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# Dangerous Trends in Modern Theological Thought

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(We are very grateful to the author of this paper, Dr. K. Runia, for giving us permission to print it in our theological magazine. We believe that it is not only a very useful and convenient summary of modern theological thought but that its evaluations and criticisms are also those which we would feel inclined to offer on the matters in question. Dr. K. Runia is Vice-Principal of the Reformed Theological College, Geelong, Victoria, where he is also Professor of Systematic Theology. This lecture was first delivered as the Annual Public Lecture of the Tyndale Fellowship of Australia.)

## FOUR PHASES

In an article on "The Development of Theological Thought," contributed to the symposium *Twentieth Century Christianity*, Dr. Walter Marshall Horton distinguishes four phases during the first six decades of this century.

(1) In the first phase *Liberalism* and *Modernism* were masters of the field. With their emphasis on divine immanence, their optimistic view of man, their unconditional acceptance of the method and results of natural science, their promotion of the so-called Social Gospel, they captured the minds of many people who had an equally optimistic view of the world and the future. In the second and third decade, however, this optimism broke down completely under the hard pressure of the circumstances. In Europe there was the horrible experience of the First World War;

in America there were the economical and social hardships of the great depression. The general feelings are well summed up in Paul Tillich's testimony concerning his experiences as a German chaplain in World War I. During the battle of Champagne in 1915 there was a night attack in which many of his personal friends were wounded or killed. "All that horrible long night," he says, "I walked along the rows of dying men, and much of my German classical philosophy broke down that night—the belief that man could master cognitively the essence of his being, the belief in the identity of essence and existence . . . the traditional concept of God was dead."<sup>1</sup>

(2) A new theology had to be found; and indeed, it appeared in the new *dialectical theology*, under the leadership of Karl Barth. In many ways this new movement (generally called Neo-orthodoxy) was a combination of diverging theologies. It ranged from a right-wing position (e.g., Barth and Brunner) to a position rather far to the left (e.g., Tillich and Bultmann), with others somewhere in between (e.g., the Niebuhr brothers). But however great the individual differences might be, they were all united in their repudiation of Liberalism with its immanence philosophy and its shallow optimism regarding man, culture, society, etc.

(3) Following this new development,

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from W. M. Horton, in *Twentieth Century Christianity* (Ed. Stephen Neil), 1961, p. 275.

and at the same time parallel to it, was the new *Biblical Theology*. The Bible was again taken seriously and a rediscovery was made of the Biblical message, the wonderful *kerygma* of God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ. The Bible does not only contain a new ethical message but its revelation is essentially of a historical nature. It describes, interprets and proclaims the unique, non-reproducible events of God's redeeming activity. "The Bible is a chain of such events, beginning with Creation and moving towards final Consummation in a divine-human *drama* whose centre is the Incarnation."<sup>2</sup> Another rediscovery made in this new approach was the fact that there is a basic unity in the Biblical message. "Without abandoning its concern to determine the date, authorship, precise linguistic meaning, literary sources and *Sitz im Leben* of each biblical writing, and indeed adding the further concern, in Form Criticism, to analyse the oral traditions behind the written sources—it has given vastly more attention to the unified presentation of the Bible's religious message: each book, each Testament, and the unity of the two Testaments."<sup>3</sup>

(4) To-day, however, we have entered upon a new phase. Borrowing the term from Stephen Neill, Horton calls it *Post-Barthian Liberalism*. This new Liberalism is characterized by at least two general features: (a) It is "not afraid of reason" but accords it a constitutive function in the reception of the revelation. (b) Being by nature apologetic its primary aim is to relate the Christian message to secular truth in every significant field and formulate this

truth in terms that are relevant to the existing situation.

