

## MYTH, HISTORY AND REVELATION

*Bultmann and Demythologization*

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IN this essay no attempt is made to discuss Bultmann's important contribution to *Formgeschichte*, which is, perhaps, the work for which he will be remembered. The purpose of the essay is rather to examine some of the assumptions that enter into Bultmann's thought; assumptions that serve to shape, at the very least, his approach to Scriptural, and other problems.

This can be best understood if one of Bultmann's typical pre-occupations is considered. In his essay 'New Testament and Mythology'<sup>1</sup> he attempts to explain in what sense he regards the New Testament as an historical document, in view of the amount of figurative language it contains. His explanation raises, among other problems, the question of what is meant by history, and this question in its turn, for Bultmann, forces the discussion into the realm of philosophy.

It is, perhaps, useful at this point to summarize Bultmann's position about history, as set out in his *History and Eschatology*.<sup>2</sup> History only begins when man frees himself from participation in a world that is full of gods; a world that he pictures, rather than analyses, in story forms that reflect both the regularity or rhythm of nature, and the irruption of awesome event. It is only when a human group becomes conscious of the processes that shape its experience that history, as self-conscious reflection on human relationships within a group, can be said to emerge. Both chronicle, with its selective character, and narrative, with its patterning of events, emerge from a reflection on, and an evaluation of, the causes and the interconnection of events regarded as significant in the experience of a people. It is stressed, and for Bultmann's ultimate position the statement is important, that the reflective process must be regarded as infra-historical until theocentric notions are excluded, because in so far as they are at work, man as agent is not the object of historical inquiry. This means that

1 Printed in *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by H. W. Bartsch, and translated by R. H. Fuller, S.P.C.K. 1953.

2 *History and Eschatology*. The Gifford Lectures, 1955. (Edinburgh University Press; 15s.)

history is uniquely concerned with human deeds (either directly or indirectly), and that other agencies are only discussed in so far as they influence human action.

The next point emerges out of his discussion of the work of Greek historians. For Herodotus history is an inquiry, a cross-examination of witnesses about the memorable deeds of men in order to produce a critical and chastened recollection. History is not just mere opinion, it is a statement that arises out of evidence that has been put to the question, for facts are blankly meaningless until they have been questioned. From this it is but one step to say that the total mental view—original or inherited—of the historian will be of paramount importance. Greek history, in other words, is limited not only by the limitations of the Greek historical method but by the presupposition of the Greek mind about the city-state, the concept of cyclic recurrence and the ideals of reason. (cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 224, and *Metaphysics* 1074.) This means that though history as an account seems objective, the historian does not stand apart from history as a process.

This general position is applied to certain famous remarks about history. No one is inclined to deny today the importance of the methodical and unprejudiced collection of facts. Yet can it be maintained that this is sufficient, as von Ranke seemed to think, to give rise to an awareness of 'what really happened'? More plausible, yet hardly consistent with his first statement, is von Ranke's contention that each period must be studied in and for itself and that this will require a sympathy with the type of human deed that dominates the period.

The first statement, however, requires more detailed examination. What really happened, on examination, turns out to be only the evidence that is at hand, and as such it has an accidental and formless character; narrative history, on the other hand, as distinguished from research, involves reflection on the evidence and the eduction or imposition of patterns; research itself will be directed by intelligent inquiry, by assumptions of relevance, and irrelevance, and itself presupposes a viewpoint from which one begins, and that the facts or evidence are, if only one can discover it, connected in some cause and effect relationship. This means that what is at hand, or what is discovered—in whatever form it may exist—must be put to the question, if any meaningful statement is to be made.

Bultmann approaches very near to Collingwood here, for what both say is that the historian is concerned with re-enacting the motives and thoughts of men. This, indeed, follows from holding that history is concerned with the deeds of men. The positive creative activity involved can be seen if it is recollected that history is not concerned with acquaintanceship with the past. As such the past cannot be perceived; all that is perceived is the evidence, taken to be signs of human activity. The task of the historian is to explain these signs; from the present, by means of analytic techniques and hypothetical interpolations, he reconstructs the deed—at times he even, in the strict sense, discovers the deed, in the sense that the causal relationships involved in the deed-situation are disclosed for the first time. If this is true, then, history will be a treatment of the past in terms of the totality of the present, for the historian is in fact arranging and criticizing the present content of consciousness in terms of his total experience.

