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## SETTING THE SCENE: A MODERN DEBATE ABOUT FAITH AND HISTORY

### 1.1 Introduction

The starting point for this study lies in twentieth-century debates about the relationship between history and faith. These debates are one of the most enduring features of the modern theological scene. As far as New Testament studies are concerned, the debates have most often arisen in the context of the application of the historical-critical method to scripture. The two most obvious examples of this have been the various ‘quests’ for the historical Jesus, and the continuing discussions about the extent to which the resurrection of Jesus is accessible to the historical-critical method.

However, this study is concerned with a rather different question, which relates not so much to the exercise of the historical-critical method, but rather to some of the underlying assumptions made about the nature and significance of history as such. This more fundamental question is about the relationship between divine reality and the world of historical events. Of course, this question cannot be isolated from issues relating to the application of historical criticism to the biblical record. Three of the main protagonists to whom I refer in this opening chapter – Troeltsch, Bultmann and Pannenberg – have engaged in great depth with both sets of questions, and a major point of Pannenberg’s programme is precisely the illegitimacy of dividing the two sets of questions from each other. Nonetheless, the focus in this study will be especially on the debate about the significance of history *per se*.<sup>1</sup>

Two opposing approaches have been particularly influential in the exploration of this question. One approach is marked by a conviction

<sup>1</sup> The distinction I am making between two sets of questions in the theological disciplines is paralleled in history and philosophy by a distinction between ‘speculative’ philosophy of history, dealing with attempts to discern a meaning in history as a whole, and ‘critical’ philosophy of history, dealing with methodological questions such as the extent to which the writing of history inevitably entails interpretation as well as the reporting of fact. Walsh (1951) and Dray (1964) give standard accounts of both areas of the philosophy of history.

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that there is a fundamental discontinuity between the world of historical events and divine reality. An important proponent of this view has been Rudolf Bultmann. In contrast, other theologians, notably Pannenberg and Moltmann, have reacted against the tendency in dialectical theology to draw this sharp distinction between the realms of faith and history. They have sought to re-emphasize a fundamental unity embracing both the divine and the historically contingent. The approaches adopted by Pannenberg and Moltmann are not identical. Pannenberg stresses underlying continuity in the historical process, which he sees as the self-revelation of God, culminating in the eschaton, at which point the coherence and purpose of history will be manifest. Moltmann stresses the hope of future *transformation* of reality by the inbreaking of the power of God. However, both of these theologians represent a reaction against the epistemological dualism inherent in Bultmann's work. In developing their theological positions, Pannenberg and Moltmann have both made use of ideas from apocalyptic literature. For Pannenberg, the attraction of apocalyptic is the idea of an ultimate eschatological horizon within which the whole of reality might be situated. For Moltmann, the attraction is the apocalyptic theme of the transformation of reality in the dawning of the new age.

The present study is an examination of the extent to which a reading of one particular apocalyptic text, Revelation, might be used to support or question the proposals of Pannenberg and Moltmann, and the extent to which their proposals provide a fruitful starting point for a contemporary interpretation of the text. In chapters 3–5 I shall examine the text of Revelation in detail, and in chapter 6 I shall relate my reading of the text to an analysis of Pannenberg's and Moltmann's theologies of history. The purpose of this opening chapter is to introduce the main contours of the twentieth-century debate about the theological significance of history. This will enable Pannenberg and Moltmann to be placed in context, and give an indication of the issues at stake. I am not offering a comprehensive account of the debate as a whole, but will highlight some of the main questions by describing briefly the work of two key figures, Ernst Troeltsch and Rudolf Bultmann, before considering Pannenberg and Moltmann. I hope to identify in particular some of the longer-term intellectual influences which have shaped the views these writers have expressed, and also the ways in which they relate to one another.

**1.2 The challenge of Ernst Troeltsch**

The German theologian and philosopher Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) saw clearly the challenges which modern historical method posed to traditional theology. Assessments vary as to how well he succeeded in

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meeting those challenges. But the problems to which he drew attention are enormous and have influenced the work of theologians and biblical scholars ever since.