Dr. Horton further distinguishes two main groups: (a) Those former liberals who, though having learned much from Kierkegaard and Barth, always had retained a residue of the old pre-Barthian liberalism, especially its regard for the abilities of human reason. As such he mentions for Scotland the Baillie brothers, and for America Prof. de Wolf of the Boston University School of Theology.<sup>4</sup> It would, of course, not be difficult to add many other names, e. g., those of Nels F. S. Ferré, John C. Bennett, and Dr. Horton himself! (b) There are those who have come from the school of dialectical theology itself. In this case particularly we can speak "unhesitatingly" of Post-Barthian Liberals.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Barth himself had often told his students that some day there would be a "violent resurgence of modernism." In our day this prophecy has been fulfilled, as is very clear from the two examples mentioned by Horton: Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich.

#### OUR SUBJECT

It is our intention in this lecture to deal with some of the general aspects and implications of this new Liberalism. There can be no doubt that it is one of the major forces in the theological field of our day. When Paul Tillich revisited Europe after the Second World War, he summed up his impression of the theological scene in these words: "When you come to Europe of this day, it is not as it was before, with K. Barth in the centre of discussion; it is now Rudolf Bultmann who is in the centre."<sup>6</sup> These

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 290.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 291.

<sup>6</sup> John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing*, 1960, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 284.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 285.

words were spoken in 1952. In the ten years that have elapsed since, the picture has not changed. To the contrary, in Europe the theological debate has increasingly centred on Bultmann. As far as America is concerned Paul Tillich himself has become the leading theologian, replacing the earlier interest in Reinhold Niebuhr with his (from the point of dialectical theology) middle-of-the-road position.

In this lecture we will concentrate on the second group mentioned by Horton, viz., the real Post-Barthian liberals. We do this not only because they are the more important theologians, but also because we believe that their theology is the more dangerous. These liberals went, as it were, through the re-discovery of the *kerygma*; they still want to retain this *kerygma*, but they do this in such a way that the *kerygma* is incorporated in a fully fledged liberal theology and consequently factually emasculated.

#### BULTMANN'S PROGRAMME OF DEMYTHOLOGIZATION

Without exaggeration we can say that the new development started in 1941, when Dr. Rudolf Bultmann, at that time professor of New Testament theology in Marburg, delivered a lecture on *The New Testament and Mythology*.<sup>7</sup> As this lecture delineated Bultmann's programme of demythologization and at the same time was the starting point for all further discussions, we shall first give a short summary of this lecture.

Bultmann begins with saying that the

world view of the Bible is essentially mythical in character. The world is viewed as a three-storied structure; the earth is seen as the scene of the super-natural activities of God, angels, demons, etc. This whole world view is altogether unacceptable for modern man. (a) Modern man has accepted the closed world view of modern science. "It is impossible 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 world of demons and spirits."<sup>8</sup> (b) Modern man also has a different understanding of man. He sees himself as "a self-subsistent unity immune from the interference of super-natural powers."<sup>9</sup> All this means that the New Testament can have meaning for us only when we thoroughly "de-mythologize" it. We have to break through the objective, cosmological images used by the New Testament authors and try to find the human self-understanding expressed by these mythical images. Of course, we have to be careful. The older liberals were also engaged in demythologization, but they did it in such a way that the whole *kerygma* was eliminated together with the mythical form. All that was left were some ethical teachings of Jesus. Our task is not to eliminate the myths but to interpret them and thus find the real Gospel expressed in them.

When we do this we find the following understanding of man in the New Testament. A life without faith is a "life after the flesh," i. e., man lives entirely in and for "the sphere of visible, concrete, tangible and measurable reality, which as such is also the sphere of corruption and death."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Published in Eng. Transl. in *Kerygma and Myth, A Theological Debate*, ed. by Hans Werner Bartsch, transl. by Reginald H. Fuller, 1960, pp. 1—44. This work will be quoted as K & M I.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 18.

The true, authentic life, however, is the life "after the Spirit," i. e., man has faith in the grace of God and thus he is released from his past and can open himself freely for the future. He is really free from the world in the sense of the Pauline "as though not." To the Corinthians Paul wrote: "From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, . . . and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it" (1 Cor. 7:29-31).

