

THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD AND BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

The topic assigned to me, and I should like to commend the committee for choosing so strategic a theme, forces me to explore the frontiers between dogmatic and biblical theology, between speculative and historical thought. The term *buffer-zone* would perhaps be preferable to *frontier*, for imperialistic historians and equally imperialistic dogmaticians often contest the other's jurisdiction over this region. The struggle, however, does not really follow the boundary between these two academic disciplines. Biblical theologians are divided among themselves over how to deal as historians with apostolic claims to divine revelation. Dogmatic theologians are also divided, I believe, over how to deal as theologians with historical reality; ever since Lessing they have known of the tension between "accidental historical truths" and "eternal truths," a problem which Kierkegaard analyzed in his *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and which has increased the temperature of subsequent theological debate.

Speaking as a biblical theologian, I will confine myself to those recent developments in New Testament studies in which the problems of hermeneutics are being debated. I believe this debate points to the recognition that it is increasingly difficult for the historian, within the domain of conventional historiography, to deal with texts which claim to embody God's address to men. On the one hand, the Bible presents us with stories of God's eternal power working in, with, through, under and beyond temporal events. On the other hand, historical methodology suggests that these stories are best dealt with as if that power were not present. This methodology is weighted in the direction of a historicism which A. E. Loen has described in these terms: "Historical reality is complete in itself and God as a transcendent reality must be bracketed out."¹

This raises the problem of defining the term *transcendent*, a

¹ A. E. Loen, *Secularization*. Philadelphia: 1967, p. 10.

problem which is by its nature insoluble. The problem is insoluble because the act of defining destroys that polarity which is intrinsic to the functioning of the word. As David Jenkins insists, in dealing with this word "it is necessary to hold in distinction, and yet in union, that which is transcendent . . . to the universe, and that which is immanent . . ."² The Creator is wholly involved with his creative work, yet that work never becomes independent of him nor does it compromise his sovereign freedom. The dominant historical method tends either to ignore or to deny both the union and the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent. I believe and shall argue that, although current developments in hermeneutics stem from this denial, such developments are as yet inadequate for dealing with the interrelation of the transcendent and the immanent, the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal.

A. *Scientific Methodology—A Possible Analogy*

Leaving the construction of my argument for the time being, I should like first of all to examine the nature of methodology in the physical sciences and notice how alterations occur in that methodology. If we look away from the maelstrom of our own obsessions to see how changes take place within a quite different academic area, it may suggest a fresh approach to our own dilemmas. T. S. Kuhn provides one set of answers in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.³ (My attention was drawn to this study by a chemist, Mr. Donald Hoffman, Southbridge, Mass.) Kuhn finds among scientists a gross misunderstanding of the development of their own disciplines. Their textbooks have taught them to view the past as the story of gradual, steady extensions in knowledge, the significance of each increment being determined by its contribution to modern thought. The historian serves them simply as a chronicler of the discoveries progressively made by individual scientists. But not so for Kuhn. He sees the methodology of each science determined less by "nature" than by educational institutions and research needs. This methodology assumes that "the scientific community knows what the world

² D. Jenkins, *The Godly of Man*. London: 1967, p. 53.

³ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962.

is like."⁴ Each initiate must accept that assumption. Professional education provides a set of "conceptual boxes" and research becomes the "strenuous and devoted attempt to force nature" into those boxes. The initiate is obliged to accept the set of boxes, the choice being always necessary and always arbitrary. Because it is necessary, the process of research tends to become bound by tradition. Because it is arbitrary, other boxes will in time prove to be superior, so that in time the progress of research will destroy the present filing system.⁵ The history of science is therefore an account not so much of steady increments in encyclopedic knowledge as of successive revolutions in views of the world.

