

# Is Bultmann a Heideggerian theologian?

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## Abstract

Ever since the 1920s, Rudolf Bultmann has been charged with confining theology to philosophy, owing to his naïve adoption of Martin Heidegger's existentialist ontology. Bultmann's personal friendship with Heidegger is well-known, and the presence of Heideggerian concepts throughout his work is impossible to miss. But there is a great deal of confusion over the details of this relationship, and scholars differ widely over what conclusions we ought to draw regarding the nature of Bultmann's work. This article reassesses the Bultmann–Heidegger relationship from three angles. First, I show that the essential elements of Bultmann's theology were already in place before he met or learnt from Heidegger. Second, I argue that Bultmann circumscribes Heidegger's philosophy within a theology of revelation. Third, I demonstrate that his theological programme is, in principle, open to other conceptualities. Since nothing material rests on the appropriation of Heidegger, one cannot accurately call Bultmann a Heideggerian theologian.

**Keywords:** demythologising, existentialism, Martin Heidegger, ontology, phenomenology, translation

One of the oldest criticisms of Rudolf Bultmann, even among those who are generally charitable readers of his work, is that his theology is inextricably tied to Martin Heidegger's philosophy. It is usually taken for granted that this philosophy is a dead-end.<sup>1</sup> By tying Bultmann to Heidegger, one implies that Bultmann's existential theology, particularly his programme of existentialist interpretation, is not only obsolete but also irreparably flawed. But this criticism of Bultmann's project is largely assumed rather than demonstrated. There is a great need for a fresh clarification of the relationship between these two twentieth-century thinkers. After a historical overview of the origin and nature of this misunderstanding of Bultmann, I will make the following three points: (a) his theological programme was already in place prior to

<sup>1</sup> The question of the obsolete and objectionable nature of Heidegger's philosophy has been reopened with the intense debate surrounding the recent publication of the so-called 'black notebooks'. See Martin Heidegger, *Überlegungen II–XV (Schwarze Hefte 1931–1941)*, ed. Peter Trawny, Gesamtausgabe IV.94–6 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2014).

encountering Heidegger; (b) this programme opened itself to Heidegger's insights strictly on its own theological terms; and (c) this programme is in principle open to other philosophical conceptualities. We will see that what is finally at stake in this matter is the legitimacy of theological interpretation as such.

### The history of a misunderstanding

The charge goes back at least to Gerhardt Kuhlmann's criticism of Bultmann in 1929.<sup>2</sup> Kuhlmann argued that Heidegger's method was not a merely formal analysis but that the method is determined by its particular object – in this case, natural human existence. By adopting the concepts of Heidegger's existentialist analysis, Kuhlmann claimed, Bultmann was unable to thematise the existence of the believer in response to revelation. Karl Barth, who had been critical of Bultmann since the early 1920s, extended this critique in the early 1930s, when he began to address publicly the issue of theology and philosophy with respect to his former allies in the dialectical theology movement. On 10 and 12 March 1933, Barth gave a lecture on 'The First Commandment as a Theological Axiom', where he lumped Bultmann together with Friedrich Gogarten and Emil Brunner and accused them all of continuing the liberal tradition, which denies the axiomatic nature of the first commandment for theology by adding an 'and' to revelation. Barth describes Bultmann's position as 'New Testament and human existence'.<sup>3</sup> He went on to ask Bultmann, 'Are theology and philosophy really interchangeable concepts?'<sup>4</sup> Barth, of course, knew that this did not reflect Bultmann's actual position on the topic, since he had discussed the matter more fully a few years earlier, in his 1930 lecture on 'Theological and Philosophical Ethics'.<sup>5</sup> Barth was instead being deliberately polemical to make it clear that he no longer wanted to be associated with the theological writings of Bultmann,

<sup>2</sup> Gerhardt Kuhlmann, 'Zum theologischen Problem der Existenz: Fragen an Rudolf Bultmann', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* NF 10 (1929), pp. 28–57. For Bultmann's response, see Rudolf Bultmann, 'Die Geschichtlichkeit des Daseins und der Glaube: Antwort an Gerhardt Kuhlmann', in Andreas Lindemann (ed.), *Neues Testament und christliche Existenz: Theologische Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), pp. 59–83.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, 'Das erste Gebot als theologisches Axiom [1933]', in Karl Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1930–1933*, ed. Michael Beintker, Michael Hüthenhoff and Peter Zoicher, Gesamtausgabe 3 (Zürich: TVZ, 2013), p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>5</sup> See Karl Barth, 'Theologische und philosophische Ethik' in Karl Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1925–1930*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe 3 (Zürich: TVZ, 1994), pp. 542–65.

Brunner and Gogarten. Unfortunately, as Konrad Hammann observes, this led him to make ‘generalized and therefore misleading accusations’.<sup>6</sup>

Barth’s criticisms initiated a long history of accusing Bultmann of engaging in an existentialist version of natural theology. In 1964 Jürgen Moltmann criticised Bultmann’s Augustinianism, which ostensibly grounds our understanding of God on a hidden correlation between God and the individual self. This entire tradition is thus inherently guilty of natural theology, evidenced in the attempt to provide proofs of God from nature and history. Standing in this tradition, Bultmann has simply replaced the traditional proofs for the existence of God with an ‘existential proof of God’.<sup>7</sup> Eric Voegelin heightened the rhetoric even further in 1965:

Bultmann accepts the philosophical interpretation of existence... as true, endows it with the character of ‘natural theology’, and considers it the task of theology to elaborate the meaning of faith ‘in constant debate [*Auseinandersetzung*] with the natural understanding of unbelieving existence’. When the argument is presented in this rigorous form, its gnostic character becomes visible.<sup>8</sup>

