



THE SPRINGFIELDER

December 1971
Volume 35, Number 3

The Relationship of Neo-Orthodox And Existentialist Theology To Philosophy: a brief retrospect

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WE HAVE COME TO THE END of an era in theology, writes Perry LeFevre of Chicago Theological Seminary. The giants, whom he identifies as Barth, Brunner, Tillich and Bultmann, are departing the scene (both literally and influentially, I would add). Theology will now follow new directions; and the relationship between theology and philosophy will be approached in fresh ways.¹

This paper will briefly trace the relationship which obtains between Neo-orthodoxy, as represented by Barth and Brunner, and radical existentialist theology, as represented by Tillich and Bultmann, and philosophy. Such a relationship becomes particularly significant when it is generally assumed that theologians of the past decades were hostile toward philosophy. Such an assumption is, of course, just not true. Neo-orthodox theologians tended to adopt an anti-philosophical stance. Yet it must be remembered that they did relate positively to existentialism, which of all recent philosophical movements has perhaps exerted the greatest single impact on recent Protestant theology. On the other hand, the other two major theologians of the time, Tillich and Bultmann, were anything but hostile to philosophical thought.

The question of the relation of philosophy to theology has been called a universal problem in Christian thought. Roman Catholicism has in the past felt more at ease with involvements with philosophy than has traditional Protestantism. Recently, however, Roman Catholic theology has been caught up in the attempt to secure its freedom from philosophical categorization in order to imbibe a bit more of the Biblical spirit. Protestant theology often claimed to be relatively free of philosophical impingements. Such a claim could be made, however, only if Protestant theology were ignorant of its contemporary philosophical movements or if it had adopted a certain philosophical stance without actually realizing it had done so.

I. KARL BARTH

The twentieth century has witnessed a reaction among theologians against philosophical influences. Karl Barth became recognized as the theologian who criticized both philosophers and theologians who allowed their teaching to be determined by non-revealed sources. Barth, whose theology fell like a bomb on the playground of

the theologians, was led in his study of the biblical witness to draw strict and bold lines of demarcation between philosophy and theology. When he undertook his drastic revision of the *Christian Dogmatics*, he made it clear that he wanted to free theology of any and all dependence upon philosophy or a general anthropological approach. In the foreward of his new *Church Dogmatics* he states that to the best of his ability he cut out in this second issue of the book everything that in the first issue might give the slightest appearance of giving to theology a basis, support, or even a mere justification in the way of existential philosophy. Along with this he repudiated the basically medieval approach to a natural knowledge of God based upon the *analogia entis*.²

Yet Barth admitted that philosophy does have a place in theology. He writes: "It is no more true of anyone that he does not mingle the gospel with some philosophy, than that here and now he is free from all sin except through faith."³ The theologian must be fully aware, however, of what he is doing with philosophy. Philosophy can never become a norm alongside that of Holy Scripture. Furthermore, there is no reason for giving preference to one philosophical perspective over others. Scripture must never become captive to any human scheme of thought.⁴

According to Barth both theology and philosophy are human enterprises, neither of which can ever fully possess the whole truth. Both can only attempt to serve the truth. Philosopher and theologian will therefore follow different ways, engage in controversy, but remember that the philosopher will give primacy to one concept of truth, the theologian another. For theology the primacy will always lie in God the Creator and Redeemer who reveals himself in dynamic self-disclosure. For the theologian, thought must move from God to man and only then from man back to God. Jesus Christ is the one entire truth; philosophy may help the theologian take nature, culture, and humanity more seriously but can never approach the ultimate revelation of God in Christ.