Kuhn's book is an analysis of the nature of these revolutions. A chief tool in his analysis is the concept of the paradigm or model. The paradigm embraces the pattern of presuppositions, points of view, concepts and rules which governs research in a given area. In fact, until a paradigm is adopted, the emergence of a science is quite impossible. A science emerges from its own pre-history when it begins to operate on the basis of a single accepted model. "To be accepted as a paradigm, a theory must seem better than its competitors, but it need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts."⁶

A science is institutionalized when this paradigm is taken for granted, so that scholars need no longer argue those basic questions which it has answered. It becomes the hidden foundation of "the establishment." Practitioners who do not accommodate their work to it are gradually eliminated. Those who adopt it can now devote all their attention to the problems it sets and the promises it makes. Because the area of research is now clearly defined, they can accomplish a greater depth of penetration, although this means that their language becomes ever more esoteric and their audience smaller.⁷ So absorbed are they in applying the paradigm to a particular problem that they become blind to fugitive phenomena which do not fit the paradigm. Their business is to demonstrate the efficacy of the paradigm, not to deal with its weaknesses, and even less to develop

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 21.

a new model which might better account for the fugitive data. Research projects are designed to reinforce the paradigm, and not to produce a new one.⁸ Each paradigm exercises authority because it has become for a group of scholars the recipient of commitments, which are both methodological and metaphysical.⁹ These two types of commitments are so interdependent that any change in metaphysics insures a change in methodology.

Such a change is inevitable simply because no paradigm takes into account all forces and factors. No paradigm can be given academic tenure. Research under one paradigm sooner or later induces change to another paradigm.¹⁰ In fact the better the paradigm, the more sensitive it is to its own failures and the more it conduces to its own obsolescence. Yet such failures do not in themselves produce change, nor do they overcome the resistance of scientists to change. "The establishment" does not surrender a paradigm immediately upon observing its deficiencies. A new paradigm must be available which circumvents those deficiencies. Scholars must test the capacities of this new theory to deal with the phenomena of nature.¹¹ The new has not really been adopted until the whole industry has been "retooled," until textbooks, teaching and laboratories have been redesigned.¹² This transition from one paradigm to another, affecting simultaneously both metaphysics and methodology, is so radical as to justify the term revolution.

Professor Kuhn gives a vivid picture of the opposition which confronts any new theory. Resistance is unavoidable since scientists are as conservative as other men when their own interests and habits are threatened. The recognized leaders in a field are those who have mastered the orthodox rules of the game. They have profited from the efficacy of those rules. Consequently, the protagonists of a new model will often represent "the young Turks" of a profession. Their discontentment with the old will at first appear to lack coherence, for each will observe a different deficiency and each propose a dif-

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 52.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 77.

¹² *cf. ibid.*, p. 76.

ferent remedy. Some will focus upon minor but very specific alterations in technique; others will demand sweeping but vague amendments in philosophical axioms. Before any major substitution can be made, there must be a widespread sense of crisis. The compulsive attachment to the old must be broken by the power of the new to inspire a comparable cluster of commitments. "When paradigms change, the world itself changes with them."¹³ The transfer of allegiance is so radical as to constitute "a conversion experience" yet this transfer is so subjective that it "cannot be forced."¹⁴ The commitment to the new model "can only be made on faith," a faith which responds to a quite new perception of the world as a whole.¹⁵ In this openness to new perceptions of reality Kuhn detects a basic kinship between science and theology.¹⁶

B. *Rudolf Bultmann and the Historicity of Man*

In presenting this analysis of revolutions in scientific methodology, I do not wish to argue that current methods for studying human history are entirely similar. Yet I believe that numerous similarities exist which are more than curious coincidence. In both historical and scientific fields, the paradigms are constructs of man's mind, modes of his response to the world. Both paradigms have been produced within the same culture during the same epoch by men working within the same educational institutions. Ours has been an epoch in which secular thought has produced naturalistic philosophies of history and historical philosophies of nature. It is not surprising that similar metaphysical assumptions should be woven into the modes of research in both disciplines. One may also observe in both the tenacity of old paradigms and popular resistance to new.

The historical paradigm is probably older, more inclusive, more flexible, more pluriform, and therefore less reducible to a limited formula than its scientific analogues. This paradigm, usually called the critical historical method, embraces the pattern of assumptions, perspectives, objectives and procedures which are illustrated by most

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁵ cf. *ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁶ cf. *ibid.*, p. 135.

essays in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* or the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. I assume that you are well acquainted with this paradigm.