This New Testament understanding of man does indeed appeal to modern man. For this is also the understanding of man discovered by modern existentialist philosophy (e. g., Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers). But now the question arises: Why do we need the Bible, if we can find all in existentialism? Bultmann's answer is that there is one decisive difference. According to the philosophers this self-understanding of man is sufficient to deliver man. You simply show man what he ought to be and he can become it in an existential decision. According to the New Testament man cannot do it himself. It can be done "only by an act of God," viz., the event of redemption which was wrought in Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

But—Bultmann himself asks—is this not a remnant of mythology? Is the whole Christology of the New Testament not one big piece of myth? Bultmann admits that there are many mythical features; e. g., Jesus is depicted as a pre-existent divine Being who became incarnate, etc. Here the New Testament is indeed on one plane with the Gnostic cult-myths. Yet

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 27.

there is one great and all-decisive difference. Jesus Christ is "also a concrete figure of history."<sup>12</sup> And so we have to interpret all the mythological features as attempts to express the meaning of this historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, and of the events of his life. This has to be done in particular with regard to his Cross and resurrection.

As far as the Cross is concerned—there is indeed much mythology. "The Jesus who was crucified was the pre-existent, incarnate Son of God, and as such he was without sin. He is the victim whose blood atones for our sin. He bears vicariously the sin of the world, and by enduring the punishment for sin on our behalf he delivers us from death. This mythological interpretation is a hotchpotch of sacrificial and juridical analogies, which have ceased to be tenable for us today. And in any case they fail to do justice to what the New Testament is trying to say."<sup>13</sup> The main message of the New Testament is that the Cross releases us from the power of sin. The Cross is not just a thing of the past, but a cosmic (i. e., all-embracing) and eschatological (i. e., ever present) event which concerns me. I have to see myself as crucified with Christ.

But how can I do this? Here the resurrection comes in. It was, of course, not a "resuscitation of a corpse."<sup>14</sup> That again is mythology. But it was the discovery made by the disciples that the Cross of Jesus was indeed the saving event. And we can share in this knowledge, because in the apostolic preaching Jesus is proclaimed as the crucified and risen One.

In the concluding paragraph Bultmann

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 35/36.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 39.

himself asks: Is there any mythology left? No doubt some will say, Yes—because they regard all language about an act of God, or a decisive, eschatological event, as mythology. Bultmann himself, however, believes that in his presentation no mythology is left, for this is not mythological language in the traditional sense. "The redemption of which we have spoken is not a miraculous, supernatural event, but an historical event wrought out in time and space."<sup>15</sup> In the concrete person of a particular time the eschatological (i. e., ever present) saving event took place. This is the real *skandalon* of the *kerygma*. Not the mythological language and images, but this—that God's saving event took place in a concrete historical figure. It is "the paradox of a transcendent God present and active in history: 'The Word became flesh.'"<sup>16</sup>

#### THE DEBATE

As we stated earlier these ideas of Bultmann have had a tremendous influence in modern theology. Yes, we may say that in many regards these ideas are characteristic of the whole contemporary development of theology. For, although not agreeing with every detail of the Bultmannian conception, many have accepted the method as perfectly valid.

The question may be asked: Why did these ideas become so popular in modern theology? Without aiming at completeness we point to the following factors: (1) Bultmann fully accepts the conceptions of modern thought. In his New Testament studies he ruthlessly applies the so-called historical method. He further

unconditionally subscribes to the closed world view of modern science. He also fully accepts modern existentialism as a true expression of man's self-understanding. (2) Yet at the same time he seriously wants to retain the New Testament *kerygma*, the glorious message that in Jesus Christ God comes to us to save us. In other words, in Bultmann's theology we encounter a new and grandiose attempt towards a synthesis of the "old" Gospel and modern thought. Bultmann firmly believes that it is the primary duty of theology to express the basic Gospel truth within the context and terms of contemporary philosophy.

