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MODERN
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

Bultmann I

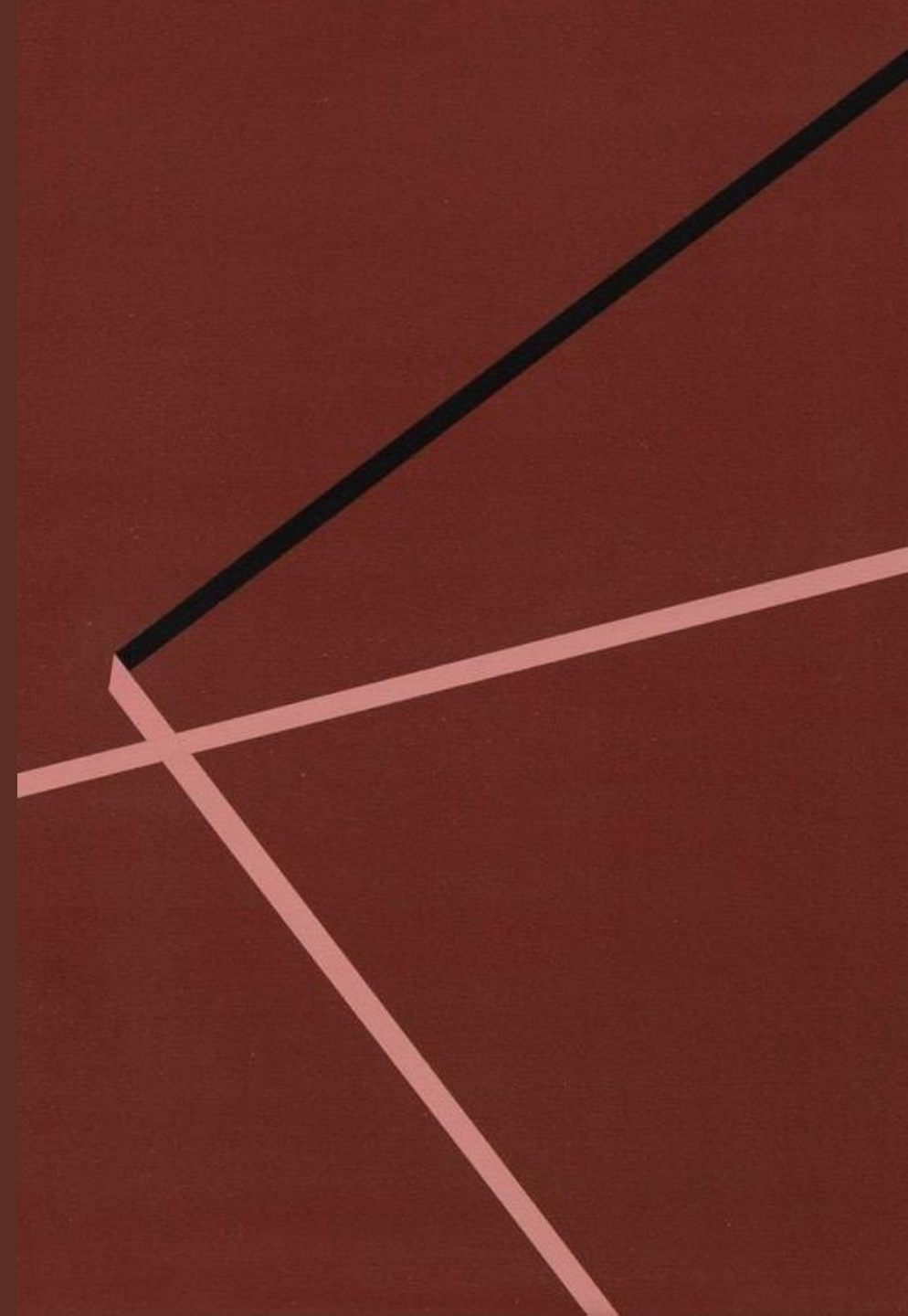


BULTMANN: DE-MYTHOLOGISING THE NEW TESTAMENT

THE PROBLEM OF MODERN BELIEF

It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.

This sentence — among the most quoted and most contested in twentieth-century theology — is Rudolf Bultmann's blunt statement of the problem that his entire hermeneutical programme was designed to address.



THE PROBLEM OF MODERN BELIEF

Whether the sentence is quite as obvious as Bultmann presents it is itself a serious theological question, and we will return to it.

But the problem it articulates – the tension between the world-picture of the New Testament and the world-picture of modernity – is real and will not disappear by being ignored.

Bultmann's achievement was to press this tension with unusual honesty and to refuse both the evasions of liberal theology, which simply discarded the embarrassing elements of the New Testament, and the evasions of conservative theology, which required a sacrifice of intellect that no honest modern person could make.

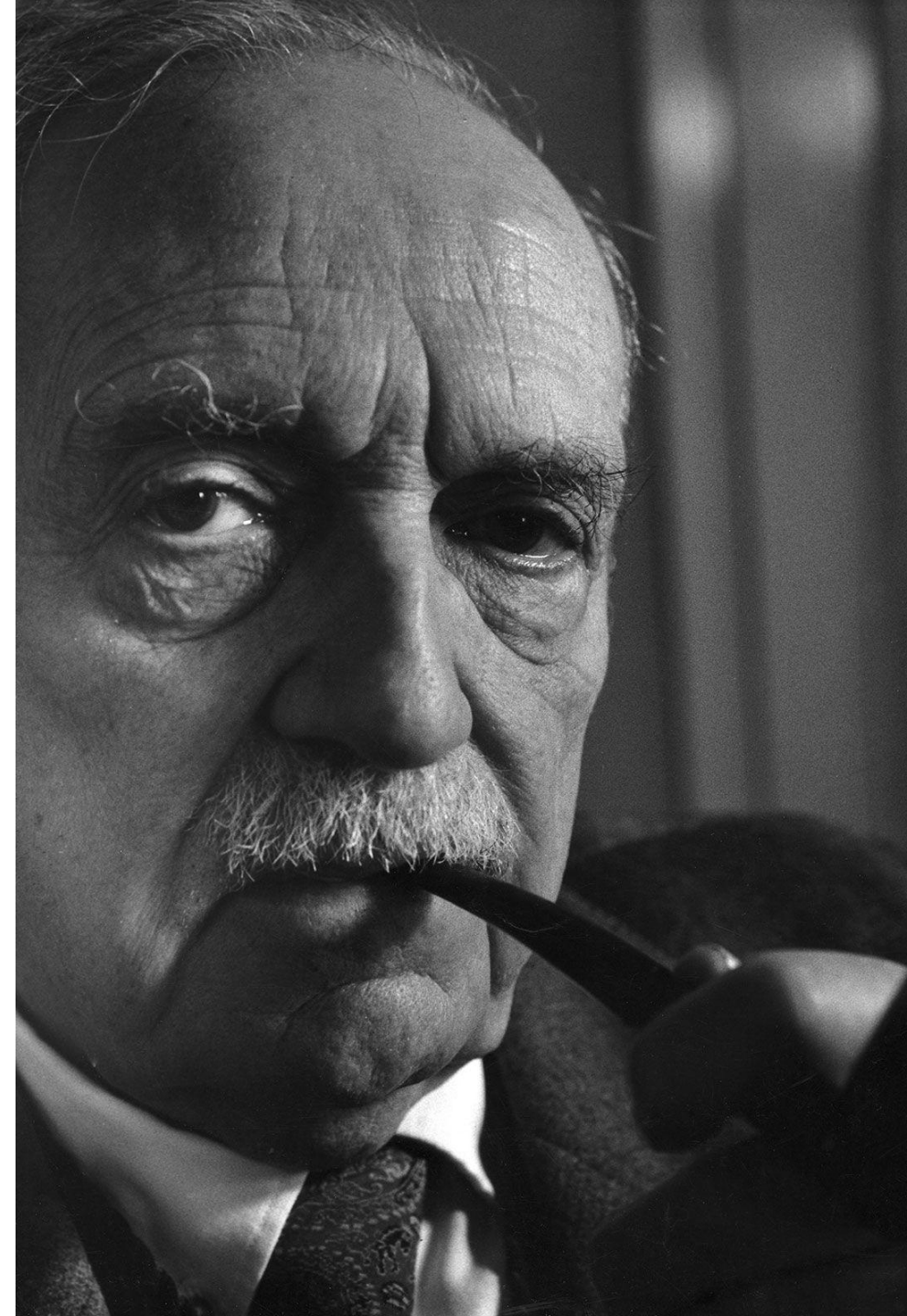


RUDOLF BULTMANN (1884—1976)

