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David A. deSilva

The Meaning of the New Testament and the *Skandalon* of World Constructions

By a happy coincidence a number of articles on the same broad theme of a Christian world view and approach to knowledge have come in for publication at about the same time. Dr deSilva is particularly concerned with the effect of secular views of reality on biblical scholarship especially as found in R. Bultmann and H. Braun.

New Testament inquiry appears to have arrived at a point of crisis. Issues continue to be discussed, but the fruitfulness of the discussion that is currently going on must be called into question. True dialogue seems to have disappeared between certain segments of the scholarly population, and the particular New Testament issues which are commonly debated must be suspended for the present to consider a deeper and more fundamental issue in New Testament investigation. This is the question of world view. The topic is not brought up here in order to demonstrate what is already axiomatic on all sides, namely that all people, scholars and laypeople alike, think, value, and understand experience in terms of one particular world view or other. Nor do I investigate the problem of world view in order to point out what is also most clear, namely that scholars in general and New Testament scholars in particular now face each other from across the proverbial unbreachable chasm of two distinct world views, the naturalist and supernaturalist.

The question which we do seek to raise is more crucial. Is scholarship engaged in true investigation of the New Testament and early Christianity, or is it engaged in the ideological work of 'world legitimization', the goal of which it achieves not only through gaining legitimization from the primary texts of the New Testament but also by means of social engineering and absolutization of a world view? We will soon define these loaded terms, taken from the sociology of religion, and expand on their significance for New Testament investigation.

The concern here is not to hold up one world view as superior to another, but only to question the function of world view, particularly the naturalist world view, in New Testament investigation. We also wish to question its use of terms such as 'critical' and 'uncritical'. Do these terms express absolutely what New Testament critics claim that they express, or do they function as lexical legitimations for maintaining one's own world view over against another in the interpretation of texts?

Fundamentally, the problem concerns how to arrive at a closer understanding of the meaning of the New Testament. Our thesis is this: We will not uncover the meaning of the New Testament, or truly perform critical studies on this text, unless we also hold up our (inherited) world-constructions to thoroughgoing criticism, particularly in the light of the text. When we accept our world view as absolute or as an appropriate frame from which to understand or into which to force the proclamation the New Testament, we will do no more than use the texts of the New Testament as a means of world-maintenance. Simply, unless in our critical investigation we allow the text to challenge our world view, and continue to allow contemporary experience to do the same, all our efforts will merely serve the end (and human need) of legitimating our world-construction.

For more than a generation, large segments of New Testament scholarship have followed the course laid out by Bultmann and, more radically, by Braun, accepting their conclusions as determinative for the question of how a twentieth-century person must read elements of the New Testament proclamation which do not fit into a secularized view of the world. The modern, supernaturalist reading of the texts is called 'uncritical' by such students, who do not themselves think critically about their involvement in legitimating the secularized view of the world through their investigations. This study will have achieved its end if it may impress upon the 'critical' student of the New Testament, who has adopted and now uses 'uncritically' the naturalist frame of reference, the need to ask such questions of himself or herself, and also challenge such a student to seek out and consider the evidence which lies outside his or her plausibility structures (from which evidence such scholars have kept themselves apart by means of social engineering), posing a threat to the supposed seamless garment of naturalism and its claim to reflect the contours of ultimate reality. Such a one may discover this 'modern view of the world' to be nothing more than a 'secular canopy', which has replaced the 'sacred canopy' but has still not come closer to opening one up to the true meaning of the New Testament.

The Sociological Basis for the Inquiry—Peter Berger

Berger's *Sacred Canopy* outlines what is ostensibly a 'sociological theory of religion', but which is in fact a much broader theory. Berger's penetrating exposition of the human social condition describes a universal process in which religion plays a role which possibly may be filled by other actors as well, naturalist philosophy and claims to scientific criticism among them. We will briefly review the chief points of this theory which concern this investigation.

Berger's theory begins with the observation that human beings have no instinctive world already made for them biologically, such as the mouse, horse, and insect do. The human world, that template which gives meaning to experience, must be constructed, and once constructed will have the force of instinct. The constructed world will be the essential guard against anomy and meaninglessness. This nomos, or world-construction, is created through the ongoing dialectic between the individual and the society to which that individual belongs, a never-ending cycle of externalization, objectification, and internalization. This dialectic not only provides a person's subjective and objective meaning within the society, but is also the way in which individuals are continually re-creating or maintaining the society's constructed order. One inherits it through socialization, and engages quite automatically in maintaining it through social interaction and subjective appropriation.

