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Scripture

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REMYTHOLOGISING : THE KEY TO SCRIPTURE

This rather forbidding title calls for some justification. It is a counterpoint to an important contemporary jargon word in biblical theology : *Demythologising*. This has to do, as we shall see, with a problem that is almost as old as Christianity itself ; but the solution to the problem that is called today demythologising was first proposed in 1941 by the German Lutheran theologian Dr Bultmann. The task he sets himself and his colleagues is that of 'demythologising the New Testament message or proclamation.' 'Decarbonising' means removing the carbon from a cylinder ; 'demythologising' means removing the mythology from the Scriptures at large, and the New Testament in particular.

Before giving a brief account of Bultmann's idea, I had better say what I mean by *remythologising* as against his *demythologising* ; and to do this I must make a distinction between 'myth' and 'mythology' that he does not. He—or his English translator, I had better say—treats them as synonymous, which he has a perfect right to do. But I want to take 'myth' for the actual story or type of story in question—e.g. the story of Prometheus or the rape of Persephone. This is what Bultmann seems to mean, more or less, by 'mythology,' and his case is that the New Testament is full of this kind of writing. I want to take 'mythology' for the name of a branch of study, or interest, like any other '-ology,' namely interest in and the study of such myths. Not to restrict its meaning to too technical or professional a pursuit, I would like to define it, for my present purposes, as 'the capacity to appreciate myth.' Now whereas Bultmann wishes to remove myth from the New Testament—that is from the theologian's and the preacher's interpretation of it—and thus to demythologise the New Testament message, I want to put the capacity to appreciate myth back into—not the New Testament, where it is to be found already—but into you and me. It is the modern mind I want to see *remythologised*, and first of all the modern Catholic mind. My contention is that until we learn to appreciate myth and related forms

of literature, we will not be able to understand and enjoy and profit by Scripture—we will be tone deaf to the word of God.

Now let us see a little more precisely what Bultmann means by removing mythology from the New Testament message, and what he wants to do it for. In his essay *New Testament and Mythology* which started off the whole discussion, he was writing as an apologist, whose main concern is to present the Christian message convincingly to modern man. Now the thing that modern man is most inclined to say when presented with the Christian message—and we must bear in mind that for a Lutheran like Bultmann the Christian message can only be imbibed direct and neat, so to speak, from the New Testament, for there is no filter of a teaching Church—what modern man says when you recite the New Testament to him is : ‘ But good heavens, it’s seventy five per cent mythology, just like fairy stories. You might as well ask me to believe in Orpheus and Eurydice, as in the resurrection of Christ from the dead.’

That, says Bultmann, is the sort of thing modern man feels about the New Testament. It is at least certainly what Bultmann himself feels. ‘ It is impossible,’ he says, ‘ to use electric light and the wireless, and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits. We may think we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible to the modern world.’¹ Demons, spirits, heaven above, hell below, miracles, all belong to an obsolete world view, to mythological categories of thought that were perfectly normal in classical antiquity when the New Testament was written, but are no longer valid in the twentieth century. As they are not the kernel or essence of the Christian message, there is no reason why the twentieth century should have to swallow them.

Bultmann states the essence of the Christian message in existentialist terms. Though from the Catholic point of view his statement of it is necessarily incomplete, the existentialist philosophical framework which he employs is not, as such, incompatible with Catholic faith ; indeed much of it is most congenial. For Bultmann, as for us, the kernel of the New Testament message is the cross. The cross is God’s challenge to our faith, and when we believe, we make the cross our own, we are crucified with Christ—crucified to the world. For faith is a total commitment of oneself to God ; that is what the gospel message demands of us, and also what it gives us in the crucifixion.