In this rather odd sense, then, history can be said to be 'self knowledge'—at least in so far as its fundamental pattern will arise out of the basic decisions the historian has made about life; and its critical value will be closely related to the historian's awareness of himself as constituted by these decisions.

Put another way this means that history is not simply subject-object knowledge but is a knowing in which the object enters into the historian's subjectivity, for since his specific object is the sign of the human deed, it will only become significant in so far as it becomes subjective. This is not to say that history is 'merely subjective', but it does imply that all judgments of the historian are relative, all are corrigible; they are objective in that they are framed in terms of evidence that provides duration clues; relative in that the past varies with the present so that truth for the historian is what the present state of the evidence compels us to believe. The tension between evidence and interpretation accounts for two diametrically opposed historical views: according to the one, history is the 'doubtful story of successive events' (Bosanquet), 'the most absurd of all things . . . a web of nonsense' (Goethe), for 'we know nothing of a reasonableness of history' (Burckhardt); according to the other, it is the selection of certain periods as examples of what is valuable in human experience—fifth-century Greece, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century, and so on. Both views ultimately drive the historian either to cultivate his

garden or to become involved in the discussion of problems that are not easily recognizable as historical ones.

From such a position Bultmann concludes that history is based on evidence, and that the historian is compelled to give an account of any set of evidences in terms of the total temporal situation in so far as it is known. This account must be reasonable in that the deeds of men are based on decisions that have human motives that are open to discovery, and the ideas and images that clothe these decisions can be explained historically by reference to the determinate situation in which they arise. This implies that no supernatural influences cause jumps in history. Hence when Bultmann comes to discuss the Gospels he regards himself as compelled to give an account that will show how the formed tradition we find in them was evolved in its situation in time, without involving any non-historical influences. That is, history is concerned with the reasonable explanation of the perceptible or thinkable, with a strong suggestion that any significance that is found in history must be a significance that is grasped in the present. Hence Bultmann's starting point will be what is significant for man now. From which he moves to discuss and criticize what was significant for man then, and in so doing finds himself involved in a whole critique of language.

With this general position in mind we can go on to consider: first, Bultmann's statement, or reconstruction, of Christianity as historic, that is, both as temporal and as significant for man now; and secondly, his attempt to show how it is that man, an historically conditioned being, can be related to God through an historical revelation—an obviously difficult thing to do for one with a theory of history like the one described above.

The first statement is found in an easily accessible form in *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*,<sup>3</sup> and, somewhat more profoundly expressed, in the essays 'Christ the End of the Law', 'Grace and Freedom', and 'The Christological Confession of the World Council of Churches'.<sup>4</sup> It can be summarized as follows.

Israel was formed by the actual experience of the Jewish people, an experience that centred round their response to the Word of

<sup>3</sup> *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*. (Thames and Hudson; 18s.)

<sup>4</sup> These essays will be found in *Essays, Philosophical and Theological*, by Rudolf Bultmann (S.C.M. Press; 21s.).

God in obedience or disobedience. The operative word is 'actual', because Israel's experience was always concerned with events and she envisaged God's promises historically. In later Jewish history a shift occurred. The Scribal movement subverted prophetic understanding to deal with God in terms of rules, fulfilment of which gave rise to a sense of self-sufficiency in one's own achievement that was destructive of religion. Our Lord reacted to this, and reformulated the prophetic teaching of a direct encounter with God, now in terms of personal, rather than group, experience. Thus, for Bultmann, Christ destroys the objective rule, with its false absoluteness, and re-instates the element of original and personal decision. Further, under the influence of historicized forms of nature myths, an apocalyptic influence emerges explicitly in late Judaism, for we find that a general teaching about the end of history in trial and conflagration, in war and judgment, is taken up into Jewish thought and applied to the end or goal of history set by God. The 'man' of fourth Ezra will come, and history will be swallowed up. Out of this background our Lord emerges proclaiming an eschatological reign, asserting his time to be the time of decision for man. He brings, Bultmann claims, no promise for the generation or group, only for the individual; and for Christ, Bultmann contends, judgment is wholly concentrated in the last judgment, in the heavenly Son of Man figure.