Troeltsch was convinced of the validity of the historical-critical method, established in the nineteenth century by von Ranke and others. He claimed that the modern idea of history had ‘developed into a unique mode of thought and research that has authenticated itself with most brilliant results’.<sup>2</sup> In an important early essay, ‘Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology’, published in 1898, he described three important elements of modern historical method.<sup>3</sup> First, he identified the principle of *criticism*, according to which ‘in the realm of history there are only judgments of probability’ and hence no certainties.<sup>4</sup> This principle applied to the history of religions, including Christianity, as much as to any other history. Second, Troeltsch described the principle of *analogy*: ‘Agreement with normal, customary, or at least frequently attested happenings and conditions as we have experienced them is the criterion of probability for all events that historical criticism can recognise as having actually or possibly happened.’<sup>5</sup> Lying behind this second principle was an assumption of the ‘basic consistency of the human spirit and its historical manifestations’.<sup>6</sup> Troeltsch’s third principle was *correlation*, according to which ‘all historical happening is knit together in a permanent relationship . . . inevitably forming a current in which everything is interconnected and each single event is related to all others’.<sup>7</sup>

These three principles have far-reaching consequences. As Troeltsch himself remarked: ‘Give the historical method an inch and it will take a mile. From a strictly orthodox stand-point, therefore, it seems to bear a certain similarity to the devil.’<sup>8</sup> Troeltsch argued that the rigorous application of the historical method (which he regarded as inescapable) was incompatible with traditional dogmatic theology. The principle of criticism opened the Bible up to the thoroughgoing scrutiny which would be applied to any other ancient text. This process was of course already well advanced by the time of Troeltsch. More generally, if historical enquiry was to regard ‘facts’, even those related in the New Testament, as merely more or less probable, then this struck at the heart of the traditional direct

<sup>2</sup> Troeltsch (1972), p. 45. *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, from which this quotation comes, was first published in 1902.

<sup>3</sup> For an assessment of this essay against the theological background of the time, see Drescher (1992), pp. 70–97.

<sup>4</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 13. This and the next four references are from ‘Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology’, 1898.

<sup>5</sup> Troeltsch (1991), pp. 13–14. <sup>6</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 14. <sup>8</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 16.

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connection between faith and fact. As Van Harvey puts it: 'If the theologian believes on faith that certain events occurred, the historian regards all historical claims as having only a greater or lesser degree of probability, and he regards the attachment of faith to these claims as a corruption of historical judgment.'<sup>9</sup>

The principle of analogy also implied a fundamental reassessment. Instead of taking tradition on trust, historians were bound to apply the criterion of their own experience. If recorded 'facts' such as the resurrection or the ascension did not correspond at all to current experience, then historians were bound to judge them to have been improbable. The whole edifice of external supernatural miraculous warrant, which Troeltsch saw as underpinning traditional Christianity, was at risk.

The principle of correlation meant that all 'facts' had to be seen in the context of other events, traditions and beliefs which surrounded them. It was no longer legitimate to treat Christianity as if it were in a privileged position, isolated from the rest of history. Troeltsch attacked what he termed the 'old dogmatic method' for perpetuating an invalid distinction between sacred and profane history: 'By its principles this method is absolutely opposed to the historical one. Its essence is that it possesses an authority that, by definition, is separate from the total context of history, not analogous to other happenings, and therefore not subject to historical criticism and the uncertainty attaching to its results.'<sup>10</sup>

Despite Troeltsch's hostility to traditional dogmatics, the overall aim of his theological programme as a whole was positive. His objective was not to undermine Christianity, but rather to re-present it in a way which was compatible with the application of historical method. He advocated a 'history-of-religions' approach, which would draw conclusions about Christianity from historical study, rather than from dogmatic preconceptions. He ruled out vigorously all notions of supernatural explanation. In a stance which nowadays appears strange, however, Troeltsch also remained a child of German idealism, accepting the existence of a universal principle, the Absolute, as a spiritual driving force within history. He attempted to reconcile this with his attachment to historical method by seeing the Absolute not as a pre-existent principle which imposed itself on historical events, but rather as a teleological principle, or 'the Goal towards which we are growing'.<sup>11</sup> Deductions about the nature of the Absolute could only be made following detailed historical study, and

<sup>9</sup> Harvey (1967), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 20. From 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology', 1898.

<sup>11</sup> Troeltsch (1991), p. 105. From 'The Dogmatics of the History-of-Religions School', 1913.

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even then it would not be possible to describe the Absolute clearly. It could not simply be identified with historical Christianity, even though for Troeltsch historical Christianity, of all known religions, came the closest to the Absolute.