It is therefore not surprising that after World War II a worldwide discussion has started. First of all in Germany itself, where—apart from numerous monographs—five volumes of articles and essays have been published under the title, *Kerygma and Myth*. But soon the discussion spread to other countries as well—France and Holland, Great Britain and America. Theologians of all denominations and confessions (Lutheran and Reformed, Anglican and Roman Catholic) participated in the debate, and even philosophers (notably Karl Jaspers) became involved.

When we survey the field, we soon discover that roughly three groups can be distinguished: (a) The centre group, viz., those who basically share Bultmann's views, though differing in details. (b) The group to the right, viz., those who criticize Bultmann because they believe him to violate the Gospel itself. (c) The group to the left, viz., those who criticize Bultmann because he does not go far enough. It may be helpful to give some more attention to each of these groups.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 44. These are the concluding words of the essay!

## THE CENTRE-GROUP

Bultmann has many enthusiastic followers, especially among the younger theologians. At the present a great number of his students and disciples occupy the chairs of Biblical Studies in many of Europe's leading universities. In a recent article on "The new search for the historical Jesus" the well-known and well-informed weekly *Time*<sup>17</sup> mentions the following names as: G. Bornkamm and Dinkler at Heidelberg, Kaesemann at Tuebingen, Braun at Mainz, Conzelmann at Goettingen, Ebeling at Zurich, Fuchs at Marburg. All these men (and many other names could be added—also for the English speaking world)<sup>18</sup> basically accept Bultmann's approach to the interpretation of the Bible. They all agree with the demand of demythologization, and that not in the old-liberal sense of elimination but in the new Bultmannian sense of interpretation of the mythological framework of the Bible.

In recent years the so-called "New Quest for the Historical Jesus" started among this same centre-group. At this point the disciples have actually moved beyond the master. Bultmann himself (following in the footsteps of, among others, Martin Kaehler<sup>19</sup>) has always denied the possibility of discovering the real historical Jesus. All that we have is the Gospels, which contain the theology of the Early Church, i.e., the post-Easter faith of the disciples who saw Jesus in the light of the resurrec-

tion and thus described him as the Messiah. According to Bultmann it is impossible to go behind the Easter faith and find the historical Jesus, i.e., Jesus as he really lived, preached, suffered and died as an ordinary historical figure. In 1926 Bultmann wrote in his "Jesus and the Word": "We can, strictly speaking, know nothing of the personality of Jesus,"<sup>20</sup> and he has actually never changed his position.

His disciples, however, noticed his emphasis on the fact that—in contrast with the Gnostic cult-myths—Jesus Christ is "also a concrete figure in history—Jesus of Nazareth. His life is more than a mythical event; it is a human life which ended in the tragedy of the Crucifixion."<sup>21</sup> Following this lead Bultmann's disciples reasoned; if we take this statement seriously and do not want to lapse into a "kerygmatic-theological Docetism,"<sup>22</sup> the historical Jesus is definitely relevant for faith. And so the Post-Bultmannians, as they have been called, started a new quest for the historical Jesus. They believe that it is possible to find some of the historical facts and features of the real Jesus in the New Testament Gospels. At least three avenues are open.<sup>23</sup> (a) We can eliminate from the sayings of Jesus anything which clearly presupposes the post-Easter situation. (b) We can eliminate any material which can be paralleled in contemporary Judaism.

<sup>20</sup> Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (1926, E. T., 1936), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> K & M I, 9.

<sup>22</sup> N. A. Dahl, *The Problem of the Historical Jesus*, in *Kerygma and History*, A Symposium on the Theology of R. Bultmann, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville, 1962, 167.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. R. H. Fuller, *The N.T. in Current Study*, 1962, pp. 32 ff.

<sup>17</sup> *Time* of June 21, 1963.

<sup>18</sup> E. g. John Macquarrie in his books: *An Existentialist Theology*, 1955, and the one quoted in Note 6.

<sup>19</sup> M. Kaehler, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus*, 1896.

(c) Any saying of Jesus, if it is authentic, should exhibit Aramaic features.