This basic teaching is expressed in the figurative language of messianic banquet, resurrection of the body, and so on; and in Bultmann's exposition a sharp contrast is presented between the relative phenomena of Scriptural history, and the absolute demand for decision, and response. Historically, Bultmann holds, the eschatological expectation is frustrated, but in Christ's acceptance of death God is encountered. In the moment of encounter with God, in the reception of the word of God, a new relationship is set up between God and man, that is, a being forgiven. This is not a state, or a static thing, but a thing of life, a dialectic of grace. At this level the Christian faith is not founded on an historical event, for the faith is without history in so far as it is eschatology, or belongs to the end.

This requires some explanation; first it must be explained how the Christian Church has come to stress the 'time between'—an historical point; and secondly, some explanation must be given of what it means to say that the Christian faith is without history.

The first point can be stated briefly, as Bultmann's discussion, though radical, is not particularly original. He maintains that the primitive community did not understand itself as a real phenomenon of history, but simply eschatologically, in terms of last-time events that had begun to happen; a position that was clothed in language derived from Jewish eschatological writing (as in Mark 13, 1 Thess. 4, 1 Cor. 15). In this sense the Church-kingdom was beyond history in that it belonged to the end-time. Next, he argues, owing to the failure of expectation, the community adjusts itself, and begins to be interested in tradition and chronology (*cf.* Luke). In the Epistle to the Romans a modified eschatology is taught for which the triumphant Church is regarded as present already, because the decisive event (the Cross) has happened. Under the judgment of this event, man exists in encounter and decision. Indeed he can only be said to exist in so far as decision in love arises out of the definite situations in which he finds himself in the time between the 'no longer' and the 'not yet'. It is in decision—encounter—that man is free.

Finally, in the work of St John (in spite of what Bultmann regards as interpolations) eschatological expectation is abandoned because all is regarded as being present in the coming of Christ. The end (hardly regarded as relevant) is projected into the future (Colossians and Ephesians), and the Church is seen as the result of the cosmic victory of Christ. Owing to this victory justification can be achieved here and now through sacramental good works, and it is on these the Christian relies rather than on future expectation. Thus eschatology is neutralized and the cultic centre shifts from the Messiah, who is the Lord of History, to the *Kyrios*, with all the lush cultic background the title invokes.

Now whether this reconstruction can be justified as a 'reasonable' account is beside the point, save to note that almost every stage in Bultmann's argument can be criticized. What is of interest is that it fits so well his theory of history; in fact it is difficult to say which is derived from which.

When the second point, which really concerns the meaning and value of religion, is raised, we begin to see that influences are at work that are properly speaking, meta-historical. And Bultmann himself both sees and admits this, as emerges in his discussion of myth.

The whole cosmological picture presented in the New Testa-

ment, which is, in essence, common to it and the Jewish apocalyptic writings and the Gnostic redemption myths, is incredible to modern man. If this is so, the question must be faced: Can we find any valuable or relevant teaching in the New Testament?

Bultmann does not think that there is an isolable absolute core, or a non-mythological ultimate history in the Gospels; he is simply asking if anything significant is said in the Gospels, and if so, how.

Myth, once its claim to be objective, to be about an 'outside', is rejected, is seen to be the expression of man's awareness that he is not lord of his own being. It is, at this level, an understanding of his own existence. Here, Bultmann asserts, it becomes obvious that philosophers and the New Testament are saying the same thing, and, he claims, saying it quite explicitly.

In order to appreciate this, it is necessary to pay some attention to his analysis of man's relationship to God as found in his essay, 'The Crisis in Belief',<sup>5</sup> and then to return to his existential interpretation of the Myth.