According to C. Marvin Pate, ‘although Bultmann too was a neo-orthodox theologian, his embrace of the analogy of being, in particular his attempt to reinterpret the New Testament along the lines of Heideggerian existentialism, aligned him with natural theology’.<sup>9</sup> By describing Bultmann’s position as an ‘analogy of being’, Pate unambiguously pits Bultmann against Barth, given that the latter famously described the *analogia entis* as ‘the invention of the antichrist’.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, the association of Bultmann with Heidegger was reinforced by the most prominent and respected literature on his theology. Within anglophone scholarship it was the work of John Macquarrie, particularly his comparative analysis in *An Existentialist Theology*,<sup>11</sup> that, as Gareth Jones

<sup>6</sup> Konrad Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann: Eine Biographie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), p. 226.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchungen zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1964), p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Voegelin, ‘History and Gnosis [1965]’, in *Published Essays, 1953–1965*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> C. Marvin Pate, *From Plato to Jesus: What Does Philosophy Have to Do with Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), p. 162.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* [hereafter *KD*], 4 vols (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag AG, 1932–70), I/1, p. viii.

<sup>11</sup> See John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (London: SCM Press, 1955); John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing: Bultmann and his Critics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

puts it, 'encouraged the view that Rudolf Bultmann was little more than Martin Heidegger's insensitive religious amanuensis'.<sup>12</sup> Schubert Ogden, writing in 1961, reinforced this view in *Christ without Myth*: 'As John Macquarrie has beautifully shown, the ontology of human existence that Bultmann presupposes in almost all his theological work is precisely the one developed by the early Heidegger. If, then, one is to understand Bultmann's work, he must first understand Heidegger's existential analysis.'<sup>13</sup> In an effort to recognise that Bultmann was not merely restating Heidegger in pious language, Jones argued that Bultmann was engaged in phenomenological-ontological analysis alongside and in concert with Heidegger, that 'both Heidegger and Bultmann understand the task of theology in relation to the task of philosophy as phenomenology, and vice-versa'.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, in attempting to give Bultmann his due, Jones only further cemented in people's minds the connection between Bultmann and Heidegger. Instead of simply applying Heidegger's ideas within theology, Bultmann was now a kind of existentialist philosopher himself. On Jones' reading, the distinction between philosophy and theology is all but eradicated.

This view did not go unchallenged over the years. Anthony Thiselton, in his classic 1980 study, reached the conclusion that 'neither the terms of the problem nor how Bultmann wishes to solve it has been dictated by Heidegger'.<sup>15</sup> The difficulty was that Thiselton preceded his treatment of Bultmann with two chapters analysing Heidegger's early philosophy, which seemed to confirm Ogden's claim that one has to understand Heidegger before understanding Bultmann. Moreover, Thiselton was arguably more positive about Heidegger's significance for New Testament interpretation than Bultmann himself, primarily because Thiselton did not accept the intellectual framework of 'Lutheranism, dialectical theology, and Neo-Kantian philosophy', which is what sets the terms for Bultmann's project.<sup>16</sup> More recently, Christophe Chalamet has declared that 'Martin

<sup>12</sup> Gareth Jones, 'Phenomenology and Theology: A Note on Bultmann and Heidegger', *Modern Theology* 5/2 (1989), p. 161.

<sup>13</sup> Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 45–6.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, 'Phenomenology and Theology', p. 166. Jones develops this argument at length in Gareth Jones, *Bultmann: Towards a Critical Theology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 232.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

Heidegger... did not contribute in any significant way to Bultmann's theological program'.<sup>17</sup>

This correction does not seem to have found its way into the larger scholarly perception of Bultmann, particularly within New Testament studies.<sup>18</sup> In an essay in a recent volume assessing Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*, Francis Watson assumes the validity of Barth's claim that, in Bultmann's work, 'the texts [of scripture] are read through the filter of the early philosophy of Martin Heidegger... It is, says Barth, this philosophical straitjacket that prevents Bultmann from proceeding beyond self-understanding in relation to God and the world to the liberating knowledge of the divine Other opened up to us in Christ.' Watson speaks further of 'Bultmann's naïve enthusiasm for his philosophical mentors'.<sup>19</sup> James D. G. Dunn, in another essay in the same volume, describes Bultmann 'as a twentieth-century Heideggerean' who 'concluded that existentialist philosophy was the "canon within the canon," or the hermeneutical key for appreciating and interpreting the theology of the New Testament in contemporary language'.<sup>20</sup> Shawn Kelley has even argued that Bultmann's interpretations 'are racialized, irrespective of Bultmann's intentions', on the grounds that the 'fundamental structure' of his thought is supposedly determined by 'Heideggerian categories'.<sup>21</sup>

Despite some important advances in recent years, it often seems that, where the relation of Bultmann to philosophy is concerned, little progress has

<sup>17</sup> Christophe Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann* (Zürich: TVZ, 2005), pp. 164–5.

<sup>18</sup> There are signs of progress. In her 2008 dissertation, Courtney Wilder 'argue[s] that despite Bultmann's reputation as an adopter rather than an interpreter of Heidegger, a close reading of his work during the period when he was most influenced by Heidegger demonstrates that Bultmann's account of the human person is in fact a marked departure from Heidegger's approach'. See Courtney S. Wilder, 'Existentialism and Exegesis: Being and the Bible in Bultmann and Tillich' (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008), pp. 2–3. For a more recent, detailed analysis of the relation between Heidegger and Bultmann, see Andreas Großmann, 'Was sich nicht von selbst versteht: Heidegger, Bultmann und die Frage einer hermeneutischen Theologie', in Ingolf U. Dalferth, Pierre Bühler, and Andreas Hunziker (eds), *Hermeneutische Theologie – heute?* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), pp. 55–81.

<sup>19</sup> Francis Watson, 'Bultmann and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture', in Bruce W. Longenecker and Mikeal C. Parsons (eds), *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), p. 258.

