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THE RIGHT INTERPRETATION OF THE MYTHOLOGICAL

I

I HAVE been asked to speak to you on the demythologizing of the New Testament proclamation, a subject which was thrown up a year ago in an essay by Rudolf Bultmann. The problem in itself is an old one. You may find it in the scorn with which the cultured Athenians greeted St Paul when he preached to them on the Areopagus about the resurrection of the dead. But in the form in which it has engaged the attention of Protestant theology it goes back to the seventeenth century. Ever since the principles of historical criticism have been applied to ancient documents the criticism of the Old and New Testaments has never been silent. The Enlightenment sought to emancipate the eternal ideas of reason from the cloak of historical tradition, to lay them bare in their stark purity and truth, and to do away with every bit of mythological sense—or, from their standpoint, nonsense. It was their dogma of reason that led them to demythologize. In idealism we find a more profound approach to the subject. The idealists believed that myth was the indispensable form which the spirit of Christianity had assumed: therein lay its right and its justification. But it meant the replacement of Christianity by abstract philosophy. Once more the aim is the removal of mythology, but this time it springs from a dogma which is less inappropriate. Demythologizing is now required by the actual content of the Christian revelation, however much the heritage of the Enlightenment is still evident in the working out of the detail. This particular solution has profoundly affected the course of liberal theology right down to our own times, though there has been a great deal of change and a weakening of its influence. But to-day, it may be said, the partnership between the Christian revelation and philosophical idealism has been dis-

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solved, at any rate in the field of New Testament exegesis, and Bultmann himself has played a prominent part in the process. It is not therefore surprising that Bultmann has reopened the problem whose solution in earlier times had been provided by German idealism. Once the partnership between the myth of the gospel and the truth of philosophy had been dissolved and their mutual relation left uncertain, the need for a fresh elucidation was bound to occur. The effects of this heritage are clearly discernible in the answer Bultmann gives to the question of demythologizing. For just as the philosophy of idealism had a twofold concern, the purity of philosophic thought and the truth of the Christian proclamation, so these two tendencies are clearly at work in Bultmann's exposition. He is fighting for the freedom of the New Testament message from falsification, and at the same time for the clarity of scientific, and particularly theological, thought. Only the watchword has been changed. The phenomenology of the spirit, as Hegel called it, has been replaced by a phenomenology of existence after the model of Kierkegaard. But there is one difference: the mythological thought of the New Testament is abandoned like an empty and useless husk as it was in the early days of the Enlightenment. For existentialist philosophy is concerned with man, whereas myth is concerned with God and gods. The only truth behind myth is therefore, as Bultmann says, the understanding of human existence which its imagery enshrines. We must first define these two tendencies with greater precision.

I

What is meant by myth? Bultmann accepts the definition of the History of Religions school—viz., that it is the presentation of the unworldly and divine in terms of the worldly and human, of the transcendent in terms of the immanent. He takes this definition for granted without stopping to ask whether it is true or appropriate to the New Testament revelation. It tells us nothing about the particular faith which the myth enshrines, but is deliberately "formal", in order to cover every possible religion. But what do we mean by form and content in this connection, and in what way do they differ from one another?
Even if we accept this definition for the moment, there is still the question whether it is appropriate to the actual content of religion. It is based on a rigid distinction between the unworldly and the worldly, the divine and the human, and sees the essential characteristic of myth in its fusion of these two distinct elements into one. That is certainly right, but does not this fusion correspond to the true nature of every religion? How else can we believe in God or speak of the gods, unless we conceive of him or of them as working and having their being in this world among us men in the same mode as men speak and work? To conceive the divine in terms of the human—that is the problem and the solution, the consolation and the mainstay of all religion. It is its secret and ultimate basis that human conceptions, while they remain human, are nevertheless capable of apprehending the divine and so surpass all human conception. On Bultmann's definition, however, it follows that myth is the language of all religion, the form in which it is expressed, and that to demythologize a religious proclamation of whatever kind is to condemn every religion to silence and therefore to destroy it. Bultmann himself is alive to this consequence, for he says at one point: "Anyone who asserts that to speak of an act of God at all is to use mythological language is bound to regard the idea of an act of God in Christ as a myth. But let us ignore this question for the moment." But can this question be ignored once the problem of demythologizing has been raised?

