expiation of another's guilt could be taken very seriously by contemporary thought is sheer nonsense. The resurrection of Jesus Christ falls under the same objection as do the virgin birth, the healing miracles, the ascension of Christ, and His pre-existence. The kerygma must be stripped of its mythological framework and re-interpreted into a meaningful message for today.

It should be made clear that in approaching mythology in the New Testament, Bultmann is not following the Liberal formula. Liberalism examined the myth by modern knowledge, measured it as meaningless, and threw it out of Christianity. Bultmann, however, sees his task as one of interpreting myth from the understanding of human existence which the New Testament enshrines. In other words, the task is to interpret myth existentially so as to arrive at the New Testament solutions to the riddle of human life, solutions which, as truth, are acceptable to the non-mythological mind of today.

Bultmann has been heavily criticized at this point of demythologizing, not so much because of its value in form criticism, which is recognized, but because of the danger involved in the selectivity of what is to be regarded as myth and in the importance attributed to myth. Such phrases as "Lamb of God" are obviously figurative ones, but others cannot be so easily distinguished. We shall say more about this later.

The second element which must be recognized is historisch or the objective-historical. "Historisch means an event, a fact, which took place on a certain date, which can be verified in our ordinary experience with the aid of the historical method."<sup>10</sup> The narrative elements of the New Testament center in the definite historic person of Jesus of Nazareth and therefore lend themselves to study as objective

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<sup>10</sup>L. Malevez, The Christian Message and Myth (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1958), p. 73.



happenings by the historian. Such events are those which have a definite place in world history. The passion of Jesus provides a good example: his betrayal, arrest, trial and crucifixion are determinable by objective scientific study. They are not mythical and, apart from interpretation, may be readily accepted as historical events, in the sense of historisch. The question which arises, of course, is whether these objective-historical events are the concern of theology. Faith in the cross has an entirely different meaning from a belief in the cross as a fact of history. To Bultmann, the prime concern must be with the content of faith and not mere historical data.

The third element which Bultmann distinguishes is termed geschichtlich or the existential-historical, and is of the greatest importance. Geschichtlich, like historisch, is concerned with an event but it is one which cannot necessarily be connected with a date or a place, nor proved by historical evidence. It is an existential encounter that bespeaks of the I-thou dimension of life: an element which makes an event significant for my existence and possibility and of the greatest relevance for my life today. This is particularly evident in the way in which the Cross is understood. As we have noted, the Cross may be viewed as historisch which admits the fact of the crucifixion of Jesus. But in the Christian message, the significance of the Cross is lifted to cosmic dimensions as a geschichtlich event which affects the whole of humanity in its relation to God and through which each man may find his real self. Indeed, the existential-historical

(geschichtlich) fact originated in the objective-historical (historisch) event of the crucifixion of Jesus, but the acknowledgement of such a death in 30 A.D. and the confession that this same long-ago death has all-important significance for me today are two different things. The significance of the Cross as geschichtlich transcends the temporal and speaks to men both then and now. The distinction of these two terms is a tremendously important one. Obviously, Bultmann attributes the greater value to the existential-historical (geschichtlich).

With these three elements in mind, Bultmann goes about his task of making the Gospel relevant to the contemporary mind, but he does so against an existential understanding of faith and eschatology.

If the being of man in the true sense of the term is to be understood as historical being, which draws the reality of its experience from encounters, it is clear on the one hand that faith which speaks of the act of God which encounters it cannot defend itself against the objection that it is no more than an illusion - for the encounter with God is certainly not objective in the sense of being an event of the natural order; but on the other hand it is equally clear that faith, being a reality of encounter on the level of existence, not only is not under any necessity of refuting this objection, but cannot in fact attempt to do so without misunderstanding its own significance.<sup>11</sup>

It is only in faith that one can say that in this or that event God acted or that God spoke to me. In this faith and in the decisions of faith, it is God himself who encounters man and in the encounter Christ is transformed into "God for us."

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<sup>11</sup>Giovanni Miegge, Gospel and Myth in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 200.

Bultmann's treatment of faith involves the existentialist view of man and identifies the life of faith as authentic being.

The New Testament addresses man as one who is through and through a self-assertive rebel who knows from bitter experience that the life he actually lives is not his authentic life, and that he is totally incapable of achieving that life by his own efforts. . . . Authentic life becomes possible only when man is delivered from himself. . . . At this very point where man can do nothing, God steps in and acts - indeed he has acted already - on man's behalf.<sup>12</sup>

By the grace of God man's sins are forgiven, he is released from the bondage of the past and he is made free for the future. This is self-understanding speaking to self-understanding. The response of faith is a receiving of self-hood as a gift and a deliverance into freedom. His past is always present in the state of being forgiven, but his future is open to obey the Will of God.

The event of Jesus Christ is the revelation of the love of God which makes man free from himself and free to be himself. The fact that the faith which transforms takes place in necessary association with a figure "who for us cannot be more than an ideal picture drawn by his followers, or a theological symbol, does not in the least evacuate the divine encounter of its reality."<sup>13</sup> The historian may answer some questions about Jesus of Nazareth, but faith, being personal decision, cannot be dependent upon a historian's labor.

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<sup>12</sup>Bultmann, et al, Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate, pp. 30-31.

<sup>13</sup>Miegge, op. cit., p. 89.

This leads us to the area of eschatology for the decision of faith is, to Bultmann, an eschatological event. In his Gifford lectures, Bultmann defined eschatology as "the doctrine of 'last things' or, more accurately, of the occurrences with which our known world comes to an end."<sup>14</sup> He makes it clear, however, in a response to J. Schniewind, that the only true interpretation of eschatology, rather than be one which lies beyond the bounds of time and space, must be a real experience of human life.<sup>15</sup> The primary message of Jesus was an eschatological one - that of the coming of the reign of God - but it must be understood in unity with his ethical teachings. As such, Bultmann contends, the fulfillment of God's will is the condition for participation in the salvation of God's reign and that requires man's decision for God now, in the concrete moment as he confronts his neighbor. As he so responds in faith, man participates in the eschatological. Eschatology involves this moment of encounter, crisis and decision, a passage from anxiety to faith, from inauthentic to authentic being.

The real historicity of the Christian life becomes apparent from the fact that his life is a continuous being on the way between the 'no longer' and the 'not yet.'<sup>16</sup>

The man in faith is no longer who he was for he is in a world not of the flesh and this is the eschatological. The paradox

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<sup>14</sup>Bultmann, History and Eschatology, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup>Bultmann, et al, Kerygma and Myth . . . , p. 106.

<sup>16</sup>Bultmann, History and Eschatology, p. 46.



is that he is, at the same time, not yet. He must still become what he already is and yet he already is what he shall become. It was in this "time-between" that the early Christians found themselves in light of their belief in the impending coming of the end of the world. But it is also the situation of the contemporary Christian whose faith is built upon the geschichtlich which, in essence, is eschatological.

As we have progressed, some idea of the way in which Bultmann employs these concepts has been obvious. It will be well, however, to go back and spell this out a little more clearly. We may begin by observing that Bultmann approaches his task of demythologizing the New Testament with a heavy hand and a well-sharpened pencil. Because of his concern to get at the basic kerygma, he eliminates most of the events of the Synoptic Gospels as being highly mythical and therefore unreliable. Of greater importance, however, is his claim that even if the records of the historical Jesus were more historically accurate and extensive, they would still be of little value since, as historisch, they could not lead to an encounter with the Christ of faith. The objective-historical has only theoretical interest for historical research. Otherwise, it is of little importance.

We have already noted that the event of the Cross is seen to be an objective-historical (historisch) event, but more importantly, an existential-historical (geschichtlich) fact. Even here, however, demythologizing must be done to remove the untenable views of sacrifice and blood atonement

as well as those of a pre-existent Son to whom death would be meaningless. The Cross is thus the existential-historical event through which God spoke and still speaks his word of forgiveness. It was not an event of objective reconciliation. All that can be said is that through it God was able to pronounce his word of pardon and that whenever it is preached anew it encounters man with God's love.

The resurrection, on the other hand, must be immediately declared as myth, on the grounds of Bultmann's presuppositions and his analysis of modern man.