We are especially interested at the moment in how this paradigm deals with the dimension of transcendence. The simplest answer is that the method encourages either antagonism or neutrality toward the presence of such a dimension. Altizer, for example, says "We inherit the historical revolution of the nineteenth century, a revolution which stripped all historical events of a transcendent ground."¹⁷ In the less enthusiastic words of A. E. Loen, the historical process has been "dedivinized," since the message of the Bible comes to be seen as "determined exclusively by historical factors."¹⁸ The sequence of historical events is sundered from their metaphysical ground, so that "forgetfulness of the sphere of being robs history of its essence, just as it robs man of his."¹⁹

A method which is either neutral or antagonistic toward the presence of God creates a double dilemma for modern exegetes. In the first place, the biblical traditions which they must interpret are themselves pervaded by the awareness of God's presence in creation, his powerful activity in the affairs of men, and the revelation of his will to a chosen people. This poses the question whether the exegete can comprehend and deal justly with biblical writers if he adopts a method of research alien to their deepest convictions. In the second place, the exegete is in most cases a servant of the modern church. His vocation normally requires him to mediate the message of Scripture to a community which is listening therein for the word of God. Can he transfer that task to the preacher and the theologian and limit his own work to the business of objective historical description? Should he do this, his decision will reflect his mastery *by* the paradigm of historical science as well as his mastery *of* it.

The creative work in biblical exegesis in our day has, I believe, been accomplished not so much by men who are content to expand the jurisdiction of the dominant method as by men who have wrestled with overcoming its deficiencies. My first example is Rudolf Bultmann. He is widely known, of course, as a superb practitioner of

¹⁷ T. J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: 1967, p. xiv.

¹⁸ A. E. Loen, *op. cit.*, pp. 7 and 10.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 92.

historical science who applies with deftness and thoroughness the objective techniques which have been developed during the last two centuries. It is this very mastery of method which to many colleagues is the measure of his greatness.

What is more to the point, however, is the incisive critique which Prof. Bultmann levels at the deficiencies in the usual application of the historical method. These deficiencies may be variously characterized as relativism, historicism, positivism, reductionism, abstractionism. "The historiography of the Nineteenth Century . . . on the whole arrived at some form of relativism. It acknowledged change as historical law and denied the absolute value of judgments and knowledge, and it confirmed the dependence of all thinking and valuing upon their time and culture."²⁰

Man "stands within history." There is no way by which he can stand at its beginning or at its end or secure a vision of the entire historical process.²¹ From such a stance it makes no sense to speak of a transcendent God. Many biblical affirmations about such transcendence should be recognized as illegitimate absolutizations of the relative. But it also makes little sense to suppose that man can ever transcend his own time, place, family or environment. The history of humanity is subsumed under the story of nature. Those aspects of his being which fall through the sieve of the naturalist historian are quite secondary and negligible. He is "nothing but history."²² Much about him that is most genuine and significant, majestic and mysterious, is lost to view. The real self that persists behind and within all experiences, that recollects the whole of previous events, that asks and seeks and suffers and rejoices, that knows that it is known by Another,—this self is drastically reduced to what can be weighed on the scales of the historian.²³ Historicism abstracts a part of man, reduces him to that part, limits him to a given space and time, and thus destroys the possibility of genuine selfhood.

It is important to note that it is the metaphysics which is basic to contemporary historiography which Bultmann faults. He remains

²⁰ R. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*. Edinburgh: 1957, p. 78.

²¹ cf. *ibid.*, p. 138.

²² *ibid.*, p. 22.

²³ cf. *ibid.*, p. 108f.

an able practitioner of the prevailing paradigm, often using it to good advantage to destroy the claims of competing reconstructions of New Testament thought. One may even wonder whether his attack on the deterministic anthropology implicit in historicism has noticeably changed the more technical side of his work. It can also be asked whether that hypothetical "modern man" of whom Bultmann so often speaks is not a stereotype which has been shaped more largely by historicism than by scientism. In any case in dealing with this scholar, we must reckon fully with both his use and his critique of the prevailing paradigm. We must now ask how he seeks to supplement that paradigm so as to surmount its deficiencies.