At this point it would seem that Bultmann is helped by the nature of myth itself. For myth contains many elements which are irrelevant to the pure relation between God and man and between God and the world. For instance, there is the idea of heaven as a kind of vault suspended over the edges of the earth's disk, of an underworld like a turbulent cauldron in a deep, dark cavern under the lid of the earth, of the stars as spirits which control human destiny. There is abundant material of this sort in the New Testament, and so far from being the lumber of a past age, it is embedded in the heart of the gospel. For instance, what becomes of the miracles of Jesus, in which evil spirits are cast out and all manner of sickness is healed? This is just a further example of the way in which myth combines religious utterance and objective definition. It borrows material from the system of objective conceptions and historical circum-
stances and uses it to explain in narrative or teaching, in oracular utterance or rule, in controversy or judicial pronouncement, what it has to say of the pure relation between God and man. It is always tempting to peel off the historical shell and extract the pure and fruitful kernel, but, as with any tradition, that is to do violence to the inner and unbreakable unity in which permanent truth and historical form are combined in myth as in other things. This may be shown from an illustration which Bultmann uses himself. Bultmann holds that the mythical eschatology "is untenable for the simple reason that the parousia of Christ never took place as the New Testament expected. History did not come to an end, and—as every schoolboy knows—will continue to run its course." That is certainly right. But is all eschatology on that account "untenable"? Why is it that during the classical ages of Christianity the Last Day has always been a close and familiar friend whose arrival was hourly expected? And that not only in the sectarian fringe, but in the heroes of the Christian faith like Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, to mention only a few. That the Lord is nigh, that the believer is standing at the end of time and history—is only a way of expressing the utimacy and the certainty of the truth and reality which the Christian confesses in faith. We shall have more to say about this in a moment.

We must pursue Bultmann's theses further. He emphasizes that myth by its very nature demands demythologizing. All myth, he says, requires not cosmological but anthropological or, better, existential interpretation. The conception of such an interpretation itself is important. It is certainly true that myth speaks of the existence of man—or rather, of man-in-faith; it speaks of the limits and the foundations of his world, of the powers which control it, which confront him with succour or demand. Certainly there is knowledge of human existence to be derived from every myth. But is that the whole story? Is that the only purpose of myth? Even if all religion (and religion always uses the language of myth) were exclusively concerned with the relation between God and man, the existentialist approach would be too narrow to comprehend its whole range. For religion knows that divine power only as the foundation or limit of this existence, not what that divine power is in itself in its absolute independence and self-sufficiency. God is more than
just the foundation or condition of human existence. It is just here that the enigma of myth lies: it dares to speak of an absolute Deity in human words and with analogies from human relationships, and moreover is successful in doing so. In other words, the existentialist interpretation of myth provides the clue to only one aspect of the relation and the gulf between God and man, but it cannot do justice to the wonder of its full range and depth. Almost more important is that other relation between God and the world. Hence the cosmogonies, which are always the most perspicuous examples of myth. Of course, an existentialist interpretation does not ignore this other relation, but, as Bultmann’s essay shows, the importance of the world in that interpretation is limited to providing the stage for human life. But God is the true centre of the world as well as of man. It would be more in accord with the spirit of myth to regard man as just one element in an infinite universe—even the New Testament does so in clear and classical language; it says, not “God so loved mankind”, but “God so loved the world”. And this limitation becomes even more acute when this world, in the sense of familiar and tangible reality, is handed over to man’s control. The teaching of myth at this point is rather the reverse, that man, as tangible reality, is handed over to the control of the world. In other words, human life is just one element in the universe and, moreover, both have their source in God and rest in his hands. Myth revolves round the inexhaustible wealth of these relations between God and the world and man: it lives and springs like a ceaseless fountain from these three sources of theology, cosmology, and anthropology.