God, he says, in the Christian sense is simply what he is to every other belief that takes him seriously, for belief in God is to see the world in the light of a reality lying beyond man. Man is, or can be, aware that he is neither creator nor master; driven by care for the morrow, he is involved in contradiction for he knows he must die. He finds significance in longing, but the pleasure of eternity is not granted; man is desire for love, but his end is always solitude, because he can never belong, as he would, to his fellows; he thirsts for knowledge, and we can nothing know; all impulse to action or work ends in 'the clanking of spades'. Faith is the recognition that God is the limiter.

Is God then just a word? Would it not be better to say 'give me eternal nothingness instead'? No, Bultmann replies, belief is the courage to call on God, to decide that 'nevertheless thou art at my right hand'—and if one surrenders to God, dread is conquered.

Belief, he continues, is never theoretic knowledge; it is a knowledge that breaks in. It cannot be possessed or retained in propositional form, for it is encounter in the moment of living. Any attempt to express faith as a series of principles that enable us to understand phenomena perverts its real nature. Faith is the acceptance—always in the form of response and renunciation of mastery—of God in a decisive manifestation to which man's

<sup>5</sup> *Essays, Philosophical and Theological*, p. 1. sqq.



decisive response is discovery of self. God, in other words, is not discovered in scientific history, but only in the futility and failure of history, understood as the deeds of men. God acts on us by getting us to alter our conception of ourselves.

Belief, then, is not based on an inferential process, it is a radical and total change in our existence; it is a living decision—not just any trivial decision, but one that delivers from the death of limitation.

We can now return to the direct discussion of myth. The process of de-mythologizing is not one of elimination, or even of dissolution into a bundle of ethical generalizations or the symbolic phantasies of cultic worship. If the Gospel is relevant for man as a religious proclamation, so Bultmann argues, it cannot be a bit of theoretic philosophy, or a set of historical propositions. It is a call to authentic existence in which nothing is possessed, for there is only the call to decision. The response is the renunciation of fleshly security, for the word has been heard by which one opens oneself to the future—we thus get rid of 'spirit', 'new nature', 'sacraments', and so on. What Bultmann seems to be saying is that the living act of decision is the relationship to God, and because the act takes place in terms of a decisive manifestation, one is existing in the last time. All that belongs to the 'time between', and to historical narrations, are trivial irrelevancies, or worse, they are part of a linear picture of salvation, not the real vertical one.

This is all in conformity with his general view, but it at once raises the question: Do we also get rid of Christ? Bultmann faces the question gallantly, but rather unconvincingly, for his answer has an oddly elusive character. He seems to be saying at one and the same time that the Christian life has nothing mysterious about it, because it is simply a statement of how man achieves authentic existence by release from the bondage of historical cause and effect; *and* that, because it cannot be achieved through reflection, it is a mutual encounter of persons that involves an act of God.

If he is in fact saying both these things, the second statement can be expressed by saying that since man has fallen (is in bondage to pride) he can only be released by the event that is Christ. Now even if all Gnostic cosmology, all mystery cult language, all, in short, that is alien to a view that refuses any value to statements that are not perceptibly verifiable and regards anything else as



incredible mythology, are interpreted as symbolic only, and as having value only as statements about personal relationship to God in Christ, is it not delusive to think that we have avoided mythology when we continue to speak of an act of God in Christ? Bultmann is very conscious of the problem his analysis has raised. History, he says, has nothing to say in reply, for the proclamation can neither be observed, nor verified by history. The life of Christ is one relative phenomenon among others, and as such finds its natural historical explanation. But, he claims, the paradox is that, although as phenomenon it can be accounted for, yet it is *also* proclamation. He asserts that the New Testament speaks, and faith knows, of an act of God through which man becomes capable of self-commitment, and thus of authentic life. All this, he admits, would be pure myth unless it is interpreted existentially. If it is objected that in terms of his original statement this does not get us very far, he then introduces a distinction between myth in the traditional or antiquated sense, and what he in one place calls an analogy between human act and divine activity that provides a basis for a legitimate statement about God.

In more concrete language, 'in the last resort mythological language is only a medium for conveying the meaning of a past event' (i.e. the event that is God in Christ). 'The real meaning of the Cross is that it has created a new and permanent situation in history, for taken with the resurrection it forms' a single indivisible and cosmic event, which brings judgment into the world, and opens up for men the possibility of authentic life.