<sup>20</sup> James D. G. Dunn, 'The Development of Doctrine', in Longenecker and Parsons (eds), *Beyond Bultmann*, pp. 175–6.

<sup>21</sup> Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology, and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 141, 159.

been made over the past half-century within English-language scholarship.<sup>22</sup> I turn now to my clarification of the nature of the Bultmann–Heidegger relationship in the hope that future work on Bultmann will not perpetuate the old misunderstandings.

### Bultmann's theology precedes Heidegger

The first thing to observe is that Bultmann's theology is already in place well before he meets Heidegger. We can illustrate this briefly by looking at one of Bultmann's earliest writings. On 27 May 1917, Bultmann gave a sermon in response to the tragedy of the war, which he published under the title, 'Vom geheimnisvollen und vom offenbaren Gott' ('Concerning the hidden and revealed God').<sup>23</sup> While he had already made use of the concept of God's hiddenness in previous writings, thanks to the influence of Wilhelm Herrmann at Marburg, the idea begins to manifest itself more systematically beginning with this sermon. Seemingly in criticism of his earlier writings, he says that 'we have represented [God] as too small' and 'we have lost our false concept' of the divine. He claims instead that God is 'wholly other [*ganz anders*] . . . than the picture which we ourselves have made of God', and for this reason, our understanding of God is 'never stagnant or at rest, but always ready to subject itself anew, to allow itself to be raised anew'.<sup>24</sup> We have in these statements already the essence of his later programme of demythologising. Everything else is an outworking of this basic conviction regarding the differentiation between creator and creature, between the transcendent reality of God and the provisional character of human God-talk.

Bultmann would make his rejection of liberal theology explicit and public three years later, on 29 September 1920, in his keynote address in Eisenach on 'Ethische und mystische Religion im Urchristentum' ('Ethical and mystical religion in early Christianity').<sup>25</sup> In that lecture he rejects the liberal quest for the historical Jesus and argues instead that it is the eschatological proclamation of Jesus that grounds Christian theology. With Bernd Jaspert,

<sup>22</sup> We can be grateful for the translation of Konrad Hammann's magisterial biography of Bultmann, which contains an illuminating section on Heidegger. See Konrad Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann: A Biography*, trans. Philip E. Devenish (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2013), pp. 201–16.

<sup>23</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort: Predigten, Andachten, Ansprachen 1906–1941*, ed. Erich Grässer and Martin Evang (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), pp. 135–47.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>25</sup> See Rudolf Bultmann, 'Ethische und mystische Religion im Urchristentum', in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, 2 vols, ed. Jürgen Moltmann (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1962–3), vol. 2, pp. 29–47.

I would identify this lecture as the point at which he turns to dialectical theology, though, in agreement with Chalamet, it is clear that many of the key elements are present years before that.<sup>26</sup> In any case, after the publication of the second edition of Barth's *Der Römerbrief* in 1922, Bultmann's theology remains more or less constant until the end, though he adopts new concepts along the way, especially in the 1940s.

Heidegger did not arrive at Marburg until 1923. During his first year there, Heidegger was an 'extraordinary member' of Bultmann's 1923–4 seminar on the ethics of Paul.<sup>27</sup> Bultmann began lecturing on the nature of theology in 1926, and around that same time Heidegger began developing his lecture on 'Phänomenologie und Theologie', which he delivered in Tübingen in 1927 and in Marburg in 1928.<sup>28</sup> While there are important similarities between them, there are also equally significant differences, and, as Eberhard Jüngel points out, it is impossible to discern 'which thoughts which of the two thinkers thought first'.<sup>29</sup> We now also know that Heidegger cited Bultmann in his 1920–1 lectures at the University of Freiburg before they even met.<sup>30</sup> Writing in 1974, Roger Johnson made the prescient observation:

It may well be that we should have to correct our older picture of Bultmann's dependence upon Heidegger. . . . The relationship may well entail a far greater degree of reciprocity than has characteristically been assumed to be the case: Bultmann's own understanding of existence from the perspective of a religiously conceived individuality providing the stimulus to Heidegger's formulation of the existentialist interpretation of *Dasein* as the point of departure for a radical new ontology.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Bernd Jaspert, 'Rudolf Bultmanns Wende von der liberalen zur dialektischen Theologie', in Bernd Jaspert (ed.), *Rudolf Bultmanns Werk und Wirkung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), pp. 25–43. For Chalamet's rejection of Jaspert's notion of a 'turn' in Bultmann, see Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians*, p. 147.

<sup>27</sup> *Sachgemässe Exegese: Die Protokolle aus Rudolf Bultmanns Neutestamentlichen Seminaren 1921–1951*, ed. Bernd Jaspert (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1996), pp. 26–8.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Phänomenologie und Theologie', in *Wegmarken*, 2nd edn, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Gesamtausgabe I.9 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1978), pp. 45–77.

<sup>29</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, 'Glauben und Verstehen: Zum Theologiebegriff Rudolf Bultmanns', in *Wertlose Wahrheit: Zur Identität und Relevanz des christlichen Glaubens – Theologische Erörterungen III* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1990), p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens, Gesamtausgabe II.60* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1995), p. 133.

<sup>31</sup> Roger A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing: Philosophy and Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), p. 175, n. 1.

So not only was Bultmann's thought established independently of Heidegger's influence, but Heidegger's own thought may owe something to Bultmann's influence.