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) was formed by two opposing intellectual traditions.

On one side, he was one of the most rigorous historical-critical scholars of the New Testament in the twentieth century. His *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921) applied the methods of form criticism to conclude that we can know very little with historical certainty about Jesus of Nazareth.

On the other side, he was deeply formed by the dialectical theology of the early Barth, and by the Lutheran conviction that the word of God addresses the human person in judgement and grace with a claim that cannot be reduced to historical knowledge.





MYTH AND EXISTENCE

WHAT IS MYTH?

Before Bultmann's demythologisation programme can be evaluated, his concept of myth must be understood precisely — because he uses the term in a specific and somewhat technical sense that differs from ordinary usage.

In ordinary usage, myth tends to mean either a false story or a traditional narrative with symbolic or cultural significance.

For Bultmann, myth means something more specific: a mode of thought and expression in which transcendent, other-worldly realities are spoken of in the language of this-worldly, spatially and temporally conditioned experience.



WHAT IS MYTH?

Myth is the expression of a non-objectifiable transcendent reality – the divine, the demonic, the eschatological – in the objectifying categories of the phenomenal world.

When the New Testament speaks of God sending his Son from heaven, of demons inhabiting human bodies, of Christ descending into hell and ascending to the right hand of the Father, it is expressing genuinely theological content – but in a mythological form that presupposes a cosmological world-picture that modernity can no longer share.

The question is whether the content can be preserved when the mythological form is left behind.



THE MYTHOLOGICAL WORLD- PICTURE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Bultmann's account of the New Testament's mythological world-picture is one of the most influential and controversial passages in twentieth-century theology.

The New Testament, he argues, presupposes a three-storey universe: heaven above, earth in the middle, and the underworld below.

Human existence is played out in a cosmic drama in which supernatural powers — God and his angels on one side, Satan and his demons on the other — struggle for dominion over the world and over human souls.

History is moving toward an imminent apocalyptic end, at which the Son of Man will come on clouds of glory, the dead will be raised, and the final judgement will be rendered.



THE MYTHOLOGICAL WORLD- PICTURE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

This world-picture, Bultmann insists, is not merely peripheral to the New Testament but constitutive of its narrative and theological structure.

The stories of the incarnation, the resurrection, the ascension, and Pentecost all presuppose this cosmological framework.

And this framework, he argues without apology, is simply irrecoverable for modern people formed by the natural sciences.



DE-MYTHOLOGISATION?

A question that arises immediately is why demythologisation is necessary rather than simple elimination.

If the mythological world-picture of the New Testament is untenable for modern people, why not simply discard the mythology and retain whatever historical, ethical, or spiritual kernel can be extracted from it?

This was, broadly speaking, the liberal theological approach – and it was an approach Bultmann regarded as theologically disastrous for two reasons.



DE-MYTHOLOGISATION?

First, the mythology is not a husk that can be peeled away from a kernel of timeless truths; it is the form in which the New Testament's theological content is expressed, and to discard it without careful interpretation is to lose the content along with the form.

Second, and more fundamentally, what the New Testament proclaims – the kerygma, the saving word of God in Jesus Christ – is not a set of timeless moral truths but a specific word addressed to human beings in their concrete historical existence, calling them to decision, to the death of the old self, and to new life in faith.

This kerygma cannot be preserved by liberal reduction; it must be interpreted by existential restatement.

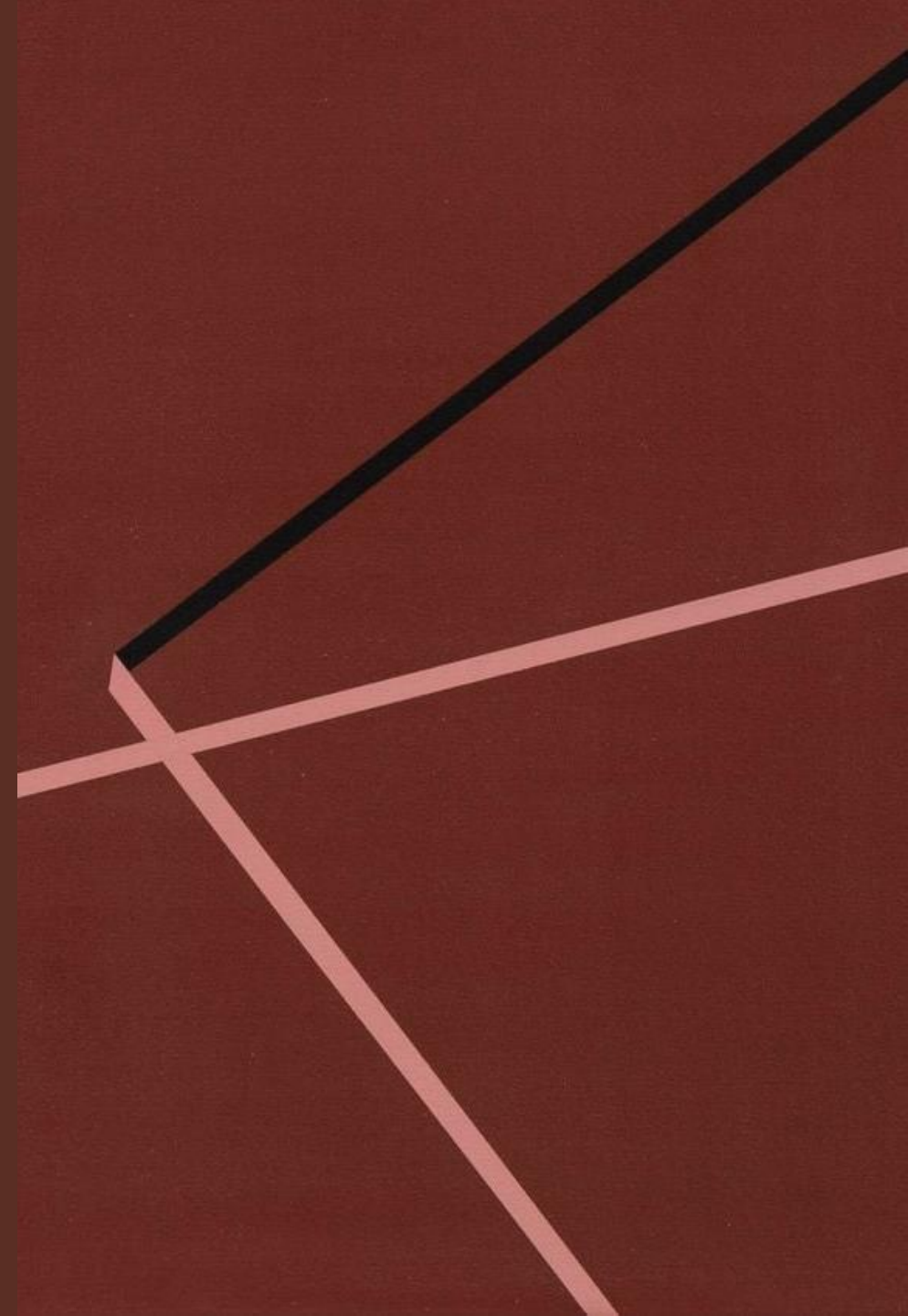


THE INFLUENCE OF HEIDEGGER

The philosophical resource that makes Bultmann's demythologisation programme possible is the existential analysis of Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927)

