

Bonhoeffer and Bultmann: Toward an Apocalyptic Rapprochement

DAVID W. CONGDON*

Abstract: In the 1950s and 1960s, the relation between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Rudolf Bultmann was a topic of much dispute, with Gerhard Krause declaring the apparent opposition between them ‘resolved’ in 1964. Recent apocalyptic theology has reopened the divide between them by claiming Bonhoeffer as an apocalyptic thinker over against Bultmann. This article disputes that reading by arguing that the very conditions under which Bonhoeffer is rightly understood as apocalyptic open up the door for a new interpretation of Bultmann. The question of their relationship reveals the ambiguity surrounding the notion of apocalyptic. There is a pressing need for greater clarity regarding this notion as well as greater charity in relation to Bultmann.

The theological relationship between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Rudolf Bultmann is an old topic. The discussion of the difference between Bonhoeffer’s ‘non-religious interpretation’ and Bultmann’s program of demythologizing has been a staple of academic theological conversation, beginning in earnest with the writings of Gerhard Ebeling¹ and Götz Harbsmeier² in the mid-1950s. In 1963, Bultmann wrote an essay that expressed agreement with the non-religious ideas found in Bonhoeffer’s prison letters and affirmed the need to subject the language of God to a demythologizing critique.³ In the following year Gerhard Krause declared that ‘today this opposition

* 5510 Pershing Ave., Downers Grove, Illinois 60515, USA.

- 1 Gerhard Ebeling, ‘The “Non-religious Interpretation of Biblical Concepts” [1955]’, in *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 98–161.
- 2 Götz Harbsmeier, ‘Die “Nicht-religiöse Interpretation” biblischer Begriffe bei Bonhoeffer und die Entmythologisierung [1956]’, in Peter H.A. Neumann, ed., *‘Religionsloses Christentum’ und ‘nicht-religiöse Interpretation’ bei Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990), pp. 43–64.
- 3 Rudolf Bultmann, ‘Der Gottesgedanke und der moderne Mensch [1963]’, in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 4 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1933–65), vol. 4, pp. 113–27; hereafter cited as *GuV*.

[between Bonhoeffer and Bultmann] can be regarded as resolved'.⁴ Despite the confidence of this claim, many continue to view the two Lutheran theologians as starkly opposed, especially in English-language scholarship, where interest in Bonhoeffer has remained strong while Bultmann has largely faded from view.

The problem of relating Bonhoeffer and Bultmann has gained new relevance through the recent appropriation of Bonhoeffer by contemporary apocalyptic theology. By 'apocalyptic theology'⁵ I refer to the work of those theologians who have taken up the interpretation of the New Testament put forward by Ernst Käsemann and, in particular, J. Louis Martyn. Especially noteworthy here are Christopher Morse⁶ and Philip Ziegler,⁷ who have presented apocalyptic readings of Bonhoeffer. If this interpretation is correct, however, it opens up a new divide between Bonhoeffer and Bultmann. Instead of the old bifurcations between non-religious and religious, political and apolitical, social and individual – all still-common ways of differentiating Bonhoeffer and Bultmann, respectively – the new division is between apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic. As will become clear, this distinction draws upon the earlier distinctions, but it places their relationship in a new light.

4 Gerhard Krause, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Rudolf Bultmann', in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Future of Our Religious Past: Essays in Honour of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 304. Originally published as Gerhard Krause, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer und Rudolf Bultmann', in *Zeit und Geschichte: Dankesgabe an Rudolf Bultmann zum 80 Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1964), p. 459.

5 Leander Keck's comments regarding the problems associated with the word 'apocalyptic' are worth quoting in full:

'Apocalyptic' may be the most misused word in the scholar's vocabulary because it resists definition. To begin with, 'apocalyptic' is an adjective which should be used to characterize the thought and imagery, of those texts regarded as apocalypses. However, it is commonly used as surrogate for 'apocalypticism.' This confusion results from regarding 'apocalyptic' as the Anglicized form of the German 'Apokalyptik,' which like 'Romantik' is used for a phenomenon in the history of culture. In addition, in dogmatics, 'apocalyptic' is regarded as a particular type of eschatology; even worse, it is not uncommon to find 'eschatological' and 'apocalyptic' used interchangeably. No wonder a scholar proposed that the word 'apocalyptic' be mothballed because it 'is a useless word which no one can define and which produces nothing but confusion and acres of verbiage.' Moreover, even if we use 'apocalyptic' adjectivally, it is difficult to determine which texts are in fact apocalypses, partly because the traits commonly associated with apocalypses are not found in all such texts (e.g., the Apocalypse of John is not pseudonymous), partly because many texts combine apocalypses with other types of materials. (Leander E. Keck, 'Paul and Apocalyptic Theology', *Interpretation* 38 (1984), p. 230)

6 See the implicitly apocalyptic interpretation of Bonhoeffer in Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), pp. 86–95. Cf. Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, 2nd edn (New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 161–7, 243–4.

7 Cf. Philip G. Ziegler, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer – An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?', *Modern Theology* 23 (2007), pp. 579–94.

The task of this article is critically to analyze this bifurcation between the apocalyptic Bonhoeffer and the non-apocalyptic Bultmann. I will argue that, upon closer examination, this division proves to be misleading, if not altogether false. Their differences are, at best, a matter of emphasis. This does not mean that Bonhoeffer is non-apocalyptic, but rather that Bultmann is best understood also as an apocalyptic theologian, in the sense defined by Martyn, Morse and others. In short, if Bonhoeffer is rightly identified as apocalyptic, then so is Bultmann. This new understanding of Bultmann will involve taking a fresh look at his writings. In particular, I will examine his 1964 response to Ernst Käsemann, where Bultmann provides his clearest account of why he rejects the category of apocalyptic and what his own eschatology entails.⁸ What becomes clear is that the conditions under which Bonhoeffer is understood to be an apocalyptic thinker open up new possibilities for a reinterpretation of Bultmann.

Christ as the ultimate reality: Bonhoeffer and the inbreaking of new creation

1. The meaning of the category of 'apocalyptic' is by no means self-evident. Even less so is the appropriateness of applying the category to Bonhoeffer. This section will examine the conditions under which Bonhoeffer is rightly identified as an apocalyptic thinker in order to clarify what theologians mean by that word. The conclusions of this analysis will prepare the ground for the fresh look at Bultmann in the following section.

The modern scholarship on apocalyptic has a complicated history. The same scholars who recovered the apocalyptic character of Jesus' preaching, including especially Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, were also quick to reject it as antiquated and irrelevant for contemporary Christian life. The conception of apocalypticism operative in this research has its basis in the thought-world of Second Temple Judaism and is understood as a genre category that includes texts like Daniel, the Apocalypse of John and the Olivet discourse (Mk 13; Mt. 24; and Lk. 21). It is born out of a prophetic and diasporic imagination that understands God as one who stands against the world in its present form; eternity confronts time as the latter's subversion and annihilation. According to Jacob Taubes, 'Apocalypticism negates this world in its fullness. It brackets the entire world negatively.'⁹ Moreover, this apocalyptic negation occurs in a determinate moment in world history as a cosmic and catastrophic event that will usher in the eschatological kingdom of God.

8 For additional analysis of this material, see my essay, David W. Congdon, 'Eschatologizing Apocalyptic: An Assessment of the Present Conversation on Pauline Apocalyptic', in Douglas Harink and Joshua Davis, eds., *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, forthcoming 2012).

9 Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009; 1947), p. 9.