Religion functions as the absolutization of this nomos. Here one may substitute any other body of legitimations which functions to claim absolute truth for a world-construction. The world-construction will need continuous maintenance. Socialization fulfills part of this need; legitimation fills in the rest. Legitimations are explanations of why the world is as it is and can't be otherwise. These therefore are programmatic in character, but in form appear as claims about ultimate truth which is reflected in the world-construction.

Legitimation of a world view requires other supports as well. Berger stresses the importance of plausibility structures for the maintenance of a particular world view. Plausibility structures are, simply, those social structures which permit a certain world-construction to retain plausibility. Plausibility structures are the social groups which affirm the particular world view. A world view cannot retain its plausibility where it has moved beyond its plausibility structures, i.e., to a place where that world view is no longer socially supported.

In any pluralistic society, however, whether the first-century

Mediterranean or twentieth-century America, adherents of particular world views will face the problem of entering spheres dominated by an opposing or merely different world-construction. In such circumstances a world-construction can only survive through engaging in some ideological work which relativizes the claims of competing world views and through social engineering.

This latter process involves the regular gatherings together of adherents of a particular world view, which forms a new plausibility structure, and so a simultaneous drawing away from those who adhere to a competing world view. Encounter with such persons will be unavoidable, but proper ideological work and establishment of a new place for and existence of a plausibility structure will so relativize or interpret the alternatives as to nullify the threat. The other side of social engineering is the elimination of those who weaken the world-construction from within by introducing elements from other world-constructions or innovating on the 'untouchable' precepts of the held world view. Such persons are either understood as deceived deviants (heretics, 'uncritical') and so tolerated or simply expelled from the conversation which has as its ultimate function the maintenance of the world-construction.

A final stage in the process, not taken by all, is alienation. An alienated person is one to whom consciousness of the social creation of the world-construction has been lost. The dialogue is denied and the world-construction given an inexorability and a completely objective and normative positive over the experience of the alienated person. The denial of the dialogue does not cause it to cease, however. The person continues to co-produce the order he or she regards as ultimate or absolutely true. The continued process of legitimation occurs at a level beneath the person's awareness. The world-construction is taken for granted, and the 'canopy' which has been socially erected over experience is now regarded as depicting the exact contours of ultimate reality.

The 'Secular Canopy'—Bultmann and Braun

What has this theory to do with the science of New Testament investigation? While we have seen social theory applied to the situation of the nascent church and the complex of relationships between Judaism, early Christianity, the Hellenistic culture, and imperial Rome (with much fruit, one must add), the implications for forming a critical evaluation of contemporary world views

(outside of Fundamentalist groups and sectarian movements within Christianity) have not been explored sufficiently.

While the New Testament writers' interaction with and determination by the first-century world view have been given much attention, the modern demythologizers of that world view have not thought it appropriate to raise the same questions with regard to their participation in the process of legitimating a contemporary world view. In short, while the former has been considered a fit subject for critical investigation, the latter has not, with devastatingly deceptive results in New Testament inquiry. Is it possible, we now ask, that much work classified as 'critical investigation' of the New Testament has in fact been nothing more than (an ingenious) translation of the New Testament into a body of material which speaks to the concerns of legitimation of a modern world view without challenging its construction?

The process of interpreting the New Testament into a system of thought which retains meaningfulness and accessibility for those who adhere to a 'modern view of the world', more properly called a naturalist (that is, a secularized view of history and present reality which admits of no interference from or interaction with supernatural powers) view of the world in order to identify its stance and set it apart from other modern (twentieth-century) views of the world, was most consciously and thoroughly executed by Rudolf Bultmann and Herbert Braun. Far from claiming an existentialist re-interpretation of the New Testament, these scholars maintained that they were presenting a theology of the New Testament, and that their interpretation was no more than a demythologization of the world view which permeated the texts and so remained true to the New Testament meaning.

What is disturbing about their work is not their conclusions, but their apparent acceptance of their own world view as the tool by which to discover the meaning of the New Testament. Yet it is this world view which has from the outset narrowly determined the confines in which the New Testament might provide meaning. It is our contention that by not pursuing a critique of their own world view as thoroughly as they pursued a critique of the New Testament based on the construction of the world contained in their world view, these scholars have not achieved their professed task, namely uncovering the meaning of the New Testament. Rather, they have dutifully achieved the task of amassing a body of legitimations for their world view from the New Testament, appealing to a corpus charged with the sort of *charisma* in the sociological sense for the maintainance of their world view. We will examine the expression each gives to his

world view and ask whether this sort of framework which is heavily charged with *a priori* presuppositions about the cosmos, taken uncritically, is an appropriate starting place for an investigation of the meaning of the New Testament or rather has pre-determined the outcome.