Nothing preceding the faith which acknowledges the risen Christ can give insight into the reality of Christ's resurrection. The resurrection cannot . . . be demonstrated or made plausible as an objectively ascertainable fact on the basis of which one could believe. But insofar as it or the risen Christ is presented in the proclaiming word, it can be believed - and only so can it be believed.<sup>17</sup>

After considering the historical evidence, then, Bultmann throws out the resurrection as myth, and establishes its reality as existing in the proclamation of the Word. Because He is present in a way different from the presence of any other historical person, His presence - His resurrection - is an eschatological event. Because, however, the resurrection must be connected to some objective-historical event, Bultmann attaches it to the event of the Cross and sees them as a unity. To believe in the resurrection is to believe in the saving efficacy of the Cross of Christ. Together, they

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<sup>17</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), Vol. I, p. 305.

are proclaimed. "Christ meets us in the preaching as one crucified and risen. He meets us in the word of preaching and nowhere else. The faith of Easter is just this - faith in the word of preaching."<sup>18</sup>

Bultmann gives similar treatment to other aspects of his Biblical study including interpretation of the Old Testament. In his essay on "Prophecy and Fulfillment," he gives particular attention to the covenant concept, the concept of the Kingdom of God, and the concept of the people of God and he interprets them in their eschatological dimension.<sup>19</sup> Realizing that the New Testament was written in light of the Easter faith, he sees the understanding of Jesus as Lord and Saviour and as the decisive eschatological event, as one which gradually developed in the early Church. The whole concept of vicarious sacrifice developed in the Church, as did the concept of Jesus as Messiah and as Judge, and the concepts of the resurrection and the Incarnation. Bultmann, in fact, presents an evolutionary outline of the development of a Christology and does so against the background of the early Church which became both Jewish and Greek and which had to adjust to its existence as both an historical phenomenon as well as an eschatological event. That development may be sketched, as it finds New Testament expression, as follows:

- (1) The germ-cell is the kerygma of the death and resurrection of Jesus

<sup>18</sup>Bultmann, et al, Kerygma and Myth . . . , p. 41.

<sup>19</sup>Bultmann, Essays, pp. 191-206.

- (2) The brief kerygma of the passion and Easter required fuller visualization, . . . and assignment of a place in the divine plan of salvation; . . . (thus) the account of the Baptist and the proofs of fulfilled predictions.
- (3) The Christian "sacraments" had to be accounted for in the life of Jesus.
- (4) A visualization of what Jesus had done . . . Hence the collection of miracle-stories.
- (5) Probably the apophthegms also stood in the service of this visualization.
- (6) The reason that sayings of the Lord . . . came more and more to be taken up into "the gospel" is that, while missionary preaching continued, preaching to Christian congregations took on ever increasing importance.
- (7) Finally both the moral exhortation and the regulations of the Congregation had to be accounted for in the life and words of Jesus. Hence, . . . /they/ were also taken up into "the gospel."<sup>20</sup>

This growth from the simple to the complex is seen by Bultmann to be based not on objective-historical data but on what the Church came to believe about Jesus. In doing so, the germ-cell of the Gospel was clouded while at the same time being made more relevant to the needs of the early Church.

It is Bultmann's point that the Gospel be seen in its core to be the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To do so requires demythologizing, but also recognizing that faith rests not on historisch but on geschichtlich. The kerygma comes to contemporary man as an act of God demanding complete surrender and at the same time offering authentic being. This is an act of divine revelation and Christ lives again in its proclamation. It is this miracle or revelation and its response, whether in faith or in rejection, that makes it an

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<sup>20</sup>Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, Vol. I, p. 86.

eschatological event.

We began our discussion of Bultmann's concept of history with a quotation from his Gifford lectures. In the light of all that has been said, it may be well to repeat it now:

The meaning of history lies always in the present, and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning of history is realized. Man who complains: 'I cannot see meaning in history, and therefore my life, interwoven in history, is meaningless,' is to be admonished: do not look around yourself into universal history, you must look into your own personal history. Always in your present lies the meaning in history, and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions. In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it.<sup>21</sup>

We understand Bultmann to be saying, primarily, three things. First, no one can expect to see any meaning in what might be called universal history, that is, some general pattern or purpose into which observable events may be fitted. God's purposes are known and worked out by Him, but they are indiscernible to man. Christians believe that His purposes are being worked out, but how the goals are being achieved is known to Him alone.

Secondly, the meaning of history lies within each man's own existence in the present moment. As man, called by Christ to authentic being, stands in the eternal present, forgiven of his sins and open to the will of God in his future, the eschatological moment becomes real. In the responsible decisions of that moment can the meaning of history be realized.

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<sup>21</sup>Bultmann, History and Eschatology, p. 155.

Thirdly, history must be seen to stand in an existential relationship with man. That is to say, man cannot be viewed as the subject and history as the object, or even the reverse. Man is in history from his origin and within it has his existence. History must be approached from the inside and not from the outside. Difficult as these thought patterns may be, Bultmann seems to be grounding his understanding of history in the nature of human existence. As such, man is called to be himself in authentic being and the essential nature and meaning of history must be interpreted in these terms.



## CHAPTER II

### REINHOLD NIEBUHR: CONCEPT OF HISTORY

As minister of a Detroit church and as professor of Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary, Reinhold Niebuhr has somehow found the time to write a great many books and a tremendous number of articles for both secular and religious periodicals. His motivations for such writings are twofold. To preach the Gospel in such a way that it will be credible to modern man is, of course, primary. His major books are written particularly toward this end. The second motive deals with the application of the principles of Christianity to every day living. In his early publication entitled Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, he observed that "the average man always accepts the gospel 'in principle,' and then proceeds to emasculate it by a thousand reservations."<sup>1</sup> Often the application is either ignored or presented with lack of clarity. Convinced that the Gospel must be brought to bear upon contemporary issues, regardless of how controversial they might be, Niebuhr has written innumerable articles on a variety of social and political issues and, in several of his books, has critically analyzed the American scene from the Christian perspective. There can be little doubt that he is the outstanding American theologian of our day, regardless

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<sup>1</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (New York: Willett, Clark, and Colby, 1929), p. 192.

of the fact that he claims, with humility, not even to be a theologian.

Throughout all of his writings has run a persistent interest in the nature and meaning of history. Because of his insistence that man must see meaning in his life, this would obviously be so. The precise structure of his concept of history, however, is not quite so obvious. Our approach will be to attempt to get at the bases of his thought and to understand his primary emphases.

In order to comprehend Niebuhr, one must first recognize the fact that he is a believer, to the first degree, in the reality of polarities in life which are incapable of synthesis. These are sometimes seen to be utter contradictions, but must be nonetheless held as true. Immanence and transcendence, freedom and necessity, time and eternity, disclosure and fulfillment, and the like are polarities which stand in tension to one another, contradicting, overlapping, intersecting. Robert E. Fitch claims to have listed well over one hundred such polarities as found in Niebuhr's books.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his writings appear such sentences as "insofar as . . . , this is true, but insofar as . . . , it is not true." All of this makes for a rather complicated understanding of history, and an even greater amount of confusion when trying to systematize his thoughts.

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<sup>2</sup>Robert E. Fitch, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Philosophy of History," Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought, ed. by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 300.

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overcome all evil and result in the fulfillment of human life. Like the classical view, history is equated with the nature-time process, but unlike it, history derives its meaning via the gradual triumph of human reason.

In order to understand fully why these two views of history are so repugnant to Niebuhr, it will be well for us to return to the subject of polarities and consider some to which he gives special attention; freedom and necessity, man within the temporal process yet transcending it, memory and destiny, and disclosure and fulfillment.

Man is in nature. He is, for that reason, not of nature. It is important to emphasize both parts. Man is the creature of necessity and the child of freedom. His life is determined by natural contingencies; yet his character develops by rising above nature's necessities and accidents. With reference to the purposes of his life, it is significant that the necessities of nature are accidents and contingencies. Sometimes he is able to bend nature's necessities to his own will; sometimes he must submit his destiny to them.<sup>5</sup>

Man, as a creature, is subject to the vicissitudes of nature, influenced by its demands, driven by its impulses. He is a body and must therefore eat, drink, and sleep. And as a mortal he must die. He is limited by heredity and by the environment in which he finds himself. At every stage of his development, man, in the individual sense as well as in the larger communal sense, remains a creature of nature, bound by its necessities.

But man is more than this. He is free to manipulate the processes of nature, to impose his own will upon its forces.

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<sup>5</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), pp. 292-293.

The fact that he can think about his limitations, consider his physical necessities, removes him from the purely animal level and is an aspect of his freedom. He can seek to comprehend the temporal process, discern the sequence, causalities and recurrences of the natural world. He is free to make decisions in relation to the natural world and to other men. Because he is free to choose, one can never be certain about what will follow any given moment. He is free to choose the unforeseen. For this reason, man cannot be studied exclusively as one studies the world of nature. But he is also free in a deeper sense. "Man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world."<sup>6</sup> In this respect, man is capable of transcending the flux of the natural world and of considering the whole meaning of human history. This is the radical freedom which allows man to understand the meaning of the warfare of good and evil in life and to possess a surveillance of reason itself. Man is therefore both creature and creator. He is involved in the flux of the natural world and is limited by its necessities. But he also transcends nature and time and thus may create new levels of coherence and meaning as well as contemplate his own finiteness.

Niebuhr's concept of history is built on this two-sided predicament of freedom and necessity and of man's involvement in the temporal process yet his capacity to transcend it.

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<sup>6</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), One Vol. edition, I, p. 3.

He is never freed completely from natural necessity, but he is also never limited completely to it. This is the realm of history.