II. EMIL BRUNNER

Although Emil Brunner is considerably more sympathetic toward philosophy, he also rejects it as source of religious truth. There is a difference between truth which lies at the base of theology and the truth which philosophy is seeking. While philosophical knowledge is grounded in the subject-object dichotomy, theological or Christian truth is understood in terms of encounter. Truth as encounter is personal; it is disclosed by giving, not by being sought. For Brunner divine revelation means the whole of divine activity for the salvation of the world, the story of God's saving acts which reveal his nature and will; above all, him who is the fulfillment of revelation, Jesus Christ. "He Himself is the revelation. Divine revelation is not a book or a doctrine; revelation is something that happens, the living history of God in his dealing with the human race."⁵

Revelation is "truth as encounter," and faith is knowledge as encounter. In the transformation which the medieval church experienced revelation became doctrine, and faith became doctrinal belief.

According to the biblical understanding of revelation, God does not become the object of our thought precisely because he is the Lord, the absolute subject who reveals himself. "He is not at our disposal as an object of knowledge. He proves himself as Lord in the fact that he alone gives the knowledge of himself, and that man has no power at his own disposal to enable him to acquire this knowledge."⁷ Truth is personal encounter. And this truth is not appropriated in an act of objective perception of truth, "but only in an act of personal surrender and decision."⁸

As to natural theology, Brunner admits that a certain knowledge of the moral law, which reflects something of the original revelation of God in the human mind, is possible for human reason. Yet this reason is limited "in the incapacity to determine whence this law comes, in the incapacity to know evil in its depth, in the abstract nature of demand, and in its impotence to overcome resistance."⁹ Philosophical theology is never sufficient to teach men to know God, because God exists only through revelation in Christ for faith. Man can of himself know the law of God, in so far as it is only the demand for a certain way of life, even though this knowledge may be to a large extent dimmed or obscured. Following the terminology of ancient philosophy, and particular statements of the apostle Paul, the theology of the church has described this law of God known to reason as the *lex naturae*, that is, as the divine law known to man by nature.¹⁰ Strictly theistic systems, says Brunner, exist only upon the foundation of Christianity.

This applies to the whole of Christian philosophy from Augustine down to the great representatives of scholasticism who were indeed always both theologians and philosophers. This is also true of the whole current of the modern tradition. With a slight exaggeration we may say that philosophical theism is identical with Christian philosophy.¹¹

"Revelation and reason possess one common element: they both claim truth. The genuine scientist wills that truth should prevail; the Christian faith also is concerned with truth."¹²

At first sight it seems as though the truth claimed by reason has one advantage over that claimed by faith. It is universally recognized. "Twice two makes four," is a truth for everyone. The truth of revelation is universally valid; but the fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Redeemer of the world is not recognized by everyone.¹³ So philosophical theism exists only within the Christian realm, argues Brunner. It is really the philosophical doctrine of God which develops in agreement with the Christian faith.¹⁴ Christian philosophy is nothing else but that which believing Christians produce when they think philosophically. Theology is thought about the content of development.

III. PAUL TILLICH

There is little question that Paul Tillich believed in a close alliance between philosophy and theology. He stated this very clearly: "As a theologian I have tried to remain a philosopher, and vice versa. It would have been easier to abandon the boundary and to choose one or the other. Inwardly this course was impossible for me."¹⁵ Tillich was always interested in the development of a philosophy of culture. He understood philosophy as a theory of the principles of meaning. And the philosophy of religion relates those principles to a theory of the essence of religion. Philosophy has to be taken seriously by the biblical theologian. He wrote that "no theologian should be taken seriously as a theologian, even if he is a great Christian and a great scholar, if his work shows that he does not take philosophy seriously."¹⁶

Since theology claims that it constitutes a special realm of knowledge the theologian is placed under the obligation of giving an account of the way in which he relates theology to other forms of knowledge. He must answer two questions: "What is the relationship of theology to the special sciences and what is its relationship to philosophy?" Tillich answers the first question by asserting that "if nothing is an object of theology which does not concern us ultimately, theology is unconcerned about scientific procedures and results and vice versa." Theology has neither the right nor obligation "to prejudice a physical or historical, sociological or psychological, inquiry." The question of the relation of theology to the special sciences merges into the question of the relationship between theology and philosophy.¹⁷

