

# Demythologizing and Christology<sup>1</sup>

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## Bultmann's Proposal for Demythologizing the New Testament

The German scholar Rudolf Bultmann's (1884–1976) controversial proposal for “demythologizing” and “existentialist” interpretation of the New Testament became well known in American theological circles in the 1950s and 1960s and, for that matter, among many people who would hardly claim for themselves the title of “theologian” or “New Testament scholar.” Although the controversy has long since subsided, the term “demythologizing” remains a part of the current theological lexicon, even for those who know little about its history.<sup>2</sup> Bultmann argued that both the language and the conceptual framework of the New Testament are essentially “mythological”—that is, they reflect a worldview that characteristically attributes the origin and goal of the cosmos as well as certain unusual or astonishing happenings within the cosmos to the activity of non-natural or supernatural causes, forces, or personages. These supernatural causes, forces, or personages are objectified and represented in terms of space, time, causality, and substance, and thus are treated as but another part of the physical world. They are, therefore, at least in principle subject to the same empirical methods of knowledge as any other objects.

For Bultmann, such a mythology was problematic for at least two reasons: (1) Most modern people no longer accept a mythological worldview; rather, they hold a scientific worldview that refuses to reckon with the possibility of any intervention in this world by transcendent or supernatural powers. Thus, for such people, most of the New Testament has become unintelligible, unbelievable, and irrelevant. (2) What is even more important is that the mythological

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2. The following summary of Bultmann's position is based largely on his initial essay on the subject, which appeared in German in 1941 and eventually was translated into English. See Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology.”

statements of the New Testament are inappropriate to Christian faith itself, for they do violence to the true meaning of God's transcendence by objectifying and purporting to provide empirical information regarding God and divine activity and thus reducing God's hiddenness to a this-worldly immanence that can be observed and evaluated objectively.

According to Bultmann, the true intent of New Testament mythology, like that of mythology in general, is not to provide information regarding a supreme being and divine activity but rather to present a particular possibility for understanding human existence. Thus, the message of the New Testament must be released from its traditional mythological framework and reformulated in terms that are not only intelligible, believable, and relevant for modern people but also express the true intent of the Christian kerygma,<sup>3</sup> which is to confront people with the radical possibility and challenge of a new self-understanding. The pressing question in seeking to interpret the message of the New Testament is this: What does this message say to me about my own existence? For Bultmann, the most appropriate categories for reformulating the New Testament mythology—ones that would show how the mythological concepts of the Bible actually correspond to the realities in the life of modern people—were those provided by existentialist philosophy, particularly as articulated by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), with his phenomenological analysis of the formal structure of human existence. When the Christian proclamation is demythologized and reformulated in existentialist (*existential*) terms, its understanding of human existence becomes clear and can challenge people to genuine existential (*existentiell*) decision regarding their own self-understanding.<sup>4</sup>

The question that immediately arises, however, is whether such a “demythologizing” and “existentialist” interpretation can be carried out consistently and thoroughly without distorting or perverting the essential thrust of the New Testament message. Is the mythological element in the Christian faith really dispensable? Bultmann insisted that it was, because the understanding of human existence set forth in the New Testament can be restated in strictly existentialist (i.e., philosophical) terms. He himself summarized this understanding as one of radical freedom from the past and openness to the future. In other words, authentic existence, which is the concern of the New Testament, is the abandonment of all human or worldly security, and the readiness to find security

3. The Greek word *kerygma* means “proclamation,” and it refers here to the *content* of the Christian proclamation, i.e., the good news that God has acted finally and decisively in Christ for the salvation of humankind.

4. Bultmann drew a distinction between *existential* (translated as “existentialist”) and *existentiell* (translated as “existential”). The former refers to the *ontological* (i.e., theoretical) categories of human existence per se as articulated philosophically, while the latter refers to the *ontic* (i.e., actual) situation of an individual human being confronted by the demand to choose the direction of his or her own existence and the specific character of that person's individual experience as formed by this decision.

where none can be discerned, namely, in the unseen and unknown possibilities of every future moment. According to Bultmann, authentic existence means understanding oneself no longer in terms of one's past but solely in terms of one's future, which continually presents itself in the form of a gift.