Man's ability to transcend the flux of nature gives him the capacity to make history. Human history is rooted in the natural process but it is something more than either the determined sequences of natural causation or the capricious variations and occurrences of the natural world. It is compounded of natural necessity and human freedom. Man's freedom to transcend the natural flux gives him the possibility of grasping a span of time in his consciousness and thereby knowing history. It also enables him to change, reorder and transmute the causal sequences of nature and thereby make history. The very ambiguity of the word "history" (as something that occurs and as something that is remembered and recorded) reveals the common source of both human actions and human knowledge in human freedom.<sup>7</sup>

There are four consequences which obviously follow from this approach and they are an integral part of Niebuhr's understanding of history. The first is the fact that man's freedom is the source of his dignity and his creativity, but it is also the source of his peril. A finite and a physical creature yet gifted with the capacity to survey eternity, he is able to look at himself as one creature among many, but he is also able to look at the world with his mind being the focusing center of the whole. Thus is he ever tempted, in his freedom, to make himself the center of all. In pride, he refuses to see his limitations. Man is mortal, but he pretends not to be and that is his sin. This is possible only because man is free. In an excellent sermon on the Tower of

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., II, p. 1.

Babel, Niebuhr shows this to be the case even when speaking of man in his communal life.<sup>8</sup> Inevitably, human cultures and civilizations build towers through which they pretend to be higher than their real height and claim a finality which is not theirs to possess. This two-dimensional existence of freedom and necessity, of nature and spirit, places man in tension and provides the possibility for nobility, but also for sin. A concomitant of this is the fact that the possibility for sin is always with man and, because he can never escape his limitations regardless of his striving, he is aware that he can never achieve perfection. It is important to note that this is not a defect in the creation of man, but rather a defect which is possible because man has been endowed with freedom.

A second consequence is closely related to the above and grows out of the fact that the meaning of history, by reason of the freedom and transcendence of the human spirit, is never contained within or satisfied by the natural-historical process and thus must point beyond itself. Man, in search of fulfillment, but faced with the knowledge of his limitations and of the imperfections within natural history, cannot believe that the meaning of history can be found in such incompleteness.

Insofar as he transcends the temporal process, he can discern many meanings in life and history by tracing various coherences, sequences, causalities and recurrences through which the

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<sup>8</sup>Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, pp. 27-47.



events of history are ordered. But insofar as man is himself in the temporal process which he seeks to comprehend, every sequence and realm of coherence points to a more final source of meaning than man is able to comprehend rationally.<sup>9</sup>

Insofar as he is involved in history, the disclosure of life's meaning must come to him in history. In so far as he transcends history the source of life's meaning must transcend history.<sup>10</sup>

Thus we are confronted with another polarity in the thought of Niebuhr: disclosure and fulfillment. Akin to this is the polarity of mystery and meaning. Within the curious mixture of freedom and necessity, lies the realm of history. Its meaning is partially intelligible, but not completely, partially disclosed but not fully. Filled with obscurities, incoherences and unfulfilled meanings, history points beyond itself. We will deal with this more completely when we come to the discussion of the relationship of Christianity and history.

The third and fourth consequences have great bearing on the way in which one approaches the study of history. The third has to do with the relationship of the past to the present. If one is to comprehend man, he must come to know his history. In a very real sense man is a being in history who has a history, but it is also true that history is in man. Instead, therefore, of relegating history to something

<sup>9</sup>Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup>Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 36. (Two interesting sermons on this subject appeared under the titles "City Which Hath Foundation" and "Mystery and Meaning" in his book Discerning the Signs of the Times.)

remote and forgotten, it must be seen as a dimension of the present. The past dwells within the present in two ways: (1) through our memory of events, and (2) through the immediacy of the situations which the past places at our doorsteps. These might be viewed as the polarity of memory and destiny. Niebuhr sees memory as "the fulcrum of freedom for man in history" inasmuch as by memory man is able to grasp the uniqueness of historical events without reducing them to natural necessities.<sup>11</sup> Memory understands that events do not necessarily follow from previous events, but sees the mixture of freedom and necessity which gives uniqueness to every historical event. By memory, man is able to rise above the temporal flux and interpret present realities through the uniqueness of past events. This he does not by logic but by memory which is one of the facets of his freedom.

The past is present not only in our memory of its events, but also in the present realities which we confront resulting from those events. Niebuhr cites, as an example, the memory of an accident, but also the scar on the forehead. More seriously, he points not only to the memory of the slaves which our fathers brought from Africa but also the reality of the problems existing on the contemporary scene. We cannot, by human freedom, revoke the social configurations which have developed from decisions of the past. Facts of locale of birth, economic status of parents, political and cultural traditions, laws and institutions present

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<sup>11</sup>Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 19.

themselves with irrevocable force upon the present. Some are facts of nature while others are facts of history which combined freedom and necessity. All of them, however, are part of the present and, in their complexity, they represent a confusion of freedom and destiny.

The fourth and final consequence which grows out of Niebuhr's approach to history through his understanding of freedom and necessity is the need to distinguish sharply between history and nature. As we have observed, events in history cannot be understood as having been dictated by natural necessity. Because of his unique freedom, man is able to create "curious and unexpected and unpredictable emergences and emergencies in history."<sup>12</sup> Confronted with a multitude of possibilities, he is able to be a creator of historical events which do not yield themselves to examination by the natural sciences nor to bases for accurate predictions of the future. History is such a compound of freedom and necessity that historical events are complexly interwoven into and superimposed upon each other. "The complex of events which constitutes history is thus such a bewildering confusion of freedom and destiny, that the historical cannot be made to conform to the patterns of either logical or natural coherence."<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, it must be observed that man's freedom over time results in historical structures and patterns, institutions

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<sup>12</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, The Structure of Nations and Empires, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 7.

<sup>13</sup>Gordon Harland, The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 92.

and cultures, which transcend the life span of the organisms of nature. Compared to the slow mutations of the forms of nature, novelties of human creativity may erupt with such a tempo and in such dimensions that historical change may be seen to be radically different.

Historical patterns are in a category of reality which cannot be identified with the structure of nature. They are to be sharply distinguished from natural structures because they represent a compound of freedom and necessity.<sup>14</sup>

To the degree that men are not free, their actions may be scientifically charted. But to the degree that they are free, the events in history are so varied and complex that their meaning may not be easily comprehended. Scientific generalizations are seen as impossible. History can therefore never be equated with nature.

It follows, too, that knowledge of history cannot be approached in the same way as knowledge of nature. At this point Niebuhr frankly admits that he is confronted with the problem of relativism of historical knowledge and that from it there is no rational escape. This is historical relativism on two fronts: (1) relativism resulting from the complexity of historical causation, and (2) relativism resulting from the ambiguous position of the observer. Niebuhr deals with this subject extensively in his book The Self and the Dramas of History and emphatically points out the impossibility of subjecting history, with its complexity of causation, to the precise analyses of scientists and philosophers, who, to his

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<sup>14</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 45.

chagrin, consistently try to understand historical dramas in terms of natural or ontological necessity. The events of history involve the motives of the agents of action, their resentments, their ambitions and jealousies, in addition to the concentration of multiple social and historical forces. The historian will do well to approach his task with considerable phronesis (practical wisdom). The position of the observer of the historical scene is moreover such that he cannot claim objectivity for the "observers of this drama are invariably themselves involved in the historical flux which they are trying to survey."<sup>15</sup> Historical distance from the event is likewise of little value in resolving the problem of historical relativism for the viewer remains within the temporal flux and must therefore observe the events from his particular locus and perspective.

There are, of course, valid social and historical sciences. They are legitimate when the scientists know themselves to be historians, rather than natural scientists; and therefore recognize that their generalizations are hazardous and speculative.<sup>16</sup>

There is no solution to the problem of historical relativism, but careful and honest historical inquiry by historians who report from their various perspectives rather than from scientists who claim empirical observation and scientific observation, can yield valid historical knowledge. Extreme biases, of course, will be refuted and obvious propagandists

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

ignored. The reports and interpretations of the events of history by honest historians will provide the only solution to the problem, but even then the knowledge cannot have the exactness of knowledge in the field of natural science.

Inasmuch as knowledge of history is always interpretation of history, unless, of course, one resorts to the listing of objective data without evaluation of any kind, and such is of little value, the meaning of history and of human life comes into consideration. Either question presupposes an ultimate framework of meaning and such a framework is derived not from an investigation of history itself, but from religious faith.

History in its totality and unity is given a meaning by some kind of religious faith in the sense that the concept of meaning is derived from ultimate presuppositions about the character of time and eternity, which are not fruits of detailed analyses of historical events.<sup>17</sup>

It is within this faith that history may be seen either to have meaning or to remain meaningless. If, as we have noted, history does indeed point beyond itself, and history is fulfilled in some point beyond time, and the polarity of mystery and meaning may be comprehended, then faith must supply the framework. It is at this point that we therefore must consider Niebuhr's understanding of Christianity and history.

