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Entmythologisierung

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As is universally admitted, German scholars are ingenious and versatile. Not only are their minds fertile in the invention of new theories, but if no new hypothesis can be found, the old ones are brought out of the closet, dusted, and supplied with novel labels. This latter phenomenon definitely is witnessed in the rise of the de-mythologizing theory, which, we are told, is a chief topic of discussion among theologians in Germany and other parts of Europe just now. A visitor from Germany recently remarked that the succession of engrossing novelties in the theological market is noteworthy and that the lack of stability and permanence of new offerings had to be heartening for all lovers of the old Gospel. He elaborated this thesis by pointing to the eminence that until recently was enjoyed by Karl Barth in the thinking and debates of theologians and which, he said, is now supplanted by the excitement caused by the *"Entmythologisierung"* theory of Rudolf Bultmann.

It cannot be denied that the latter has succeeded in riveting the theological eyes of the world on his person. In 1921 he published a work called *Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition;* five years later appeared his book called *Jesus,* which was given to the English-speaking world under the title *Jesus and the Word.* His commentary on John came in 1941 and his *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* in 1948. It has been announced that he will visit the United States this coming fall, making Yale his headquarters, or at least his first stopping place, and that he will deliver lectures in seminaries and divinity schools.

The particular theory which we are here concerned with was propounded by Bultmann in 1941, in a publication which he entitled *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen.* At once, in spite of the confusion and turmoil of the times, a lively discussion arose, and the chief papers pertaining to this debate were published in 1948 by Hans-Werner Bartsch in a volume called *Kerygma und Mythos, ein theologisches Gespraech.*

To state it briefly, the de-mythologizing theory of Bultmann assumes that the N. T. books contain mythical elements which serve as the outward garb of the truths that are to be handed down; and it is the function of the theologian to detect these mythical elements and to give them their proper evaluation. An example will best show what is meant. The N. T., as all critics concede, relates the ascension of Jesus. But that our Lord left this visible sphere, as Acts 1 describes, is in the eyes of Bultmann incredible; it is a myth. There may be an important truth taught in the ascension story, but the event is not historical, the ascension as related by Luke and Mark never occurred.

What in keeping with my opening remarks should be noted is that Bultmann is not the first one to speak of mythical elements in the N. T. *Fuer Arbeit und Besinnung*, a theological journal appearing in Stuttgart, in its issue of August 1, 1950, and various following ones, presents some pertinent facts which in part furnish the basis of my little article. As early as 1750 Professor Heyne of Goettingen had asserted that in the days when the human race began, the mythological presentation of religious truth was commonly employed. Then came Eichhorn, an archrationalist, who by means of certain tests "proved" that what we have in the early chapters of Genesis is not history, but myths. That there was development along these critical lines we see from the appearance of a work by Geo. Lorenz Bauer, published 1803, entitled *Hebraeische Mythologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments.* When the old rationalists with their insipid interpretations had run their course, David Friedrich Strauss arose and in his *Leben Jesu* presented the so-called mythical theory of the life of Christ. It was a daring attempt to destroy, through the assumption of a mythical basis, the picture of the historical Jesus as we have it on the pages of the N. T. and as it is reflected in the ecumenical creeds. Though startling in its audacity and dazzling through its live and imaginative presentation, his work was soon found to rest not on sound historical facts, but on subjective considerations, and the mythical theory was properly embalmed and placed alongside other literary mummies in the vast museum of discarded notions. Other hypotheses came. They, too, flourished for a while and then disappeared. And now, a little more than a hundred years after Strauss (the

Leben Jesu of Strauss appeared in 1835), we have another attempt to destroy what the N. T. teaches about Jesus by the theory that much of what the Apostolic writings present is mythical and that our task as theologians must be to find these elements and to penetrate to the kernel of spiritual truth they may contain.

It is evident that these views contain nothing new. The old Rationalists looked on the accounts of miracles in the Bible as unhistorical, and as G. L. Bauer's writing of 1803 proves, they even used the term "mythological." Strauss, it is true, poked fun at them on account of their barren, matter-of-fact rationalism which could not look beyond the multiplication table; but while he mocked them as they were lying in the ditch of stupidity, he plunged into one that was still deeper than theirs, though it looked somewhat more respectable and inviting. His mythical theory had the same presuppositions as the old Rationalism, viz., the accounts of supernatural events found in the Bible cannot be true. Where he differed was in the refinements with which he elaborated his theory. When Bultmann now speaks of de-mythologizing the Gospel, he reverts back not only to the fundamental negative attitude, but to the very phraseology of Strauss. No wonder that D. M. Baillie (*God in Christ*, p. 22) says: "Bultmann definitely expresses the opinion that 'we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus' because the documents are so fragmentary and often legendary, and so he has been called the Strauss of the twentieth century."

