

What's Happening in Continental Theology? — 1

# The Legacy of Barth and Bultmann

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'I hope I need not say,' wrote Pusey, when faced with the possibility of an Oxford tutorship, 'that I should introduce no German Theology into my lectures' (H.P. Liddon. *Life of E.B. Pusey*, p. 102). It is now over 150 years since Pusey expressed his concern over those who might suspect that his time studying in Bonn had made him a dangerously radical biblical scholar. But the suspicions of German theology to which he felt it necessary to defer remain with us. Advances have, of course, been made: a great deal of German theological writing has appeared in reliable English translation, and co-operation and interchange between German and Anglo-Saxon biblical scholars have probably never been better. In the area of systematic theology, however, with which this series will be concerned, the picture is less rosy. Barth and Rahner, Kung, Moltmann and Pannenberg are certainly available in English and certainly read. Yet negative evaluations of their work are not infrequent, and both liberals and evangelicals can often be heard to voice frustration and dissatisfaction with its styles and content.

Evangelicals in particular have not been slow to urge the fundamentally unsound character of much German dogmatic thinking. Although recent years have seen little in the way of evangelical appraisal of current trends in German dogmatics, older works such as Reymond's *Introductory Studies in Contemporary Theology*, Hamilton's *What's New in Religion?* and Morris' *The Abolition of Religion* give a clear and consistent message to their readers: Barth, Bultmann, Brunner and Bonhoeffer have got it wrong, and seriously wrong — so seriously, indeed, that their various theologies can only be described as a radical departure from the historic Christian faith. At a more popular level, the impression is sometimes put around that, in addition to persistent strains of agnosticism and unfettered speculation, German systematic theology is well-nigh unreadable, wearying its readers with massive paragraphs of the densest argument in a language all its own.

Both the academic critique and the popular appraisal contain elements of truth: *some* German theology is speculative, and *some* of it is unreadable (even in German). But the same could be said of any theology in any language, ancient or modern, and it would be both unjust and unwise to dismiss the whole on the grounds of the excesses of some of the parts. German theologians have no monopoly on riotous speculation or bad prose. What is needed more than anything else in the current climate is informed, sensitive and yet critical evaluation of major works in German dogmatic theology, and this series of articles is intended as an initial step in that direction. Each article will look at a major German

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systematic theologian, either Protestant or Catholic, seeking to indicate how his work might most profitably be approached, setting out an interpretation of the main lines of his theology, and offering some guidelines for its evaluation. The aim will not be merely to highlight areas in which evangelicals might wish to formulate a critical response, but also to demonstrate some of the theological and pastoral resources in the works to be considered, and in this way to suggest that much current mistrust is unwarranted.

First, however, some historical remarks on how this situation of mistrust has arisen. Attempts are often made to explain the matter on the basis of supposed differences between the German and the English intellectual temperament, differences which spill over into styles of theology. Where the German mind is abstract and speculative, it is proposed, the English is predominately empirical. Evidence for this view is allegedly to be found, for example, in the fact that England (or, at least, Anglicanism) has little home-grown systematic theology, but is rich in historical studies of the New Testament and patristic periods. But this suggestion does not in the end take us very far, basically because its generalisations are so broad as to lack any real historical credibility. Abstractions such as the 'German mind' or 'English theology' are simply too diffuse to describe anything, and merely reduce the diversity of each nation's intellectual life and theology. In effect, they tell us little that is really precise about the difficulties of mutual understanding and interchange between English and German-language theology.

The situation is in fact more complex and ramified than such historical slogans allow. For the difficulties felt by many contemporary English-speaking readers of German theology are not so much the result of different national mental attitudes as of an involved historical process in which each nation has developed a variety of

native theological styles which do not always overlap or even engage with the styles of the other. One result of this diversification of theological activity is that English readers often go to German theological works with the wrong expectations, assuming that issues, styles of argument and points of contention are the same for German as for English audiences. Finding to his dissatisfaction that they are not, either he lays the German work aside as incomprehensible, or he tries to force it to speak to issues on which it has little to say. Either way, his understanding of the work is blunted and its ability to draw him into fresh areas of reflection is severely curtailed.