### Christianity and History

The Christian faith begins with, and is founded upon, the affirmation that the life, death, and

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<sup>17</sup> Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 118.

resurrection of Christ represent an event in history, in and through which a disclosure of the whole meaning of history occurs.<sup>18</sup>

The demand for religious faith as a framework of meaning is met by Niebuhr with the insistence that the whole historical drama becomes meaningful by being oriented from the Christian perspective. As he has noted, specific presuppositions are mandatory for any interpretation of the meaning of history. He readily admits that his interpretation rests squarely on Christian presuppositions.

The focal point of Niebuhr's interpretation of history is the revelatory event of Christ and, though it is a scandal to find the meaning of history in an historical event, it is nonetheless the only source of understanding history. The truth of the revelation can be apprehended only by faith, but, given the revelation, reason can show that it gives the only adequate understanding of the character of history and the meaning of human life.

In considering the significance of the revelatory event of Christ, we will want to consider Niebuhr's understanding of such things as the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Resurrection. It will be well, however, if we first give attention to his treatment of symbol and myth. At times, it seems that Niebuhr uses these terms interchangeably, but actually he does make a slight distinction. A symbol is a partial and particular aspect of life which is used to illuminate the meaning of the whole, to point to the eternal. Symbols are

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 26.



the tools of myths in that they are used to give meaning beyond the limits of their immediate and obvious meaning. They become instruments of linking the realms of time and eternity. Thus, almost any idea or event may have symbolic significance in its ability to communicate a larger truth. The myth, on the other hand, is a story, whose origin may or may not be known, which serves to communicate profound religious truth. The term here does not mean mere fairy tale or fable, but rather means an attempt to give depth to history as an artist does to a painting. In Beyond Tragedy, myth and symbol are discussed in the opening sermon and are seen to be both deceptive and true.<sup>19</sup> They are deceptive insofar as their elements may draw such attention to themselves that they obscure or even hide their deeper meanings: they are true inasmuch as they are the purveyors of truth about the ultimate meaning of life. As deceivers, they have frequently been misunderstood. Some have treated myths with attention only to the facts and events of the natural order while others have viewed them as scientific absurdities and therefore of no value. Biblical mythology has fallen prey to both errors with literalism being the result of the first and rationalistic dismissal the result of the second. It is Niebuhr's point that they must be taken seriously, though not literally. He is keenly aware of the fact that as conveyors of eternal truths in time they are the only means of speaking of the trans-historical. "Meaning can

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<sup>19</sup> Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, pp. 3-24.

be attributed to history only by a mythology."<sup>20</sup> Biblical symbols and myths are therefore an attempt to point to ultimate meaning from the position of finiteness: they reveal true insights about God-man relationships.

Niebuhr is quite clear in his treatment of the creation story and of the fall, but there is considerable ambiguity in his treatment of the Incarnation, the Cross and the Resurrection. It is the affirmation of the New Testament that Christ is the end of history as well as a new beginning. In His life, death, and resurrection, the meaning of man's existence is fulfilled in that God is seen to have a resource of mercy and love and forgiveness which completes history. In Christ, there is a new beginning in that man, seeing the true meaning of life and responding with faith and repentance, may experience renewal of life. This is the wisdom of faith, however, and may not be reduced to rational comprehension.

In Christian thought Christ is both the perfect man, 'the Second Adam' who had restored the perfection of what man was and ought to be; and the Son of God, who transcends all possible human life.<sup>21</sup>

By this Niebuhr means that Christ is the revelation of the very impossible possibility which the Sermon on the Mount elaborates in ethical terms, that is the absolute law of love. "The Jesus of history is a perfect symbol of the absolute in history because the perfect love to which pure spirit

<sup>20</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 123.

<sup>21</sup>Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, p. 16.

aspires is realized in the drama of his life and cross."<sup>22</sup> Seen with reference to the cross, Christ is the norm of human existence which is derived from the ultimate relation of the divine to history, a relation of love. By His freedom God "involves Himself in the guilt and suffering of free men who have, in their freedom, come in conflict with the structural character of reality."<sup>23</sup> The orthodox statement of the two-fold nature of Christ is deceptive in many ways and yet it is true in that it expresses the paradoxical relationship to divine agape which comes down to man to conquer and human agape which rises above history to a sacrificial act. The tragedy of the Cross was necessary simply because it was the fullest expression of God's love and forgiveness. The Cross stands as a judgment upon all men who, in their search for meaning, seek to make themselves the center of the whole. But it also stands as "the assurance that judgment is not the final word of God."<sup>24</sup> The mercy of God does not wipe out the distinctions of good and evil in history but rather overcomes what man cannot overcome by himself. Thus, the life and Cross of Christ reveal the true nature of God and unleash for man new power and meaning in his life.

The Resurrection of Christ, while it cannot be ascertained as an historical fact as can the Cross, cannot be dismissed as irrelevant.

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<sup>22</sup>Niebuhr, Reflections . . . , p. 287.

<sup>23</sup>Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 71.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., I, p. 142.

The church as a fellowship of believers was obviously founded upon the conviction of the fact of the resurrection. This 'fact' contained an alternation in the story through faith's apprehension of the significance of the story. To recognize that the Cross was something more than a noble tragedy and its victim something else than a good man who died for his ideals; to behold rather that this suffering was indicative of God's triumph over evil through a love which did not stop at involvement in the evil over which it triumphed; to see, in other words, the whole mystery of God's mercy disclosed is to know that the crucified Lord had triumphed over death . . . It is the revelatory depth of the fact which is the primary concern of faith.<sup>25</sup>

The Resurrection is both the triumph of Christ over sin and the proof of God's power to overcome death. It is important to note that, to Niebuhr, the miracle of the recognition of the true Christ in the Resurrection was an event of immediacy and not one which is grounded in a slow-dawning consciousness of the church. The Resurrection is a miracle without which the church could not have come into existence. The Crucifixion and the Resurrection are the events through which man is able to find meaning in history. They are God's word of revelation to man that discloses His sovereignty over history as well as His justice and mercy and that discloses the mystery of His relation to history.

From these Christian presuppositions there are many implications which Niebuhr draws. Five of them deserve at least our brief attention.

(1) Christianity deals with the whole of history and not just a particular people. It views by faith certain

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<sup>25</sup>Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 147-148.

events in history and proclaims that these events have relevance for all men in that they transcend the whole panorama of time and reveal the source and meaning and end of all history. God covenants with men from any nation who are called, that is, "who are able to apprehend by faith that this person, drama and event of history discloses the power and the love which is the source and the end of the whole historical drama."<sup>26</sup>

(2) Faith in the sovereignty and love of God gives unity to history, but it is always faith. The significance of the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ come to man by revelation and not by sight or reason. This is not to say that reason is of no value in man's relationship with God nor that Christianity is completely irrational, but it is to say that man must face and acknowledge his limitations. The revelation of God cannot be proved: it can be accepted only by faith. Examples abound in the history of Christianity of attempts to "prove" what is revealed. Even Biblical stories such as the virgin birth are little more than efforts to give credibility to the revelation of the significance of Christ. To do so is to make faith less than it must be.

(3) The Cross of Christ reveals the true distinction between evil and good. Instead of negating the evil of man, it reminds him of the reality of evil. Man sees the true norm of human existence and is vividly aware that he falls short. But he sees even more than this: he sees that his freedom, which is the source of his dignity and creativity,

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 27.



is also the source of his sin. Sin is placing one's self in the role of God, in the center of the whole, as the being around which all of history moves. In his freedom, man refuses to recognize his limitations and claims for himself that which rightfully belongs to God. Viewing the Cross, it is impossible to calm his guilt any longer by pointing to natural necessities. In the Cross, the distinction of good and evil is preserved and affirmed and God's judgment upon sin is made all the more severe.

(4) In Christ, man sees the norm of human existence and accepts the law of love as the ethical ideal. Such an ethic is an impossible possibility. This results in two things: (1) ethical relativism, and (2) the realization that the absolute is never attainable. Ethical relativism is not, in this sense, that held by some who say that "moral principles are only relative to particular culture and situations."<sup>27</sup> Instead it is a relativism based on the fact that love is the source of ethical decisions and actions and not some objective moral law. Because, however, the life-ethic can never be perfectly applied in the realm of history, man is caught in a contradiction. Niebuhr has been emphatic in his belief that there are no simple choices in the problems which man and society face. The situation of man is that he must choose the lesser of two or more evils rather than an undiluted good. The law of love remains, nonetheless, the ideal and its relevancy is three-fold. It serves as a

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<sup>27</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christianity and Moral Law," The Christian Century, Vol. LXX, No. 48, Dec. 2, 1953, p. 1386.

measure of our failure, providing a basis for an evaluation of our achievements and it serves as an absolute standard toward which we move. Finally, the ideal of love serves as a principle of discriminating and making decisions.

Where there are two or more alternatives, both admittedly falling short of the ideal, the law of love provides the criterion by which we may determine which of these 'second-bests' approximates most closely to the ideal.<sup>28</sup>

(5) In an earlier section, we noted that Niebuhr contends that history, filled with obscurities, incoherences and unfulfilled meanings, points beyond itself and that the end of history is not a point in history, but beyond it. In the light of the Christian faith, this takes on a new dimension of meaning.