### Bultmann's theology circumscribes Heidegger

It naturally follows that, when Bultmann made use of Heidegger's ontology, he did so strictly on his own terms. He delivered lectures on theology between 1926 and 1936 that were posthumously published in 1984 under the title *Theologische Enzyklopädie*. In a passage added in 1930, likely in response to Heidegger's 1927 lecture, he presents theology as a 'positive science' defined by its object, and 'no positive science can allow its object to be prescribed by a philosophy'.<sup>32</sup> In a section from 1926, he states that theology 'can be defined only by its object, and it finds this object in no other science than in theology. And this object is clearly . . . God. . . . To treat the question, What is theology? already means to do theology.'<sup>33</sup> The object of theology is one that philosophy 'cannot see at all, because it has a different object'.<sup>34</sup> A lecture given in 1929 on 'Wahrheit und Gewißheit' ('Truth and certainty') reinforces the point. He says there that 'theology may not wait for an ontology of *Dasein* to provide a solution for the problem as to how faith manages in the dispute with science and worldview. It must manage with the problem without philosophy, because faith must manage with it on its own.'<sup>35</sup> But Bultmann is not only concerned about the independence of theology; he also denies that philosophy – and here he has Heidegger in mind – accurately understands the human situation. Both philosophy and theology ask the question, 'What is truth?' But whereas philosophy interprets this in terms of the question, 'What is the human person?', theology understands that the question of truth is the 'question of God', and thus only in understanding God can we genuinely grasp the truth.<sup>36</sup>

Though Bultmann and Heidegger share a concern for authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*), they address this concern in fundamentally different and irreconcilable ways. Bultmann makes this explicit. 'Faith denies that a person can achieve authenticity through a death-preparing resolve [*todbereiten*

<sup>32</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel and Klaus W. Müller (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'Wahrheit und Gewißheit [1929]', in *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, ed. Jüngel and Müller, p. 200.

<sup>36</sup> Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, p. 50.



Entschluß] in the situation', he says, referring it seems to *Being and Time*.<sup>37</sup> Authenticity cannot be achieved in this way, 'because God wills to have the person in another way. Faith cannot possibly get involved here in discussion with philosophy. . . . Faith can judge the choice of philosophical existence only as an act of the self-justifying freedom of the person who denies being bound to God.'<sup>38</sup> Heidegger's claim that authenticity can be achieved by a person's resolve is antithetical to Christian faith, which ascribes authenticity to God's justification of the sinner in Christ.

Faith alone knows the answer to the human dilemma (viz., divine justification), but what about the question? Does not Bultmann still give Heidegger a normative role in theology at the level of describing the problem of natural (i.e. sinful) human existence? In his important lecture on natural theology, given in Marburg in the autumn of 1931, Bultmann does indeed say that the person prior to faith 'has a pre-understanding of revelation'.<sup>39</sup> At a superficial level, it would appear that he opens the door here to an existentialist form of natural theology. But what does he mean by this concept? All understanding, he says, 'presupposes the life-context [*Lebenszusammenhang*] in which the one who understands and what is understood belong together. Something strange or new encounters me in my life-context, and as something strange it is investigated and understood from within this life-context by virtue of being placed in it.'<sup>40</sup> At one level, then, pre-understanding simply means that the person who understands something – in this case, God – does so as one who has a particular historical life and context: 'If faith is an event in historical life, then it stands within the life-context that is characterized by understanding.'<sup>41</sup> If this were not the case, then we would have to conclude that revelation either encounters a person as an ahistorical *tabula rasa* or that revelation replaces the history of the old person with an entirely new history. The person of faith, on this view, would have no continuity with the person prior to faith.

Shortly after Bultmann clarified his position on natural theology, Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave lectures in Berlin on theological anthropology, in which he already perceived the difference between Barth and Bultmann at this

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 89. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Gesamtausgabe I.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), pp. 408, 506.

<sup>38</sup> Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, p. 89.

<sup>39</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'Das Problem der "natürlichen Theologie" [1933]', in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze* [hereafter *GuV*], 4 vols (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933–65), vol. 1, p. 298.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 296.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

point. 'In Barth,' Bonhoeffer says, 'the self breaks apart: old self – new self. In Bultmann too: however [here it is a matter occasionally of] whole self now, whole self now, whole self now.'<sup>42</sup> There is a measure of truth in this claim. Barth certainly does place the emphasis on the radical break between the old and new person. Here he was only following the sixteenth-century Lutherans, who could say that, 'in spiritual and divine matters . . . the human being is like a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife, indeed like a block of wood or a stone, like a lifeless statue'.<sup>43</sup> Barth agrees explicitly with this view in his later *Church Dogmatics*:

Fallen human beings are surely dead. But for the wonder of their awakening from the dead, which they need, and in which their reconciliation with God consists, it is necessary that they should still be there as corpses, as human corpses. With the *Formula of Concord* we can call them *truncus et lapis* [wood and stone] in order to describe their total inability to help and save themselves.<sup>44</sup>

Does this mean Bultmann's emphasis on pre-understanding and continuity constitutes a denial of the *Formula of Concord*? Not at all. We have to understand that, borrowing from Heidegger, Bultmann differentiates between two dimensions of human existence: the ontological and the ontic. The ontological refers to the empirical or phenomenal level of human existence (e.g. sensory experience), while the ontic refers to the existential or personally concrete level of existence that is particular to each one's history. Revelation encounters a person *ontically*, according to Bultmann, and at this level he can say that 'prefaithful existence is sublated [*aufgehoben*] in faithful existence' and that faith 'is an *existentiell-ontic* overcoming of prefaithful existence'.<sup>45</sup> Ontically, in other words, a person is indeed like a pillar of salt, and faith comes to such a person as the death of the old and the resurrection of the new. Ontologically, however, a person remains the same, since 'what occurs in the Christian event that takes place in faith is not a magical transformation of the human person'.<sup>46</sup> Believers are

<sup>42</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 12* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 221.

<sup>43</sup> *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration 2.20, The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000). The quoted passage is attributed to Luther's *Commentary on Psalm 90*, though it is compiled from various sources.

<sup>44</sup> *KD 4/1*, p. 535.