The result, however, is very meagre. Hanz Conzelmann has summarized it as follows: "Jesus proclaimed the Reign of God. This Reign, while future, was effectively engaging men already in the present, in the word of Jesus himself. It demands decision, response, acceptance of the challenge. It is making itself felt in advance in the words and works of Jesus, so that men's lives here and now are 'decisively qualified' in the present by the future reign of God." Others have added that Jesus' gracious activity in eating with publicans and sinners is a special concentration of the redeeming activity of the Reign of God, already making itself felt in advance. The healings and exorcisms point in the same direction, etc.<sup>24</sup>

It is yet too early to assess the impact of this new quest on the future development of theology. Personally we believe that it will be as fruitless as the older liberal quest. Not only does it completely ignore the Bible's claim of being the infallible Word of God, but it also makes the mistake of separating the so-called "historical" Jesus from the post-Easter Christ—as if there ever was a Jesus in isolation from the Resurrection. Such a Jesus is a scientific fiction. He not only never existed, but He would also be totally irrelevant for faith.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>25</sup> To what length the new quest carries this separation between the historical Jesus and the Christ of the Gospels appears from the rather heated discussion on the question, whether Jesus regarded Himself as the Messiah. With the necessary qualifications, the common answer is (in the line of Bultmann himself) in the negative, cf. Fuller, *op. cit.* 37 ff.

### THE GROUP TO THE RIGHT

When we return to the group to the right, we first of all notice that this group comprises quite a variety of schools. There are, e. g., the Roman Catholic theologians, such as L. Malevez and R. Schnackenburg.<sup>26</sup> There are the conservative Lutheran theologians.<sup>27</sup> There are various theologians in the English-speaking world, ranging from rather liberal to rather conservative.<sup>28</sup>

Although there are far-reaching differences among those theologians themselves, they all agree in their rejection of the Bultmannian proposal as making an adequate restatement of the Christian message impossible. Some of the main objections are the following: (1) Bultmann is inconsistent in emphasizing the centrality and indispensability of the event Jesus Christ, but at the same time interpreting it in such a way that this event is robbed of all its objective significance. (2) Bultmann is wrong in his approach to the Bible. He does not allow his exegesis to be determined by Scripture itself, but comes to it with his "pre-understanding" of the ex-

<sup>26</sup> For the former see his *The Christian Message and Myth*, 1958. For the latter, see his contribution to the 5th volume of the German series, *Kerygma und Mythos*, which is entirely devoted to the discussion by R. C. theologians. The essay of R. Schnackenburg, *Christology and Myth* has been included in *K & M II*, 1962, 336—356.

<sup>27</sup> An article of H. Thieliicke is published in *K & M I*. Several articles are to be found in *Kerygma and History* (see note 22).

<sup>28</sup> To mention a few names only: G. V. Jones, *Christology and Myth in the N. T.*, 1956. A. Smethurst, *Modern Science and Christian Beliefs*, 1955 (esp. 281—287). P. E. Hughes, *Scripture and Myth*, Tyndale Press, 1956. Austin Farrar, in *K & M I*, 212—223. David Cairns, *A Gospel without Myth*, 1960. Nels F. S. Ferré, *Searchlights on Contemporary Theology*, 1961.



istentialist conception of man and Scripture is forced to speak in these existentialist terms. (3) Much of what Bultmann calls mythology is essential to the Biblical *kerygma*, e. g., the idea of a history of salvation, of God's participation in history (cf. miracles), of Jesus being the truly incarnate Son of God, of a real atonement, etc.

#### THE GROUP TO THE LEFT

Finally there is the group to the left. The theologians belonging to this group want to go much further than Bultmann. Taking their starting point in his premisses, they accuse Bultmann of inconsistency and wish to carry his programme to its fullest consequences. One of the most powerful spokesmen of this group some years ago was the Basle theologian Fritz Buri, who asserted that demythologization was not sufficient but that we have to proceed to de-kerygmaticization. "The *kerygma* as retained by Bultmann in the 'event' of Jesus Christ is simply the final remnant of mythology that is inconsistently maintained."<sup>29</sup> Although Buri subsequently retraced his steps somewhat, it cannot be denied that his argument was to the point. Barth called Buri's views an ultra-radicalization of Bultmann's radicalism,<sup>30</sup> and such it was.