Bultmann acknowledges that this message of the cross is a scandal to modern man, as indeed to man of any age. He does not wish in

¹ *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 5

any way to whittle down this scandal, or make it easy. He would keenly resent the charge of adulterating the word of God. But he does not see why the scandal of the cross should be encumbered and obscured by the quite unnecessary scandal or stumbling-block of an outdated mythological world-view ; with all its attendant paraphernalia of demons, angels, virgin births, last trumps and so on. Hence his concern to demythologise and so to interpret the New Testament that the kernel of its message is presented without the husk of its mythology. This metaphor of the kernel and the husk is one Bultmann and his critics all accept quite happily. But it is to my mind, as I hope I shall show, seriously misleading.

So much, very inadequately, for Bultmann's apologetical problem. The problem I am concerned with is one which confronts believers in their believing, not in their approach to unbelievers. It is my opinion that Bultmann, in tying the whole theological discussion to an apologetic problem has succeeded in tangling up together all sorts of questions. This usually happens when theological thought is built on a base of apologetics ; it involves a mixture of categories as gross as the mixture of metaphors I have just perpetrated ; a solecism which the law of Moses censures when it forbids us to yoke the ox and the ass together, or to sow a vineyard with two kinds of seed, or to wear a mingled stuff, wool and linen together (Deut. 22:9).

The Church has been tackling Bultmann's apologetical problem from the beginning ; at least in principle it has been successfully demythologising all along, if you care to use the word. For example, we say in the creed, ' he sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,' an expression taken straight out of the New Testament, and as mythological as Bultmann could wish. What does it mean ? Here is the answer of the *Explanatory Catechism* : ' By these words I do not mean that God the Father has hands, for He is a spirit ; but I mean that Christ as God is equal to the Father, and as man is in the highest place in heaven.' I doubt if that would satisfy Bultmann as an exercise in demythologising, and to tell the truth it does not really satisfy me as an exercise in theological explanation. But here is St Thomas on the same problem : ' By "sitting" two things can be understood ; (a) rest, and (b) royal or judicial authority. In both respects it benefits Christ to sit at the Father's right hand . . . By "the Father's right hand," as Damascene says, we mean the glory and honour of the godhead,' and he also gives other possible meanings for the expression (*Sum. Theol.* IIIa, 58, 1).

Here is a more personal instance. A senior colleague of mine tells the story of how as a young man he approached Fr Vincent McNabb to be received into the Church. Fr Vincent, after some instructions,

asked him if he had any difficulties, and he said he had : would he, as a Catholic, have to believe (1) that Mathusala really lived 969 years ; and (2) that an angel really and literally took Habacuc by the hair of his head and whisked him off to Babylon to give Daniel his dinner in the lions' den ? I do not know what Fr Vincent answered, but I do know that his catechumen became a Catholic and still does not believe either of those propositions.

Apologetics and the instruction of converts and children are essentially a matter of technique, which will vary with circumstances. While admittedly our contemporary techniques may sometimes be antiquated, modernisation programmes are always possible, and many indeed are afoot, all within the limits of impeccable orthodoxy.

But now we come to the problem that faces us as believers, not as apologists. Here are we, with our faith explained to us and assimilated to a large extent in demythologised language, and capable no doubt of further translation into conceptual language still in accordance with the Church's rule of faith ; and there, way back at the beginning of the process, so far away from us in the twentieth century as though seen through a telescope back to front, is Scripture. It seems both remote and irrelevant. We know we don't have to believe all that is said about Mathusala and Habacuc and Jona to the letter, or for that matter that our Lord at his ascension went straight up into the sky like a rocket, and is sitting somewhere at the top of the sky on a golden cloud. Why read about it then ? Perhaps we are prompted to by curiosity or piety, and frankly we may find it all not only alien but uncomfortable ; a lot of it reads very like myth, which in our ordinary language means a certain type of fiction or falsehood. We are uncertain how much of this our Catholic faith obliges us to accept. So our interest in Scripture dies a speedy death.

My quick answer to how much we have to swallow is : the lot—Mathusala, Habacuc, Jona, mythology and all. And until we learn how to swallow and digest it, our faith cannot properly mature into a faith that is intelligent and understanding. And the way to digest Scripture is to remythologise our minds, and for that matter our theology ; to become sensitive to the mythological way of thinking and writing.