If this analysis of the situation is correct, it suggests that critical appraisal of theological work involves more than sloganising judgements. It demands an awareness of the real nature of the issues to which the work addresses itself, a willingness to enter into the author's persuasion that the issues as he sees them are matters of significance. As Barth once wrote, the good student of the work of others, far from making do with 'slogans and handy formulae' should 'try to present what has engaged another person . . . as something *living*, as something that *moved* him in some way and that can and indeed does move *oneself* too; to *unfold* it in such a way that even if one finally takes some other route the path of this other has an enticing, or, if you like, a tempting attraction for oneself' (*Letters 1961-8*, p. 234).

One might take Barth's point a little further by suggesting that one essential prerequisite for understanding some of the contemporary options in German theology is a good historical sense. For even the most recent theology has a history, in the sense that it is, in part at least, determined by the works which have preceded it, with which it enters into dialogue and from which it differs. Very often our reading is shallow and unsatisfying because we have not attended sufficiently closely to what it is trying to do in the context within which it stands. We mistake its aims and so come to have an inadequate grasp of its central thrust. And as a consequence we may all too easily make criticisms which are inappropriate, or fail to take away from our reading what might be of profit.

It is because of this need for an accurate historical perspective that this first article looks behind contemporary German theology to the work of Barth (died 1968) and Bultmann (died 1976). It would be hard to overestimate the influence that their very different theological programmes have had, and still have, on German dogmatics. This is not simply because most of the figures that we shall consider in future articles — Pannenberg, Moltmann, Jungel, Ebeling, Kung, Kasemann — have been students of one or either of these seminal figures. Much more is it because, between them, Barth and Bultmann were in large part responsible for setting the agenda for German theology for most of the middle period of the present century, when figures who are now prominent were receiving their theological education. However much thinkers like Pannenberg or Ebeling have come to adopt a critical stance towards their teachers, it remains true that much of their theological energy has been devoted to assimilating and working through the legacy left by the two earlier figures.

## Bultmann

Bultmann is perhaps best known for his radical works of New Testament scholarship. His *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, for example, first published in 1921, is one of the seminal works of form-criticism. In this book, Bultmann analyses the various literary forms of the accounts of Jesus' ministry in the synoptic gospels (miracle stories, controversy sayings, parables, etc.), and seeks to show how these forms have been altered, and indeed often created, by the activity of the early church, to such an extent that little of the synoptic account can be relied upon as an accurate record of the ministry of Jesus. And whilst his later works, such as the *Theology of the New Testament* or the commentary on *The Gospel of John*, are often richly kerygmatic in their treatment of the biblical text, their exegesis goes along with radical critical positions over such matters as Paul's interest in the history of Jesus or the influence of Gnostic thought-forms on the Johannine writings.

Here, however, we are primarily concerned with Bultmann's legacy for more general theological debates. His work is often judged to be a curious mixture of radical biblical scholarship and existentialist philosophy, and its chief defect thought to lie in his attempt to interpret the theological content of the New Testament through the use of such philosophical categories. This judgement is not without its truth. In his early years as Professor of New Testament at Marburg, Bultmann had as a colleague the philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose book *Being and Time* deeply impressed him. Heidegger's highly complex work is in part an existentialist anthropology — that is to say, it sets out a philosophical account of man in which human nature is not something fixed and static but something which is created in moments of decision. In the act of deciding between the various possibilities with which he is faced, a man becomes himself.

Such an anthropology is often thought to lie at the heart of Bultmann's interpretation of the New Testament. He writes, for example, that the task of the New Testament

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theologian is to look underneath the surface 'mythology' of the biblical text for the 'conception of man which in the last analysis underlies it' (*Jesus and the Word*, p. 47). Or again, he argues that New Testament theology should set out the 'understanding of human existence' in the early Christian gospel (*Primitive Christianity*, p. 12). It is in this light that Bultmann's familiar distinction between *kerygma* and *myth* is usually interpreted. Bultmann uses the concept of 'myth' in a highly flexible way, but by it he usually means a way of talking about divine realities in

ways drawn from creaturely existence — such as talking of God's transcendence in terms of spatial distance (God 'out there'). For Bultmann, the New Testament is couched in such mythological terms, terms which are not only incomprehensible to contemporary man but also not indispensable to the real message of the New Testament. This real message is what he identifies as the kerygma: the existential message of the New Testament, the understanding of man before God which is expressed in dispensable mythological categories.

