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Myth and Contemporary Theology

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The term *myth* (Greek *mythos*) occurs five times in the New Testament — four of them in the pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 1: 4, 4: 7; 2 Tim. 4: 4; Tit. 1: 14; 2 Pet. 1: 16). In each instance it signifies the fiction of a fable as distinct from the genuineness of the truth (*cf.* 2 Tim. 4: 4, '. . . turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto myths '). This is in complete harmony with the classical connotation of the term, which from the time of Pindar onwards always bears the sense of what is fictitious, as opposed to the term *logos*, which indicated what was true and historical. (This consideration sheds an interesting ray on John's use of the term *Logos* as a title for Christ, Jn. 1: 1, 14, and Paul's frequent use of it as a synonym for the gospel which he proclaimed.) Thus Socrates describes a particular story as ' no fictitious myth but a true logos ' (Plato *Timaeus* 26E). It is also the term's connotation during the period of the New Testament. Thus Philo speaks of those ' who follow after unfeigned truth instead of fictitious myths ' (*Exsecr.* 162) and Pseudo-Aristeas, using an adverbial form, affirms that ' nothing has been set down in Scripture to no purpose or in a mythical sense ' (*mythōdōs, Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates*, 168). In the English language, too, the *mythical* is ordinarily synonymous with the fabulous, the fantastic, and the historically inauthentic.

In contemporary theological discussion the term *myth* has achieved a special prominence. This is to a considerable degree the result of Rudolf Bultmann's demand for the ' demythologization ' of the New Testament, that is, for the excision or expurgation from the biblical presentation of the Christian message of every element of ' myth '. In Bultmann's judgment, this requires the rejection of the biblical view of the world as belonging to ' the cosmology of a pre-scientific age ' and as therefore quite unacceptable to modern man (see *Kerygma and Myth*, SPCK, London, 1953). In effect, it amounts to the elimination of the miraculous or supernatural constituents of the scriptural record since these are incompatible with Bultmann's own view of the world as a firmly closed system, governed by fixed natural laws, in which there can be no place for intervention ' from outside '. John Macquarrie, however, justly criticizes Bultmann for being ' still obsessed with the pseudo-scientific view of a closed universe that was popular half a century ago' (*An Existentialist Theology*, SCM Press, London, 1955, p. 168), and Emil Brunner complains that in claiming ' that our faith must eliminate everything that suspends the " interrelatedness of Nature " and is consequently mythical ' Bultmann ' is using, as a criterion, a concept which has become wholly untenable ' (*The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, Dogmatics*, vol. II, Lutterworth Press, London, 1952, p. 190).

It is Bultmann's contention that the central message or *kerygma* of Christianity is incredible to modern man so long as it is presented in the mythical setting of the biblical world-view, and that the latter constitutes an offence which is not at all identical with the true and ineradicable offence or *skandalon* of the Christian proclamation. He accordingly finds it necessary to discard such obviously (on his premisses) mythical elements as Christ's pre-existence and virgin birth, His deity and sinlessness, the substitutionary nature of His death as meeting the demands of a righteous God, His resurrection and ascension, and His future return in glory, also the final judgment of the world, the existence of spirit-beings, the personality and power of the Holy Spirit, the doctrines of the Trinity, of original sin, and of death as a consequence of sin, and every explanation of events as miraculous. It is self-evident that this process of demythologization, when carried through with the thoroughness Bultmann displays, mutilates the Christianity of the New Testament in so radical a manner as to leave it unrecognizable. The stature of Jesus is reduced to that of a mere man

(*cf. Theology of the New Testament*, vol. II, SCM Press, London, 1955, pp. 46, 75) and the Christ-event is transformed from an objective divine intervention into ' a relative historical phenomenon ' (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 19). And it is in this, according to Bultmann that the real offence of Christianity lies: the linking of our redemption with God's choice of an ordinary mortal individual, no different from every other man, and of an event, in no way miraculous or supernatural (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 43), which in its essential relativity belongs to the normal order of all mundane events.