Assuming that Bultmann was right, that the New Testament message can and must be demythologized and reformulated in existentialist terms, another crucial question is posed: What place does Jesus or the Christ-event<sup>5</sup> occupy in this proposed reconstruction? Or, to put it differently, is it possible to speak meaningfully of the significance of Christ in non-mythological, existentialist terms? If the New Testament understanding of existence can be articulated without reference to Christ, as Bultmann appeared to maintain, would it not also be possible, indeed necessary, to have a "Christianity without Christ," because Christian faith is nothing more and nothing less than an authentic understanding of one's own being as a person? Bultmann's answer was that, although the nature of authentic existence can be *discovered and articulated* apart from Christ, it cannot be *realized* apart from Christ. The issue is the proper understanding of humankind as "fallen." The New Testament insists that humans in and of themselves are totally incapable of releasing themselves from their "fallenness," their inauthentic existence. Every attempt to do so represents an act of self-assertion of the old person to establish his or her own security. It can only result in plunging people further into their "fallen" state. Authentic existence, the abandonment of all attempts to establish one's own security and the commitment of one's self to the unknown future, can be realized only as response to a proclamation, to a word of deliverance from beyond humankind. Unless this word is rooted in actual history, however, it remains only a piece of wishful thinking and thus a subtle form of self-assertion. The New Testament therefore speaks of an act of God, the event of Christ, and asserts that it is only through response to the proclamation of this event that people become capable of authentic existence. They become able to understand themselves as crucified and dead to their own past and alive to the unknown future. Such response cannot take place once-for-all, but can only occur from time to time when the proclamation is actually heard as a word of deliverance. Thus, faith can never be a permanent possession.

Christian faith, then, is humankind's original possibility of authentic existence. It is a possibility *in principle* (i.e., an *ontological* possibility) for all people everywhere and at all times, but it is a possibility *in fact* (i.e., an *ontic* possibility) only in consequence of a particular historical event, the event of Jesus the Christ, God's act of redemption. If this event is mythological, however, then demythologizing and existentialist interpretation must halt at this crucial point.

5. "The Christ-event," when spoken of by Bultmann (and others), refers to the historical event, Jesus of Nazareth, understood not simply as *an* event among other events in human history but rather as *the* event in human history in and through which God has acted finally and decisively for the salvation of humankind.

Clearly the New Testament portrayal of Jesus is essentially mythological. Statements about his pre-existence, divine sonship, virginal conception, contacts with angelic and demonic forces, supernatural powers, sacrificial death, resurrection, ascension, second coming, and the like are appropriate to the first-century mythological worldviews of Jewish apocalypticism and Hellenistic Gnosticism but not to a contemporary scientific worldview. Can the Christ event then be spoken of meaningfully in non-mythological, existentialist terms, or is the mythology essential to New Testament christology?

Bultmann pointed out that the person about whom this mythological language revolves is an actual historical figure, but that various details in the portrayal of this figure are often mutually contradictory. This suggests that the real intention of the myths cannot lie in their objective content or in any factual information that they appear to impart. The purpose of the New Testament's christological mythology is to express the existential significance of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth as God's act of salvation, to point to this event as the salvation occurrence that alone makes possible an authentic self-understanding. The event is not mythological because it is not miraculous or supernatural; it does not represent an invasion of this world from beyond. The event is historical, wrought out in space and time, fully explicable and intelligible within the context of world history. Nevertheless, when the event is proclaimed by the church, it confronts the hearer with the possibility of authentic existence. Thus it is, paradoxically, understood by faith alone as God's act of salvation. According to Bultmann, it is possible to speak of God's redemptive activity, of his unique eschatological<sup>6</sup> act in Jesus the Christ in strictly existentialist terms and to avoid the objectifying view of mythology.

### **Left-Wing Critiques of Bultmann's Proposal**

Not surprisingly, Bultmann's proposal was vigorously assailed by many as an implicit denial of the essentials of Christian faith, as a reduction of the gospel to an existentialist philosophy. By others, most of whom had only a casual acquaintance with Bultmann's writings, it was ridiculed as a passing fad or the purely academic concern of an "ivory-tower" university professor. More surprisingly, Bultmann came under attack by so-called "liberal" or "left-wing" theologians for what they saw as his unwillingness to carry his program of demythologizing and existentialist interpretation consistently and thoroughly to its logical conclusion, namely a complete non-mythological reformulation of the New Testament message. It is at the point of Bultmann's christology that most of these criticisms were directed.

6. "Eschatological" refers to that which is last, final, or ultimate. Here it means that in Jesus the Christ God's plan for the salvation of humankind is fulfilled, brought to fruition; there is nothing further that God needs to do.

