

Theses of a PhD Dissertation

Hermeneutics and Theology in Rudolf Bultmann's Thought

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The dissertation proposes to explore the connections between hermeneutics and theology in the thought of Rudolf Bultmann. The relationship between hermeneutics and theology is a many-sided and complex one. On the one hand, hermeneutics—as the specific art (*Kunstlehre*) of interpreting texts handed down by the tradition and containing collections of rules and prescriptions for reconstructing the meaning of past texts—has from the very beginning been maintaining strict connections to theology in so far as a good deal of its interpreting work has been centering around religious texts. It was classical or holy texts that required being understood or interpreted in the first place, so hermeneutics has been developed, as Gadamer pointed out in his major work, „on two different ways, those of theology and philology.”

Gadamer also claimed that it was owing to Schleiermacher that the hermeneutical problem had been extended to cover not only written texts but also oral communication, whereby a strict contact came to be established between rhetorics and hermeneutics. In fact, he claimed, one can legitimately speak about the belonging together of rhetorics and hermeneutics. It is this rhetorical aspect that brings hermeneutics from a new perspective in the vicinity of theology, in so far as a major task falling in the domain of theology is, as has been the case with 20th century theology, and especially, Bultmann, precisely preaching—that is, oral performances whose rhetorical aspect is beyond any doubt.

The link between hermeneutics and theology is reciprocal: there is a twofold relationship between them. It is a major proposal of the dissertation to show that, if one essential source of hermeneutics is provided by theology, then—especially in the 20th century, and first of all (but not exclusively) in Bultmann's thought—theology in its turn is also linked in several important respects to hermeneutics. Indeed, a number of shifts and changes in accent taking place in the self-interpretation of theology in the 20th century relies for its essential considerations upon hermeneutical insights. If theology provides one of the sources for philosophical hermeneutics then *vice versa* the hermeneutical import or relevance of theology—its being influenced and affected or attracted by hermeneutics—is no less conspicuous. As Gadamer put it, many tend to accentuate not so much the research or scholarly character of theology as the kind of „hermeneutical help it can offer to preaching.”

Regarding the question concerning the connections between hermeneutics and theology there is, however, a more specific answer. It is the claim of this dissertation to show that one of the central themes of Bultmann's monumental life-work centers around understanding as a hermeneutical concept. If this is a fair claim that can be justified then it follows that Bultmann's writings contain considerably more hermeneutical aspects than has typically been assumed to be the case with regard to his single essay on hermeneutics which is

slightly more than thirty pages in length. This claim is substantiated by the fact that his four volume collection of essays, gathering his selected studies that cover a period of four decades (1924–1965)—a collection that has assumed authoritative power and has been most frequently referred to and cited on international scale—is entitled *Faith and Understanding* (*Glauben und Verstehen*). It may legitimately be claimed that the term *Understanding* in the title stands for Bultmann’s hermeneutical perspective.

Bultmann’s studies confront the reader with basic questions pertaining to hermeneutics: historicity, alienness—as well as the various ways to overcome it—, pre-understanding and application. The hermeneutical character of his work has still remained largely ignored or overlooked. The dissertation makes an attempt to probe into Bultmann’s hermeneutics, to explore his insights relevant for hermeneutics and their reciprocal connections.

Forerunners and Historical Background

It was a basic and radical change in intellectual climate at the turn of the century that provided the background for the reciprocal connections that have come into being between hermeneutics and theology, on the one hand, and between philosophy and theology, on the other. This transformation covers a period of several decades extending from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of World War One—a transformation characterized by the growing awareness of crisis as to beliefs in progress and culture. The latent crisis explicitly broke out not until after the end of the war.

Change in intellectual atmosphere as well as radical transformation of the philosophical consciousness of the age had not left theology unaffected either. A passionate revolt against, and an overall criticism of, the intellectual orientation of the older generation was in the field of theology no less characteristic than it was in philosophy and other branches of culture. This explains why theology and philosophy of the younger generation, permeated by radically new views, were able to encounter and establish long lasting contacts with each other.

The new orientation in theology was shown by a renewed interest in primal Christianity together with a turn towards eschatology characteristic of primal Christianity. This new orientation obviously had the meaning of turning against and opposing the world of bourgeois culture and values catalyzed by crisis. Eschatology characteristic of primal Christianity and expectations of the end of the world were put in the fore in order to oppose the modern sense of this-worldly culture; accent was put upon the distance between church and world.