Everything in human life and history moves toward the end. By reason of man's subjection to nature and finiteness this 'end' is a point where that which exists ceases to be. It is finis. By reason of man's rational freedom the 'end' has another meaning. It is the purpose and goal of his life and work. It is telos.<sup>29</sup>

The Christian faith fully understands the tension between these two and, though it cannot solve the problem, it looks toward the end of history with faith and hope rather than with fear. Finis is the end of time, but telos, the Christian faith insists, lies outside of history. The Christian faith makes a further claim and that is that in the revelation of God in Christ the end of history as telos has already come with a

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<sup>28</sup>G.H.C. MacGregor, The Relevance of an Impossible Ideal, (New York: The Fellowship of Reconciliation, n.d.), p. 9.

<sup>29</sup>Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 287.

disclosure of the meaning of history though not a full realization of that meaning. It is one of the supreme paradoxes of Christianity that telos has preceded finis. Such a faith means that the world has been overcome and that the incoherences and incompletions of history have been in a sense illuminated. But such a faith also points to the end when all of the corruptions and incompletions of history shall be completely overcome.

In the New Testament the eschata or last things are described in three fundamental symbols: the Parousia, the Last Judgment, and the Resurrection. Niebuhr sees the Second Coming of Christ as dominant over the other two symbols inasmuch as the latter are actually expressions of Christ's return as triumphant judge and redeemer. The Second Coming of Christ is symbolically significant because (1) it demonstrates the fact that since Christ is the norm of all human existence, existence cannot defy that norm: (2) it expresses the Christian hope of fulfillment of life while holding fast the essential conception of the relation of time and eternity, placing fulfillment at the end of history and not in some far off abstraction: (3) it demonstrates the ultimate triumph of the law of love: and (4) it witnesses to the sufficiency of God's sovereignty over all the world and history.

The symbol of the Last Judgment in New Testament mythology enshrines three basic ideas in the Christian understanding of life and history. (1) Christ Himself will be the Judge and He will judge men not by their finiteness but by their sin as seen by their own ideal possibility which has

been known in history. (2) The distinction between good and evil will be affirmed instead of swallowed up in some nebulous eternity. Granted that historical realities are ambiguous, making absolute distinctions within history impossible, the final judgment allows this necessity and possibility.

(3) Coming at the "end" of history, the Last Judgment symbolically demonstrates a denial of any possibility that history can fulfill or complete itself. Any idea that by growth and progress man can emancipate himself from his guilt and sin is fully refuted. Fulfillment can come only at the end and from God, though it is related to the whole process of history.

The third symbol which the New Testament employs to describe the eschata is that of the resurrection. The idea of the resurrection of the body is a hope which implies the redemption of the whole man. Eternity will fulfill the rich variety of the temporal process and yet will in some way maintain the freedom of man. The body symbolizes man's relation to nature and the contribution which nature makes to individuals and to all historical realizations. The resurrection of the body further implies that the whole unity of history belongs to eternity and that all of its particularities shall be brought into the harmony of the whole. The resurrection of the body thus has individual and social significance and the end of history is viewed as loving fellowship with God.

All three of the symbols have great meaning for the Christian understanding of history. Though they may not be

taken literally, it is important that they be taken seriously.

At the conclusion of his book, The Self and the Dramas of History, Niebuhr makes the following statement.

The dramas of history contain many facts and sequences which must be rationally correlated. But the frame of meaning in which these facts and sequences are discerned must be apprehended by faith because it touches the realm of mystery beyond rational comprehension. The ultimate question always remains whether the mystery is so absolute as to annul the meaning of the historical drama or a 'light that shineth in darkness,' which clarifies, rather than annuls, all the strange and variegated dramas of human history.<sup>30</sup>

Our discussion of Niebuhr's concept of history points clearly to his belief that Christ is the key to the meaning of history. Within this framework, we understand him to be primarily saying the following things.

History deals with man in his wholeness and therefore must be sharply distinguished from nature.

Freedom and necessity are dialectical realities and man's freedom is the source of his creativity as well as of his evil. Because this is true, history itself can never be viewed as redemptive. Christ only can serve as judge and redeemer.

History has both unity and meaning, but this can be acknowledged only through faith in God and not through empirical evidence.

History is a complexity of incoherences, fragments, and incompleteness and points beyond itself for meaning and

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<sup>30</sup>Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, p. 242.

fulfillment. Man, even though he responds in faith and repentance to Christ and acknowledges God as the center of the whole, must accept his limitations and the truth that only in the end of history will he find fulfillment.



## CHAPTER III

### COMPARISON AND CRITIQUE

Rather than approach this aspect of our task by criticizing each of the men and then comparing them, or doing the reverse by comparing them first and then criticizing separately, it seems feasible to combine these two and move through their thought comparing and criticizing at the same time. At certain points, Niebuhr and Bultmann lend themselves to the same criticisms. Even ideas which differ may sometimes be criticized for the same reasons. There are, of course, areas of their thought which must be treated separately and this we will do.

For the purposes of organization, we will follow the outline used earlier by considering first their general views and then their views of Christianity and history.

Bultmann has attempted to defend his position with regard to the subjectivity of the historical scholar as being, in effect, his objectivity, but the concept still presents problems. It is true that the presuppositions of historical research, particularly in terms of pre-understanding and in terms of the investigator standing within history, necessarily result in subjectivity, but it does not follow that the researcher, recognizing these facts, is therefore objective. Indeed, if the historian must make use of secondary sources

or the observations of other historians then he necessarily is giving subjective interpretation to subjective interpretation of objective events. Obviously, this could go on ad absurdum. Perhaps we must say that historical study can never be objective and would be meaningless if it could. A certain objectivity may be achieved toward one's own presuppositions, but this will surely prevent one from believing that objectivity in history can ever be attained. Recognizing history as remembered and interpreted event, the existentialist would isolate himself in his own decisions. At the same time, it must be said that the historian of integrity surely goes to his material with sincere intent to record objective fact as best he can. This is what distinguishes it from legend and fiction. If Bultmann carries this too far, he is, as a New Testament scholar, destroying his own tools.

Niebuhr has insisted on the relativity of historical knowledge in the light of the manifold causations of historical events and in the light of the ambiguous position of the observer. While he does not do this in existentialist terminology, he is in agreement with Bultmann regarding the impossibility of objective recording of history that goes beyond the recording of mere data. He does not, however, say that a recognition of this subjectivity provides the historical scholar with objectivity. Actually, Niebuhr's concern is much more that the interpreter of history be an historian instead of a natural scientist or a philosopher and that such an historian recognize fully his limitations and the

hazards of his generalizations and interpretations. Niebuhr's view of the problem of historical relativism seems to be much more healthy than Bultmann's.

Another area of comparison is at the point of the analysis of the present. Both men see history as living in the present and both acknowledge the existence of the past and the future within that present. But while Bultmann places his real emphasis on history as being future-directed, Niebuhr deals primarily with history as past-directed. It is as if one were saying that history is pulled forward while the other were saying that history is pushed forward. There are several observations that might well be made.

While the future of man influences his decisions in every moment in terms of intention, it is also true that much that actually transpires is not what he had intended. Many of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation or the French Revolution threw up their hands in horror when they saw the things which actually took place, declaring that they had never intended to produce anything like that. The very moving play The Bloody Tenet is an excellent dramatization of this very fact as Roger Williams is transported to the contemporary American scene to witness the long-range results of his plea for religious freedom. This is all simply to say that the idea of future-directed man must be seen within limitations.

In contrast to Bultmann, Niebuhr places his emphasis on history as past-directed. It is interesting to note that even though his understanding of freedom acknowledges the

wide possibilities of decision in any given moment, he does not put much stress on the influence of these possibilities within the present where the decision is made. It must be acknowledged that he does recognize that the intentions of man do have their effect, but there is not, in his thought, much sense of man being "pulled," so to speak, by his future. One wonders why, as a dialectician, he does not hold these two aspects of man's present in greater balance.

At this point in our discussion, it appears wise to consider points in each of these men's writings which cannot be compared, but which must be criticized. We are thinking specifically of Bultmann's analysis of modern scientific thought and of Niebuhr's treatment of the condition of man.