<sup>45</sup> Bultmann, 'Die Geschichtlichkeit des Daseins und der Glaube', p. 66.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

not granted supernatural powers of knowledge, for example. Empirically speaking, they remain the same historical creatures they were before. To use the term introduced above, they remain within the same *Lebenszusammenhang*, the same sociohistorical context, with the same human capacities and limitations as their unbelieving neighbours. Pre-understanding in this ontological sense means that revelation encounters someone who already has a history, who already belongs to a particular cultural and historical situation.

Bultmann's distinction between the ontic and the ontological is nothing more radical than a restatement of the differentiation between the invisible and visible church, since justification does not visibly manifest itself. But it also corresponds to the Protestant differentiation between faith and works, since if justification were something visible and empirical, it could be achieved by anyone with the natural capacity to grasp it. Bultmann makes this very point at the end of his lecture on natural theology when he says that 'justifying faith is not a phenomenon of existence [Dasein]. . . . For the one who is justified is only justified before God, and always only before God, and on earth is a sinner.'<sup>47</sup> This is precisely why he rejects any account that makes pre-understanding into a 'point of contact for revelation'.<sup>48</sup>

Thus far we have explained that when Bultmann says we have a pre-understanding of revelation, he is speaking first and foremost of the *ontological* level, namely, the fact that we are creatures who are capable of being encountered by revelation because we exist within the world and have our own distinct histories. The person affected by revelation is not a blank slate but has particular experiences, memories, desires, relationships and the like. But the natural human person apart from faith also has a particular *ontic* pre-understanding, one that faith judges to be of no more value than a pillar of salt. When Bultmann wishes to indicate the ontic level, he speaks instead of 'understanding' (*Verstehen*) or 'self-understanding' (*Selbstverständnis*). So faith, he says, grants a person a new 'understanding' that 'displaces and replaces all earlier understanding', which is another way of saying that faithful existence sublates prefaithful existence.<sup>49</sup> Of course, this assumes there is an earlier self-understanding that faith can replace. As Bultmann says, 'revelation can only call into question what already stands in question'. There is a

<sup>47</sup> Bultmann, 'Das Problem der "natürlichen Theologie"', in *GuV*, vol. 1, p. 311.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 297. It is this strict differentiation between pre-understanding and point of contact that Barth was unable to grasp, almost certainly due to the fact that Brunner did not make this distinction.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 296.

prior 'questionableness' (i.e. sinfulness) that belongs to 'human existence with its natural self-understanding', and this is what revelation overcomes and replaces.<sup>50</sup>

Here is the point at which most interpretations of Bultmann take a wrong step, and in fairness to other scholars, Bultmann is not as clear in this essay as he could have been. He is not saying that knowledge of revelation depends upon a prior knowledge of our own sinfulness, nor is he claiming that philosophy, which conceptualises our pre-understanding, is capable of recognising the 'questionableness' of our existence. He is not advocating a method of correlation in which philosophy articulates the question and theology articulates the corresponding answer. Bultmann denies this explicitly, in fact, when he says that this questionableness 'only becomes visible for a believing understanding of existence'.<sup>51</sup> Our sinfulness, he says in 1940, is 'visible as such only from the standpoint of faith' and only 'on the basis of the grace that has actually appeared in Christ'.<sup>52</sup> For this reason, it is impossible to develop a natural theology in the sense of a general 'foundation of dogmatics' that would provide a 'special segment before or within genuine theology'.<sup>53</sup> We are only able to recognise the questionableness of our natural self-understanding from the standpoint of faith, and thus only after we have already begun engaging in theology. As we saw above, faith alone knows the answer (i.e. divine justification), and now we also see that faith alone knows the question (i.e. human sinfulness).

To be sure, Bultmann made extensive use of Heidegger's conceptuality. In addition to ideas like authenticity, *Dasein*, existence and present-at-hand, he systematically applied the distinction between the ontological and the ontic, between the existential and the existentiell. But because these were all placed in service to theology's reflection on revelation, Bultmann freely departed from Heidegger's strict understanding of these concepts. For Bultmann, they served to explain a distinction that he had already arrived at on the basis of his New Testament exegesis regarding the relation between sin and grace, law and gospel.<sup>54</sup> Heidegger's ontology therefore did not provide

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 297–8.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 298.

<sup>52</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'Christus des Gesetzes Ende', in *GuV*, vol. 2, pp. 35, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Bultmann, 'Das Problem der "natürlichen Theologie"', in *GuV*, vol. 1, p. 311.

<sup>54</sup> In his programmatic essay on demythologising, Bultmann says: 'When people occasionally object that I interpret the New Testament with the categories of the Heideggerian philosophy of existence, I fear they are blind to the actual problem. They should be alarmed instead that philosophy already sees by itself what the New Testament says.' Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel (Munich: Chr.

Bultmann with a systematic ontology that determined from the outset what theology could and could not say. Indeed, as Eberhard Jüngel correctly observes, Heidegger did not provide Bultmann with an ontology but rather an *anthropology*: ‘Bultmann always construed the *Dasein*-analysis of *Being and Time* as a fundamental anthropology and essentially ignored the fundamental-ontological intention of Heidegger.’<sup>55</sup>

By 1928, when Heidegger left Marburg to take a position at the University of Freiburg, he and Bultmann had begun to part ways. Heidegger told Bultmann in a letter that he no longer saw theology as a science, which makes Bultmann’s insistence on this point in his *Theologische Enzyklopädie* all the more pronounced.<sup>56</sup> Insofar as Bultmann is an ‘existentialist’ theologian, Johnson argues that the existentialism ‘which comes to expression here presupposes Heidegger, but Heidegger may not be construed as being consistent with it. Therefore, if the term “existentialist” is to be defined by Heidegger, I must abandon its usage in conjunction with [Bultmann].’<sup>57</sup> In 1932, Heidegger

Kaiser Verlag, 1985), pp. 41–2. It is important to understand what Bultmann thinks philosophy actually ‘sees’. In the previous sentences he explains that he has in mind the fact that ‘human beings exist historically in care for themselves’, that they exist ‘in the moment of decision between past and future’, that authenticity is gained ‘in the surrender of all securities and in the wholehearted freedom for the future’ (ibid., p. 41). All of this, however, resides at the level of the ontological and refers to the general characteristics of human existence. Philosophy does not see the sinful condition in which human beings find themselves, nor does it see God’s gracious act of justification that alone grants genuine authenticity.