Bultmann's relativism goes hand in hand with subjectivism. The relevance of the Christ-event assumes a merely subjective significance. Neither the incarnation nor the resurrection of Christ, for example, are to be understood as datable events of the past, but as ' eschatological ' events which are to be subjectively experienced through faith in the word of preaching (*cf. Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 41, 209; *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. I, SCM Press, London, 1952, p. 305). It is, in fact, only *my* experience, here and now, that can have any authenticity for me — not anything that has happened in the past or that will happen in the future. In short, the Christian message is compressed within an existentialist mould. History and eschatology are to be understood in terms of pure subjectivism. Pronouncements about the deity of Jesus are not to be interpreted as dogmatic pronouncements concerning His nature but as existential value-judgments, not as statements about Christ but as pronouncements about me. Thus, for example, the objective affirmation that Christ helps me because He is God's Son must give place to the subjective value-judgment of the ' moment ' that He is God's Son because He helps me (*The Christological Confession of the World Council of Churches*, in *Essays*, (SCM Press, London, 1955, p. 280). Truth, in a word, is identified with subjectivity.

While the message of Christianity is, beyond doubt, in the truest sense existential and contemporaneous and demands the subjective response of faith, yet the faith it requires is faith in an objective reality. When robbed of its objectivity, the ground of which is God's free and supernatural intervention through Christ in the affairs of our world, Christianity becomes a drifting idea, an abstraction, a rootless idealism,

an ungraspable balloon loosed from its moorings. Bultmann's ' confusion of the question of the world-view with that of Myth ', criticizes Brunner, ' and the effort to adapt the Christian Faith to " modern " views of life, and to the concepts of existential philosophy, comes out continually in the fact that he " cleanses " the message of the New Testament from ideas which necessarily belong to it, and do not conflict with the modern view of the world at all, but only with the " self-understanding ", and in particular with the prejudices, of an Idealistic philosophy '; while in his conception of history Bultmann ' is lacking in insight into the significance of the New Testament *eph hapax*, of the " once-for-all-ness " (or uniqueness) of the Fact of Christ as an Event in the *continum* of history ' (*Dogmatics*, vol. II, pp. 267, 268).

Yet, while realizing that in Bultmann's programme of demythologization ' what is at stake is nothing less than the central theological question of revelation, of " Saving History ", and the knowledge of God as a " Living God ", who is the Lord of Nature and of History ' (*Dogmatics*, vol. II, p. 186), Brunner refuses to ' give up the right to criticize this or that recorded miracle, this or that marvel as due rather to the " myth-forming imagination " than to the historical fact ' (*ibid.*, p. 192). In other words he is prepared to concur with the judgment that in the New Testament there are mythical elements which require to be eliminated; but as a demythologizer he is unwilling to proceed to such radical lengths as does Bultmann. When, however, we find him repudiating doctrines like the virgin birth of Christ, His bodily resurrection (whence the unbiblical ' liberal ' distinction between ' the historic Jesus ' and ' the risen Christ '), His bodily ascension, and the general resurrection at the last day, we perceive that he is definitely moving in the same direction as Bultmann, even though, unlike Bultmann, he seeks to defend his procedure by arguing that these doctrines formed no part of the original *kerygma* (*ibid.*, pp. 352ff.). But none the less, despite his criticisms of Bultmann, ' modern science ' plays a determinative role in Brunner's thinking. Thus Brunner emphasizes that he ' cannot say too strongly that the biblical view of the world is absolutely irreconcilable with modern science ' (*ibid.*, p. 39); and he assures us that ' the position of modern knowledge forces us to abandon ' the definite picture of space, of time, and

