

Pacesetters for the Radical
Theologians of the 60s and 70s*
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If contemporary theology is like a rushing, muddy river, as indeed it is, a pertinent question naturally arises: how did it ever become so turbulent and turbid? A related question also obtrudes itself: what were the tributaries somewhere upstream which poured themselves into this now swirling flood? An exhaustive answer to these questions would require a study that reached back into the remotest depths of human civilization and ransacked the vast resources of specialized scholarship. But we are at least entitled to say that in the more recent past the potent influences of four men have converged to swell this river. Our task, therefore, is to consider briefly the distinctive input which individually Rudolf Bultmann, Teilhard de Chardin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Tillich have made to the onflowing tide of present day theology.

I
Rudolf Bultman

Born on August 20, 1884, at Wiefeldstede in Oldenburg, Germany, Rudolf Bultmann has spent his entire career in the academic world. He taught at Marburg from 1912 to 1916; then he was assistant professor at Breslau until 1920; very briefly he held the rank of full professor at Giessen, returning to Marburg in 1921, where he remained until his retirement in 1951. Though not a political activist, he supported the Confessing Church during the Hitler era.

An encyclopedic scholar, he moves with competence and distinction, not to say critical creativity, in the fields of Judaism, Old Testament, Biblical Criticism, New Testament studies, classical culture, historical theology, modern science, contemporary theology, and world religions. Let Schubert M. Ogden give an appraisal of his importance.

Rudolf Bultmann is one of the most significant figures on the contemporary theological scene. By whatever criteria one judges such significance—whether quantitative or qualitative, whether with reference to specific areas of concern (i.e., “historical,” “systematic,” or “practical” theology) or to theological inquiry as a whole—his contribution is unchallengeably among the most important of our time. In the course of a long and productive scholarly career, which already spans half a century and still continues with unabated power, he has come to be one of the most decisive influences on the direction of Protestant theology in the

*From a forthcoming Moody Press book (1976) on *Options in Contemporary Theology* edited by S. Gundry and A. Johnson.

twentieth century. The basic reason for this, undoubtedly, is that to an extent that seems to distinguish him among his contemporaries he has become a part of all that he has met theologically, and thus embodies in his own achievement virtually all of the important motives in the long tradition of German theology in which he stands. Of his work, as perhaps of no other, it can be said that it represents an integral and creative restatement of the cumulative wisdom of classical Protestant theology in its several decisive phases.¹

1.

The Bultmann *corpus* is an impressive body of books and articles, much of it devoted to a highly technical exegesis of the New Testament. How best, then, can we understand this multifaceted contribution to present-day theology? Does it have a controlling purpose and, if so, what is that? Running the risk of oversimplification, we can say that Bultmann's primary passion is to communicate the *kerygma* or the Christian message to the twentieth century world. In order to carry out this task, he engages, negatively, in a demythologization of the Biblical sources, while, positively, he sets forth an existential analysis of the Gospel proclamation. Thomas Oden helpfully elucidates the relationship between these two aspects of Bultmann's task.

Demythologization is distinguished from existential analysis (*Daseinsanalyse*) in that the former deals with the special problem of trying to perceive the New Testament proclamation in the context of the mythical world picture of the first century, and to indicate how this world picture is not necessary to the particular understanding of existence expressed therein. Existential analysis of the New Testament proclamation, however, involves the positive task of taking these first-century conceptualities, language, and meanings and translating them into terms that are familiar and understandable to modern man and that correspond to the actual situation of human existence.²

But why is demythologization necessary? Why, moreover, must the New Testament be subjected to an existential analysis? As we ponder these questions, Ogden can again be of help to us. He calls attention to the well-known passage from the Preface to the second edition of Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*.

If I have a "system" it consists in the fact that I keep in mind as persistently as possible what Kierkegaard called the "infinite qualitative difference" between time and eternity in both its negative and its positive meaning. "God is in heaven and you are on earth." The relation of *this* God to *this* man, the relation of *this* man to *this* God, is for me at once the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy. The philosophers speak of this crisis of human knowing as the primal source, while the Bible sees at this parting of

1. Schubert M. Ogden, ed., "Introduction," *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1960), p. 9.
2. Thomas C. Oden, *Radical Obedience* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 47.

the ways Jesus Christ.

Ogden then asserts that this "system," repudiated by Barth in his later years, is precisely the "system" to which Bultmann tenaciously adheres: an "affirmation of the 'infinite qualitative difference' between time and eternity in its several negative and positive implications." And Ogden concludes his incisive orientation with these words, mostly italicized.

Indeed, we may lay it down as a rule that *one ought never to suppose he has correctly understood anything that Bultmann says, as regards either the method or the contents of his theology, until he is able to see it as permitted or required by this basic dialectic.*³

The bearing of this "infinite qualitative difference" on Christian faith is incalculably decisive, Ogden argues. An analogy may prove illuminating. I am a self, and at my deepest center is a reality qualitatively different from my psyche or my body or my world. Its existence can never be identified with any physical process within my organism nor with any action I perform nor word that I speak. My self, though inextricably related to my body, my psyche, my world, nevertheless qualitatively transcends its environment. My self, in fact, transcends my own subjective world as well as its objective world, revealing itself indirectly by the decisions which determine its network of relationships and activities. Analogically, Ogden points out, God is the Reality Who infinitely transcends everything and Who, paradoxically, is at the same time related to everything. Yet because He is the Wholly Other, nothing in nature or history—nothing, for instance, that man is or does—can directly reveal God. In Bultmann's own words, "God is the *Creator*, i.e., he is not immanent in the ordinances of the world, and nothing that encounters us as a phenomenon within the world is *directly* divine."⁴ Hence as cosmic Self, He remains *Deus absconditus* except as He indirectly discloses something of Himself. To quote Ogden once more,

Just as man in his finite "historicity" transcends the whole sphere of the subject-object correlation, so also does God as infinite Thou or "Existent" transcend all that falls within the macrocosmic counterpart of this same sphere.⁵

One may believe that God has been at work in an event, but one cannot demonstrate God's reality by an appeal to that event any more than an appeal to some human action will demonstrate to a disciple of B. F. Skinner that a self has been responsible for a specific behavior. In short, the reality of God is as undemonstrable as the reality of the human self. Since God is Spirit, Bultmann assumes, He simply does not disclose Himself miraculously in space-time. History, like nature, is a closed continuum of causes and effects with even human motives susceptible of causal explanation. Bultmann, consequently, makes a significant assertion:

This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent

3. Quoted by Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 14.

4. Rudolf Bultmann, "The Task of Theology in the Present Situation," Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 160.

5. Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 16.

powers and that therefore there is no "miracle" in this sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie within history. While, for example, the Old Testament narrative speaks of an interference by God in history, historical science cannot demonstrate such an act of God, but merely perceives that there are those who believe in it. To be sure, as historical science, it may not assert that such a faith is an illusion and that God has not acted in history. But it itself as science cannot perceive such an act and reckon on the basis of it; it can only leave every man free to determine whether he wants to see an act of God in a historical event that it itself understands in terms of that event's immanent historical causes.⁶

2.

It follows, therefore, that revelation comes in symbols which must be decoded. To use Bultmann's term, they must be demythologized.

Besides the theological reason for demythologization, there is an apologetic reason. Modern man thinks scientifically in strictly causal categories. Spirits, demons, miracles, the devil, a virgin birth, the Saviour's literal descent into hell and His equally literal ascension into heaven, a supernatural Being returning in clouds of the sky as if the universe were a structure of three levels like flats in an apartment house—to demand that modern man accept all this as anything but myth is to demand a *sacrificum intellectus* which prevents people today from taking the *kerygma* seriously. Who, to state the issue sharply, can utilize the achievements of science and deny its presuppositions?

It is impossible to make use of electric light and of the radio, when sick to take advantage of all the resources of medical and clinical research, and at the same time to believe in the world of spirits and of miracles as we find it set forth in the New Testament. Anyone who claims to be able personally to do so must recognize that, if he presents this as the attitude which is required of Christian believers, he is making Christian preaching incomprehensible and impossible of acceptance in the modern world.⁷

So when a grossly misguided apologetic insists on faith in the facticity of the Biblical myths rather than on faith in their underlying meaning, it is substituting a false stumbling-block for the true *scandalon*. What demythologizing does, then, is "eliminate a false stumbling-block and bring into sharp focus the real stumbling-block, the word of the cross."⁸ Or, as Bultmann writes in another context, "This stumbling-block is that the Word of God calls man out of all man-made security."⁹ Apologetically, then, no less than theologically demythologization is imperative if twentieth century culture is to be

6. Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?", Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 292.

7. Quoted by Giovanni Miegge, *Gospel and Myth in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 8.

8. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 36.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

confronted with the *kerygma* in all its authentic offensiveness and redemptive power.

Myth, though, needs to be defined, and Bultmann proposes a rather simple definition which applies to myth *per se*, whether in Judaism, Gnosticism, Christianity or any other religion.

Mythology is that form of imagery in which that which is not of this world, and that which is divine, is represented as though it were of this world and human; "the beyond" is represented as "the here and now." For example, the transcendence of God is expressed in terms of distance in space. When this kind of imagery is used, worship is readily understood as an action in which, by the use of material means, non-material powers are communicated to man.¹⁰

With myth thus defined, that polysyllabic term, demythologization, may now be explicated. Essentially, Bultmann declares, "it is a method of hermeneutics," which seeks to extract the kernel of insightful significance from the shell of an antiquated worldview.

This method of interpretation of the New Testament which tries to recover the deeper meaning behind the mythological conceptions I call *de-mythologizing*—an unsatisfactory word, to be sure. Its aim is not to eliminate the mythological statements but to interpret them.¹¹

Bultmann insists that demythologization does not necessitate a root-and-branch rejection of Christianity. On the contrary! It rejects only a pre-scientific cosmology. Bultmann argues that "the world-view of the Scripture is mythological and is unacceptable to modern man whose thinking has been shaped by science and is therefore no longer mythological."¹²

3.

Once the mythological materials in Scripture have been demythologized, what remains? A revelation that is meaningful to the modern mind, a revelation of a new possibility in human existence.

Revelation means *that opening up of what is hidden which is absolutely necessary and decisive for man if he is to achieve "salvation" or authenticity*; i.e., revelation here is the disclosure of God to man ... an occurrence that puts man in a new situation.¹³

Revelation, then, offers a new self-understanding and with it the challenging hope of a new self-possibility.

Simple as this message may sound, its elucidation requires the collaborative labor of both philosophy and theology with their vast apparatus of learning. But why philosophy? Why not, as with Barth, the exegesis and systematization of revelational data—demythologized, to be sure, but precisely on that account acceptable to the modern mind? The answer to that question depends on one's view of philosophy, and

10. Quoted by Giovanni Miegge, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

11. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

13. Rudolf Bultmann, "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament." Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 59.

Bultmann's view makes philosophy a necessary propaedeutic to theology. Hence replying to the criticism of Gerhard Kuhlmann that he has done little more than baptize Martin Heidegger's anthropology, Bultmann advances his own view of the relationship between philosophy and theology.