Critique directed against liberal theology by the new generation—first of all, by Barth’s dialectical theology or neo-orthodoxy—was centered around the following points: reduction of religion to ethics, belief in the gradual this-worldly, i.e., historical, realization of Christ’s message, conceiving of Christ’s activity in terms of a moral preacher, identification of the reverence for God with love and brotherhood of fellow-men, altogether the secularization of Christian faith, attempt to fuse it with secular culture or to make it compatible with it (*Kulturprotestantismus*). In addition to the objection to linking Christianity too close to culture, especially Barth’s criticism included also the charge of liberal theology having ignored the due weight pertaining to dogmatic or systematic perspectives.

As an example to illustrate the typical perspective of liberal theology the dissertation selects the work of Adolf von Harnack. Harnack regarded the essential uncorruptible germ of

Christianity to lie in the simple Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. His interpretation of Christianity centered around the infinite worth and freedom of human personality, the commitment to work for social justice and balance, and the universal value of humanistic thought. Luther's doctrine of justification by faith was transformed by Harnack into a symbol of free individuality, and therefore he came to view man's this-worldly destination as consisting in active service for the sake of the community.

Bultmann thought it was a weakness in Harnack's position that by wrongly assessing the scope of the religious-historical school, he failed to appreciate the eschatological character lying in Jesus' work and proclamation and that he underestimated altogether the eschatological consciousness characteristic of Paul and primal Christianity. This objection of Bultmann's clearly relies for its convincing force upon the new position he had assumed by shifting the focus upon eschatology and primal Christianity.

Parallels Between Bultmann and Hermeneutics

The intention and effort of understanding is altogether not alien to theology, but there are few theologians who have viewed it so central to theology as Bultmann did. Interpretation has for Bultmann a twofold importance. On the one hand, the theologian falls back on interpretation every now and then in that he proposes to understand a life-world that is past and has become estranged. On the other, interpretation is always already in play in so far the Bible is in several important respects itself also fruit and result of interpretation.

One main argument for classifying Bultmann's writings on the interpretation of Biblical texts as pertaining to the history of hermeneutics is provided by the fact that according to Bultmann's *locus classicus* „the interpretation of Biblical texts is subjected to the same conditions as any other literary text” („Die Interpretation der biblischen Schriften unterliegt nicht anderen Bedingungen des Verstehens als jede andere Literatur”).

Characteristic for Bultmann's work on the interpretation of holy texts is the simultaneous application of the historical-critical method and existential interpretation. Both of these approaches have indeed a history of their own, but they had not yet been applied in reciprocal conjunction. Bultmann's typical procedure is thereby the following: first he establishes with the help of the historical-critical method the „real facts”, then proceeds to interpret the whole text in existential terms. He relies mainly on the perspectives of Neo-Kantianism and existentialism, thus he stresses simultaneously the importance of the cognitive power of human reason and that of man's existence.

By the conjunction of Neo-Kantianism and existentialism Bultmann avoids subscribing to the one-sided orientation of reason-centeredness, characteristic of the enlightenment, and to the antirational attitude, or over-emphasis of the subjectivity, assigned to existentialism. To avoid going from one extreme to the other is for him to sustain a reasonable portion of both perspectives; his efforts are directed to reconcile the attempt at gaining secure knowledge to the interests of the personal, individual existence.

After summarizing the initial influences and reviewing the main positions elaborated by the secondary literature as to the periodization of Bultmann's work, the dissertation proceeds to inquire the relationship between philosophy and theology as has been understood by Bultmann himself. The question comes here down to the extent to which Heideggerian

existential ontology may serve theological purposes. One should ask whether and to what extent the conceptuality and specific perspective, provided by philosophy, affect and are related to, the difference between believers and non-believers. On Bultmann's view, the existential structures disclosed by philosophy are prior to this difference, therefore, the „atheism” of philosophy is not synonymous with religiously understood „atheism” as a rejection of faith.

The dissertation centers subsequent discussion around basic concepts or themes of Bultmann's hermeneutics.