American theologian Schubert M. Ogden (1928– ), for example, objected to what he called the structural inconsistency in Bultmann’s argument, which he asserted can be reduced to two mutually incompatible propositions:

1. Christian faith is to be interpreted exhaustively and without remainder as man’s<sup>7</sup> original possibility of authentic historical (*geschichtlich*) existence as this is more or less adequately clarified and conceptualized by an appropriate philosophical analysis.
2. Christian faith is actually realizable, or is a “possibility in fact,” only because of the particular historical (*historisch*) event Jesus of Nazareth, which is the originative event of the church and its distinctive word and sacraments.<sup>8</sup>

According to Ogden, the two propositions are self-contradictory: If, as the first proposition affirms, Christian faith is to be interpreted solely in existential terms as man’s original possibility of authentic self-understanding, then it demonstrably follows that it must be independent of any particular historical occurrence. On the other hand, if the second proposition is true and Christian faith has a necessary connection with a particular historical event, then clearly it may not be interpreted without remainder as man’s original possibility of authentic historicity.

In short, what is involved when these two propositions are affirmed jointly is the self-contradictory assertion that Christian existence is a historical (*geschichtlich*) possibility open to man as such and yet first *becomes* possible for him because of a particular historical (*historisch*) event.<sup>9</sup>

In an attempt to overcome this alleged structural inconsistency, Ogden proposed two theses of his own:

1. Christian faith is to be interpreted exhaustively and without remainder as man’s original possibility of authentic existence as this is clarified and conceptualized by an appropriate philosophical analysis.
2. Christian faith is always a “possibility in fact” because of the unconditioned gift and demand of God’s love, which is the ever-present ground and end of all created things; the decisive manifestation of this divine love, however, is the event Jesus of Nazareth, which fulfills and corrects all other manifestations and is the originative event of the church and its distinctive word and sacraments.<sup>10</sup>

Bultmann responded to Ogden’s criticisms by asserting that what the latter called a structural inconsistency is not necessarily inconsistent at all, for there

7. In quotations, I have retained the non-inconclusive language that was still prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s.

8. Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth*, 112. Cf. esp. 111–26.

9. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth*, 117.

10. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth*, 146, 153. For the entire argument, see 146–64.

is a legitimate distinction between a possibility in *principle* and a possibility in *fact*, or, as Bultmann preferred to put it, between an *ontological* possibility and an *ontic* possibility. Because authentic existence is not actually *realized* in a philosophical understanding of human existence but only as an event of human decision in a concrete historical situation, it always stands before people as a future event, not as a permanent possession or quality. What is always an *ontological* possibility in principle, therefore, can become an *ontic* possibility in fact only in the moment of genuine existential decision. Furthermore, authentic existence, understood as existence in freedom and responsibility, cannot be achieved by people in and of themselves, for they are always determined by their own past, and thus every attempt to become free is doomed to relative failure. Radical freedom, or freedom from one's past, is possible only as a gift, and Christian faith contends that this is the gift of God's grace, not as an idea but as an act of God, as a historical event, the event of Jesus the Christ. Bultmann admitted that "this assertion cannot be proved by philosophy; indeed, it is a stumbling block, a *scandalon* for rational thinking," and he asked whether the inconsistency that Ogden saw "is not rather the legitimate and necessary character of what the New Testament calls the stumbling block."<sup>11</sup>

In my opinion, Bultmann was correct in insisting that there is a legitimate distinction between a possibility *in principle* (i.e., an *ontological* possibility) and a possibility *in fact* (i.e., an *ontic* possibility) and that authentic existence can occur only as existential response in an actual historical situation. Bultmann appeared to miss the real thrust of Ogden's objection, however, which was his contention that to make the actual possibility of authenticity contingent on the prior occurrence of *one particular* historical event is not only to deny a person's essential freedom and responsibility but also to involve oneself in the very mythology that Bultmann wanted to escape. The claim that an existential decision in favor of authenticity is possible only as response to the proclamation of *this one event* implies that this event is somehow objectively different in principle as well as in fact from all other events and thus constitutes an invasion into the normal course of history; thus, it is to view this event mythologically rather than existentially. As Ogden put it, "so far as [Bultmann's] argument goes, all that is required is *some* event in which God's grace becomes a concrete occurrence and is received by a decision of faith."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the real difference between Ogden and Bultmann was not that Ogden saw authentic existence as a general possibility that one can at any time or under any circumstances grasp simply because one is human or because God is God, while Bultmann insisted that authentic existence occurs only as existential response to the event of God's grace. The real difference was that Bultmann

11. Bultmann, review of *Christ Without Myth*, 226.

12. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth*, 123.

tied God's grace inseparably to the event of Jesus, or rather to the event of the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, whereas Ogden refused to limit the event of God's grace to any one particular historical occurrence.