Bultmann argues surprisingly in his reply to Jaspers that he does not 'hold that modern science provides us with a world view', nor 'base his thinking on a philosophical doctrine'.¹ When he states, however, that his 'attempt to demythologize begins by clearing away the false stumbling-blocks created for modern man by the fact that his world-view is determined by science',² it is clear that the first step in his interpretation is to remove from the New Testament text all elements which are inaccessible to one whose world view is predominantly naturalist or existentialist. This world view is at first a filter for the New Testament, and last a mould into which form what passes through the filter must be cast. A particular world view, not the New Testament, is given authority and made normative.

The content of this world view is clearly outlined in the first sections of the essay 'New Testament and Mythology', as well as the role this world view is to play in the identification of what is meaningful in the New Testament. The following excerpts reveal that the twentieth-century *naturalist* world view determines how particular features of the New Testament proclamation are classified, particularly as 'mythical' or 'mythological':

Man's knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world. . . . We no longer believe in the three-storied universe which the creeds take for granted. . . . There is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of the world. . . . Now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in spirits, whether good or evil. . . . The miracles of the New Testament have ceased to be miraculous, and to defend their historicity by recourse to nervous disorders or hypnotic effects only serves to underline the fact. . . . The mythical eschatology is untenable for the simple reason that the parousia of Christ never took place as the New Testament expected.

But natural science is not the only challenge which the mythology of the New Testament has to face. There is the still more serious challenge presented by modern man's understanding of himself. Man is essentially a unity. He bears the sole responsibility for his own

¹ R. Bultmann, 'The Case for Demythologizing', in *Kerygma and Myth* vol. 2 (London, 1953), 181.

² R. Bultmann, 'The Case for Demythologizing', 183.

thinking, feeling, and willing. . . . He finds what the New Testament has to say about the 'Spirit' and the sacraments utterly strange and incomprehensible. . . . The view of the world which has been moulded by modern science and the modern conception of human nature [is that it is] a self-subsistent unity immune from the interference of supernatural powers. . . . The resurrection of Jesus is just as difficult. . . . The idealist would not object to the idea of a life immune from death, but he could not believe that such a life is made available by the resuscitation of a corpse. Quite apart from the incredibility of such a miracle, he cannot see how an event like this could be the act of God, or how it could affect his life.³

Bultmann's concern, in line with the programme of the *Religions geschichtliche Schule*, was to remove stumbling-blocks from the message of the gospel so that the modern person could make an honest confession and hear and respond to the proclamation of the New Testament. He does not, however, move to challenge the modern person's conception of reality on the basis of the New Testament, but only her or his mode of existence, whether one marked by anxiety or by authenticity. This is particularly striking since Bultmann appears to be fully aware of revolutions in world-construction, yet refuses to allow the New Testament to operate as such for the modern person. He writes concerning world views in the same essay:

Such a view is not absolutely unalterable, and the individual may even contribute to its change. But he can only do so when he is faced by a new set of facts so compelling as to make his previous view of the world untenable. He has then no alternative but to modify his view of the world or produce a new one. The discoveries of Copernicus and the atomic theory are instances of this, and so was romanticism, with its discovery that the human subject is richer and more complex than enlightenment or idealism had allowed, and nationalism, with its new realization of the importance of history and the tradition of peoples.⁴

While Bultmann did not have access to claims and evidence which would have compelled such a rethinking of the world, modern critical scholars may, which is the challenge inherent in this study. The words which Bultmann said concessively, that 'it may equally well happen that truths which a shallow enlightenment had failed to perceive are later rediscovered in ancient myths',⁵ should be taken programmatically in the near future if

³ R. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Kerygma and Myth* vol. 1 (London, 1953), 3-8.

⁴ R. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', 3.

⁵ R. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', 3.

indeed such critical scholarship is to break free of a certain holding pattern.

Bultmann speaks to the heart of a person in her or his human situation with clarity and engagement. However, Bultmann does not truly offer to that person the New Testament proclamation in all its otherness, as it might stand not only as a critique over against and challenge to the individual, but also as a critique over against and challenge to the world view which dominates that individual's (and his or her social order's) experience. The New Testament must also be investigated with regard to its possibilities for the latter, even as certain passages suggest concerning this function of the gospel against the world views current then (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-25!).

More rigorously even than Bultmann, Herbert Braun engages in a translation of the New Testament into a meaning system for a modern world view. This world view is, along with its determinative role in 'sifting' the New Testament witnesses, most clearly outlined by its representative;

That there is such a figure as the Messiah or the Kyrios is beyond discussion for the man of that time. . . . We today with our world view are not able to meet this prerequisite, namely that there is a Messiah, a Kyrios. . . .