Heidegger's analysis of human existence — *Dasein* — provided Bultmann with a vocabulary and a set of categories for describing the human condition that were philosophically rigorous, culturally accessible, and structurally capable of receiving the New Testament's theological content.

Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence, his analysis of anxiety as the fundamental mood that discloses *Dasein*'s structure, his account of being-toward-death as constitutive of human temporality — all of these provided Bultmann with the existential framework within which the New Testament's language of sin, faith, death, and resurrection could be reinterpreted.

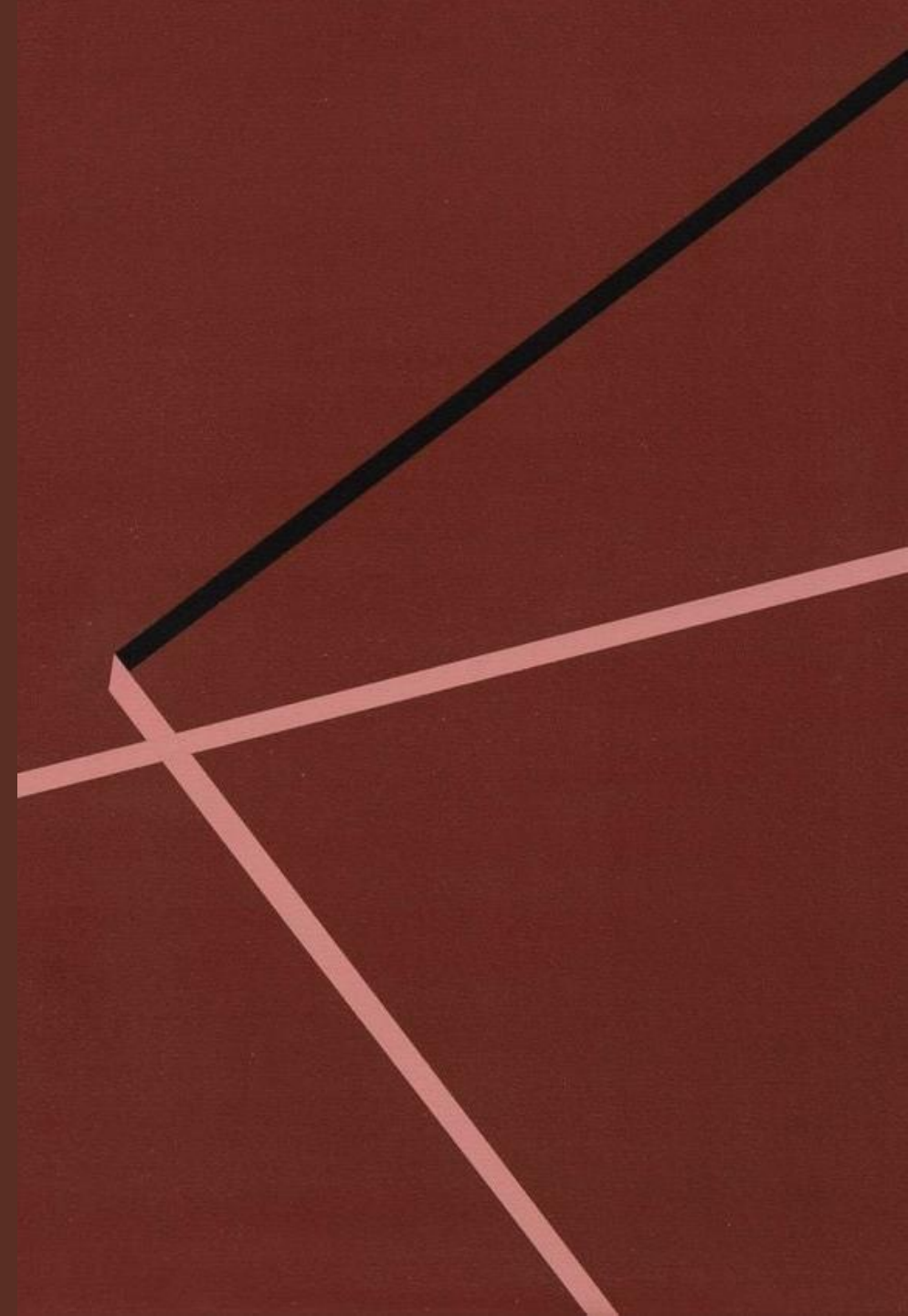


AUTHENTIC AND INAUTHENTIC EXISTENCE

The distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence — drawn from Heidegger but given theological content by Bultmann — is the existential axis around which the demythologisation programme turns.

Inauthentic existence, in Heidegger's analysis, is the mode in which Dasein flees from its own finitude and freedom — losing itself in the impersonal crowd, refusing the anxiety that comes with self-knowledge, allowing itself to be defined by inherited roles and conventions rather than by the genuine self-appropriation of its own existence.

Authentic existence is the mode in which Dasein confronts its own finitude, accepts the anxiety of being-toward-death, and takes genuine responsibility for its own being.