Thus, Ogden asserted that authentic existence, which is what the Christian faith is all about, can be achieved apart from faith in Jesus or faith in the specific proclamation of the church. For the word spoken in Jesus is nothing else than what is spoken everywhere in the actual events of nature and history, and particularly in the Old Testament scriptures. Ogden went on to insist, however, that the word spoken in Jesus is the *normative* expression that makes all other expressions relatively fragmentary, or even false. The event of Jesus is *par excellence* the event that, when proclaimed in its significance, confronts a person with the possibility of a new and authentic existential self-understanding, for in this event the final truth about human existence ceases to be an idea and becomes a living reality. In this way Ogden claimed to have overcome Bultmann's structural inconsistency and to have arrived at a valid interpretation of Christ without myth. The event of Jesus is not *necessary* for authentic existence, but it is the *decisive* and *normative* expression of such existence.

Much of Ogden's argument makes a lot of sense. If Christian faith is to be presented in non-mythological, existentialist terms, it cannot be regarded as necessarily dependent on any one particular historical event. Bultmann himself, however, pointed out an inconsistency in Ogden's position, and, ironically enough, it is essentially the same inconsistency that Ogden attributed to Bultmann:

I fail to understand how he can say, on the one hand, that the "possibility of Christian existence is an original possibility of man before God" . . . and, on the other hand, that "the deepest conviction of Christian faith is that God's saving action has been decisively disclosed in the event Jesus of Nazareth." . . . How is it possible to characterize the Christ-event as decisive and ultimate and yet deny that authentic existence becomes reality only as a result of the particular historical occurrence?<sup>13</sup>

By way of summary, one might say that while Ogden correctly called attention to a structural inconsistency in the proposals of Bultmann, his own positive formulations constituted no real improvement, for they shared essentially the same inconsistency. Neither Bultmann nor Ogden was able to reconcile the original demand for a demythologizing and existentialist interpretation with the insistence upon the centrality of Jesus to Christian faith. The one seems necessarily to cancel out the other.

Before the appearance of any of Ogden's writing, a more consistent though much more radical position had been proposed by the Swiss theologian Fritz

13. Bultmann, review of *Christ Without Myth*, 226.

Buri (1907–1995), who, like Ogden, saw a basic inconsistency in Bultmann's argument.<sup>14</sup> According to Buri, Bultmann demanded a thorough demythologizing and existentialist interpretation of the New Testament, but limited this demand by appealing to a unique historical event that he regarded as God's saving act, the significance of which cannot be expressed in exclusively existentialist terms. In Buri's view, such an appeal constituted a falling back into mythology. The reason for this inconsistency, Buri thought, was that Bultmann was motivated by two mutually incompatible concerns: (1) He wanted to make the Christian message intelligible and relevant to modern people by freeing it from its mythological framework and interpreting it existentialistically. (2) He wanted to retain, rather than eliminate, the unique character of the Christian proclamation as kerygma, that is, as the announcement of the good news that God has acted for humankind's salvation in Christ.

Buri agreed with Bultmann that the Christian message must be demythologized and interpreted in existentialist terms, or else it will be incompatible with modern people's understanding of themselves and their world. He argued, however, that such a demythologizing and existentialist interpretation cannot be combined with the retention of the kerygma as kerygma, that is, as the proclamation of a unique act of God. The claim that authentic existence is possible only in consequence of God's act in Jesus the Christ is sheer arrogance, Buri insisted, as is the assertion that God's grace is decisively tied to this particular event. Buri maintained that grace is a possibility, though not a permanent quality or possession of human existence; it is the promise of authentic existence that is given to inauthentic humankind everywhere and at all times. Grace is the experience of one's own life as a gift, and it is not contingent on any one particular historical event. Thus, Buri concluded, an adequate and relevant interpretation of the New Testament today requires not only demythologizing but also "dekerygmatising," a term that he acknowledged was a "fighting word" and perhaps misleading. He wanted the kerygma—the proclamation of the Christ event—itsself to be demythologized in order to allow its existential significance to become clear. Demythologizing must not be arbitrarily halted, leaving a mythological remainder at the heart of Christian faith. As the Scottish theologian John Macquarrie (1919–2007) summarized Buri's position:

The New Testament teaching will be set free from its mythical and kerygmatic setting so that we can recognize it as simply the expression of a concept of authentic existence which is not restricted to either the New Testament or the Church, but is to be found elsewhere as well. Salvation has nothing to do with

14. Fritz Buri's most important work on this subject is "Entmythologisierung oder Entkerygmatisierung der Theologie."

a once-for-all event, and the value of the New Testament does not lie in the fact that it speaks of such an event, but in the fact that it gives expression in mythical terms to authentic existence.<sup>15</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus is proclaimed as God's unique eschatological act of salvation. But the fact that the expected second coming (*parousia*) of Jesus never occurred should make it clear that such a claim is untenable today, and Jesus must now be regarded by modern people as a *symbol* of possible authentic existence, not as the historical *basis* of such existence.

Buri did believe, however, that the mythological form of the New Testament has value as a symbol of authenticity, a symbol that can move people to a new self-understanding far more powerfully than any abstract philosophical statement about the nature of existence. For Buri, the distinctiveness of Christian faith lay in its treasury of myth and symbol, and the task of theology was to explicate these Christian symbols, to make clear their existential significance, and to show how they point to authentic existence. The myths are not, of course, to be understood as giving information about a higher world or a saving history, but rather as symbolic expressions of ancient people's awareness of being confronted by transcendence, expressions that have significance for people today insofar as they offer the possibility of a similar encounter in the present, calling into question people's self-understanding and challenging them to see themselves in a new light. According to Buri, the Christian symbols, as opposed to other sets of symbols, are most appropriate for Western people, because people cannot separate themselves from their tradition. They are who they are because of their history, and a significant part of Western people's history is the Christian tradition. Theology is an interpretation of the tradition in which one stands. In Buri's view, it is the Christian faith from which Western people derive their most meaningful symbols of authenticity, recognizing all the while that other people whose roots are in other traditions draw their symbols from other sources.<sup>16</sup>

The problem can now be summarized. Bultmann called for the demythologizing of the New Testament and its reinterpretation in existentialist terms. Demythologizing to him meant the rejection of all statements that speak of God and divine activity in objectifying terms, that is, apart from their exis-

15. Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing*, 136.

16. As Robert H. Miller has noted (e-mail correspondence to me dated April 10, 2013), Buri erroneously suggested that "the Western people are uniformly from a Christian tradition," thus implying that Jews, for example, are not Western people; moreover, Buri's claim that "it is the Christian faith from which Western people derive their most meaningful symbols of authenticity," while it may have been more-or-less true when Buri wrote more than half a century ago, ignores the "profound secularization" that Western culture has undergone since then and "is (at least) doubtful today."

tential significance for human existence. This, however, does not include the elimination of references to God's unique eschatological act of salvation in the historical event of Jesus the Christ, which alone, according to Bultmann, makes authentic existence an *actual* possibility. Ogden, going further, argued that such demythologizing necessarily involves the rejection of *any one particular* historical event as a prerequisite for authentic existence, but he also asserted that Christian faith can legitimately regard the event of Jesus as the *decisive* manifestation of authenticity and the proclamation of this event as the *decisive* or *normative* call to authenticity. Buri insisted that the kerygma itself must be demythologized and interpreted as neither *necessary* nor necessarily *decisive* for authentic existence, but rather as a symbol of the possibility of such existence. He considered this the logical implication of Bultmann's original demand for a demythologizing and existentialist interpretation, and any less radical conclusion, even though it be drawn by Bultmann himself, a failure to carry the program through consistently.

### A Way Forward

As was pointed out earlier, Ogden reduced Bultmann's proposals to two fundamental propositions, accepted the first, but, recognizing that it is inconsistent with the second, reformulated the second. The inconsistency was still not eliminated, however, and in my judgment a consistent statement must proceed along the lines suggested by Buri.

