

# The Legacy of Rudolf Bultmann and the Ideal of a Fully Critical Theology

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## I

By any measure, the legacy of Rudolf Bultmann to those of us who have come after him is immense. Whatever criteria one uses to assess it—quantitative or qualitative, with reference to specific topics of inquiry, or to the fields of Christian theology and religious studies in general—his contribution remains unchallengeably among the most significant of the twentieth century. His special competence, of course, was as a New Testament scholar and more broadly a student of the religious and cultural traditions presupposed by early Christianity and contemporary with it; and it is entirely possible that he remains the preeminent student of these matters in our time. But it is not only or even primarily as a historian that he is significant for theology and religious studies today. In his own self-understanding, certainly, he was first and last a Christian theologian, who did all of his work, including his historical work, in service of the church and its witness. And as the years have passed, it is in this capacity that he is also widely regarded as one of the three or four Protestant theologians of the twentieth century whose impact on Christian witness and theology promises to be permanent. So, if our discussion in this seminar<sup>1</sup> is to do anything like justice to his legacy, we cannot fail to take account of his contribution as a Christian systematic theologian.

Furthermore, posthumous publication of some of his literary remains—notably, the several series of lectures on the introduction to theological study collected and edited under the title “theological encyclopedia”<sup>2</sup>—has confirmed the full scope and depth of his attention over the years to what I call “theology of theology,” by which I mean the critical systematic, and therefore normative, reflection by Christian theology on its own tasks and methods, on what it has to do and how it ought to be done. Actually, the stipulated responsibilities of the chair that Bultmann held in Marburg from 1921 to 1951 called for lectures in “introduction to theological study” as well as lectures and seminars in New

1. This paper was presented at the Fall 2012 Westar Seminar on Bultmann.

2. Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*.

Testament theology and exegesis.<sup>3</sup> But to read the lectures in theological encyclopedia he actually wrote and rewrote, along with other writings closely related to them, such as the 1941 essay I translated as “Theology as Science,”<sup>4</sup> is to realize how far they are from perfunctorily discharging a merely formal teaching obligation. It is, in fact, to encounter Bultmann as the Christian systematic theologian he understood himself to be, keenly mindful of the full obligations of that office and gifted with an extraordinary aptitude for meeting them. If our discussion here, then, is to deal with a fundamental part of his legacy as a Christian systematic theologian, we can hardly ignore or neglect the gift and the challenge his work in the “theology of theology” presents to us today. In any case, this is the first reason why I decided to write the paper I am contributing to our seminar.

A second reason, obviously, is my own long-standing and still continuing interest in so understanding and practicing Christian theology that it may more fully perform the critical service it exists to perform for the Christian community in bearing its witness. Beyond any question, my interest in this specific topic of theological inquiry was awakened early, antedating my graduate-professional education in theology when I took my first formal courses in “theological method,” as this topic was then characteristically (if somewhat one-sidedly) designated at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. But it is just as certain that, as in the case of most of my other theological interests, it was my reading of Rudolf Bultmann, which started shortly after I had begun my theological studies, that fixed this interest in the essential form it has had ever since. Whatever the other differences with his theological position that gradually appeared the more I read him, the one point at which I always felt our theological intentions to be completely convergent was our shared interest in the normative, which is to say systematic, understanding of doing Christian theology—and our common concern to work out critically and constructively just such an understanding in our respective historical situations. Moreover, the longer I worked at this task, the more sensible I became that it was really Bultmann’s contribution to it that above all had become formative for my own attempts at it—again, notwithstanding my very real difficulties with other points in his theological position.

There is also a third, and in its way more important, reason why I decided to write this paper. Despite certain challenges issued to it over the last quarter of a century by Christian theologians working out of different traditions and in different cultural and ecclesial contexts, what I call “the traditional understanding and practice of theology” continues to dominate all across the theological spectrum. What I refer to by this phrase will emerge more clearly as my ar-

3. Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 128, 207.

