

DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE NEW TESTAMENT

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I - Introduction

Before we start to examine the subject of Bultmann's demythologizing it is necessary to say a few words of introduction. The subject of demythologizing the New Testament is a very large one indeed, one which has large areas of investigation bordering on the main theme. Form criticism, the relation of science and theology, the relation of philosophy and theology are only three of the formidable areas of interest that are intimately involved in the question of demythologization. It is, therefore, manifestly impossible that in the next hour or so we should completely encompass the subject at hand. I do hope, however, that this paper and the discussion following will prompt you to think very seriously about the value of Rudolph Bultmann's contribution to theology, to your individual ministry and most important, to your personal faith. In the preparation of this paper, this has been accomplished for me. You might say I have become existentially involved with Bultmann. Consequently, I ask your pardon in advance for instances in which this paper appears to lapse into a sermon.

For the sake of brevity I have had to discriminate arbitrarily as to what ideas to emphasize. The method of presentation will be roughly what Professor Boyce in first year Homiletics called "A Lazy Man's Sermon." That is, a question will be posed and then the answer attempted. No doubt as each question is raised and discussed a dozen more will occur to you. If so, please write them down and ask them later in the question period.

II - Why Demythologize the New Testament?

The need to demythologize the New Testament arises from the fact that modern man looks upon the world scientifically and, hence, finds the mythical view of the world that is found in the N.T. obsolete, unintelligible and in some respects clearly incredible. The three-storied cosmology of the N.T., with heaven up, with earth in-between and hell underneath, is incredible. So are the N.T. stories which directly presuppose this cosmology: for example, the story of the Ascension or the claim that Jesus descended into hell. The traditional hope that the Son of man will return on the clouds of heaven has also become meaningless

Modern science operates on the assumption that every event has a natural cause which can be determined if sufficient effort is made. If this assumption is taken seriously, and most of us take it quite seriously, it renders incredible the belief in evil spirits, for example, that cause diseases, and the belief that the natural order can be disrupted by what the N.T. calls miracles, wonders or signs.

Furthermore, we have every reason to believe that this cause and effect sequence will continue in the future, indefinitely if not infinitely. The modern view of history is that it is a straight

progression of events uninterrupted by super-natural interference. This brings N.T. eschatology into question. The Parousia of Christ which was supposed to bring an end to history in Jesus' time never happened, and is unintelligible to the modern world. Even if we can still manage to expect its coming, to insist that others do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible.

The sciences of human nature regard man as a self-subsistent unity which does not allow for any mechanical interference from supernatural powers such as are claimed for Christian baptism or the Eucharist. Theology attributes such action to the Holy Spirit. It is just this mythically clouded concept which needs to be demythologized.

It is also unintelligible that death is the punishment of sin. Surely death is natural and even necessary for the survival of the human race.

The doctrine of the Atonement is difficult and incredible for many if sins are understood to be atoned for cultically by the blood of a divine Being. It must surely be myth also to speak of juridical transactions between God and man. Besides, asks modern man, if Christ were the pre-existent Son of God what could death mean for him, especially if he knew he was going to rise again in three days? Finally, the resurrection itself is inconceivable and absolutely incredible if physical resurrection is meant.

This list of difficulties which modern man has with some N.T. doctrines and beliefs is by no means exhaustive. It is sufficient, however, to point up the problem of myth in the N.T. What are we, who cannot ignore the findings of science, going to do with the problem of myth. Bultmann sees only three alternatives:

- 1) We can sacrifice our intellectual integrity and affirm the "impossible" to be true.
- 2) We can skip all the difficult N.T. concepts and affirm only the broadest religious truths of Jesus' teachings.
- 3) We can seek to find the religious truth beneath the mythical concepts of the N.T. by interpreting the myth in which the essential truth is embodied, and by eliminating myths which are of only peripheral significance and which tend to be unnecessary stumbling blocks to modern man's understanding and appropriation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The first alternative, to sacrifice our intellect, is unthinkable since it involves us in a basic inner contradiction and inconsistency which might be called hypocrisy. Neither can we rest in a reverent agnosticism if we hope to preach the Good News of Jesus to others.

The second alternative of choosing what parts of the N.T. mythology we will believe and what parts we conveniently ignore is also unsatisfactory. Bultmann claims that the mythical view of the world must be accepted or rejected in its entirety. I quote: "The theologian and the priest alike must make it quite clear what their hearers are expected to accept and what they are not.

At all costs the preacher must not leave his people in the dark about what he secretly eliminates, nor must he be in the dark about it himself.”

