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# Rudolf Bultmann's Concept of Myth and the New Testament

By OSCAR CULLMANN

**EDITORIAL NOTE:** Dr. Cullmann, who is professor of New Testament historical theology at the universities of Basel and Paris, is internationally known as a thoroughly Biblical scholar. Among his widely read books are *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, *Christ and Time*, *Early Christian Worship*, *Baptism in the New Testament*, and *Peter*. In the course of his lecture tour in our country the past winter and early spring, Professor Cullmann visited also our seminary in St. Louis. Here he delivered two lectures, one of which it is our privilege to publish. In the letter accompanying the manuscript, Professor Cullmann writes: "Herewith I am sending you the promised manuscript on Bultmann. . . . I am happy to submit it for publication in your journal, since I am concerned to remain in touch with Concordia. . . . I shall always fondly treasure my short stay with you. I received an excellent impression of your seminary, the faculty, and the students."

**I**s it necessary to add a new contribution to the dossier, already too voluminous, of the debate revolving around the publication of Rudolf Bultmann, former professor on the faculty of Protestant theology at Marburg, titled *The New Testament and Mythology*? This small pamphlet, which may be considered a manifesto and has since been reproduced by the author in a slightly different form, appeared for the first time in 1941 under the title *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen*. The purpose of the author is to make the New Testament language accessible to the modern mind by eliminating what he calls the "myth" and what I call "redemptive history" (*Heilsgeschichte*).

I myself took issue with Professor Bultmann in 1944.<sup>1</sup> Since the conclusion of the war the discussion aroused by this influential scholar dominates the Protestant theology of Germany to the point of having relegated more or less to the background all other problems. Is this the reason why studies concerning the origins of Christianity are experiencing a certain stagnation in postwar Germany? This is so much more regrettable because New Testament studies owe much to German scholars and even to works published by Rudolf Bultmann himself. I do not wish to imply that since the war there have appeared in Germany no solid works whatever on certain particular points in the New Testament area.

But compared with the richness and importance of earlier German productions in the exegetical and historical field, the horizon of the investigation appears, in this area, to have become considerably limited. The question naturally arises whether the discussion regarding the problem of method, that is, the method of "demythologizing," has not dissipated some of the efforts of German scholars that might have been employed more usefully.

The professor at Marburg himself is less responsible for this development than the excessive enthusiasm and fanatical polemic displayed by some of his disciples and opponents. Does not German theology too often have the tendency to be fashionable, to be absorbed entirely by one single problem, to be "in style," but to become passé as soon as another novelty makes its appearance?

The momentary enthusiasm, in such instances, is generally as little justified as the complete oblivion which often succeeds it at the end of twenty years. The same symptoms reproduce themselves in each instance: The name of an outstanding theologian leaps into prominence, and a slogan is coined which highlights or, for that matter, caricatures his ideas.<sup>2</sup> The actual slogan launched by Bultmann, which designates the problem of his interest, was adopted by his disciples and opponents, though in this instance it strikes one as a term particularly barbaric, namely, "demythologizing." The German word *Entmythologisierung*, though a bit less difficult to pronounce, is scarcely more beautiful than its English translation.

This slogan imposed itself more readily because in the theological thought of Bultmann it relates itself closely to a current vogue in philosophy known as existentialism. But it also relates itself to a subject which has in recent years fascinated philosophers, ethnologists, psychologists, and religious historians, and which is designated as "myth."<sup>3</sup>

In order to account for the flow of ink that Bultmann's publication released since the war, it will suffice to consider the three volumes in which Hans-Werner Bartsch assembled, under the title *Kerygma und Mythos*, the articles by different authors who entered in on the problem raised by Bultmann, as well as the answers which Bultmann himself supplied to some of these articles. Since the appearance in 1952 and 1953 of the second and third volumes of Bartsch's collective work the literature on the subject has been

enriched considerably by further contributions, of which we shall cite only the most important: the pamphlet published by the theologian Karl Barth<sup>4</sup> and the article by the philosopher Karl Jaspers.<sup>5</sup> There is therefore enough material available for a fourth volume in the Bartsch series, unless there were to arise a new problem of such general concern as to overshadow current interest in Bultmann's problem.