It is high time to take a closer look at this word ' myth,' and to justify our applying it to Scripture at all. We ordinarily use the word to carry a suggestion of untruth. If that is what it really means, then we cannot accept the application of it to Scripture. But in fact this suggestion is secondary to the word ' myth,' and has come to be attached to it by historical accident. Primarily it signifies a certain

literary form, like the words 'novel,' 'limerick,' 'lyric,' 'epic.' We do not usually use these words as evaluative terms, but as terms of classification. When we do use them to express value—for example the word 'epic' to mean 'heroic' in the phrase 'an epic struggle'—we realise that the meaning is secondary. We can use 'epic' to mean 'heroic,' because as a term of literary classification 'epic' means a poem in a certain literary form about heroes. There is a great deal of epic, or saga, in Scripture.

So with 'myth'; as a term of classification it means a story in a certain form about the gods. Now it is a historical accident that the myths with which we Christians have always been most familiar have been stories about pagan gods. They have therefore been readily dismissed—too readily in my opinion—as false stories, and we have come to use the word myth as an evaluative term meaning 'heathen falsehood.' There is of course no heathen falsehood in Scripture, or even heathen nonsense; we accept that *a priori*. But what I object to accepting *a priori* is (1) that all heathen tales are simply false or nonsensical; and (2) that there is no affinity between heathen tales and tales told in the Bible, between the type of language used by heathen mythologers and that used by inspired and prophetic writers. In fact my remythologising will simply be an attempt to convince you of the contrary of these two propositions.

(1) All heathen tales are not simply false or nonsensical.

I take as my example the story of Prometheus. He was one of the Titans, ancient pre-Olympian deities. When his brothers fought against Olympus he sided with Zeus, whom he had helped to overthrow his father Kronos. But against the wishes of Zeus he took pity on the wretched race of mortals, and stole for them the divine gift of fire, and taught them all the arts. For this crime he was chained to a crag in the Caucasus, where every evening he had to suffer the attentions of Zeus's eagle pecking at his liver.

Is this story true? It is as absurd to dismiss it as false on the grounds that it has no historical foundation in fact and never really happened, as it would be for a pious believer in the Greek pantheon to assert the historical truth of the story against such light-minded scepticism. The story is clearly neither true nor false in terms of actual fact, because it is precisely not a story in the historical form, but in the mythical.

So before we ask the question 'Is it true?', we have to ask the question 'What does it mean?'. It is easy to say what the name Prometheus means; it means Foresight or Forethought. Perhaps the story is simply a picturesque way of reflecting on the human situation, on what Bultmann calls 'the question of human existence.'¹ All

¹ *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 191f.

the arts of civilisation, very aptly symbolised by the capacity to make fire, are the product of the human mind's ability to think ahead. This ability is the greatest of blessings, indispensable for success. And yet what a double-edged blessing it proves to be ! You pay for thoughtfulness by sorrows that the heedless are blissfully unaware of ; by a double knowledge of misfortune, before it happens as well as when it happens ; by a knowledge of your own helplessness to prevent what you foresee—Prometheus riveted to the crag. Your very far-sightedness—symbolised now by the far-seeing eagle of Zeus—torments you with worry and care and anxiety. Growing wiser means inevitably growing sadder.

This is to read the story as an allegory, as no more than an imaginative statement of the thesis 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' This thesis is its meaning, the kernel of it ; the form of the story is the husk. If the story so interpreted is true to life as you know it, you say it is true ; if not, not.

