

NOTES

A RECENT INTERPRETATION OF BULTMANN

A glance at the three volumes edited by H. W. Bartsch under the title, *Kerygma und Mythos*,¹ will give some idea of the momentous discussion launched in Protestant theological circles by Rudolf Bultmann. Bartsch's work gathers together a great number of articles by different authors—Lohmeyer, Sauter, Schniewind, Barth, Buri, Jaspers, *et al.*—giving their critiques of Bultmann along with his replies. This vast controversy, which has occupied German Protestant theology since the end of the war, was set in motion by a conference of Bultmann, published in 1941 in the *Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie* and entitled, "Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen." It is known today as *Neues Testament und Mythologie*, with its explanatory subtitle, *Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*.

According to Bultmann the New Testament picture of the world is couched in mythological terms. Myth explains in earthly terms the supra-terrestrial world in which it believes. This type of thought is opposed to scientific thought and even destroys it, since it introduces the arbitrary quality of mysterious powers. For modern thought formed by science this mythological image of the world is radically unacceptable. Moreover, man knows himself as a personal, unified reality and cannot admit that his life can be transformed by the intervention of strange elements or powers. Thus the understanding that modern man has acquired of himself shuts him off from this mythological conception.

On considering the New Testament we find that its message is clothed in mythological forms. We have a world with three levels; heaven is the dwelling place of God, hell is the place of torments, and earth is the place where the action of the supernatural powers interferes with the natural course of events, where miracles are performed.

Much more serious is the fact that the event of salvation is represented in mythological terms. God's action in Christ, the principal theme of the Christian message, is presented in the mythological terms of the Jewish apocalyptic and the Gnostic myth of redemption. There is the divine pre-existent being who comes to earth. There is his death on the cross meriting and effecting the pardon of our sins. His resurrection inaugurates the great upheaval of the end of time when death, introduced by the sin of Adam, is destroyed. The Son ascends to the right of God. There is the doctrine of the sacraments with the idea that the spiritual life can be nourished by

¹ Hamburg: H. Reich, B. I, zw. Aufl., 1951; B. II, 1952; B. III, 1954.

material means, the idea of adoptive filiation, etc. Modern scientific thought has demolished these mythical representations and made them completely unacceptable to modern man.

The solution lies in a radical process of demythologizing (*Entmythologisierung*). This is not to be identified with the methods of the old liberal theology which eliminated the properly kerygmatic note of the New Testament, the decisive action of God. Bultmann's demythologizing intends to bring out the message in all its force and to keep the truth of the kerygma *qua* kerygma. This message must be translated into a language that the man of today can understand. The authentic demythologizing will eliminate the anthropomorphic representation that the New Testament myth presents of the transcendence of God. The true demythologizing is conceived as an existential interpretation of the Christian myth. Against this, modern man will raise no objection.

The biblical message is an existential and personal one. It is not theoretic; it does not set itself up on the terrain of speculation. If it were to do so, it would no longer merit our assent. It teaches us no general doctrine on God, or on His operation in the world, or even on predestination or reprobation. It is a call to concrete man, in his *hic et nunc* existence, and it moves him to an acceptance. It centers on the call of God and the reply of man. Further, we are to interpret this message in terms of the philosophy of Heidegger (as understood by Bultmann), because this philosophy, in revealing the distress of the *Dasein*, prepares us by itself for an understanding of a Gospel message of fall and pardon.

It is to be noted, says Bultmann, that the New Testament, looked at in itself, demands to be demythologized. Representations such as the kenosis and miracles, the virgin birth and pre-existence, etc., cannot be reconciled. The process of demythologizing is already begun in the New Testament, especially in St. John.

Having indicated his motives and the meaning of his project, Bultmann reminds us that he can only trace the main lines while the full execution will mean the efforts of a whole generation of theologians.

His outline opens with an analysis of the Christian conception of human existence as it is presented outside of faith and inside of faith. After describing the existence which faith inspires, Bultmann notes that this faith as pictured in the New Testament is always faith in Christ and it follows upon an act of Christ. The New Testament message is not a doctrine on the nature of man, but the announcement of the liberating action of God, of the salvific act accomplished in Christ. Man's fall is such that without the saving action of God every act on his part is that of a fallen man. The

knowledge he can obtain of himself, especially through philosophy, brings no healing remedy with it. This knowledge only deepens the problem since by its presumption to rise above the need of healing it only succeeds in exalting pride and self-sufficiency.