Every theology is dependent for the clarification of its concepts upon a pretheological understanding of man that, as a rule, is determined by some philosophical tradition.... Even preaching is guided by a specific understanding of man, even if it does not need to make this understanding conceptually explicit. Theology, however, does have to make it explicit, since its task is to stand guard over preaching's purity and understandability. It can fulfill its task only if it inquires after concepts that express the being of man in the most appropriate and "neutral" way possible. And if it does not ask philosophy for these, this is a mere fake. For then it is either uncritically dependent upon some older philosophical tradition or else itself engages in philosophical work—in which case the results are usually inferior enough!¹⁴

But why is a pretheological understanding of man necessary? For a most compelling reason. It is impossible to approach any text "without asking questions of it," and simultaneously bringing to bear upon the interrogative process certain concepts which we already hold. If, accordingly, we approach the Bible asking for an answer to the question of man's existence, we must be sure, Bultmann contends, that we are operating with "an adequate hermeneutical principle, the right way to ask the right questions," and we can discover this principle "only by objective, critical reflection."¹⁵

The right pretheological conceptions are available—providentially, Bultmann might be tempted to say—in the ontological analysis of Martin Heidegger, who penetratingly dissects the formal structures of human life. Indeed, there is a remarkable correspondence between Heidegger's anthropology and the New Testament delineation of the natural man, man before faith, man as a fallen being, experiencing care and anxiety and dread, haunted by the inescapability of death and nothingness, struggling to achieve self-security out of the bankrupt resources of his own self-sufficiency, and so existing in bondage and inauthenticity. Man's root trouble is his willful misunderstanding of himself, his refusal to face the truth about his own existence. This is Heidegger's analysis and Paul's as well.

These two anthropologies diverge radically, however, in their teaching as to the process of human self-actualization. Heidegger, on the one hand, calls man into a new life of authenticity by the exercise of sheer resolve. Here is Bultmann's summarization of the position espoused by his philosophical mentor:

To be a man ... is something that uniquely belongs to the individual; and the being of man is a "possibility of being," i.e., the man who is involved in care for himself chooses his own unique

14. Rudolf Bultmann, "The Historicity of Man and Faith," Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 98.

15. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

possibility. This choice is a genuine resolve only when it is a carrying out of the "resolution" that grows out of man's seeing in death his properest possibility and letting himself be thrown back by death into the now—of understanding the now from the standpoint of death and thus resolving in the situation.¹⁶

Heidegger's authentic man is, in the end, a resolute Stoic.

Paul, on the other hand, calls man out of his false and frustrating self-misunderstanding into a new and fulfilling self-understanding revealed in Jesus Christ. If man chooses to respond in faith to the Biblical message, he will perceive himself as a being totally dependent on God, gaining his frantically-sought-after security by a committal of his life to God's inscrutable and unpredictable power, existing in freedom and openness and love, and so existing in authenticity. This is Bultmann's description of the life which follows when a human being, fallen and frustrated, apprehends a new self-understanding and in decisive self-surrender begins to actualize his new self-possibility:

Because man thereby no longer belongs to himself (I Cor. 6:19), he is free from care, free from anxiety about death, free from legal prescriptions and human conventions and standards of value. In short, he is free from himself as he actually is as he comes out of his past; he is a new creation in Christ (II Cor. 5:17). As a man of faith, he has passed from death to life (John 5:24). But—and this is the paradox—his freedom is never a static quality; it never loses the character of a gift that never becomes a secure possession, but must rather constantly be laid hold of anew as a gift. But in what does this constantly new apprehension consist? In nothing other than the constantly renewed attitude of faith, i.e., in that openness for what God demands and sends that can never be taken for granted, but must always be realized anew.¹⁷

4.

But the utterly crucial factor in this transition from inauthenticity to authenticity has not yet been mentioned, and that fact is the revelation of human authenticity in Jesus Christ. Bultmann, as we have noticed, highlights this indispensable factor by affirming in italics that revelation means the "*opening up of what is hidden which is absolutely necessary and decisive for man if he is to achieve 'salvation' or authenticity.*"¹⁸ And this "opening up" occurs when the Church proclaims God's action in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, "the preaching itself belongs to the salvation occurrence."¹⁹ We are brought into a saving encounter with Jesus Christ "through the preaching of the Church, which proclaims him as the grace of God made manifest."²⁰

16. Rudolf Bultmann, "The Historicity of Man and Faith," Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 102.

17. Rudolf Bultmann, "Man Between the Times According to the New Testament," Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 255.

18. Rudolf Bultmann, "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament," Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 59.

19. Rudolf Bultmann, "Jesus and Paul," Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 200.

20. Quoted by Giovanni Miegge, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

Undeniably the cross, which the Church proclaims, is a "mythological event," yet through this event—and through this event alone—God works to save man from his life of inauthenticity.

The cross as saving event is not an isolated event which happened to a mythical person, whom we know under the name of Christ; this event has in its significance a "cosmic dimension." And its decisive significance, in the sense that it effects a revolution in history, is summed up in its particular character as eschatological event; this means that it is not simply an event in the past, to which we look back retrospectively; it is the eschatological event in time and beyond time, inasmuch as when understood in its true significance, when understood through faith, it is always present reality.²¹

And this significance Bultmann expounds more fully, distinguishing "mythological happening" from "saving event."

Considered as saving event, the cross of Christ is not, then, a mythological happening; it is a truly historical happening, which has its origin in a merely historical event, the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. The true historical significance of this event is that it is the judgment passed upon the world, the judgment passed upon men which sets them free. And in so far as this is true, Christ was crucified "for us." Not in the sense of a theory of "satisfaction," or of vicarious sacrifice. The fact of mere history discloses its significance as the event that brings salvation, not to a mythological interpretation, but to a genuinely historical interpretation; for it is only a true historical understanding which grasps the meaning of a merely historical happening in terms of the importance of that which it signifies. The mythological form of speech has in reality no other purpose than that of finding expression for the significance of the merely historical event. What the merely historical event of the cross means, when its significance is rightly grasped, is that it has created a new historical situation; the proclamation of the cross as saving event challenges the hearer to make up his mind whether he is willing to make that significance his own, whether, that is, he is willing to be crucified with Christ.²²

As for the resurrection, which the New Testament never isolates from the cross, that too is a "salvation event" presented under the guise of a "mythological happening." Thus Bultmann points out that

The cross cannot be separated from the *resurrection*; i.e., precisely he who accepts as valid for himself the judgment that is spoken in the cross, who, as Paul puts it, lets himself be crucified with Christ, experiences the cross as liberation and redemption, and is able to believe that, by giving Jesus up to the cross, God thereby led him into life—a life in which all share who let themselves be crucified with him.²³