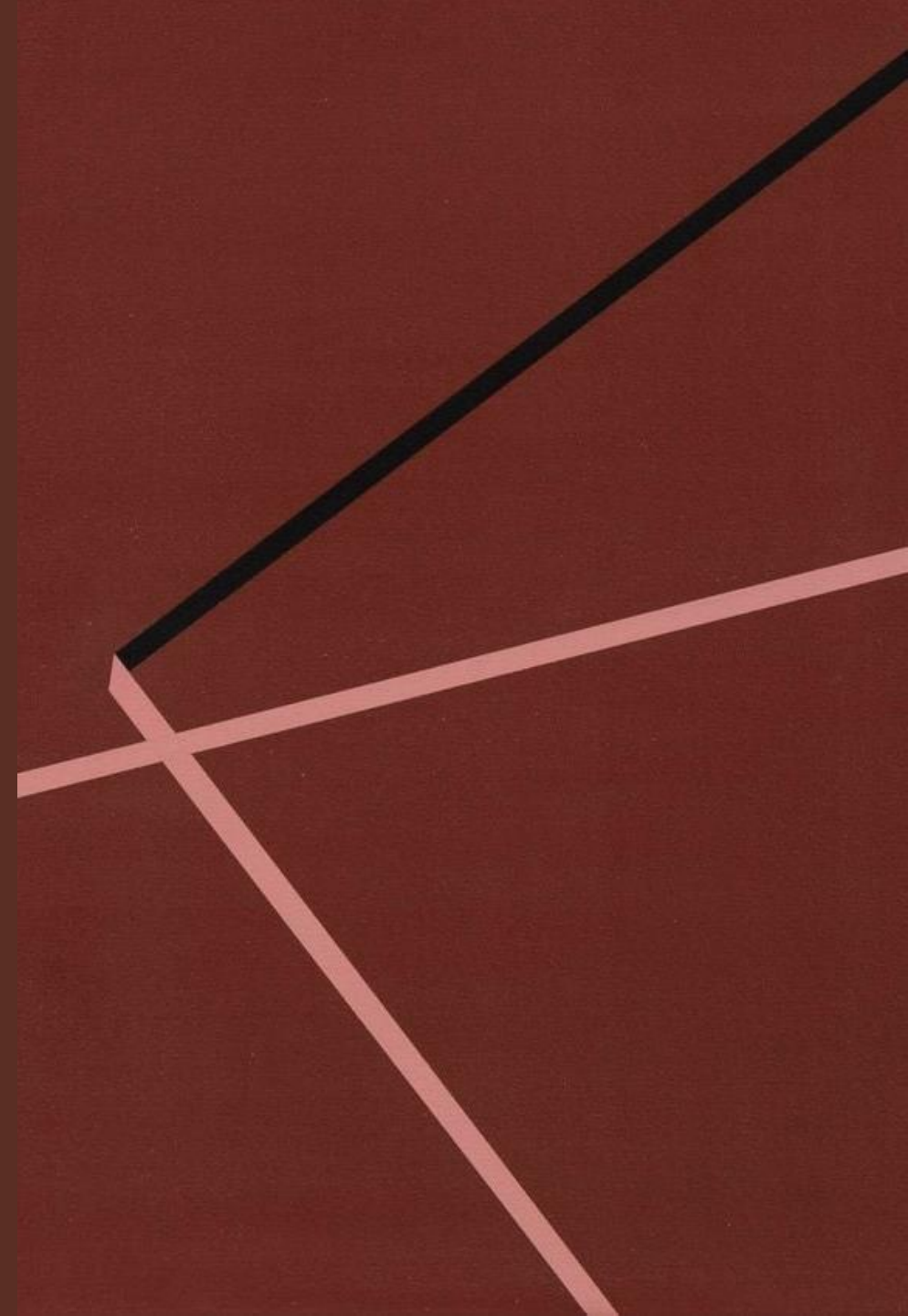


AUTHENTIC AND INAUTHENTIC EXISTENCE

For Bultmann, the New Testament's language of sin and grace maps onto this existential structure:

Sin is the condition of inauthentic existence – the attempt to secure oneself in the things of the world, to evade the demand of genuine self-understanding;

Grace is the divine gift that enables authentic existence – the freedom from anxiety about the world that comes with trust in the God who addresses the human person in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ

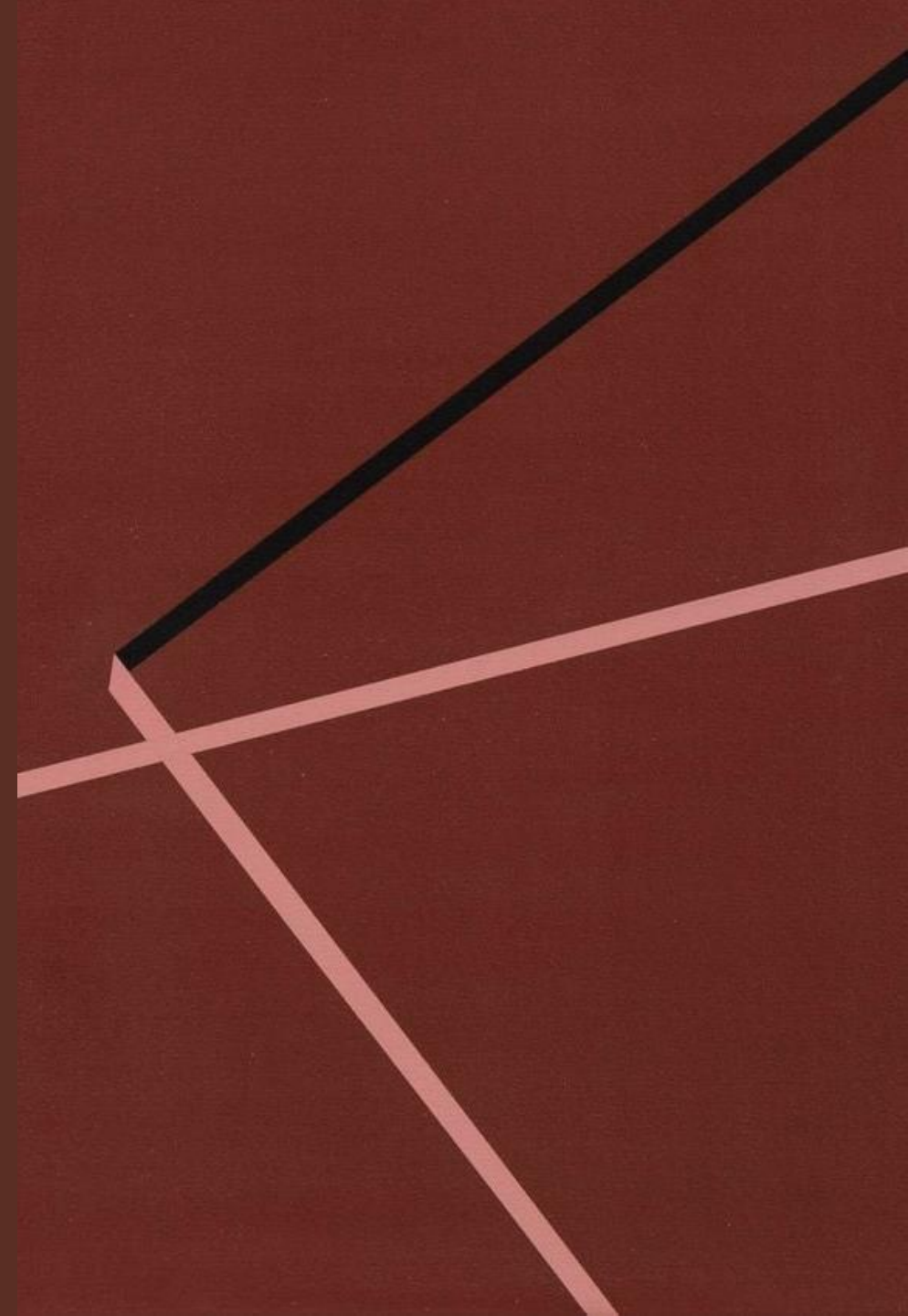


THE KERYGMA AND THE EVENT OF DECISION

The kerygma (the proclamation) is the specific word of address by which God confronts the human person in the proclamation of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, calling that person to a decision that is simultaneously the death of the old self – the self that seeks security in worldly possessions, achievements, and relationships – and the birth of the new self that lives in freedom and openness toward the future.

This is not a decision about the truth of propositions; it is an existential event – a transformation of the mode of existence – that happens when the word of God actually reaches and addresses the human person.

The demythologised gospel is not a set of philosophical truths about human existence that could in principle have been derived from Heidegger; it is a specific word of address that is dependent on the contingent historical event of Jesus Christ, however limited our historical knowledge of that event may be.



THE CROSS

The cross of Jesus Christ is not, for Bultmann, primarily a historical event whose significance depends on accurate knowledge of the circumstances of Jesus's crucifixion.

Nor is it a mythological transaction in which the Son of God bears the punishment of human sin in a cosmic legal drama.