A similar view we find in the book of a young American theologian, Schubert H. Ogden, "*Christ without Myth*" (1962). Ogden fully agrees with Bultmann that the only way we can make the Biblical message relevant is by interpreting it in existential terms. We therefore have to demythologize the Bible and we have to pursue this course to the very end. For this reason Ogden wants to go beyond Bult-

mann, who says that the "event of Jesus Christ" is not mythological. Ogden writes: "When it is viewed from the standpoint of modern man's picture of himself and his world, Bultmann's claim that authentic historicity is factually possible only in Jesus Christ must be regarded as just as incredible and irrelevant as the other myths with which it properly belongs."<sup>31</sup> In other words, we have to go further to the left. But can we do this without giving up "the sole norm of every legitimate theological assertion, viz., the revealed word of God declared in Jesus Christ"?<sup>32</sup> How can we be fully consistent in our demythologizing and yet retain the *kerygma*?

Ogden's own solution is the following: Every human being stands before God *coram Deo*, and therefore is continually confronted with the gift and demand of authentic existence. "Before God each individual person is entirely and radically responsible for his final destiny."<sup>33</sup> But how can man fulfil this responsibility? Only on the basis of the everlasting love of God. This love is primordially active in the mighty works of creation, preservation and redemption. (Note how Ogden put them all on the same level!) This love becomes particularly manifest in Jesus Christ. On purpose Ogden uses the word "manifest." He writes: "Contrary to Bultmann . . . the New Testament does *not* affirm that in Christ our salvation 'becomes possible.' It affirms, rather, that in him what has always been possible now 'becomes manifest', in the sense of being decisively presented in a human word of witness." Its message is not that God "is

<sup>29</sup> *Kerygma und Mythos*, II, 96.

<sup>30</sup> *K & M* II, 130.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 161.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 165.

the one who must be reconciled" . . . but that "God who is eternally reconciled, wants us to be reconciled." (Tillich).<sup>34</sup>

But does this not mean that we give up the unique significance of Jesus Christ? Ogden indeed believes that this New Testament notion also has to be demythologized. "The New Testament sense of the claim 'only in Christ' is not that God is only to be found in Jesus Christ and nowhere else, but that the only God who is to be found anywhere — *though he is to be found everywhere* — is the God who is made known in the word that Jesus speaks and is." How then does salvation become ours? There is but one divine condition, which can be formulated "in complete abstraction from the event Jesus of Nazareth." It is clearly expressed in the parable of the Last Judgment in Matt. 25: we have to accept God's love for us and thereby become free to respond to the concrete needs of our neighbours. This condition holds for one and all, and it can be realized "apart from faith in Jesus Christ or in the Christian proclamation."<sup>35</sup> True, we as Christians believe that God's saving action has been decisively "disclosed" in the event of Jesus of Nazareth. But we are not allowed to make this event the condition apart from which God is not free to be a gracious God. Jesus Christ is only "a" revelation of God. That is the message of the New Testament when one applies the demand of demythologizing consistently. This is truly the message of *Christ without Myth* (the title of Ogden's book).

It cannot be denied that this view is consistent. We for ourselves believe that

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 167 (underlinings by Ogden).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 168/9.

this is indeed the logical outcome of Bultmann's starting point. Bultmann himself may not draw these conclusions, but it was to be expected that others would go further. In the long run half-way positions cannot be maintained.