There are in Bultmann's position, to begin with, certain fixed principles of interpretation. Of these principles the elements unacceptable for modern thought in their traditional form—Bultmann calls them "mythological"—are destined, in reality, to communicate to us a new manner of understanding our true existence and to liberate us from our false comprehension of it. According to the expression dear to existentialist philosophy, whose influence Bultmann has strongly experienced, especially in the form that Heidegger gave it,<sup>6</sup> the sacred New Testament text stripped of its mythological form will give to the reader a new self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*), a new comprehension of himself.

And what does Bultmann mean by "myth"? What is that element of which, according to him, it is necessary to rid the affirmations of the New Testament in order to give them the only interpretation acceptable today, that is to say, an existentialist interpretation in the sense indicated? Bultmann defines "myth" as the "representation according to which that which is transcendent, divine, appears as immanent, human; the invisible as visible." Understood thus, there are not "myths" in the New Testament. There is only one unique "myth," or rather, everything in the New Testament is only "mythical" expression; more precisely still: "mythical" expression of our "authentic existence." And what is this "authentic existence"? Let us look at Bultmann's answer. The man without faith trusts in this world, which gives him a false security; and as soon as he becomes aware that his values escape him, he is overwhelmed with cares which transform themselves into "agony." It is of that situation that the message of the New Testament liberates us by making us pass to the "authentic existence" by way of the realities not under our control—which are the only true realities—and to abandon confidence in the

controllable realities which are at our disposal. Thus the existence of the interpreter himself is engaged in the exegetical debate. In order to describe the "authentic existence," the New Testament uses, according to Bultmann, the antiquated form of the "myth," which one is no longer able to accept, so he claims, any more than one is able to accept a naive construct of the world "when one uses at the same time electricity and the radio."

Therefore all that which the first Christians believed regarding a people chosen by God from eternity and regarding a divine Being that became incarnate on earth among people among whom He accomplished His divine mission; regarding His redemptive, substitutionary death, His resurrection, His activity in the communion of saints through the Sacraments, and His final return: all that is "myth." Again, all this "redemptive history" (*Heilsgeschichte*), which the New Testament writers saw developing so to speak in the frame of ordinary, profane history, is, in reality, only "myth." Jesus' appearance in history and His human existence is subordinated to the "myth" and does not belong to the profound essence of the thought of the New Testament.

To strip this thought of the "myth" is not, then, according to Bultmann, to discern between the historical elements and the "mythical" ones, as the "Lives of Jesus" of the nineteenth century had attempted, but it is to consider in a consistent manner the "redemptive history" in its totality as a "myth"; and it is to search there, conforming to the nature of all myth, and explication of our "authentic existence" and to express it with the aid of modern categories. Expressed in another way: Bultmann rejects, on the one hand, the totality of "redemptive history" in so far as it pretends to be history, and he accepts, on the other hand, the totality of that history on condition that one regards it a "myth" susceptible to interpretation, in virtue of its profound intention, according to the categories of existentialism. With regard to the point toward which we are directing ourselves, that is to say, to the study of early Christianity, this means that for Bultmann the *historical* element characterizing the teaching of the first Christians is not essential, but a means of "mythical" expression for an a-historical, a-temporal truth, of which it forms the real substance. This devaluation of the *historical* element in the message of early

Christianity, does it not remind us singularly of the Gnosticism of antiquity, of that conception of Christianity which also pretended to scorn history to the point of denying the truly historical character of Jesus? We are tempted to think of docetism, which attributes to Jesus only the *appearance* of a body.

On the other hand, Bultmann's point of view does not appear, at first glance, much different from the conclusion of modern scholars, such as Drews and Couchoud, who classify as "mythologists" and who deny the historical existence of Jesus in order to make an integrated myth of it.

However, Bultmann has too much sense of history to fall into the above errors. He seems to have recognized the dangers of this association. Furthermore, he insists emphatically at least on *one* historical fact: the death of Christ. It is the only historical event which he recognizes to have fundamental value for the salvation of man. Apart from the death of Jesus, we know, so Bultmann asserts, nothing about the historical Jesus. And where lies the value of Christ's death? Bultmann replies: The cross makes us pass from the false security of a life according to the principles of the visible world and the world which we can control to the faith which makes us live according to the principles governing what lies beyond our control. Thus the necessity of the Christian revelation at the side of philosophy seems to be safeguarded. But one is compelled to ask: Does not profane existentialist philosophy achieve, according to Bultmann, exactly the same result in its analysis of the "authentic existence" without the Bible and without Christ? An affirmative answer to this question would make perfectly superfluous the Christian revelation. Professor Bultmann is aware of this dangerous inference and is obliged to make the following distinction: Whereas philosophy hopes to arrive at the comprehension of the "authentic existence" by way of the intellect, the Christian knows that he needs the divine act of the death of Christ as an image, which, always anew, confronts him with the decision of faith. It is the call addressed to us by the cross of Christ, what Bultmann calls the *kerygma* (the message) of the New Testament. There is, then, one historical element which remains in the necessary process of "demythologizing," that which sets in motion, so to speak, the entire process of existentialist interpretation.