The attempt, of course, is made by Bultmann to give his theory a very scientific aspect by going, for instance, into the field of psychology and investigating how man can be influenced by the Spirit of God and how human language expresses our feelings and convictions with respect to what is supernatural and infinite. In the ancient world, so he says, people thought of God as approaching them in some supernatural, but tangible form; and as a result, God's revelation to them had to be robed in accounts which conformed to the prevailing notions on miracles, theophanies, signs, and wonders. In our modern age, where science reigns and natural laws are better understood, we have different conceptions of how God speaks to us and reveals His will. The Bible contains divine truths, but being written in an unscientific age, it everywhere shows

the thought patterns of mythology. It is not necessary to dwell on these matters at length; one merely has to ask what everybody's human reason, aided by a knowledge of science and ordinary psychology, has to say about the supernatural events recorded in the Gospels, and one will without difficulty arrive at the positions taken by the modern de-mythologizers.

Defenders and abettors of Bultmann point out that there are theologians rated as conservative who advocate the view that the Bible contains myths. To give an example, Althaus of Erlangen is said to have given up the Scripture doctrine that through the fall of Adam sin was brought into the world, declaring that the respective event cannot be regarded as historical. The same theologian is said to view the ascension of Jesus as mythical, regarding it as a vivid and in the days of the primitive Church effective way of expressing the belief that Jesus was exalted to the position of heavenly majesty. The same view is taken by this Erlangen professor of the teachings of the virgin birth of Jesus and His descent into hell. (P. Althaus, *Die Christliche Wahrheit,* II, 146; 216; 264 f.)

What seems to fascinate Bultmann and others is the attempt they make to view the tenets of the Christian creeds concerning Christ as having existential significance, though lacking historical reality — *"das existential Bedeutsame, wie es im neutestamentlichen Kerygma enthalten ist, klar zu erfassen"* (*Fuer Arbeit und Besinnung,* November 1, 1950, p. 485). What does that mean? Following the existential philosophy of Heidegger, Bultmann holds that our aim must be not merely to apprehend the importance of N. T. truths intellectually, but to seize them with our whole being and to make their cultivation the aim and purpose of our existence. Bultmann insists that we have to search the N. T. for its existential significance (*Befragung des Neuen Testaments hinsichtlich seiner eventuellen existentialen Bedeutsamkeit, ibid.*). The facts of Christ's life which are miraculous, especially the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, and the Ascension, he regards as unimportant *when viewed merely as facts.* For him these things are solely the outward hull hiding and enveloping the kernel which the ingenuity of the exegete has to discover. He makes the claim that orthodoxy, which he terms mythodoxy, misunderstands and misinterprets the Scriptures and

that proper exegesis will show his position in its differentiation between the outward shell and the inner kernel of the truth to be that of the N. T.

As I mentioned above, what Bultmann contends for is simply a form of rationalism, that is, of that attitude which makes man and his intellect, reason, and understanding the arbiter of what is true in the field of religion and morals and which lets human judgment determine whether the statements and teachings of the Scriptures are valid or not. The challenge of Bultmann, employed in his claim that he has the N. T. on his side, should not be feared or avoided. The Church has based its creed on the majestic "It is written"; on that foundation it has achieved its victories in the past, and on that basis it can confidently meet its foes of the present day. The de-mythologizers, of course, deny the divine character of the Scriptures. Our reply is that the Scriptures themselves have convinced us through their testimony, and especially through the message of Christ and its effect in our hearts and lives, that they come from God.

When Bultmann and his co-workers say that the N. T. teachings must be given an existential significance, we gladly agree. We are far removed from sanctioning any dead formalism which finds the essence of Christianity in the drafting and acceptance of correct modes of expression pertaining to Christian doctrines. There come to my mind some words of our sainted Dr. F. Pieper which he spoke at a conference after a paper had been read in which the logical and conceptual difficulties belonging to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit had been pointed out. "Let us beware," he said, "of belittling anything that the Scriptures say on this subject. Here we are dealing not only with truth, but with precious truth. Luther never grew tired of contemplating and praising what God has revealed on the high article of the Holy Trinity; in this revelation he found comfort, joy, strength." If Dr. Pieper were living today and employing the terminology which is in vogue, he would say: "These great truths have existential significance for us, on them depends our hope, our salvation; they have to be laid hold of by us with every fiber of our being. That Christ was born of a virgin is not only true; it is the source of hope and joy because it means that the Son of God entered our sphere, became our Brother, and

took upon Himself our burdens." What Bultmann and others consider an obstacle to an existential use of N. T. teaching, is not such an obstacle at all, but lends itself very well to such a use, as the N. T. itself and the devotional literature of the Church, especially the hymns, abundantly testify.

The subject, I realize only too well, has not been exhausted. What, for instance, of the contention of Bultmann that in Bible times the so-called mythological method of teaching divine truth had to be employed because it was the only one that was effective in that unscientific age? The answer obviously is that here we are dealing with a mere assertion of the de-mythologizers, an assertion, furthermore, which is not correct in the light of the N. T. itself, for it can easily be proved that not in every case when a great person appeared his activities were enhanced by miraculous deeds. The striking case of John the Baptist, as it is reported in John 10:41, at once comes to mind. But I trust that enough has been said to give the reader a fairly exact picture of the central idea in the efforts of Bultmann, which are called *Entmythologisierung*. May the reaction of all of us, as we think of the N. T. message, violently attacked in this new endeavor, be the conviction expressed 2 Pet. 1:16 (RSV): "We did not follow cleverly devised myths."