II

If things so stand with regard to myth, what does “demythologizing” then mean? We will not press the point that Bultmann defines it in a kaleidoscopic variety of ways. Its literal meaning, which it bears in large parts of his essay, is the removal of the inappropriate mythical garb with the false objectivity of its cosmic imagery—and this means the abolition of the myth. But elsewhere it has a different meaning—the interpretation of the myth in the existentialist sense—and this means the preservation of the myth. For every interpretation preserves the text: the text is not only its material, but the master which it endeavours to serve. From a logical point of view, however, these two conceptions are not mutually exclusive, especially if Bultmann is right in regarding the true sense of myth as the disclosure of the “self-understanding of man”, and the objectivizing imagery with its implied mythical world view the inadequate means for the expression of that sense. Now, that is to make the interpretation the master and judge of the myth it is interpreting, instead of keeping it in its rightful place as a servant. What right have we to do that? Sometimes Bultmann says this is the task of the theologian, sometimes the task of preaching, of the parson in the pulpit. But are theology and preaching the same thing? Only if theology is simply the proclamation of faith and proclamation the same as theology. But that would be the end of theology as a science, and there could hardly be a keener champion of theology as a science than Bultmann. His discussion with secular existentialist philosophy would also be rendered superfluous, a point to which we shall return at a later stage. More important for the moment is the question whether it is the task of Christian proclamation to give an existentialist interpretation, and whether it lies within its competence to do so. Here we touch on a great problem which has often been neglected. All Christian preaching is based upon the New Testament as the title-deeds of its revelation and faith. The New Testament provides preaching with its subject matter and principles, its truth and reality. But the relation between preaching and the New Testament is a curious combination of subservience and freedom. On the one hand the New Testament is an historical document relating to a long-vanished past, with its own peculiar concepts and images, its problems and solutions, its doubts, needs, and troubles, its hopes, consolations and promises, all of which are quite different from our own. In respect of these the Christian proclamation is free. For its standard and its centre lie in the faith vouchsafed to it in the here and now, in the revelation which is its abiding heritage; Jesus Christ the same yesterday and to-day and for ever. On the other hand, Christian preaching is grounded upon that revelation, which it must obey as the “steward of the mysteries of God”. In this sense it is bound to the letter of the documents of this revelation. This blending of freedom and subservience springs from the distinctive charac-
ter of the revelation. It is an historical religion, and at the same time the final, eschatological, only true religion—Jesus Christ, not only yesterday, but to-day and for ever. In other words, this freedom and subservience are once more a reflection of the Word made flesh. This subservience and freedom apply to each separate book and to the document as a whole, to every chapter and every sentence, to the earliest Christian confession and the earliest Christian world view, to mythical miracle and historical event. All this is at once the ground and abyss of faith, its encouragement and stumbling-block, its mainstay and problem, its answer and question. There have been times in the history of Christianity when the whole of revelation has seemed to be comprehended in myth so-called, and other times when it has seemed to be comprehended in the historical reality of the Master. Many ages have seen only the Christus Rex, while others—one need think only of St Francis of Assisi—have seen only the humble and kindly Brother who conquered the world by love. The secret behind this constant swing of the pendulum—whose mid-point is always the same—is that each successive generation is faced anew with the privilege and responsibility of apprehending and realizing the whole of God’s revelation in the whole of its contemporary life and time. This is what moulds tradition and destroys it, affirms and denies, creates myths and abandons them. And although Christianity may often take a wrong turning or be led astray by the spirit of the age, it may always be sure that the Spirit of God is leading it into all truth, even though that assurance may often be shattered and may have to be fought for all over again. In this never-ceasing process, often frustrated, often getting bogged down in the mire of human sin, but always rising again—in this process of appropriation, even demythologizing has its proper place. But demythologizing is not confined to the destruction of myths in order to extract the existential kernel and enjoy the fruit, whether it be sweet or bitter to the taste. It also means to appreciate that myth is the mode in which God reveals himself, and that the apparently empty and worn-out husk is the symbol of the historicity of that eschatological revelation of God in which “the Word became flesh”. And that applies not only to the central event of salvation, to Christ himself, but also what we call the mythical world view which provides the framework of the picture. Even to say “Our Father which art in Heaven” is to make a confession of faith which depends on a three-storied universe of heaven, earth, and hell.