It is the event in which the judgment of God on the world is revealed, in which the human attempt to secure existence through the resources of the world is unmasked, judged, and called to surrender.

The cross confronts every human being with the demand to die to the old self – to release the grip on worldly security – and to receive existence as grace rather than achievement.

This interpretation preserves what Bultmann regards as the genuine theological scandal of the Cross.



THE RESURRECTION

No aspect of Bultmann's demythologisation programme has attracted more controversy than his treatment of the resurrection, and the controversy is entirely understandable, because the resurrection stands at the centre of the New Testament kerygma in a way that no demythologisation can easily negotiate.

Bultmann's position is carefully stated but widely regarded as ultimately inadequate: the resurrection is not a historical event in the ordinary sense (the resuscitation of a corpse) and it is not verifiable by historical inquiry.

It is the expression, in mythological form, of the theological significance of the cross: the affirmation that the crucified Jesus is not a defeated martyr but the living Lord whose cross is the word of life.

But whether this account can sustain the weight of the New Testament's resurrection language, which speaks with apparent concreteness of an empty tomb, of appearances, of Thomas touching the wounds has never been satisfactorily resolved within Bultmann's framework.

ESCHATOLOGY

Bultmann's treatment of eschatology draws on the theology of the Fourth Gospel, where the eschatological events are presented as already occurring in the encounter with Jesus: the judgement is present in the moment of decision for or against Christ; eternal life is not a future state but a present quality of existence in faith.

Eschatology is demythologised as present, existential reality: the believer who has died to the old self and lives in faith is already living the eschatological existence and is already experiencing the judgment and grace that the mythological world-picture projected onto a cosmic future.

This existential realised eschatology has a genuine New Testament basis, but it sits in tension with the equally genuine future-oriented eschatological language that the New Testament also contains.



HISTORY AND THE CHRIST OF FAITH

This tension is also reflected in the relationship between the what we call the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith - between the person who lived and died in first-century Palestine and the Christ proclaimed in the New Testament.

Bultmann's consistent position is that the kerygma is not dependent on historical knowledge of Jesus's life and personality. What matters for faith is not the historical Jesus but the Christ encountered in the proclaimed word: the word that addresses the hearer here and now with God's judgement and grace.

Faith is therefore not vulnerable to the uncertainties of historical inquiry; it rests not on historical probability but on the encounter with the living Word. This position has the obvious advantage of insulating faith from the fluctuating results of historical research.

But it raises an equally obvious question: if the kerygma is so loosely tethered to the historical Jesus, in what sense does it retain its specifically Christian character? Is the name of Jesus more than a cipher for a universal existential truth that could in principle have been articulated without him?





CRITICISMS OF BULTMANN

KÄSEMANN AND THE NEW QUEST

The most significant challenge to Bultmann's account of history and faith came from within his own school, in the form of Ernst Käsemann's 1953 lecture that inaugurated what came to be called the 'New Quest of the Historical Jesus'.

Käsemann argued that Bultmann's drastic separation of the kerygmatic Christ from the historical Jesus created a theological vacuum that Docetism could fill: a Christ whose connection to historical humanity is so attenuated that his genuine human existence becomes doubtful.

Against Bultmann, Käsemann insisted that a continuity between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ is theologically necessary – that the specific content of Jesus's preaching, his proclamation of the gracious nearness of God to sinners, is not only historically recoverable but theologically essential as a check against the reduction of the kerygma to a merely formal existential structure.

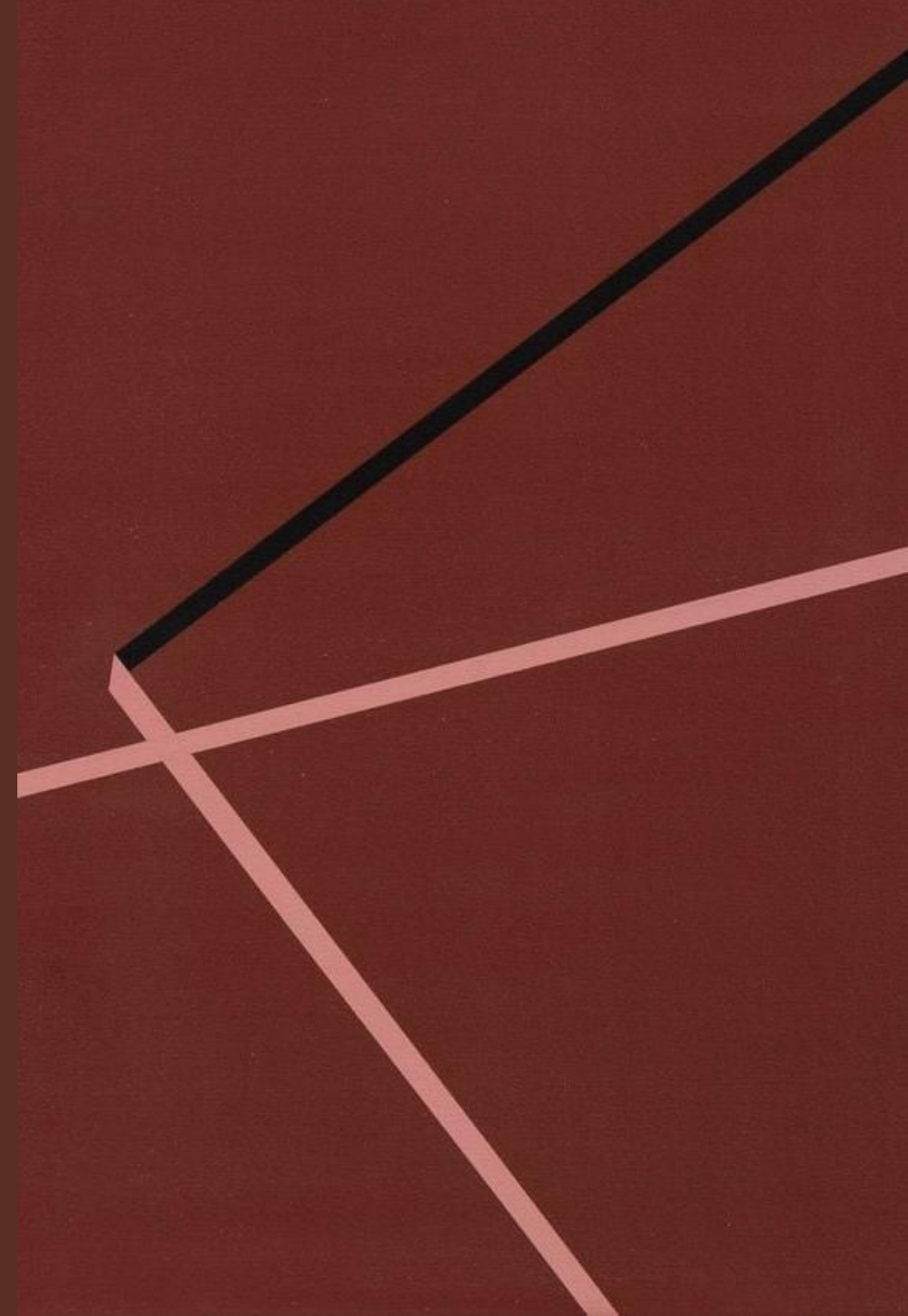


Ernst Käsemann

THE JASPERS DEBATE

A debate that took place between Bultmann and the philosopher Karl Jaspers, conducted through published exchanges in the early 1950s, crystallises one of the fundamental questions about the demythologisation programme: whether it is genuinely theological, dependent on the specific historical event of Jesus Christ, or whether it has effectively dissolved theology into existentialist philosophy.