Christian faith in its source is faith in sin and in the liberation from sin. Outside faith man is blind with regard to sin and does not perceive his culpable self-sufficiency. To him all doctrine of sin will necessarily appear as mythological. But in faith, where man seizes his existence as completely dependent on the gratuity of divine love, he understands that the only possibility of finding his true life is to be freed from himself and from the self-sufficiency that cuts him off from this love. It is the proper note of the New Testament that it announces this liberation. It announces that where man cannot act, God has acted for him. This is the meaning of the event of Christ.

With regard to this event the New Testament mixes the historical with the mythological. Bultmann's examination is centered on the all-important question of the cross. To bring out the realization of the act of Calvary, the New Testament uses a certain number of mythological elements—the crucifixion of the Son of God become man, expiating for our sins in his bloody sacrifice, etc. The aim of these elements is to underline the cosmic dimensions of this act, to express the real and eschatological meaning of it. It is in the measure that these dimensions are grasped, i.e., in faith, that the cross is an act ever present for us. The cross becomes a present reality in the concrete unfolding of the life of the believer.

What the New Testament tells us of the resurrection is directed solely toward expressing the full meaning of Calvary. The resurrection is an eschatological event, an object of faith, and faith in the resurrection is nothing else than faith in the cross, but the cross considered as triumphant, as the saving event. It is not a miracle destined to provoke or sustain faith.

What role is assigned to the history of Christ in the economy of salvation? Most interpreters of Bultmann have understood him to propose an interpretation that may be called subjectivistic. This means that there would be no divine event in the life or death of Christ. Nothing in this Christ-event would transcend his own time. The history of Jesus of Nazareth participates in no way in the divine history of salvation; for this history is integrally subjective. The whole drama of salvation would be enacted in the actual encounter of faith, in the new understanding that the action of God in us gives us of ourselves. This salvation would be conferred on us on the occasion of the exterior preaching proposed under the type of the preaching of the cross of Christ. But this would not be considered as the

prolongation of the preaching of Christ himself. The New Testament kerygma would have been formed after the death of Christ, in the faith of the disciples, as the fruit of their own interpretation of their phenomena of conscience and of their subjective faith. The apostolic kerygma itself would not enter, as an objective reality, into the constitution of the salvation-event. For the modern believer it would be only the occasion of a divine event in itself completely subjective. On hearing the living word preached by the heralds of the message we would be enlightened with regard to the grace of God who pardons. But the speculative, objectivizing intelligence would not perceive the divine character of this calling. Only the existential attitude of adhesion or rejection would be felt. In our adhesion, whose principle would be placed only in our free decision and not in the mythological action of a divine pneuma, we would raise ourselves to the authentic existence. Thus understood, the salvific intervention of God would be accomplished only in the interior of my existence. The history of Christ would contain nothing of it. The believer would be before a God truly encountered in the existential objectivity.

What would be the role of the history of Christ? Bultmann's intention is to maintain a certain eschatological meaning in this history, since he does not want to lose completely the idea and reality of a faith that is Christian. Bultmann's reply, say these interpreters, is vague; hence they bring forth this attempt at an answer. The crucifixion of the past is little more than an example, an indispensable inspiration, an impulse needed for our own existential decision. The whole encounter of God and the sinner takes place in the actual apprehension of the message; there is no presence of the act of God in Christ. But we can decide for the acceptance of the forgiving grace only by referring to the model of Christ, only by contemplating this acceptance in the prototype of the dying Christ.

By placing the whole content of the New Testament message in an eschatological intervention of God, Bultmann believes that he has eliminated all mythological remnants.

In view of Bultmann's proposals, the storm of controversy that followed is not surprising. Bultmann gave further expression to his thought especially in two later works, *Zu J. Schniewinds Thesen, das Problem der Entmythologisierung betreffend* in 1943, and *Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung* in 1951. These two works along with his first essay are included in Bartsch's work.