This relationship between Christ's crucifixion, his resurrection, and the possibility of a new life is explicitly stated by Bultmann.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

23. Rudolf Bultmann, "Jesus and Paul," Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 197.

The resurrection is not a mythological event which can be adduced in order to make credible the significance of the cross; this too has to be *believed in*, just in the same way as the significance of the cross has to be accepted by faith. Belief in the resurrection is simply and exactly the same as belief in the cross as "salvation event" (*Heilsereignis*), in the cross as the cross of Christ.²⁴

The actual historicity of the man Jesus is, therefore, curiously incidental; so as well is the fiercely debated issue of His divinity. In a sense, while Bultmann appreciates why traditionally these matters have been regarded as the hallmarks of Christianity, he treats them with relative indifference. A founder of the form criticism school, his book *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* espouses a radical devaluation of Gospel history. What is left when the "forms" are analyzed, those congealed segments of biographical material which the early church created for propaganda purposes? Virtually nothing.

As a result of this investigation it appears that the outline of the life of Jesus, as it is given by Mark and taken over by Matthew and Luke, is an editorial creation, and that as a consequence our actual knowledge of the course of Jesus' life is restricted to what little can be discovered in the individual scenes constituting the older tradition.²⁵

Moreover, as for the dogma of Christ's divinity painstakingly deduced by the Church from the New Testament data, that also must be reinterpreted in the light of a valid hermeneutic:

In the New Testament, or at least in the greater part of it, declarations concerning the divinity or deity of Jesus Christ are, simply as a matter of fact, declarations intended to express not his nature but his significance for faith; their purpose is to confess that what he says and what he is do not derive their origin from anything within this world; they are not human thoughts or events of this world; on the contrary in them God speaks to us, works upon us and for us. Christ is the power and the wisdom of God; he has become to us the wisdom of God, righteousness, sanctification and redemption (I Cor. 1:30). I would, then, give it as my opinion that in so far as declarations of this kind are adopted in the form of propositions in which Christ is set before us as an *object* for our discernment, they must be subjected to critical evaluation.²⁶

5.

Bultmann's demythologized, Heideggerian version of Christianity, though it embraces insights which are of inestimable value, has been subjected to withering criticism. And one criticism in particular cuts to the very heart of his reinterpretation of the *kerygma*. What compelling reasons convince a scholar of Bultmann's stature that God, the inscrutable and unpredictable Source and Sustainer of reality, has acted redemptively in a man whose historicity is very dubious and whose

24. Quoted by Giovanni Miegge, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

25. Rudolf Bultmann, "The New Approach to the Synoptic Problem," Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 39.

26. Quoted by Giovanni Miegge, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

alleged significance comes to us through a mythological fog that only sophisticated scholarship can penetrate? Why accept this man as the saving model of authenticity? Oden reminds us, consequently, that an unanswerable question arises from the headon collision between philosophy and theology—or at least theology as Bultmann understands it.

Although the New Testament hardly provides us with an existential analysis of the nature of man, it does proclaim an event of redemption that addresses man in his ontic situation with a new and actual possibility of truly human existence. *Since it understands that man's new moral possibility is given in an event, the saving act of God, it also understands that without this event man's situation is one of despair, an assertion that philosophy rejects.* How can the New Testament maintain this, in contrast to the whole weight of the philosophical tradition?²⁷

Bultmann has no reply to such devastating inquiries except a sheer fideism:

If we still ask these questions, we are obviously not yet rightly prepared. For they indicate that we still consider the Bible as an ordinary book which we may study like other books in order to profit by it. If we ask for plain convincing reasons why God speaks actually here, in the Bible, then we have not yet understood what God's sovereignty means. For it is due to his sovereign will, that he has spoken and speaks here. The Bible does not approach us at all like other books, nor like other "religious voices of the nations," as catering for our interest. It claims from the outset to be God's word. We did not come across the Bible in the course of our cultural studies, as we came across, for example, Plato or the Bhagavad-Gita. We came to know it through the Christian church, which put it before us with its authoritative claim. The church's preaching, founded on the Scriptures, passes on the word of the Scriptures. It says: God speaks to you *here!* In his majesty he has chosen *this* place! We cannot question whether this place is the right one; we must listen to the call that summons us.²⁸

But if one does not hear God speaking through Scripture, what then? History and logic are powerless to persuade. Bultmann on his premises cannot appeal to any internal testimony of the Holy Spirit—another mythological concept! Hence if modern man will not or cannot resort to a most unscientific voluntarism, his sole alternative is skepticism or atheism. Thus Bultmann becomes a John the Baptist for the God-is-dead movement.

For Further Study

Bultmann's major works in the New Testament field include *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), *The*

27. Thomas C. Oden, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

28. Rudolf Bultmann, "How Does God Speak to Us Through the Bible?", Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 168.

Theology of the New Testament (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), Vol. I, 1951, Vol. II, 1955; *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961). His articles in Kittel's *Wörterbuch* are of highest merit. Among his other books these deserve attention: *The Presence of Eternity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957); *Faith and Understanding* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); *Myth and Christianity* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1958), a debate with Karl Jaspers; and *Kerygma and Myth* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1961), another debate with five top-flight critics.

II Teilhard de Chardin

Born in 1881 at Sarcenat in the Auvergne district of central France, Teilhard de Chardin became a Jesuit priest who gained an international reputation as a palaeontologist. After receiving his doctorate in geology from the Sorbonne, he carried on research in China for many years, later traveling in South East Asia and Africa. A philosopher as well as a scientist, a mystic whose prose is roaringly poetic, he engaged in speculation on a cosmic scale, projecting a vision of reality which reconceptualizes traditional Christian dogmas in terms of an all-inclusive evolutionism. Though the Church refused him permission to publish any of the books which set forth his iconoclastic theorizing, he obeyed its authority and remained its loyal son throughout his life. As he explained in a letter to his friend Henri de Lubac, "Only in the Roman 'trunk' do I see the biological support sufficiently vast and differentiated to carry out the enduring transformation of humanity which we await."¹ Following his death in 1955, however, some 15 volumes of his writings were published in rapid succession; these have called forth an ever-increasing plethora of books and articles which seek to interpret Teilhardism.

