

and otherwise “fudging” in the interest of an application of Christian principles. But, of course, that is just the point. According to Niebuhr, the actual world in which we live is in fact characterized by particularities, relativities, and ambiguities—the consummation of all things has not yet occurred. That may be unfortunate, but that’s the fact. So a truly meaningful application of Christian principles will necessarily be realistic about our situation and willing to give and take in the interest, as is were, of striking the best deal at the moment.

At any rate, many of those who have reflected on the course of twentieth-century theology would say that Reinhold Niebuhr was, with his particular insights and contributions, surely the right person, at the right place, at the right time. Certainly everyone remembers the prayer he composed in 1934:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.¹⁴

CHAPTER THREE

Jesus Christ and Mythology

Rudolf Bultmann

If it is true that Karl Barth was, in an important sense, the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, there is no doubt that Rudolf Karl Bultmann (1884–1976) was the greatest New Testament scholar. Of course, this doesn’t mean that everyone has agreed with his views. Hardly. But his views—sometimes controversial in the extreme—established a framework that determined the character of subsequent New Testament scholarship to the present day. Further, not only did his methodological and exegetical insights hold obvious implications for the larger world of theology, but he made distinctive contributions to theology itself; he was a major shaper of one of the dominant strands of twentieth-century theology, namely, “existential” theology. Born in Bremen in northwest Germany, the son of a Lutheran pastor, and educated in the universities of Tübingen, Berlin, and Marburg, he settled into an academic career at the University of Marburg and wielded a decisive influence over the entire theological world from 1921 until his retirement in 1951.

Like Barth, Bultmann studied at Tübingen, Berlin, and Marburg. Like Barth, he was greatly influenced by his liberal teachers, Wilhelm Herrmann and Adolf von Harnack. Like Barth, he reacted to theological liberalism. With Barth he was initially united in the development of dialectical theology. But then he took a quite different turn.

The New Testament

Though our concern is mainly with Bultmann's contribution to theology, some notice should be given to his closely associated legacy to New Testament studies. This latter necessarily involves many considerations, but we mention here just two: form criticism and the history of religions approach to the New Testament literature.

The historical-critical approach to the Bible—which insists on bringing to bear on the Bible the same sorts of interpretive tools that would be brought to bear on any literature—goes back to the eighteenth century with Hermann Reimarus. Since then the method has been increasingly refined, but probably the single biggest boost was provided by the introduction of *Formgeschichte*, almost always rendered in English as “form criticism.” Though applied first to the Old Testament, in the 1920s and '30s it became for many an indispensable tool of New Testament interpretation, mainly through the work of, first, Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Martin Dibelius and, then, Rudolf Bultmann. Form criticism—which has been applied mainly to the New Testament Gospels, and especially to the first three (the Synoptics)—begins with the recognition that the original oral content of these Gospels has been altered by superimposed layers of subsequent tradition. It then attempts to uncover that original content through analysis of the differing linguistic forms or types of expression present in the text, which

point to differing and developing concerns in the early Christian communities. In this way, not only do we more correctly identify the authentic sayings of Jesus in the Gospels but we reconstruct somewhat the development of early Christian doctrine and the church.

Form criticism was, of course, attended by yet other critical tools employed in the interest of identifying authentic Jesus-material in the Gospels. Bultmann was one of the first to apply what came to be called the “criterion of dissimilarity”: Only those sayings of Jesus can assuredly be accepted as authentic that stand in contrast both to Jewish teaching and practice, on the one hand, and to Christian teaching and practice, on the other. The idea is that only thus can we be certain that the saying or material wasn't read into the Jesus-story from either the Jewish or Christian side. Bultmann was also one of the first to emphasize the relevance of linguistic factors: Rhythms, phraseology, and particular expressions, especially Semitisms, can often reveal a Palestinian and thus early date for the material in question.