4. Bultmann, *New Testament*, 45–67.

gument develops, so I need to say here only that it is an understanding and practice of Christian theology, specifically Christian systematic theology, whose ideal is very different from “the ideal of a fully critical theology” spoken of in my title. Please note, however, that when I say “understanding and practice,” I do not mean two things: an understanding, and then a practice that somehow fails to agree with it. That any of our practices usually falls short of our ideal for it is simply part of our human condition, along with our remaining largely ignorant and being often wrong. No, what I mean is, rather, one thing with two aspects: a practice of theology *entirely in keeping with the ideal* held up by a certain understanding of it. The issue that primarily concerns me, in other words, is not between an ideal on the one hand and a practice that somehow falls short of it on the other, but between two contrary ideals, one of which is viewed as profoundly inadequate when judged by the other. I could also say that the issue is between two contrary normative or systematic understandings of what theology is supposed to do, or, to use my term, between two contrary “theologies of theology.”

In any case, one of the most serious defects of the traditional understanding and practice, when it is judged by the contrary understanding of theology as ideally fully critical, is that it typically leaves some of the most basic problems now facing Christian theology entirely unsolved, if even so much as seriously addressed. It is possible, naturally, that this is the best that Christian theology can do without ceasing to be what it is called to be. But I am deeply persuaded that before Christian theologians today acquiesce in doing business as usual, an alternative understanding and practice of theology, derived to a considerable extent in my own case from attempts to critically appropriate Bultmann’s legacy, deserves to be given a hearing and rejected only for sound reasons. This then is *the* reason, if you will, why the rest of my paper will be concerned with unpacking what I mean by “the ideal of a fully critical theology,” over against the contrary ideal put forth by the traditional and still dominant understanding and practice of Christian theology.<sup>5</sup>

In thus offering what I shall be arguing for as one way of entering into Bultmann’s legacy as a Christian systematic theologian, I very much have in mind his own understanding of what it is to do this. “True fidelity to tradition,” he insists, “is not going back but going on”—or in words elsewhere that could well stand as an epigraph for my paper: “True fidelity is never archaizing ‘repetition’ but always and only critical appropriation, which makes the legitimate motives of the tradition one’s own and brings them to expression in a new form.”<sup>6</sup> This means among other things that I have no interest in claiming

5. I put it this way because I always remember something my esteemed colleague, Brian Gerrish, once said while examining a student, “Okay, you’ve given me three reasons, but what I want to know is *the* reason!”

6. Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, 2, 283; Bultmann, “Geleitwort,” xvi.

that Bultmann would agree with everything I understand to belong to the ideal by which Christian systematic theology should be guided and judged. I claim only that he would certainly recognize the genuine continuity between one of his own profoundest questions and concerns and mine today—and would welcome, just as he always welcomed in all of my discussions with him, the (to him) new forms in which certain of his own theological motives were in process of being critically appropriated.

## II

I turn now to explaining, and in that way arguing for, what I mean by “the ideal of a fully critical theology.” To simplify my explanation, I ask that, whenever I henceforth use either the term “theology” and its cognates or the closely related term “witness” and its cognates, you allow me to mean, absent any indication to the contrary, specifically *Christian* theology or witness respectively. I also ask that whenever I use the term “theology,” you take me to mean “*systematic* theology,” unless I give you reason to think otherwise, and that whether I speak of “critical reflection” or “critical appropriation,” you understand me to mean essentially the same process.

There is widespread agreement that although the term “theology” may be used broadly enough to mean any thought and/or speech about God, it is also properly used in a stricter sense in which it means not *all* thought and/or speech about God, but only *some* of it—namely, whatever is required in order to reflect more or less critically on all the rest of it. My term for this rest is not “theology,” but “witness.” And so my working definition of “theology” (understood as “*doing* theology”) is more or less critically reflecting on “witness” (understood as “*bearing* witness”). As such, theology has two essential responsibilities: more or less critically interpreting the *meaning* of witness, and more or less critically validating the claims to *validity* that witness necessarily makes or implies just as and because it is witness.