#### PAUL TILLICH

This is true even of Paul Tillich. Tillich goes much further than Bultmann in his demythologizing or, as he sometimes calls it, deliteralizing of the Bible. Bultmann "restricts" himself mainly to the history of salvation and the Christology, but seems still to accept the concept of a personal, supernatural God. In his *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, e.g., he speaks of God as "a personal being acting on persons" and existing "outside the believer."<sup>36</sup>

As early as 1944 Bonhoeffer criticized Bultmann for this "restriction" of the programme of demythologization. In one of his letters from prison he wrote: "My view of it today would be not that he went too far, as most people seem to think, but that he did not go far enough. It is not only the mythological conceptions such as the miracles, the ascension and the like (which are not in principle separate from the conceptions of God, faith and so on)

<sup>36</sup> Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (1958, E.T. 1960), 70. We must add, however, that Bultmann generally is very silent about God. It is not incorrect that Malevez wrote (before 1958!): "His theology is thus absolutely silent about the God whom it urges us to worship; there is nothing about His nature or His attributes; nothing remains of the doctrine of the Trinity; God forgives us, that is all, in a mysterious act of mercy and love. The only valid elements in the idea of God are those which proclaim His action upon us, His participation in our concrete *Dasein*. God illuminates our existence but He Himself remains veiled," (op. cit. 156).

that are problematic, but 'the religious' conceptions themselves. You cannot, as Bultmann imagines, separate God and miracles, but you do have to be able to interpret and proclaim *both* of them in a 'nonreligious' sense."<sup>37</sup>

Tillich fully agrees with this and has made an attempt to carry the demythologizing through to the doctrine of God. He strongly rejects the view of theism, viz., that of a supernatural, personal God, "a" Being existing apart from the creation. At the same time he wants to avoid the pitfall of pantheistic naturalism, which simply identifies God and creation. His aim is to go beyond both supernaturalism and naturalism. He therefore formulates his conception of God in terms of "being itself" or "the ground of being." God is not somewhere "up there" or "out there" but "underneath us." Yet there is no place for identification, for although God is "being itself," in and underneath us, He at the same time transcends us.<sup>38</sup> It is at this juncture not necessary to go into all the details of Tillich's system. His views have recently been popularized by the Bishop of Woolwich in his booklet *Honest to God* (1962). One thing is perfectly clear: every aspect of Scripture is brought under the merciless hammer of demythologization; the doctrine of God, of Christ, of the atonement, etc. And this view has far-reaching consequences for our personal life. Take only what Tillich says of prayer; if taken as a literal conversation between two persons, it is blasphemous! Or what he says of death: death is final, there is no personal life after death.

<sup>37</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 1956, 125.

<sup>38</sup> See my booklet, *I believe in God . . .* (soon to be published by the Tyndale Press).

Yet Tillich, too, retains some point, where the demythologization comes to a standstill. What is non-mythological is the historical fact that in the man Jesus of Nazareth (or whatever his name may have been, for historically we know next to nothing of the actual life of this man) the new being (that is, Bultmann's authentic historical existence) has been revealed. In other words, again we encounter the same strange inconsistency, which we have noticed in Bultmann's theology. Of course, one can say that it is a happy inconsistency. At least this historical aspect of the New Testament message is preserved! Yet it is an inconsistency and has to be recognized as such.

In his book *The Scope of Demythologizing* John Macquarrie, of the University of Glasgow, has tried to remove this charge of inconsistency by taking refuge in the term "paradox,"<sup>39</sup> but we cannot accept this as a valid solution. We would certainly not deny the validity of this term in theological usage, but we do believe that it is a subterfuge to introduce it here as a solution for the inconsistencies of Bultmann's (or Tillich's) theology. Why are we required to demythologize the whole Biblical message (including its theology, Christology, history of salvation) and to stop at this particular point? It may be true, as Macquarrie affirms, that there is a "minimal core of historical factuality which cannot be doubted."<sup>40</sup> But does this really give us the right to assert that in this historical figure God's grace has been "decisively and finally" revealed? Macquarrie may say: Yes, but a Christianity without such an

<sup>39</sup> John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing*, 240 ff.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 93; cf. also 97, 98, 244.

historical figure at the centre would mean "a grave impoverishment of the Christian religion," for in that case the Christian way of life would be only a "remote ideal," which has never been manifested in the world."<sup>41</sup> But how does he know this? Is Ogden not fully right when he, on the basis of the demythologization programme itself, declares this to be a remnant of mythology? Why can the "ideal" not be realized by my own existential response to God's love, which is visible anywhere?