At the heart of Troeltsch's theological system was a contradiction, which he found increasingly difficult to reconcile. He was fully committed to the unrestricted application of historical method; yet he sought to maintain the assumption of a universal principle lying behind historical events. Indeed, his examination of the history of religion revealed a picture of such complexity that it became impossible to detect the operation of such a universal principle in any coherent way.

Troeltsch was committed to seeking to bridge the gap between contingent historical events and the work of God; he was opposed to any solution which would resort to a reimposition of a natural/supernatural division. As Coakley argues, he held 'a religious objection to the idea that God has two distinct modes of activity: one relatively unimportant and humdrum, which critical scholarship is allowed to probe, and the other salvifically decisive but sealed off from critical scrutiny'.<sup>12</sup> Yet seeking to avoid such a division was an uncomfortable task. On one side, the 'historical' end of Troeltsch's bridge was eroded: the failure of the historical method *per se* to reveal the workings of God in history meant that Troeltsch had to admit that some element of faith presupposition was essential if divine action was to be identified.<sup>13</sup> At the opposite, metaphysical end of the bridge, a different process of erosion took hold: by the end of his career, the complexity of the historical process had led Troeltsch to doubt whether one single universal principle was at work after all.

For present purposes, the importance of Troeltsch lies in his brilliant yet flawed attempt to use the historical-critical method to trace a universal divine purpose working in history. Holding this programme together coherently was ultimately beyond him, but the challenge he laid down has never been totally answered. In the remaining sections of this chapter I shall examine briefly different responses to that challenge.

### 1.3 Rudolf Bultmann: a dualistic response

Bultmann's response to the problems exposed by Troeltsch was marked by a series of dualisms.<sup>14</sup> He embraced wholeheartedly the principles of historical investigation set out by Troeltsch, yet sought to protect faith

<sup>12</sup> Coakley (1988), p. 83.    <sup>13</sup> Coakley (1988), pp. 86–7.

<sup>14</sup> For a perceptive account of the dualisms at the heart of Bultmann's theology, see Roberts (1977).

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from the rigours of such investigation by postulating a fundamental discontinuity between the world of contingent historical events on the one hand and divine reality on the other. Thus, faith could be isolated from the ambiguities and uncertainties of historical criticism.

In this respect, Bultmann's thought needs to be seen as standing in an intellectual tradition stretching back to Kant and Lessing. Each of these thinkers developed views of the relationship between faith and history which assumed a dualistic model of the perception of reality. Kant made a fundamental distinction between the realm of the 'phenomenal' (that which is knowable by being accessible to scientific investigation) and the realm of the 'noumenal' (which includes transcendental concepts relating, for example, to God, and which cannot be 'known'). Since God lies beyond the phenomenal, nothing may be known about him save that he is transcendent. Thus there is an epistemological dualism at the heart of Kantian thought between the phenomenal and the noumenal, the immanent and the transcendent.<sup>15</sup>

Lessing's work assumed a logical dualism between the uncertain and approximate world of historical knowledge and the world of eternal truth. He argued that it was illegitimate to base conclusions relating to eternal truth on the foundations of contingent historical events, formulating the problem most famously in his image of a ditch:

If no historical truth can be demonstrated then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths. That is: Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason . . . That, then, is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap.<sup>16</sup>

Lessing's ditch was thus an expression not so much of a *temporal* distance between the Christ event and the modern believer, but rather a *logical* distance between two kinds of truth, contingent and eternal. At one level, this appears to be a major difficulty: how can the realms of history and faith be brought together? However, for Lessing, this difficulty in fact dissolves away. Since the eternal truths of reason cannot in any case be

<sup>15</sup> Yovel (1980) has demonstrated how this division works itself out in Kant's philosophy of history. Yovel argues that Kant ultimately failed to explain how his notion of a transcendent reason in the realm of the noumenal interacted with the phenomenal world of events.

<sup>16</sup> This passage appears in 'On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power', published in 1777, reprinted in Lessing (1956), ed. Chadwick, pp. 53, 55.

derived from history, there is no need to bring history and faith together in that sense.