On my analysis, there are mainly two or three such validity claims, depending on how closely one analyzes them. There is first the claim that the witness in question is *adequate to its content*, to the meaning it intends to express; and there is second the claim that it is *fitting to its situation*, to the particular life-world of the hearers and/or readers to whom it is borne. Considered more closely, the first claim to adequacy proves to consist in two further claims: the claim that the witness in question is *appropriate to Jesus Christ* as Christians specifically experience and understand him, and the claim that it is *credible to human existence* as human beings generically experience and understand it. So as I think of it, the one field of theological reflection quite naturally divides itself into three theological disciplines: *historical* theology, understood as more or less critical reflection on the meaning of witness; *systematic* theology, understood as more or less critical validation of the one claim of witness to be adequate to its content,

and therefore both appropriate to Jesus Christ and credible to human existence; and *practical* theology, understood as more or less critical validation of the other claim of witness to be fitting to its situation.

You will have inferred by now, I am sure, that the qualifying phrase “more or less critical” is important to my argument. This is because theological reflection in particular, like human reflection in general, may always be done not just on one level of understanding, but on two: the two levels already tacitly acknowledged when I distinguished at the outset between broad and strict senses of the term “theology.” I usually refer to these two levels as the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis and the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory—the first being the level on which we make or imply claims to validity by our several speech-acts, the different things that we think, say, and do, and the second, the level on which we more critically interpret the meaning of these things and more critically validate their claims to be valid in the different ways in which they claim to be so. Although understanding and, therefore, reflection occur on both levels, the criteria employed in the judgments in which reflection ordinarily issues are different in being less critical on the primary level, more critical on the secondary. But crucial as it is, this difference in criteria is not the only respect in which an instance of theological reflection may more or less closely approximate what I mean by “the ideal of a fully critical theology.” There are in fact two other respects in which theologies may differ in the extent to which they realize this ideal. I want to say a few words about them before returning to the crucial difference of criteria.

One respect in which a theology, so-called, may differ from another is whether it is not just more or less critical interpretation of the meaning of witness, but also more or less critical validation of the claims to validity that witness makes or implies. However much critical reflection a theology may involve, it minimally involves more or less critically interpreting what witness means—whence the familiar characterization of theology as a special case of hermeneutical reflection. But it is simply a fact that many “theologies” in the traditional understanding of the term are little, if anything, more than “hermeneutical” in that they are mainly, if not entirely, interpretive. If they also involve more or less critically validating the claims of witness at all, they are limited to validating at most *some* of them: its claim to be appropriate to Jesus Christ, say, or perhaps merely its claim to be fitting to its situation.

And this, of course, is the other respect in which one theology may differ from another in the extent to which it realizes the ideal of a fully critical theology. Unless it is not just more or less critical validation of the claims of witness as well as more or less critical interpretation of witness’s meaning, but also more or less critical validation of *all* the claims to validity that witness makes or implies—including, by no means least, its claim to be credible to human existence and in that sense true—it falls short of the ideal of being fully critical. But again it is simply a fact that, on the traditional understanding and practice of

theology, something may be put forward and accepted as “theology” in the full and proper sense, even though—or possibly just because!—it omits to validate more or less critically the claim of witness to be worthy of belief by any human being simply as such.

But even if theologies may also differ in both of these respects relative to the ideal of a fully critical theology, the crucial respect in which they may differ, as I have said, is in respect of their criteria. One theology is crucially different from another in approximating the ideal because the criteria of judgment essential to its critical reflection on witness are more or less critical. How so?