You will immediately protest that I am canonizing every syllable of the New Testament as if it were part of the unchanging wisdom of God, and that I am varnishing its errors and its obsolete thought with the splendour of abiding truth. Surely, you will say, this is shutting up the revelation of God in the sanctuary, cutting it off from all that is true in modern thought, and erecting a wall between them which gets harder to penetrate the longer it lasts. But such an objection only betokens a profound misconception of the change which the Christian revelation has undergone in the course of history. The sole reason for this change is that the Christian revelation allies itself with the thought of each successive age, and so makes faith and appropriation possible. At this point, however, we meet another difficulty. Bultmann has handed out the task of demythologizing not only to the New Testament proclamation, but also to theology, and how important that task is in his eyes may be seen from the space he gives to the discussion of a profane existential philosophy.

What then does demythologizing mean in the field of scientific theology? A theology of the New Testament has but one all-embracing task, which is to give a lucid and methodical presentation of the New Testament material with due regard to its systematic relations and the varied nature of its historical background. Hence it is not enough simply to reproduce the material word for word as past history or to ossify it as timeless, abstract doctrine. There is only one way in which to present it—that is, in a way which not only answers the question: What was it actually like? but also the further question: what “it” now is which really was then. Now, whatever else may be said of it, the New Testament material—and here Bultmann is quite right—is undoubtedly mythological. By designating it as such we have already advanced one step in defining what that material is, though that step is based on science and not demanded by faith. We have recognized its affinities with and more particularly its differences as regards the nature of its myth from the documents and contents of other religions. But the language of myth is not that of science. In the one we have imagery,
parable, and the reality of a divine-human event: in the other, the abstract concept and the truth of historical fact. At this point therefore demythologizing means the translation of the New Testament material from the language of myth into that of science. This is a possible procedure, as there is only one truth, which is intended by both kinds of language, and it is a necessary procedure, as the New Testament material assuredly contains perceptible truth. For myth never recognized any limit to its applicability, any more than modern science does. Both are potentially capable of drawing all truth into their own sphere, and even where something happens which does not fit into its conceptions, it is brought into relation with those conceptions, and even the most ordinary occurrence may become the vessel of a mythical revelation. Take for instance that famous text from the Fourth Gospel: "And it was night." In such instances it would be wrong to set aside the mythological element because of its supposed incompatibility with modern thought. Instead, we must try to ascertain the abiding truth it enshrines and accept its mythical expression as a symbol of the unique character of its historicity. This is the same process which the scientific historian applies to every historical fact—a process which must be applied anew in each successive generation, and which testifies to the inexhaustible vitality and fruitfulness of the tradition.