But I do not think that Aeschylus or the original mythologer would accept this kind of demythologising, allegorical interpretation. After all, why wrap up so straightforward a reflection as 'Vanity of vanities' in an allegory ? 'My story,' he might well say, 'is not like the nutshell or orange peel which you crack or peel off in order to get at the edible meaning ; it is like the apple, which you must eat in order to taste the meaning. You cannot really rationalise it in that superficial way ; I am saying something at once more primitive and more mysterious than Ecclesiastes. More primitive—the bit about the eagle tearing at Prometheus's liver contains an allusion to the common ritual of soothsaying by inspecting the liver of a sacrificial victim. For me the foresight which indeed gives Prometheus his name is not a mere matter of making rational forecasts and prudent prognostications ; it has something uncanny about it ; it is a gift from one or other of the unseen powers, the *numina*, on which, as I am most acutely aware, men are utterly dependent. I call them gods. I have no doubt whatever of their reality ; and the mystery is that man owes all the arts and blessings of civilisation, all wisdom and divination and foretelling of the future (so necessary for the conduct of all human affairs) to the benevolence of these powers ; while at the same time by the possession of such blessings he seems to excite their jealousy and spite, as though this possession had originally been snatched by man, or stolen for him, from their unwilling hands. Hence the paradox that wisdom is both a blessing and a grievous burden.

'Now I cannot convey this mystery,' Aeschylus continues, 'as this inadequate attempt at explanation shows, in straightforward terms, because I cannot describe nor conceive these numinous powers which

I call gods, although I encounter them and experience them at every turn. I can only talk about them in the indirect, evocative language of myth. This sense I have of the mysterious predicament of man, so hauntingly subject to the higher powers, finds its best expression in the tragic art of the great poets.'

There is no point now in trying to evaluate in terms of truth such a hypothetical profession of faith by a pagan mythologer. But I think its deepest intuitions deserve to be taken seriously. And for a criticism of these intuitions that is speaking the same language, that does not simply brush aside, you must go first of all to Scripture. This brings me to my second proposition.

(2) There is an affinity between the style of heathen tales or myths and the style of some of the tales told in Scripture.

First let us see how Scripture criticises the pagan intuition about the reality of the unseen powers called gods. The word 'god' with a little g could be called the arch-mythological word, the word for what myths are about. And the point I want to make about the use of this word in Scripture, is that the Hebrew word for God with a capital G is 'gods' with a little g; it is a plural form, *Elohim*, nearly always construed, indeed, when applied to the God of Israel, with singular verbs and pronouns, but none the less the linguistic fact remains that the Hebrew word for God is 'gods.'

This suggests to me that the way in which Israel came to a belief in one God, the true God, was the very opposite of the way of demythologising. It was not by learning to speak a different language from mythology, the language of philosophy and science; that was the way of the Greeks. The Hebrew way, or rather God's way with the Hebrews, was revelation, which is not, like philosophy, an alternative way to mythology, but an extension of mythology. God revealing Himself means God accosting man. Where He accosted the Hebrews in the first place was in the primitive intuition, common to other archaic peoples, and commonly expressed in mythical terms, that the world is full of gods, full of *elohim*, on whom man is utterly dependent. And so it is, of course. It is only when people start trying to clarify, to rationalise and tidy up this obscurely felt awareness, that they fall into pagan errors. But for the Hebrews it was clarified by revelation, by an ever surer, more unmistakable encounter with the divine, by an ever more penetrating intuition. The gods, the *elohim*, are not rationalised or arranged into a tinsel pantheon; they are gradually seen to be one. 'All the very real powers and mysterious influences which bear upon man are understood to be so many various aspects of Yahweh, the tutelary deity of the nation. Israel came to

realise that He is not just one among many gods, but that He is simply the gods, all the gods there are. Israel's great profession of monotheistic faith in Deut. 6:4 literally runs, 'Hear O Israel, Yahweh is our gods, Yahweh is one.' The gods which the gentiles worshipped are not Yahweh, therefore they are not gods. But this does not mean that they are figments of the imagination; no, they are very real. They are visible idols, and as such the objects of much not very subtle jesting on the part of psalmists and prophets; but more than that, they are also demons, evil but lesser spirits who seduce men from the truth. This idea appears clearly in the later writings of the Old Testament, it is taken for granted by St Paul (1 Cor. 10:19ff.), and is the common opinion of the Fathers. Pagan gods are undoubtedly false, but they are also as undoubtedly real.