This relationship between theology and philosophy is clearly stated in his *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I. He defines philosophy as ontology. It questions the structure of being. The object of theology is what concerns a man ultimately. And what concerns a man ultimately must be real; it must be related to being. Furthermore, "it must be the ground of our being, that which determines our being or not-being, the ultimate and unconditional power of being."¹⁸ While philosophy is interested in the structure of being, theology is interested in the meaning of being. Philosophy and theology ask the question of being; but they ask it from different perspectives. The philosopher attempts to maintain a detached objectivity toward being and its structures. He tries to exclude all personal and historical conditions which might distort an objective vision of reality. The theologian, on the other hand, "is not detached from his object but is involved in it. He looks at his object with passion, fear, and love." This is not the eros of the philosopher of his passion for objective truth; it is the love which accepts saving, and therefore personal truth.¹⁹ The attitude of the theologian is "existential"; he is involved with the whole of his existence, with his finitude and his anxiety, his self-contradictions and despair, with the healing forces in him and in his social situation. Whenever he abandons this existential attitude he is driven to statements the reality of which will not be acknowl-

edged by anybody who shares the existential presuppositions of the empirical theologian. The one reality and the structures that appear in it, and the manifestation of what concerns man ultimately, concern both philosopher and theologian. Thus there is in every philosopher a hidden theologian, and in every theologian, a hidden philosopher.

The relationship between philosophy and theology is also apparent in Tillich's understanding of the theological method. His concept of correlation unites man's existential questions and theological answers. The theologian assumes a philosophical task when he formulates the questions implied in human existence; but he remains a theologian when he insists that the answers must be found in the symbols of the Christian faith. The answers are spoken to human existence from beyond it.²¹

Tillich holds that there is no conflict between philosophy and theology, but there is no synthesis either. A common basis is lacking. He states that the idea of a synthesis between theology and philosophy has led to the dream of a "Christian Philosophy." For Tillich the term is ambiguous. It can mean a philosophy whose extential basis is historical Christianity. Or it can denote a philosophy which does not look at the universal logos but at the assumed or actual demands of a Christian theology. The idea of a Christian philosophy in the narrower sense of a philosophy which is intentionally Christian must be rejected, says Tillich. Christianity does not need a Christian philosophy in the narrower sense of the word.

IV. RUDOLF BULTMANN

Rudolph Bultmann also claims a positive role for philosophy. So much so, in fact, that Nels Ferre has charged both Bultmann and Tillich with being neo-naturalistic philosophers. Bultmann wants to use philosophy; at the same time he wants to avoid a collapse of theology into any kind of philosophy, because theology presupposes the exclusive act of God in Christ which is disclosed only to faith. For Bultmann knowledge which does not come through faith in response to Christ is not knowledge of God *as God*. Philosophy, therefore, cannot reach genuine knowledge of God. Yet philosophy plays an important role.

Bultmann is concerned about proper self-understanding which issues in authentic existence. This is an existential understanding of life. And the basis for such existential interpretation must, says Bultmann, be found in philosophy. So he takes over the concepts of existential analysis. "The object of my theological research is not existence in faith, but rather the natural man. The philosopher completely disregards whether something like faith or unfaith can take place."²¹ In this way theology becomes dependent upon philosophy's interpretation of human existence. Philosophy inquires ontologically into the formal structures of human existence, while theology deals with the concrete man in so far as he is to be encountered by a specific proclamation. Bultmann expresses the difference between philosophy and theology in this way: philosophy shows that

my being a man uniquely belongs to me, but it does not speak of my unique existence: this, however, is exactly what theology does.²²

Philosophy sees man as a particular concrete man who is determined by some specific "how"; it speaks of the "that" of this "how," but not of the "how" itself. Theology speaks of a specific "how," but not by jumping into a hole that has been left open by philosophy in the totality of what is knowable or in the system of the sciences. Rather it can have its own original motive only because the man who is determined by that specific "how" has need of theology for his own realization.²³