We shall not ask here, as others have done, the question whether Bultmann is consistent with himself when he allows the last historical element to remain as an element of salvation. Some of Bultmann's disciples reproach their master for not being consistent in this respect. They eliminate this last historical event as an element of salvation. But did Bultmann himself interpret correctly the profound intention of the faith of the first Christians in attributing to the cross of Christ the function that we have just noted? In order to reply to this question it seems appropriate to take note of the element because of which the German scholar seems to be nearest to the language of the New Testament itself—the cross of Christ, since this is the only historical factor which he recognizes to be of value for salvation.

But is it really the cross of which the Apostle Paul speaks? Is it really the unique act accomplished once for all time (ἐφάραξ) of which the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks? No, for, according to Bultmann, it is not Christ's death on the cross, the last historical event, which saves us, but uniquely the encounter between the historical event and man. I insist on the word "uniquely." Of course, the writings of the New Testament also teach that it is faith which saves, but for them it is the faith that the event of the death of Christ as such *has* saved us already. By faith we merely appropriate to ourselves the fruit of that which has already been achieved independently of us. For Bultmann the event itself, apart from the appeal it addresses to us, signifies nothing for our salvation and is only a martyrdom like other martyrdoms. Therefore any other martyrdom could, on principle, have exactly the same effect, when there is an encounter between it and ourselves.

Salvation does not, then, in Bultmann's terms, reside in the unique act, in Christ's death on the cross, but is an event repeated ever anew in each individual, whenever the message of the death of Christ addresses itself to him. At the unique historical moment when Christ expired on the cross, nothing happened ontologically for the salvation of humanity. When, therefore, the first Christians speak of a redemptive death for our sins, of a reconciliation with God, and thus of an effect produced outside ourselves, we again meet the "myth." The "demythologized" faith in the death of

Christ is not, then, a faith in the unique event, but only in the invitation it addresses to us to conceive our existence in a new way. Faith is not the conviction that the event of Golgotha has effectively placed us in a new situation, but that it invites us to reconsider our existence.

Thus even the single historical event that Bultmann allows to remain as an element of salvation is, in reality, stripped of its character as a unique event.

I decline to judge the personal theological position of Bultmann which he defends with sincere conviction that does not lack grandeur and that I respect. But is it not an illusion on the part of the German theologian to believe that the "demythologized" faith in the cross of Jesus really was the faith of the first Christians? In reality we are not dealing with a simple transposition of the Christian message into our modern language, but with a faith radically different in its essence. The *object* of faith is no longer the same. That which throughout the New Testament characterizes the faith in the divine act accomplished through Christ is the complete surrender to an event in the past which certainly happened *for us*, but *for us* because entirely *outside us*. The believer of the New Testament believes that something happened between God and Christ through the reconciliation effected by the death of Christ: the new era was inaugurated. Most certainly we must *believe*, but the object of our faith is the unique event itself which has happened. The "once for all time" does not concern the understanding of our existence. Certainly, the first Christians arrived at a new understanding of their existence, but only through a faith which precisely does not relate itself to that understanding, but to the ontological scope of the act on Calvary. The man of the New Testament does not believe in a martyr whose death has a pedagogical meaning for all humanity, but in the "Servant of God" who by a voluntary act, through His death on the cross, took away the sin of the world.

Some people no doubt agree with Bultmann that it is no longer possible for the man of today to adhere to that faith. But they should know that by replacing that faith with the faith in the pedagogical meaning of the cross they are no longer interpreting the faith of the New Testament, because they have jettisoned its object



and, in so doing, the fundamental character of the New Testament faith. Any other martyrdom could have the same effect.

Bultmann believes to have stripped the primitive Christian message of the "myth," a simple form of expression, whereas in reality he has stripped it of its historical basis, of the "once for all time," which characterizes the central redemptive event. In his definition of the "myth" — "the transcendent represented by the immanent" — he encircles in the immanent also the historical factor, but without noticing that for primitive Christianity the historical factor is not a simple representation of a transcendent theme, but the point of departure and the permanent substance of faith.