In the case of theology, just as more generally, critical reflection as, first, critical interpretation of meaning and then, second, critical validation of claims to validity, may always be done more or less critically, depending on the level on which it is done and therefore on the criteria employed in doing it. To reflect critically on witness on either level is somehow to employ criteria in order to make judgments. But if it is done on the first relatively less critical level, the only criteria employed are the consuetudinary criteria that have come to be generally accepted over time in the relevant context of self-understanding and life-praxis. In the theological context, these include such criteria of validation as the canon of scripture and in one way or another what has traditionally been distinguished from “scripture” as “tradition.” If, however, theological reflection on witness is done on the second relatively more critical level, the sole criteria employed finally, both in interpreting the meaning of witness and in validating its claims to validity, are the ultimate—or if you prefer, primal—criteria of human experience and reason as they require to be differentiated to fit the relevant context and the particular case. Here we must remember that experience as well as reason based on experience is not just one thing, but many things, and that the appeal solely to it that is of the essence of any relatively more critical way of reflecting on witness, as on any other life-praxis, requires to be made in suitably different ways, corresponding to the different claims that witness itself makes or implies to be valid.

Thus, in critically validating the claim of witness to be appropriate to Jesus Christ, a relatively more critical theology appeals finally not merely to “scripture” or to “scripture and tradition,” on some understanding or other, but solely to specifically Christian experience of Jesus as of decisive significance for human existence. Uniquely authoritative in retrieving and critically appropriating this Christian experience is what I distinguish as “formally normative Christian witness,” by which I mean the first and foundational, the original and originating, witness of the apostles—those whom Kierkegaard designated aptly as “disciples at first hand.” But even their witness derives such unique authority as it has solely from its explicit primal source, which in its ontic aspect is the man Jesus of Nazareth as authorizing a certain self-understanding as alone authentic and, in its noetic aspect, their own first-hand experience of him as authorizing it. In this sense, it is specifically Christian experience alone by which the appro-

priateness of any witness is to be finally validated if the theology in question is to be more rather than less critical relative to the ideal of a fully critical theology.

Things are different, however, if a relatively more critical theology is to validate the other claim of witness to be credible to human existence. Here the only logically relevant appeal is not to some specific experience, Christian or otherwise, but only to our common experience simply as human beings and to reasoning based thereon. Of course, just what this common human experience is can be determined only through critically appropriating all the different cultures and religions. So here, too, there is a unique authority for retrieving and critically appropriating this experience—namely, what Bultmann speaks of as “the ‘right’ philosophy,” meaning thereby any philosophy insofar as it rightly explicates the understanding of existence given with existence itself.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, one may speak of what Alfred North Whitehead calls, in a strikingly similar formulation, “a correctly verbalized philosophy,” meaning by that any philosophy that “mobilizes [the] basic experience which all premises presuppose.”<sup>8</sup> And yet, because the unique authority of any such philosophy is derived entirely from what each and every one of us actually experiences simply as a human being, we may say that it is to our common human experience alone that any theology has to appeal finally, if its validation of a witness as credible is to be more, rather than less, critical. This means among other things that it will never do for any theology that would be fully critical to appeal simply to this, that, or the other particular philosophy in determining the credibility of witness, any more than it may ever appeal simply to scripture, or to scripture and tradition, to determine the appropriateness of witness. That Whitehead or Heidegger says it can no more make it credible than Matthew’s or Paul’s saying it can make it appropriate.

One theology is crucially more critical than another, then, insofar as it involves critically validating literally more of witness, which ideally of course is *all* of it, by the ultimate or primal criteria of relevant experience and reason. Whereas a relatively less critical theology, judging by merely customary criteria, has to exempt these criteria themselves from critical validation, a relatively more critical theology, judging finally solely by the relevant ultimate or primal criteria, is free to validate even all such customary criteria critically. This means, of course, that the distinction between witness on the one hand and theology in the strict sense as critical reflection on witness on the other is a clear and sharp distinction only insofar as theology is relatively more critical. Any relatively less critical theology is insofar only inadequately distinguishable from witness and is therefore properly treated as precisely that by any relatively more critical theology.

7. Bultmann, *New Testament*, 107.

8. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 67.