Within this dualistic context, we can make sense of why Bonhoeffer is at pains, in some of his final writings, to distance himself from the category of apocalyptic altogether. His position paper on state and church associates it with ‘the church’s withdrawal from the world’ and ‘from the connections with the state’.¹⁰ An ‘apocalyptic understanding’ of the concrete situation ‘would have to entail total disobedience’ to the government.¹¹ Similarly, his position paper on the first use of the law states that ‘apocalyptic proclamation can be a flight from the *primus usus legis*’.¹² In each of these passages Bonhoeffer explicitly cites Revelation 13 as the text that defines his understanding of apocalyptic. This in itself is quite revealing. The apocalypse for him identifies the end of history, the concrete conclusion to the historical existence of the world. This is why, in his notes on William Paton’s book *The Church and the New Order*, Bonhoeffer connects a ‘strongly apocalyptic stance’ with ‘the total abandonment of any thought of the future’.¹³ In his mind at the time, apocalypse refers to the end of the world and thus the breaking of all social bonds; it legitimates the church’s withdrawal from society in order to focus on its own inward spiritual life.¹⁴

2. While there are other texts that seem to indicate a more positive evaluation of apocalyptic,¹⁵ the most important factor in reassessing its role in Bonhoeffer’s theology is his particular definition of the term. The condition for the possibility of understanding him as an apocalyptic theologian is the recent move from a Jewish, Synoptic or Johannine to a distinctively *Pauline* conception of apocalyptic,

10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 16 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 525.

11 Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, p. 517.

12 Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, p. 598.

13 Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, p. 529.

14 In agreement with Bonhoeffer, with whom he discussed these matters in depth, W. A. Visser ‘t Hooft writes of two groups within the Confessing Church. One group ‘believes that the Church should stick to what is called “the inner line” and concentrate exclusively on the building up of its own spiritual life. This tendency is often combined with a strongly apocalyptic note.’ The other group ‘believes that the Church has also a prophetic and ethical function in relation to the world’. It goes without saying that Bonhoeffer identifies with the second group over against the first, hence the rejection of apocalyptic theology. See Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, p. 178.

15 Take, for example, the following statement from the draft of the Bethel Confession: ‘Thus Christian faith is always oriented toward the end of the world . . . Christian trust in God lives with reference to the end of all things, the last days.’ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 401. In a sermon from November 1932, Bonhoeffer says that ‘the last hour has almost come for our church . . . God has been known to employ the strangest of instruments in working destruction. The story of Jerusalem’s destruction by unbelievers is beginning to take on a terrible relevance for us’ (Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 445). In another context, he speaks of ‘a community which hears the apocalypse’. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928–1936* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 324.

specifically the Paul of Galatians and Romans. At the same time, we must move from a strictly historical use of the word – understood as an ancient literary genre with a specific *Sitz im Leben* – to a more encompassing *theological* use. The rise of a Pauline apocalyptic theology in the work of theologians such as Morse, Ziegler, Douglas Harink¹⁶ and Nathan Kerr¹⁷ presents a very different picture of the apocalypse. Their work is largely dependent upon the seminal writings of J. Louis Martyn. From him we learn that apocalyptic refers to ‘God’s liberating invasion of the cosmos’. This apocalyptic invasion is a ‘cosmic act of liberation’ enacted ‘in Christ’ that crucifies the old creation in which we were slaves to Sin and Death – ‘Sin’ and ‘Death’ being Paul’s reworking of the cosmic powers that are prominent in earlier apocalyptic literature – and delivers us over into a new creation through the Spirit’s power.¹⁸ God’s action in the advent of Christ is apocalyptic primarily in the sense that ‘it is not visible, demonstrable, or provable in the categories and with the means of perception native to “everyday” existence . . . The inbreak of the new creation is itself revelation, apocalypse.’ The invasion of divine grace causes an ‘epistemological crisis’ for those whom it encounters, since the world they inhabit now appears in an entirely new light. The one confronted by the apocalypse ‘sees bifocally’; that person sees ‘both the evil age and the new creation simultaneously’.¹⁹

Contemporary Pauline apocalyptic theology thus establishes a correlation between (a) the ontological *reality* of the new age in Christ and (b) the epistemological *knowledge* or *perception* of this new age through faith. The reality of the new age, according to apocalyptic theology, is cosmic and historical in scope. In Harink’s words, the language of apocalypse ‘is not language merely about human matters or “spiritual” realities or faith-perspectives or states of mind or consciousness, but language about mutually different worlds or ages’.²⁰ While Harink rightly emphasizes the ‘objectivity’ of Christ’s reign – that is, the fact that it is not reducible to some epiphenomenal mental fabrication – his account lacks a recognition of the epistemological crisis and bifocal vision that Martyn identifies as central to Pauline apocalypticism. In fact, there *is* a kind of ‘faith-perspective’ connected with God’s apocalyptic action, in the sense that the new is paradoxically and dialectically present within the old and can only be known by the one whose eyes have been opened by God’s gift of faith. Apocalyptic theology rules out the notion of an eschatological inbreaking that occurs on the level of the empirical or the generally available. The new age is neither a historical-phenomenological datum nor an abstract metaphysical theory; it is, instead, a divine event that is absolutely

16 Douglas K. Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003).

17 Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

18 J. Louis Martyn, ‘The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians’, *Interpretation* 54 (2000), pp. 254–5.

19 J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 104.

20 Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals*, p. 69.

transcendent or qualitatively other than the world. The new age is not something derivable from natural reason or historical evidence, but rather requires an initiating and invasive divine action. Apocalyptic places the emphasis on 'the *otherness* and the *priority* of God's action', as Kerr puts it,²¹ but in such a way that it always remains other and never becomes something given within the world. What is already real in Christ has to *become real* again and again for those who participate in it. The cosmic aspect of God's disruptive inbreaking has to manifest itself anew through word and spirit. The apocalypse is, therefore, a cosmic event in that it decisively changes how one understands the world. It is an event that transfigures the world for the eyes of faith.

3. The character of Bonhoeffer's theology as apocalyptic in this sense becomes especially apparent in his later works, where he moves from the ecclesiocentrism of his early academic theology to a cosmic, this-worldly christocentrism. The early works of *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* share a common general thesis: the various tensions between I and You, act and being, continuity and discontinuity are all solved through their sublation in a christologically-grounded yet ecclesiocentric theology of sociality. In these works, the ecclesial community is explicitly identified as an 'end in itself'.²² The church is the goal of God's will for humanity; it is the object of God's ontologically determinative revelation in Christ. God's will is actualized in the form of 'Christ existing as community' (*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*).²³ By contrast, the *Ethics* manuscripts and the prison writings move the concept of sociality out of the church and into the world. The focus is no longer on Christ as present strictly in the community but rather on 'Jesus Christ as present in the real world'.²⁴ 'Christ is Christ', he says, 'only in the midst of the world', and thus we cannot 'preserve Christ for the church', or else everything would be lost.²⁵

21 Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic*, p. 12; emphasis mine. Kerr lists five key themes of Christian apocalyptic theology: (1) a stress on 'the otherness and the priority of God's action'; (2) the location of the 'center of gravity' in 'the history of Jesus Christ'; (3) a soteriology that is 'cosmic and historical in scope'; (4) 'apocalyptic is constitutive of the meaning and shape of Christ's lordship'; and (5) it is 'doxological and missionary' (pp. 12–15).

22 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 173, 176, 190, 216, 261.

23 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 111.

24 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 233.

25 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 67. This is in stark contrast to *Sanctorum Communio*, where (p. 158) we read: 'Christ is present only in his church-community, and therefore *community with God exists only in the church*.' Bonhoeffer also states in this early work that the Spirit is present and operative only within the church (pp. 144–61).

Bonhoeffer writes of ‘the reality of God and the world’ which is already constituted in the decisive inbreaking of Jesus Christ, and in which we then come to participate. This new reality does not involve an empirical change. God’s reign is not an immanent phenomenon, as in the ancient Jewish apocalyptic literature. Instead, for Bonhoeffer, the reality of God in Christ confronts the world as an *ethical* event that takes concrete form through the community’s active and faithful obedience to the command of God within each particular historical situation. The christological *reality* of the world must *become real* in our world.²⁶ The church comes into existence whenever and wherever Christ ‘takes form’ among human beings.²⁷ The church-community thus lives as those who follow after Christ; he is the one who has already gone ahead of us. The church is now identified as a self-donating community wholly given over to a this-worldly mission of being a *means* toward an end, that is, the end of God’s coming reign.²⁸ It is in this relation between the ‘ultimate reality’ of God’s reconciliation in Christ and our ‘penultimate world’ wherein we respond to this reconciliation that Bonhoeffer’s christocentric apocalypticism presents itself.

