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Demythologisation and Dogmatics

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THERE is grave danger that the demythologisation controversy may have run its course before the fundamental issues raised by it for dog-matic theology have been followed through to what might be regarded as a satisfactory conclusion. I draw attention to this danger in complete aware-ness of the facts that the controversy began with the discussion of the rela-tion of myth to the *kerygma*, and that the discussion has fairly consistently observed the limits thus defined. As R. H. Fuller says in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. ix, ". . . as this is a matter of the interpretation of the New Testament documents, the solution must come from the exegesis of the New Testament. We must hearken to the testimony of the New Testament itself." Curiously enough, Fuller says earlier in the same paragraph, "the systematic theo-logian must be interested in the controversy if he is to take account of modern philosophy." However, as the controversy has developed, certain matters of fundamental internal importance for theology, and not simply of oblique importance through theology's interest in "modern philosophy," have emerged; and it is the purpose of this paper to elicit these and to indi-cate the relevance of the controversy to them.

Now, while the English-speaking world has not entered the controversy with the abandon shown by the Germans and the Swiss, probably because the war years cut us off from theological developments inside Germany, so that we were rather late in coming into it, nevertheless, we have already become aware of many of the implications of the controversy for the proc-lamation of the *kerygma*. It is realised that, for example, the communication of the Gospel is not merely a question of efficient techniques, but is also, and more pertinently, one of content; and we must be sure that in our proclamation we are summoning men and women to decision in regard to the Gospel, and not to some peripheral unessential. Nor are we as sure as we once were that even our own contemporary culture is necessarily an unequivocal medium for the illustration of the Church's message. These facts we have observed, and acted on accordingly—though the success of Billy Graham's London campaign has made the more cautious ask whether "modern man" is not more mythologically-minded than Bultmann appre-ciates.

The challenge of the controversy, it might be said, then, has been sharply accepted not only by the exegetes who have an obligatory interest in it, but also by those who seek a relevant proclamation. My fear is that the total implications of the challenge may be missed, because these two groups are held to exhaust the field of interest; whereas, in fact, the controversy could lead us to points at which our most serious dogmatic thinking today ought

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to be taking place. *Kerygma und Mythos* ought to have as its sequel *Theologie und Mythos*.

In a certain sense it is true that demythologisation is one of the perennial functions of theology, its earliest clear expression being the Creeds, and its classical expression the Thomistic theology. If we give this alignment to the process of demythologisation, then two characteristic parts of the process may be observed, and these ought to be included in any adequate definition of the process. On the one hand, there is a large-scale elimination of the episodic as well as of the mythological in most if not all of the forms so clearly delineated by Professor Ian Henderson, (*Myth in the New Testament*, p. 46); and on the other hand, there is a thorough-going attempt to state the essential content of the Christian Faith in terms of contemporary culture. (The word "culture" is here used in its most comprehensive sense to include philosophy, psychology, socio-economic and political principles, cosmology and, one might add, superstitions.) Before proceeding to define what are, in my judgment, some of the basic dogmatic issues raised by the controversy, I should like to mention four assumptions made in demythologisation as thus analysed. (1) It is assumed that the original *kerygma* and, in fact, the whole of the Bible, is an amalgam of essential content plus mythological expression; that is, that they come to us in the terms of a past culture. (2) A further assumption is that the essential content is capable of separation from the mythological and episodic form, so that the demythologiser is subsequently able to express the essential content in terms of his later culture. (3) The demythologiser believes that his contemporaries, either can not understand the *kerygma* when it is proclaimed in the Biblical forms because of the difference in culture between them and the original situations; or, if they do understand the forms, do not "see the point of the situations" in relation to themselves, their sins and their needs. The narration of the *kerygma* in the Biblical forms does not call forth the appropriate responses either of acceptance or rejection. (4) This separation of the essential content from the unessential form in which it is expressed in successive generations implies that the demythologiser has some criterion of theological truth which enables him to make the all-important distinction between the essential and the unessential. Discussion of these assumptions, used at times by all parties to the controversy, should take us to the basic theological question of our time.

I. THE CRITERION OF THEOLOGICAL TRUTH

We begin with the question of the criterion of theological truth, which appears to be the point at which contemporary theology is most divided and confused. The Roman Catholic Church with its firm standard of Scripture and Tradition, the Scholastic Calvinists with what B. B. Warfield called the Old Protestant Doctrine of Scripture, the extremist who interprets the "*testimonium internum Spiritus Sancti*" in completely subjectivist

fashion—these may know what the *regula fidei* is in its minutest detail. But with Protestant dogmatics at large the case is otherwise. Even Karl Barth, who in Volume I/i of *Kirchliche Dogmatik* in his Doctrine of the Word of God seemed to promise a working *regula,* has not gone on to do so in the later volumes of his work. He has not, to use his own words in Volume I/i, given us the means whereby we may invariably distinguish "what must be said under all circumstances" from "what may be said under none." Nor have Bultmann and the supporters of his kind of demytho-, logisation been conspicuously helpful in this regard: their failure to be so is one of the weakest parts of their whole position. At worst, their *regula fidei* is the *kerygma* minus what conflicts with the *Weltanschauung* of "modern man;" at best, it is that within the *kerygma* which is patient of existentialist interpretation. In either case dogmatics is subjected to a heteronomy, that is, to the definition of specific content by considerations extraneous to itself.