But what about more, rather than less, critical interpretation? How can *interpretation* of witness, as much as validation of its claims to validity, be subject finally only to the ultimate or primal criteria of experience and reason? To answer these questions adequately would take us well beyond the limits of this paper into the whole basic problem of hermeneutics. It must suffice to say only that an interpretation of witness is relatively more critical, more justified by relevant experience and reason, to the extent that its only criteria for judging what witness means are wholly immanent in the *interpretandum* itself, in what witness itself says and means, as distinct from being in some way transcendent of it—as they are, for example, in all allegorical interpretation and in any other interpretation that in whatever way is likewise prejudiced in already implying its results.

I hope that with this much explanation, what I mean by “the ideal of a fully critical theology” is becoming reasonably clear. In any case, I will summarize my explanation so far by saying that a theology is relatively more critical and insofar realizes the ideal to the extent to which it satisfies three main conditions:

First, it must carry out both responsibilities essential to theology by not just interpreting the meaning of witness more critically but also more critically validating the claims to validity that witness itself makes or implies.

Second, it must more critically validate not just some of the claims of witness but all of them—its claim to be credible to human existence no less than its claim to be appropriate to Jesus Christ.

Third, and most important, it must employ finally in all of its judgments not just the customary criteria that have come to be employed in the theological context but solely the ultimate or primal criteria of relevant experience and reason: of specifically Christian experience and reason in determining the appropriateness of witness to Jesus Christ, and of generically human experience and reason in determining the credibility of witness to human existence.

It may be helpful to add to this summary that to do theology in accordance with the ideal I am explaining is neither simply to repeat the formulations of the past nor—as is sometimes assumed to be the only other way to maintain the continuity essential to theological reflection—simply to “develop,” as is said, certain previous formulations. It is, instead, as Karl Barth once put it,<sup>9</sup> to begin in every new theological situation *ab ovo*—from the egg, by which I can understand only relevant experience and reason, in order then to reformulate them in formulations that in that particular historical situation are adequate to their content because they are at once appropriate to Jesus Christ and credible to human existence. Or, to exchange Barth’s metaphor for Frederick Denison Maurice’s, to be a theologian in accordance with the ideal for which I am arguing is to be nothing but a “digger”—one whose “sole vocation,” as he says, “is metaphysical and theological grubbing,” digging down beneath all putative

9. Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert*, 2.

authorities to the primal sources of all authority in specifically Christian experience of Jesus on the one hand and in common human experience of our existence on the other.<sup>10</sup> This is to say, then, that the continuity proper to theology, given the ideal I am explaining, lies neither in its formulations nor in further developing them, but in meeting its *responsibilities*—again and again anew in each new situation by returning once more to its origins in relevant experience, both specifically Christian and generically human, and then reformulating such experience as adequately, and therefore as appropriately and credibly, as its new situation requires and makes possible.

### III

In this last part of my paper, I want to explain the ideal of a fully critical theology a bit further by returning to something I said earlier, but did not elaborate or defend, about the traditional understanding and practice of theology against which I am arguing. On that understanding, I remarked, a theology typically fails to solve or even seriously address some of the most basic problems now facing it. One of these problems, I hold, is set by the criteriological question: what is to serve, both in principle and in fact, as in my term “formally normative Christian witness,” or if you prefer “the Christian canon”? The traditional answers to this question in their classical forms are well-known by means of the conflicting Reformation-Counter Reformation watchwords “scripture alone” or “scripture and tradition,” understood in one or the other of the different senses of “tradition.” And underlying all of these classical answers in one way or another is what I call “the apostolic principle,” according to which the sole primary authority in the Christian church is “the apostles,” the first and foundational witnesses, whom Protestants have traditionally held to be represented by the apostolic canon of scripture alone, or whom Orthodox and Roman Catholics have taken to be represented in different combinations by apostolic creed and apostolic ministry as well. In modern Christian history, however, certain revisionary answers to the question have emerged that typically reject all the classical answers because they abandon the apostolic principle in favor of another. Their appeal is to the very different principle of “the historical Jesus,” understood as Jesus himself prior to any witness to him by others, whether the apostles or others who came after them.