Bonhoeffer strikes an apocalyptic note as early as 1932, in his essay on the prayer ‘Thy Kingdom Come!’ He writes there of the miraculous inbreaking of God’s kingdom in which ‘all previously existing community . . . is annulled, destroyed, and broken through’ to make way for the ‘new community of the resurrection world’.²⁹ The church is then defined by its ‘witness to God’s breaking through to the world’.³⁰ In the *Ethics*, these apocalyptic ideas are given a thorough christological grounding and made to be determinative of his mature theological ethic. He writes about the miracle of ‘the rescuing act of God that reaches in from above, beyond all historical calculations and probabilities, and creates new life out of nothingness’.³¹ The apocalyptic invasion of God *happens* in the event of God’s justification of the sinner in the proclamation of the gospel. The ‘dark tunnel of human life’, where humanity is curved in upon itself (*incurvatus in se*), ‘is powerfully torn open’ through the justifying word of God that ‘bursts in’ from above.³² ‘All worldly powers are subject to and bound to serve Christ’, he says.³³ But this subjection of the powers is not a mythological battle in the cosmos; it is, instead, a concrete historical battle that occurs ever anew in the proclaiming, hearing and obeying of God’s word. In the

26 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 55.

27 ‘The church is nothing but that piece of humanity where Christ really has taken form’ (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 97).

28 Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 404. Throughout the *Ethics* Bonhoeffer defines God’s will in radically different terms from his dissertation: no longer is God’s will realized in the sheer *being* of the community, since now it is now realized in the church’s *being-for-the-world*. The identity of the church is located in its ‘genuine worldliness’ – that is to say, in its life of self-giving service to the world on behalf of the new reality that has appeared in Christ.

29 Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 293.

30 Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 294.

31 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 131.

32 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 146.

33 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 401.

justifying event, the new age breaks into the world and establishes itself. God's coming in Christ involves 'a complete break with everything penultimate, with all that has gone before'.³⁴ The old cosmos is crucified and a new world is inaugurated.³⁵

4. Bonhoeffer is rightly described as an apocalyptic theologian only in light of the radical revision of apocalypticism carried out by Pauline biblical scholars and theologians in the second half of the twentieth century. Where the conception of apocalyptic operative in Second Temple Judaism has gnostic and dualistic tendencies – in addition to being highly mythological in character and futurist in orientation – the revisionist apocalyptic theology of people like Martyn and Morse conceives of the dualism between the old and new ages in a radically dialectical, rather than metaphysical or mythological, manner. By 'dialectical' I mean that the realism or 'objectivity' of God's inbreaking is inseparable from one's 'subjective' perception of and participation in the event. The meaning of the apocalyptic invasion cannot be articulated apart from its relation to concrete human existence in the present moment. The event's transcendence coincides with its immanence, but in such a way that its transcendence is not metaphysically fixed in the abstract nor is its immanence empirically observable or verifiable. We can, therefore, describe the dialectical nature of the apocalyptic inbreaking as actualistic, paradoxical and existential. The new age is: (a) actualized in a particular historical event in Christ that is made present in the Spirit; (b) paradoxically present within the old age and thus visible only to faith; and (c) made effective in a new mode of existence that is inseparable from the sociopolitical implications of God's disruptive inbreaking in Christ. With these aspects in mind, we can turn now to assess the relation of Bultmann to apocalyptic theology.

Christ as the turning point of the aeons: Bultmann and the eschatological event

1. If there are challenges to applying the category of apocalyptic to Bonhoeffer, the difficulty becomes seemingly a near-impossibility with regard to Bultmann. Here is a theologian who repeatedly and explicitly rejected apocalyptic as a legitimate framework for Christian theology. He begins *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, for example, by discussing the 'epoch-making' work of Weiss, who demonstrated that the preaching of Jesus was an eschatological message derived from Jewish apocalyptic literature regarding the dramatic and imminent arrival of the kingdom of God.³⁶ But this kingdom never arrived; the parousia continues to tarry. The

34 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 149.

35 Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 158: 'The resurrection has already broken into the midst of the old world as the ultimate sign of its end and its future, and at the same time as living reality.'

36 Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958), p. 12.

apocalyptic hope of the early Christian community ‘was not fulfilled. The same world still exists and history continues.’ Bultmann thus states that ‘the course of history has refuted mythology. For the conception “kingdom of God” is mythological, as is the conception of the eschatological drama.’³⁷ One could argue that, in a certain sense at least, the program of demythologizing is a de-apocalypticizing. The endeavor to find an apocalyptic rapprochement between Bonhoeffer and Bultmann thus appears to be a fool’s errand. And yet, as I will demonstrate, the very conditions for the discovery of an apocalyptic Bonhoeffer make it possible to arrive at an apocalyptic interpretation of Bultmann.

2. The place to begin for a new perspective on Bultmann is his *Auseinandersetzung* with Käsemann.³⁸ The two scholars carried on a long-standing argument over numerous issues in theology and biblical interpretation. In a way, it was their agreement on many essential points that placed their disagreements into such sharp relief. These disagreements ranged from the problem of the historical Jesus to the meaning of the ‘righteousness of God’ in the epistles of Paul.³⁹ The various aspects of their dispute crystallize around the fundamental question: ‘Is apocalyptic the mother of Christian theology?’ It was Käsemann who famously made this claim in 1960,⁴⁰

37 Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 14. In his Gifford Lectures, Bultmann refers to the delay of the parousia at the start of his treatment of the ‘secularising of eschatology’ that took place in modernity: ‘The longer the parousia failed to come and the end of the world was removed to an indefinite distance, the longer the Church had a history in this world, the more an interest in history developed.’ Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Gifford Lectures 1955* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), p. 56.

38 For a recent and comprehensive assessment of this debate, see Andreas Lindemann, ‘Anthropologie und Kosmologie in der Theologie des Paulus: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Rudolf Bultmann und Ernst Käsemann’, in Martin Bauspiess, Christof Landmesser and Friederike Portenhauser, eds., *Theologie und Wirklichkeit: Diskussionen der Bultmann-Schule* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2011), pp. 149–83.

39 See, for example, Ernst Käsemann, ‘Das Problem des historischen Jesus’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 51 (1954), pp. 125–53; Ernst Käsemann, ‘Gottesgerechtigkeit bei Paulus’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 58 (1961), pp. 367–78; Ernst Käsemann, ‘Sackgassen im Streit um den historischen Jesus [1964]’, in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), vol. 2, pp. 31–68; hereafter *EVB*. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1960); Rudolf Bultmann, ‘Dikaiosynē Theou’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964), pp. 12–16; Rudolf Bultmann, ‘Antwort an Ernst Käsemann [1965]’, in *GuV*, vol. 4, pp. 190–8.

40 Ernst Käsemann, ‘Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 57 (1960), pp. 162–85; *EVB*, vol. 2, pp. 82–104. ET Ernst Käsemann, ‘The Beginnings of Christian Theology’, in *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM Press, 1969), pp. 82–107. Käsemann followed up this essay two years later with a response to critics and a clarification of his position. See Ernst Käsemann, ‘Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalypitk’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 59 (1962), pp. 257–84; *EVB*, vol. 2, pp. 105–31. ET Ernst Käsemann, ‘On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic’, in *New Testament Questions of Today*, pp. 108–37.

and it was Bultmann who adopted this question as the title for his 1964 rebuttal.⁴¹