The third alternative and the only alternative is what Bultmann calls “de-mythologizing.” The name, he admits, is unsatisfactory since the aim of the process is not primarily to eliminate the mythological statements but to interpret them. Before we examine this approach it will be worthwhile to examine the precise nature of mythology.

III - What precisely do we mean when we speak of myth or mythology?

Mythology has been called a primitive science the intention of which is to explain strange, curious or frightening phenomena and incidents by attributing them to supernatural causes, Gods or demons. Myth is this in part, for example, when it attributes phenomena like eclipses of the sun and moon to such causes. But there is more than this primitive science to mythology. Beneath this primitive science mythology is really a way in which man expresses his understanding of reality and of known existence. Myth is an expression of man’s belief that the origin and purpose of the world in which he lives are not to be sought with the world but beyond it, beyond the reality of known and tangible reality. And myth also expresses man’s understanding of his own existence as one in which he is dependent on these unknown powers beyond the world to deliver him from the known forces of the world.

The mythology of the N.T., like any other mythology, is essentially a way of expressing a particular understanding of human existence. This understanding Bultmann believes to be the true and right understanding of man’s being. The difficulty for modern man is that this truth is expressed in inadequate mythological language. Myth expresses the other-worldly in terms of the objective world of nature. For example, it speaks of divine transcendence in terms of spatial distance. It speaks of Gods as if they were really men and of their actions as human actions.

Myth is inadequate for modern man’s reason because the world’s natural weft of cause and effect is incredibly torn apart by supernatural action, by the other-worldly acting in a this-worldly fashion. Bultmann believes that the weft of cause and effect is opened to supernatural action, not by a tearing apart of the order but by the transcendence of the order. This transcendence is seen only in faith which paradoxically can understand an event in its context in nature and in history as an act of God.

Mythological language is inadequate to describe the true understanding of man’s being; therefore, Bultmann stresses the necessity of describing truth in non-mythological terms. This is accomplished by a re-interpretation of the myth.

IV - How then is myth to be interpreted?

Bultmann points out that his is not the first attempt at interpreting myth. The allegorical interpretation of the Bible has been with the Church ever since the earliest centuries. By this method the literal meanings were ostensibly allowed to stand but the individual believers really dispensed with them by interpreting them as spiritual truths.

The older liberals approached the problem of myth by eliminating it altogether and by stressing only the broad basic principles of religion and ethics. Unfortunately, they threw the Kerygma out with the myth for they no longer proclaimed the central message of the N.T. witness that God had acted decisively for mankind in Jesus.

The History of Religions school made the same mistake in not recognising the centrality of God's act in Christianity. They minimized the problem of mythology because they believed that the essence of the N.T. message lay in the mystical way of life that it proposed.

Bultmann asserts that the true nature of human existence, which he calls "eschatological existence," can be conveyed only by an existentialist interpretation of the myth of the N.T. This existentialist interpretation approaches the Bible with the intention of hearing what it has to say for our actual present existence, what it has to say of present significance for our lives and our souls. It, in effect, is looking for self-understanding in the framework of myth.

Perhaps an illustration will help to clarify the method as well as show some of its results. We will attempt to show how Bultmann interprets the N.T. proclamation of the end of present history and the beginning of "God's history" or eternity. Jewish apocalyptic saw this as a day in the future when a cosmic catastrophe would bring the world to an end. All would be judged on this day and a new age begun in which everything would be newly and perfectly created under a Messiah from God. Hellenistic Gnosticism sees the end of this world coming about through a cosmic process induced by the Son of God whose fate and teaching would deliver the elect and assure them of a return to their heavenly home. These beliefs are clearly mythical. They speak of the other-worldly as though it already had or was going to have this-worldly historical objectivity.

Traditional Christianity has perpetuated these mythical concepts by approaching these beliefs with historical questions such as "how can we understand history so that these predictions are literally true? Or even. When will the eschaton be realized in time? Bultmann points out that the only proper question to ask of these myths is a religious and existentialist one: namely, "of what significance is the truth behind these myths to my individual existence? What self-understanding of my life and my soul is presented in this myth?"

Surely this is the right question to ask of N.T. eschatology. It is utterly irrational to ask seriously "will time really end sometime and some other order reign instead of the present order of creation? When the existential approach is taken to the myth of eschatology some significant religious meaning is uncovered.

For Bultmann the Christian life of faith is the new creation. The act of God in Jesus Christ is the judgement which inaugurates the new life and brings the old to an end. Bultmann points out, incidentally, that this realized eschatology is found in the Gospel of John, indicating how early the process of demythologizing was begun.

