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A Critique: "Two Levels of History"

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# A Critique "Two Levels of History"

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It is scarcely possible to read a theological treatise today without at some point meeting the current distinction between two levels of history, between *Historie* and *Geschichte* (following the Bultmannians), or between "outer" and "inner" history (H. Richard Niebuhr), or between the "objective-historical" and the "existential-historical" (John Macquarrie).<sup>1</sup> This distinction has primarily been occasioned by the rise of the historical-critical method in the 19th century, by the failure of the so-called "quest for the historical Jesus," and by the church's apologetic needs in the scientific ("positivistic") era.<sup>2</sup> The primary aim of this paper is critically to examine this distinction, to point out certain difficulties that beset it, and to suggest a number of limitations that must be placed on the distinction if it is to retain its significance. In the process of criticism the paper will seek to reflect some of the concerns manifested in the contemporary philosophical analysis of religious discourse and, for that matter,

in the overarching critique of the whole theological enterprise per se.

## THE DISTINCTION

We may take as representative of the distinction between two levels of history the programmatic monograph of James M. Robinson, *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus*.<sup>3</sup> Robinson herein traces the failure of the "old" quest to its one-dimensional view of history, namely, its emphasis on the "objective factual level" as the *truly* historical. The 19th-century approach to the person and work of Jesus reflected the Rankean goal of presenting history "as it really happened." Thus in its reaction to the Christological dogmas of Orthodoxy, the old quest sought to apprehend through this "objective" methodology the Jesus of history as He really was, divested of all dogmatic (and mythological) garb. Viewed from the contemporary perspective, the old quest failed not only because it misjudged the nature of its sources (since the Synoptic Gospels are themselves "dogmatically" colored throughout) but especially because of this defective understanding of history. In Robinson's words:

We have come to recognize that the objective factual level upon which the nineteenth century operated is only one dimension of history, and that a whole new dimension in the facts, a deeper and more central plane of meaning, had been largely bypassed.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Friedrich Gogarten, *Demythologizing and History* (London, 1955); H. R. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York, 1941); and John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (New York, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (London, 1947), employs the so-called "faith principle" in historical interpretation as the key to Christianity's self-defense before the bar of science.

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<sup>3</sup> *Studies in Biblical Theology*, No. 25 (London, 1959).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Robinson goes on to summarize this contrast between the two levels of history, and between two divergent historical methodologies, as follows:

. . . The positivistic understanding of history as consisting of brute facts gave way to an understanding of history centering in the profound intentions, stances, and concepts of existence held by persons in the past, as the well-springs of their outward actions. Historical methodology shifted accordingly from a primary concern for recording the past "wie es eigentlich gewesen," i. e., cataloguing with objective detachment facts in sequence and with proper causal relationships. Instead, the historian's task was seen to consist in understanding those deep-lying intentions of the past, by involving one's selfhood in an encounter in which one's own intentions and views of existence are put in question, and perhaps altered or even radically reversed.<sup>5</sup>

What concerns the present-day theologian *qua* historian, therefore, is not the "brute facts" of the history of Jesus, but the "kerygma," that is, the *interpretation* of those facts, the witness to the past events of His life—especially His death and

resurrection—understood as "God's act calling me to accept my death and receive resurrected life," with the result that "believing the witness about God's past action in Christ coincides with the occurrence of this divine action in my present life."<sup>6</sup> It is precisely in this focus on the kerygma that the theologian evidences the similar concern of the modern historian, namely, with the underlying meaning of history, its "existential" facets (*Geschichte*) rather than the "brute facts" objectively construed (*Historie*). Even so, as Daniel Day Williams has noted, "there can be no doubt that theologians have found in this distinction between objective factual knowledge and personal grasp of meaning a potent means of saving theology from the disintegrating effect of a narrow and positivistic historicism. . . . Historical events do not bestow their ultimate significance upon us apart from our own personal involvement."<sup>7</sup>

#### SOME CRITICISMS

Undoubtedly the current stress on personal involvement in the events of "redemptive history," as opposed to a spirit of "objective detachment," is absolutely essential to militate against any mere *fides historica*. In this sense, at least, the distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* is a modern extension of fundamental emphases found in the reformers.<sup>8</sup> At the

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 39. It should be carefully noted that this so-called "new" historical methodology is in fact that "idealistic" type (via Kant and Hegel) associated primarily with such historians as Wilhelm Dilthey, Benedetto Croce, and R. G. Collingwood (see pp. 30—31, n. 1, and p. 67, n. 1). In *The Philosophy of History in Our Time: An Anthology* (New York, 1959), editor Hans Meyerhoff observes that Collingwood, like Croce, "staked his whole position on the controversial idealistic thesis that written history was nothing but the present re-enactment, in the mind of the historian, of past thought" (p. 65). The case for an "objective" historiography is cogently argued in the essays by Arthur Lovejoy, Morton White, and Ernst Nagel (Meyerhoff, pp. 172—215). In any event, "the positivistic understanding of history" is by no means so passé as Robinson asserts.