Final salvation is conceived either in a Jewish way, as life free from toil upon the renewed earth, or dualistically, as an unearthly, otherworldly condition in the place where God and the heavenly beings are. Both ways of thinking are foreign to us. It should not be objected that their foreignness is merely a question of a different way of viewing things. Such a prolonged earthly-thisworldly or heavenly-otherworldly form of what we here call life is in its naiveté neither believable for us nor worth striving for. . . .

The presupposition that God has proclaimed in an authoritarian way instructions of a definite content which are therefore, i.e., heteronomously, binding, is not within our reach and is unattainable in its naive heteronomy. . . . for the conception of God which lies behind it is unattainable for us.

Is God not here naively taken as given? And is it not this naive acquiescence which brings it about that the hearer plunges into the desperate adventure—desperate in terms of our world view—of extending the time after the near-expectation [of the parousia] has proved to be in error?

Even older, not specifically sacramental concepts remain within the sphere of a way of thinking in which the coming of the deity is taken temporally and objectively—that is, in the area of a naive concept of God. . . .

To realize all this means at the same time to recognize the impossibility of this view and this concept of God.⁶

Throughout the examination of the New Testament texts, Braun never raises the questions concerning this world view, which one must say is *his* world view, and not more broadly *the* modern world view.

The meaning of the New Testament is thus limited by Braun's world view from the outset. It can never authentically speak of anything outside of this world view, and thus never present a challenge to the individual to question the taken-for-granted world-construction under which she or he lives. Rather, in those places where it does speak concerning some reality outside Braun's world-construction, the New Testament is interpreted so as to be brought under the canopy under which Braun's reality takes place. Its claims are relativized under such classifications as 'objectifying language', and so the threat to the canopy is neutralized.

A particular difficulty with Braun's approach is an apparent inconsistency in method which belies a deeper interest. While he asserts (rightly) that one cannot pick and choose between the formulations within the New Testament and so determine the meaning of the New Testament, but one must rather push behind all the formulations to arrive at the meaning, he nevertheless does engage in a process of selection. Räisänen, among others, recognizes this.⁷ Those statements located in the New Testament which go furthest in the direction in which he would like to take the New Testament he declares to represent the furthest reaches of the New Testament, making of them a sort of canon within the canon by which to interpret the whole. Most significantly, however, the selection of these texts and 'germs' are clearly conditioned by what Braun regards as 'attainable' from the modern world view.

Braun has gathered a body of meaning from the New Testament, but this meaning is wholly conditioned by his world view. He makes no attempt to question the presuppositions of his world-construction on the basis of what he has read in the text. Can the achievement be truly said to be a 'theology of the New Testament'? Räisänen puts it most concisely when he says that 'Braun may have shown what "God" means "ultimately", but not what "God" means "within the meaning of the New Testament"'.⁸ Here, though, we must qualify the criticism: Braun shows clearly what God means within the meaning system of his own world

⁶ H. Braun, 'The Problem of a Theology of the New Testament', *JTC* 1, 1965, 174-7.

⁷ H. Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology* (London, 1990), 63.

⁸ H. Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology* (London, 1990), 63.

view, and what God can only mean if that world-construction is to remain secure.

The question again poses itself: Are we truly engaged in New Testament investigation or are we doing the ideological work of world-legitimation and maintenance? The manner in which both Bultmann and Braun exclude the supernatural, indeed the very reality of God (Braun only) by naming God an 'objectification', pushes us towards favoring the latter option. Berger has made this challenge to his colleagues in sociology. What he says to them he may just as well say to us:

The ideological interest that concerns me most is much more basic: It is the interest in the quasiscientific legitimation of the avoidance of transcendence. My thesis is this: The functional approach to religion, whatever the theoretical intentions of its authors, serves to provide quasiscientific legitimations of a secularized world view. It achieves this purpose by an essentially simple cognitive procedure: The specificity of the religious phenomenon is avoided by equating it with other phenomena. The religious phenomenon is 'flattened out'. Finally, it is no longer perceived. Religion is absorbed into a night in which all cats are grey. The greyness is the secularized view of reality in which any manifestations of transcendence are, strictly speaking, meaningless, and therefore can only be dealt with in terms of social or psychological functions that can be understood without reference to transcendence.⁹

The implications of this for New Testament criticism are easily drawn. Have New Testament scholars, like sociologists who operate on a purely functional level, so defined their task as to limit their considerations and results to what may be held consonantly with a secularized world view? When talk of God is said not to represent an encounter of another but rather the objectified projection of some aspect of the self, or simply called 'objectifying language', is this not the legitimation of a secularized world view which refuses to contemplate the existence of God in God's Self? The work of Bultmann and Braun, and of those who follow in their footsteps similarly uncritical of this secular world view, does in fact lend legitimation to this world view. Whether or not more can in fact be said of it, such as that it adequately conveys the meaning of the New Testament, is to be called into question.