We do not intend to go into a complete analysis of what Bultmann conceives to be the Christian life in faith. This would involve an overly lengthy look at his theology itself. We must confine ourselves substantially to his method. In this regard it has been evident (I hope), that if a religious question is addressed to mythology containing religious truth then a meaningful answer is uncovered. On the other hand, if an historical question is addressed to a religious myth the answer is unintelligible.

Another example can be seen in the way Bultmann demythologizes the crucial Christian concept of Spirit. The modern scientific view does not allow for the objective action of the Holy Spirit in men's lives. Psychology and other social sciences operate on the assumption that every mental phenomena can at least be described in terms of natural sequence, if not yet controlled. We assent to this belief in practise if not when pressed in theological discussion. Anyone in our society who claims to prolonged experiences of the Holy Spirit is suspected of schizophrenia and forcibly detained. In our own lives we attribute very few things directly to the Holy Spirit and only those things which science has not clearly explained.

Bultmann frees God altogether of "creeping science" which continues to whittle God down in size by explaining scientifically all the things traditionally ascribed to God's direct intervention. The concept of Spirit is no longer approached with a scientific question: namely how can the Spirit perform miracles and cause normal or abnormal psychic phenomena such as speaking in tongues or prophesying or even edification? The question to ask of the Spirit is not: "How can the Spirit perform like a natural psychological force originating from the other world where God is?" The question Bultmann addresses to the Spirit is an existentialist one: "What does the Spirit mean in my life and for my existence?"

The answer he finds in St. Paul. Bultmann understands that St. Paul means by "Spirit" the possibility of a new life which must be appropriated by a deliberate resolve. The Spirit does not work ostensibly like a supernatural force nor is it a permanent possession of the believer. Rather, it is a possibility of a new life in faith. Paul says "live after the Spirit and not after the flesh." The sentence is an imperative requiring a decision for its fulfilment. The Spirit must be accepted by a deliberate commitment. The possibility of a new life in faith must be apprehended. If it is, then the fruits as Paul lists them are love, joy and so on. These are not themselves the Spirit. They are the result of faith which a person receives on the initiative of the Spirit and with deliberate resolve. This is the paradox of the new creation or new life in faith. The gift and the receiving are inseparable. The indicative "God forgives" and the imperative "receive forgiveness" inevitably go hand in hand.

This demythologization of the concept of Spirit may seem quite severe in view of the fact that the Spirit is usually the only divine element left after radicals finish criticizing traditional theology.

Nevertheless, this is the way the concept of eschatology and Spirit are demythologized by Bultmann. They have been re-interpreted at every point in which the other- worldly is expressed in terms or images of this world and objectified to hold the same kind of being as this- worldly things.

V - What happens when the event of Jesus Christ is demythologized?

The event usually means that in some way and for some purpose God acted in history through Jesus Christ and especially through his cross and resurrection. Many people have asked Bultmann if it is not mythological to speak of God as acting at all. In other words, if Bultmann carried his demythologizing to its logical conclusion would not the event of Jesus Christ lose all divine significance? Bultmann says no! The divine significance cannot be proved objectively but nevertheless it is legitimate for faith to speak of it.

Outwardly and objectively the life and death and resurrection of Jesus must be recognized to be within the scope of normal human affairs. That is to say, all the miraculous elements must be re-interpreted, if they are to be meaningful to the Christian faith, and eliminated by the process of form criticism if they are not meaningful. From the historical point of view Jesus was an extra-ordinary man but a man nevertheless in the fullest sense of the word. He was bound to laws of cause and effect as much as we are, both in his life and in his death.

What about the resurrection? The resurrection is absolutely non-historical although, of course, it is of the greatest religious significance. It is united with the cross in one unified religious significance upon which our faith is inescapably dependent. The resurrection cannot and must not be used as a gimmick for proving the significance of Jesus' death as the eschatological event. Rather, the resurrection compliments the significance of the cross. When interpreted existentially the Cross and Resurrection are one event in our present existence. The dying and rising with Christ are inseparable. We die to sin and rise to freedom all in one indivisible moment.

Bultmann believes that the earliest disciples interpreted Jesus' death and the resurrection this way. The resurrection was an event in the religious experience of the disciples, not an historical or scientific experience. We can see this in St Paul, the earliest Christian writer who continually speaks in existentialist terms of dying and rising himself with Christ. Only later did the Church begin to employ the resurrection as a proof of their claims for Christ.