A meaningful and relevant interpretation of the New Testament today, then, will presuppose two theses. The first is that suggested by Ogden in his summary of Bultmann's position and followed in his own positive reformulation. It involves the recognition that any theological statement that cannot be interpreted as a statement about humans and their possibilities is meaningless. Only insofar as Christian faith deals with the actualities of human existence as modern people are aware of them can it have any contemporary relevance and meaning. Christian faith does not point to a "real" world somewhere beyond this world in which we live; it speaks of life in the here and now. The New Testament message, therefore, must be demythologized and interpreted in terms of its existential significance for the life of humankind.

Not only does this kind of interpretation make sense to people today, it also discloses more adequately than any other the real intention of the New Testament writers. Christian faith in essence means receiving one's life from moment to moment as a gift, as grace; it means giving up every attempt to base the security of one's life on any kind of tangible or objective reality; it means living by faith and not by sight. This alone is authentic existence. To first-century people, with their mythological worldview, this could most meaningfully be articulated in mythological terms. For most modern people, other forms of expression must be found—forms that are appropriate to their understanding of

themselves and their world. And the church, if it is not to become completely irrelevant, must continually seek such forms of expression.

Furthermore, this first thesis also involves the recognition that an essentially “Christian” understanding of existence can and often has been articulated by persons outside the church and without recourse to what would normally be called theological, Christian, or even religious terminology. When such an understanding is found in other religious traditions, philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, literature, or elsewhere, the church must accept it as a valid statement of the nature and possibility of authentic existence, whether it makes use of the church’s vocabulary and thought forms or chooses its own.

The second thesis is suggested by Ogden’s second thesis, but represents an attempt to overcome the inconsistency in his position: Authentic existence is always a possibility not just in *principle* but in *fact*, because every event and every encounter of people’s lives confront them with the opportunity and, indeed, the demand for an existential decision regarding their own self-understanding—whether they will understand themselves in terms of their past and thus be bound to the past or whether they will understand themselves in terms of their future and thus be open to the future, receiving the concrete situation as a gift, as an opportunity for authentic response to its promise and claim.

The Christian gospel is the proclamation that such faith, such genuine response, is called for and is indeed a possibility precisely amid the conditions of human existence as we know them. The proclamation of this possibility is therefore continually the originative event of the church—the community of faith—and its word and sacraments. The Christian gospel, in other words, is the proclamation to people that they must and can live their lives, if at all, in the here-and-now of their own historical situation. They cannot shift the responsibility for their lives to another person, not even to God, nor to another time and place, not even to heaven. The responsibility is theirs—here and now, and this responsibility is also a promise. The primary significance of the incarnation as proclaimed by the church is that it points not to some other world of transcendent being, but to the actualities of human life and experience as the arena where God encounters people, where judgment and grace are at work, that is, where people are confronted by the absolute claims and promises that alone make authentic existence possible. God is to be found, if at all, not somewhere else but here. Authentic existence is not a permanent possession; it can only occur as an event, as a genuine response to the givenness of a specific moment. And this means that authentic existence is not an achievement of which a person can boast, a “work” in Pauline terms. Authenticity is never the prior reality but always the response to the gift of the moment, the response to the grace that the situation at hand offers. What constitutes the Christian message as “gospel” (“good news”), then, is precisely its insistence that the authentic existence of which it speaks is always and everywhere an actual possibility, because every given moment offers the possibility of a positive response. It is, therefore, the

mission of the church to call people into an awareness of the possibility of living authentically.

### Postscript

Bultmann's initial proposal to demythologize the message of the New Testament was written and circulated in 1941 in wartime Germany. Only after the close of World War II did it become generally known throughout Germany, more widely in Western Europe, and eventually in the English-speaking world. It provoked a storm of controversy, particularly during the late 1940s, the 1950s, and the early 1960s.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the original version of this article, "Demythologizing and Christology," was written at the height of the debate in 1965.

Today it is difficult to recall the heat of the demythologizing debate, because already in the 1950s New Testament scholars were increasingly focusing their attention on other issues.<sup>18</sup> Within a few years "demythologizing" had for most New Testament scholars become simply a chapter in the past history of the discipline. Nevertheless, it is my own judgment that Bultmann's demythologizing proposal made some important and lasting contributions both to New Testament scholarship and to the faith and life of the Christian church. I regard four of these contributions as particularly significant, and each of the four stems from a major influence in Bultmann's thinking and scholarship:<sup>19</sup>

1. *As a child of the Enlightenment* (also known as rationalism or the age of reason), and in agreement with much of the "liberal" scholarship of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bultmann recognized that ideas and beliefs grounded in tradition and faith must be subjected to the scrutiny of the scientific method and human reason. This meant that thinking people simply could no longer accept the supernatural features or, as he preferred to call them, the mythological features of the New Testament, because these features had become unintelligible, unbelievable, and/or irrelevant. On this point I think Bultmann was absolutely correct: For the church to insist upon a literal acceptance of the mythological elements of the New Testament results in either (a) a wholesale rejection of the Christian faith, (b) a kind of "schizophrenia" or "bifurcation" whereby people base part of their lives upon a scientific worldview and part upon a mythological worldview, and/or (c) outright hypocrisy in which people claim to accept the mythology but actually at the deepest level of their consciousness realize that it is not credible.