All this is a development within the framework of mythological thinking, elicited from a primitive pre-biblical intuition of gods or *elohim*. This primitive stratum of uncriticised myth shows through the text of Scripture itself in places; for example, 'Then Elohim said (singular verb), Let *us* make in *our* image, after *our* likeness' (Gen. 1:26); or again, 'Yahweh Elohim said, Behold the man has become like one of *us*, knowing good and evil' (ibid. 3:22).

The stories of the creation and the fall, from which these two texts come, give us more instances of Scripture using and criticising myth, staying within the framework of myth language, accepting this language as the place of revelation. These two stories, and indeed a very great deal of Scripture, have a pre-biblical history. The story of the fall in one of its pre-biblical forms may well have been a different myth about the same idea, the same mythologem, as Prometheus. (This of course, is conjecture, not fact.) In the garden of the gods there grows the tree of knowledge; man, whom the gods had made in order to work their garden for them, is kept from this tree by being told he will die if he eats of it, though this is just a little bit of divine opium for the masses. One of the gods, more benevolent than the rest, tells man the truth about the tree—its fruit will make man like the gods, knowing good and evil, that is to say, possessing power. Man eats, but the gods, out of fear and jealousy turn him out of their garden, in case he eats of the tree of life and lives for ever.

This story is definitely false, not because it did not really happen that way, but because it conveys a false idea about the real relationship between God and man. So Scripture recasts it, combines it perhaps with other versions, to tell us a story which is true, not because it all did happen exactly like that, but because it truly sets out the real relationship between God and man.

Of course among all the stories and other forms of literature in

the Bible, comparatively few are what you might call criticised myth, like the story of the fall. And just as important for our appreciation of Scripture as its affinity with pagan mythology are the immense differences between them. One important difference follows from the monotheistic faith of the sacred writers. Pagan myths are stories about the gods ; men do not necessarily figure at all, and when they are introduced, it is rather like the anomalous introduction of a man from the audience into the action of a play. The ordinary *dramatis personae* are the gods. But a drama with only one *persona* is rather a difficult thing to stage. The Yahweh Elohim of Israel does not easily lend Himself to the full myth treatment. Members of the audience have to be brought into the action in order to make a play at all. So revelation becomes a drama in which all distinction between players and spectators is dissolved. All the stories about God in the Bible are stories about His dealings with men—they represent a sort of cross-talk between stage and auditorium.

A second difference, and this is crucial, is that the biblical narratives are fundamentally about history. I suppose this is really a corollary of the first difference. If you tell a story about the goings-on among the gods of Olympus, your hearers will not want to know when it all happened, because they realise that it did not happen in a human historical 'when,' but that it all refers to a special divine 'when' of its own. But the moment human beings begin to figure in stories, the question 'when' begins to be asked ; for the human beings are related to us here and us now, they are our ancestors, our predecessors.

Pagan myths usually locate their stories in known places, but never fix them at known points of time. I suppose the reason is to be sought in the connection of myth with cult. The sacred rites are performed at certain sacred places, they have their appropriate myths, which are recited or re-enacted during the ceremonies, and so the myths get attached to the places ; but as for time, the sacred rites take place annually, they are concerned with the cycle of the seasons. Ask *where* the rape of Persephone occurred, and the mythologer will tell you at Eleusis. Ask *when*, and the only answer is, in the autumn, every year. But stories in which particular human beings, even legendary ones, even such shadowy ones as Noah and Mathusala, play leading roles opposite Yahweh Elohim, almost require some sort of location in the time sequence, even if only in the pre-history of 'long, long ago.' Such stories too, like the pagan myths, are very often cult stories, associated with this or that sacred place. Many of the stories in Genesis about the patriarchs have this character. But in their Scriptural form, as distinct from any inferential pre-Scriptural and more purely mythological form, the chief importance of these

stories is that they are about the ancestors, about the nation's pre-history, not their connection with this or that sacred place.