One of the weakest points in Bultmann's concept of history lies in his understanding of modern scientific thought. When he discusses history in his Gifford lectures, he makes it quite plain that he sees history as movement of process founded on the connection of single events in a chain of cause and effect, a continuity which allows no room for intervention from an outside source which might be thought of as supernatural. This is likewise made clear as he approaches demythologizing for he presupposes that modern man, influenced by the natural sciences, is an independent unity that cannot possibly accept a redemptive event brought about by transcendent intervention, nor any phenomena that stand as exceptions to the natural laws of creation. Bultmann leaves himself open for criticism at at least two points. To begin with, it is a bit questionable whether any

theologian should set himself up as capable of speaking in the name of contemporary scientific thought. The fact of the matter is, as Malevez has correctly observed,

If there is something of which we can be quite certain, for us all, it is this, that in the form which it has assumed during recent decades, science has given up the attempt to make a picture of the world at all, because it knows that such a picture cannot possibly be created.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, even if one does not go to the opposite extreme and accept the Principle of Uncertainty, the concept of scientific determinism has been brought into serious question. Not only has science no authority to establish the principle of determinism in physical reality as necessary, there seems to be considerable evidence that, indeed, events do occur which have no cause, phenomena which really are new. Whether this is proved true or merely held as a possibility, Bultmann cannot use the principle of determinism as a basic part of modern thought. A further problem regarding Bultmann's treatment of the causal sequence is the transcendence of man and the place of his intention. One must ask whether these intentions stand within or without the sequence. If they stand outside of the sequence, then is there an outside reality which may affect something within the sequence? And is his eschatological being, which is so much a part of his personal decisions, affected by the causal sequence? If man's intentions and decisions are involved in the cause-effect sequence, then where is the order of nature and history to claim the sequence unbreakable?

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<sup>1</sup>Malevez, op. cit., p. 127.

Even if one ignores all of these arguments from the point of physics, there is reason to believe that modern man has no problem accepting the possibility of divine intervention. The attention given by many devout and intelligent Christians to the whole subject of miraculous healings would lead one to conclude that such an idea is not untenable. Bultmann's thought hangs heavily on this aspect of his analysis of modern man. If it is false or even questionable then his whole theory of history is in trouble, but particularly at this point of ignoring or demythologizing anything which smacks of the supernatural or miraculous.

Turning to Niebuhr's analysis of man, we are confronted with two problems, man's evil and man's transcendence. With reference to the first, this aspect of his thought is probably the most well known. That man's sin stems basically from his freedom, and that it expresses itself in pride and in sensuality are important truths to be recognized. The point in question is whether Niebuhr emphasizes man's sin to the extent that he should be left in nothing but despair and gloom. We must acknowledge that over against this Niebuhr places the possibilities and asserts that in every situation there are untried opportunities to apply the spirit of love. It is true, too, that he points out the creativity and nobility of man which is the other side of his freedom. The problem is holding the good and evil in proper tension. One would like to hear him say a bit more about the imago dei in every man. Perhaps in his efforts to combat the extreme of liberalism with its stress on the goodness of

man, it is understandable that he would over-emphasize the evil in man. One wonders, too, if, since apparently there is some evil in all of man's acts in the light of the fact that his motives are never pure and the ideal of love is unattainable, there might not be some truth in the opposite. Is there genuine good in history as surely as there is evil? Niebuhr points out that the Cross of Christ is a reminder of the sin and evil in history, but is it not also the reminder of the good?

With reference to the second problem, man's transcendence, Niebuhr is right in recognizing this unique ability of man to step outside of himself, so to speak. The question is whether man, by doing so, participates in what appears to be another realm of being and whether he actually transcends his reason. Niebuhr points in one place to man's fear of death and to his anticipation of another dimension of reality as being proofs of man's transcendence. But is this accomplished beyond reason? There is no doubt about the reality of the fear since it involves the unknown, but in what way is this an aspect of man's transcendence instead of his reason? It would seem that any image of death or life beyond might be nothing more than a composite of what man knows by reason in history. Niebuhr can easily be misunderstood at this point, but the question must be asked.

The subject of myth is treated by both Bultmann and Niebuhr though the former dwells on it at much greater length, perhaps because of his interest as a New Testament scholar. The two men approach the subject with considerable



difference, but come out much closer than they went in. Both, however, are open to criticism.

Attention will be given later to some of the specific instances of Bultmann's demythologizing, but perhaps now is an appropriate time to remark on some concerns about the whole process. Basically, Bultmann is correct in seeing the need to demythologize the New Testament where the first century world-view tends to obscure the message. And he is right in understanding that the myths are not to be discarded but rather re-interpreted for modern man. But there are several aspects of the subject which Bultmann fails to properly acknowledge.

We have already noted the inaccuracies of his analysis of modern thought and the problems of subjectivity. Their implications for the approach to demythologizing are obvious. But as for myth as an expression of the other-worldly and divine in terms of this-worldly and human, he does not seem to adequately recognize the inevitability of mytho-poetic language wherever one speaks of the activity of God. The language of religious and spiritual truth and experience, as contrasted with science, is that of myth and poetry, symbol and imagery. It shall always be so. Even such simple terms as "Father" or "Son" are mythological when used in reference to God and man in relationship, but man has no choice but to so express himself. Bultmann does acknowledge this, but he does not seem to see that this is as true today as it was when the New Testament was written. In re-interpreting the kerygma

for modern man, the task is as much one of transmythologizing as it is demythologizing.

A further recognition follows and that is that there may well be a twentieth century myth. In the world-view, we have seen that "cause and effect" might also be the language of myth. For that matter, so might "process." There is really little doubt that two thousand years from now, possible catastrophic events not accounted for, man will look back on us and think that our world-view is quite naive and unrealistic.

We might also observe that there is mythological language even within the existentialist philosophy which Bultmann employs. Such phrases as "being-in-the-world," "divine transcendence," "primordial understanding," and "leap of faith" reflect the need for interpretation. It cannot be simply assumed that this language communicates to modern man any better than, or if as well as, the present language of the New Testament. Indeed, one must have a fairly advanced knowledge of the particular school of thought even to know what Bultmann is talking about.

It might further be observed that somehow, down through the ages, many a simple peasant has been able to reach high levels of Godly-living or even "authentic being" through a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ without ever feeling the need to remove the Biblical myths. This is not to make light of the need to demythologize, but simply to say that God's activity with men is not always dependent upon our scholarly pursuits. So much, for now, for Bultmann's demythologizing.

As early as 1920 Niebuhr made the observation that "Religion is poetry. The truth in the poetry is vivified by adequate poetic symbols and is therefore more convincing than the poor prose with which the average preacher must attempt to grasp the ineffable."<sup>3</sup> Unlike Bultmann, Niebuhr fully realizes the necessity of expressing the religious truths in mytho-poetic language. Nor is he as anxious as Bultmann to extract the meaning from the myths and re-phrase it for contemporary man by some process of transmythologizing. On the contrary, Niebuhr takes the mythological expressions seriously and sees the truth expressed within them. Myth provides the key to understanding history and the God-man relationship. As supra-historical and supra-rational, myth is the word of God to man "coming to him from beyond the boundaries of human knowledge; . . . Its form and content belong together, essentially and inseparably."<sup>4</sup> For Niebuhr, myth expresses a supra-historical and supra-rational truth about men, while for Bultmann, myth is always an expression of subjective understanding of self. One is cosmological, the other anthropological.

The truth which the myth communicates about eternity and time is essential to it. Biblical literalists concretize the myth and liberals cast myth aside entirely; both miss the important truth which is there. This is an important and good

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<sup>3</sup>Niebuhr, Leaves from . . ., p. 32.

<sup>4</sup>Hans Hoffman, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 77.

point of Niebuhr's and differs greatly from Bultmann's view that the truth of the myth comes to each man from "something out there." Niebuhr may employ contemporary myth to communicate truth, but by his understanding of Biblical mythology it is impossible for him to transmythologize.

Niebuhr's main problem with myth deals with the relation of myth and symbol to historical events. One is never quite sure whether he is saying that there is an objective historical event behind the myth/symbol and whether such is necessary for the myth/symbol to be valid. Was there really a Tower of Babel or an Ark of the Covenant? He treats the Creation story as "primitive" myth and the Fall as non-historical, but he also explains the Trinity and the Incarnation as myth/symbol. In one place he seems to be saying that as a pointer toward the trans-historical, myth inevitably falsifies history, while in another he seems to insist on the reality of the historical event. Some of the confusion may be based on his sometimes interchangeable, sometimes distinctive usage, of the terms myth and symbol.

In one respect, Niebuhr's treatment of myth is most satisfying. In his collection of sermons, Beyond Tragedy, he is particularly effective in discussing the essential truths which are contained in some of the Biblical myths and in considering the dialectical relation between the temporal and the eternal. On the other hand, Bultmann treats the relationship of myth to history more definitely and with greater consistency in his total approach to the subject. If

Niebuhr would clear up the ambiguity of myth and symbol, as well as their relationship to objective history, his treatment would be more acceptable.

As we come to a consideration of the ways in which these two men approach the subject of the Christian faith and history, there are comments which must be made regarding each before any comparative statement can be made.