It might be thought at this stage that such embarrassment affects only the New Testament demythologisers. But not so. If it is held, as suggested above, that some form of demythologisation is the perennial task of theology, then the problem exists also for the specialist in dogmatics. If, in fact, theology is constantly endeavouring to construe the original *kerygma* in systematic terms which are drawn from contemporary culture, then the absence of any clearly formulated criterion of theological truth, whereby we can determine whether any given contemporary term is valid, is *prima facie* at least, a very serious disability. When has the contemporary concept ceased to be the servant and become the master? This is the question which theology must never cease to ask itself. It may be that in the end of the day we shall discover that we can not have such a criterion; and further, that we ought not to have one, for if we did, we should have the Word of God in our pocket, a kind of foot-rule with which to measure propositions. To ask for a criterion of truth in theology could be an impatient demand to walk by sight, when the Gospel exacts of us that we walk by faith—even in theology. However, if that is to be the final answer, it ought to come after much more searching for a criterion than we have done since the controversy on demythologisation burst upon us. So far, even the theological disputants have not extensively tackled Bultmann on this question of the criterion, of how he, and we, know what are the defined limits of the *kerygma.*

II. ANALOGY IN DOGMATICS

Granted that it is, as Barth puts it, the continual obligation of the Church to say to our generation in its language what the Apostles and Prophets said to their generation in theirs: granted that it is the specific obligation of dogmatics to keep vigilance upon the adequacy of such language—and the whole demythologisation controversy has confirmed both of these provisions;

then, the place of analogy in theological statement, as well as in proclama-
tion, requires most careful examination. For analogy is the basis of all
demythologisation, as practised either by Bultmann or by dogmatic theo-
logians. Statements a,b,c, mean for Generation A what statements x,y,z
mean for Generation X: that is the pattern of demythologisation, and it is
essentially the pattern of analogy. But there is nothing particularly modern
in analogical statement. It is the basis of the "I am" sayings in the Fourth
Gospel; it is employed by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 4, as well as by the
expository preacher in any age; by Augustine and Calvin in their sermons
and equally by W. Vischer in his Christological interpretation of the Old
Testament. Its ubiquity in the Church's thinking has not been reflected in
critical analysis of her employment of it, there being scarcely one major
treatment of the subject between Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth.

It is beyond our present possible scope to deal with the general problem
of analogy, but the immediate purpose is served if the relevance of the
demythologisation controversy reminds us of the importance of striking the
right balance between what has been called the positive and the negative
elements in the analogies used both in demythologisation and dogmatic
formulation. When we say that there is an analogy between Situation A
and Situation X, I think that we mean something such as follows: Situation
A is composed of elements a,b,c,d,e,f, and Situation X of elements a,b,c,k,
l,m; a,b,c constituting the positive, and d,e,f,k,l,m, constituting the negative
elements. The effectiveness of the analogy depends on three things: first,
and obviously, on the identity of a,b,c in the two situations; secondly, on
the relation of the d,e,f, to the k,l,m; and thirdly, on the extent to which
the positive elements are affected by their relation to the negative elements
in the different situations. In the present controversy, the k,l,m used by Bult-
mann (existentialist philosophy), the critics would say, so affects the a,b,c
as to produce something which is different from the a,b,c, of the *kerygma*
situation; or, alternatively, the negative elements of the analogy destroy
the positive. The same thing happens in a much more extreme form in the
philosophy of Spinoza, when he employs the terms God, Nature and Divine
Attributes in what A. E. Taylor once called the Spinozistic acosmism.

But in the hands of the demythologisers and the dogmatic theologians,
analogy is not used only for purposes of statement. It carries a practical
inference; in Brunner's words, it contains an imperative as well as an indi-
cative. In fact, it is to Bultmann's credit that, despite the "coat-trailing" in
which he indulges, and the fascination for him of existentialism, he is gen-
erally concerned to bring the *kerygma* home to our generation in terms both
of gift and demand. The relevance of this fact to our theological thinking
is that it brings us to the realisation that analogy dare never become for us
simply a logical problem and that it must have as its end-term the salvation
of men and women. In a single word, this is the difference between Thomas
Aquinas' treatment of the subject and Karl Barth's.