In any case, says Bultmann, in our sophisticated age there can be no proofs for the existence or action of God. Any such proofs or actions may quite rightly be interpreted in natural terms. The action of God is hidden so that only the eyes of faith can perceive it.

When we speak of God acting in Christianity any other time we are not speaking mythologically in the sense that we are objectifying in a worldly fashion the action of another-worldly Being. To this-worldly eyes there is no evidence of God in Jesus. The significance of Jesus, which is that God acted in Him for us, can only be perceived through faith. This is the true *skandalon* of the Cross –that in a man crucified, God could be acting. The *skandalon* is incredible to unbelievers but to the eyes of faith there is no *skandalon* at all, only a blessed reality.

When and if the Church objectifies myths and insists that they be believed, it is creating *skandala* which are never really surmounted. They insidiously remain to pervert faith into self-destructive attempts to prove itself to the objective eyes of the world, an enterprise that is impossible. The simple fact of what Bultmann is saying is that we are justified by faith alone not only for our sin in spite of our conscience, but for our very knowledge of God in spite of the wisdom of this world. If you accept justification by grace through faith the rubber-crutch attempts to lean on either scientific or historical proof for faith can be discarded for ever. The legitimate endeavor of examining faith for its true and complete meaning is emancipated from the fruitless task of proving the existence or action of God.

VI – The Language we Use

The question of the language we use when speaking of God's actions must be briefly examined. When we say God redeems or loves or forgives are we not using mythological concepts? Bultmann again say no! Even though these terms may be the ones traditionally used in the myths of the Bible, they cease to be mythological when they are used in faith. The language of myth may provide many images and symbols which the Church should not, and perhaps could not, expediently discard. But this language must be interpreted for modern man in other than mythological terms. This is possible, Bultmann claims, and thus when we use mythological language in liturgy, for instance, the words are of mythological language but the concepts and understanding of the words are not mythical.

Bultmann believes that modern existentialist philosophy can help Christianity in its task of interpretation. A full treatment of the relation between existentialist philosophy and demythologization is impossible here. Enough to claim dogmatically that in employing philosophy for the service of Christianity Bultmann does not sell for a mess of philosophy the inheritance of Christianity which is the unescapable dependence on the act of God in Jesus Christ and on the Word of God which proclaims this act.

VII – A Final Question

The one final question which may be haunting you and which deserves consideration is this: If we are not, as we say, to speak of God as acting in ways that are historically or scientifically observable, does this mean that God exists only as an inner event in the soul? And if faith is only an inner event in the soul then is it in fact meaningless?

Faith is surely meaningless if God does not exist outside the self, that is, if He is merely a psychological experience. Worse yet, faith is only a grand delusion if this is the case. But the solution to this question is not to try and defend faith against the charge of being delusion. Faith cannot defend this charge. The grounds of faith are the same as its object. The object is God and the ground for believing is God.

This does not logically imply that God exists only as an inner event. We know God only existentially in faith as we experience God in our lives, but this in no way means that God exists only in our experience. The fact that we experience God through the proclamation of the Word of God in Scriptures does not help prove God's independent existence either, since the word of God is ever hidden in the Scriptures except to faith. It may help to point out no personal encounter can be proved to exist objectively. Even the simple and frequent phenomena such as love of friends or of husband and wife cannot be demonstrated objectively. Our faith must be justified by faith or not at all. Bultmann claims there should be no hesitation for scientific modern man in accepting the faith in a transcendent God who works immanently in hidden and mysterious ways. This faith should be completely compatible with the scientist's or the common man's desire to expand his knowledge of this world. This applies to the Biblical theologian as well. His faith need not be jeopardized by even more sensitive examination of its historical beginnings.

If I may indulge in one mild imperative in closing, it is this: let us for the sake of Christ and man be absolutely orthodox in our faith and much more liberal in our exegesis.

POSTSCRIPT 2017

I no longer agree with what this paper said about the Spirit. I have come to believe that the spirit exists in the whole creation and can be discerned by people in many of its activities albeit apart from pure scientific methods. Much of what I have come to understand about spirit has been set out in my two books: *Humanity and Spirit, Reasons for Hope*, and *A Spirit Christology, Recovering the Biblical Paradigm of Christian Faith*. I believe Bultmann gave too much credit to scientific methods to account for all knowledge of reality. Spirit is a reality that is not entirely accessible to scientific methods of knowledge. While I do not challenge the results of accepted scientific knowledge I am convinced that the Creator Spirit exists and initiates events that are beyond scientific predictability and control. Love is an example. There are many others whose power and forms originate in mysterious but discernible ways.