According to Käsemann, the defining feature of apocalyptic hope is *Naherwartung*, the expectation of something imminent within history. The heart of early Christian apocalyptic is the belief in the ‘impending irruption [*baldig Hereinbrechen*] of the parousia’,⁴² marked by ‘the return of Jesus in the role of the heavenly Son of Man’.⁴³ Jesus serves a cosmic function as the one who enacts the last judgement and brings about the general resurrection of the dead. In his reconstruction of the origins of Christian theology, Käsemann argues that this apocalyptic conception of the world was a polemical reaction to the rise of Christian ‘enthusiasm’, which viewed the present possession of the Spirit as the final *telos* of history. The fact that this apocalypticism is mythological in nature is not at all denied by Käsemann. He states, in fact, that the apocalyptic hope in an imminent end ‘proved to be a delusion’ and resulted in the collapse of the ‘whole theological framework of apocalyptic, with its expectation of the parousia’.⁴⁴ He insists on recognizing the ‘mythical character’ of the early Christian understanding of history.⁴⁵ He further warns against the notion of a ‘perennial theology’ (*theologia perennis*), a system of thought universally valid for all times and places. And yet he asks ‘whether Christian theology can ever survive in any legitimate form without this [apocalyptic] theme’.⁴⁶

-
- 41 Rudolf Bultmann, ‘Ist die Apokalyptik die Mutter der christlichen Theologie? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Ernst Käsemann’, in *Exegetica: Aufsätze zur Erforschung des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967), pp. 476–82. For Lindemann’s explication of Bultmann’s essay, see Lindemann, ‘Anthropologie und Kosmologie in der Theologie des Paulus’, pp. 167–70.
- 42 Käsemann, ‘The Beginnings of Christian Theology’, 92; *EVB*, vol. 2, p. 91. My translation. Future references to Käsemann will place the German citation from *EVB* in parentheses.
- 43 Käsemann, ‘On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic’, p. 114 (110). The later emphasis in Christian teaching on a chronologically distant hope is the result of the failure of the parousia to occur as expected. As Käsemann puts it in a footnote:

I speak of primitive Christian apocalyptic to denote the expectation of an imminent parousia [*die Naherwartung der Parusie*]. Where this is changed in apocalyptic literature to the expectation of something far distant in time [*Fernerwartung*], the change occurs because of disappointed hopes and consequent caution in prophecy, without being able to conceal the original phenomenon. We can understand well enough why apocalyptic seldom enjoyed the good will of the dominant church or theology. For this reason it is all the more important to define the limits of the problem which is presented by the fact that the beginnings both of church and theology were conditioned by ‘imminent’ expectation. (p. 109 n. 1 [106 n. 1])

- 44 Käsemann, ‘The Beginnings of Christian Theology’, p. 106 (104); translation revised.
- 45 Käsemann, ‘The Beginnings of Christian Theology’, p. 96 (95).
- 46 Käsemann, ‘The Beginnings of Christian Theology’, p. 107 (104).

Bultmann responds to this question in the affirmative: not only *can* Christian theology do away with this apocalyptic theme, but it *must* do so if it is to remain authentically *Christian* – that is to say, if it is not to confuse the gospel kerygma of Jesus Christ with the outdated cultural-historical perspective or *Weltbild* of the prophets and apostles. We can get a better sense of what concerns Bultmann by looking closely at his 1964 response. He begins with a clarification regarding the difference between apocalyptic and eschatology:

In two significant essays Ernst Käsemann has championed the thesis that apocalyptic is the true origin of early Christian theology, indeed, the ‘mother of Christian theology’. I could accept this if instead of ‘apocalyptic’ we speak of ‘eschatology’. Eschatology is the notion [*Vorstellung*] of the end of the world; it is a notion which as such does not intend to include a concrete picture [*Bild*] of the end-occurrence [*Endgeschehen*], which does not even think of the end as chronologically fixed. As Paul and John demonstrate, there is not only ‘future’ but also ‘present’ eschatology. By contrast, apocalyptic is a specific concretization of the eschatological notion. It draws up pictures of the end-occurrence, and it fixes the end chronologically. So because Käsemann chooses the concept [*Begriff*] of apocalyptic, he understands the early Christian eschatological expectation as the expectation of an *imminent* end [*Naherwartung*].⁴⁷

This statement is instructive, especially when compared with contemporary uses of apocalyptic language in theology. The crucial aspect of apocalyptic for Bultmann is its specific depiction of a future chronological occurrence within world history. But this idea appears nowhere in Martyn’s presentation of the key aspects of Pauline apocalyptic, nor does it appear in the current theological appropriation of apocalyptic themes.⁴⁸ The notion of an imminent occurrence is virtually absent from the

47 Bultmann, ‘Ist die Apokalyptik die Mutter der christlichen Theologie?’, p. 476.

48 The break from traditional apocalypticism on this point is due to Martyn’s decision to prioritize Galatians above Paul’s other letters and make this letter to be the ‘hermeneutical key’ of what counts as apocalyptic. Current apocalyptic theologians, in following Martyn, thereby adopt this axiomatic decision as their own. This move is significant, since Galatians has ‘no archangel’s call, no sound of God’s trumpet, no reference to Christ’s parousia, no mention of the general resurrection of the dead’. Instead, Martyn finds a number of apocalyptic motifs, the three most important of which are (a) eschatological dualism, (b) God’s redemptive invasion in Christ, and (c) the crucified cosmos and the new creation. Regarding the first, it is especially important to note Martyn’s observation that ‘in Paul’s vocabulary the expression that stands opposite “the present evil age” is not “the coming age,” as in numerous apocalyptic traditions. For the apostle, the opposite of the present evil age is rather “the new creation” (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17)’. See Martyn, ‘The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians’, pp. 252–9 (pp. 252–3).

The decision to make Galatians definitive for Pauline apocalyptic is the exegetical outworking of earlier efforts to rethink the idea of apocalyptic as such. According to Martinus C. de Boer, Christopher Rowland’s 1982 study of Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic is responsible for differentiating the concept of apocalyptic from a strictly

present conversation. Instead, as Morse's work demonstrates, imminence has been deliteralized to refer to the unanticipatable forthcoming of God in the present moment.⁴⁹ Bultmann goes on to add that 'one could also speak in a certain sense of a "present" apocalyptic, insofar as one thinks of the present as being ruled by Satan and by the "powers"'.⁵⁰ It is clear that he understands the concept of apocalyptic to refer literally to a mythological understanding of God and the world. On both of these points, the vast majority of participants in the apocalyptic conversation – insofar as they do not make a literal return of Christ constitutive of apocalyptic – are in agreement with Bultmann without realizing it, or at least without admitting it. Put another way, the issue over which Bultmann and Käsemann divided is *not* the issue over which contemporary apocalyptic theologians divide from Bultmann today.

3. Since virtually everyone already demythologizes in some sense – even if only in Morse's limited sense of deliteralization – the contrast between Pauline apocalyptic theology and Bultmann's eschatological theology is widely understood today as a conflict between, respectively, a *cosmic-historical* and an *existential* conception of the saving-event of Christ. By 'cosmic-historical', scholars today do not mean that there is a literal cosmic catastrophe that will occur in the future. Instead, they give it some nonliteral or theological interpretation; they might say, for example, that the

futurist orientation. Rowland writes: 'Apocalyptic is as much involved in the attempt to understand things as they are now as to predict future events.' See Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982), p. 2. Cf. Martinus C. de Boer, 'Paul, Theologian of God's Apocalypse', *Interpretation* 56 (2002), pp. 21–33. De Boer puts it nicely: 'The promised solution ("the age to come") must address the problem ("this age")' (p. 23).

49 According to Morse's apocalyptic reinterpretation of heaven (*The Difference Heaven Makes*, pp. 10–12):

Most basic to all of the sounds of the Gospel is this association of heaven with life that is currently coming to meet us. Whatever sense it may make, it is certainly news to hear that our life is daily a fresh occurrence of heaven . . . What happens on earth is inseparable from the course heaven takes . . . [A] world of difference exists between hearing that Jesus looks skyward, and is taken up into the sky, and in hearing that Jesus looks to, and is taken up into, the very life that is now forthcoming toward us . . . Here the direction of heaven in relation to the disciples is depicted not as their looking up above the earth, or overlooking the earth, but as looking ahead or forward to what is promised to come into the very situation that now faces the disciples where they are on earth.

A world of difference indeed! The distinction Morse draws here, though he does not make it explicit, is between a mythological and demythologized conception of apocalyptic. He affirms Bultmann in the sense of a 'deliteralizing' of heaven, but he levels a number of unsubstantiated criticisms that are often treated as truisms today, especially the claims that Bultmann subjects Scripture to an alien ontology and that his conception of theology is apolitical and individualistic (pp. 37–41). If we have reason to reassess Bultmann's relation to apocalyptic, then perhaps it is time to reassess old assumptions about other aspects of his theology.