<sup>6</sup> Robinson, pp. 42—43.

<sup>7</sup> *What Present-Day Theologians Are Thinking* (New York, 1959, rev. ed.), pp. 125, 127.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Luther's remarks in *The Freedom of a Christian* in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia, 1957), p. 357: "I believe that it has now become clear that it is not enough or in any sense Christian to preach the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts, as if the knowledge of these

same time, the distinction is often made far too facilely, so that its problematic nature is obscured or even sidestepped altogether. In what follows, we offer several serious objections to this distinction as it is presently employed, with particular reference to Robinson and his master Bultmann.

(1) The inescapable presupposition of this distinction is that, *in any case*, one has to do with certain historical "events," certain "brute facts." To be sure, with regard to the kerygma concerning Jesus Christ, they are *interpreted* events and facts, shaped by the cultic needs of the primitive church. Nonetheless, the claim is being made that certain happenings have transpired. Robinson, for example, wishes to stress the "whole new dimension in the facts," but he therewith concedes that they remain *facts* all the same. If the events of Jesus' life, however, are truly facts, then they should be open to some manner of verification or confirmation, in this instance, historical ("objective") confirmation. One cannot protest against this emphasis on personal involvement in such events as the *sine qua non* of a dynamic faith, but surely it is not mere "objective detachment" which prompts one to ask about the nature of the events themselves. (Indeed, how can I existentially affirm something-I-know-not-what?)

It would seem, however, that Robinson would suffice for the conduct of life; yet this is the fashion among those who must today be regarded as our best preachers. . . . Rather ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established, that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us." There is little doubt that Bultmann and his disciples have taken these remarks with utmost seriousness.

wishes not only to assert a "new dimension" *in* the facts but to focus so exclusively on those "profound intentions" at their root that the facts no longer seem problematic in any way. Indeed, one even gains the impression that the "facts" have themselves been swallowed up, so to speak, by the existential "interpretation," so that the latter is not just a "commentary" on the facts but in some real sense even "constitutes" them. Thus like every Christian theologian, Robinson necessarily speaks of the death and resurrection of Christ as the very heart of the kerygma. Ostensibly *two* events are thereby indicated, all the more so when the essence of faith is said to be "dying and rising with him."<sup>9</sup> On closer examination, however, one notes that Robinson speaks of "God's eschatological action centering in the saving event of cross and resurrection."<sup>10</sup> Apparently Robinson, following Bultmann, means to speak of Christ's death (cross) as the *sole* historical event, which then holds out for me — when I accept that death as God's judgment on my life *qua* quest for security — the possibility of a new life, authentic existence, in short, resurrection. In other words, the resurrection is something that happens to me through my personal implication in another's death, not Christ's literal rising from the dead but my life-through-His-death (or the rise of faith in the crucified One who yet lives for me). Whatever one's estimate of Robinson's interpretation, it is scarcely legitimate of him to continue to speak of Christ's death *and* resurrection as if two separate events were involved in *his* personal history. Surely, in the interest of clarity, Robinson could express himself

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

much more precisely on this all-important point.<sup>11</sup> Such precision is especially imperative today when the problem of the theologian's specific "meaning" has come to the fore. The language here is so slippery that it conceals many ambiguities.

(2) If the first criticism was basically a call for clarity, certain other objections have also been intimated therein. Thus to speak of any historical *event* in a straightforward fashion is at the same time to point to that event as capable of confirmation or, at least, to give some indication as to the relative probability of its occurrence. The primary concern here, however, is not to discuss possible modes of verification in the light of the historical sources, but to question the rationale employed by the Bultmannians for refusing even to *consider* the question of verification. Thus, Robinson asserts:

To require an objective legitimization of the saving event prior to faith is to take offence at the offence of Christianity and to perpetuate the unbelieving flight to security, i. e., the reverse of faith. For faith involves the rejection of worldly security as righteousness by works.<sup>12</sup>

To attempt to build faith on "objective" history, therefore, is to retreat into carnal security, to deny justification by faith. The hearer of the kerygma must not inquire into the factual historicity of the "saving event" but must allow himself to become

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the further statement that the kerygma is a call to faith "in which God calls me to accept his judgment upon me in Jesus' death, and to live from his grace in Jesus' resurrection" (ibid., p. 48). Here two specific events in the history of Jesus are designated. Robinson appropriates Bultmann's language but is not as forthright in his declaration that the disciples' faith is the only event of Easter Day.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

existentially involved in what is being proclaimed.