The historical and temporal element distinguishes Judaism and Christianity from all other religions, and consequently one may not eliminate it without attacking the very substance of either. In effect, in Christianity this historical element is still more important than in Judaism, because Christians take their point of departure in "the fullness of the time" (Gal. 4:4), in the fact that time has already in the death of Jesus Christ reached its central point, which divides it, in a decisive way, into two parts, the old era and the new era.

That an historical event which inserts itself in profane history may thus have a decisive meaning for the salvation of the world, that is what the Apostle Paul calls the "foolishness of the cross." To strip the faith of the New Testament of the faith in the unique event, is it not to strip it of its "foolishness" and thus of its very heart? Does it not, then, become an "empty" cross, as the Apostle Paul suggests in 1 Cor. 1:17? For it is essential to note that this "foolishness" is not, as Bultmann thinks, a faith in that which is not within man's control and at his disposal. *That* faith many Greeks would have been able to accept and to express with the aid of real myths. But that the redemptive act is an *historical datum*, that was "foolishness" for Greek thought and is that for modern thought. For this reason we are in no other situation today than were the Greek philosophers, in spite of "electricity and the radio." For that which the Apostle calls "foolishness" has nothing to do with the naive mental construct of the world which the ancients had and which we, too, no longer accept. The cross, the center of redemptive history for the world, was "foolishness" already for the

Greeks of the first century, who were not yet acquainted with "electricity and radio." It was and it still is the center, the very heart of the Christian faith, and we dare not eliminate it. To eliminate this core of the faith of the first Christians, is not to render the New Testament accessible to the modern mind, but it is to replace the New Testament faith with another faith.

That is why already the Gnostics of antiquity and also many theologians of the ancient church tried to do, *mutatis mutandis*, what Bultmann proposes to us. Their attempt to eliminate the "foolishness" of an everlasting salvation accomplished in an historical fact challenges those who study the Hellenization of Christian thought. But their exegesis has scarcely any value, for they have merely succeeded to have their Greek ideas agree with the New Testament through the aid of the allegorical method.

The mystery religions and all syncretistic religions take their point of departure in an a-temporal myth which repeats itself; primitive Christianity took its point of departure in history and rests resolutely in the frame of time, even though it *interprets* the meaning of history. In eliminating this distinctive aspect which distinguishes Christianity from the religions of the surrounding world, and in reducing it to an a-temporal truth, Bultmann has in reality demoted the Christian faith to the syncretism to which, in reality, it showed itself a rebel. And may we not risk the paradoxical affirmation that, by eliminating the temporal aspect of the primitive Christian message, Bultmann has placed himself, in truth, in the way of the "myth"?

I willingly concede that the history of salvation does not coincide with profane history. It *is* an interpreted history. The historical facts have been interpreted prophetically as *holy* history. Consequently we must so interpret it. We shall therefore not reproach Bultmann for having searched for the principles and motives underlying the historical affirmations of the New Testament, but we must insist on the fact that the motives of "redemptive history" are not the same as the motives of the "myth" and that the temporal character is inherent in the motives. We must make accessible to the modern mind the prophetic interpretation of history as *holy* history. But in doing this we may not replace history with existentialism.

Certainly, the first Christians had a new manner of understanding their existence, to use the language of Bultmann. But they had it not because they set out consciously or unconsciously from a philosophical consideration of their existence, but because certain events of which they had been witnesses had given them the conviction of having been placed in the new era, in the new *αἰών*, and of having thus been integrated in the history of Christ. The comprehension of their existence was not their point of departure but the consequence of some events. The point of departure was certain events whose fundamental importance Bultmann, so it appears to me, minimizes. It does not concern only the cross but the whole life of Christ. It includes the events which the New Testament interprets as proofs of the resurrection of Jesus, and certain acts which it attributes to a direct action of the Holy Spirit. Bultmann almost never speaks of the resurrection and still less of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the first Christian community. However, it was precisely these events in which the first Christians saw manifest a history of the Christ designated by the Apostle Paul as *οἰκονομία*. This begins with the creation of the world, of which the Christ was the Mediator; it continues after the Fall, with the election of the people of Israel; it reaches its climax in the death and resurrection of the Christ; it evidences itself in the communion of saints, the body of Christ, the new Israel; it will fulfill itself in the return of Christ.