It is not the historical event that is met, but in the testimony, the eschatological or existential event, God is encountered. Thus though the Cross is a unique event in past history, none the less it has a permanent historic significance, what he sometimes calls 'a timeless significance'. In saying this he regards himself as making a statement that satisfies the conditions he has laid down about the possibility of knowing God; that falls in with his view of history in general, and which emerges from his analysis of the teaching of the New Testament, once it has been seen that its objective language has to be given an existentialist interpretation. As a past fact it cannot enter into our lives; as present encounter, however, Jesus's understanding of himself before God is ever present as the proclamation, 'now is the day of salvation'.

This is, he asserts, a *skandalon* for the mind; but since faith is

total surrender, it must be without proof (a further reason for suspecting miracle, which, if it be interpreted as proof, is destructive of the given and unproveable relation that is faith).

If one returns to the objection that encounter-language is mythological, he simply replies that one must not confuse the language of psychological experience with that personal encounter itself. Just as love is only understood in encounter, so it is with faith; and, if this is so, encounter-language will point to, though never take the place of, such confrontation. Love is nothing to the one who is not in love—it is the *non-lover* who is blind. Similarly it does not follow from the fact that God cannot be seen apart from faith, that he does not exist.

Hence, he concludes, the language we use is 'neither symbolical nor pictorial, though it certainly is analogical, for it assumes an analogy between the activity of God and that of man'. This seems to be very difficult. 'Faith' is not an activity like 'being in love'. Poetic and pictorial language is, at one level, very suitable to describe, is indeed the only way of conveying, certain aspects of the activity of loving. But faith, on Bultmann's description of it, is very different. It bears on a subject who is in every respect unknown apart from it. It thus carries its own authentication with it, not only as a state, but as revealing the other. If this is the case, the sole valid relation is of the faithful 'I' to the revealed 'thou'. But even to say this is to introduce a measure of generality into the discussion, which Bultmann must reject. The point is made even more obscure by the difficulty of discovering what is meant by faith. He is clear that it is not a quality, that it does not involve the possession of theoretic truth; at his most illuminating he will regard it as freedom from ourselves. It does not fall on historical fact, but is an awareness that is given. It is the decision that overcomes limit, dread and death. Is it the discovery of the futility of man, or is the word 'giver' to be understood in the old-fashioned orthodox sense, as revealed from outside? Does encounter mean authentic self-knowledge, or knowledge of an-other?

I think it must be maintained that Bultmann means to speak of man before God and that when he does he regards himself as speaking of a revealed 'thou'. It is tempting to think that he is appealing to an experience. And yet he regards experience and psychology as irrelevant. Nor, for him, is the Gospel demythologized in the sense that something not mythological is left.

On his view it is all relative and mythological, and yet—. This is what is so difficult to discover: the 'and yet—'. God vanishes from history and experience; and yet is confronted. If he means that he is known indirectly by analogy in the ordinary sense, then his whole stress on encounter seems to be wrong; if, on the other hand, he means known directly in personal relationship, and that only beyond the limits of world and mind, then he is struggling with the ineffable. If the second is the true interpretation of his thought, as I think it is, it becomes easy to see why the historical person of Christ falls away unlamented, though it is difficult, at least for the writer, to see how the historic (i.e. relevant for authentic existence) Christ can be anything other than a mere name given to that which is beyond names.

Bultmann, one suspects, wishes, strongly and sincerely, to retain his Lutheran faith in Christ, something he cannot deny but something that bears no relation to the phenomena discussed by his critical intelligence. His faith only begins when the world ends; significance is timeless, for it is in no sense found in temporally conditioned phenomena. But if this is true for him, what becomes of the activity of man that he calls an analogy—after all, the word 'activity' is a temporal word, man is a temporally conditioned being? To what is he drawing our attention? To one knows not what beyond what one knows? But that is silly. He is either, when he talks of God in Christ, speaking as a good Lutheran child, or is invoking that which is hidden from the earth-bound, like the writer of this essay.

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