Against the prevailing relativism, Bultmann defends the transcendence of God or at least certain aspects of that transcendence as expressed in the Bible. He sees the Eternal acting in history as the ever-coming, ever-encountering Other, whose sovereign Word demands man's obedience. God's will is absolute; obedience to him must therefore be radical. The message of God's action in raising Jesus from the dead remains the one point where the biblical saga cannot be demythologized. Whenever word of this resurrection is preached, it calls for a response so radical as to set a transcendental limit to the relativism of historical change.²⁴ This God who directs the historical process toward his goal speaks to man with indubitable authority; this speaking provokes an eschatological crisis which alone can restore freedom to man.

Although Bultmann thus defends the full actuality of God's action, he carries out this defence mainly by way of adopting an existentialist anthropology. Through the mesh of relativistic historicism *both* the transcendence of God *and* the corresponding historicity of man have dropped out. To Bultmann the second dropout is the more serious. Therefore, the exegete can restore the dimension of transcendence in the eschatological message only by restoring the radicality of eschatological faith. Man is the rightful "subject of history."²⁵ He receives back his authenticity as *subject* through the gift of freedom and the act of love. There is an inescapable paradox about this transcendence. On the one hand, man does not stand out-

²⁴ cf. *ibid.*, p. 96f.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 87.

side history; yet, on the other hand, in faith he does in fact receive a standpoint above history.²⁶ It is by the decision of faith that this paradox is enacted. "Every instant has the possibility of being an eschatological instant, and in Christian faith this possibility is realized."²⁷ It is through faith that man thus participates in the transcendent freedom of God. Since theology is faith's self-understanding, the theological analysis of transcendence must focus upon what happens to man in this *instant*. Since the kerygma is what calls this instant into being, the work of hermeneutics is defined by the needs of preaching.

Hermeneutics, therefore, must fulfill this task in full awareness that modern man has adopted the stance of the historicist and yet craves the freedom of genuine historicity. Historicism has destroyed the credibility of first century mythology; but historicity can yet be produced whenever the kerygma creates faith.

As you know, Bultmann makes much of the contrast between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. It is this concept of *two* histories which enables Bultmann to maintain both his loyalty to the critical historical method and his allegiance to a second, existentialist paradigm. There is one mode of historical being (*historisch*) which is objectively studied by secular man by means of the critical methods of academic science: "a self-enclosed, dynamic continuum of events which can be fixed as points of time." There is a second mode which recognizes man's historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) and regards the moment of encounter with the Transcendent as revelatory of who man is and of what his historical reality consists.²⁸ Bultmann's historical work is based on commitment to the historical paradigm; his theological work is based on the existentialist paradigm. Hermeneutics should translate the kerygma in such a way as to recognize the antithesis between first century and twentieth century modes of conceptualizing the activity of God in history and yet also to produce in modern men an authentic historicity wholly akin to the faith of

²⁶ cf. *ibid.*, p. 152.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 154.

²⁸ cf. H. Ott in R. W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and Word of God*. New York: 1966, p. 110 f. and, also, in C. W. Kegley, *Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. New York: 1966, p. 56f.

Paul and John. It can do this without major change in the prevailing methodology. The only adjustment is the replacement of an implicit historicism by an effective existentialism.

For many scholars today, Bultmann's treatment of hermeneutics provides the starting-point for further discussion. Certainly it is Bultmannians who are talking and writing most on this subject, often with quite exorbitant claims of its importance. The differences among them are determined chiefly by their proposals on how to advance beyond Bultmann. There are, of course, theologians who deny the value of Bultmann's maneuver and who believe that a better starting-point can be found. Although I belong to their number, I am now concerned with those who, starting with Bultmann's position, try to move beyond it in an effort to do fuller justice to the biblical witnesses. The most recent thorough summary of such discussion may be found in Robert Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and Word of God*. Let me make some comments on this book before raising the question: in what respects does current hermeneutical theory and practice do justice to the New Testament witness to God's transcendence?