The point, then, is that Lessing does not have to leap the ditch for which his essay is most famous . . . he is in effect rejecting the notion that the truth of authentic religion is dependent upon the occurrence of certain historical events or on the emergence at an identifiable moment in time of a truth not previously available to us.<sup>17</sup>

In effect, history becomes a vehicle for disclosing truth of a non-historical character. A consequence of this line of argument is that religious truth becomes effectively insulated from the scrutiny of historical research. There are clear resonances with certain strands of twentieth-century dialectical theology, with their attempts to safeguard faith from the advance of historical criticism.<sup>18</sup>

These are the long-term intellectual influences against which Bultmann should be seen. More immediately, he was influenced by the Neo-Kantianism of nineteenth-century scholars such as Cohen and Natorp.<sup>19</sup> Their distinctive contribution was to radicalize Kant's epistemology: they argued that not only can we not know 'things-in-themselves', but even the senses through which we experience the world cannot be depended upon. Thiselton argues that in Bultmann's case this development of Kant was fused with a brand of nineteenth-century Lutheranism, which stressed the need to avoid seeking one's security in anything but God. The combination of these two influences led Bultmann not only to dilute the importance of empirical historical enquiry for faith, but to regard any attempt to base faith on historical fact as misguided.<sup>20</sup> This is the source of Bultmann's fundamental mistrust of anything which 'objectifies' faith on the grounds that this will inevitably consist of worldly knowledge rather than genuine encounter with the transcendent. Thiselton comments: 'Bultmann . . . accepted the Neo-Kantian assumption that knowledge which objectifies

<sup>17</sup> Michalson (1985), p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Bultmann's approach is also strongly influenced by Kierkegaard's critique of Lessing. Although Kierkegaard kept Lessing's and Kant's distinction between the world of faith and the world of history, he emphasized the importance of the particular moment in the mediation of divine truth to the believer. Eternal truths were inaccessible to fallen human reason without God's initiative at particular moments. See Michalson (1985), pp. 61–92.

<sup>19</sup> See Thiselton (1980), pp. 208–12.

<sup>20</sup> Carnley (1972) argues that Bultmann's radical dilution of the importance of historical events as a foundation for faith is based on a mistaken view of the nature of historical evidence. While it may be true that any particular view of a piece of historical evidence is provisional and open to correction, that does not mean that all historical knowledge is necessarily uncertain in principle.

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in accordance with law is a knowledge in which *man* does the shaping and seizes the mastery. Therefore, in the light of his Lutheranism and his dialectical theology, talk of God cannot take this form.<sup>21</sup>

How does this Neo-Kantian inheritance work itself out in Bultmann's theology? The epistemological dualism between the world of faith and the world of historical research which I noted in the thought of Kant, Lessing and Kierkegaard is also present in Bultmann, albeit expressed in a different way. Bultmann's statement that 'the world which faith wills to grasp is absolutely unattainable by means of scientific research' is a typical summary of his position.<sup>22</sup> At the heart of Bultmann's position is a fundamental dichotomy, which occurs throughout his thought in different contexts. On one plane is the merely actual, the world of empirical history and factual knowledge. On a quite distinct plane is authentically and specifically human existential encounter and the self-understanding of human individuals in their historicity. Nothing in the first plane can claim to have ultimate value, and as long as individuals understand themselves in terms of this plane, their true selves remain in bondage, in inauthentic existence. In his consideration of history, Bultmann expresses this distinction by means of two German words: *Historie*, to represent the world susceptible to historical investigation; and *Geschichte*, to represent the world of authentic existence which cannot be accessed by historical investigation. This accords with Bultmann's theological conviction that we cannot and must not seek knowledge of God from objectified sources (i.e. from data which can be assessed and explained using human reason). For Bultmann, 'God does not stand still and does not put up with being made an object of observation. One cannot *see* God; one can only *hear* God.'<sup>23</sup> Hence his assertion that he actually welcomed negative results of historical criticism, since they discouraged the founding of faith on the wrong premises.

Along with this dichotomy, Bultmann held to a view of history as a closed continuum of events, in effect applying Troeltsch's two principles of analogy and correlation to exclude the idea of special supernatural intervention in history.<sup>24</sup> Unlike Troeltsch, Bultmann did not believe that the results of historical investigation could bear the theological weight of

<sup>21</sup> Thiselton (1980), p. 226.      <sup>22</sup> Bultmann (1969), p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Bultmann (1985), p. 144. From 'Science and Existence', 1955.

<sup>24</sup> Morgan argues that Bultmann's commitment to the thoroughgoing application of the historical-critical method places him in some respects close to Troeltsch. 'Both theologians [Bultmann and Troeltsch] do their history according to modern critical norms, and try to draw out its theological significance. They both stand opposed to Barth, whose theological method resists the autonomy of modern critical history' (1976, p. 60).