1.

The impact of this creative genius has been extraordinary. On the one hand, Bernard Towers pays tribute to his originality and creativity in the field of science.

A Christian priest of rare spiritual insight, he was also a scientist of great eminence. His geological and palaeontological studies, published in the journals of learned societies in Europe, Asia and America, constitute the kind of lasting contribution to science that marks a distinguished scholar. The honours which he received from, and the esteem in which he was held by, his scientific colleagues are matters of record. But he was not only a highly skilled and dedicated research worker, whose labours served to push forward the boundaries of knowledge "inch by inch." This is the normal way in which science advances, by the steady, competent work of those who have mastered the necessary skills. But as well as being a master in his scientific field, he was also one of those relatively rare people, the pioneers of science. He was, in fact, a pioneer of great intellectual daring and originality, whose ideas are likely to modify profoundly, and to advance enormously, our understanding of the nature of science and of its relation to other aspects of living.²

On the other hand, the Very Rev. Father Arrupe, General of the Society of Jesus, in a press conference on June 14, 1965, had this to say regarding Teilhard's theological contribution:

Père Teilhard is one of the great masters of contemporary

1. Quoted by Christopher F. Mooney, "Teilhard de Chardin and Christian Spirituality," Ewert H. Cousins, ed., *Process Theology* (New York: Newman Press, 1971), p. 317.
2. Bernard Towers, "Introduction" in Bernard Delfgaauw, *Evolution: The Theory of Teilhard de Chardin* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1961), p. 9.

thought, and his success is not to be wondered at. He carried through, in fact, a great attempt to reconcile the world of science with the world of faith. Starting from the evidence provided by scientific investigation, he used a phenomenological method now popular with contemporary thinkers, and completed his system by a spiritual teaching: in this, not only does the person of Christ stand at the centre of the world's evolution, as St. Paul meant when he spoke of the Christ "in whom all things hold together." It is impossible not to recognize how rich a contribution to our time has been made by the message of Perè Teilhard.³

It is impossible, therefore, to understand the development of *avant garde* theology among both Catholics and Protestants in recent years without an appreciation of the work done by this priest-palaeontologist.

Teilhard's central and controlling conviction can be quite simply stated: if the Gospel is to win the allegiance of the 20th century world, it must be reconceptualized in keeping with the most advanced knowledge.

After two thousand years, so many of our views have been modified that, in religion, we have to slough off the old skin. The formulas we have been using have become too narrow and unyielding. We find them irksome and they have ceased to move us. If we are to go on living we must make a fresh start. By constant repetition of dogma in the same form and by developing it only abstractly, we are losing ourselves in the clouds, where we are completely out of touch with what agitates the world, with what it seeks, and with what feeds its vigour. From the religious point of view we are living cut off from the world, both intellectually and emotionally.⁴

Only a reconceptualized Christianity, he repeatedly contends, will make sense to the modern mind.

We who are Christians know that the Saviour has already been born. But now that we have this completely new phrase of mankind, should he not be *reborn*, in a way adapted to our present needs?... We find something too narrow and something lacking in the Gospel as it is now presented. Our soul needs stronger meat. The trial through which we are passing is not a crisis of weakness and spiritual frigidity, but one of metamorphosis and growth. Wider horizons are not tighter control, that ... is the only thing that can effectively bring our generation back to the paths of truth.⁵

Concerned, then, to demonstrate that the ancient faith is in deepest harmony with the truths discovered by an evolutionary-oriented science, he once offered this prayer:

In my own small way, Lord, I would wish to be the apostle, and (if I may be so bold) the evangelist of *your Christ in the universe.... To bring Christ, in virtue of interconnexions that are specifically organic, to the very heart of the realities that are considered the most fraught with danger, the*

3. Quoted by Emile Rideau, *Teilhard de Chardin: A Guide to His Thought* translated by Rene Hague (London: Collins, 1967), pp. 659-660.

4. Quoted, *ibid.*, pp. 574-575, n. 198.

5. Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 331.

most philosophically naturalistic, the most pagan—that is my gospel and there lies my mission.⁶

In working to help God answer his prayer, Teilhard tirelessly seeks to reformulate “old Christianity” in order that, with the relevance of a seemingly “new religion,” it will magnetize even contemporary pagans to Jesus Christ. Reassuringly, he therefore remarks, “The new religion will be exactly the same as our old Christianity, but with a new life drawn from the legitimate evolution of its dogmas as they come into contact with new ideas.”⁷ Hence in Teilhard’s new Christianity the concepts of evolution, God, and Christ are daringly intermeshed. Let us examine, then, these three fundamentals of Teilhardism.

2.

He holds, to start with, that reality is a temporal process, operating under the dynamic and direction of evolution.

Taken at this degree of generalisation (in other words where all experimental reality in the universe forms part of a *process*, that is to say, is *born*) evolution has long ago ceased to be a hypothesis and become a *general condition of knowledge* (an additional *dimension*) which henceforth all hypotheses must satisfy.⁸

He also holds to the organic interrelatedness of everything that exists: being, inextricably interrelated from its lowest primordial levels to its highest ultimate reaches, is one enormous fabric with all its threads woven together. Energy, he likewise holds, is the essence of being, and being is psychic through and through. Reality, he therefore hypothecates, has a within as well as a without. Hence Teilhard speaks indiscriminately about interiority, mentality, and consciousness from man on down through to the cell. Energy, he further postulates, is of two kinds, radial and tangential, and in its processive churning through space-time it has undergone and keeps on undergoing amazing transformations.