C. R. W. Funk and the Linguisticity of Existence

Many post-Bultmannian hermeneuts have adopted as slogans the terms *language-event* and the *linguisticity of existence*. The emphasis on language as the focal problem stems in part from Bultmann's Lutheran concentration on the moment of faith as the moment of man's realization of his authentic historicity. When the Word of God addresses man and man responds, man enters into eschatological existence—a realm in which his captivity to historicism is overcome. The words are human, and therefore relative; but the Word is God's and therefore transcendent. If language belonged wholly to men, revelation would be impossible; if it belonged wholly to God, human response would be impossible. What, then, is the character of that language-event which breaks through the walls of relativistic historicism and creates a new man in a new world?

This is the focus of Funk's analysis: not ordinary language as such, but that use of language in God's address to man which exerts the power to call into being things that are not. He sees the "Death

of God" as basically a result of the failure of language. He sees the task of hermeneutics as the restoration of the creative power of language.²⁹ Transcendence, we are led to suppose, becomes a function of this restored language. But this function must operate within a history which is perceived entirely in Bultmannian terms. By this I mean that no more than his master does Funk attack the critical historical method as basically wrong in its perception of reality and in its treatment of the text.³⁰ The *text* which is accessible to the exegete is *not* God's word. It is only the medium through which God addresses man. Man's transcendence of the historical order (*historisch*) depends upon his hearing of that address. The historian deals only with the text; it is the preacher and the theologian who preside over the process by which the Word of God becomes audible.³¹ Through their work the text is again enabled to become God's address, yet this work neither competes with nor qualifies "the crucial function of the critical-historical method."³²

Already, then, we have a Bultmannian acceptance not only of the current historical methodology but of the metaphysical axioms on which it is based. Fuchs (whom Funk follows) explicitly approves Bultmann's definition of history as "a unity in the sense of a closed correlation of effects."³³ History stands wholly under the law of causality, a power which operates as unconditionally in history as in nature. Any interruption by supernatural powers is quite inconceivable. Faith, in fact, must accept this view of history as an expression of God's will, as including all things under the law of death, and as a mode of divine judgment. Faith must therefore concede to the critical historian an exclusive jurisdiction over the text of Scripture so far as that text is viewed as a bit of past history.

It is, therefore, in their understanding of the future that Fuchs and Funk, like Bultmann, seek to free themselves from the determinism of the past. In certain respects, of course, they recognize the degree to which the critical historical method fails even to cope with

²⁹ cf. R. W. Funk, *op. cit.* p. 9, 10.

³⁰ cf. *ibid.*, p. 10.

³¹ cf. *ibid.*, p. 31.

³² *ibid.*, p. 12.

³³ cf. E. Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus*. London: 1964, pp. 39, 47.

the past. Because history is a system bound by the laws of causality, all phenomena whose effects are not discernible drop out of the historian's world.³⁴ At best, therefore, written history is an "incomplete obituary notice."³⁵ But such deficiencies have for this school the positive value of turning attention toward the place where authentic freedom can alone be realized, that point in time where a man faces the future. By facing the future man can assume a concern for the whole of history, a sense of responsibility for history, and an experience of the end of history. But man can do this only in faith. And this faith takes place only in response to a message which is addressed to him.

Transcendence is therefore limited to this present moment of faith when man confronts that future which addresses him in the form of the Gospel. The transcendent is even more narrowly defined than this: it is that to which faith responds. Since faith is mediated by listening, God-talk must be limited to talk about this language-event. In a world come of age "religion is not the presupposition of anything."³⁶ To a historian who respects his methodology, *no* credence can be given to transcendence as a factor in either nature or history.³⁷ But "language-event" is a necessary presupposition of faith.