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presenting the Christian message. However, it is important to understand that Bultmann is *not* saying that God is not active at all; he is merely saying that God's action cannot be seen by empirical observation. It is possible to speak about God's act only in the context of existential encounter. 'God's act is hidden from all eyes other than the eyes of faith.'<sup>25</sup>

Bultmann's most sustained discussion of the nature of history and how it relates to faith and authentic existence comes in his *History and Eschatology*. He traces the development of different ways in which scripture conceives of the relationship between history and faith. He contrasts Old Testament prophecy, which he sees as speaking of the execution of God's judgement within history, with later Jewish apocalyptic, which saw divine judgement bringing about the end of this world and the dissolution of history. For Bultmann, the New Testament draws on both of these views, although the apocalyptic element predominates in the earliest traditions, such as Jesus' proclamation of the inbreaking of the eschatological reign of God. Passages such as Mark 13 and 1 Corinthians 15 also appear to show little interest in any continuing history or divine judgement within it: in effect, history is swallowed up by eschatology in the context of intense expectation of an imminent parousia.

Bultmann interprets Paul in an existential light, as stressing 'the historicity of man, the true historical life of the human being, the history which everyone experiences for himself and by which he gains his real essence'.<sup>26</sup> This concept of the historicity of the individual is vital for Bultmann. It functions almost as a redefinition of what is truly significant in history, once one accepts his contentions that nothing which is objectified is of ultimate value and that authentic existence is glimpsed only in existential encounter. When Bultmann speaks of the 'historicity' of the individual, he therefore means something very different from the world of historical investigation.

For Bultmann, the Fourth Gospel takes this process further and, unlike Paul, dismisses any concept of future eschatology, so that eschatological reality is seen as breaking into the present. (This argument depends of course on Bultmann's ploy of regarding the references to future eschatology which appear in the text as being the work of an 'ecclesiastical redactor'.) Bultmann therefore detects in both Paul and the Fourth Gospel (for him the most important parts of the New Testament) a sense that the present time, swallowed up in eschatology, has a particular character as a 'time-between'. In Paul it is the time between the resurrection and the

<sup>25</sup> Bultmann (1985), p. 111. From 'On the Problem of Demythologizing', 1952.

<sup>26</sup> Bultmann (1957), p. 43.

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parousia, in John the time between the glorification of Jesus and the death of the individual believer.<sup>27</sup> In each case, the present time is more than merely chronology. For Bultmann this represents a valuable perspective, since eschatological reality and therefore existential possibility are woven into the present.<sup>28</sup>

One senses the tone of regret as Bultmann argues that with the delay of the parousia this view of the present became unsustainable, and a sense of history re-emerged distinct from eschatology, so that eschatological reality came to be understood primarily as anticipation, rather than as current reality. Only with the Romantic reaction against the teleology of the Enlightenment, and with what Bultmann sees as the modern sense of man's historicity, is there a renewed opportunity to glimpse the reality of history as personal encounter and decision:

the present is the moment of decision, and by the decision taken the yield of the past is gathered in and the meaning of the future is chosen. This is the character of every historical situation; in it the problem and the meaning of past and future are enclosed and are waiting, as it were, to be unveiled by human decisions.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, for Bultmann, meaning in history is to be found in momentary existential encounter in the present moment, rather than by historical investigation. In the believer's experience of Christ, what matters is not whatever can be pieced together about the history of the Christ event, but rather Christ's summons to decision in the present. And Bultmann is strongly opposed to any notion that a meaning is to be found in the broad sweep of history. Schemes such as those developed by Hegel or Marx which depend upon a view of history as a whole are for Bultmann illegitimate because a vantage point from which the whole of history may be seen is unattainable.<sup>30</sup>

Bultmann is representative of one possible response to the challenges laid down by Troeltsch at the beginning of the twentieth century. He accepts Troeltsch's historical-critical agenda, yet, under the influence of his Neo-Kantian inheritance, seeks to preserve a secure zone within which faith might be appropriated, safe from the rigours of historical investigation. This is not, however, the only possible response.

<sup>27</sup> Bultmann (1957), p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> In fact, Bultmann's use of scripture can be attacked as arbitrary and selective. As Roberts points out, the New Testament includes a variety of eschatological perspectives, and not merely the realized eschatology detected by Bultmann; see Roberts (1977), ch. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Bultmann (1957), pp. 141–2.

<sup>30</sup> Bultmann (1985), pp. 137–8. From 'Science and Existence', 1955.