

FAITH AND HISTORY

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The question of the nature of history has been raised in a recent article in the Bulletin which demands further discussion.¹ In this article the present writer was quoted because he refuses "to accept the resurrection as objective *Historie*." "The New Testament does not share the modern idea of history, and it does not represent the resurrection of Jesus as an "historical" event in the modern critical sense of this word. It was an event without historical cause . . . The resurrection is also without historical analogy . . . The basic problem for the modern theologian is this. Shall we insist upon a definition of history broad enough to include such supra-historical events as the resurrection; or shall we accept the modern view of history as a working method but insist that there is a dimension within history which transcends historical control? The latter is the method of Karl Barth; and . . . it appears to be the only adequate explanation which satisfies the data of redemptive history."² Montgomery feels that the position expressed in this quotation embodies a fallacious methodology which "inevitably weakens the central Christian truth of Incarnation."³ He maintains that this form of "metahistory" will accomplish nothing because it has no meaning to the non-Christian since it is beyond the possibility of investigation. He insists that the event of *Heilsgeschichte* must be regarded as *Historie* in the fullest sense of the word lest their objectivity be lost. We ought not to allow fear of criticism to lead to the "Barthian divorce between theology and history and to all its attendant evils."

The basic question at stake is that of the definition of terms: what is meant by *Historie*? Montgomery's concern is that the Resurrection of Christ be regarded as *Historie* lest its objectivity and facticity, and along with it the reality of the Incarnation, be lost.

At the outset, the present author would join hands with Montgomery in a concern to preserve the objectivity and facticity of the Resurrection and of the Incarnation as well. A recent essay in another journal⁴ had the purpose of arguing that the historical method requires a real objective event to account for the resurrection faith of the early church, even though that event is of such a nature that it transcends ordinary historical experience. The article apparently was sufficiently persuasive to demand an answer from a scholar outside the evangelical circle.⁵

The question is: Is there a dimension of objective factual historical reality which lies outside the domain of *Historie*? Apparently Montgomery thinks not. The present author would argue that there is such a sphere which can be designated *Geschichte*, for *Historie* by definition is secular, unbelieving history.

This distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* stems from Martin Kahler who in 1896 wrote a book entitled, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche biblische Christus*.⁶ The two German words, *Historie* and *Geschichte*, cannot be rendered by equivalent English words; but they embody important concepts of history. "Historical" and "historic" are often used as the English equivalents. Kahler wrote in a day when liberal theology had discovered a purely "historical" Jesus, i.e., one who could be reconstructed by the techniques of critical historiography, and who could therefore be explained altogether in human, historical categories. Such a Jesus was no divine being, no incarnate God, no supernatural savior, but a kindly ethical prophet teaching eternal truths about God, the human soul, and ethics. This liberal "Jesus of history" stood in almost complete contrast to the divine, redeeming Christ of the Epistles and the Gospel of John.

Kahler rejected the entire quest for the Historical (*historisch*) Jesus as a product of modern scientific research which could only lead down a side road

(Holzweg), in part because the presuppositions of the method would not permit historical criticism to recognize the real Christ. According to Kahler, the actual Biblical Christ who is pictured in the Gospels is identical with the Jesus who lived in Palestine in the first century. The Biblical Christ he styles the *geschichtliche* Christus, in contrast to the *historische* Jesus who is only an hypothesis of scientific historical criticism.⁷ *Historie* is only that dimension of the past which conforms to the presuppositions of and can be known by the techniques of modern secular historiography. Such a historico-critical method is by definition unbelieving. It boasts that it has freed itself from the shackles of Christian dogma. It is purely "objective," i.e., it refuses to recognize the validity of Christian faith.

There is, however, according to Kahler another dimension of historical reality. A man of the past can be known not only by the facts which can be reconstructed by critical historiography, but also by his influence upon his contemporaries and successors. The Gospels give us a picture of Jesus in terms of the impact Jesus made upon his followers. And because the historical (*geschichtliche*) Jesus is also the risen exalted Lord, he continues to meet and to make his impact felt today. He speaks to us out of the Gospels. He can be actually known as one reads the Scriptures and responds by faith. This sets Jesus apart from all other figures of the past. For Kahler, the *geschichtliche* Biblical Christ portrayed in the Gospels, who can be known by faith, is the only Jesus who had any existence. The *historische* Jesus of scientific criticism is only an hypothesis.