<sup>55</sup> Jüngel, ‘Glauben und Verstehen’, p. 27, n. 44. Barthian critics may still find reason to object at this point, on the grounds that only a *theological anthropology* can be truly ‘fundamental’ or ‘general’. Here I think we need to ask just what a *theological anthropology* is expected to accomplish. We have to keep in mind the fact that a ‘fundamental anthropology’ in Bultmann’s sense is a *phenomenology* of the human person, a description of the empirical existence of human beings in general. Does a *theological anthropology*, even in the strong Barthian sense of a *covenant ontology*, actually purport to describe the phenomena of human existence? Or does it rather describe the true nature of the human person whose being is ‘hidden with Christ’ (Col 3.3)? It seems to me that the latter is Barth’s explicit intention and achievement. But if that is the case, then a *theological anthropology* is an *ontic anthropology*, not an *ontological anthropology*. A Barthian *theological anthropology* therefore does not compete with a Heideggerian *fundamental anthropology*.

<sup>56</sup> Martin Heidegger to Rudolf Bultmann, 18 Dec. 1928, in Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger, *Briefwechsel 1925–1975*, ed. Andreas Grossmann and Christof Landmesser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), p. 87: ‘My question in the lecture [“Phenomenology and Theology”] concerning theology as a science is not only too restrictive, but unsustainable. The positivity of theology . . . is something other than the sciences. In a completely different way than philosophy, theology stands outside the sciences.’

<sup>57</sup> Johnson, *Origins of Demythologizing*, p. 170, n. 1.

began a letter to Bultmann with the comment: 'Fortunately, our friendship is not dependent on the determination of the relation between theology and philosophy.'<sup>58</sup> Heidegger understood, in a way that many theologians since have not, that Bultmann was engaged in a distinctively theological programme all his own, which was only related to Heidegger's work in the most formal sense. He expressed his hope later in the same letter that 'the oft-heard objection that you have prescribed my philosophy does not prevail as a seemingly valid reason to reject your work of reflection in general'.<sup>59</sup>

To summarise, the place of philosophy in Bultmann's theology is circumscribed on all sides by revelation.<sup>60</sup> It makes sense that he was a consistent proponent of the medieval axiom *philosophia ancilla theologiae* ('philosophy is the servant of theology').<sup>61</sup> In Bultmann's understanding,

<sup>58</sup> Martin Heidegger to Rudolf Bultmann, 16 Dec. 1932, in Bultmann and Heidegger, *Briefwechsel 1925–1975*, pp. 189–90. Judith Wolfe writes that 'Bultmann's own relationship to Heidegger, as reconstructable from the letters and memoirs of both men, had a warm but intellectually ambivalent quality'. Judith E. Wolfe, *Heidegger's Eschatology: Theological Horizons in Martin Heidegger's Early Work* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 104.

<sup>59</sup> Bultmann and Heidegger, *Briefwechsel 1925–1975*, p. 190.

<sup>60</sup> Where the boundary between theology and philosophy is concerned, 'the limits of Bultmann's theology almost always lie in those theological givens and not primarily in Heidegger's ontology'. See Otto Schnübbe, *Die Existenzbegriff in der Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns: Ein Beitrag zur Interpretation der theologischen Systematic Bultmanns* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), p. 140.

<sup>61</sup> In a 1927 review of Ernst Lohmeyer's *Vom Begriff der religiösen Gemeinschaft*, Bultmann states: 'Because theology speaks as a science in concepts, it is always dependent upon the daily, traditional formation of concepts in its time, and thus dependent on the tradition of a prior philosophy. . . . In this way theology is always dependent on philosophy, which means: philosophy carries out its old service to theology as *ancilla theologiae*. But as soon as theology thinks it can gain information about its object from philosophy, it brings the content of its statements into a dependence on philosophy; the relation is reversed, and theology is the *ancilla philosophiae*'. See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie als Kritik: Ausgewählte Rezensionen und Forschungsberichte*, ed. Matthias Dreher and Klaus W. Müller (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), pp. 199–200. The following year, Bultmann made this same point in conversation with Karl Barth. See Rudolf Bultmann to Karl Barth, 8 June 1928, in Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, *Briefwechsel 1911–1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, 2nd edn, Gesamtausgabe 5 (Zürich: TVZ, 1994), p. 82: 'It is true that dogmatics should have nothing to do with a philosophy insofar as it is systematic; but it is also true that it must learn from a philosophy that is a critical (ontological) inquiry. For only then does theology remain free and make use of philosophy as the *ancilla theologiae* [servant of theology]; otherwise it becomes the maid (*Magd*) and philosophy the mistress (*Herrin*)'. The earlier passage helps make sense of the latter. When Bultmann appeals to the 'ontological inquiry' of philosophy, he means nothing more than that philosophy provides linguistic concepts that theology then takes up in its task of faithfully reflecting on its object, namely, God.

philosophy held no significance for theology outside of the role determined for it by revelation. His talk of pre-understanding and philosophical ontology is therefore innocent of the claims made about it by scholars who have uncritically accepted the Barthian interpretation. Helmut Gollwitzer is a better reader of Bultmann on this score. In his critique of the post-Bultmannian school of existentialist interpretation – primarily represented by Herbert Braun – he acknowledges that ‘on the problem of natural revelation it is clear that Bultmann wants to be a theologian of revelation in the strict sense’.<sup>62</sup>

### Bultmann’s theology points beyond Heidegger

If Bultmann’s theology arose independently of Heidegger and constrained the latter’s conceptuality within clearly defined limits, then it would follow that his theological programme could, in principle, adopt a new conceptuality. And while it is not immediately evident, this is, in fact, precisely what we find. Bultmann’s hermeneutical programme is understandably connected to Heidegger because of its emphasis on ‘existentialist interpretation’. In his famous programmatic lecture, Bultmann says that ‘Martin Heidegger’s existentialist analysis of existence appears to be only a profane philosophical presentation of the New Testament view of human existence’.<sup>63</sup> But he also gives indications throughout his work that demythologising would be compatible with other analyses.