The "focus" of this "redemptive history" consisted for the first Christians in the act of being incorporated effectively in its temporal fulfillment as the new Israel, the communion of saints. There are in the "redemptive history" that we have outlined elements which are not controllable by profane history alongside the elements controlled by history. I call these elements prophetic. That which unites the two categories of elements is that they all are presented to us in a temporal perspective in the frame of *Heilsgeschichte*. Certainly, the first Christians were not able to distinguish between these two categories of events, but we must do it when we explain the New Testament to the modern mind. But that which is important to me here is not this factor, but rather the consideration that profane history was not absorbed by the nonhistorical, prophetic elements, but, vice versa, that the prophetic elements are

made to harmonize with the historical events. I have shown in detail in my book *Christ and Time* how the origins of "redemptive history" are constituted by historically noncontrollable events, by prophetic elements, also the end of "redemptive history," the apocalyptic events, and how even the description of the central part, which is more particularly historical, also utilized in some places themes which are not historically controllable. But all these elements to which, apart from the Christian "redemptive history," we can apply the general characteristics of the myth are subordinated in the new perspective to the history of Christ.

Expressed in another way: by incorporating these elements of profane history into the "redemptive history," the first Christians in reality "demythologized" them, but not in order to set off a nontemporal truth, but in order to put them in agreement with the events of the history of Christ. We might say they "historized" them in the sense of "redemptive history" (*Heilsgeschichte*) so that they cease to be myths in the New Testament. That is the reason why it is not possible to eliminate them by an existentialist interpretation; we must, on the contrary, show in which way they are destined to make evident the movement of holy history in relation to the controllable historical events. To make this distinction is our task as we make the New Testament accessible to the modern mind.

In order to answer the question with which we began, I shall say that in attributing the notion of the "myth," as Bultmann has defined it, to the teaching of primitive Christianity, Bultmann does not appear to have furnished for the exegesis of the writings of the first Christians a method of interpretation adequate to penetrate into the profound sense of their thought. Wishing to strip the New Testament of the "myth," he has stripped it rather of the "redemptive history," of the central events which form the substance itself of the Christian faith. These events may be unacceptable to the modern mind, but this does not mean that they were not constitutive and essential to that of the Christians of the first century. The "myth" may be an object of study for psychoanalysis and philosophy, but it does not authorize us to search also the intention of the thought of the New Testament in this direction. New Testament exegesis is difficult enough and must not stoop to arbitrariness.

In interpreting the first Christian documents by way of the philosophical approach of the individual existence, we ascribe to their authors a preoccupation which, in any case, is not primary for them, and we make mythical and timeless what they regarded to be real and temporal.

I conclude: The historical character of salvation, which Bultmann regards as unacceptable to the modern mind (the mind of the century of "electricity and radio"), is not a secondary element, but it is the essence of the thought of the New Testament. It cannot be eliminated and replaced by an existential philosophy. We must make the New Testament language accessible to the modern mind, but it must still be the New Testament. We must maintain the *σκάνδαλον* of the historical event, the "foolishness of the cross."

#### NOTES

1. To the first German edition of *Christus und die Zeit* (translated into English under the title *Christ and Time*) Rudolf Bultmann published an answer in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 1948, pp. 659 f., under the title "Heilsgeschichte und Geschichte. Zu Oscar Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit*."
2. I shall cite at random only some examples of this phenomenon of "collective psychology" in the scientific theological world, without offering a negative judgment on the value of the works which are at the basis of these discussions: Albert Schweitzer (slogan: "consistent eschatology")  
Rudolf Otto (slogan: "the Numinous")  
Karl Barth (slogan: "dialectic theology")  
Martin Dibelius (slogan: "formgeschichtliche Methode")
3. I mention only some of these works: G. van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 1933; C. G. Jung, *Über die Archetypen des kollektiven Unbewussten*, trans. 1934; L. Lévy-Bruhl, *La mythologie primitive*, 1936; C. G. Jung-K. Kerényi, *Einführung in das Wesen der Mythologie*, 1941; F. Medicus, *Das Mythologische in der Religion*, 1944; M. Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, 1953; G. Gusdorf, *Mythe et métaphysique*, 1953.
4. Karl Barth, *Rudolf Bultmann. Ein Versuch, ihn zu verstehen*, 1952.
5. Karl Jaspers, "Wahrheit und Unheil der Bultmannschen Entmythologisierung," *Merkur*, 1953, pp. 1001 ff.
6. *Sein und Zeit*.