Without language, Funk argues, there could be no contact with God, no true being for ourselves, and therefore no trans-empirical basis for theological reflection.³⁸ Language empowers man to exist as man, i.e. as one who answers.³⁹ His appeal to transcendence springs from an effort on his part to understand faith's dependence on language. For example, the doctrine of the transcendence of Christ, based on confidence in his resurrection, is a way of affirming his presence in the kerygmatic language to which faith responds.⁴⁰ Apart from such language, God would be made speechless.⁴¹ To Fuchs, Ebeling and Funk, the traditional God-talk does, in fact, leave God

³⁴ cf. Fuchs, *op. cit.*, pp. 42.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁶ Funk, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁸ cf. *ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁹ cf. *ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴⁰ cf. *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴¹ cf. *ibid.*, p. 57.

speechless. "The God who is generally believed in is no God at all."⁴² To exorcize God's dumbness, if we may put it that way, the theologian must learn to speak of God godlessly, i.e., without presupposing God.⁴³ The program of Fuchs and Funk appears then to equate theology with hermeneutics, since their common task has to do with the use of the biblical text. The historian, applying his method, has verified the text's imprisonment within the closed system of causality which embraces everything in the past. The historian hands over to the preacher and the theologian the opportunity and the obligation to preside over the process by which the text can again become the Word of God, encountering man and producing faith. Thereafter, the theologian, by examining the language which has produced this effect, can talk about the trans-empirical factor without scandalizing his empiricist colleagues.⁴⁴

We may summarize by observing that these exegetes are unanimous in endorsing the critical historical method as applied to the Bible. They are equally agreed in repudiating all theologies and all ways of dealing with God's transcendence which do not start from the central Bultmannian dicta regarding the relation of nature to history, of *Historie* to *Geschichte*, of mythology to experience, of Gospel to faith. Their position is shaped by a continuing polemic not so much against secularist historians as against non-Bultmannian theologians, and even more against any post-Bultmannians who should challenge the combined acceptance of a historicist view of *Historie* and an existentialist view of *Geschichte*.

D. *The Transcendence of God in the New Testament*

We began our study with an analysis of the nature of revolutions in scientific methodology, which result from deficiencies observed in current paradigms. We then shifted to a study of recent ways in which a group of biblical historians have reacted to observed deficiencies in historical methodology. These deficiencies include particular presuppositions with regard to God's relation to history. I now turn to a critique of Bultmannian and post-Bultmannian herme-

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ cf. Funk, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

neutics. I believe that to combine a historicist view of history with an existentialist view of faith fails to remedy the deficiencies in the historical paradigm. It accepts the reductionism which the historical method applies to the historical process. It advocates a theological reductionism which limits the transcendent to one component of speech and which limits faith to the experience of an individual responding to Scriptural preaching. It does not, to be sure, translate theology *wholly* into anthropology, but by restricting attention to the "more than human within the human" (a phrase of Gregory Baum) the transcendent becomes so attenuated as to be trivialized.

What evidence is to be offered to justify this charge of reductionism? The pluriform witness of the New Testament to the corporate experience of transcendence. First of all, the awareness of God's activity is reflected in many syntactical and grammatical phenomena, such as the predominance of verbs of action, whether in the passive or active voice, in which God is the source and subject. Also, one may reflect upon the typical reliance on a wide variety of prepositional phrases: from, by, through, to, for the sake of, in. Without reference to the awareness of the transcendent it is difficult to account for the rich congeries of rhetorical forms: parable, dialogue, poetry, epiphany, allegory, vision, hyperbole, typological narratives, archetypal symbols.⁴⁵

Second, let me mention how the early Christians found in prayer a natural way to express their awareness of the interplay in all situations of the infinite and the finite. The divine command to pray and the promise to answer are found in all strata of the literature. The injunction to thank God for everything bespeaks a world-view in which every moment is permeable by his power. The forms and the practice of prayer reflect an experience of the transcendent more continuous than punctiliar encounters with the future; they illustrate the linguisticity of existence, to be sure, but they resist limiting that existence to a series of discrete language-events.

Third, consider the variety of corporate liturgical forms in the New Testament and their robust, uninhibited vitality. The baptismal and eucharistic motifs embrace corporate memories of the old age and

⁴⁵ cf. A. N. Wilder, whose *Language of the Gospel*. New York: 1964, is free of the linguistic reductions I find in Fuchs and Funk.

excitements of the new. Every Hallelujah and Amen is addressed to the Creator and Redeemer of all things, whose life transcends human distinctions between nature and grace, *Historie* and *Geschichte*, the past and the future. He is the only one who is worthy to receive all glory and power, wisdom and blessing. To limit his speech to a word to which faith responds would sadly sterilize and prostitute the New Testament celebrations of his presence. A history of the early church which ignored its convictions concerning the powerful guidance of the Holy Spirit would not be recognized by that church as either authentic or germane.