Objections Considered—The Supernaturalists' Critique

The unacknowledged partner in New Testament dialogue is the

⁹ P. Berger, 'Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion', *JSSR* 13, 1974, 129.

one who does not rule out *a priori* the possibility of the supernatural, specifically the possibility that God is in fact a causal agent in history. Until dialogue with this partner is reestablished, New Testament investigation will only limp around, hardly ever forward. The naturalist needs to take seriously the claims and critiques of the supernaturalist, lest he or she remain an uncritical servant of the secularized world view. The sociologist's term for this condition is *alienation*. Likewise, let it be said at the outset, the supernaturalist needs to be 'kept honest' by the skeptical partner lest the truth be missed on account of an easy answer in the appeal to the supernatural: We are calling for mutual critique.

The objections here to be considered are largely framed on two levels. The first concerns the soundness of methodology within the scholars of the naturalist world view. The second concerns the very sort of data which Bultmann conceded would necessitate a reorientation of the secularized world-construction. We will examine each of these criticisms and turn finally towards a consideration of the two possible consequences for New Testament investigation, particularly with reference to the *skandalon* of the New Testament for modern people.

The Methodological Objection

Most scholars who object to the task of New Testament investigation as it is defined by the naturalists' 'historical-critical' school begin not with objections to the results with regard to particular issues but rather preface such remarks with an objection on methodological grounds. The heart of this criticism is that the 'historical-critical' method, as executed by these scholars, cannot be considered truly scientific on account of the philosophical presuppositions underlying the method. Thus Ladd writes;

[This] scientific methodology is one which *a priori* excludes the possibility of divine acts in history. It has laid down in advance the limits of historical study. It assumes that history is a closed continuum, that all events must have historical causes. Thus the 'scientific method' excludes the possibility of the supernatural before it has studied all the evidence. It is based on a philosophical presupposition about the nature of historical reality.¹⁰

The 'closedness' of the continuum to which Ladd objects is really the closed nature of the 'cast list', or causal agents allowed to figure in the equation. Here the divine agent as an historical cause

¹⁰ G. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, 1975), 13.

remains a *persona non grata*. Scientific method has admittedly closed itself off from the possibility of any supernatural agency,¹¹ but does not recognize that this is in any way unsound, methodologically speaking, because of the firmness of its conviction that the naturalist view of the world is absolute.

This alleged blind spot is found to be a major stumblingblock in the method, one which guides the reading of ancient texts, and thus the posited reconstructions of history, as surely as a Fundamentalist world-construction:

History is the modern historian's effort to reconstruct the past by the critical use of ancient records and documents. At this point, it is important to note that the so-called 'historical-critical method,' especially as it is understood in Germany, is not an open-minded inductive study of the evidence. Rather, ancient literature is studied and past events reconstructed with certain rigid presuppositions of what could or could not have happened. This is done, however, in the name of scientific objectivity. One of America's leading New Testament scholars [C. C. McCown] wrote, 'Is it not axiomatic that, aside from the assumption that there is order in the universe, critical historical research can brook no presuppositions? . . . Modern science and philosophy have no place for miracles and special providences. History is the result of the complex interaction of natural and social forces and the actions and reactions of men. There are no demons nor angels. God acts only through men.' While such a statement disclaims any theoretical presuppositions, as a matter of fact, it affirms one basic presupposition: That miracles cannot occur.¹²

Thus statements such as Bultmann's concerning the resurrection of Jesus, that 'a historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable',¹³ reveals more about the presuppositions and world-legitimizing enterprise of the historian than about the history of Jesus.

Antony Flew, a professor of philosophy and professed atheist, offers an illustration of the historical approach in question.

The practical upshot of all our methodological contentions taken together comes out sharp and clear in a footnote in which Hume quotes with approval the reasoning of the physician DeSylva in the

¹¹ cf. A. Flew in T. Mieth, *The Resurrection Debate* (New York, 1987), 5: 'The heart of the matter is that the criteria by which we must assess historical testimony, and the general presumptions which make it possible for us to construe leftovers from the past as historical evidence, are such that the possibility of establishing, on purely historical grounds, that some genuinely miraculous event has occurred is ruled out'.