Two questions may be asked at this point. The first concerns the scientific concept. Is it really capable, as we have assumed, of comprehending and defining religious truth in all its fullness? We hear so much, especially in the New Testament, of the inexhaustible riches and the unsearchable nature of the religious or mythical revelation, and that makes us ask whether it is not a hopeless task to try to define it in the concepts of science, which after all are only human. This is the old problem of "negative theology" so called, which we can only deal with summarily here. For it would require a thorough and methodical examination of the nature of religion and its relation to other branches of human knowledge. In so far as all these branches may be classified under the concept of the one truth, and in so far as this truth is precisely the aim and task of scientific apprehension, to that extent that concept is capable of apprehending the truth in all the data of religious experience. It apprehends it in the way appropriate to it—that is, it investigates the possibility and necessity of it in the strict sense, and leaves it for faith to affirm in action this possibility as the ultimate truth. Thus faith is left free to perform its own essential function, while scientific apprehension assesses its rationality. In other words, the idea of an historical or even of a mythical revelation requires to be apprehended in two ways. In so far as it is historically given, it may be classified with other knowable historical data. For it is a fundamental proposition and a fundamental fact of the New Testament that God has revealed himself fully and completely at the end of history in his Son. And in so far as it is revelation, it demands the assent of faith—which is the justification of speaking of the unsearchability of the revelation. It is the characteristic of religion that it submits itself unreservedly to thought, and in the very act of doing so transcends all thought. The second question is whether the translation of myth into the language of concept leads to the existentialist interpretation rather than any other. Rightly understood, and with the reservations of which I have already spoken, the concept of existence in this sense is not open to any objection: it simply means man standing before God in judgement and grace. Of course the New Testament has much more to say than this idea of human existence in faith. It speaks of the kingdom of God, it speaks of the world, of its passing away and its coming into being, though all these things are obviously related to existence in faith. But it is quite another matter to interpret this idea of existence in faith in terms of this existentialist philosophy. With that philosophy existentialist interpretation has only this much in common—though the connection is absolutely firm and inalienable: it defines the place which religion occupies in its system. In this way it furnishes the terminology for the definition of religion, as it does for any other science. Its function is thus of a methodological or logical nature, and therewith it embraces theology as for instance it does natural science. But on the actual subject matter of theology it has no more right to pontificate than it has about physics, and it makes no difference whether the philosophy be existentialism or naturalism or idealism or materialism. It may be true that existentialist philosophy arrives in the end at statements almost identical with those of Christian theology, but that is not because it is a philosophy, but because it borrows its thesis from other spheres which belong to another kingdom and another order, or
else it posits them dogmatically. Certainly the theologian, or more precisely the apologist, has the additional task of assessing the primary justification of its own propositions and of detecting surreptitious importations from alien spheres. And in this task demythologizing has also a part to play, in bringing to light the original deposit of truth which the mythical language of the New Testament conceals just as much as it reveals. But this task belongs to a wider field, where the controversy between Christian faith and a so-called new Weltanschauung is being carried on. My impression—it is only a personal impression, and I cannot stop to argue the point now—is that existentialist philosophy is no more than a secularized form of Christian theology. It has borrowed a number of propositions from Christianity and wrested them from the context of faith on which all theological affirmations depend for their existential reality.