The real theme of philosophy for Bultmann is not existence, but existentiality, not the factual but factuality; it inquires concerning existence with respect to existentiality but it does speak to concrete existence. Every interpreter, says Bultmann, depends upon the concepts of a philosophy. And Bultmann believes that existential philosophy is the correct assumption. Theology can make fruitful use of the philosophical analysis of human existence. "For the man of faith is in any case a man, just as the proclamation out of which faith arises encounters him as a human word."²⁴ And he believes that Martin Heidegger is correct in his understanding of human existence. "I learned from him not what theology has to say, but how it has to say it, in order to speak to the thinking man today in a way he can understand."²⁵ Philosophy thus provides the categories of existence within which a particular understanding which is gained by faith can be understood by theology.

In his autobiographical reflections Bultmann acknowledges that the new theology (Barthianism) had correctly seen that Christian faith is the answer to the word of a transcendent God who encounters man; it is the task of theology to deal with this word and the man who has been encountered by it. In pursuing this theological quest Bultmann asserts that the work of existential philosophy, which he had come to know through his discussion with Heidegger, had become of decisive significance for him. "I found in it the conceptuality in which it is possible to speak adequately of human existence and therefore also of the existence of the believer." He adds, incidentally, that in his efforts to make philosophy fruitful for theology, "I have more and more come into opposition to Karl Barth. Nevertheless, I remain grateful to him for the decisive things I have learned from him."²⁶ At the same time Bultmann insists that philosophy can never become a substitute for theology. Philosophy is limited because the true meaning of existence comes only through faith which is response to divine revelation. Bultmann admits that there is a kind of revelation to be found both in nature and in history, a revelation accessible therefore to the philosophical spirit. This points toward the revelation of God spoken in the kerygma. But Christian faith insists "that all answers apart from the Christian answers are illusions."²⁷ Bultmann sums up his understanding of the limitations of philosophy when he writes:

I do not consider such a philosophical theology possible. It is only possible to make God the object of conceptual thought in

so far as the concept "God" can be objectively explicated. Indeed, that must be the case since theology must be able to say what it means when it speaks of God. Theology must therefore clarify in a conceptual way—for example, the concepts of transcendence, of omnipotence, of the presentness of God, the concepts of grace and forgiveness. This cannot mean, however, that theology speaks directly of God and of his activity. It cannot speak of God as he is in himself, but only of what he does for us.²⁵

Bultmann would never conceive his task as the replacement of traditional Christian faith. Existentialist philosophy is not concerned to demonstrate the reasonableness or validity of the so-called evidences for the existence of God. It does not attempt a metaphysic, although it does concern itself with those experiences which give rise to God-talk.²⁶ It is significant to note that Heidegger turned from his early analysis of human *Dasein* to being in a much wider sense. Bultmann used Heidegger's early work; he shows little interest, however, in his ontological investigations. Bultmann firmly believes that neither theology nor philosophy can speak objectively about God or divine being. "If by speaking of God one understands to talk about God, then such style has no sense at all. One can speak of God only from out of the depths of personal relationship with God."²⁷

This brief survey of the relationship of Neo-orthodox and existentialist theologies to philosophy serves as a reminder that Christian theology has often come under the spell of secular philosophies. Many of Bultmann's critics hastily concluded that he wished to set the clock back and return to the theology practiced in the 19th century, which Barth calls "Egyptian bondage" to philosophy. Theologians, writes Professor John Macquarrie, used prevailing philosophical thought apologetically, that is, they attempted to find a point of entry into the contemporary mind in order to present the Christian faith in terms intelligible to their own age. They sometimes used current philosophical concepts even when they were drawn from systems which were quite alien to Christianity.²⁸

