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The Atonement and Mythology

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PROFESSOR RUDOLPH BULTMANN, in his essay on *New Testament and Mythology*, raises the fundamental question of how we are to present the saving work of Christ to the modern mind. This problem is involved in his discussion of the larger subject of how far the thought and language of the New Testament can be understood by men and women in this twentieth century. Bultmann's essay has projected a vigorous debate among his German contemporaries and is now attracting much attention in the English-speaking world. The relevant documents are available in an English translation, published under the title *Kerygma and Myth*,¹ containing the original essay, followed by a series of critical articles from German scholars, with two replies by Bultmann himself and concluding with an English appreciation by Austin Farrer.

It is not intended here to discuss at any length the whole large question raised by Professor Bultmann concerning our attitude to the mythological elements in the New Testament but rather to concentrate attention on what he himself regards as the all important problem—what is the message of the Cross? How shall it be heard in our time? Bultmann insists that along with the Word of the Cross we must also proclaim the Word of the Resurrection—and with this position there can hardly be anything but the fullest agreement; although we should note that these two events (the death of Christ and His Resurrection) are not to be regarded as historical in the same sense—but of this more later. Nor can there be two minds about the radical character of the discussion. This is no question of detached scholarly interest. It is concerned with the very nature of the Gospel, in which the preacher is at least as much involved as the theologian. Bultmann himself realizes its practical importance, and however we may judge the adequacy of the treatment, his evangelical purpose ought to be fully recognized.

I

Professor Bultmann's thesis is that the essential message of the New Testament is so involved with an outmoded mythology that it can be neither understood nor accepted by contemporary men and women. Consequently, there is an urgent need to disentangle the Gospel from its cosmological setting, so that its real truth may be declared. However, the aim is not one of facile accommodation to modernity in the hope that the Word of God can be reduced to more acceptable terms. The scandal of the Gospel remains, particularly the offence of the Cross, which persists in being as foolish to the worldly minded as it has always been. But we need not obscure the summons of the Christian message to decision by

retaining the mythological furniture, which places an unnecessary burden on faith and has the effect of distracting attention from the real challenge of the Cross. This process of liberating the vital Word from its New Testament framework, is described by Bultmann as *Entmythologisierung*, a cumbersome German word that has no exact English equivalent. The translation, now largely accepted, is *Demythologizing*, which is probably as near an English equivalent as we are likely to get, although it hardly represents what Bultmann has in mind. His purpose is positive rather than negative. Mythology cannot be expunged from the New Testament, but we can attempt to grasp its real meaning.

In his radical treatment of the Christian message of salvation, Professor Bultmann proceeds beyond the New Testament to maintain that the traditional doctrines of the Church must be subjected to the same criticism. The very idea of Atonement is regarded as mythological.² Thus as Professor H. Sasse is quoted as saying in the Foreword to the English publication, "We have a proposal not only to demythologize the New Testament, but also to dedogmatize the Christian faith."³ Bultmann contends that the conception of expiation by death involves a most superstitious idea of God. "What a primitive mythology it is that a divine Being should become incarnate, and atone for the sins of men through his own blood!"⁴ According to Bultmann, the traditional doctrine of the Atonement has been governed by judicial categories, borrowed from the law-courts. Such an interpretation fails to recognize the real nature of sin and is entirely unworthy of God, who is thus represented as a Judge demanding satisfaction for a penal offence. The Atonement becomes a transaction, externally achieved, without getting at the heart of guilt and forgiveness.⁵ It is evident that Bultmann has in mind the Anselmic interpretation of Christ's work, which, along with the recently revived Ransom theory, may be regarded as the classical statement of the doctrine of Atonement in Christian theology. Bultmann is equally clear that the idea of a Ransom from the Devil is unacceptable. Who, he asks, really believes to-day in the power of demons?⁶