The question of subjectivity arises again when we turn to Bultmann's treatment of the Christian faith. One may be tempted to conclude that the faith rests completely on one's personal experience and that, therefore, you may have yours and I may have mine and they may not be in the same tenets or the same god. The criteria must be its meaning to me. Certainly, there can be no proof and decidedly no proof-texts. (Interestingly, Bultmann is a great employer of proof-texts, particularly in his two-volume Theology of the New Testament.) Furthermore, one can never answer the question of why the Christian should claim that the Christ-event was and is the decisive eschatological event. Why him and not someone else? Why not John the Baptist, or Buddha or any one of a number of "good" people? Bultmann tries to answer this in his "Reply to the Critics" when he says that "God encounters us in His Word - i.e. in a particular word, in the proclamation inaugurated with Jesus Christ. True, God encounters us at all times in all places, but he cannot be seen everywhere unless His Word comes to us as well and makes the moment of revelation intelligible to us in its own

light."<sup>5</sup> He elaborates on this to equate Jesus Christ with the Word, but his insistence upon this being verifiable only as an eschatological event for the individual still leaves these questions open. At this point, another question must also be asked. If the Christ-event as present reality is dependent upon my response, is preaching of the kerygma the Word of God only as I recognize it as such? Further, would Christ have been Christ if no one had responded? It seems to be a matter of pro me vs. pro se, but actually shouldn't it be seen to be both?

Most of Bultmann's problems arise out of a failure to recognize the necessary relationship between historisch and geschichtlich. He must either bring objective-history up to existential history or visa-versa. Even when agreeing with him that Christian theology and Christian preaching must be concerned with Jesus Christ as geschichtlich, we must nonetheless insist that the historisch does have value and that, in fact, there would be no saving events without certain objective-historical events. The Christ of faith cannot be separated as easily from the Jesus of history as Bultmann proposes. He subordinates the objective-historical events to the point of making the history of Jesus at least shadowy and almost docetically spiritual. On quotable grounds, he would deny this vigorously. "The agent of God's presence and activity, the mediation of God's reconciliation of the world unto himself, is a real figure of history."<sup>6</sup> He also

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<sup>6</sup>Bultmann et al, Kerygma and Myth. . . , pp. 206-7.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

confesses that it is the superb paradox that Jesus was both human and divine.<sup>7</sup> But his overall emphasis on the existential-history denies this and he fails to see that a central aspect of that superb paradox is that Jesus Christ was historisch and geschichtlich.

As a result of this outlook, Bultmann has little concern for the life of Jesus nor for the Biblical accounts of that life. Even though he acknowledges that the word of God is not a "mysterious oracle, but a sober, factual account of a human life, of Jesus of Nazareth, possessing saving efficacy for man," he pays the account little attention and holds the objective-historical happenings as of little import.<sup>8</sup> Nils A. Dahl has criticized Bultmann squarely at this point:

The existentialist interpretation carried out consistently signifies, . . . not only a demythologizing but also a dehistoricizing of the New Testament. The dehistoricizing of the New Testament is an ultra-Pauline extreme conditioned by existence philosophy which does not do justice to the Gospels. Though it may be true that the Gospels are proclamation and witness, still it would be completely contrary to the intention of the evangelists to declare as irrelevant the inquiry into the historicity of the narratives.<sup>9</sup>

To be interested in the earthly life of its Lord and Saviour is a necessary characteristic of an historical religion: to desert such interest and divorce the Christ of faith from the Jesus of History would be a precarious rooting, indeed.

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<sup>7</sup>Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, II, 123-127.

<sup>8</sup>Bultmann et al., Kerygma and Myth . . . , p. 44.

<sup>9</sup>Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville (eds.) Kerygma and History: A Symposium on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 163.

The early Church was extraordinarily firm in its insistence that the religion should be firmly grounded in history and, as though providentially guided, would have no tampering with the flesh of Christ as though he were someone who did not endure real pain nor experience true humanity as they knew it. Both in the canonizing of the New Testament (as it is absurd to assume that the writers gave their phantasy free reign) and in the formulae of the early creeds, they guarded against this error. Though it is true that the Gospel accounts of the earthly life of Jesus are written from within the position of faith and in light of the Resurrection, they can hardly be dismissed as totally inaccurate and irrelevant.

Bultmann's treatment of the Cross gives little attention to its significance as historisch, again bowing out in favor of geschichtlich. To him, its significance is the fact that God speaks to me in the Cross-event and it becomes present reality for me as I make the Cross of Christ my own, undergoing crucifixion with him, becoming free from myself. As a redemptive event, it has cosmic importance only in these terms and cannot be viewed as a process wrought outside of me and of my world. To Bultmann, this does not mean that it is a mythical event, but an existential-historical (geschichtlich) one which originated in an objective-historical (historisch) event. But it becomes redemptive only as I appropriate its significance for myself. Bultmann is right in asserting that the Cross of Christ cannot be understood outside of faith, but the question is whether it is significant that the Cross of Christ was also the Cross of Jesus



as a figure in past history. He admits that the early preachers looked at it this way, but then they had lived with him and it was an experience in their own lives. For us, as an event of the past, the Cross cannot disclose its own meaning. But, we must ask, did not the first preachers see the cross and come to understand its significance after the resurrection and in light of the resurrection, just as we do? And did not the cross in some way become significant because it was the cross of Jesus and not someone else? The cross must be seen as both historisch and geschichtlich and as significant not only because it became the latter, but precisely because it was and is both.

The subordination of the objective-historical becomes particularly acute with reference to the resurrection. Wilder accuses him of seeing the resurrection as something which happened only between God and the disciples rather than between God and Jesus Christ: it must be seen as a real event, apart from the Cross, and it must be viewed as the mighty act of God in Christ.<sup>10</sup> Bultmann's dismissal of the resurrection as a mythical event is an arbitrary decision on his part based on his prior assumption that anything miraculous in character must be eliminated as being historisch. Such an assumption sounds far more like the influence of liberal modernism than existentialism. The miracle of the Resurrection was an event in past history witnessed to by a select few and by the Gospel writers. He who was resurrected

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<sup>10</sup>Amos Wilder, "Mythology in the New Testament," Journal of Biblical Literature, Vol. 69, p. 121.

was the same Jesus Christ who was crucified. His appropriate body was both within time and space and beyond time and space and they both knew him and did not know him. These witnesses cannot be dismissed as foolish visionaries and the faith of the early Church, which the writers recorded with integrity cannot be counted as naive. Every geschichtlich event must be based on an historisch fact. Bultmann's statement that the resurrection rests on the objective-historical event of the cross and is a witness to the fact that this was the Cross of Christ seems to be escapism and a bit absurd. The resurrection must be seen as an objective-historical event in its own right. It is interesting to observe that the kerygma for Bultmann does declare that it is this One and this One only who is preached. That is the basic offense. Does it really become any greater with the acceptance of the Resurrection?

It is this basic failure to unite the Jesus of Nazareth with the Christ of faith that brings Bultmann most of his troubles. His concept of the development of Christology within the early Church contributes substantially to this failure, but it primarily rests on his emphasis on the unimportance of historisch for faith. Amos N. Wilder, in his review of Kerygma and Myth, commented:

What is peculiar and surprising is that Bultmann puts historical research out of count in what concerns our grasp of the real significance of these matters. Only faith is operative here - on the basis of direct revelation of the Word. He thinks, indeed, of revelation as operating in isolation from historical contingencies and relativities - save that, of course, it

began with an historical event and that our own faith is conditioned by our individual historical setting. The Word reaches us, as it were, by a kind of high-tension trolley across the centuries and strikes its saving spark in us. But the origin of its must not be placed at the mercy of historical investigation.<sup>11</sup>

Closely akin to the matter of relating historisch to geschichtlich is that of relating eschatology to the life of man-in-the-world. Even if one accepts the view that history must be essentially seen as existing in the present, the fact remains that any given moment must be historical, but only may be eschatological. In the eschatological moment in which time, past and future, is telescoped into "now" and man achieves authentic existence, man is nonetheless involved in the world of objective facts. In the best of existentialist terms, he is still enmeshed in the toils of decisions and problems and though open to possibilities (as Heidegger puts it), still limited by his earthly existence and unreleased from the course of objective happenings.

Bultmann's emphasis on the eschatological seems to give little value to life as it is lived in time and space. Butterfield has wisely observed that

It has always been realised in the main tradition of Christianity that if the Word was made flesh matter can never be regarded as evil in itself. In a similar way, if one moment of time could hold so much as this, then you cannot brush time away and say that any moment of it is mere vanity.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>12</sup>Herbert Butterfield, Christianity and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 121.

In all fairness to Bultmann, he does say that in the eschatological moment when man becomes authentic being, he becomes free to obey.

The Pauline catalogue of the fruits of the Spirit ('love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, temperance', Gal. 5:22) shows how faith, by detaching man from the world, makes him capable of fellowship in the community. Now that he is delivered from anxiety and from the frustration which comes from clinging to the tangible realities of the visible world, man is free to enjoy fellowship with others. . . . And this means being a new creature.<sup>13</sup>

The ambiguity arises in his view of eschatological existence as being complete detachment from the world, by which he claims to mean, not asceticism, but dealing with the world in a spirit of "as if not." From an existentialist anthropology, this presents real problems and man's relationship with the world becomes quite vague. If we could find evidence in his writing to avow a definite belief in an eschatological existence beyond death, this question of man's relationship to the world would be less of a problem perhaps. But he has little to say specifically about this. He does, however, deny the actuality of the Resurrection except in the proclaimed Word and he does apparently equate "lostness" with inauthentic existence and "saved" with authentic existence in the here and now. If he is to hold to a concept of realized eschatology, then he must deal more seriously with man's relationship with the world. On the other hand, if he holds to his existentialist anthropology and his understanding of

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<sup>13</sup>Bultmann et al, Kerygma and Myth . . . , p. 22.

redemption and faith, I'm not sure that the problem can be overcome. What this does to the historical deposit of the Church down through the years and to the witness of this or that Christian as he lived yesterday is another question. Apparently, however, it makes it rather unimportant.