The historical-critical approach to the New Testament literature continued to be refined into the latter part of the twentieth century with the addition of many other criticisms—source criticism, redaction criticism, literary criticism, and the like—and other criteria of authenticity. But for all their importance, none of these hit the scene, so to speak, with the force of form criticism. It was a kind of new beginning for New Testament studies. In this respect, Bultmann's *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (published in German in 1921), a largely form-critical scrutiny of the traditions about Jesus contained in the first three Gospels, became a sort of agenda-setting work.

Like form criticism, the history of religions approach was largely a German-sponsored methodology. In German it is known as the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*—a real mouthful that means the “history of religions school.” As the label suggests, this is the attempt to relate some of the most important

material in the New Testament to its religious and cultural environs. This approach claims that the New Testament material was largely derived from non-Jewish or extrabiblical settings. Thus, for example, Egyptian mysticism, Hellenistic philosophical speculation, mystery religions, and Roman religious rites figure as relevant background to and explanations for central New Testament ideas. This even includes some of the Christological titles by which the New Testament writers attempted to represent the person and work of Jesus. The Pauline "Lord," for example, was seen to derive not from the Jewish-biblical tradition but from a Hellenistic religious milieu, and likewise with "Son of God" and "Savior."

In this approach Bultmann was not an originator. Heavy-duty work had already been done prior to Bultmann, perhaps most notably by Wilhelm Bousset (d. 1920) and Ernst Troeltsch (d. 1923). But again, it was the Marburg professor who brought this approach to the forefront. Without minimizing the Jewish-biblical contribution, Bultmann emphasized that with the spread of early Christian teaching a division was bound to rise between Palestinian and Hellenistic forms of that teaching. In the latter case, it was inevitable that many Hellenistic elements would intrude into the original Gospel, and this is indeed evident in the New Testament documents as they now stand before us. In this respect one should note Bultmann's book, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, which includes discussions not only of the Jewish background but also of the Greek city-state, Platonic idealism, astrology, Stoicism, mystery religions, and the like. The book includes a chapter entitled, "Primitive Christianity as a Syncretistic Phenomenon." Even though Bultmann believed, as we will see, that Christianity embodied a unified and distinctive "existential" teaching, he recognized that the New Testament confronts us with a syncretism, a drawing upon many diverse cultural strands—in addition to the Jewish strand—to formulate and express that central teaching.

One of those strands calls for special note: Gnosticism. It itself was a hybrid, involving in its various forms elements drawn from late Jewish speculation, Greek philosophy, Persian religion, and the like. It was called Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis*, "knowledge") because it taught that redemption of the human soul was attained by a secret knowledge. Generally, this was a knowledge of the spiritual world of light from which a heavenly redeemer had descended into this world of matter and darkness to engage in combat the Powers of Darkness and to liberate enlightened souls into fully spiritual existence. Bultmann believed that such a mythology lies behind the image of Jesus Christ we encounter especially in the fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, with its pervasive descending-ascending Savior motif, its unmistakable light-darkness dualism, its talk about the vanquishing of the evil one, and its emphasis on the believer's release into eternal and spiritual life. Some of this, naturally, figures into Bultmann's monumental commentary, *The Gospel of John*, published in German in 1941. It is hard to overstate the influence of Bultmann's view of the Gnostic presence in the New Testament literature. It is also hard to overstate the controversy it started.

Bultmann's work on the New Testament contributed dramatically to a distinction that would have ever increasing consequences for theology: the distinction between the Jesus of history—the historical Jesus as he actually lived and taught—and the Christ of faith—the One who is encountered in the New Testament documents and who is believed in, proclaimed, and worshiped. It was a distinction thrown into clear relief in the title of Martin Kähler's important book, *Der Sogenannte Historische Jesus und der Geschichtliche, Biblische Christus*, or "The So-called Historical Jesus, and the Historic Biblical Christ" (second edition, 1896).¹ Indeed, the distinction would prove crucial to Bultmann's own theology.