#### THE AIM OF THE NEW THEOLOGY

So far we have limited ourselves largely to a description of the demythologization programme and its implications. In the rest of this paper we shall make an attempt at a brief evaluation of this modern trend. We are immediately confronted with the question: Why have all these problems been raised? What is the motive behind it? Is it only a matter of playing with words and terms merely for the sake of the game itself? Is it only a matter of abstract philosophy without any relation to the reality of life?

The answer to these questions can be brief. It is beyond any doubt that there is a very practical motive behind this whole new trend. These theologians do not live in an ivory tower, where they play with their theological jigsaw puzzles, unperturbed by the exigencies of life. To the contrary—they are, one and all, deeply involved in the spiritual problems of our day, and in some cases busily engaged in conversation with present-day culture.

Horton says of Tillich's theology: "It is not only apologetic in the sense of answering the questions of the age, as all liberal

theologians . . . have sought to do, it is also apologetic in that it concerns itself with the relation of the Christian message to every aspect of culture."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the basic aim of the new theology is an apologetic one, and that not in the negative sense of defence against attacks, but in the positive sense of a "missionary" apologetic. What urges these men is the burning desire to communicate the Biblical message (as they understand it) to modern man. In their opinion modern man cannot possibly understand and accept the Gospel in the form in which it is presented in the Bible. And they believe it is not necessary either to ask such an acceptance, for this form is not essential. It is therefore the great task of theology to "translate" the message into the categories and terms of modern man.

There is, undoubtedly, a great deal of truth in this concern. Indeed, in every age the Biblical message has to be translated into the language and patterns of thought of the man of that time. This apologetic concern is deeply embedded in the New Testament itself! In his latest book William Barclay writes: "The great characteristic of the language and the thought of the New Testament is that it was completely contemporary. It is a simple linguistic fact that, apart from the papyri, the New Testament is the supreme monument of Hellenistic Greek, Greek as the ordinary man spoke it in the first century A. D. And further, it is the supreme characteristic of the N. T. that it uses categories of thought which were completely familiar to the people to whom it spoke. The problem which faces us to-day is precisely the problem of persuading ourselves to admit

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 98.

<sup>42</sup> Horton, *op. cit.* 294.

that these categories of thought are quite alien and strange to the mind of the twentieth century and have to be reminted and restated in the language and the thought of today. It may well be that it is a basic mistake of a great deal of the Christian message that it is offered in first-century categories of Jewish and Hellenistic thought expressed in Elizabethan English."<sup>43</sup>

The great question, however, is not *whether* this "translation" must take place — at this point we are fully agreed — but *how* it must be done. In concrete, can and should it be done by means of demythologizing?

We cannot answer this question before we have decided on another problem, viz., that of *hermeneutics*. What is our standard in the interpretation of the Bible? Is this

standard to be found in a hermeneutical principle that has been devised apart from the Bible (e. g., the world view of modern science and the self-understanding of modern man) or must this principle be derived from the Bible itself? We believe that at this point we encounter the real crux of the matter. For Bultmann and Tillich the principle is not to be sought in the Bible as the inspired Word of God, but the theological hermeneutics, which is based on the modern view of world and man. We ourselves believe that the hermeneutic principle has to be taken from the Bible itself. Being the inspired Word of God and dealing with God's revelation in Jesus Christ, i. e., with God's redemptive activity in history, the Bible provides its own hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of revelation. The fathers of the Reformation used to express it in the formula: *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (Holy Scripture is its own interpreter).

<sup>43</sup> William Barclay, *Many Witnesses, One Lord*, 1963, 119, cf. also Malevez, 119 f., and Julius Schniewind, *K & M I*, 90 f.