Critics of Bultmann have often, and not without some justice, pointed out that the New Testament does not sit as lightly on its 'mythology' as he supposes. 'Mythological' concepts such as incarnation, miracle or resurrection are not simply the external clothing of the kerygma: they are part of its essential content, without which its authentic character would be lost. At this point there can be little doubt that Bultmann seriously underestimates and misinterprets the New Testament's

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concern with the historical. And as a consequence, he finds himself in great difficulty when he tries to articulate a sense in which we may speak of God's action in the world (*Jesus Christ and Mythology*, ch. 5). Because Bultmann regards all talk of God's action as 'mythological', he runs the risk of neglecting the objective reference of all theological statements, and thus of interpreting them in too private a manner, as expressing not truths about God but the subjective reality of the believer.

Yet criticism along these lines should not make us unappreciative of the deeper theological motives behind Bultmann's existentialist reading of the New Testament or of his programme of 'demythologising'. His fundamental concern all along the line is to avoid what he calls an 'objectifying' way of talking about God. For 'objectifying' language speaks about its subject matter from outside — impartially, disinterestedly, without any real engagement. It treats the matter of which it speaks as if it were a neutral object 'out there'. The importance of his essay of 1925 'What Does it Mean to Speak of God?' can hardly be overemphasised in this connection. Here he sets out how only those truths about God are meaningful which refer to the situation of the speaker: '... it is not legitimate to speak about God in general statements, in universal truths which are valid without reference to the concrete, existential situation of the speaker' (*Faith and Understanding*, p. 53). Or, as he goes on to say more tersely, 'It is therefore clear that if a man will speak of God, he must evidently speak of himself' (p. 55).

It is tempting, but ultimately mistaken, to interpret such statements as the expression of thorough-going theological subjectivism. Tempting, because much of what Bultmann says here is ambiguous and open to a variety of interpretations. But mistaken, because from the more general context of his work it is clear that his concern is not to offer a reduced, man-centred account of the Christian faith. Much more is he searching for ways in which that faith might be seen to be a matter of the most pressing concern for human existence. It is not so much that his theology is anthropocentric as that it seeks to spell out how the theocentric character of Christian faith might be made meaningful for the life of man in the world.

Bultmann's deepest concern was with the reality of faith. His theology is best seen as an exploration of how the reality of God impinges upon and forms our understanding of our own selves. 'Adherence to the gospel message is called "faith", and faith involves a new existential understanding of Self' (*Primitive Christianity*, p. 202). It is from this concern that the thoughtful reader of Bultmann's writings will learn most. And it is this concern more than any other which has impressed itself on German theological debate. In particular, three areas of discussion have received much stimulus from Bultmann's work.

In the area of hermeneutics or the theory of interpretation, Bultmann was one of the first to see clearly how interpretation of a text involves a consideration and fruitful use of the situation of the interpreter. His essay 'Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?', setting out how the ideal of a neutral interpreter is neither possible nor desirable, has had very wide influence on contemporary hermeneutical theory. Secondly, Bultmann has forced theologians to consider how to spell out Christian doctrines in terms which speak to the ways in which man understands himself. And thirdly, his work offers the challenge to his followers to look for ways in which God and his action in the world may most properly be spoken of, without either 'objectifying' God or reducing him to a mere function of the human. Subsequent articles will show how all three areas have become matters of lively debate.

### Barth

Barth's legacy to the history of theology in Germany in the present century is more complex. Partly this is because in sheer volume his work outstrips that of

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Bultmann, and because of Barth's very deep involvement in European cultural and church life. But it is also in some measure due to the fact that Barth's theology contains several significant changes in emphasis, in contrast to Bultmann's work whose character is less fluid and whose consistency is more readily discerned.