Demythologization

Now the more theological and apologetic aspect of Bultmann's contribution comes into view. It also becomes apparent how closely intertwined, for Bultmann, are the interpretive and theological tasks. Recalling Barth's treatment of the book of Romans, exegesis involves not just an exegesis of the text but also *Sachexegese*, "exegesis of the subject-matter." That is, a *theological analysis* of, evaluation of, and response to what the text says. As Bultmann made clear already in the introduction to his 1926 (German) *Jesus and the Word*, the point is to be led to a "highly personal encounter with history."²

In 1941 Bultmann exploded his own bombshell when he issued a mimeographed pamphlet, eventually published in English under the title *New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Eliminating the Mythological Elements from the Proclamation of the New Testament*. The result was that the world of theology would never again be the same.

Bultmann begins, rather abruptly, with the judgment that much of the New Testament is, for moderns, irrational and utterly meaningless. To take his own example, the New Testament cosmology is obsolete. The New Testament writers believed in a three-storied universe: Heaven is up above, we are here, and hell is down below someplace. Now the fact is that this view of the world is wrong and we can never again believe it. But is it not possible to reject the world view of the New Testament while continuing to affirm its essential teachings? Not quite. As Bultmann explains, the New Testament three-storied universe is built right into our essential doctrines and creedal statements:

No one who is old enough to think for himself supposes that God lives in a local heaven. There is no longer any heaven in the tradi-

tional sense of the word. The same applies to hell in the sense of mythical underworld beneath our feet. And if this is so, the story of Christ's descent into hell and of his Ascension into heaven is done with. We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air.³

At many other points, as well, the New Testament can no longer speak to our contemporary situation. A literal interpretation of the whole "eschatological" framework of the New Testament (that is, its teaching about the end of the age and the last events) must be abandoned, for the Son of man did not in fact return in glory on the clouds of heaven and the reign of God did not materialize as scheduled. The New Testament teachings about the atonement rest upon primitive ideals of guilt and righteousness. The idea of a pre-existent son of God who enters the world to redeem humans is drawn from Gnosticism. In fact, at almost every turn the New Testament reflects the mythologies of Jewish apocalypticism and Greek-inspired Gnosticism, with their dualisms, demonic powers, and divine interventions. What can all of this mean to modern technologically minded people, committed as we are to a scientific world view? A literal interpretation of the New Testament, with its three-storied universe and its demons, would mean for us today a *sacrificium intellectum*. Bultmann concludes that if the modern individual "is prepared to take seriously the question of God, he or she ought not to be burdened with the mythological element in Christianity."⁴

The question then becomes this: Can the *kerygma*, or essential message of the New Testament, survive this elimination of mythology? At this point Bultmann's more positive contribution begins to take shape. He believes that the essential truth and relevance of the New Testament can be preserved through the program of *Entmythologisierung*, "demythologization," the process of liberating the New Testament message from its mythical setting and expression. Actually, the word "demythol-

ogization," as Bultmann himself observes, is inadequate because the aim is not to eliminate or subtract the mythological elements in the New Testament but to interpret them. The older liberalism had attempted such a subtraction of the mythological elements with the result that it threw out the *kerygma* itself and left us with only the trite and sentimental ideals of the social gospel—love thy neighbor and collect used clothing for the poor. More accurately, demythologization is "the method of interpretation which tries to recover the deeper meaning behind the mythological conceptions."⁵ What we must do is penetrate to the kernel of eternal truth hidden within the mythological husk. We must free the existential meaning, valid for all times, from its local mythological expression in the New Testament. The *kerygma* is the gospel proclaimed and experienced in faith. We must not allow it to be emptied of its power by tying it to a prescientific understanding of the universe. The task of freeing the existential meaning of the gospel, says Bultmann, will tax the time and strength of a whole generation, but it will be worth the trouble, for the New Testament does indeed offer even the contemporary individual "an understanding of himself which will challenge him to a genuine existential decision."⁶