17. The most important source for tracing the development of the debate is Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma und Mythos*. Some of the selections from these volumes are available in English in Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*.

18. In Germany, the first of these was "The New Quest for the Historical Jesus," which was initiated by one of Bultmann's own students; see Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus."

19. For much of what follows, I am indebted to Konrad Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*.

2. As a product of the history-of-religions school,<sup>20</sup> and in distinction from at least some “liberal” scholarship, Bultmann recognized that the New Testament could not be understood except within the context of its wider Jewish and Hellenistic religious-philosophical milieu. This involved a recognition that both the language and the conceptual framework of the New Testament are so inextricably bound up with a mythological worldview that a thoroughgoing elimination of the mythology would mean a total rejection of the New Testament message. Thus Bultmann insisted that the mythology of the New Testament should be *interpreted* rather than simply *eliminated*, as many of the “liberal” theologians had done. Here too I think Bultmann was correct: Both the New Testament scholar and the Christian church must somehow come to terms with the *entire* New Testament, including its mythological features, not just with those portions of it that are easily incorporated into their own worldviews.

3. As a *Christian theologian*, Bultmann was concerned with the task of articulating the New Testament message in terms that would be intelligible, credible, and relevant for people holding a scientific worldview. Moreover, he was convinced that this task could be successfully carried out. For him, such articulation meant translating the mythological categories of the New Testament into the existentialist categories set forth by Martin Heidegger. This, however, was only a *tactical* move for Bultmann. His *strategy* was the larger endeavor to translate the New Testament into *whatever* categories would be most effective in communicating its essential message of “good news.” This, I submit, remains the essential task of Christian theologians, and it depends upon the contributions of New Testament scholars—particularly those who in some sense or other see their work as being in the service of the church.

4. As one of the founders of New Testament form criticism,<sup>21</sup> Bultmann had concluded two decades before his proposal for demythologizing the New Testament appeared that the New Testament gospels represent the end-product of a period of oral tradition in which the various passages (pericopes) underwent significant alteration, and in some cases were created *de novo*, for use in the preaching, teaching, worship, discipline, and other activities of the early church. This meant that the nature of the available source materials made any “quest for the historical Jesus” simply impossible. This conclusion was completely consistent, however, both with Bultmann’s demythologizing and with his

20. The history-of-religions school was a movement in nineteenth-century Germany that sought to study religion systematically as a socio-political-economic-cultural phenomenon—that is to say, as both influenced by and influencing the particular culture in which it lives. It also involved an examination of similarities and differences among various religions and thus the possible influence of one upon another.

21. Form criticism of the New Testament gospels, as practiced by Bultmann and others, classified individual passages (pericopes) by their literary form (parable, miracle story, wisdom saying, etc.), attempted to locate each form in the life and work of the early church (preaching, teaching, debate, etc.), and sought to show how the pericopes were expanded, otherwise adapted, and at times created for such use by the church.

existentialist interpretation of the New Testament. The former signaled the end of a literal interpretation of much of the material in the gospels, thus reinforcing the idea that the “quest” was historically impossible; the latter insisted that the “quest” was theologically illegitimate because it sought to provide a secure basis for Christian faith in the historical events involving Jesus of Nazareth. For Bultmann, the desire for such security negated the very essence of faith, which was an openness to each moment as an opportunity for authentic response and thus for authentic existence and a willingness to live with radical uncertainty and insecurity. My own judgment is that Bultmann was essentially correct on both points: The quest for the historical Jesus is impossible if it expects to reconstruct anything remotely resembling a “life of Jesus,” and it is theologically illegitimate to the extent that it promises to provide a secure basis for Christian faith. This, I think, is another of the lasting contributions of Bultmann’s proposal for a demythologizing and existentialist interpretation of the New Testament.

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