¹² G. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, 1975), 23.

¹³ R. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', 42.

case of Mlle. Thibault: 'It was impossible that she could have been so ill as was proved by witnesses, because it was impossible that she could, in so short a time, have recovered so perfectly as he found her'. That, with regard to the presuppositions of critical history, is the heart of the matter.¹⁴

Based on the physician's experience in the time generally required for recovery, he concluded that the illness could not have been so great as was affirmed by the witnesses. Two questions arise immediately concerning the supposed soundness of this reasoning. Is anyone's experience ever so vast as to rule out exceptional cases, and Does that person's experience in other cases nullify the possibility that new factors are at work in this particular case? DeSylva had not truly disclaimed the possibility of the girl's illness, but only denied it as he affirmed his own convictions about recovery rate.

DeSylva's mode of reasoning, however, has been approved and made normative in historical research. Troeltsch had laid some theoretical groundwork for this when he declared that the historian has no right to accept as historical fact the account of a past event for which he has no analogy in the present. Green expresses an implication of this for New Testament investigation with simple clarity: 'Dead men don't rise, so it is inconceivable that Jesus rose'.¹⁵ Similarly, Blomberg states:

So too the historian who has never experienced miracles of the kind attributed to Jesus, or who after thorough investigation of the world as it exists in his age has no knowledge of such events ever occurring, may not accept that such miracles could ever have happened.¹⁶

We have learned from sociologists already, however, that our experience of our world will largely be limited and defined by our world-construction—necessarily, if our world-construction is to serve its function as a framework of meaning and guard against anomy. The cycle shows itself to be complete. Our world view determines our experience, we make our experience normative for all experience, and nothing arises out of our past or present that can threaten our world-construction. All the parts function as Berger tells us they must in the process of world-legitimation. The centripetal force of this cycle can only be broken by moving outside of our plausibility structures to consider some objections which may provide the data Bultmann required for a revolution in world view.

¹⁴ A. Flew in T. Miethe, *The Resurrection Debate* (New York, 1987), 6.

¹⁵ M. Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (Downers Grove, 1984), 104.

¹⁶ C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, 1987), 78-9.

The Phenomenological Objection

Marxsen reflects Troeltsch's tenet perfectly when he says concerning the miracles of the New Testament, particularly the resurrection, 'I can at most guess that it was a miracle—but only if I am acquainted with the corresponding miracle today'. The problem with the resurrection proper is, of course, that it is theoretically unrepeatable until the general resurrection. Resuscitations of corpses will not correspond to a resurrection, for those of the former class die again, the one of the latter, it is claimed, has entered into an 'indestructable life' (Heb. 7:16). Nevertheless there is a call for naturalists in all disciplines to test not only their experience, but a broader sampling of experience, and so perhaps discover that even in this modern age there exists necessary analogues to New Testament phenomena which Troeltsch's paradigm requires.

Berger addresses his colleagues in sociology with this startling exposition of the place of the transcendent in the contemporary, secularized situation:

Secularization can be defined as a shrinkage in the role of religion, both in social life and in the individual consciousness. Put in sociology-of-knowledge terms: Secularization is a progressive loss of plausibility to religious views of reality [where plausibility is a term concerning social function, not truth]. Now there is a certain ambiguity to this definition. It could imply two things: One, people are having fewer religious experiences. Or, two, they still have these experiences, but, under social pressure, they deny them. In the first case, modern consciousness would represent a startling *novum* in human history. This has been maintained forcefully at least since the Enlightenment, and it was stated most dramatically in Nietzsche's proclamation of the 'death of God'. For better or for worse, the realm of transcendence would then become closed to modern man. In the second case, we would not have so much the disappearance of this type of experience, but rather its *delegitimization*. Religious experience, so to speak, would be hidden in brown paper wrappers. Modern man would then not so much be deprived of transcendence as dishonest in his reports about it.

I suspect that both these things are true to some extent, but I am increasingly inclined to think that the second is more important. Secularization appears to be less far-reaching and less inexorable than many theories of modern man had assumed. The Third World today is full of religious eruptions, some of profound political significance. The evidence now emerging from the Soviet Union is downright astounding. But even in the western world there have been indications in recent years that (to paraphrase Mark Twain) the reports of God's demise have been somewhat exaggerated.¹⁷

Berger contends that such experience must not be 'flattened out' to appear as simple psychological or sociological phenomena anymore. Sociology must develop a way to speak about the 'transcendent' as a real phenomenon. While this is not to lead to making absolute truth claims, Berger recognizes that the 'methodological atheism' necessary for serious sociological work has actually resulted in making truth claims for atheism.