This distinction of *Historie* and *Geschichte* involves a profound philosophical question which the historian *qua* historian cannot settle: the relationship between knowledge and faith. A common distinction is that knowledge has to do with objective verifiable facts, while faith has to do with the subjective area of spiritual reality and with God. Obviously, Kahler cannot accept this distinction, for Kahler believes God has acted in the historical Jesus. Both knowledge and faith, when directed toward the historical Jesus, are concerned with objective realities; but faith provides a means of access to an area of objective reality which scientific historical criticism cannot apprehend. Faith does not create its own object; faith is reposed in the objective Biblical Christ who meets us in the Gospels.

This distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* has been all-important in recent Continental theology and has been used in two altogether different ways. On the one hand, Karl Barth has used the two terms in the interests of preserving the factuality of the Gospel events while freeing them from the rigid limitations of critical historical research. Referring to the search of historical criticism for a "historical" Jesus, Barth says,

The so-called historico-critical method of handling Holy Scripture ceases to be theologically possible or worth considering, the moment it conceives it as its task to work out from the testimonies of Holy Scripture (which does ascribe to revelation throughout the character of miracle), and to present as the real intention, a reality which lacks this character, which has to be regarded as reality otherwise than on the basis of God's free, special and direct act. This must be said particularly of the gigantic attempt (still as gigantic as ever) of the "Life of Jesus research," i.e., the attempt, made in every style from mildest conservatism to the most imaginative or else most unimaginative, "hypercriticism," to uncover out of the New Testament, by means of a series of combinations, restorations and also and particularly deletions, the figure of the mere man Jesus, the so-called "historical Jesus," as he might have lived in the years 1-30.⁸

On the basis of such statements, Barth has been frequently accused of having no interest in the Jesus of history. This is true, if by the "Jesus of history" is meant one whose personality and conduct can be reconstructed by scientific historiography, i.e., as Barth himself says, one who is a "mere man" as he "might have lived." For Barth as for Kahler, the only Jesus who existed is the Christ portrayed in the Scriptures. It is impossible by the use of the scientific methodology and presuppositions of *Historie* to go behind the *geschichtliche* portrait of the Gospels and discover a purely human Jesus who is capable of being explained in terms of historical causality and human analogy.

Barth's use of the distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie* is even more sharply indicated in his debate with Bultmann over the nature of the resurrection of Christ. Barth agrees with Bultmann that the resurrection cannot be *Historie*, i.e., an event of such a character that it can be structured in terms of modern historical criticism. However, Barth charges Bultmann with making a grievous mistake in concluding that if the resurrection of Jesus is not *Historie*, it therefore could not have occurred.

It belongs to the nature of the biblical material that although it forms a consecutive historical (*Geschichtsbericht*) narrative it is full of this kind of history (*Geschichte*) and contains comparatively little "history" (*Historie*) [the translator has added the words, "in Bultmann's sense"] . . . It is sheer superstition to suppose that only things which are open to "historical" (*historische*) verification can have happened in time. There may have been events which far more certainly have actually happened in time than the kind of things the scientific historian can prove. There are good grounds for supposing that the history (*Geschichte*) of the resurrection of Jesus is a preeminent instance of such an event.⁹

We must still accept the resurrection of Jesus, and His subsequent appearances to His disciples, as genuine history (*Geschichte*) happening in its own particular time.¹⁰

We should be guilty of a fundamental misunderstanding of the whole New Testament message if, because the history of the resurrection (*Auferstehungsgeschichte*) is not history (*Historie*) in this sense, we tried to interpret it as though it had never happened at all, or had not happened *in time and space in the same way as the death of Jesus Christ*, or finally had happened only in faith or in the form of the formation and development of faith.¹¹

In other words, the resurrection of Jesus is a real event which occurred in time and space and is just as real and objective as Jesus' death. However, its character is that of a direct act of God, and historical science cannot talk about acts of God. Therefore the resurrection is a real past event, but must be styled *Geschichte* instead of *Historie*.

An altogether different use of *Geschichte* has been made by Bultmann. He disagrees radically with Barth that *Geschichte* can designate past events in time. Referring to the passage quoted above, Bultmann asks, "What kind of events are those about which it can be said that they 'have really taken place as history in time far more certainly than everything which the "historian" can establish as such?' It is perfectly clear that Barth is interpreting the pronouncements of Scripture by means of an imported body of abstract categories."¹² Bultmann goes on to speak caustically of any possible events in time and history which can be known by faith but which cannot be established by the means and method of historical science. Such a faith for Bultmann is blind acceptance involving a sacrifice of the intelligence. Thus Bultmann rejects out of hand the notion of *Geschichte* to

designate events in past history and time which transcend scientific research. One can know nothing about events which have happened in time and history except through scientific historical (*historische*) reconstruction.