One pressing question still remains: has the striving for "factual security" actually been *displaced* by this stratagem or simply *replaced* by another type, namely, the security of a faith that is unfalsifiable because the alleged historical events on which it is based have been reduced to subjective experiences that are in principle irrefutable? If Christianity wishes to maintain its claim to uniqueness as a *historical* religion, then surely it must run the *risks* of history, that is, of being proven in error, of holding as historical what in fact never transpired.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, a further question might be put to the exegetical theologians themselves: if history (*Historie*) and faith are inimical, why did the early Christians attempt to *historicize* their faith? (Cf. the traditions of the "empty tomb," the resurrection appearances, etc.)

(3) The previous objection leads directly to another consideration. In discussing the Resurrection, Bultmann (here much clearer than Robinson) contends:

The real Easter faith is faith in the word of preaching which brings illumination. If the event of Easter day is in any sense an historical event additional to the event of the cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord. . . . The resurrection itself is not an event of past history. . . . *But the historical problem is not of interest to Christian belief in the resurrection.* For the historical event of the rise of the Easter-faith means for us what it meant for the first disciples — namely, the self-attestation of the risen Lord, the act

<sup>13</sup> Thus Ronald Hepburn, in Chapters VI and VII of his *Christianity and Paradox* (London, 1958), searchingly examines this problem of "Historicity and Risk" in contemporary theology.

of God in which the redemptive event of the cross is completed.<sup>14</sup>

Can the "historical problem" really be dismissed in such summary fashion? For one thing, why should faith be *in any sense* concerned with history? Is it not logically absurd, for example, to hold that "authentic existence" is possible through confrontation with a fictional story? Put otherwise: how does faith in the crucified and risen Lord differ from faith in a mythical Christ, if what is primary is my existential involvement, my reception of a new self-understanding?

Orthodoxy, it may be noted, has traditionally insisted on the "objectivity" of the Resurrection (empty tomb, post-Easter appearances of the risen Lord attested by eye-witnesses) because it has also seen in the Resurrection a significance that transcends the believer's subjective involvement, that is, as the sign of reconciliation between God and man now complete and finished apart from my new self-understanding.<sup>15</sup> But once the "event of Easter

<sup>14</sup> "New Testament and Mythology" in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York, 1961), p. 42 (italics added).

<sup>15</sup> This insistence on "objectivity" is by no means exempt from serious criticism. If the resurrection of Jesus, for example, is a strictly "objective" event, then it must be approached in the same fashion as any other such event, i. e., through the established methods of historical-critical study. Such study entails a number of presuppositions, including the so-called "principle of analogy" (all historical events are basically similar inasmuch as they are significantly continuous with the context in which they occur, i. e., no event is completely *sui generis*), and the "principle of causality" (any breach of the causal nexus is a priori excluded, i. e., history is viewed immanently in terms of the development of potentialities, etc.). Furthermore, such study demands exacting scrutiny of the pertinent texts (such as the New Testament accounts of the

Day" is claimed to be "nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord," one wonders whether this "faith-event" might not be equally well triggered by a story that involves a "Christ-idea." Is the "historical Jesus," then, at all requisite for a living faith? Bultmann's theology, in par-