Jaspers argued that Bultmann had not gone far enough: if mythological thinking must be abandoned, the specific claims of Christian revelation (e.g. the unique salvific significance of one historical figure) must also be abandoned, since they too represent a form of the objectifying mythological thinking that modernity has outgrown.



THE JASPERS DEBATE

Bultmann's response was that the kerygma is not a philosophical truth derivable from existential analysis but a specific word of address dependent on the contingency of the Christ event: God's act of grace is not a universal human possibility but a particular historical gift.

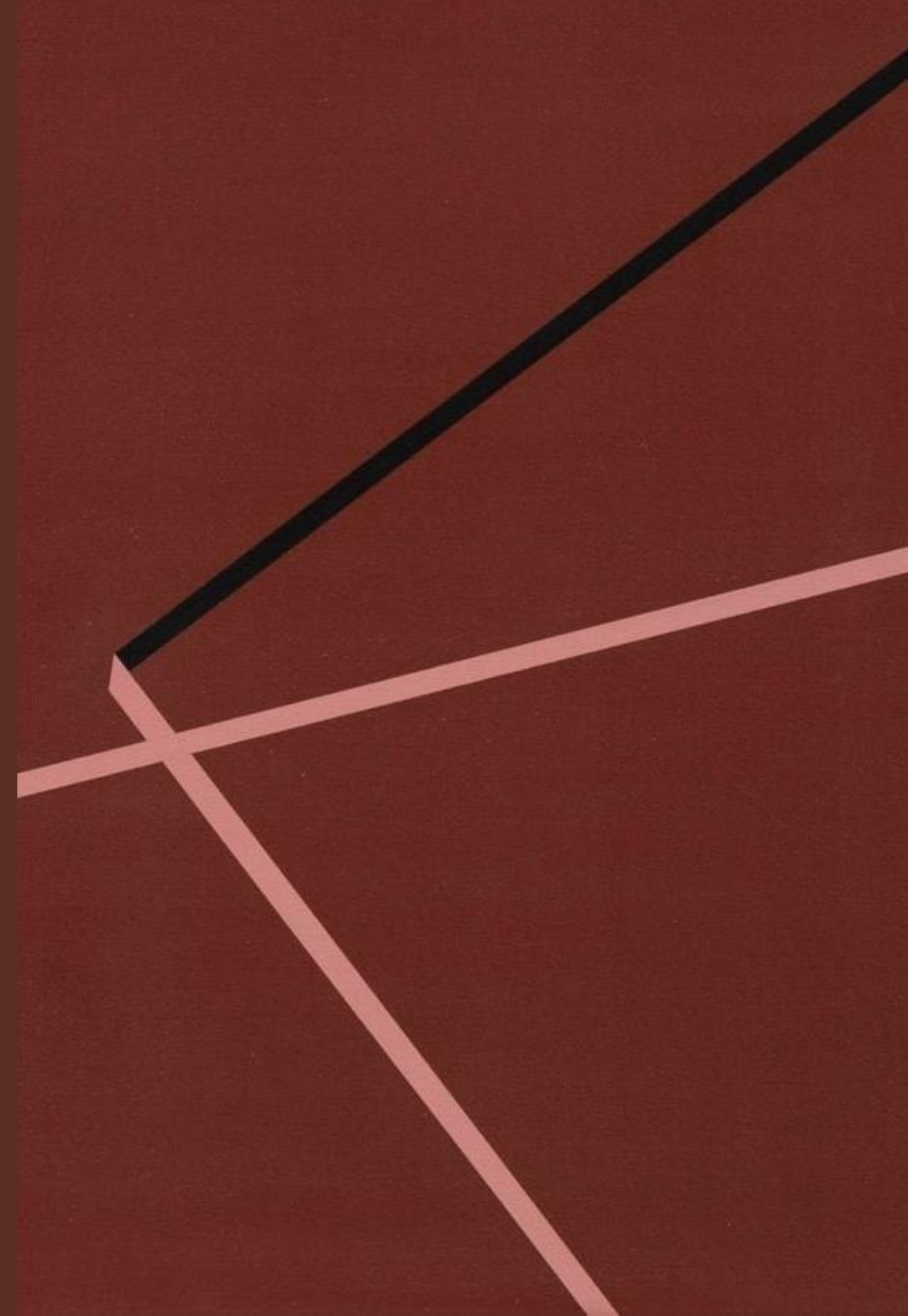
This response distinguishes Bultmann from Tillich and from any purely philosophical existentialism, but whether it is ultimately coherent given Bultmann's treatment of the resurrection and the historical Jesus remains genuinely contested.



FEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUES

Bultmann's programme also attracted, from the latter decades of the twentieth century, critiques from feminist and postcolonial theologians that expose the cultural particularity of his supposedly universal existential framework.

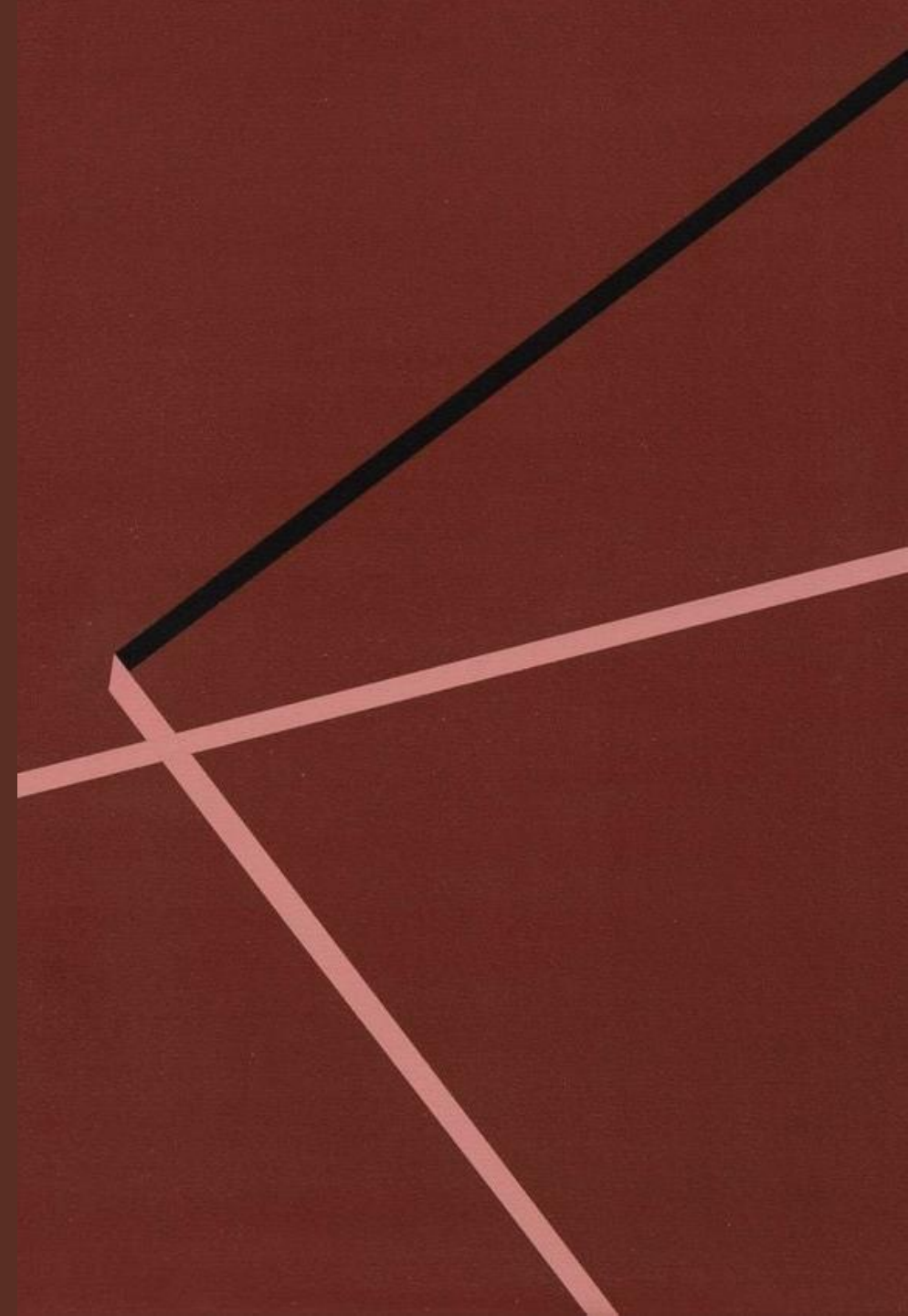
The Heideggerian categories of authentic existence, being-toward-death, anxiety, and freedom are not culturally neutral analytical tools; they reflect the experience and preoccupations of a specific cultural formation – the educated, male, European, shaped by the individualism and the existential angst of post-war German intellectual culture.



FEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUES

Feminist theologians, such as Judith Plaskow and Dorothee Sölle, argued that the existentialist account of sin as the flight from authentic individual self-assertion reflects a characteristically male pathology; for many women, the spiritual problem is not excessive self-assertion but its opposite – the loss of self in the service of others that patriarchal culture demands.

Postcolonial critics similarly argued that the universal human existential situation that Bultmann's method presupposes is in fact the particular situation of one cultural tradition presented as normative for all.

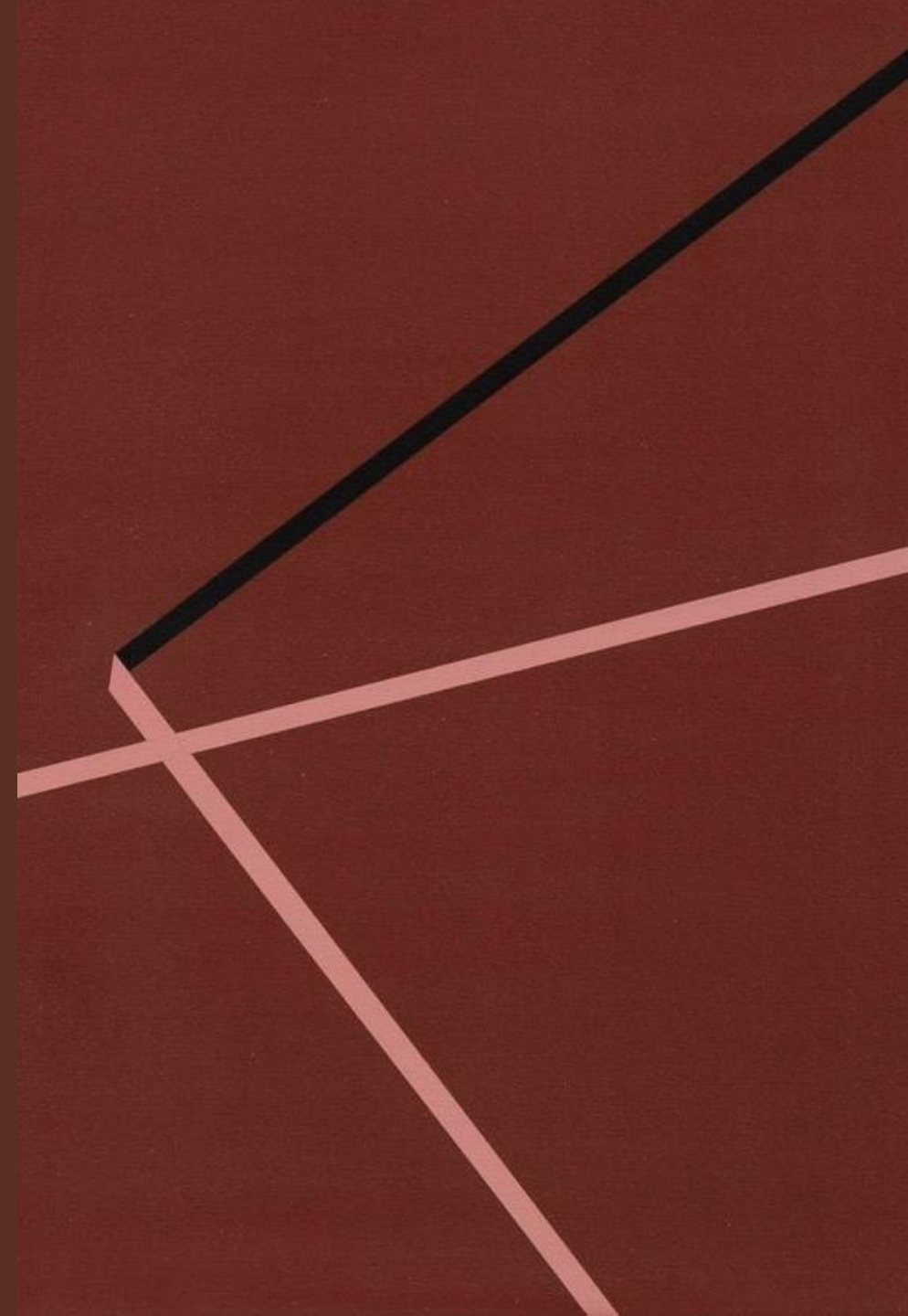


THE HERMENEUTICAL QUESTION BULTMANN OPENED

Perhaps Bultmann's most enduring contribution is not his specific programme of demythologisation but the hermeneutical question it opened: how is the meaning of an ancient text to be made available to readers whose world-picture, cultural formation, and existential situation differ profoundly from those of the text's original authors and hearers?

Bultmann's answer, interpretation through existential analysis, was one possible response to this question.

But the question itself turned out to be generative far beyond the specific theological context in which Bultmann posed it.