50 Bultmann, 'Ist die Apokalyptik die Mutter der christlichen Theologie?', p. 476.

Christ-event has cosmic significance or that divine revelation is intrinsically communal and historical in nature. The distinction between apocalyptic and eschatology, according to this recent reinterpretation, comes down to a distinction between sociality and individuality. At least on a surface reading, this construal certainly has much to commend itself, especially as a way of differentiating Bonhoeffer and Bultmann. There is a strong temptation to divide them in terms of, respectively, a cosmic-apocalyptic sociality and an individual-existential subjectivity.

Criticisms of Bultmann as a liberal subjectivist are deeply embedded in the theological literature, and we cannot adequately deal with the topic here. It must suffice to point out that Bultmann's rejection of 'objectification' (*Objektivierung*) is by no means a rejection of the 'objective' as such. It is in fact a criticism of the Cartesian attempt to capture divine activity in the categories and concepts of the thinking subject, that is, to make the transcendent (or *geschichtlich*) available on the level of the immanent (or *historisch*).⁵¹ Bultmann aims to uncover the true reality of the Christ-event – a reality that is not accessible as a neutral or objective fact, but is only accessible to the one who faithfully responds to it in active obedience. It is precisely this point that Bultmann goes on to emphasize in his response to Käsemann:

Käsemann's statement that the dialectic of indicative and imperative is only 'the projection of the relation of Christ's reign to the subjection of all cosmic forces into the anthropology of the Christian', is in my opinion only right if Christ's reign is understood as his lordship over me, if my being is understood as *καὶνὴ κτίσις ἐν Χριστῷ* ['new creation in Christ']; correspondingly, the subjection of the cosmic forces must be understood as my active participation in this subjection through my obedience. If the lordship of Christ and the subjection of the cosmic forces are understood only as apocalyptic statements, then although they occur in the relation of the already and the not-yet, they are not in a dialectical relation. They do this only if they are oriented toward the individual.⁵²

It may seem as if this reference to the individual confirms the typical worries raised about Bultmann's existentialism, but that would be a hasty judgement. Bultmann is concerned about descriptions of the Christ-event that 'are understood *only* as apocalyptic', by which he means, only about a cosmic intervention that takes place 'over our heads', so to speak. Apocalyptic in this bad sense refers to a kind of objectivity that is on the same level as the objectivity of Caesar crossing the

51 For a defense of Bultmann that accurately interprets his theology, see Friedrich Gogarten, *Demythologizing and History* (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 48–81. For a thorough historical analysis of Bultmann's use of the concept *Objektivierung*, see Roger A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing: Philosophy and Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp. 38–86, 169–231.

52 Bultmann, 'Ist die Apokalyptik die Mutter der christlichen Theologie?', pp. 480–1.

Rubicon, to use one of Bultmann's favorite examples. Bad apocalyptic is inherently literalistic; it is an objectification, and thus banalization, of the Christ-event, such that it is not really the *event* of Christ at all but a mere object or idea. But then such an object or idea cannot be the invasion of divine grace, the inbreaking of the new age. By rejecting a certain notion of apocalyptic, Bultmann is actually making possible the current Pauline apocalyptic understanding of Christ's advent.

Put another way, Bultmann's point is that if such statements are going to be theologically meaningful, they have to genuinely concern us on an existential level. The *promerity* of such statements has to be made explicit. Bonhoeffer would concur with Bultmann. In his 1943 essay 'What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?' Bonhoeffer argues that truth is an inherently *relational* category. Truth is determined by the concrete context in which one speaks. 'Even God', he writes, 'is not a general principle but is the Living One who has placed me in a life that is fully alive and within this life demands my service.'⁵³ To speak of God – in this case, to speak of God's apocalyptic incursion into the world in Christ – is to speak of the God who confronts *me* and calls *me* into a new life of obedience. A truthful word 'must vary' according to context, because it is 'not an entity constant in itself but is as lively as life itself'.⁵⁴ In short, talk of God's apocalypse is not theoretical knowledge of some natural fact or historical datum; it is an *existential* knowledge in which the one speaking knows herself to be involved. If apocalypticism is to be a valid mode of God-talk, it will have to be just as existentially oriented as Bultmann's concept of eschatology.

4. Bultmann confirms the Pauline-apocalyptic character of his theology in another key paragraph early in the essay. After mentioning the possibility of a 'present' apocalyptic, he goes on to describe his own view regarding 'present eschatology'. He argues, in essence, for a thoroughly christocentric theology that emphasizes what Christ *has done* and today *is still doing*, over against speculation about some future occurrence:

The presence of the end in the 'present' eschatology of the early Christians is indeed also chronologically fixed, insofar as the end began with the sending of Jesus, 'when the fullness of time had come' (Gal. 4.4), when 'the light had come into the world' (John 3.19). But the end has now become the present. It is independent of some end-occurrence that is still pending, which apocalyptic awaits. The end-occurrence takes place rather in the proclamation as an occurrence that happens at any particular time (2 Cor. 6.2; John 5.24f), as an occurrence in which all people are involved for whom this proclamation gives faith and by which they become new creatures, for whom the 'old' has

53 Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, p. 602.

54 Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, p. 604.

passed away (2 Cor. 5.17), who have already passed from death to life (John 5.24; cf. 1 John 3.14).⁵⁵

One cannot overstate the importance of this paragraph for understanding Bultmann. First, he affirms the concrete and historical nature of apocalyptic, but he relocates its historical grounding away from a future catastrophe and places it in the singular history of Jesus Christ. The apocalypse is not a cosmic battle between God and Satan at the end of history; it is, instead, the sending of Jesus into the world, as described by the Gospel of John, an advent that confronts us with God's judgement and grace in the present moment. Second, and for this reason, he rejects the notion that there is a final *telos* that is still pending which could surpass Jesus in importance. The end has already come, and it arrives again and again whenever and wherever one confronts the news of Jesus in the gospel's proclamation. As Bultmann puts it in a 1962 letter to a Lutheran missionary, 'When faith is the present possession of the life of God, and when eternity is present now to the man who has faith, then every speculation about the consummation of the present world (consummation as a cosmological event) becomes superfluous.'⁵⁶ The old age has already been destroyed by the inbreaking of the new, and life has already swallowed up death. For Bultmann, this is the message of a 'present eschatology'. Today's Pauline theologians simply call this 'apocalyptic theology', but the meaning is essentially the same.⁵⁷

-
- 55 Bultmann, 'Ist die Apokalyptik die Mutter der christlichen Theologie?', pp. 476–7. Whereas Käsemann states that present eschatology is strictly included *within* a future, apocalyptic eschatology, Bultmann makes a crucial dialectical addition: 'As true as it is to say – that is, against the enthusiastic pneumatics – that present eschatology is "anchored and qualified" [*verankert und eingeschränkt*] by apocalyptic, it is, in my opinion, also true to say, conversely, that apocalyptic eschatology is anchored and qualified by the present' (p. 480). The notion that apocalyptic is anchored in a present confrontation with Christ is a view that finds support in current apocalyptic theology.
- 56 Rudolf Bultmann, 'Letter to Rev. Stanley D. Padgett', *Lutheran Quarterly* 2 (1988), p. 554. Bultmann goes on to say:

That does not mean that a consummation of the world will not happen in the future. But it is more important to reflect on the (individual) consummation of the world which happens for every man in his death, when the world vanishes for him – than to reflect on the consummation of the world as a whole. And in every case you are right: 'the future consummation is really the future confirmation that our faith is not in vain now' – this belongs as well to the individual as to the cosmological consummation.