There are certain dangers attendant upon this kind of theologizing. Macquarrie draws attention to three: preoccupation with a secular philosophy might lead to a distortion of Christian teaching through over-emphasis of certain elements which seem particularly congenial to the philosophy concerned; ideas quite foreign to Christianity may slip into theology; at worst, there may be a plain accommodation of the Christian faith to the prevailing philosophy of the age. Did Bultmann, for example, fall into this kind of trap by granting undue influence to existentialist philosophy? Did he, in fact, make Christian theology conform to a current secular thought? Quite obviously Bultmann used existentialism, which appeared as a philosophical reaction to scientific humanism, to present Christianity as a relevant issue in the mid-twentieth century. At the same time Bultmann certainly did not intend to expound Christian thought in concepts which may be nothing more than a passing philosophical mood.

Bultmann insists that the philosophy of existence stands in a very special relationship to theology.³² He believes that the presuppositions of theological thinking are clarified and secured by Heideggerian existentialism since it is a philosophy of being. The proper philosophical outlook to theological study is that philosophical work which endeavors to develop in suitable concepts the understanding of existence that is given with human existence. For Bultmann it all hinges on the *Fragestellung*, the putting of the question. When Bultmann goes to the Bible he asks the question of human existence. Of course, he is concerned *qua* theologian about God; but about God in so far as he is significant to man as existing. Man and his being are central in all theological problems.³³

In making this claim Bultmann believes that he is following the scheme of the New Testament. Such a *Fragestellung*, in Bultmann's thinking, does not predetermine the answers which Biblical exegesis provides and from which the theologian interprets the Christian faith. To the contrary, it rather opens the theologian's eyes to the content of the text. In fact, in employing existentialism Bultmann feels that he is remaining true to the teachings both of St. Paul and Jesus himself. St. Paul's use of body and spirit relates, thinks Bultmann, to the distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence. And there is little question for Bultmann that Jesus demanded authenticity. The worst that can happen to a man is to lose himself as he sets his heart on the things of the world. Jesus presses a man to radical decision. Man must choose between God and the world, between being his true self in obedience to God or losing himself in serving the creaturely.

Bultmann thinks he successfully escaped the trap of pinning his theology to what might prove to be a passing philosophy. He did nothing more than use contemporary philosophical concepts to assist in his presentation of the Christian faith. Theology always makes ontological assumptions about man, and existentialism stands in a very special relationship to Christian theology because it reflects much of the basic teaching of the New Testament. Bultmann is convinced that Pauline theology expounds a doctrine of man which is parallel to that of Heideggerian existentialism. The life of man without Christ and the life of man in faith matches what Heidegger calls inauthentic and authentic existence.³⁴

Macquarrie suggests that Bultmann did not fully escape the trap because of his preoccupation with the existentialist elements which he found in the teaching of Jesus. According to Bultmann, the historic Jesus was little more than a teacher of practical philosophy with certain resemblances to existentialism and who is stripped of the numinous characteristics which the Gospel ascribe to him. Did Jesus have no Messianic consciousness? Would people have taken him seriously if he had not at least claimed to be the Messiah, especially if he had not risen from the dead? Macquarrie sees in Bultmann's negative attitude to such questions an indication that he was uncon-

sciously biased in his presentation because of the influence of philosophy in his thought.

V. *What Kind of Philosophy?*

Philosophy and theology have been bound together in a strange relationship for some time, so much so that no theology can afford the luxury of not determining itself in relation to philosophy.³⁵ At the same time theology has either feared that philosophy would rule against it decisively or that it would simply take over theology and dictate whatever theological solutions that considered necessary. For a theologian ever to assume that a particular philosophy is dictated to him is a faulty presupposition which can sometimes prove fatal to the theological enterprise. But to believe that a theologian can ever undertake his task entirely free of philosophy is engaging in self-delusion. Sontag describes both conditions as the worst conceivable state for theology.