The real difficulty, according to Professor Bultmann, is that the Gospel as it comes to us in the original Kerygma of New Testament, and as it has been doctrinally elaborated in subsequent theology, is involved with an account of God and the world that is mythological rather than scientific. Modern man simply cannot accept this outworn cosmology, and consequently he rejects the Gospel that still has the power to speak from within it. The Evangel must be liberated from its imprisonment. The Biblical mythology presents God as a localized deity somewhere above the earth in the heavens. He creates the world by a direct act, but the scene of earth becomes infested by demonic powers of evil. The heavenly Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, becomes incarnate in a man Jesus, Who dies to atone for the sins of the world, only to be raised up after having descended into Hell. Now He has ascended to sit at God's right hand awaiting the end of time, when He shall return in power and glory.

Is this intelligible to the modern mind? Bultmann contends most emphatically that it is not, and there is no reason why it should be. In fact, even if it could be accepted, it would be irrelevant, "because there is nothing specifically Christian in the mythical view of the world as such. It is simply the cosmology of a pre-scientific age."⁷ How, in effect, asks Bultmann, can a mythological account of world-history save any man's soul? How can an event in history be the means of forgiveness for sins nineteen centuries later? We are not redeemed by either cosmology or history.

II

Professor Bultmann does not propose to resolve his problem by eliminating unacceptable elements from the New Testament. This was the objective of the so-called liberal scholars whose methods received their final criticism at the hands of Albert Schweitzer. There can be no expurgation of the New Testament, which must be accepted as it has come to us—myths and all. This is the only truly scientific method of dealing with historical documents. We must not attempt to reach so-called actual facts supposed to lie beneath superimposed layers of pious and mythological interpretation, not only because this is an impossible task, but because even if it could be achieved, the results would be irrelevant. Our concern is not with historical details. The mythological interpretation is really the vital element in the documents, but only if it is properly understood.

According to Bultmann "the real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially."⁸ Thus, we must not think of myth as a pre-scientific way of thinking about the nature of the universe, but now rendered obsolete by methods of empirical investigation. Myth is essentially religious rather than philosophical in its nature; it is an imaginative account of man's own personal life as he is confronted by what is other than himself, but to which he must submit and to which he must become reconciled. It speaks of his sense of dependence on powers beyond his control, of a supersensible world, expressed not in conceptual ideas, but in the form of a story. The origin of myth is thus to be found within man himself. Although Bultmann does not use the actual word or even refer to the process, he appears to interpret myth-making as what contemporary psychologists describe by "projection". Man projects upon the world an imaginative version depicting his interior self-awareness of conflict as he senses his inability to manage his own life. But he attains security and meaning for existence by externalizing his faith into imaginative objectivity, as a myth of Divine origin and cosmic process.

Professor Bultmann contends that this understanding of myth points the way to the interpretation of the New Testament for the modern mind. As cosmology, the myths of the Bible impose an intolerable strain on scientific thought: as anthropology, they are as true as when they were

first written. They arise out of a felt need for security and reconciliation. Man has always been in search of his real existence, for what he really is. Hence the significant word for Bultmann is "existential", expressing, as it does, man's sense of involvement in life as a demand in which he feels himself frustrated and defeated, a guilty sinner in need of forgiveness and newness of life. His life is pervaded by a sense of nothingness—it is devoid of meaning and significance. It runs on to "dusty death". The original power of the Gospel lay in its address to this very condition as a message of new life. But in the New Testament the saving event of the death of Christ comes to us in a setting of Jewish apocalyptic and Gnostic myths of redemption, whereas the real efficacy of the Cross and Resurrection lies in an inward experience, whereby they become redemptive acts of God in our present lives.