Pre-understanding

Bultmann derives this concept from Heidegger and gives it a thorough elaboration. The fore-structure of understanding as well as the relationship between understanding and interpretation are developed in harmony with the Heideggerian perspective. This has led Bultmann to work out two significant hermeneutic concepts, those of existential interpretation and of pre-understanding.

The concept of pre-understanding can best be delimited against the background, and in reference to, the claim at the lack of „presuppositions.” „Without presuppositions” means avoidance of anticipating the results of the exegesis, whatever these may be. In this sense, presuppositionless exegesis is for Bultmann not only possible, but also desirable and, indeed, obligatory. In another sense, exegesis is not presuppositionless, for the exeget is not a *tabula rasa*, but approaches the text always already in possession of certain questions and background knowledge concerning the subject matter which the text is about.

Bultmann's requirements as to the procedure of exegesis may be summed up in a few points. These he elaborated on the basis of prior exegetic practice. Although Bultmann speaks of exegesis the points are formulated (with the only exception of 3) so generally that they can be regarded to be universal hermeneutic rules as well.

1. Exegesis of Biblical texts, just like the interpretation of any other text, should be free from presuppositions or prejudices (this is not equal to the lack of pre-understanding).
2. Exegesis is however not without conditions; as a historical interpretation it presupposes the historical-critical method.
3. A further presupposition is the living relationship (Lebenszusammenhang) of the exeget with the matter discussed in the Biblical text, thereby also some kind of its pre-understanding.
4. Pre-understanding is not fixed once for all, but remains open to future modification, thus it can come to an existential encounter with the text as well as to what is for Bultmann especially important, to existential decision.
5. Understand the text is not fixed once for all either, but remains open. It is always possible that the text assumes new meaning in the future.

Existential Interpretation

In consideration of our historicity and the recognition that understanding has as its point of departure the indispensable pre-understanding, pre-judices of humans, existential

interpretation, in the practice of exegesis, is taken to mean that we should push interpretation of the biblical texts up to the point of involving ourselves and being affected in our very existence by what is being interpreted, or, *vice versa*, we should, in our present situation, find characters of our personality most plausibly matching the sense of the biblical texts in question.

The Self-Interpretation of Bultmann's Hermeneutics

On Bultmann's view, the conception of hermeneutics provided by Schleiermacher and Dilthey is one-sided felfogás egyoldalú, for it is the psychic process of the author, as well as its reconstruction and re-enactment, that they are mostly interested in. In other words, rather than the thing itself under discussion, it is more the author's relation to the matter being discussed, or his/her opinion about it, that they strive to understand. By viewing the work of his predecessors in this way, Bultmann explicitly joins Heidegger's turn in the history of hermeneutics.

Demythologization

Bultmann takes pains several times to stress the point that demythologization is not a new method or idea, for it is to be found already in the New Testament which „critically eliminates primal Christian mythology.” Bultmann's basic idea is that the world-view of the New Testament is essentially mythical. Literally, the woprls has three levels: Heaven, Earth, Hell. The Earth is thereby not a regular order of events either, it is, rather, a scene of events of supernatural forces. For today's man this conception is irremediably alien; for us the stars and planets are moving according to the laws of mechanics, illnesses have natural causes and this-worldly medicines—there are no wonders or miracles.

Can we speak about truth independent from a mythological world-view? Bultmann gives us an answer in the affirmative. On his view, it is not the picture-like frame but the sense or meaning of the myth that is of utmost importance. („Das Entscheidende ist jedoch, dass solche Bilder und Symbole wirklich einen Sinngehalt bergen, und die philosophische und theologische Reflexion hat doch die Aufgabe, diese Sinngehalt deutlich zu machen”; GV, IV, 134). Bultmann's demythologization does not turn against myths, things are, rather, the other way round: it is myths that call for demythologization. („So wird es einleuchtend, dass der Gebrauch der mythologischen Sprache kein Einwand gegen die Entmythologisierung ist, sondern sie vielmehr positiv fordert”; GV, IV, 177). Almost all theologians agree on the point that it is not literally that the Bible is to be understood. The question is, then, what we take myths to be, and if something is to be understood in terms of a myth what is its genuine meaning.