<sup>62</sup> Helmut Gollwitzer, *Die Existenz Gottes im Bekenntnis des Glaubens* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1963), p. 13.

<sup>63</sup> Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie*, p. 41. This statement is often read in isolation as a blanket endorsement of Heidegger’s philosophy, but the larger context suggests otherwise. The question Bultmann poses in this section is ‘whether the Christian understanding of being is realizable without Christ’ (ibid., p. 39). He says ‘it could appear . . . that in the New Testament an understanding of being is only discovered for the first time . . . that is basically the natural human understanding of being’ (ibid., p. 40). He then refers to the work of several philosophers, including Heidegger. We have already seen that he elsewhere rejects philosophy’s claim to understand either the problem or the solution to human existence, and he reinforces that position here. Immediately following the paragraph on Heidegger, Bultmann examines the work of Wilhelm Kamlah, a former student of his and Heidegger’s, who argues that what Christianity calls faith is simply ‘a basic structure of our natural being’ (ibid., p. 42). He rejects this – and, by extension, any uncritical adoption of Heidegger’s philosophy – on the grounds that ‘there is therefore no need of revelation’ (ibid., p. 43). Bultmann’s position, by contrast, is that revelation is the only possible starting-point for Christian theology.

The place to begin is with his observation that ‘the demythologizing of early Christian mythology is, for all intents and purposes, nothing new’.<sup>64</sup> Demythologising is not a modern method, nor does it depend in any way on Heideggerian existentialism. Bultmann traces the basis for his programme back to the pre-Christian period of Second Temple Judaism, when ‘the conceptual language of Old Testament-Jewish tradition’ was ‘translated into the Hellenistic world in a conceptuality familiar to it’. This was a ‘historically necessary process’, as the Jewish people were forced to reinterpret their traditions within a new historical situation.<sup>65</sup> The same process occurred again in the Pauline and Johannine communities, in which the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus were translated into a more realised eschatology of present faith. Bultmann further sees this demythologising programme carried out in various ways throughout history, each time in response to the new demands of a particular context. The ancient and medieval church engaged in a process of sacramentalising that translated the mythical-eschatological expectation of Christ into the sacramental and liturgical practices of the church. According to Bultmann, Luther, the pietists, Kant and liberal theologians represent a spiritualising of early Christian myth, a process that continues today in North American evangelicalism. And the work of Hegel and Marx, in addition to many more recent thinkers, illustrates the process of secularising.<sup>66</sup> Bultmann does not defend himself further along these lines, but he certainly could have. If he were more knowledgeable of and less sceptical towards ancient allegorical interpretation of scripture, he would have found a ready ally in the likes of Origen, Jerome, Augustine and others, all of whom engaged in their own versions of demythologising by translating the mythical content of scripture into a conceptuality that was, to their way of thinking, more ‘fitting’ for God.<sup>67</sup> As Edmund Hill states with respect to Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, ‘If one is going to interpret the eschatological images of scripture at all, to demythologize them, as the classical Christian tradition always has done, then with Augustine and this tradition, one must divinize them.’<sup>68</sup> The process of dispensing with the mythical forms of scripture and reinterpreting the

<sup>64</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Die christliche Hoffnung und das Problem der Entmythologisierung* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1954), p. 26.

<sup>65</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2nd edn (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1954), p. 163.

<sup>66</sup> Bultmann, *Die christliche Hoffnung*, 26–9.

<sup>67</sup> For an excellent recent account of this, see Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

<sup>68</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine* 1/5 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), p. 96, n. 82. Emphasis mine.



kerygma in a new philosophical conceptuality appropriate to one's time and place has a long, venerable tradition within the church.

Bultmann made a unique contribution to this tradition, not because his method was new, but because, as a modern theologian and historical critic, he consciously reflected on the question of method to an extent that most of those before him had not. His hermeneutical programme articulated the conditions of possibility for both past and future translations. The use of Heidegger in his interpretation of the New Testament was simply what made sense in his immediate context, but it is by no means the final word. Bultmann makes the provisionality of his interpretation explicit. In a lecture on 'Theologie als Wissenschaft' ('Theology as science') given on 5 June 1941, the day after he delivered his famous lecture on demythologising to members of the Confessing Church in Alpirsbach, Bultmann argues that the need for new interpretations is not due to any imperfection in these interpretations. There is no 'ideal type of the kerygma' for which we are striving, as if the need for translation would cease once we reached that goal. Instead, every translation 'is formulated for today and only for today', and therefore 'even the most accurate translation needs to be translated again in the following generation'.<sup>69</sup> There is no final or definitive translation, but rather the kerygma 'must always appear in a new form in correspondence to each historical situation'.<sup>70</sup> It is thus the duty of New Testament research to communicate the message of the text 'in the language and conceptuality of each particular present'.<sup>71</sup> Bultmann found that language and conceptuality in Heidegger, but those in following generations will need to find new conceptualities, and indeed already have.