Resurrection), and the acknowledged presence of textual ambiguities or contradictions renders the actuality of the event problematic to the extent that such difficulties obtain. Nevertheless, traditional "supernaturalism" wishes to maintain a legitimate claim to "historical objectivity," but in practice must do so with its hands tied. For one thing, it denies the applicability of the principles of analogy and causality to the Resurrection but in so doing constantly imposes a severe strain on its working vocabulary, i. e., it asserts the historical basis of the Resurrection and then proceeds to stretch the received meaning of "history" almost beyond the breaking point; the latter apparently remains such only in name. In addition, once the presence of human "interpretation" in the New Testament texts is at all granted, the door is then opened in principle for the most radical criticism. Such criticism can be halted or stifled only on dogmatic grounds or for ecclesiastical (or personal) reasons. Thus the doctrines of verbal, plenary inspiration and Biblical inerrancy appear fundamental to traditional supernaturalism if the devastating fires of critical study are to be withstood. Such study then becomes, by definition, "blasphemous." Yet by such a procedure orthodoxy's claim to historical objectivity is further undercut, namely, by the disavowal of a genuine historical criticism. In summary, it might be said that Bultmann grants the complete legitimacy of historical-critical investigation and accepts its canons, yet denies that such study really touches the significance of the Resurrection; for the latter is not primarily concerned with Jesus of Nazareth but with us. We have argued that by so doing he in effect surrenders the historical basis of the Christian faith, passing much too cavalierly from the negative results of his own historical criticism to his more "positive" existentialist interpretation. Orthodoxy, by contrast, affirms the Resurrection's absolute historical grounding but can do so only by arbitrarily redefining the concept of history, thus exposing itself to the charge of meaninglessness, and by denying the applicability of historical-critical methods to the Biblical documents,

ticular, seems open to the charge of docetism, all the more serious in an era when theologians are striving to recover the "true humanity" of Christ.

(4) In the passage quoted above, Bultmann also refers to the "self-attestation of the risen Lord" as the meaning of the Easter-faith for us today (as for the first disciples). Such a claim apparently represents a further retreat into the security (!) of the nonfalsifiable. The risen Lord attests Himself through the proclamation of the Word. Once the hearer has faithfully accepted that Word as a judgment on his life and a call to decision, he may claim: "Jesus Christ is indeed risen, since I am conformed to His resurrection (that is, I possess a new self-understanding through the Word of the Cross)." Such a claim, however, bears no more attestation than any similar statement of the "it seems to me" variety, that is, it possesses complete psychological certainty but may in fact stem from delusion or hallucination. Furthermore, how may the believer now move from such a statement to an affirmation of the further claim made by that selfsame Word: "God raised Jesus from the dead"? This latter claim purports to speak of something that lies beyond my experience, something that cannot be totally reduced to ex-

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thus removing them from the province of scientific investigation. Various contemporary theologians are evidently seeking a point beyond the *Historie-Geschichte* dialectic in speaking of the Resurrection as history, that is, they desire a view of history shaped from "within," so to speak, by the Resurrection itself. See Walter Kunneth, *Theology of the Resurrection* (St. Louis, 1966), and Richard R. Niebuhr, *Resurrection and Historical Reason* (New York, 1957). Kunneth's book opposes both Bultmannian existentialism and traditional supernaturalism without recourse to the doctrines of verbal inspiration or Scriptural inerrancy.

istential significance. Surely the latter claim cannot participate in the "self-authenticating" nature of the former without confusing the two levels of use. The "self-attestation of the risen Lord" may thus afford absolute psychological certainty but says nothing about what is the case. Nor can such self-attestation really be a "risk" since it is not open to refutation. It seems passing strange, therefore, when Bultmann insists that "it is precisely immunity from proof which secures the Christian proclamation against the charge of being mythological."<sup>16</sup> But to be immune from proof is also to be compatible with any state of affairs, even with the "mythological"!

#### SOME SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The distinction between the "objective-historical" and the "existential-historical" is a useful and meaningful one within certain bounds. Basically it asserts that theological talk about history is qualitatively different from scientific concerns with history. Whereas the historian *qua* scientist is concerned with marshalling the facts and seeks to control unwarranted intrusion of personal interests, the theologian *qua* historian is concerned with history as the sphere of God's revelation *pro nobis* and therefore preeminently with personal involvement in the events of the past. But in the process of making this distinction, several dangers must be recognized and guarded against.

(1) The distinction between the two levels of history must be so presented as to make clear that the difference is not between the "objective" and the "subjective," but between the "neutral" and the "personal." In other words, the theologian is (or should be) very much interested in

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<sup>16</sup> *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 44.

what really happened, albeit his interest springs from involvement rather than detachment. As a historian, how could the theologian's true concern be any other than with the facts? The "ultimate significance" of any event may not be disclosed without personal involvement, but if that event never occurred (or was substantially different than asserted to be), such involvement would be but a particularly treacherous form of self-delusion. Therefore the theologian must always attempt to discover, as far as possible, the "brute facts." Thus in reopening the quest for the historical Jesus, the disciples of Bultmann have shown themselves aware that their teacher's flight from *Historie* threatens to end up precisely in the realm of the "mythological," which he so strenuously decries, unless the "kerygmatic Christ" be shown to have His legitimate source in the "historical Jesus."<sup>17</sup>