Bultmann claims that the aim of a myth is never to provide an objective world-view. A myth is not some kind of a primitive science. It does not speak about the world in itself, but about the world in relation to humans. Mythological thinking objectifies the other-wordly. On the contrary, demythologization attempts to validate and express the genuine intention of the myth, in order to speak about man's authentic reality

Demythologization relies for its fundaments upon the existential interpretation. The real content of the pictures and symbols are to be spelled out by existential interpretation to be derived from philosophical-theological thinking.

In so far as the task of demythologization is seen to lie in a reduction of the mythical assertions of the Bible to their intended sense or content of reality, Bultmann's position seems to tacitly presuppose a linguistic or conceptual dimension adequate to the task. Bultmann's theory of myth, as Joseph Bleicher suggested, „relies on a distinction between invalid and valid languages. The same point is stressed also by Ricoeur who remarked: „the expressions 'God's activity', or 'God as activity' are no more mythological expressions.”

Bultmann and Gadamer

A separate chapter of the dissertation is dedicated to the investigation of the relation between Bultmann and Gadamer. Gadamer had no difficulties to accept Bultmann's idea of demythologization. For him, demythologization was no modern unheard-of idea, as this may have been the case with theologians. Among others, understanding can, on purely hermeneutical grounds, be seen to be a kind of translation into our own language. Gadamer argues that demythologization is by virtue of its essential character, a hermeneutical problem.

Through a comparison of Gadamer's and Bultmann's hermeneutical ideas we attain interesting results. Gadamer, the philosopher, argues for the specific character of faith, while Bultmann, the theologian, claims that the pre-understanding required for the interpretation of the Bible is the same as with other texts. In a subsequent study Bultmann tacitly revises his position according to which „the interpretation of Biblical texts is subjected to the same conditions as any other literary text” („Die Interpretation der biblischen Schriften unterliegt nicht anderen Bedingungen des Verstehens als jede andere Literatur”).

Bultmann's revision of his own earlier position may however be purely apparent. His paper on hermeneutics had in fact stated the thesis concerning the same conditionality of all texts in regard to the existence of pre-understanding. The question turns then not on the specific character of pre-understanding, but, rather, on its pure existence. Thereby the contradiction or the necessity of revision is explained away.

Gadamer ranked Bultmann as belonging to the school of Dilthey. This point is critically debated by the Canadian hermeneutician, Jean Grondin. He argues that Gadamer's assessment is not fair because Bultmann had in fact taken over Heidegger's hermeneutical position and, also, because, in his 1950 paper on hermeneutics, Bultmann had criticised Dilthey. Gadamer's and Bultmann's common Heideggerian background is therefore to be further differentiated. They draw on different dimensions and periods in Heidegger's thinking: Gadamer puts the emphasis on the late Heidegger while Bultmann follows the author of *Being and Time*. It is Gadamer's merit to have *recognized* Heidegger's ontological radicalization of hermeneutics, but it was Bultmann who first *applied* Heideggerian existential interpretation in his exegetical work..

Both Gadamer and Bultmann took over Heidegger's concept of the fore-structure of understanding, as well as his idea of the hermeneutic circle. Both Gadamer and Bultmann concentrated on the „Sache selbst”, rather than the intention of the author, over against Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Both of them think, understanding and interpretation are in continuous movement, new conditions give rise to a new understanding. What Bultmann says about translation may be paralleled to what Gadamer dubbed as the fusion of horizons.

Both Gadamer and Bultmann expressed reserves and objections to what has traditionally been called „objectivity.” Both of them tend to use this concept in quotation marks, distancing themselves from the Cartesian meaning of it which can be characterized by concepts such as: intersubjective, valid once for all, independent of men, etc.

Objectivity and Dialogical Character

Bultmann attempts to overcome the subject-object dichotomy, and one consequence of this attempt is his provocative statement that the message of the New Testament is not some kind of an „object” to be isolated from the interpreting „subject”. Can interpretation ever be „objective”? In the sense of natural science we cannot of course speak about objectivity. This, however, does not imply that the subject is free to confer an arbitrary meaning on the text. Rather, the implication is that something such as sense has only meaning in relation to a subject that in its historical being is connected to the text. Every historical phenomenon is many-sided and complex. It can be subjected to different approaches, but if we proceed in accordance with our leading question then we can attain an authentic understanding. It is of no importance that every interpreting person is limited in her subjective capacities. „Objective” means here this: adequate or proper to a subject matter under a specific interrogation.