It is arguable, however, and I myself have actually argued since the mid-1970s, that all of these traditional answers, whether classical or revisionary, have long since been rendered untenable simply by the ongoing process of historical-critical study of Christian tradition, both the early traditions represented by the writings of the New Testament and the later traditions represented by

10. Maurice, ed., *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice*, 295; cited in Vidler, *The Theology of F. D. Maurice*, 7.

post-New Testament writings. In the course of this study, it has been demonstrated beyond serious question that none of the New Testament writings is “apostolic” in the strict, formal sense presupposed by the process of its canonization. Why not? Well, because, as source-critical, form-critical, and tradition-critical study have in turn confirmed, every New Testament author makes use of sources of witness, oral and/or written, earlier than her or his own writing. The immediate inference then is obvious: no New Testament writing as such can be “apostolic” in the strict formal sense of being first and foundational, original and originating witness to Jesus as of decisive significance for human existence. In other words, the New Testament writings as we actually have them have been exposed, one and all, as themselves already precisely “tradition,” as distinct from “scripture,” in the senses in which these terms have been traditionally understood.

But if historical-critical study of the New Testament has thereby undermined all of the traditional classical answers to the question of formally normative witness, it has also subverted all of the traditional revisionary answers by demonstrating that there are simply no primary sources for determining the historical Jesus and his significance. To be sure, one may distinguish *theoretically* between what Jesus himself thought, said, and did prior to any witness to him by others and what those others then thought, said, and did in witnessing to him. But there is no way of making this distinction also *operationally*, because all the available sources are at best secondary, any available evidence being therefore the same for both Jesus himself and the apostles’ witness to him, and into the bargain, they are all sources that are instances of witness, not historical reportage.

I cannot elaborate on the dilemma now faced with respect to this one basic theological problem by all forms of the traditional understanding and practice of theology that also profess to accept the findings of historical-critical study of the New Testament. But I trust it is clear enough why, if they continue their profession and expect it to be taken at all seriously, either they must admit to simply having no reasoned answer to the criteriological question of formally normative witness or else they can continue to employ what they take to be the criterion only in some different sense from that in which it has traditionally been understood and employed—whether by loosening up the strict meaning of “apostolic,” as classicists tend to do, or by taking “the historical Jesus” to be simply the Jesus attested by the only sources we have, in the move that revisionists are inclined to make.

If this is clear, however, it should be just as clear why my argument for the ideal of a fully critical theology should be considered very carefully indeed before simply assuming that the traditional understanding and practice of theology, whether in its classical forms or in some revisionary one, is the only way in which theology is to be done. The plain truth of the matter is that there is another way of doing it, and it is the way for which I have been arguing by explaining the ideal of a fully critical theology over against all forms of traditional

understanding and practice and by insisting on its significance for theology now and in the future.

Allow me to say again, however: I in no way want to give the impression, much less ever to claim, that Rudolf Bultmann would have no criticisms to make of the ideal of a fully critical theology as I have explained it. Anyone familiar either with what I have had to say elsewhere about his theology or with what he had to say about mine, will know that we had our differences and that we both judged at least some of them to be real and important. Fully recognizing this, however, I have every confidence, as I said before, that Bultmann would greet my argument as one attempt, whatever its limitations, to appropriate critically a fundamental part of his own legacy as a Christian systematic theologian.

We all have our reasons for wanting to participate in this seminar—among them, presumably, to join in celebrating the appearance in English translation of Konrad Hammann's fine biography<sup>11</sup> and in expressing our gratitude and congratulations to those who have made it possible: to Philip Devenish as its translator and to Polebridge Press as its publisher. Anyhow, I have my own reason for very much wanting to be here: if there is anything that to my mind would be likely to brighten the prospects of more theologians eventually accepting the ideal of a fully critical theology for which I have argued, it is that more and more of them would become ever better acquainted with the life and work of the extraordinary human being that this book illumines so well. His ideal of a fully critical theology is not exactly mine, but it can certainly be for others the gift and the challenge that it has ever been for me.

11. The book's English title is *Rudolf Bultmann: A Biography*.

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