This evolutive process Teilhard characterizes as orthogenesis, a straight-line development towards a predetermined goal. At various “thresholds” or “critical points,” he thinks, major breakthroughs occur as qualitative changes take place and new properties are precipitated, all of this brought about by the concomitant activities of “complexification” and “centering.” So cosmogenesis leads to biogenesis, and biogenesis leads to noogenesis, and noogenesis is leading to Christogenesis as energy or matter is being more and more Christicized; and Christogenesis will eventually terminate in the Omega-point. This process, Teilhard assumes, was guided from within by Christ through its divergent phases until the level of hominization was reached; at that critical point Christ became incarnate and is now directing orthogenesis through its convergent phase until Christicized reality attains the Omega-point, the Future-Universal which is Hyper-Personal. Concerning the nature and significance of this cosmic goal, Teilhard waxes rhapsodic.

7. Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 644.

8. Quoted by Ian G. Barbour, “Teilhard’s Process Metaphysics,” Ewert H. Cousins, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

If we pursue the perspectives of science as they relate to the humanization process to their logical and final conclusion, we then discover the climax of anthropogenesis to be the existence of an ultimate centre or focus of personality and consciousness which is indispensable for the orientation of the historical growth of spirit and for its synthesis. Now this *Omega point* (as I have called it), is it not the ideal centre from which to see radiating the Christ whom we worship—a Christ whose supernatural lordship is accompanied, as we are aware, by a predominating physical power over the natural spheres of the world? *In quo omnia constant*. Marvellous coincidence, indeed, of the data of faith with the processes of reason itself! What at first appeared to be a threat instead turns out to be a splendid confirmation. Far from coming into opposition with Christian dogma, the vastly increased importance assumed by man in nature results (when considered exhaustively) in traditional Christology being given a new lease of relevance and a new vitality.⁹

This breathtaking vision, it must be borne in mind, rests on the premise that evolution is an indisputable fact. Teilhard has no patience with an obscurantism which insists that it is only a theory. For him it is the master-key, providentially forged by modern science, that unlocks the secrets of nature and history.

Appearing locally, in the wake of zoology, evolution, after making gradual progress through the neighbouring realms, has finally *invaded everything*.... Let us be done once and for all, therefore, with the naive conception of the “evolutionary hypothesis”; it has long been out-of-date. No, taken sufficiently broadly, evolution is no longer, and has not been for a long time, a hypothesis—nor merely a simple method. It is in fact a new and common dimension of the universe, and consequently affects the totality of elements and relations of the universe. Not a hypothesis, therefore, but a condition which all hypotheses must henceforth fulfill.¹⁰

More fully, but with equal dogmatism, he spotlights this premise which is foundational to the edifice of his *Weltanschauung*.

What modern natural scientists most fundamentally hold to—what they cling to as an unshakable conviction, a conviction that has continuously grown beneath their surface arguments—is the fact of a *physical connexion* between living beings. Living beings *hold together* biologically. They have organic command of their successive appearances.... The successive growths of life can be the *substance of a history*.... Every being in our universe is by its material organization part and parcel of a whole past. It is in essence a history. And by its history, by this chain of antecedents which have prepared and introduced it, it is joined with no severance to the milieu within which it appears to us. The smallest exception to this rule would upset the entire edifice of our experience.... *Reduced to its essence*, transformism is not a hypothesis. It is the particular

9. Quoted by N. M. Wildiers, “Cosmology and Christology” Ewert H. Cousins, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 274-275.

10. Quoted by Emile Rideau, *op. cit.*, p. 388, n. 9.

expression, applied to the case of life, of the law which conditions our whole knowledge of the sensible universe: the law that we can understand nothing, in the domain of matter, except as part of a sequence or collection.¹¹

3.

As for the existence of deity, it is neither negated nor verified, in Teilhard's opinion, by orthogenesis or any other evolutionary hypothesis. The question of deity's existence stands exactly where it stood before the time of Charles Darwin. Thus in *The Vision of the Past* Teilhard writes:

Just as the materialistic biologist thinks he has gotten rid of the soul in demonstrating the physicochemical mechanisms in the living cell, so certain zoologists imagine that they have dispensed with the need for a First Cause because they have discovered a bit more of the general structure of his work. It is time to put aside a problem so badly formulated. No scientific theory of evolution strictly speaking proves anything for or against God. It merely states the fact of a linked series in reality. It shows us an anatomy, not a final reason, of life.... The decision as to whether the course of evolution is intelligible by itself, or whether it demands a progressive and continuous creative act of a First Mover, is a question for metaphysics. Evolution, one must keep repeating, does not impose any particular philosophy.¹²

But evolution has modified the traditional doctrine of God in one respect at any rate: it assumes that God did not create punctiliously at some moment in the mists of the past; rather, as the active *elan* of the cosmic process, He is continually creating. Teilhard, therefore, urges us to think of creation not "as an instantaneous act, but in the manner of a process or synthesizing action.... Creation has never ceased. Its act is a great continuous movement spread out over the totality of time. It is still going on."¹³

In another respect, too, evolution has modified the traditional view of God. It conceives Him not as static perfection but as active and undoubtedly changing. So in a typically difficult passage, one which climaxes in adoring devotion, Teilhard speaks about his own mind-staggering view of God.

By one of those strange inhibitory effects that prevent us from seeing what is staring us in the face, I did not realize that as God "metamorphosized" the world from the depths of matter to the heights of spirit, so, and in the same degree, the world in return must "endomorphize" God. Under the influence of the unitive operation that discloses him to us, God in some way "transforms himself" as he incorporates us. Thus what now seems to me to be the essential act and concern of hominized evolution is not simply to see God and allow oneself to be enveloped and penetrated by

11. Quoted, *ibid.*, pp. 386-387, n. 9.

12. Quoted by Michael H. Murray, *The Thought of Teilhard de Chardin* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1966), p. 30.