Barth's theology, for all its firmness of line, displays a remarkable openness to self-correction, to which the shifts in his thinking bear witness. As a young parish minister he turned decisively from the liberalism of his teachers, rediscovering a theology that stresses the utter contrariness of the divine and the human. This theology, expressed in early works such as his commentary *The Epistle to the Romans* and *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, was in turn replaced by a more definitely systematic approach in *Christian Dogmatics*, which was again replaced by the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* in 1932. And within the thirteen massive volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, which span over thirty-five years of writing, there is still clear development. Earlier volumes centre on the concept of the 'Word of God' as the criterion of all dogmatic thought, whereas later volumes spell out the content of the Word of God in more concrete and biographical terms as the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Such changes of mind should not, of course, be seen as the fruit of indecision: in fact, they furnish the clue to Barth's theological consistency. For his concern is always to measure human thinking against revelation, to judge the word of the church and the theologian against God's self-disclosure. In the earlier phases of his work the meaning which Barth attaches to the concept of the Word of God is flexible, but he generally uses it to describe his conviction that the theologian is above all responsible to God's objective self-communication. In later works, this self-communication is increasingly identified with the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, since it is in the ministry of the incarnate that God's very being is disclosed to the world.

It is this which leads to what is perhaps the most significant feature of the mature work of Barth in the *Church Dogmatics*: his 'Christological method of construction'. Barth's approach to all areas of dogmatic theology is to work from Christology outwards, so that our beliefs about Jesus Christ form the foundational or pivotal doctrine at the heart of the theological system. Barth's theology is, in other words, radically and consistently Christocentric. Thus, for example, his doctrine of God takes its rise not from general ideas of God derived from philosophy or natural theology or religious experience, but solely from the knowledge of God given in the person of Jesus Christ. And because God thus discloses himself in human form, it is for Barth both appropriate and necessary that we talk of the 'humanity of God' — not in order to fashion a god after our own image, but in order faithfully to think through what God has told us of himself. Far from being a sceptical or primarily critical exercise, Barth's conception of dogmatics is that of a meditative and humble transcription of the reality of God in Christ. Readers of the later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* will not fail to be moved by their imaginative power and sensitivity of

theological and spiritual insight into many themes at the heart of the Christian faith.

And, indeed, it is this imaginative restatement of many of the major concerns of classical Christian theology which forms the largest part of Barth's legacy to contemporary

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theological reflection. Barth recognised the depth of potential in such doctrines as the incarnation and the trinity, and saw that they were kept on the agenda of theological debate at a time when they might have been pronounced outmoded. In particular, he reintroduced the concept of revelation, when it had all but fallen by the wayside in the immanentist theological scene of the beginning of the century. Clearly, evangelical readers of Barth will find much here to dissatisfy them, notably in the area of the doctrine of Scripture. Nevertheless, Barth's doctrine did furnish a tough-minded alternative to the subjectivism which he found in the liberal tradition in which he had been moulded. But perhaps the deepest lesson to be taken from Barth is not that of a particular account of Christian truth, striking and powerful though it is, but more a way of approaching the task of constructing such an account. Barth's greatness lay in his single-minded, undeflected attentiveness to the objective reality of God, in his steadfast conviction that theology is rational discipleship, the humble yet delighted submission of the mind to what God has shown of himself. 'Evangelical theology,' he wrote, 'is modest theology, because it is determined to be so by its object, by him who is its subject' (*Evangelical Theology*, p. 7). Because Barth's theology is massive and massively influential, nearly all the thinkers to be considered in this series have worked through to varying degrees the implications of his programme. To be a systematic theologian in Germany involves taking a stance on Barth's work, however critical that stance may be. And that is, in itself, an eloquent testimony to the power of his work.

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The profit to be gained from studying the writings of thinkers like Bultmann and Barth is immense. For simply to be a spectator of the sheer energy and skill with which they wrestle with the fundamentals of the Christian faith is an invigorating experience for student, pastor or preacher. But more: theology is nothing if not a repentant science. Part of repentance is changing one's mind. And if through studying the thought of others we are jolted out of false habits of thought into a fresh grappling with the truth of the faith, their efforts and ours are not wasted.