- 57 Compare, for instance, the apocalyptic account of heaven given by Morse with Bultmann's 1950 Marburg sermon on Mk 13:31–3. Morse interprets the hope of heaven in terms of God's promise of grace that frees us from the fear of death and loss. The divine inbreaking is interpreted as a 'coming of life . . . inbreaking at hand in the situation of each and all', in which 'news of this life . . . is not expressed, or recognized as such, literalistically, but parabolically – and it is only instantiated as real life apocalyptically by the taking place in the present tense where we are of an arrival upon the scene that is unprecedented' (Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, pp. 117–18). Morse's account is entirely present-tense and highly existential in nature. The apocalyptic inbreaking is not

In both its past and present modes, the eschatological event is an instance of what Bultmann calls 'paradoxical identity'. The term 'paradoxical identity' is Bultmann's third way between the *direct identity* of pantheism – his primary target being the 'pantheism of history' that he finds in liberal theology⁵⁸ – and the *nonidentity* of dualism. Mythology represents an unreflective and unintended pantheism insofar as it locates divine action on the same ontological plane as other occurrences in nature and history. Demythologizing simply means interpreting God's apocalyptic action in a way that preserves its genuine transcendence and invisibility. God's action in Christ is therefore *paradoxical* in the sense that its eschatological and transcendent reality is visible only to the eyes of faith. The new age established in Christ is paradoxically identical with the old age that is generally apparent.⁵⁹ The kerygma proclaims an epistemological crisis, according to Bultmann, because it speaks of an event that encounters us *sola fide*. It quickly

a literal miracle within nature, but an unprecedented message of God's promise in Christ. Morse writes of this event as being 'at hand' but not 'in hand', in the sense that it is beyond our ability to anticipate or control. If we compare this to Bultmann, we discover many points of similarity:

The eternal reality which is to mold and color our present is not a reality immanent within it, which by our own resources we might elicit and express; it is a gift coming to us from the beyond, it is the resurrection of the dead. And as the passing away of heaven and earth is not something which is to be realized only in the future, so the resurrection of the dead is not simply an event which awaits future realization . . . Rather, the gift of eternal grace gives to our present in time that genuine truth and reality which man today, in the midst of our spiritual confusion, often so wistfully seeks . . . The future towards which we are moving becomes then for us God's future . . . It is from God's future that the present receives its eternal meaning. (Rudolf Bultmann, *This World and the Beyond: Marburg Sermons* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), pp. 245–7)

58 Rudolf Bultmann, 'Liberal Theology and the Latest Theological Movement [1924]', in *Faith and Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 32–3. Cf. *GuV*, vol. 1, pp. 5–6.

59 The following passage from Bultmann's 1952 essay on demythologizing represents his best account of the concept of paradoxical identity:

The idea that divine action is unworldly or transcendent is preserved only if such action is represented not as something taking place *between* occurrences in the world but as something that takes place *in* them . . . God's act is hidden from all eyes other than the eyes of faith. The only thing that can be generally seen and established is the 'natural' occurrence. In it God's hidden act takes place. The immediate objection to this is that Christian faith is thereby transformed into pantheistic piety. But whereas pantheism believes in the *direct identity* of worldly occurrences with divine action, faith asserts their *paradoxical identity*, which can be believed in in each case only against appearances . . . In general, God is just as hidden in nature and history for believers as for everyone else. But insofar as each concrete occurrence is seen in the light of the word of grace spoken to me, faith should and can accept it as God's doing, even if its meaning remains enigmatic. . . [T]he paradox of faith is that it understands an event that can be established in its natural and historical continuum as nevertheless God's act. This 'nevertheless' is inseparable from faith. (Rudolf

becomes evident that Martyn's concept of 'bifocal vision' and Morse's notion of 'incommensurable juxtapositions'⁶⁰ are both, in fact, equivalent to Bultmann's concept of 'paradoxical identity'. When Martyn thus says that the new age is simultaneously present within the old age in a way that calls for a new epistemology of faith, he is simply stating in different words Bultmann's own position. The point for all three is that the apocalypse is not an event alongside other events in history, nor does it create a new historical age that appears to all people apart from faith. It is neither a mythological miracle nor a metaphysical idea. On the contrary, it is an epistemological crisis in the sense that it alters our very relation to the world. The Christ-event transfigures history for the one who faithfully participates in it.

5. What about Bultmann's emphasis on the individual? Is this not still in conflict with the sociopolitical and communal nature of apocalyptic that contemporary theologians rightly underscore? We certainly do confront a difference in emphasis at this point. But is there an unbridgeable impasse between Bonhoeffer and Bultmann? Is there anything to warrant claims that Bultmann's theology is 'a new form of pietism, locating faith in what Bonhoeffer calls the sphere of personal inwardness, which is one of the essential features of religion'?⁶¹ Such statements are still repeated as established facts despite the fact their basis in Bultmann's actual texts is dubious at best.⁶² As a dialectical theologian from beginning to end, Bultmann's entire career is in opposition to the liberal theology of feeling (*Gefühl*) and inward experience (*Erlebnis*), and, as noted earlier, he even subjects the religious language of God to critique in explicit agreement with Bonhoeffer.⁶³ But the grounds for overturning this old criticism of Bultmann go much deeper.

One of his most direct statements on the matter appears in a sermon given in Marburg on 16 December 1931, where Bultmann expressly rejects the reduction of Christ's advent to the individual soul on behalf of a *cosmic* inbreaking:

The coming of the Lord, which the Christian community anticipates in Advent and celebrates at Christmas, is not at all primarily his coming to the individual, his entering into the soul, but rather his coming to the *world*. 'The eternal light comes in, giving the world a new appearance' (Luther) . . . God's word is . . . that the Lord *has* come, that the eternal light *has* given the world a new appearance. This coming . . . is not something which the soul ever and again experiences;

Bultmann, 'On the Problem of Demythologizing', in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 111–13. Cf. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, pp. 61–2)

60 Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, pp. 108–11.

61 Russell W. Palmer, 'Demythologizing and Non-Religious Interpretation: A Comparison of Bultmann and Bonhoeffer', *Ilfiff Review* 31 (1974), p. 12.

62 For example, see Adam Kotsko, *The Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Salvation* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), pp. 10–11, 16.

63 See Bultmann, 'Der Gottesgedanke und der moderne Mensch', in *GuV*, vol. 4, pp. 113–27.

such a comfort quickly vanishes. Rather it is the coming of the Lord into the world; it is the word that the Lord *has* come and *is* with us. If we are serious in the expectation of the coming one, then *we await one who has already come, who is already here.*⁶⁴

Christ comes to the *world* and makes everything new. It is because his advent is a cosmic event embracing the entirety of God's creation that it is also an occurrence for each individual person. At the same time, Bultmann insists that we do not have epistemic access to the world-transfiguring reality of Christ's advent prior to or apart from our individual participation in this event through faith. His emphasis on personal faith is not a denial of Christ's cosmic lordship, but rather a denial of our *access* to this lordship independent of God's awakening interruption of our existence in the word of the kerygma. Our knowledge of this divine event in Christ is solely made possible by God's action upon us. Over against the notion that Bultmann's definition of faith as self-understanding means that faith is a matter of inward experience which gives the individual the power of self-reconstruction, we discover instead that Bultmann defines faith as 'being the object of the divine activity [*Gegenstand des göttlichen Tuns*] and being oneself summoned to act'.⁶⁵ Eberhard Jüngel rightly writes of 'the passivity of faith' in Bultmann's theology, in which 'the passivity of receiving is identical with the act [*Tat*] of decision'. Consequently, 'the understanding-of-oneself [*Sich-selbst-Verstehen*] that faith implies is the exact opposite of a dwelling-on-oneself [*Bei-sich-selbst-Verweilens*]'.⁶⁶ Faith, for Bultmann, is inherently *ex-centric*: it is an *encounter* with and an obedient *response* to the God who confronts us in Jesus Christ and in whom we come to understand ourselves anew. As he would often say, 'A faith which concentrates on itself is no more faith than a love which concentrates on itself is love.'⁶⁷

The analogy with love, however, is more than just an analogy. For Bultmann, Christian faith is necessarily oriented toward the neighbor, in the sense that faith

64 Rudolf Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort: Predigten, Andachten, Ansprachen 1906–1941* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), p. 240.