In any case, the essence of the revelation given us in Scripture is that it is revelation in history. It is salvation history, or the history of the development of the saving relationship between God and man. It is within this historical context too, of real Exodus and monarchy and captivity and return, and real historical Jesus of Nazareth called the Christ, that the prophets prophesy, the psalmists worship, Ecclesiastes muses sceptically, the authors of Jona, Judith, Tobias and Daniel, write up their folk-lore, Paul writes his epistles, John his Apocalypse. There is nothing similar to this armature of history in the *corpus* of any pagan mythology.

But, what we have to remember, we to whom this historical character of our religion and its documents is axiomatic, is that there is nothing in these documents—with the possible but doubtful exception of the Acts of the Apostles—that is historical writing in the modern sense of the word. The gospels are not histories, not biographies of Jesus in that sense. So also with the books of Kings, with Judges etc. ; and much more so with Genesis and Exodus. The difference is this ; the historian must aim at accuracy of detail, and he is liable to adverse criticism if he is casual, or takes liberties, with the details of events and dates. But the story teller is under no such limitation. His principle is ' Why spoil a good story merely for the sake of truth ? ' This is surely the principle of the story-tellers of Scripture, evangelists included, if you take ' truth ' here in the narrow sense it has for us of historical or scientific accuracy. For they were interested in telling a much grander sort of truth. As story tellers they were ready to use the details with the greatest freedom, inventing, exaggerating, transposing, modifying, omitting, all in order to make the point or the several points of the story being told. It is in this ' point of the story ' that its inspired truth lies. And it is conveyed by the way the story is told, the way the details are treated. However fictitious, or embroidered, or inaccurate the details may be, they cannot be discarded as untrue, or falsely mythological, because without them the message, the point of the story is lost. They *are* true, but within the context of the story they belong to. And the stories are true, but again not in isolation, only—or at least only fully true—in the context of the book they form a part of, in the context of revelation as a whole.

Thus to appreciate the full truth of Scripture we need to cultivate an attitude of mind that is akin to the mind of the sacred writers, and particularly to the mind of the New Testament writers, who occupy a privileged position in revelation history. After all, what we meet immediately when we read the Bible is the mind of the writer as he

expresses it in the text. It is only through that expression of his mind, only through his reflection that we meet the real events and the real people, our Lord included, he is writing of. There are of course great differences in quality between the minds of St Luke, St Paul, St John, and all the other writers of the inspired text. But I think we can generalise to the extent of saying that what they all have in common is a capacity to think in pictures, in concrete images, images derived from the Old Testament, and with their origins going back deep into ancient myth forms. They do not, for example, first give a bare description of our Lord's passion and death, and then reflect upon its significance in abstract language; they write its significance into the very story by the way they describe the details to fit such Old Testament passages as Isaias 53. Similarly with the infancy narratives; they are not bare descriptions of events, but stories told to bring out the revealed significance of the virgin birth of the Saviour. If you treat any biblical narrative as a bare description of events, you at once come up against disconcerting inconsistencies—as for example between the genealogies in Matthew and Luke. I will not say there is no bare description of events anywhere in Scripture; in the books of Kings you often come across passages which read like transcriptions from official records. But I suggest that for the full significance of such passages you have to consider the larger context of the book in which they are set.

It is such an ability to think, and to reflect on events, in concrete images and pictures; it is the sense that only by such reflection can one reach a really deep and genuine understanding of God and His saving revelation, which I am calling a mythological habit of mind. I am not attached to the word; I am only using it because it has been introduced into such discussions on Scripture. I am aware that it has serious disadvantages as well as being in many ways very suggestive. But I am attached to the habit of mind; I would like to cultivate it more myself, to become more adept in it, to achieve the effort of imaginative thought that it calls for. It seems to me that the mind which expressed its divine doctrine in parables, and chose to achieve its saving purposes on the cross, in the setting of the Jewish passover feast, was such a mind. If we would share more fully in the mind of Christ, we too must learn to think concretely, imaginatively, in parables.

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