III. Hypostatic Union and Theological Language

It seems to be that the demythologiser is committed to some form of dis
tinction between the essential content of the Christian Faith and the tran-
sient forms which that content may take in different generations. In dis-
cussing the bearing of this distinction upon the question of the criterion of
theological truth, we were examining the *practicability* of this distinction.
The issue which I would like to raise now is that of the *desirability* of this
distinction; and the issue relates to the seriousness with which we are pre-
pared to allow our theological statement to be affected by our Christology.
Professor T. F. Torrance in the Albrecht Stumpff Memorial Lecture of
1954 (printed in The Scottish Journal of Theology, Volume 7, pp. 245ff.)
has shown how the Chalcedonian Christology of the hypostatic union is to
be worked out in soteriology and the doctrine of the Church. But surely,
too, there ought to be some answer to the demythologisation question in
terms of that Christology and of the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The answer might be along such lines as these. If it is true, as Leo's Tome
says, that in Jesus Christ the two natures co-exist, *indivise et insepara-*
biliter, then two clear consequences follow. First, it is not surprising that in
the language in which we seek to speak of Him, we find difficulty in divid-
ing and separating the human from the divine, and that we are unable to
grasp the divine as an entity by itself to be expressed at will in a variety of
cultural media. Secondly, it is open to the gravest doubts whether it is desir-
able to aim at such a division and separation, even if it were possible. Con-
fessing two natures in the unity of one Person, and knowing the divine
nature and attributes only in their hypostatic union with the human nature
and attributes, can we honestly expect that the truth concerning that same
Christ will not exhibit something of the same mystery as His Person—
whether the truth be stated in the *kerygma*, in myth, in a Creed, or in
modern Christology? In other words, any demythologisation which goes on
the assumption that the divine can be separated from the human in the
kerygma or in our re-statements of it for our generation, is committed to a
denial of the Incarnation. It fails to see that Incarnation which happens
in its primary form in Jesus Christ must happen in a secondary and deriva-
tive way in our proclamation of Him and in our language about Him. The
true goal of the Church is, therefore, not *de*mythologisation but *adequate*
mythologisation. Her prayer should ever be that the Word, which was
once so mightily incarnate to the salvation of men, may in secondary fashion
be incarnate again in her words concerning Him, even redeeming them
from their sinful associations, debased meanings, and their open-ness to
misunderstanding. If in its human-ness it is crucified at the hands of logical
positivism and analysis, then that is the price of Incarnation—and rele-
vance; yet, as Luther wrote, "God's Word shall have its course."

IV. HISTORY AND THE FAITH

The final issue raised by the demythologisation controversy, which I wish at present to mention, is that of whether more should not have been done in regard to relating the central events of the Faith to history than is indicated by saying that the events are "grounded" in history, or that Christianity is essentially an historical religion. It is now clear that many contemporary Protestant theologians would be unsympathetic towards Bultmann's attempt to "de-historicise" the central facts of the Faith and to interpret them solely *geschichtlich* or *eschatologisch*. But I do feel that something more creative is required in the situation than the rather negative judgment that the *historisch* and the *mythologisch* can not be assigned the secondary role which Bultmann desires for them. If Bultmann is wrong, what is the correct account of the relation of the *eschatologisch* to the other two?

It is at this point that it becomes unprofitable to continue the controversy in German terms, for beyond this point it lapses into just another rather interesting escapade in philology. To become more fully aware of the problem raised for us by Bultmann's threefold classification, we have to ask what is the relation, to the basic historical data provided by Scripture, of the interpretations we put upon them, when we give expositions for our contemporaries and formulate Christian doctrines? Back of that question, there is another: what is the relation to the empirical data observable by our Lord's contemporaries, believers and unbelievers, of the interpretations which the believers put upon the data? We may sum up both questions by asking: how are data, interpretation and fact inter-related?

One view is to say that the data are facts, that the interpretations we put upon them belong to a different order and that, while every one agrees about the facts, our interpretations are of varying degrees of validity. In this way, the Scriptural evidence for our Lord's life, for example, is the factual basis upon which we may erect the Orthodox conception of Christ, the Liberal or even the Humanist one. The factual data, so some of the older Liberals would have said, are patient of any one of these three interpretations, though they usually secured a higher validity for their own by tampering with the Scriptural data. As soon as they did so, they had moved away from the first view of the relation of data, interpretation and fact. The other view is to say, with Professor N. Kemp Smith, that fact is not something *from* which but *to* which interpretation proceeds; fact is reached at the end of a process of interpretation of data. To develop this view, part at least of what we mean by the "given-ness of Revelation" is that in regard to Revelation believers are not only observers of empirical data (which are at the same time open to unbelievers) but are also provided with the interpretation, which enables them to apprehend, and be apprehended of, certain *facts*. Revelation is not therefore, reached by means of processes of inference from, and private interpretations of, certain objective uninter-

preted data; it is a situation in which the data, as defined above, are presented to him in interpreted form and as fact. What the unbeliever observes, what could be called the *historisch* in Bultmann's language is an abstract from what is for the Christian a living situation; it is analytically posterior to it and not prior. Bultmann looks on Revelation as a body of data to be manipulated to suit a philosophy, whereas indeed it is a set of facts, an ultimate reality, with which all philosophy and philosophers must come to terms, and by which they will be finally judged.

Such, then, is the final challenge put to dogmatic theology by the demythologisation controversy: are we sufficiently sure ourselves of the "givenness of Revelation," of its factuality over against the theoretical quality which some of its expositors would assign to it, to be able to defend it in face of all attempts to reduce it to something less than itself?