In this sense the most subjective interpretation can become the most objective. This claim has been formulated by another prominent hermeneutician of our times, Luigi Pareyson. One should not suspend one’s own subjectivity in interpreting. One should only put into bracket one’s explicit expectations as to the results of interpretation. Objectivity includes then in itself also the question adequate to the subject matter. This position coincides considerably with Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s view concerning the role of prejudices in gaining new knowledge. Indeed, something such as „objectivity” is to be attained for them only by awareness of the fore-structure of understanding and by making our own prejudices explicit.

Paul Ricoeur’s Interpretation of Bultmann

In order to correctly understand Bultmann, Ricoeur thinks it indispensable to note a kind of hierarchy in his strategy of demythologization. On a first level, we have to do with demythologization to be done with an eye to natural science, on a second level demythologization is related to philosophy, and finally, on a third there is demythologization in relation to faith. These three different or sometimes contrasting attitudes are, for Ricoeur, not incoherent. They constitute different levels of demythologization. Indeed, a number of the misunderstandings Bultmann had later to face stem from ignoring or overlooking the distinction among these three levels. The function of demythologization is, on the first two levels, radically different. Whereas, on the first level, demythologization concerns the cosmology of the Bible, its replacement by the world view of natural science, on the second level, demythologization means not elimination, but regaining of meaning, a new validation of it—namely, regaining the meaning of myth in and through existential interpretation.

Passing over from the second level to the third, Bultmann recognizes the need to replace the notion of salvation by good deeds by the tenet of justification by faith, as has been held by Paul and Luther. Here Bultmann leaves philosophy, i.e., existential interpretation, behind, and abandons it and elevates himself into the dimension of the third stage of demythologization,

Luther's and Paul's theology. Here interpretation is a function of the kerygma. It follows that for Bultmann existential interpretation does decisively have its limits. As Ricoeur puts it: demythologization is called for by modern man, by the existential philosopher and finally, by the believer. Demythologization has for each of them slightly different meanings. Modern man, man of science replaces the cosmology of the Bible, he is followed by the existential philosopher who reduces mythical elements to their existential meaning; and at the end comes the protestant theologian who replaces the philosopher by shifting the focus on proclamation. .

Ricoeur's objections are surely not illegitimate. They, however, rest on their turn on assumptions related to a conception of language and meaning, rooted in his own hermeneutic theory. The latter reposes on an understanding of hermeneutics different from that of Heidegger and Gadamer. On Ricoeur's view, a distinction is to be made between meaning and significance of a text. This distinction places Ricoeur's position among the methodologically oriented hermeneuticians. The present-day, existential significance of a text is from this perspective not inessential, but it is not the only significance. The way interpretation has to go to the end brings from the „ideal meaning” up to the „existential significance.” On Ricoeur's view, Bultmann is going a shorter way, he cuts off, or ignores, the first step, and aims one-sided enough, at arriving at the second. This objection is essentially of the same character as the one Ricoeur put forward against Heideggerian hermeneutics.

Conclusion

In summary, Bultmann's life-work can be seen to constitute a passage between two periods. He started off with a critique of 19th century liberal theology, and attempted to bring the failure of the historical research on Jesus' life to clear awareness. Notwithstanding, interpreters more often than not tend to view his work as an attempt to bridge the gap between two eras. Bernd Jaspert formulated the view that „Bultmann had remained true to liberal theology up to the end of his life to an extent to which he gathered enemies from the most diverse camps of theologians.” Existential interpretation and the program of demythologization as the two pillars of Bultmann's hermeneutics, as well as the introduction of hermeneutics into the heart of theology can, from this perspective, be interpreted as conveying not so much the meaning of opposition to liberal theology, but rather, the effort to set it forth. It is in this sense that Jaspert sees in existential interpretation not a vehicle of Bultmann's criticism of liberal theology, but an essential part of his liberal theology. John Macquarrie thinks, in much the same vein, that Bultmann's essential motive is that of „the liberal modernist of fifty years ago.” Against this background, philosophical hermeneutics itself can be assessed not so much in terms of a criticism of historicism and scientific world view, characteristic of the enlightenment, as in terms of their essential consummation and self-application. Bultmann's work may be regarded to close off an era and constitute in its motives a bridge as well as a passage to a new age.