III

Thus the problem of demythologizing seems to belong to two spheres; though perhaps it would be better not to speak of two distinct spheres, but of two interconnected approaches to the subject. For they are both concerned with the same object, and both are demanded by it. God requires faith—an almost tautological statement, but it includes the requirement of a believing theology. By this I mean a theology which starts with faith, raises it to a knowledge informed by faith, and produces a theological system. Every word of faith and every word of revelation which faith apprehends is not content until it has found its proper place in a believing theology. Every halting, unspoken prayer is at heart a theological affirmation or a theological idea. They differ only in degree, in the extent to which they are conscious and explicit in word and thought. But in unfolding itself like this, faith follows the categories of scientific thinking and assesses its own validity in accordance with the rules of judgement and conclusion. And here we are concerned not only with an external system of concepts embracing the object of theological affirmations but with the thing itself, with the nature of the concept as it is appropriate to the object of faith. Thus believing theology can begin its work by taking for granted a system of theological concepts and affirmations with a proved scientific basis. And how could it be otherwise, seeing that every judgement of faith is a judgement in the real sense of the word with its proper place in a whole system of judgements, which follows the pattern of scientific thought? But just as believing theology needs scientific theological thinking, so in its turn scientific theological thinking needs believing theology. For the task of scientific theology is to assess the possibility and necessity of what faith asserts. And this task is a legitimate one, as certainly as the object of faith (particularly when it provides the foundations for all possible objects or, in religious language, when it creates them) still remains the object of faith and is the immediate and exclusive object of human activity. And this task is not only developing systematically in the present, it has done so historically throughout the past. Thus the two kinds of theology need each other, and we may best define their relation by adapting a famous dictum of Kant: "Without believing theology all scientific theology is empty, and without scientific theology all believing theology is blind." What then will demythologizing mean for these two kinds of theology? We have seen already that it is a legitimate task for the scientific interpretation of the New Testament, though not because it is myth, but because that myth is given in history. In this connection therefore the interpretation of myth does not differ essentially from that of any other expression of faith—e.g. a dialogue, a doctrine, or a prayer. Interpretation must always establish the permanent content of truth behind the mode of expression, and ascertain why historically it was uttered in that particular mode. As on the day which created it, myth must be refashioned from the possibilities furnished by its content and history, and its form and content redefined: its obsolete elements must be removed and its permanent truth restated. In this way scientific theology teaches us that myth and history are not opposites, but complementary aspects of the same truth. This may be illustrated from the call of Moses or the covenant of Mount Sinai, or from the death and resurrection of Jesus. Scientific theology teaches us the questionable character alike of myth and history—indeed, one may say of the history of redemption and of the history of the world, of revelation and of the nations. It teaches us both the connection and the difference between them, and that both always
are worthy of new questions. In all this activity, which owing to
the investigator and his subject matter is rarely brought to a con-
cclusion, scientific theology must adhere faithfully to the text and
to what the text says. Its task is to remember and meditate upon
the text, though it must never make that the determining prin-
ciple of its activity or the reality by which it stands or falls. Its re-
quirement is, to apply a much misused word, relevance, or, more
accurately, objectivity. When the truth is established as valid
apart from the investigator himself, scientific theology has
achieved its aim. For believing theology, on the other hand,
demystifying has quite different implications. It is the hall-
mark of Protestant theology and Protestant faith that it never en-
trenches itself in a province of its own where it can enjoy its own
content untouche by outside movements and upheavals. Its weak-
ness is that it has too often surrendered to the spirit of the age.
Yet that weakness is also its strength, for despite its association
with the world, it has managed to preserve the unbounded freedom
of its own faith and its location by God in the here and now. This
is a matter for wonder and gratitude. That is why Protestant the-
ology cannot, as Catholic theology could and does, ignore the
challenge of demystifying. It is therefore the special voca-
tion of Protestant theology to associate itself with all the develop-
ments in science, and to reap the fruits from all the trees of
secular knowledge. It cannot therefore ignore the challenge of
demystifying and, since that problem has a legitimate place in
scientific theology, it becomes its own problem too. But believing
theology engages in demystifying with quite a different
purpose—not to bring criticism to bear upon myth, nor yet to
eliminate myth, but to experience in the process the purity
and godliness of its own revelation and affirmations of faith.
Myth can become the solid rock on which the faith is built,
the place where believing theology can experience the wonder
of its own faith. But it can also become the rock of offence which
must be surmounted if that theology is to acquire a clearer and
purer understanding of itself. This applies, however, not only
to myth but, as we have seen, to every sentence in the New
Testament. Only under the pressure of doubt, doubt in every-
thing and doubt in itself, can theology experience the triumphant
power of its divine vocation. To have its faith tried and tested
in the fires of doubt is of the very essence of Protestant theology.

It may freely admit both its strength and its weakness, but it
knows that the act of God which is the ground of its own ex-
perience is greater than myth, and that it can experience that
act more genuinely the more it penetrates behind mythology
to the essential core of truth. Protestant theology knows that
myth is the mode in which God has chosen to reveal himself.
That revelation is a treasure which we have to bear in earthen
vessels, not only because we are men of earth, but because it
has pleased God to place it in this vessel. It is not for us to smash
the vessel, but to make proper use of it and to learn that after all
it is an earthen vessel. The more sincerely we devote ourselves
to the cause of demystifying, the more surely shall we
preserve the treasure God has given us.