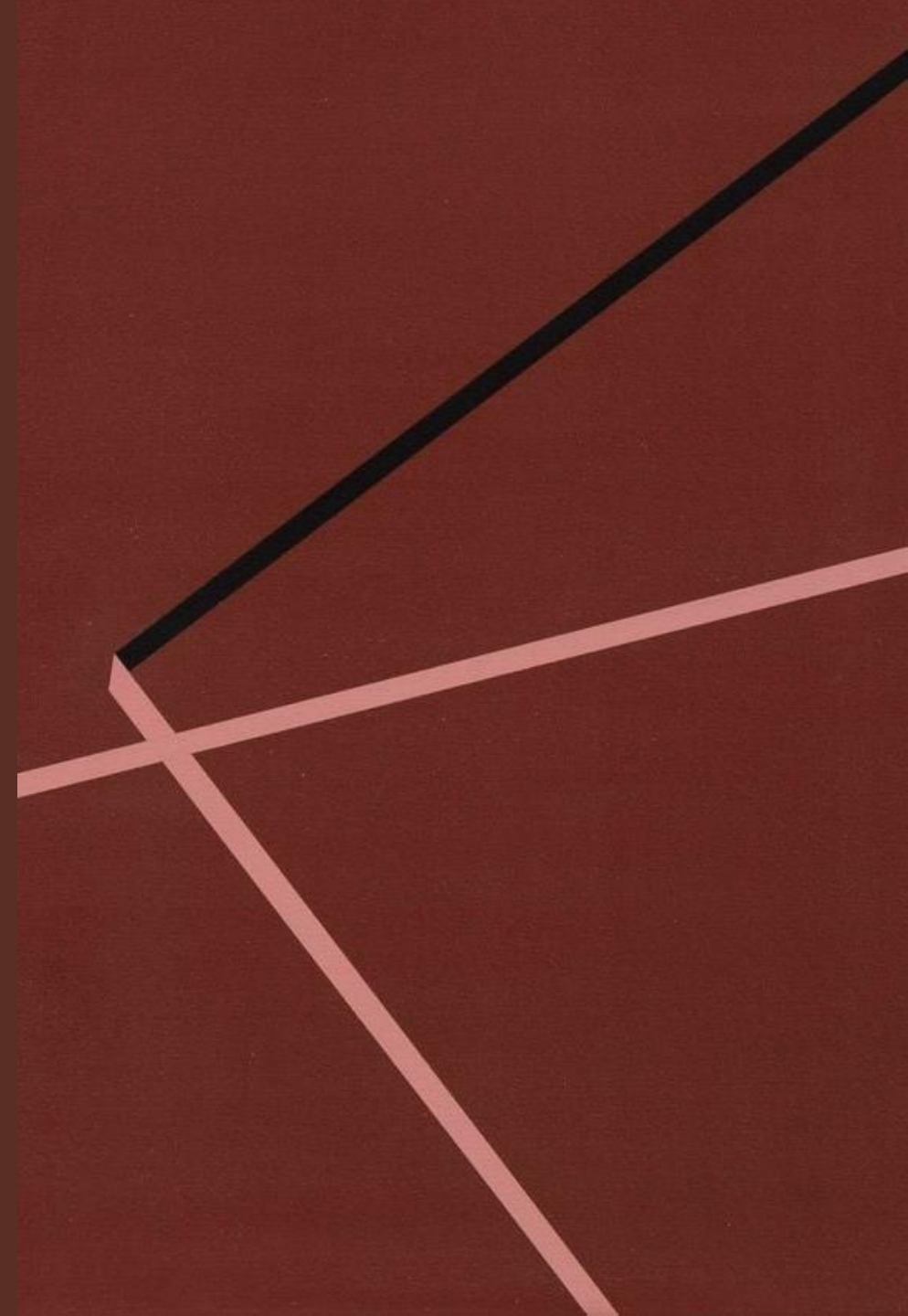


THE HERMENEUTICAL QUESTION BULTMANN OPENED

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, which developed the concept of the hermeneutical circle and the fusion of horizons as the fundamental structure of all textual understanding, was significantly shaped by the Bultmann debates.

Paul Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics, which insisted that the meaning of texts is not reducible to the intentions of their authors but emerges in the encounter between text and reader across time, represents another development of the hermeneutical tradition that Bultmann's work helped to inaugurate.

The question of what Scripture means — not only what it says — remains one of the most productive in contemporary theology.

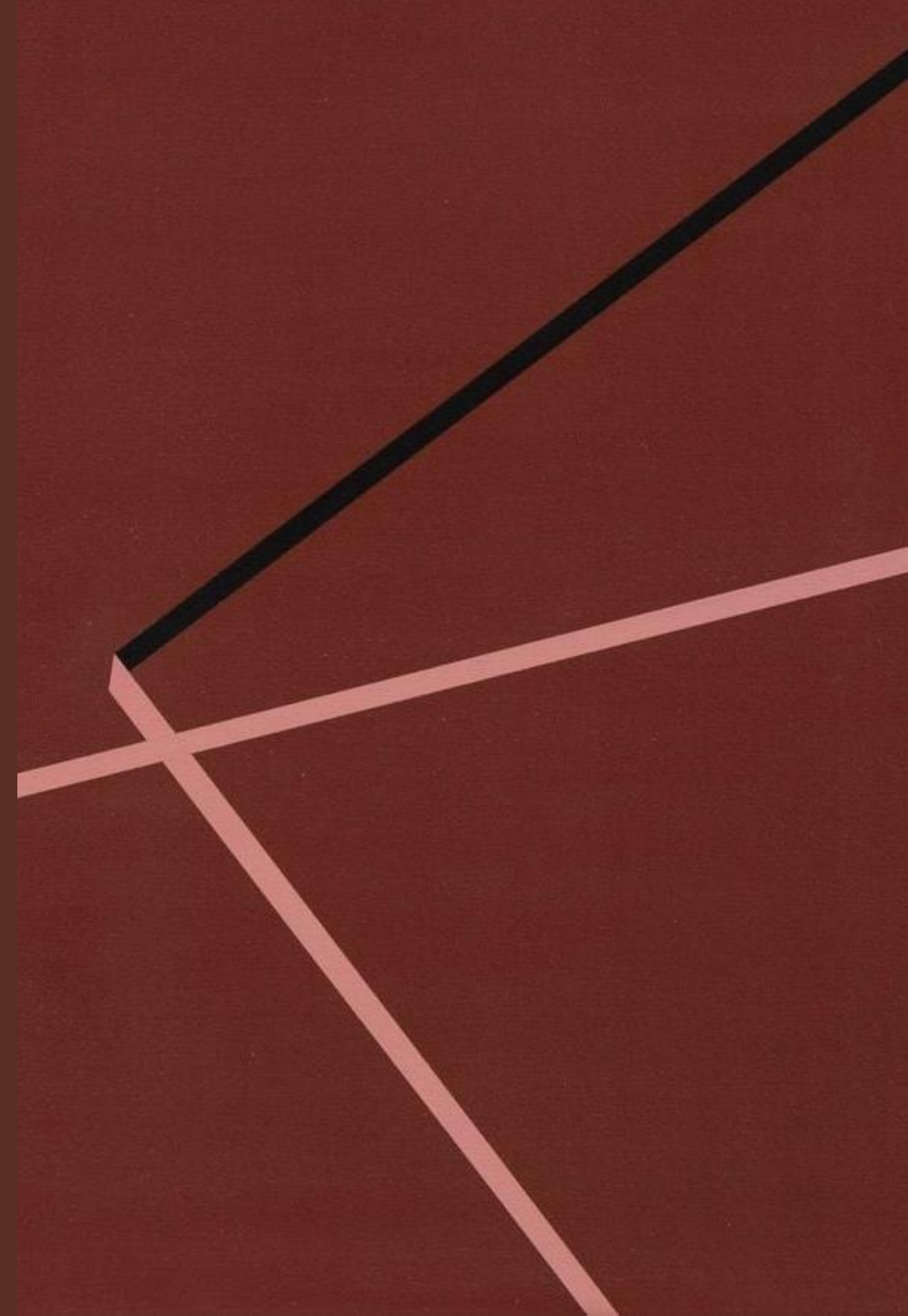


SUMMARY

Bultmann's demythologisation programme represents one of the most honest and consequential attempts in modern theology to take with equal seriousness the demands of critical modernity and the specific theological claim of the Christian gospel.

The honesty is real. He refused the evasions available to him: the liberal reduction of Christianity to ethical principles, the confessional reassertion of traditional categories without critical engagement, the Barthian insistence that God's Word is simply its own criterion and needs no hermeneutical mediation.

The consequential character is equally real: his work permanently raised the questions of myth, interpretation, and existential meaning that all subsequent hermeneutical theology must address.



READINGS

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