13. Quoted by Ian G. Barbour, *op. cit.*, pp. 336-337.

him ... but at the same time (if not first of all) to disclose (or even in a sense to complete) him ever more fully. Around us and in us, through the encounter between his attraction and our thought, God is in process of changing. Through the rise of "the quantity of cosmic union," his radiance grows brighter and his colour richer. Here at last we find, here we have the expression of, the great event, the great tidings ... Lord of consistency and union, you whose *mark of recognition and essence* are the power to increase indefinitely, without distortion or rupture, in step with the mysterious matter in whose heart you reside and of all whose movements you are the ultimate master—Lord of my childhood and Lord of my end—God, for himself ever complete, and yet, for us, over and endlessly being born.¹⁴

"God is in process of changing." Explicitly Teilhard makes this pronouncement. In other texts he alludes to "the fulfillment of God" who "consummates himself only in uniting," and adds, "God is entirely self-sufficient, and nevertheless creation brings to him something vitally necessary." In still another passage he declares:

Truly it is not the notion of the contingency of the created but the sense of the mutual completion of God and the world that makes Christianity live.... God, the eternal being in himself, is everywhere, we might say, in process of formation for us.

Then he further affirms the notion that the *raison d'être* of creation was a divine necessity.

In the world viewed as the object of "creation," classical metaphysics accustoms us to see a sort of extrinsic production, issuing from the supreme *efficiency* of God through an overflow of benevolence. *Invincibly*—and *precisely* in order to be able to act and to love fully at one and the same time—I am now led to see therein (in conformity with the spirit of St. Paul) a mysterious product of completion and fulfillment for the Absolute Being Himself.¹⁵

So at this juncture the criticism of Claude Trestamontant seems to be entirely justified:

In order to avoid the Charybdis of a universe created in a purely contingent and arbitrary way, Teilhard falls into the Scylla of a well-known mythology. According to it, God fulfills Himself in creating the world. God engages in a struggle with the Many (the ancient chaos) in order to find Himself again, richer and pacified, at the terminus of this world. This is an old gnostic idea which is found in Boehme, Hegel and Schelling.¹⁶

Entirely justified, too, is the comment of biologist D. Gareth Jones: "Anything suggestive of an unchanging God who is in some sense over against the processes of this present world can find no place in Teilhard's theology."¹⁷

Thus the traditional view of God has been radically challenged by

14. Quoted by Emile Rideau, *op. cit.*, p. 502.

15. Quoted by Ian G. Barbour, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-342.

16. Quoted, *Ibid.*, p. 342.

17. D. Gareth Jones, *Teilhard de Chardin: An Analysis and Assessment* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 63.

evolution. No longer adequate, it cries out for drastic reconceptualization. And John Baptist Walker, a popularizer of such reconceptualization, counsels Christian theology to take as its "starting-point the work of Teilhard de Chardin," and begin to think adventurously in terms "of an evolutionary God." What are the implications of such a thinking or rethinking?

Our ancestors looked back to a time "in the beginning" when God expressed himself by creating an unchanging universe. If we now accept the fact that this universe is in reality evolving, then this can only mean, in consequence, that God's *expression* of himself is undergoing evolutionary change. The transcendent and unchanging Father is immanent and present in his changing creation, shaping and moulding it until it shall finally proclaim his glory to the fullest extent of which it is capable. Then, as Paul tells us, "God will be all in all".... It would also be wrong to imagine that evolution is sustained and directed by God from the outside, as though he were a celestial puppet-master holding all the strings. Yet this is precisely what we do if we rely upon special divine interventions as explanations of those facts of earth that human knowledge is at present unable to fathom.¹⁸

This changing, non-intervening, totally immanent God is scarcely identifiable with the God Self-revealed in Jesus Christ. To reconceptualize is one thing; to totally metamorphosize the traditional view is to destroy while alleging to preserve.

4.

Let us notice, finally, how Teilhard, in the light of his evolutive assumptions, reconceptualizes the traditional view of Jesus Christ. That he worships this Person with a burning ardor is moving apparent from his unabashed and repeated confessions of love and trust. Lyrically, for example, he bears testimony to his Lord and Saviour.

And then comes the question of Christ himself—who is he? Turn to the most weighty and most unmistakable passages in the Scriptures. Question the Church about her essential beliefs; and this is what you will learn: Christ is not something added to the world as an extra, he is not an embellishment, a king as we now crown kings, the owner of a great estate.... He is the alpha and the omega, the principle and the end, the foundation stone and the key-stone, the Plenitude and the Plenifier. He is the one who consummates all things and gives them their consistence. It is towards him and through him, the inner life and the light of the world, that the universal convergence of all created spirit is effected in sweat and tears. He is the single centre, precious and consistent, who glitters at the summit that is to crown the world, at the opposite pole from those dim and eternally shrinking regions into which our science ventures when it descends the road of

18. John Baptist Walker, *New Theology for Plain Christians* (Denville, New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1970), pp. 8-9.

matter and the past.¹⁹

Thus what orthogenesis does, Teilhard claims, is open up the way for a deeper apprehension of Christology. "By showing us the summit that crowns the world, evolution makes Christ possible—just as Christ, by giving meaning and direction to the world, makes evolution possible."²⁰ It is a tragic mistake, consequently, to imagine that evolution and Christology are in conflict. Instead, they require and supplement each other.

Not only does the Christological tradition through experience show itself capable of tolerating an evolutionary structure of the world; but even more, contrary to all previews, it is at the heart of this new organic and unitary milieu, in favor of this particular orientation of space linked with time, that it develops most freely and fully. It is there that it assumes its true form.... Christianity and evolution are not two irreconcilable visions, but two perspectives destined to fit together and complement each other.²¹

Rather than searching after some new deity, therefore, Teilhard insists that Jesus Christ has all the essential qualifications for an "evolutive God."