Not that demythologization began in modern times. Bultmann believed that the earliest attempts at demythologization are to be found in the New Testament itself—for example, in the Fourth Gospel. Written to a generation for whom the apocalyptic Son of Man did not, in fact, return as expected, the Fourth Gospel attempts to translate the futuristic eschatology of the Synoptic Gospels into "realized eschatology"; it spiritualizes the message of a coming reign of God into a message, a truth, a *kerygma* for the present. In the same way, judgment and salvation—which Bultmann existentializes into self-understanding and authenticity—must be confronted and appropriated here and now. Though, for instance, we can no longer take seriously the biblical teaching about the imminent

end of the world, we should take seriously the imminent end of the world of each one of us, that is, our deaths.

It should be apparent from all of this that Bultmann was in agreement with Barth over the rejection of the older liberal theology. But it should also be apparent that his interpretation and application of the *kerygma* was taking a quite different character that was, to use a word that Barth despised, "existential."

The Heidegger Connection

In 1957 Bultmann published a brief but highly provocative article called, in the English translation, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" The answer, he said, was no. The problem is to identify the correct presuppositions. That he thought that the correct "preunderstanding" was provided by existentialism—a philosophical perspective then in its heyday—is one of the best known facts about Bultmann. One recognizes at this point the influence of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Bultmann's contemporary, who was in Marburg during 1923–28. In an autobiographical essay, Bultmann reflected on Heidegger's influence:

The work of existential philosophy, which I came to know through my discussion with Martin Heidegger, has become of decisive significance for me. I found in it the conceptuality in which it is possible to speak adequately of human existence and therefore also of the existence of the believer. However, in my efforts to make philosophy fruitful for theology, I have more and more come into opposition to Karl Barth.⁷

Existential philosophy as mediated by Heidegger thus became the hermeneutical sieve through which Bultmann sifted out the real stuff, as it were, of the New Testament *kerygma*.

After his time in Marburg, Heidegger taught at the University of Freiburg. He was supportive of the Nazi party in the '30s and '40s (unlike Bultmann), but was in any case a major shaper of one important strain of twentieth-century philosophy—phenomenology, which, along with existentialism, focused attention on the immediate, inner, self-conscious experience of the individual. It should be remembered that these were the days when people like the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre were writing books with titles such as *On Being and Nothingness*. Heidegger's own most influential work was called *Being and Time*, published in German in 1927.

Heidegger talked of the human being as "thrown" into the universe, in a state of *Angst* and "forlornness" and in search of responsible or authentic existence. In diametric opposition to Barth, Bultmann solicited direct help from philosophy and sought to demythologize the Bible specifically in light of Heidegger's phenomenological-existentialist approach.

Our question is simply which philosophy today offers the most adequate perspective and conceptions for understanding human existence. Here it seems to me that we should learn from existentialist philosophy, because in this philosophical school human existence is directly the object of attention. . . . Existential philosophy, while it gives no answer to the question of my personal existence, makes personal existence my own personal responsibility, and by doing so it helps to make open to the word of the Bible. It is clear, of course, that existentialist philosophy has its origin in the personal-existential question about existence and its possibilities. Thus it follows that existentialist philosophy can offer adequate conceptions for the interpretation of the Bible, since the interpretation of the Bible is concerned with the understanding of existence.⁸

The recurring references here to "human existence," "personal existence," and "personal responsibility" signal that we are in the presence of a perspective very different from traditional on-

ologies, or theories of being, which understood human nature as a sort of universal and fixed category. Here, rather, the accent falls on the particular individual, enmeshed in temporality and in the ambiguities of concrete situations and confronted by a call to decisions—and the decisions are what make us what we are. Bultmann believed that this is what the New Testament *kyrigma* and Christian faith is really about—not the timeless ethical truths that the old liberal theology propounded. But Heidegger's existentialism was a humanistic existentialism, seeking to identify answers to the human quandary by looking within the human individual, apart from any input from the divine. In contrast, Bultmann, the Christian thinker, believed that we must be "open to the word of the Bible" because the message of the Bible confronts us with a special and gracious act of God, from the outside, in order to make possible the recovery of authentic existence.