Fourth, early Christian conceptions of transcendence were functions of a moral struggle that made men aware of the abysmal depths of human existence. Every situation became for them a time of temptation and testing, when an Evil One who was stronger than they struggled for their loyalty. They could not understand the origin, course, or outcome of such a struggle except by referring to spiritual powers in heavenly places. They knew the hopelessness of men without God in the world, the scepticism of Ecclesiastes, the despairs of Job. Knowing well the weakness and transiency of their own wills, they looked for strength to endure through the final conflict. It was because of this struggle that they could not conceive of a world in which either Satan or God had died, although they of course met fools who claimed that such a world existed. Instead, they knew themselves as heirs of a kingdom which would never end. In their relation to this kingdom they experienced the interdependence of time and eternity. God's Kingdom was a realm which transcended human measurements of space and time. As God is the Alpha and the Omega, his kingdom reaches from the beginning before all beginnings to the ending after all endings. Yet this transcendence encountered early Christians within the context of the ordinary and the humdrum. It offered immediate freedom from the past, freedom from sin and death. It superseded the claims of the most holy and venerable institutions: Temple, Law, priesthood. The whole ministry of Jesus became a parable of the mysterious presence of the kingdom and of the gift of citizenship therein.

In the fifth place, in the New Testament every contact with any form of ministry was a contact with the transcendent, since each gift

of ministry mediated God's power, whether to preach or to heal, to teach or to serve tables. Each member, in fact, was recipient of the powers of the resurrection; each congregation could think of itself as a temple of the Holy Spirit or the body of Christ. Nor was this self-understanding limited to a succession of language-events. It would be more adequate to describe the life of the church in Corinth as "a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal" to use Kierkegaard's phrase, than to say with Funk that the classical theological language is no longer tenable for describing the life of the church.⁴⁶

Finally, the genuine experience of the transcendent by New Testament authors is manifested by the constant reminders of the poignant inadequacy of human thoughts and speech. "Who has known the Lord's mind? Who has become his adviser?" (Rom. 11:34). They knew the dangers of idolatry in worshiping their own knowledge of things human or divine. They knew they were dealing with "what eye has not seen, nor ear heard", with a wisdom which seemed folly to the wisest men, with a mystery which could never be adequately translated into any language other than in some form of Passion Story, some type of prophetic vision. This is why they were so prodigal in their use of parables, pictures and symbols in referring to God's dealing with them.

There is a huge disparity, therefore, between the character of the historical process as seen by New Testament writers and as seen in modern historiography. In this regard the deficiency in the dominant paradigm is no trivial matter. In part, the deficiency stems from its own set of metaphysical presuppositions. The paradigm embodies a repudiation of metaphysics all the while it offers an example of unexamined and untenable metaphysics. One sign of this is the arrogance with which it dismisses all other metaphysical positions as unacceptable to modern man. Among the positions so dismissed is that of the New Testament traditions. It is assumed that their concepts of transcendence are impossibly archaic and obsolete. In this case the judges may be more naive than those being judged. The New Testament writers were not unacquainted with deterministic theories of history. They were quite aware of the attractiveness of

⁴⁶ cf. Funk. *op. cit.*, p. 103.

relativism, of positivism, of materialisms in various modes. They knew the anomalies involved in speaking of heavenly treasures in earthly vessels, of resurrection from the dead, of God's reconciliation of all things. Their choice of mythological language was due to this very knowledge. Surely this sophistication is one reason why their God-talk has proved to be viable in every succeeding century, including our own. I insist on that viability, even though it be denied by the dominant historical method and by the Bultmannian amendments to the method.