A hitherto unknown form of religion—one that no one could yet have imagined or described, for lack of a universe large enough and organic enough to contain it—is burgeoning in men's hearts, from a seed sown by the idea of evolution.... Since his appearance Christ has never ceased to emerge from every crisis of history more present, more urgent, more assertive than ever. What, then, does he lack to be able to appear once more to our new world as the "new God" we look for? 1. He must no longer be limited, *constitutionally*, in his operation to no more than the "redemption" of our planet. 2. We now realize that everything in our universe follows a single axis of co-reflexion: we must, therefore, avoid that subtle confusion of "super-natural" and "extra-natural," so that Christ will no longer be offered to our adoration as a peak distinct from and in rivalry with the summit to which the slope of anthropology, extended biologically, ultimately leads.²²

Most of the historic doctrines of Christology Teilhard bypasses with not so much as a fleeting glance or at best a hasty nod. Typically, arguing that suffering is an integral element in the cosmic process, he offers this comment:

Following the classical view, suffering is above all a punishment, an expiation; it is efficacious as a sacrifice; it originates from sin and makes reparation for sin. Suffering is good as a means of self-mastery, self-conquest, self-liberation. In contrast, following the ideas and tendencies of a truly cosmic outlook, suffering is above all the consequence and prince of a labor of development. It

19. Quoted by W. J. P. Boyd, "Teilhard de Chardin and Modern Protestant Theology," Anthony Hanson, ed., *Teilhard Reassessed* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970), p. 124.

20. Quoted by Emile Rideau, *op. cit.*, p. 635, n. 180.

21. Henri de Lubac, *Teilhard Explained*, translated by Anthony Buono (New York: Paulist Press, Deus Books, 1966), p. 61.

22. Quoted by Emile Rideau, *op. cit.*, pp. 642-643.

is efficacious as effort. Physical and moral evil originate from a process of becoming; everything which evolves experiences suffering and moral failure.... The Cross is the symbol of the pain and toil of evolution, rather than the symbol of expiation.²³

Significantly enough, though, the Second Coming looms large in his thought. For as he reconceptualizes the meaning of the Parousia, Teilhard manages to pull together the multiple threads of his theorizing:

Christ's first coming to earth was only feasible—and nobody will dispute this—after the human species, in the setting of the general process of evolution, had been anatomically constituted and from the social standpoint had attained in some degree a collective consciousness. If this much be granted, why not go a step further and ask whether in the case of his second and last coming *also*, Christ defers his return until the human community has realized to the full its *natural* potentialities, and thereby becomes qualified to receive through him its supernatural consummation? Indeed, if the historical development of spirit is bound by definite physical rules, must not this be equally the case—a *fortiori*, even—where its further unfolding and completion are concerned?²⁴

Pondering Teilhard's Christology, as well as his other reinterpretations of traditional faith, one concludes that Dietrich von Hildebrand has not been overly severe in his criticisms:

It was only after reading several of Teilhard's works,... that I fully realized the catastrophic implications of his philosophical ideas, and the absolute incompatibility of his theology-fiction (as Etienne Gilson calls it) with Christian revelation....

Teilhard's Christ is no longer Jesus, the God-man, the epiphany of God, the Redeemer; instead he is the initiator of a purely natural evolutionary process and, simultaneously, its end—the Christ-Omega. An unprejudiced mind cannot but ask: Why should this "cosmic force" be called Christ?

In Teilhard's theology, the stress is laid on the progress of the earth, the evolution leading to Christ-Omega. There is no place for salvation through Christ's death on the Cross, because man's destiny is part of the pancosmic evolution. Teilhard has written: "Yes, the moral and social development of humanity is indeed the authentic and natural consequence of organic evolution." For such a man, original sin, redemption and sanctification can no longer have any real meaning. Note that Teilhard does not seem quite aware of this incompatibility: "Sometimes I am a bit afraid, when I think of the transposition to which I must submit my mind concerning the vulgar notions of creation, inspiration, miracle, original sin, resurrection, etc., in order to be able to accept them."²⁵

Teilhard's anxiety is well-grounded. For while he can manage to rationalize his continued profession of faith in the "vulgar notions" of

23. Quoted by Ian G. Barbour, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

24. Quoted by N. M. Wildiers, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

25. Dietrich von Hildebrand, "Teilhard de Chardin: Catholicism's False Prophet," *Triumph* (May and June, 1967).

traditional Christianity by a kind of speculative *legerdemain*, many of his less adroit admirers and disciples are unable to mimic his dazzling performance. Hence they eventually conclude that even Teilhard's reconceptualized faith is a "vulgar notion" that an honest modern must totally abandon.

For Further Study

Few contemporary works are more stylistically lyrical and intellectually provocative than Teilhard's *The Future of Man*, *The Divine Milieu*, *The Phenomenon of Man*, *Science and Christ*, *Hymn of the Universe*, *Man's Place in Nature*, *The Making of a Mind*, all of which have been published by William Collins Sons & Company in London. Most of Teilhard's books have also been published by Harper and Row.

Highly recommended as thorough, detailed, expositions of Teilhard's entire *corpus* are Emile Rideau, *Teilhard de Chardin: A Guide to His Thought* (London: William Collins Sons and Company, Ltd., 1967) and Piet Smulders, *The Design of Teilhard de Chardin* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1967). Less weighty but extremely clarifying is Michael H. Murray, *The Thought of Teilhard de Chardin: An Introduction* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1966). Henri de Lubac seeks to justify Teilhard theologically and philosophically in his heavily documented *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin* (New York: Desche Company, 1967). Extremely Marian in orientation, rather esoteric from a Protestant standpoint, is de Lubac's *The Eternal Feminine: A Study on the Text of Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Collins, 1971). *Christ in the Thought of Teilhard de Chardin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967) is the attempt of Ecuadorian Francisco Bravo to explore and explain Teilhard's Christic view of reality. One can also profitably consult the bibliography which is included in *Pierre de Chardin: Christianity and Evolution*, with a forward by W. M. Wildiers (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969). Another useful bibliography may be found in Bernard Delfgaauw, *Evolution: The Theory of Teilhard de Chardin* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), which conveniently focuses Teilhard's ideas on this pivotal issue in his system.