65 Rudolf Bultmann, *What Is Theology?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 237 n. 144. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), p. 129 n. 67. Future German citations from this work in parentheses.

66 Eberhard Jüngel, *Glauben und Verstehen: Zum Theologiebegriff Rudolf Bultmanns* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1985), pp. 56–9. This is in contrast to Jüngel's less nuanced assessment of Bultmann in Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), pp. 239–40. For an excellent defense of Bultmann's account of faith, see Benjamin Myers, 'Faith as Self-Understanding: Towards a Post-Barthian Appreciation of Rudolf Bultmann', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10 (2008), pp. 21–35.

67 'Ein Glaube, der bei sich selbst verweilt, ist so wenig Glaube, wie eine Liebe, die bei sich selbst verweilt, Liebe ist.' Bultmann, 'On the Question of Christology [1927]', in *Faith and Understanding*, p. 144; *GuV*, vol. 1, p. 113. The sentence is repeated verbatim in his lectures on theology. See Bultmann, *What Is Theology?*, p. 155 (157).

paradoxically coincides with the work of love.⁶⁸ The fact that faith is a self-understanding never means that faith is self-involved or self-contained. The new self established by God is one that is made open to others in a radical way. His 1930 essay 'Das christliche Gebot der Nächstenliebe' describes the love of God as that which 'determines me in my being-with-others [*Miteinandersein*]'.⁶⁹ The kerygmatic word of judgement and grace that creates faith informs us that 'we are in the same situation as our "neighbours", that we are sinners as they are, and blessed as they are. For them too forgiveness is already present in Christ, and we have to see them as those who have been forgiven.'⁷⁰ Notice the strongly realistic language here: 'forgiveness is *already present* in Christ'. My new self-understanding is an intrinsically *social* understanding; it is by no means inward and self-enclosed. In his 1967 commentary on the three Johannine epistles, Bultmann comments on the command to 'love one another' by noting the Johannine connection of the 'neighbor' with the 'world': 'If the love of God has as its object the world and thereby "we," the object of those loved by God is accordingly the neighbors . . . The gift of God's love includes the demand for mutual love.'⁷¹ The eschatological event of God's justifying grace thus places the individual within a social context – not only the church, as the place where we hear the kerygma, but also and primarily the world. Neighbor-love has the whole world in view. Since the world has 'a new appearance', each person in each new situation has a new appearance as well; every person is now the neighbor to whom we are responsible. The new possibilities established by grace are intrinsically *ethical* possibilities to be actualized within our concrete political situations.

While this social dimension is discernable in Bultmann, it is not prominent enough. It is on this point above all that a Bultmannian theology ought to learn from Bonhoeffer's more consistently social account of revelation. In the final analysis, Bultmann's emphasis on the individual's existential historicity and Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the community's social historicity are equally essential to theology's reflection on God's self-revelation in Christ. Bultmann emphasizes individual responsibility with an eye toward the social context; Bonhoeffer emphasizes the social context with an eye toward individual responsibility.⁷² Both are necessary

68 For example, see Bultmann, *What Is Theology?*, p. 144 (144): 'In the decision of faith the decision of love is made; the one is not without the other.'

69 Rudolf Bultmann, 'To Love Your Neighbour', *Scottish Periodical* 1 (1947), p. 53; *GuV*, vol. 1, p. 242. Translation revised.

70 Bultmann, 'To Love Your Neighbour', pp. 55–6; *GuV*, vol. 1, p. 244.

71 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. 66.

72 A complete defense of Bultmann on this point is beyond the scope of the present argument. The following two exhibits must suffice. First, Bultmann emphasizes individual responsibility in order to let the gospel *freely* engage the sociopolitical situation. In his 1958 article 'Theology for Freedom and Responsibility' he warns against the temptation to turn the message of Christ into a piece of propaganda. For this reason, according to Bultmann, 'the church's task is to proclaim the word of God, not to pronounce political judgments . . . Theology must be sharply on guard against any identification of the Christian faith with a political program.' At the same time, Bultmann insists that 'the Christian ought to act as such in practical life, and therefore in the

and mutually reinforcing facets of a singular apocalyptic-eschatological event of reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

6. When Bultmann rejects apocalyptic, he is opposing the literalistic and mythological conception of God's inbreaking that one finds in the texts associated with the genre of apocalyptic literature. But this is the conception of apocalyptic that Bonhoeffer himself rejects as gnostic and dualistic, and it is the very same conception that contemporary Pauline apocalyptic theologians reject as well. In short, it is no longer possible to repeat the simplistic bifurcation between apocalyptic and eschatology that one finds in the work of scholars such as J. Christiaan Beker. The dialectical theology of Karl Barth, whom current theologians identify as the one who paved the way for a truly Pauline apocalyptic in his *Der Römerbrief*, is precisely what Beker rejects under the label of 'neoorthodoxy', in which he also includes the work of Bultmann. According to Beker, 'Neoorthodoxy collapsed apocalyptic eschatology into Christology.'⁷³ The notion of eschatology 'in Neoorthodoxy becomes a term that no longer has any precise meaning', because it 'refers not to future eschatology but to the Christ-event as God's transcendent revelation'.⁷⁴ Ironically, it is exactly this identification of apocalyptic eschatology with the transcendent-eschatological Christ-event that is now labeled 'Pauline apocalyptic', thanks to the work of Martyn and those who have followed his lead.⁷⁵ It is one of the unexpected twists of theological history that the eschatological insights which Bultmann developed could be rejected by his own students, but then be repackaged, reformulated and affirmed by the following generation – though still ostensibly in opposition to the great Marburger.

political sphere also; which is to say that he recognizes that he is responsible in political life also and acts in that awareness'. See Rudolf Bultmann, 'Theology for Freedom and Responsibility', *Christian Century* (27 August 1958), pp. 967–9.

Second, we should briefly note Bultmann's own political action during the *Kirchenkampf*. Bultmann was the leader of the Marburg school's unequivocal denunciation of the Aryan Paragraph in 1933. See, in particular, Rudolf Bultmann, 'Der Arier-Paragraph im Raume der Kirche', *Theologische Blätter* 12 (1933), pp. 359–70, where he challenges the views of the Erlangen school and Georg Wobbermin. For the texts related to that debate, see Heinz Liebing, ed., *Die Marburger Theologen und der Arierparagraph in der Kirche: Eine Sammlung von Texten aus den Jahren 1933 und 1934* (Marburg: Elwert, 1977). That same year he published 'Die Aufgabe der Theologie in der gegenwärtigen Situation', which is his most political piece. There he renders an unequivocal judgement against the defamation of the Jews as a 'demonic distortion' of the faith. Rudolf Bultmann, 'Die Aufgabe der Theologie in der gegenwärtigen Situation', *Theologische Blätter* 12 (1933), pp. 161–6.

73 J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 139.

74 Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, p. 142.

75 To put the matter more bluntly, I contend that we must posit a break between the Käsemann–Beker school of apocalyptic and the Martyn–Morse (or 'Union Seminary') school of apocalyptic. We might differentiate these two schools in terms of where one places the 'center of gravity' in Paul's theology: Romans and Galatians, respectively.

Bultmann articulates what we might call a *postmetaphysical* or *postmythological* apocalyptic theology, though he, of course, could not envision using the term ‘apocalyptic’ in this way. What he rules out is the notion of an apocalyptic inbreaking that occurs (a) on the level of empirical history or (b) on the level of a general ontology. Either form of the apocalypse would result in a revelation that is immanent and calculable rather than transcendent and incalculable, that is, ‘in hand’ rather than ‘at hand’, as Morse puts it. Against these options, Bultmann argues instead that the eschatological event ‘happens here and now’ as a contingent disruption of our existence in the proclamation of the kerygma. It is ‘once for all’ not as something that transforms human nature in the abstract, but rather as a singular divine act in a concrete historical moment (*Augenblick*).⁷⁶ Every moment may be the occasion for a new eschatological event wherein God’s future breaks into our present and opens us up to the possibility of faithful obedience to the word of God.

