

# Reviews

**RUDOLF BULTMANN'S THEOLOGY: A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION** by Robert Campbell Roberts, *SPCK*, London 1977, pp. 333 paper £4.95

The more Robert Roberts has immersed himself in the theology of Rudolf Bultmann, the more he seems to have been exasperated by its lack of cogency. He is, therefore, heavily critical of Bultmann and that is certainly a move in the right direction after his easy seduction of so many theological students in the nineteen sixties. Roberts has not touched on the exegetical works of Bultmann—and his commentary on John's Gospel may prove to be the most monumental commentary of the twentieth century—nor on his historiography of religions, nor on his sermons. He has expounded and analysed Bultmann's, for lack of a better expression—systematic theology. In fact Bultmann's systematic theology has not been set out very systematically, but a cohesive and theologically self-contained system is there to be found, as Roberts shows, which was nascent at the beginning of his career in the nineteen twenties, even before he met Heidegger in Marburg, and which changed hardly at all in later years.

Bultmann's theology can be viewed in a number of perspectives, no one of which is all-encompassing, and Roberts structures his interpretation around Bultmann's distinction between existence and the world. The "world" represents everything inauthentic in human life and is characterised as 'the controllable' (which includes evidence which is offered in support of faith), 'physical nature', 'general truths' (which includes the propositions of Church dogmatics [Barth], ethics, and religious ideals (Ritschl and Harnack), 'the past' (which includes the Jesus of history), and 'personality' (nineteenth century biographers of Jesus). Authentic human "existence", on the other hand, excludes all of this and is best described in the New Testament, particularly by Paul and John. Can Bultmann's existence/world dichotomy, then, be reconciled with the New Testament? Rob-

erts argues that it cannot. Evidence is offered there which protects faith from being a blind and arbitrary decision (e.g. 1 Cor. 15). General truths are clearly present in Paul and John in the form of ethical recommendations and doctrinal statements, and both constantly focus their theology on past events in the life of Jesus.

Roberts further argues that Bultmann's christology is ambiguous and not well based. God's saving event, his revelatory act, is identified with the preaching of the Church's kerygma in the ever-present moment, yet the kerygma is both related to Jesus and made independent of him. On the one hand there is an appeal to history which is elsewhere called inauthentic, and on the other hand the kerygma is cut loose from history and lacks a stabilising point. Jesus Christ is reduced to a cypher that lacks a clear identity. Bultmann's account of faith contains similar difficulties when it is described as an act of decision which does not seem to realise anything. Roberts goes on to look at Bultmann on language and myth, God and ethics. There is the necessary exposition of his theology though hardly in a form which would attract a student to Bultmann's thought (will SCM republish Walter Schmithals *Introduction* and Bultmann's own *Essays Philosophical and Theological*?). In fairness to Bultmann it must be said that the strength, forthrightness and attractive simplicity of his ideas are not conveyed in the detailed argumentation of this book, and for this there can be no substitute for the original texts. Yet it is my opinion that Bultmann deserves all the criticism he gets from Robert Roberts, and more, and the present author is surely correct in criticising Bultmann for having reduced the complexities of Christian theology to one or two simple ideas which lack cogency when subjected to criticism.

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