But how?

An Existentialist Christology

According to Bultmann, the event of Jesus Christ is a unique mixture of history and myth, and if we are to appreciate the existential truth and meaning of that event we must look beyond its mythological setting. After all, says Bultmann, myths are to be interpreted not cosmologically but anthropologically, not as objective pictures of the world but as expressions of our understanding of human existence.

Bultmann accepted the crucifixion of Jesus as a historical fact, but did not see Jesus as, in a literal sense, the Son of God expiating the sins of the world. Moreover, "an historical fact which involves a resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is utterly inconceivable!" The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which Bultmann took to be one event, is an "eschatolog-

ical" event, an event the existential significance of which cannot be located in any historical fact but is apprehensible through the eyes of faith. And what does faith see there, hidden from ordinary historical, scientific, and objectifying understanding? It sees open and authentic existence supremely actualized in Jesus Christ, and it hears an invitation to participate in it ourselves. Such talk must not be mistaken for a mere slogan. What it means is that in identifying ourselves with the cross—death to the world—and resurrection—the Lordship of Christ—we forfeit the security of the world and of things and align ourselves with the hidden, transcendent, and divine Reality. Thus, though we can no longer interpret Jesus' proclamation of the coming reign of God in terms of space and time, Jesus may yet be for us the bearer of the "last" world—not a temporal but an existential last world, the ultimate and decisive word about God.⁹ In such talk we see again the "existentializing" of biblical language.

There is, therefore, an important difference between *Historie* and *Geschichte*, that is, between history conceived as merely *chronological* events and history conceived as dramatic and consequential events, or *historic* events—echoing the title of Kähler's book. It is the latter kind of history that holds existential meaning, and it is the latter that theology is interested in. Theology is not concerned with whether or not something could be shown to have actually happened once upon a time, but with what it could mean for humanity. That is why Bultmann, when he was asked whether he believed that Jesus actually rose from the dead, responded: "I am a theologian, not an archaeologist." The historical (*historisch*) status of the cross and resurrection has no bearing at all on their existential (*geschichtlich*) significance. Again, there is a big difference between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. So much is this the case, that one encounters this rather startling assertion in the oft-quoted opening line of Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*: "The message of

Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself."¹⁰

Bultmann vs. Cullmann

It is sometimes noted that no one hit more home runs than Babe Ruth and that no one struck out more times than Babe Ruth. Likewise, Bultmann was the most important New Testament scholar of the twentieth century, but no New Testament scholar was more ruthlessly criticized. The criticism of Bultmann usually centered on one or more of three Bultmannian ideas.

For one thing, Bultmann concluded that virtually nothing can be known about the historical person of Jesus himself and that what can be known of his teaching has to be wrung out from the texts by means of exceedingly complex methods. Second, he held that even what can be determined turns out to be quite unlike what has traditionally been held. In this respect, Bultmann believed that Jesus did not identify himself with the future coming Son of man but, like John the Baptist, proclaimed the imminent coming of that eschatological figure; and he concluded that it was during the development of the Gospel traditions that—to use a famous Bultmannian slogan—"the proclaimer became the proclaimed." Thus, according to Bultmann, Jesus himself had no "messianic self-consciousness." Third, he argued that the early Christian interpretations of Jesus and his mission were heavily colored by the redeemer myths of Gnosticism. As we have seen, he believed that the Gospel of John, especially, with its descending-ascending heavenly savior motif, clearly betrays a Christian adaptation of Gnosticism.

For all the power of Bultmann's contribution to the understanding of the New Testament, it was criticized by many of his fellow scholars. These included, to name a few, Werner