

The Struggle for the Possibility of Faith

Memories of Rudolf Bultmann and Reflections on the Philosophical Aspects of His Work

Prof. Dr. Michael Bongardt, Universität Siegen

Published: German: KGA III/1, S. 377-405
English: Is Faith Still Possible? Memories of Rudolf Bultmann and Reflections on the Philosophical Aspects of His Work, in: Hans Jonas: On Faith, Reason and Responsibility. Six Essay, rev. ed., Claremont 1981, p. 1-21.

The text concerns an extended version of a lecture given by Hans Jonas on 16 November, 1976 at an academic commemorative ceremony held for Rudolf Bultmann, who had passed away on 30 July, 1976.

In the first pages of the text, Jonas acknowledges his teacher in a personally moving and biographically interesting manner. He portrays Bultmann as a man of “unshakable integrity,” who, in contrast to Heidegger, did not allow himself to be corrupted by National Socialism; he is seen as an upright and tenaciously inquiring scholar.

According to Jonas, Bultmann found himself faced with a double challenge in his role as exegete of the New Testament. He had to

- make the content and truth of faith accessible to;
- and demonstrate the possibility of faith for

modern man.

1. Demythologization

In terms of methodology, Bultmann chose “demythologization” in order to make Biblical texts understandable. The mythical texts of the New Testament tell us something about the true reality of humanity, revealing the fundamental conditions and forms of human life and experience. They do this, however, in an inadequate fashion, because they conceive of dynamic experiences in the form of historical stories and in hypostatizing statements about transcendent realities. According to Bultmann, these “objectifications” can be traced back to the initial religious experiences, which are also accessible to modern man and can be theologically interpreted. The conditions for the possibility of such an exegesis can be found in a philosophical elucidation of the existential nature of human Dasein, which Bultmann recognizes in the work of Heidegger. Jonas acknowledges the methodological conception of Bultmann’s theology, yet, as a philosopher, he abstains from commenting on the theological claims developed by Bultmann upon this foundation.

2. An intervening God?

The fundamental philosophical question concerning the “possibility of faith” is discussed in greater detail by Jonas. Both Bultmann and Jonas face at least three obstacles that prevent modern thought from conceding this possibility:

- the Biblical world view;
- the miracle stories of the Bible;
- the belief in a God who directly intervenes in the world.

Admittedly, the ancient and Biblical conception of the earth as the center of the cosmos is no longer acceptable. Jonas and Bultmann have no problem in abandoning this view, as they regard it as “adiaphora” (matters not regarded as essential) to faith.

Miracles, in the sense of violations of the laws of nature, also appear unreasonable to modern man. This belief, in contrast to the acceptance of a “lucky combination of circumstances,” also plays a subordinate role for Biblical faith.

What remains is the issue of a God who directly intervenes in history. Bultmann saw himself compelled to exclude God as a transcendent actor in world events, even in a theological interpretation of history. From the perspective of a believer, however, Bultmann still always saw it possible to explain events through the “hidden hand of God.”

Jonas takes issue at this point, as such a conception results in the actions of God being fundamentally unknowable. It is important for Jonas that God’s actions can be thought of as “real” actions. This is possible if:

- the “atheism” of modern science is understood as a “methodical approach and not as a metaphysical assertion” (389);
- the awareness of human freedom is taken seriously so that engagement stemming from free choice has an equal probability (“zero-point of indifference”) of becoming reality – then God must also be accorded the possibility of such action;
- there can exist words spoken by human beings that are beholden to “a direct form of transcendental casuistry in inner life” (403) and, in this sense, are a direct revelation from God.

To choose such a possible conception, as Jonas clearly sees it, is an act of faith that can prove itself, but that cannot be transformed into knowledge. Its test in practice consists not least in reconciling contradictory claims of revelation.

3. Historical reception

Bultmann’s theology was not without its detractors. He was accused of religious decisionism as well as the dissolution of faith in the historical divine revelation in favor of an existential self-interpretation of mankind. The widespread extent of opposition, even today, is matched by an equally large affirmative reception.

Jonas himself is only seldom mentioned or known as a pioneering thinker in demythologization. His metaphysical speculations are largely ignored in both philosophy and theology.

4. Suggestions for discussion

How do the arguments developed here by Jonas on the intervention by God relate to positions found in other texts by Jonas, particularly with respect to:

- the conception of God after Auschwitz;
- Heidegger and theology;
- Existentialism, Gnosticism, and Nihilism?