I want, however, to argue that the deficiency in that method extends beyond its metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical) presuppositions. It is deficient in accomplishing its historical objective, the recovery and description of past events in their original sequence and significance. When the historian succeeds, his story of the past remains, in Fuchs' words, "an incomplete obituary notice." This incompleteness condemns the method. The net which he uses as historian fails to catch the data which to early Christians constituted the significance of the events in which they shared, while the data which he recaptures would have been to them of only secondary importance. Yet his work tends to claim an authority competing with that of apostles and prophets. It tends to fulfill functions once fulfilled by tradition. It is able to abolish traditions, though less able to create new traditions. "History as science acquires a tendency to do away with history as remembrance."⁴⁷ As in the parallel developments in the scientific world, the successes of this paradigm have served to clarify its failures.

The failures in this case have not been removed by the hermeneutical movements we have analyzed. It is not enough by appeal to the eschatological character of faith to free man's present choices from the chains of causality. It is not enough by analysis of the linguisticity of existence to assert the power of God's word to bring life out of death. It is not enough by distinguishing between *Historie* and *Geschichte* to develop a theology of hope in which openness to the future frees men from the Hell of historicism. These movements have merit. They succeed in preserving a modicum of recognition of

⁴⁷ J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*. London: 1967, p. 236f.; also p. 292f.

the transcendent as "the more than the human within the human." Yet none of them adequately challenges the current historical paradigm. And for the same reason none of them offers to historical science those distinctive contributions which should accrue from the revelation in Christ of what history is like.

In saying this, I do not mean that an academic science can translate the facts of God's transcendence into an alternate paradigm for historical study. Success in such an enterprise would indeed deny the reality of that transcendence. But historical reason is surely not restricted to a choice between two paradigms: a closed system of causality which enforces the denial of God on the one hand, or a historiography which would seek to demonstrate his activity on the other. There have, in fact, been many paradigms for dealing with history which have done less violence to the dimension of transcendence. And there will be other methods in the future more appropriate to the mysteries of revelation. There are few things of which we can be more certain than that there will be continuing revolutions in historical and hermeneutical methodology. This in itself is indication that the source and goal of history transcend the powers of human description. When any method has developed to the point of claiming absolute finality for its presuppositions about nature, history, anthropology or divine grace, it guarantees its own obsolescence.

As I see it, the task of contemporary exegetes is to allow Scripture itself to criticize both the assumptions and the methods which are used in their study. They must listen also, of course, to secular historians, and to theologians. Success in their task will be possible only through a conviction that the temporal distance between this and earlier centuries is itself bridged by the eternal purpose of God and by the participation of the Church in that purpose. But it will also be possible only if there is more effective collaboration between historians and theologians. Historians have too easily assumed that they know what history *is*, and have merely proved their susceptibility to an untenable metaphysics. To recover from that error they are in dire need of help from their theological colleagues. Instead of pontifically prescribing the task of the dogmatician (as is done in different ways by Bultmann, Cullmann, Ebeling and Funk), exegetes need to

be delivered from whatever arbitrary presuppositions may be implicit in their methodologies.

The scriptural witness to divine revelation, which everywhere echoes a faith in transcendence, will never be adequately described by a methodology which has been shaped in an empiricist's laboratory. The nature of the object studied will continue to demand a change in methodology. The greatest resistance to revisions in methodology, however, will continue to come from historians who assume that the community of scientific historians already knows what history is like. It is clear that the process of historical research has become tradition-bound. Bultmann and his successors have broken that tradition at one point, where it had arbitrarily canonized a false view of man; they have created a supplemental paradigm that has changed greatly the work of Christian historians and theologians. But this revolution has stopped far short of genuine completion. It has not adequately challenged the sovereignty of the paradigm of scientific historiography as applied to man's *Historie*; it has prematurely claimed sovereignty for an existentialist methodology as applied to man's *Geschichte*. In developing a more adequate hermeneutics important roles must be given to metaphysicians, dogmaticians, moral theologians and linguistic analysts. Even the ideal cooperation among scholars, however, will never lead to reducing God's transcendence to the size of our various conceptual boxes.

All the reasons given for crediting the proposition "God exists" cannot prepare one for the shock of his actuality. The Gospel administers this shock. Woe to theology (or historiography or hermeneutics) if it provide metaphysical insulation against it.⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ J. N. Hartt, *A Christian Critique of American Culture*. New York: 1967, p. 144.