With what kind of philosophy will theology stand in intimate relationship during the coming decades? A continuing impact of existentialism on theology is not automatically ruled out simply because various forms of the philosophical movement have so greatly influenced theology during the first decades of our century. Phenomenology presents itself as a candidate, even though its preoccupation with phenomena makes of God an entity quite beyond its self-imposed range of experience. Logical positivism is decidedly antimetaphysical and contemporary analytic philosophy scarcely qualifies as a proponent of biblical revelation, even though its stress on careful analysis of terms, definitions, and statements ought to be more carefully heeded by theology. In a certain sense process philosophy is the most likely candidate since it offers a metaphysical concern for the divine which is distinctly absent from most of its contemporary schools of philosophical thought. Whitehead, Hartshorne, and de Chardin have demonstrated a pronounced interest in the unfolding nature of the divine essence, even though all brands of process philosophy tend to enunciate a limited God who is simply not at home in Biblical thought.

Karl Barth informs us that when the faculty of the University of Koenigsberg made its annual pilgrimage to the town church for divine service, Kant absented himself from the procession just as it was about to enter the Church and went home. Perhaps that act is symbolic of what happened when the theology of the eighteenth century went beyond "rational reasonableness." Philosophy left the procession and, like Kant and the Biblical character, went to its own place. During the nineteenth century philosophy and theology walked once more due to the theological philosophizing of such men as Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Ritschl. The twentieth century we have just surveyed, at least its first half. What kind of philosophy will emerge in challenge to theology during the next decades? What relationship between philosophy and theology will develop? We do not, says Professor Sontag, want a philosophy which will lead us inevitably to a particularly Christian conclusion; but neither do we want one

that will not allow distinctively Christian assertions to be made. One thing ought to be added: theology will always make a mistake when it allies itself with a particular philosophy, no matter how seemingly congenial the system might appear to be. The one great service philosophy can always perform for its onetime comrade, theology, is to challenge theology to reexamine its quite unique foundations and to reassert its equally unique revelatory proclamation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Perry LeFevre, ed., *Philosophical Resources for Christian Thought* (Abington Press, 1968), pp. 7-8.
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. (T & T Clarke, 1936), I/1, IX. For a detailed discussion of Barth's celebrated doctrine of the self-revelation of God, see his early essay on "The Principles of Dogmatics according to Wilhelm Herrmann," in *Die Theologie und die Kirche* (1928). Cf. also Pannenberg's critique in *Offenbarung als Geschichte* (1961), and W. Kreck's discussion of *analogia entis* in his *Antwort. Festschrift fuer Karl Barth* (1956).
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 728-729.
4. Karl Barth, *Credo*. (Scribners, 1962), p. 183.
5. Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*. (Westminster Press, 1946), p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 371.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 326.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 358.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 362.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 358.
15. Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary*. (Scribners, 1966), p. 58.
16. Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*. (University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 8.
17. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, (University of Chicago Press, 1951), I, p. 18.
18. *Ibid.*, I, p. 21.
19. *Ibid.*, I, p. 23.
20. *Ibid.*, I, 64.
21. Rudolf Bultmann, "The Historicity of Man and Faith," *Existence and Faith*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (World Publishing Co., 1968), p. 93.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *The Theology of Rudolph Bultmann*. ed. by Charles W. Kegley, (Harper, 1966), p. 276.
26. *Existence and Faith*. p. 288.
27. Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays, Philosophical and Theological*, trans. James C. G. Greig (Macmillan, 1955), p. 98.
28. LeFevre, p. 38.
29. Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, trans. R. H. Fuller (London, 1953), pp. 23ff.
30. Rudolf Bultmann, "What Sense is There to Speak of God?" *The Christian Scholar*. Fall, 1960, p. 213.
31. John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (SCM Press, 1955), p. 3.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-24.
35. Frederick Sontag, *The Future of Theology* (Westminister Press, 1969) p. 22.