One must not misconstrue Bultmann to mean that the apocalyptic event is a mere possibility that we have to actualize, much less that the justifying word of God is an idealistic projection of our own existential needs. This is a common conservative reaction to Bultmann, but it is belied by what we might accurately call his *soteriological realism*. For example, in a sermon from 1926 on the meaning of Christmas, he says that the event of the ‘word made flesh’ inaugurates a new beginning within history, an event that not only ‘*always* wants to be the beginning for us, [but] *is* in fact always the beginning for us, whether we want it to be or not’. It demands our decision only in the sense that it demands we live in obedience to this new actuality.⁷⁷ In his lectures on theological encyclopedia, Bultmann argues that Jesus Christ is the locus of God’s eschatological inbreaking in which the world is made new. Christ is rightly understood as the ‘turning point of the aeons, the *krisis*’, such that in him ‘forgiveness is already there’.⁷⁸ Bultmann states that ‘since Christ the world (history!) is other than it was’, because now ‘the new aeon is *present*’.⁷⁹ But

76 Cf. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, pp. 80–2:

According to the New Testament the decisive significance of Jesus Christ is that he – in his person, his coming, his passion, and his glorification – is the eschatological event . . . The eschatological event which is Jesus Christ happens here and now as the Word is being preached (2 Cor. 6:2; Jn 5:24) regardless of whether this Word is accepted or rejected . . . Thus, the ‘once for all’ is now understood in its genuine sense, namely, as the ‘once for all’ of the eschatological event. For this ‘once for all’ is not the uniqueness of an historical event but means that a particular historical event, that is, Jesus Christ, is to be understood as the eschatological ‘once for all.’ As an eschatological event this ‘once for all’ is always present in the proclaimed word, not as a timeless truth, but as happening here and now . . . The acting grace [of God] is present now as the eschatological event. The word of God is Word of God only as it happens here and now.

77 Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort*, pp. 237–8.

78 Bultmann, *What Is Theology?*, pp. 134–5 (135–6).

79 Bultmann, *What Is Theology?*, p. 140 (141).

this new age does not affect the world like other historical events, which result in demonstrable changes and are chronologically fixed in the past (or in the future, as in mythological forms of apocalypticism). The Christ-event is not 'a once-for-all historical act available to historical investigation, such as the crossing of the Rubicon'.⁸⁰ Neither does the new age constitute a metaphysical-ontological change to human nature as such. Instead, it confronts each person with the truth of their being before God. The new age is therefore an apocalyptic-eschatological interruption in the word of the kerygma. It is always 'new every morning', always 'present only *in actu*, as occurrence, an occurrence that cannot be observed like other happenings in the world but is perceivable only by one who participates in it'.⁸¹

I have argued here that Bultmann is rightly understood as an apocalyptic theologian, albeit of a contemporary Pauline variety that is dialectical, actualistic, paradoxical and existential in nature. He is not apocalyptic in the sense that he and his contemporaries understood it at the time. Neither Barth nor Bonhoeffer viewed apocalyptic favorably as a normative category in theological reflection, even though both are today viewed by many as distinctively apocalyptic thinkers.⁸² This radical reinterpretation of apocalyptic has made possible new readings of Bultmann's contemporaries. It is only fair that we allow for a new reading of Bultmann himself.

Conclusion: why an apocalyptic rapprochement?

A reasonable response at this point might be to ask: why pursue an apocalyptic rapprochement? If even Bultmann can be interpreted as an apocalyptic theologian, are we really still talking about apocalyptic theology? The answer to this is 'yes', for two main reasons: the first having to do with our understanding of Bultmann, and the second with our understanding of apocalyptic.

First, Bultmann is long overdue for a fresh rehearing of his theology. His work faded from view with the attacks of Jürgen Moltmann's *Theologie der Hoffnung* (1965) and Dorothee Sölle's *Politische Theologie* (1971), both of which decisively

80 Bultmann, *What Is Theology?*, p. 139 (139).

81 Rudolf Bultmann, 'Theology as Science [1941]', in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, p. 60.

82 In an interview in 1963, Barth was asked what he thought of Käsemann's thesis regarding apocalyptic. He responded by largely dismissing it as one more instance of an exegete trying to make a provocative claim by reducing the biblical witness to a single idea. What is more interesting is the fact that, according to Barth, Käsemann told him in a private conversation that 'what is true for the Gospel of Matthew is true, in his opinion, for the whole New Testament'. Karl Barth, *Gespräche 1963*, Gesamtausgabe 4 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005), pp. 253–7.

83 Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); Dorothee Sölle, *Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974). For an excellent defense of Bultmann against the charges of both Moltmann and Sölle (as well as Hans Frei), see James F. Kay, *Christus Praesens: A Reconsideration of Rudolf Bultmann's Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 125–72.

changed the dominant theological conversations.⁸³ Until recently, Bultmann seemed to belong to an almost irretrievable theological past. Thanks to the ongoing publication of his *Nachlass*, and the abundance of new literature on his theology, Bultmann's writings are receiving a new audience. With the renewed interest in his work – even though it is mostly limited to German scholarship – there is an opportunity to look again at these texts without the baggage of the old demythologizing debates. More importantly, this article confirms Krause's 1964 assessment of the Bultmann–Bonhoeffer relationship. Krause was even more right than he knew to argue for a fundamental agreement between the two theologians. By establishing a rapprochement on the level of apocalyptic – which deals with basic issues of Christology and soteriology – it should become possible to discover new ways of bringing together Bonhoeffer and Bultmann around issues of hermeneutics, ecclesiology and even ethics.

Second, the concept of apocalyptic needs clarification. Käsemann himself admitted that the word is 'ambiguous' (*mehrdeutig*), but that was over a half-century ago.⁸⁴ The current proliferation of articles and monographs on apocalyptic has resulted in a situation in which several different meanings of the word are in circulation. This article seeks to inject a modicum of clarity into the conversation – not by excluding certain meanings of the word in favor of others, but rather by acknowledging and affirming the various uses of apocalyptic in their diversity. Clarity should not come through the word's restriction to a single, universal definition; that would, ironically, be a non-apocalyptic approach to the word 'apocalyptic', in the sense of foreclosing the possibility of new interpretations of God's inbreaking in Christ. The polysemic nature of the concept is appropriate to its unfinalizable subject-matter.

A major contributor to the present confusion is the discrepancy between apocalyptic-as-historical-genre and apocalyptic-as-normative-concept. Scholars referring to the former (usually working in biblical studies and the history of religions) understand apocalyptic to refer to the ancient mythical notions of an imminent and immanent cosmic phenomenon, generally connected with Jewish prophecy and the longing for political emancipation. Scholars referring to the latter (usually working in theological studies) understand apocalyptic to function as a theological criterion for a proper understanding of the Christ-event and its significance for contemporary theological reflection. This appropriation of apocalyptic tends to be indebted to the christocentric revolution in modern theology that Barth inaugurated in his dialectical approach to God-talk. Such a view is premised on the conviction that a theology need not share the ancient cultural-historical assumptions of Second Temple Judaism in order to count as an exercise in apocalyptic thinking.

The purpose of this article has been to explicate what this latter understanding of apocalyptic entails. I have argued that it involves nothing less than a

84 Käsemann, 'On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic', p. 109 n. 1 (106 n. 1).

demythologizing of apocalyptic, one that seeks to differentiate between a *mythical-historical* apocalyptic and a *normative-theological* apocalyptic. The latter is a nonreligious and postmetaphysical mode of theological discourse; it is highly actualistic and paradoxical, ethical and hermeneutical. The recent interpretation of Bonhoeffer as an apocalyptic theologian implies this demythologized form of apocalyptic theology. This new category makes possible a novel and radical interpretation of Bultmann, one that unsettles long-held assumptions about his theology. It also opens up new possibilities for thinking about contemporary theology. Though it marks a conceptual break with the work of pioneering scholars from a century ago, it does so in a way that frees apocalyptic from outdated historical assumptions for future theological investigations.⁸⁵

85 I am grateful to Ry Siggelkow for reading an earlier draft of this article and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Any errors are, of course, my own.