The 'delegitimization' of religious phenomena is an important concept here. Since the secularized world view rests on other legitimations, there has been no hesitancy in many disciplines to simply push these phenomena to the side or dismiss them. The deep roots of social engineering—of avoiding those people and claims which do not support our world view, or relativizing these claims by such terms as 'naive' or 'inconceivable'—will come to the fore when a witness to the supernatural is now adduced. If seriously investigated, however, the experiences of Michael Harper may provide new analogues for New Testament investigation.

In 1964 I prayed for a woman with epilepsy, who never had a seizure again; but I had to wait until 1984 before I knew it. I was particularly frightened of wheelchair cases, and avoided praying for such people. I had to pray on one occasion for a woman in a wheelchair. I promptly forgot all about it. Yet twelve years later I hear that she had been healed, because she remembered my name and told a friend of mine about it.

Some years ago I was attending a large healing service in California. The star that night was Kathryn Kuhlman. My critical faculties, nurtured at school and university, were well tuned and ready for action. I was not expecting anything to happen. I was finding it a struggle not to reject the whole affair as superficial showmanship, a vulgar form of show biz transferred from the secular to the Christian stage. Suddenly Kathryn announced to a crowd of several thousand people that God was healing a young man of emphysema. His lungs had been seriously damaged when he had been involved in a fire. About forty yards from where I was sitting a young man sprang to his feet and went quickly up to the platform. He was beaming from ear to ear. 'You are healed', Kathryn said, and the young man obviously believed her. 'Run down to the end of the auditorium and back', she commanded. This he proceeded to do, to the ecstatic delight of the audience. They cheered him all the way. By this time I was ready to write the whole thing off. It had clearly been rigged. The young man was an exhibitionist. He had clearly not been ill at all. The cure was psychologically induced. Kuhlman knew this young man and his case history. These were some of the possibilities

¹⁷ P. Berger, 'Some Second Thoughts on Substantive Versus Functional Definitions of Religion', *JSSR* 13, 1974, 132-3.

which came into my mind. But a miracle—certainly not. Every kind of rational explanation bounced backwards and forwards in my brain. The possibility that we had witnessed a miracle never occurred to me.

I turned instinctively to the man next to me who was a complete stranger. I asked him what he thought about it all, with a bit of a sarcastic edge to my voice. I immediately noticed that he had been deeply moved, and I was soon to know why. 'That is my boy', he said. I was taken aback. I asked him several questions. His son had been told by the doctors that his lungs had been so badly damaged he would never be able to run again. Prior to that evening, he had been unable to walk more than fifty yards without severe breathlessness. No, he was not known to Kathryn Kuhlman, who had no prior knowledge of his condition. I learned a lesson that evening—never to limit God and never to judge people or situations by outward impressions alone.¹⁸

Such a witness stands among many. Blomberg notes that 'too many medical miracles continue today among religious people who believe that God rewards their faith for even the most die-hard secularist to dismiss all of them as fraudulent'.¹⁹

How Will Secularists Respond?—Two Possibilities

The issue here is, of course, not whether or not miracles do occur in the twentieth century, or indeed in any century. The issue is whether certain segments of the 'knowledge class' (a technical term) are open to consider such possibilities, and the effects that such an investigation might have, or whether these scholars are going to behave in sociologically predictable ways along the lines of the paradigm of world-legitimation given by Berger, the effect of which is evident. The fact that Harper and, say, Braun, have not been in dialogue, and that such dialogue almost never takes place between any such partners, is manifest evidence of the social engineering in which both worlds have participated, to what this author feels to be the loss of both. The religious investigators of the New Testament would greatly benefit from the critical questions raised by academicians, and the academicians would do well to challenge their view of the world rather than allow it to guide their work.

The testimony of Harper, and, to be sure, of others like him, may be dismissed as unworthy of investigation, unscientific,

¹⁸ M. Harper, *The Healings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, 1986), 12–4.

¹⁹ C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, 1987), 94.

uncritical, or beyond the scope of New Testament investigation. As a result, naturalist scholars would remain within their plausibility structures—the university armchairs and the colleagues with whom conversation would support and maintain the secularized world view—and continue to exclude the individuals who pose a threat to that world-construction, together with their claims. Pressure may continue to be exerted from within so that such phenomena, even if experienced, will never be admitted. What Berger says of neo-orthodoxy may easily be applied as well to this ‘knowledge class’:

If one is to believe what neo-orthodoxy wants one to believe, in the contemporary situation, then one must be rather careful to huddle together closely and continuously with one’s fellow believers.²⁰

Such a response would demonstrate that New Testament scholars are engaged in, as they have been engaged in for some time, the ideological work of developing ‘quasiscientific legitimations for a secularized world view’.