Yet Bultmann talks about *Geschichte*; but by it, he means something very different from Barth. He uses the term to designate the existential confrontation with Jesus Christ through the *kerygma*. The interpretation of the resurrection of Christ as an actual past *geschichtliche* event is nonsense. Historically, all that the scholar can say about the resurrection is that Jesus's disciples had certain visions which made them believe he was alive. "An historical (*historische*) event which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable."¹³ With this statement, Barth would agree. However, Barth would say that an actual resurrection from the dead as a *geschichtliche* event in time and history is conceivable, and did in fact occur. Bultmann denies this. The only place Jesus can be thought of as risen is in the proclamation of the Gospel. In this *kerygma*, Jesus is actually present, and his word confronts the hearer.¹⁴ The *geschichtliche* meaning of the resurrection is existential. In the *kerygma*—the proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ — I am confronted by Christ and raised into newness of life. "Christ meets us in the preaching as one crucified and risen. He meets us in the word of preaching and nowhere else. The faith of Easter is just this—faith in the word of preaching."¹⁵ In the *kerygma*, the event of redemption occurs. This redemptive event is nothing miraculous or supernatural, "but an historical (*geschichtliche*) event, wrought out in time and space." i.e., in my historical existence.¹⁶ *Historisch*, Jesus was only a Jewish apocalypticist who mistakenly proclaimed the imminent end of the world. He is one about whom Bultmann, as an historian, knows almost nothing, for the portrait of Jesus in the Gospels is that of a self-conscious divine being. Bultmann seeks the "historical Jesus" behind the Gospels and finds a Jewish apocalyptic teacher who does not belong to the Christian message of the New Testament. However, *geschichtlich*, Jesus Christ is the risen Lord who meets us in the *kerygma* and brings us into authentic existence. But the risen Lord has no objective existence apart from the *kerygma*.

Thus Barth and Bultmann use *Geschichte* in very different ways. For Barth, the *Geschichte* of the Resurrection of Christ possesses factual objectivity. It was an event in past time and in space, like the death of Jesus. For Bultmann, *geschichtliche* events do not belong to past time and space but only to present historic existence.

However, both Barth and Bultmann agree with Kahler and with all modern criticism on the meaning of *Historie*. *Historische* events are events whose nature is such that they can be proven and verified by the modern secular historical method. This method assumes historical causality and analogy. The methodological question under discussion in the present essay is this: do we have the right to lift a technical term (*Historie*) out of its own setting and give it a meaning which is alien to it in the universe of discourse in which it belongs? The problem does not exist in the same acute form with the English word "history," for "history" can designate either past events, or the critical record of those events. Thus a scholar who is hardly a candidate for membership in ETS, can write, "The Resurrection has all the marks of historicity."¹⁷ Such a statement completely ignores the distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*, a question which Buttrick does not discuss. By this statement, Buttrick means that "The Bible is history, though it should be specially noted, *it is history after its own kind*."¹⁸ This means *Geschichte* and not *Historie*. The character of *Historie* is that it is continuous with and analogous to all human history. The admission that the Resurrection of Christ is

Geschichte and not *Historie* is simply to acknowledge the suprahistorical,¹⁹ i.e., supernatural character of the Resurrection. For *Historie*, by definition, there can be no supernatural. "The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent 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."²⁰ Exactly! The Resurrection of Christ occurred in history, in time, in space; but its cause is no antecedent historical event, but a *direct unmediated act of God*. As such, it cannot be called *Historie*. Only the man of faith can accept and believe the fact that God has raised Jesus from the dead. Unbelief admits the historical (*historische*) fact of the resurrection faith but attributes it to visions, to a stolen body, or other equally unlikely "historical" causes. Only the man of faith can accept the witness of the Scriptures, that God factually and objectively raised the dead body of Jesus into resurrection life.

The denial that the Resurrection is *Historie*, therefore, is not made out of fear of the historical method, but out of a recognition that the Resurrection is of such a supernatural, suprahistorical,²¹ character that the historical method (*Historie*) cannot account for it. *When the Resurrection of Christ becomes Historie, i.e., an event which the historian can explain in terms of other historical events, the heart has been cut out of the Christian faith.*

Let us illustrate the point by another redemptive fact which Montgomery insists must be interpreted *historisch*. "The Pauline assertion that Christ 'was delivered for our offenses and was raised again for our justification' (Rom. 4:25) must mean, if it means anything, that apart from a truly historical, *historisch* (not merely *geschichtlich*) death and resurrection, we would still be in our sins, subject to God's wrath."²² Does the *atoning* death of Christ belong to *Historie* or *Geschichte*? Montgomery insists that it must be *Historie* or lose its reality.