According to Professor Bultmann, the contemporary existential philosophy is giving us the same account of the human predicament as the New Testament. What the scriptures state in terms of myth, the new philosophy expresses as man's awareness of his own existence. In both, the mode of thinking is "existential," i.e. not abstract, detached or neutral. In neither is it scientific in the sense that man makes an objective appraisal of facts as a prelude to formulating a theory about himself. Rather this approach to the nature of existence recognises commitment and the demand of life for decision, albeit an enforced decision. Man cannot cease to exist, and therefore an attitude towards life is not a matter of avoidable choice; and the real account of Being is not a theoretical system of metaphysics, but the way in which he actually exists. Bultmann places particular reliance on the work of Martin Heidegger as his guide into this new and somewhat unfamiliar philosophical pathway. And certainly Heidegger is the ablest and most thoroughgoing of its exponents, although by no means the easiest to follow. He raises the ancient question of philosophy concerning the nature of Being not as a general abstract problem for metaphysical discussion, but as one that confronts the human individual in the enforced assignment of his own personal existence. He gives a novel turn to the expression "existential" as descriptive of man's unique nature. Man "ex-sists" i.e. he stands out from himself in self-awareness of his own existence.⁹ He can never get away from himself—he has "Da-sein"—he is always there.¹⁰ This gives to human life a sense of anxious concern.¹¹ We did not ask to exist—we are simply "thrown" into a stream of events at a point and under conditions we did not choose.¹² But we cannot disavow responsibility for our lives without ceasing to exist and this is not a live option. We are therefore involved in a movement of events that lie beyond us, and to that extent life defeats us and we have a sense of existence as not being what it ought to be. This for Heidegger is the experience of "fallenness"—we fall beneath real existence.¹³ Above all, we, each of us, have a real experience of the "nothingness" of life, not in some general philosophy of nihilism, but in the fact that all of us shall cease to exist. For life runs on to death; existence runs on to non-existence.¹⁴ What, then, is the mean-

ing of my existence?—nothing at all? It is in these searching terms that Heidegger raises the age-long problems of Being and Non-Being—not as questions for abstract discussion—but as involved in the very nature of human existence.

Professor Bultmann declares that this “existentialist analysis of the ontological structure of being would seem to be no more than a secularized, philosophical version of the New Testament view of human life.” To the objection that he is reading back into the New Testament subjective interpretations borrowed from some other source, the rejoinder is that his critics are not really facing the fact that “the philosophers are saying the same thing as the New Testament and saying it quite independently.”¹⁵ Here then is Bultmann’s position: the existentialist analysis of human life is the latest version of a *philosophia perennis*, which reveals an account man at the deepest level of his being has always given of his own existence, that he is compelled to live in two worlds, in neither of which can he fully accept himself. Consequently his life is beset with anxiety, guilt and a feeling of insignificance. Ancient myth, New Testament cosmology and contemporary philosophy all unite in bearing witness to man’s divided existence and reveal his need for a fundamental reconciliation or atonement. If it is said that every man we meet in the street to-day, the modern technological man, is not an existentialist thinker, and is not perpetually engaged in asking troubled questions about the nature of his own existence, Bultmann agrees. However, man to-day is unhappy, frustrated and nowhere accepts life as it is. He is rebellious, even if the sources of his disturbance are unconscious rather than brought into the light of understanding. The existentialist philosophy may be said to fulfil the contemporary role of the Bible by acting as a mirror for the soul.

III

Shall we then close the New Testament and turn to the less interesting and certainly much less intelligible pages of *Sein und Zeit*? That is hardly Bultmann’s proposal. What need then of the New Testament at all, if existentialist teaching says the same thing and declares it more relevantly to the modern mind? The answer is that in the Scriptures we have a saving event addressed to faith—the event of Jesus Christ. There is no gospel in existentialism, only the need for a gospel. The question therefore is how can the saving act of God which occurred in history through Jesus Christ become mighty to save, for us to-day. Not, declares Bultmann, if we regard it as an event in history and nothing more. It was not so interpreted in the New Testament: consequently in the Scriptures we have both the historical Jesus and the mythological Christ. To use a somewhat ambiguous expression, which nevertheless appears unavoidable in contemporary theology, the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus are eschatological events—their true meaning lies beyond history and they are addressed to faith. Only thus can they be apprehended as acts of God. But, according to Bultmann, the mythological account in the New Testament is no longer acceptable:

on the other hand, we cannot dispense with it in the interests of getting at the real Jesus, because, even if we could reach such an understanding, it would have no saving virtue. Our task therefore is to interpret aright the Christology of the New Testament and this can only be done if we can understand what it really means. For Bultmann, Christ is the Word of God, mediated to us through a real historical person, who truly lived and died on the cross. However, His saving power lies not in His historical existence, but in His address to us now, when we accept Him by faith as our only real existence. This is not an act of intellectual assent, but an identification of ourselves with Him so that we are crucified with Christ, and are thus enabled to die to the world. And the Resurrection is no longer a dubious historical event, but an inward experience of being raised into newness of life. Only thus can we realise the forgiveness of sins through the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. The Cross "is not just an event of the past which can be contemplated in detachment, but an eschatological event in and beyond time, for as far as its meaning—that is, its meaning for faith—is concerned, it is an ever-present reality."¹⁶

Professor Bultmann's interpretation of the Cross is a restatement of what is generally known as the subjective theory of the Atonement. He is avowedly critical of historical and theological objectivity in the sense that the Cross is a mighty act of God whereby our redemption is accomplished through the obedient sacrifice of Christ. His account of the Cross virtually eliminates all the traditional interpretations which have their source in the New Testament and have found expression in the doctrine of the Church whereby Christ is our representative before God, bearing our sins, and giving His life as a ransom. All of this Bultmann assigns to the realm of out-dated mythology.¹⁷ True, he proposes to retain eschatology in the sense that the death of Christ, simply as an event in history, is not in itself the Divine act of salvation, but with this position theology has never disagreed. The real question which Bultmann studiously avoids is: Why did Jesus die on the Cross? Had he any intention in His death? According to Bultmann, Jesus is "a concrete figure of history—Jesus of Nazareth. His life is more than a mythological event: it is a human life which ended in the tragedy of Crucifixion. We have here a unique combination of history and myth"¹⁸ For Bultmann, this combination presents only "a number of difficulties", but surely these arise only if we do not recognise the uniqueness of the historical person of Jesus. He was more than a man of Nazareth. He was a son of Israel and entered into what may be called a heritage of myth, in which the Word of God had assumed definite symbols of promise and hope—the Messianic Office, the coming of the Son of Man, the Suffering Servant and the eschatological Kingdom of God. The New Testament represents Jesus as accepting His existence in relation to these myths, but we know from Bultmann's other writings that he regards this identity as apostolic interpretation rather than historical fact.¹⁹ In that case, of course, the death of Jesus was a tragedy—just one more crucifixion of a misunderstood man by the world. But if it be, even

accepting Bultmann's existential categories of interpretation, that Jesus was what the New Testament represents Him to be, one who had true human existence in the sense that He was at-one with God, untroubled by guilt or anxiety, and for whom death meant a victory to be achieved rather than an anticipation of nothingness, then in Him personally the distinction between myth and existence, between symbol and reality had been abolished, and as Dodd maintains, eschatology was realized. Perhaps we should go further and say that in Him eschatology was transformed and Jesus was the Christ. However, such judgment carries us beyond the limits of existential thought and demands the category of transcendence, and so we must say that while Jesus was a unique man in his human existence, in Him there was also Divine existence. But if we omit, as Bultmann appears to do, all reference to historicity except the bare event of the Cross, without reference even to the identity of Him who was crucified, then the Cross itself becomes nothing more than a symbol which could be more easily interpreted as a revelation of human tragedy than a Word of Divine Salvation. The real Divine event is Jesus. It is He who gives meaning to the Cross, but only if He is the Christ of God. It is in the light of His Person that we can understand such "scandalous" events as the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, which are not to be regarded, as Bultmann maintains, in the category of miraculous "proofs," and therefore to be relegated to the realm of myth.²⁰ They are elements in the total unique event, at the heart of which stands the Cross. And this is surely the objective ground of our faith i. e. the media through which the Saving Word comes to us.