In considering Niebuhr's treatment of Christianity and history, the first question that comes to mind centers in the ambiguity of his Christology. In some of his earlier writings he makes frequent references to the "religion of Jesus" and to the "ethics of Jesus" and in his first book went so far as to state

If there is any lack of identity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of religious experience, the Jesus of history is nevertheless more capable of giving historical reality to the necessary Christ idea than any character of history.<sup>14</sup>

In later writings he seems to have changed in this respect, but his thought concerning the nature of the person of Jesus Christ is still quite ambiguous. On several occasions he treats the orthodox statement that Jesus was both divine and human as a mythological one. He does not, however, with his emphasis on the Christ of faith, fall into the error to which Bultmann succumbs, that of making the historical Jesus vague and unimportant.

E. J. Carnell has been extremely critical of Niebuhr in his treatment of the Jesus of history and accuses Niebuhr of making Christ the abstract wisdom of history and Jesus of

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<sup>14</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion? p. 235, cited by Paul Lehmann, "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr," Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious . . ., ed. by Kegley and Bretall, p. 260.

history as inconsequentially related to his system. He goes even further in his criticism by saying that, since Niebuhr states that where there is history there is freedom and where there is freedom there is sin, Jesus was finite and a sinner and is judged himself by the Christ.<sup>15</sup> This is going a little far, it seems, as Niebuhr is conscientious, even if vague, about attempting to hold the full human reality of Jesus to the person and work of Christ. The criticism, however, seems just in light of Niebuhr's claim that sin is inevitable but not necessary. Actually, Niebuhr has not treated the subject of Christology explicitly. It would be well if he would spell out his thoughts a little more precisely.

We might, at this point, say a word about Niebuhr's treatment of the resurrection of Christ. While it is much more satisfactory than Bultmann's complete dismissal of the resurrection as non-historical and his insistence that it be seen only as existing within the preaching of the Word, Niebuhr's conclusions leave something to be desired. We greatly appreciate his emphasis on the revelatory depth of the fact of the resurrection, but cannot agree that the Biblical accounts are mere "efforts to certify this triumph through specific historical details [which] may well be regarded as an expression of a scepticism which runs through the whole history of Christianity."<sup>16</sup> The miracle of the

<sup>15</sup>Edward John Carnell, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), rev. ed., p. 144.

<sup>16</sup>Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 148.

resurrection is imbedded in the historical process and must be seen as something more than an awareness on the part of the disciples. His proposition that the recognition of the triumph of God's sovereignty was the miracle of belief is very much appreciated, but that cannot be all. There must be an historical event behind that fact.

Fortunately, Niebuhr does not deal with historisch and geschichtlich, but he does have some problems in relating what he calls "beyond history" to the historical process. ("Beyond history" appears to mean something beyond time and space and all the phenomena of this world, yet it also is the source of meaning for history. D. D. Williams rather humorously calls for the "meaning of meaning" at this point.<sup>17</sup>) It must be recognized, and appreciated, that Niebuhr goes to great lengths to keep man within the historical process and related to it. But he runs into trouble when he stresses that meaning must come from beyond history. Nature, history, and beyond history seem rather unrelated a great deal of the time.

This becomes particularly acute when man is seen in relation to God. Niebuhr is ambiguous in his discussion of the relation of God's redemptive work to history. In Faith and History, he makes the statement that "from the first covenant of God to the resurrection, God's revelations to a people are imbedded in history" and later he states that "the climax of the crucifixion and resurrection thus become not

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<sup>17</sup>Daniel D. Williams, "Niebuhr and Liberalism," Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious..., ed. by Kegley and Bratell, pp. 207-8.

merely the culmination of the whole series of revelations but the pattern of all subsequent confrontations between God and man."<sup>18</sup> At this point there are four questions which we would like to ask Niebuhr. (1) If the Christian revelation occurred in history, it seems to follow that it must be connected with preceding and subsequent history and that it must function as a power within history. If there is hope beyond this realm of history, then must not there also be hope within this realm? (2) If the God-man relationship is seen to be one of I-Thou, does this occur in complete transcendence or does it not occur within this realm of history? (3) In Christ, something happened in history and the new age began. In man's response of faith and repentance, something happens in history and while in one sense he does live in the interim before the fulfillment of history, is it not also true that in another sense he participates in that fulfillment now? (4) In redemption all of the evil and injustice of life are surely not removed, but if it is relevant for man, as Niebuhr would surely insist, then should it not be said that God's redemptive work occurs within history and not beyond it?

We are not suggesting that Niebuhr errs by an emphasis on the beyond that negates this realm. On the contrary, his emphasis is always on man in the historical process. But he does insist that the meaning of this process is only available

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<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 148-49.



beyond the process. What we are asking is that he make more clear his understanding of the relationship of the two.

A part of this same issue, obviously, is the question concerning the source of ethical norms which are to be applied to history. Niebuhr attempts to emancipate himself from pure relativism by clinging to the Christian perspective, but his revolt against legalism and absolutisms fails to see this through with much success. At some points he seems to say that there exists a moral law which is God's commandment, while at others he seems to imply that no moral law can be known or made applicable within history. One cannot but appreciate his emphasis on the law of love as the impossible possibility, yet one wonders if this does not agree with some kind of universal ethic which, though coming from beyond history, imposes its meaning upon history, judging it as well as bringing it to redemption. We are back to the question of this relationship between history and beyond history. Robert E. Fitch has been quite critical of Niebuhr at this point and observes that

the principles of nature and the principles of history are not so radically divorced as Niebuhr insists. Such a law [that is, one which would see these two as inter-related] would allow for flexibility as well as for precision, would combine the positive element of love with the negative element of judgment, would readily embrace the multifarious polarities and ironies of life, and behind the competing but still cooperating impulses toward the creative and the discreative in man, would yet point to the Christian revelation in history as the token of a God who, under the conditions of human

freedom and finitude, is still both absolutely and empirically the Lord of that history.<sup>19</sup>

For Niebuhr, what is the source of the ethical norms, if there are any, and what is the relation of nature, history, and beyond history? Always stressing the world of nature and of human history, he escapes any kind of "other-worldly" solutions that might suggest gold streets and pearly gates, yet he remains extremely vague at this point of meaning, principles, and norms.

In this final section of this thesis, we have attempted to evaluate the strengths and the weaknesses of the concept of history in the thought of these two men and to point out where they are similar and where they are different. We have not attempted to say where one is right and the other wrong, nor to set our own thought up as the ultimate truth.

Appreciation must be expressed to both Bultmann and Niebuhr for their worthy attempts to speak to the contemporary situation and to make the Christian Gospel intelligible to modern man. Some of their errors may be best understood when placed over against the thoughts of such various antagonists as liberalism, orthodoxy, and progressivism. In reply to these, one man goes off in one direction while the other seems to go off in another.

Bultmann finds meaning within the existentialist philosophy and this provides the basis for his ideas of history. Within this framework and with these presuppositions, he builds

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<sup>19</sup>Fitch, op. cit., pp. 306-8.

his "system," if he will please forgive the term, and develops his emphasis on the eschatological dimension of history and his emphasis upon the individual and his encounter with God. Because he begins from an existentialist anthropology, his thought forms are quite different from Niebuhr's and any particular conclusions, therefore, extremely difficult to actually compare.

It must be said that Niebuhr does a better job of criticizing other theories than he does of constructing a satisfactory alternative. Yet because he has rightly sensed, as Hoffman points out, that "contemporary society can conceive of no goal which would give it direction and meaning, that history seems to have lost all significance,"<sup>20</sup> he has attempted to give insights that would help people see a sense of meaningfulness in the whole of history, not just in the present as Bultmann does, and see the movement toward the end as filled with purpose.

As he develops his concept of history, however, he keeps in balance the mutually serving roles of society and the individual, in contrast to Bultmann's rather strict individualism, and he places his primary emphasis on human history as it is lived in this world. Actually, it would be helpful if Bultmann had a little more of Niebuhr's emphasis on this world and if Niebuhr had a little more of Bultmann's eschatology. Bultmann would do well to try to rectify his thought to give history the meaning and significance which

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<sup>20</sup>Hoffman, op. cit., p. 84.

it warrants and has. If one must decide, it would be our conclusion that one would be better off to err with Niebuhr who, at least, does not negate human history. Both, however, need a little of the other.

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