The death of Christ was *Historie*. It is an event upon which all historians agree. Its causes can be found in the political situation of the times, the hatred of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the willingness of the Roman governor to sacrifice an admittedly innocent man to prevent wide-spread unrest. Every one near God loved me" (Rom. 5:8)?

But is his atoning death an *historische* event? Was it an observable phenomenon that as he died, he was bearing the sins of the world? Did the Roman soldiers, or even the little handful of disciples who stayed near the cross, throw themselves to the earth, overcome with amazement, crying out, "I never knew how much God loved me"? (Rom. 5:8).

Far from it. The death of Jesus was to them the death of their dreams, their hopes, even of their faith in Jesus. "We *had* hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk. 24:21). *Historisch*, the death of Jesus - the cross - was sheer tragedy. It was the denial of Jesus' claims. It was not redemption; it was the tragic execution of an innocent victim of power politics. This is all the modern critical historian *qua* historian can see in the cross.

It was only after the Resurrection when Jesus himself interpreted the meaning of his death that they began to see it for *what it really is*: The divine deed of atonement. The cross can be understood as an act of atonement only when it is accompanied by the divinely given, inspired, authoritative word of interpretation which is received by faith. *Historisch*, the cross to the Jews was and is a stumbling block, as it is folly to Gentiles (I Cor. 1:23). To unbelieving Jews and Gentiles, the

cross can never be demonstrated to be an act of divine love. It can never be proven historically to be the place of atonement. It is only to those who are called, to those who have received the Word of God, that a crucified Christ is both the power of God and the wisdom of God. If the deliverance of Christ for *our offenses* were an *historische* event, by definition it would be capable of being demonstrated as such to the "neutral," i.e., unbelieving observer. This however is not possible, for the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God (I Cor. 2:14). That the cross is a *geschichtliche* event means, as we use the term, that it is an event possessing full objectivity and facticity, but one whose real eventfulness can be perceived only by faith. On the cross, in history, a spiritual event was taking place. What Jesus accomplished on the cross is not merely an event of past history, although it is that. It is also an event whose spiritual meaning transcends all historical limitations, whose relevance and power are as effective today as yesterday. It is *Geschichte*, not *Historie*.

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FOOTNOTES

1. John Warwick Montgomery, "Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology of History," *Bulletin of The Evangelical Theological Society* 6 (1963), pp. 39-49.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 47, quoted from George Eldon Ladd "The Resurrection and History," *Dialog* 1 (1962) pp. 55-56.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
4. See George E. Ladd, "The Resurrection and History," *Religion in Life* 32 (1963), pp. 247-256.
5. See Donald T. Rowlingson, "Interpreting the Resurrection" *Christian Century*, (April 10, 1963), pp. 459-461.
6. Zweite Aufl.; *Munchen: Kaiser Verlag*, 1956. This work has been translated into English by Carl E. Braaten as part of a Harvard doctoral dissertation and accompanied by a study entitled "Christ, Faith and History" (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1959).
7. See James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 31, who admits that the "historical Jesus" by technical definition is not Jesus as he actually was, but "Jesus, in so far as he can be made an object of historical-critical research." "The 'historical Jesus' comes really to mean no more than 'the historian's Jesus'. The clear implication is that 'Jesus of Nazareth as he actually was' may be considerably more than or quite different from 'the historical Jesus.'"
8. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956), I, 2 p. 64.
9. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchlliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948) III, 2, p. 535; my translation (see *Church Dogmatics*, III, 2, p. 446.)
10. *Ibid.*, p. 537. My translation. (Eng., p. 447).
11. *Church Dogmatics* IV, 1, p. 336. Italics mine.
12. Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (J. C. G. Greig, tr.; London: SCM, 1955), p. 260.
13. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (H. W. Bartsch, ed.; London: SPCK, 1953), p. 39.
14. Bultmann, *Des Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1961), p. 27.
15. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 41.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
17. G. A. Buttrick, *Christ and History* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1963), p. 150.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 16. Italics in original.
19. I do not care for the word "metahistorical" which Montgomery uses to describe my position, for it suggests something alongside of, not within, history.
20. R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, Schubert M. Ogden, ed.; (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p. 291.f.
21. "Suprahistorical," like "metahistory," is subject to misunderstanding, for it may suggest to some a level of events which is "above" history, not in it. However, as "supernatural" describes events which occur within nature whose character transcends natural causation, so "suprahistorical" is meant to designate events which happen within history but whose cause is outside of history - God.
22. J. W. Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 43.