of the origins of life given in the biblical story of creation (*ibid.*, p. 31). And so he rejects as myths the Genesis accounts of creation and Paradise (*cf. ibid.*, p. 74). Likewise he affirms the need for the demythologization of statements concerning the form in which the event of Christ's *parousia* will take place, on the grounds that they are 'pronouncements of the New Testament which are clearly mythical, in the sense that they are in fact unacceptable to us who have no longer the world-picture of the ancients and the apostles' (*Eternal Hope*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1954). Again, and inversely (!), new discoveries may reinstate as respectable certain aspects of the biblical world-picture which 'modern science' was thought to have exposed as mythical: for example, the doctrine of the sudden end of human history which 'until recently seemed to be only the apocalyptic fantasies of the Christian faith has today entered the sphere of the soberest scientific calculations', with the result, says Brunner, that 'this thought has ceased to be absurd, *i.e.*, to be such that a man educated in modern scientific knowledge would have to give it up' (*ibid.*, p. 127). And so our modern man, so educated, must now be invited to de-demythologize at this point where he had so recently and with such approval demythologized!

Karl Barth, whose approach to the question of the authority of Scripture is governed by premisses akin to those accepted by Bultmann and Brunner, wishes to establish a distinction between *myth* on the one hand and *saga* or *legend* on the other. By 'legend', however, he means what the other two understand by 'myth', as Brunner in fact acknowledges (*Dogmatics*, vol. II, p. 74, note). Legend, according to Barth, does not necessarily attack the substance of the biblical witness, even though there is uncertainty about what he calls its 'general' historicity. (*i.e.*, its historical truth as generally conceived), whereas he views myth as belonging to a different category which 'necessarily attacks the substance of the biblical witness' inasmuch as it pretends to be history when it is not, and thereby throws doubt on, indeed denies, what he calls the 'special' historicity of the biblical narratives (*i.e.*, their special significance as history between God and man), thus relegating them to the realm of a 'timeless truth, in other words, a human creation' (*The Doctrine of the Word of God, Church Dogmatics*, vol.

I, part I, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1936, pp. 375ff.). This, however, is principally a matter of definition: where Bultmann and Brunner use the term 'myth' Barth prefers to use 'legend'.

There is one further definition of myth to which attention must be drawn, that, namely, which in effect equates it with symbolism, and relates it to the inherent inability of human language to express adequately the things of God. Thus Brunner maintains that 'the Christian *kerygma* cannot be separated from Myth' since 'the Christian statement is necessarily and consciously "anthropomorphic" in the sense that it does, and must do, what Bultmann conceives to be characteristic of the mythical — " it speaks of God in a human way " ' (*Dogmatics*, vol. II. p. 268). And in the same connection Bultmann explains that 'mythology is the use of imagery to express the otherworldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side' (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 10). To eliminate myth in this sense would mean that it would become impossible for man to say anything about God, or for God to say anything intelligible to man, for we have no other medium of expression than the terms of this world. But it certainly does not follow that the terms of this side must always be given a symbolical (= mythological) meaning, or that they are always inadequate for the purpose intended. While there is indeed much symbolism in the New Testament, it is evident also that many things there are intended in a literal sense, and that events, for example Christ's ascension, are described phenomenally (*i.e.*, from the quite legitimate point of view of the observer). Finally, it must be stressed that the concept of myth which we have been discussing in this article is incompatible with the Reformed doctrine of Holy Scripture. The Christ of the Bible is *The Logos*, not a *mythos*; He needs no demythologization at the hands of human scholars.

Bibliography

Major works are mentioned above in the course of the article. The following should also be consulted: P. E. Hughes, *Scripture and Myth*, Tyndale Press, London, 1956; I. Henderson, *Myth in the New Testament*, SCM Press, London, 1952; F. Gogarten, *Demythologizing and History*, SCM Press, London, 1955; N. B. Stonehouse, 'Rudolf Bultmann's Jesus ', in *Paul Before the Areopagus*, Tyndale Press, London, 1957.

Note

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