IV

The value of Professor Bultmann's interpretation of the Atonement ought to be gratefully recognized. We may accept it as more than a protest against objective theories that regard the Work of Christ in the nature of a transaction externally contrived as a corrective measure within the Divine economy of grace. Its positive importance lies in the demand for contemporary relevance. He does face the question that every preacher of the Cross must encounter viz.—how can an event in history become the present Word of God? In what sense can we say that we are saved by the Death of Jesus Christ? Bultmann is surely right in maintaining that unless the Cross becomes an inward experience whereby we respond in faith to the Divine overture, there is no forgiveness of sins. It is questionable whether the portrayal of Calvary as a cosmic drama in which Christ overcame the evil powers of the world by the strange victory of loving surrender to their insurgent attack, is sufficient unless His warfare is recapitulated in us. God the Holy Spirit must speak through the Cross to us now in our contemporary need of redemption, so that Calvary no longer remains in the externality of history but becomes, as Bultmann maintains, an existential apprehension of Divine action. All of this surely indicates the manner in which the Gospel must be proclaimed and should be gladly accepted.

However it is questionable whether we may therefore dispense with what is described as the mythological furniture of the *Kerygma*: rather we must ask whether the message of the Cross can be heard in any other way.

The real issue is the correctness of Bultmann's account of myth. He insists on an anthropological rather than a cosmological interpretation. Is he right? We may fully agree with his contention that primitive myth is not simply a pre-scientific cosmology. All the present-day authorities confirm this judgment. But is the true understanding of myth not theological? Bultmann deals with this point in his "Reply to the Theses of J. Schniewind." He maintains that, as a matter of fact, "I *am* trying to substitute anthropology for theology, for I am interpreting theological affirmations as assertions about human life. What I mean is that the God of the Christian revelation is the answer to the vital questions, the existentialist questions."²¹ Here we come to the heart of the whole matter. Is God an answer to questions? Is God not rather He from whom the questions proceed? It is this Divine address to man that is depicted in myth, and as Schniewind maintains, it is difficult to see how this Unseen Presence can be expressed in any other language.²² This is no mere debating point. Bultmann's entire argument is vitiated when he maintains that the contemporary existentialist thinkers are saying the same thing as the New Testament and saying it quite independently. Are they indeed? The existentialists are speaking from within a world wherein the profoundest questions are addressed by Christ, even if He is not openly acknowledged. And, in any case, surely the source of the despair that is presented to us in the New Testament as the condition to which the Gospel comes as the Word of Life, did not derive from a cosmology but rather from an apprehension of God. It was the Word of the Cross that spoke in Judgment. This was something far profounder, much more deeply disturbing, than the anxiety of the contemporary existential man. The "fallenness" of which the apostolic writers speak is quite different from that of Heidegger—it is a falling away from real existence because it is a self-affirmation against God. True, that same Word of the Cross speaks in our time to man in his disaffection with himself, and the preacher must so present it; but its power does not lie primarily in its capacity to illumine, but rather in its authority to condemn. The guilty conscience that cries out, "What must I do to be saved?" has an objective origin in the sense that the accusation is addressed to us from God. This is the real existential situation portrayed in the New Testament, not a cosmology, not even a theology, but man in the hands of his Creator, Who is His Judge, but Who by His own act of redemptive love, is His Saviour. Call this myth, if you will, but how else can it be stated? And is it as unintelligible to modern man, as Bultmann contends?