If such claims are investigated seriously, however, New Testament investigation may find this out for itself, and so whether or not it constructs a new methodology, it will at least have a broadened sampling of experience by which to judge New Testament phenomena. Irrespective of the actual verdict on the supernatural, it will mean for New Testament investigation the possibility of a new critical approach, one which critically examines for the first time the presuppositions of the world view held by the scholar and the effects of this world view on her or his inquiry. The understanding of the ‘meaning’ of the New Testament, now so much shaped by the secularized world view, might open up to grasp the deeper message of the early Christian religion. The relativizing of the resurrection in favor of the absolutization of the cross may be overturned, and a new dimension rediscovered in the New Testament of striking relevance for even modern women and men. Green notes the effect of world view on selection of the center of New Testament meaning:

Rationalism has had a hand in the separation of the cross and resurrection in Christian thought. Since the rise of the Enlightenment . . . it has seemed naive and credulous to believe the greatest of all miracles associated with Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The cross presents no such difficulties. There is nothing supernatural about it. . . . This is not [so] with the

²⁰ P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York, 1969), 164.

resurrection. And the New Testament makes it very plain that both stand or fall together as acts of God [Rom. 4:25, Acts 2:23, 32f.].²¹

Where Bultmann thinks to preserve the 'scandal of the cross', he has in effect effaced the scandal of the gospel as a challenge to a contemporary world view, and hence robbed it of most of its power.

If scholarship will take up the challenge of its critics, it may be that the supernatural will again be discovered and the naturalist world-construction modified. This is not to let in the host of demons and angels again, something which scholarship might well fear on both sides of the chasm. It is, however, to correct an excess of rationalism which has been protected and legitimated for centuries now through a method which may well be no more than a safety feature of the world-legitimation process. It may well open up new avenues for understanding the meaning of the *New Testament* and close off the oft visited pathways of deriving meaning from the *New Testament*.

In a sense, authority in this enterprise will be stripped from the powerful demands of the nomos, the world-construction, and returned to the text of the New Testament. We will certainly still need to examine its world view critically, but also to allow it to challenge ours, especially should we find serious analogues in contemporary experience. A new 'center' or 'consistent element' may be discovered in the New Testament, a center which neither makes dogmatic claims about God nor concerns itself solely with anthropology. Texts such as Phil. 3:10-12 and 2 Cor. 3:17-18, which bear witness rather to the dynamic of a transforming relationship with the Other who is God, may be allowed to speak with integrity rather than dismissed in essence as 'objectifying language' and recast as awareness of dependence. The New Testament speaks of *religion*, not *philosophy*, and it would be a critical disaster were criticism to make of the New Testament 'the handmaid to existentialism or whatever the contemporary intellectual fashion happens to be'.²²

Whether or not scholarship will arrive at such a conclusion is for the moment immaterial. What is crucial is that secularist New Testament scholars reflect on the dangerously Fundamentalistic enterprise in which they have been engaging for some time, namely the maintenance work of legitimating world-constructions rather than true critical investigation and the process of social engineering rather than true dialogue. The challenge is to be

²¹ M. Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (Downers Grove, 1984), 15-6.

²² M. Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (Downers Grove, 1984), 107.

critical of a commonly-held, taken-for-granted world-construction which has assumed the stature of absolute reality, when it is in fact no more than an ongoing social construction.

In effect, the program of demythologizing begun by Bultmann with the New Testament reaches its true conclusion here, in the 'demythologizing' of a secularized world view. If the open interaction between plausibility structures proves to furnish no material for altering the world-construction, New Testament investigation may, if nothing else, proceed along with its task with the integrity of having questioned its participation in world-legitimation and demonstrated that it is capable of consistent criticism.

The probable outcome of such an investigation, however, would be a modification of the secularized world view in favor of one which takes seriously the interaction of the Divine with the mundane. The New Testament witnesses would then receive an authentic hearing once more when it speaks of the act of God in Christ and the hope of the believer. What Bultmann or Braun, or any of their present-day students, would discard as part of the mythological packaging would be seen in a new light, as part of the message and meaning of the proclamation itself. To allow ourselves to be bound by the demands of secularism in the academic world is, in fact, to do nothing more than do the 'ideological work' required for world-maintenance of a secularized world view. The truly critical task pushes deeper, to the very criticism of our world-constructions on the basis of the voice of the New Testament which stands beyond those humanly-made conceptual walls.