(2) Robinson and Bultmann both oppose "objectification" in the name of the risk of faith and the scandal of the Gospel. Without a doubt faith is not "sight" and the faith-filled hearing of the Gospel requires the acceptance of God's judgment on the whole of one's life. But Christianity, it must be further asserted, entails *several* risks and scandals. In addition to the existential risk of giving allegiance to One who was crucified and the scandal of allowing one's "natural" life to be judged as inauthentic, there is also the risk of history and the scandal of particularity. The

<sup>17</sup> See the essays by Ernst Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Naperville, Ill., 1964), pp. 15—47; Ernst Fuchs, "The Quest of the Historical Jesus," in *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (Naperville, Ill., 1964), pp. 11—31; and Gerhard Ebeling, "The Question of the Historical Jesus and the Problem of Christology," in *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia, 1963), pp. 288—304.

"offense of Christianity" is also the offense of claiming that God has made Himself signally known in the personal *history* of this *one* Man, Jesus Christ. To affirm such a claim is to run the risk of being shown in error, that is, that this Jesus was not at all what Christians have made Him out to be.

The risk of history and the scandal of particularity, therefore, also imply that a man may finally decide to reject the Gospel not solely because he refuses to place his life under the divine judgment (a sin of pride) but equally well because for him the historical evidence is much too flimsy to bear the weighty superstructure that Christianity has erected on it. Bultmann wishes to dispense with the *sacrificium intellectus* entailed by the "outmoded" (or prescientific) aspects of Christian thought, but he seems to demand in turn a *sacrificium intellectus* with regard to the historical underpinnings of the Gospel. He makes strictly an issue of faith what is also a problem of knowledge.

(3) Concerning the Resurrection, Bultmann rightly insists that one could have all the "facts" — be assured by some indisputable proof of the resuscitation of a corpse — and still miss completely the significance of Christ's resurrection. Decision and commitment are called for. There might be an empty tomb without in any way a "Resurrection" in the Christian sense. In the New Testament itself the meaning of the Resurrection is inextricably bound up with the sense of the ongoing and immediate presence of the risen Christ as the Lord of life. As Ian Ramsey would put it, the Resurrection is "spatio-temporal *and more*."<sup>18</sup> Granted, but then it is

<sup>18</sup> *Religious Language* (New York, 1963), p. 149.

spatio-temporal *at least*, since it is not an idea but an event. What is that event? Bultmann answers that the only historical event of Easter Day is the disciples' faith. If that be the case, however, then it must be made abundantly clear that when one accepts the Resurrection, he is accepting the church's faith in the disciples' faith in the Resurrection, that is, his is a faith in faith (for he is not saying anything about Jesus). And to designate the Resurrection an "act of God," therefore, is to say at most that God awakens faith, not that He raised Jesus from the dead. But now, when seen in this light, theology's recurrent talk about the "mighty acts of God" is really not language about God's doing something in history but about His doing something to me, His acting in my inner life.<sup>19</sup>

At this point, I think, it is possible to recognize how radically Bultmann has departed from the claim that Christianity is a historical religion.<sup>20</sup> For it is logically im-

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," in *Journal of Religion*, XLI (1961), 194—205; and James Barr, "Revelation Through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology," in *New Theology No. 1*, ed. Martin Marty and Dean Peerman (New York, 1964), pp. 60—74.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the remark of Helmut Thielicke in "The Restatement of New Testament Mythology," in Bartsch, p. 147: "The historical narratives of the New Testament are, to put it bluntly, not events in their own right, but only

possible to derive propositions about God's acting in history from existential claims to the effect that He has acted in my life. The problem is one of priorities. If God acted once for all in Jesus Christ, He may yet act for me today (through the Word about His action in Christ). But His acting for me can never become His acting once for all in Jesus Christ, and this latter claim is the fundamental tenet of Christian belief. What ostensibly began, therefore, as a distinction between "brute facts" and the apprehension of a "deeper and more central plane of meaning" within the facts has ended up with the existential meaning *alone*. The distinction is useful to bring out the "new dimensions" in the historical, but when it simply *transforms* the historical into the psychological (or experiential) it has abandoned the historical grounding of the Christian faith.

In summary: the problem is to maintain a distinction between the "neutral" and "personal" levels of history without falling into pure subjectivism. It would appear that this is one of the most pressing theological tasks of the present, at least for all those who wish to make such a distinction at all.

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the prelude to an event. The real event is the change which takes place in human self-consciousness."