Is the language of cosmological myth less acceptable to the modern man than the interpretation of an existentialist philosophy? Or do we need an existentialist interpretation? May it not be that we must exclaim with Sheridan, "Egad, I think the interpreter is the hardest to be understood of the two." If, as Bultmann maintains, we must adjust our thought to an age of science, is it not precisely with cosmological and historical involve-

ment that modern man is most deeply concerned? The strength of the Marxist appeal to the modern mind is derived from its world-view. Its gospel is a summons to become reconciled to an ongoing process that moves with an inherent logic through nature and history, and there can be no peace until our redemption is accomplished by a surrender to its onward drive. Again, call it myth if you will, but who can deny the power of its appeal? What it lacks, of course, is what the Bible supplies—the presence of a Personal God active in the movement of the cosmos and history, not as irresistible force but as spiritual grace. This is the Word of the Cross, and it speaks from within a cosmological and historical frame of reference. If modern man finds himself caught up into a cosmic process, may the Atonement not be fittingly presented as giving man new life and hope, precisely because, as in the New Testament his whole world is being redeemed? We need to replace the myth of a mechanical, soulless universe that has bemused the modern mind, with a nobler picture—the God who becomes Incarnate in a Man. Here myth and history have an authentic place of meeting in the New Testament.

Let the last word rest with Bultmann. Along with Kierkegaard's and Berdyaev's, we may well accept his teaching that the truth of the Gospel is an inward apprehension. Faith is essentially subjective. Revelation is only perceived by an assent that is a decision. The Atonement must be a personal reconciliation to God. Without this, nothing else matters. But it is God who reconciles us. Christ is our Atonement. The Revelation must be received before it can be accepted. Faith is not self-created. The Cross is a historical event before it is an inward experience. The Resurrection is the actual raising up of Christ before it is our new life. In a word, subjectivity flows from objectivity.

NOTES

1. *Kerygma and Myth—A Theological Debate* with contributions by Rudolf Bultmann, Ernest Lohmeyer, Julius Schniewind, Friedrich Schumann, Helmut Thielicke and Austin Farrer, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch, translated by Reginald H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1953).
2. "The idea of atonement is juridical, and when applied to God, mythological: so is the doctrine of satisfaction"; R. Bultmann: *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 109.
3. "What Bultmann and his school are trying to remove, according to Sasse, is not myth but dogma" (dedogmatizing, not demythologizing); *ibid.* p. ix. 4. *Ibid.* p. 7.
5. "Or again, one might adopt an analogy from the law courts, and explain the death of Christ as a transaction between God and man through which God's claims on man were satisfied. But that would make sin a juridical matter"; *ibid.* pp. 7, 8.
6. *Ibid.* pp. 4, 5, 119. 7. *Ibid.* p. 3. 8. *Ibid.* p. 10.
9. *Sein und Zeit Erste Hälfte* (Halle, Niemeyer, 1927). Martin Heidegger, "dass die Zeitlichkeit als ekstatische Einheit," p. 365.
10. *Op. cit.* p. 42, "Das Wesen des Daseins liegt in seiner Existenz," *also passim*.
11. *Op. cit.* p. 183 et seqq., "Die Angst offenbart im dasein," p. 188.
12. *Op. cit.* p. 182, "Das sich-vorweg-schon-sein-in-einer Welt."
13. "Verfallenheit"; *op. cit.* pp. 175, 176.
14. *Op. cit.* pp. 250 et seqq., "Das Sein zum Tode ist wesentlich Angst," p. 266.
15. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 25. 16. *Ibid.* p. 36.
17. "This mythological interpretation is a hotch-potch of sacrificial and juridical analogies, which have ceased to be tenable for us to-day"; *ibid.* p. 35.
18. *Ibid.* p. 34.
19. See e.g. *Theology of the New Testament*: R. Bultmann (E.T.) (S.C.M. London 1952), Chap. I.
20. *Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 11, 39. 21. *Op. cit.* pp. 107, 108. 22. *Op. cit.* pp. 47 ff.