### On the necessity of translation: toward an appreciation of Bultmann

In this article I have argued that Bultmann arrived at his theology independently of Heidegger, appropriated Heidegger within strict and carefully defined limits, and articulated a hermeneutical programme premised on the provisionality of every philosophical conceptuality. We must emancipate Bultmann once and for all from the charge that he has reduced or confined the Christian message to Heideggerian existentialism. If we are going to reject Bultmann for his supposed Heideggerianism, then we must also reject Augustine for his Neoplatonism, Thomas Aquinas for his Aristotelianism and Barth for his Kantianism. Some, of course,

<sup>69</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'Theologie als Wissenschaft', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 81/4 (1984), pp. 460–1.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 466.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 460.

wish to do precisely that, but then, in the interest of consistency, they must also reject the Bible for its appropriation of, among other things, Ancient Near Eastern and Hellenistic concepts and thought-forms. What is really at stake in the question of Bultmann's relation to Heidegger is the legitimacy of appropriating contemporary philosophical conceptualities and translating the Christian kerygma into the present situation. Unfortunately, the legitimacy of translation is hardly self-evident to many scholars today, especially within the field of biblical studies, despite the fact that this is inevitable – since all linguistic concepts are connected to some philosophical tradition or cultural framework – and the history of theology is, from beginning to end, a history of appropriation and translation.

The work of John Walton is an instructive example. In his work, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, he recognises that 'language assumes a culture, operates in a culture, serves a culture, and is designed to communicate into the framework of a culture'.<sup>72</sup> But from this insight he concludes that translation is inappropriate:

Translation involves lifting the ideas from their native context and relocating them in our own context. In some ways this is an imperialistic act and bound to create some distortion as we seek to organize information in the categories that are familiar to us. . . . The very act of trying to translate the culture requires taking it out of its context and fitting it into ours. . . . The minute anyone (professional or amateur) attempts to translate the culture, we run the risk of making the text communicate something it never intended. Rather than translating the culture, then, we need to try to enter the culture. . . . We must make every attempt to set our English categories aside, to leave our cultural ideas behind, and try our best (as limited as the attempt might be) to understand the material in its cultural context without translating it.<sup>73</sup>

Walton's hermeneutical axiom is that 'the truest meaning of a text is found in what the author and hearers would have thought'.<sup>74</sup> This axiom has a long history in the discipline of biblical studies. Krister Stendahl famously distinguished between two tenses of meaning in the biblical text: 'what did it mean?' and 'what does it mean?'.<sup>75</sup> And while this distinction is problematic

<sup>72</sup> John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>75</sup> Krister Stendahl, 'Biblical Theology, Contemporary', in George A. Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 418–32.

in itself, Walton actually pushes this even further: what the text meant in its ancient context is what it means today.

The claim that translation is imperialistic runs up against a few basic problems. The first is that, if true, it means virtually the entire history of theology is not only a distortion of the biblical message but also morally objectionable. That is a difficult proposition to maintain. The second problem is that Walton's hermeneutical prescription – 'to leave our cultural ideas behind' – is no less imperialistic; it just moves in the other direction. If the reader of scripture is like an emigrant to a foreign culture, then Walton's method requires that this person shed her native culture and assimilate into the dominant culture of the new environment. Stated that way, we begin to see the highly problematic assumptions embedded within what seems like an otherwise laudable goal of reading the text in light of its historical context.

This leads naturally to the third problem: shedding our native culture is not only undesirable but impossible, and this is not something to lament but to embrace. There is no 'presuppositionless exegesis', as Bultmann argued forcefully toward the end of his career, since 'every exegete is determined by his or her individuality in the sense of special biases and habits, gifts and weaknesses'.<sup>76</sup> The attempt to engage in a neutral or objective interpretation of history by denying our own historicity and subjectivity only ever ascertains 'a certain side of the historical process', namely, things that are fixed in space and time.<sup>77</sup> But history is a process of forces, events, and ideas that admit multiple perspectives and demand the personal concern and participation of the interpreting subject. The interpretation of history is thus by nature relative, in that there is no ahistorical or acultural location from which to survey history as a whole. Our cultural location, our pre-understanding, is precisely what makes it possible for us to enter empathetically into a foreign context. As Heinrich Ott observes, pre-understanding is 'the condition of possibility of understanding', and thus 'without a pre-understanding there is also no understanding'.<sup>78</sup> But this pre-understanding also makes us aware of the cultural distance between ourselves and the text, a distance of which Walton is keenly aware. The interpreter encounters a text that 'speaks in a strange language with the concepts of a distant time, of a strange world-picture (*Weltbild*)'. For this reason, in order to understand the text, 'it must be

<sup>76</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich? [1957]', in *GuV*, vol. 3, p. 143.

<sup>77</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'Wissenschaft und Existenz [1955]', in *GuV*, vol. 3, p. 110.

<sup>78</sup> Heinrich Ott, *Geschichte und Heilsgeschichte in der Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1955), pp. 68, 63. Original emphasis removed.

translated'.<sup>79</sup> Presented in this fashion, we can start to see translation in a new way. Translation is not the imperialistic removal of ideas from their native context; it is rather an act of *intercultural communication*. Translation is a dialogue between past and present that respects the cultural distinctiveness of both text and reader. It is actually the *rejection* of translation that is imperialistic, because that inevitably means denying the significance and value of some cultural context, whether ancient or modern.

Bultmann's theological appropriation of Heidegger was his effort to engage in an intercultural dialogue with the biblical text. We can certainly raise questions about the adequacy of Heidegger's conceptuality, so long as we recognise that Bultmann's theology is irreducible to this conceptuality, given the way Bultmann circumscribes the latter within his prior convictions regarding divine revelation. But if and when such questions are raised, one must be careful not to criticise the act of translation as such, and thereby inadvertently undermine the capacity to facilitate genuine understanding across cultural barriers – thus undermining the possibility of theology itself.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Bultmann, 'Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?', in *GuV*, vol. 3, p. 145.

<sup>80</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Esqueda, Scott Jackson, Travis McMaken, Andrew Torrance and Jim West for their comments on an earlier version of this article. Any errors are my own.