Most of the discussion on Bultmann has been carried on in Protestant circles and in the German tongue. In French there are some few articles, and from the Catholic side, mainly a short introduction to Bultmann's

theology by R. P. J. Hamer, "Une orientation de la pensée protestante: Rudolf Bultmann,"² and by R. Marlé, "Bulletin Critique. Théologie protestante: R. Bultmann et la 'Démythologisation' du message néotestamentaire."³ Oscar Cullmann notes the paucity of writings in French on this question as one of his reasons for a further critique (Cullmann first criticized Bultmann in his *Christus und die Zeit*) in "Le mythe dans les écrits du Nouveau Testament."⁴

The situation is much the same with regard to works in English. R. H. Fuller has brought out a partial translation of Bartsch's work under the title, *Kerygma and Myth*.⁵ There is also Ian Henderson's *Myth in the New Testament*.⁶ There are some scattered articles, but no complete critical study and evaluation of Bultmann. Some of the reactions of the English-speaking Protestant world will be found in Ronald Gregor Smith's "What Is Demythologizing?"⁷

In the light of all this, the value of Fr. Malevez's critical study and evaluation is inestimable.⁸ The first chapter sets forth the process of demythologizing in penetrating terms, working from the text of Bultmann to as great a clarity as is possible. The second chapter gives the philosophical background necessary to understand Bultmann and his use of Heidegger in his existential interpretation of the Christian myth, which is his conception of the process of demythologizing. After evolving Bultmann's justification for the principle of an existential interpretation, the third chapter unfolds this interpretation. In opposition to the natural and philosophical conception of existence, the New Testament message affirms the existence of an action of God; and it is this action, and it alone, that makes possible the gift, the faith, the love and the authentic existence of man.

But by this very fact the faith of the New Testament places us face to face with a very grave problem. The New Testament message treats a divine event in Christ. Is not this Christ-event (*Christusgeschehen*) mythological? This leads to the question, is it possible absolutely to demythologize the event of Christ without losing it entirely? Is it possible to give to the salvific action of God an exclusively existential interpretation? Bult-

² *Revue nouvelle*, 17 (1953), 639 ff.

³ *Recherches de science religieuse*, 41 (1953), 612-32.

⁴ *Numen*, 1 (1954), 120-35.

⁵ London: S.P.C.K., 1953.

⁶ London: SCM Press, 1952.

⁷ *Theology Today*, 10 (1953-54), 34-44.

⁸ L. Malevez, S.J., *Le message chrétien et le mythe: La théologie de Rudolf Bultmann*. Museum Lessianum, section théologique, n. 51. Paris-Brussels-Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1954. Pp. 167. 80 fr. belg.

mann thinks so. This leads to chapter four and the explanation of the salvation-occurrence which contains the most important contribution of Fr. Malevez in the interpretation of Bultmann's thought.

First an ambiguity is pointed out. Orthodox belief speaks of an event that is objectively determinable, which takes place outside of us, to which our faith is related. Bultmann unites this event so closely to faith that it is effected exclusively in faith. For him, the salvation event in Christ, when demythologized, would have no reality objectively knowable. Here is the ambiguity; for this can mean two things.

The divine event has an objective reality; God has effected something in Christ that has taken place outside of us. All that is denied is that this reality is discernible by us. This would be to maintain that it escapes our means of historical investigation. Reason cannot know it; it can be grasped only in faith. The other meaning is that the divine event has placed nothing outside of the believer; but on the occasion of the preaching of the churches or on reading the Bible God calls us interiorly. The reality of the divine act remains completely interior in this intimate calling and in the reply we give in faith, in this decision by which we choose to say that we owe to God and to His free grace our salvation, our authentic existence.

Most interpreters follow this second interpretation. Fr. Malevez defends the first one, while admitting the difficulty of eliminating all doubt. This is due in part to a lack of preciseness in Bultmann's notion of myth and consequently in his conception of an integral demythologization. Bultmann's use of myth in a strict sense and in a broader sense is carefully demonstrated along with the important results that this usage entails for his doctrine.

Bultmann's problem is clear enough. The existential and demythologized interpretation of the New Testament must leave a place for the God-event in Christ; for otherwise the content of Scripture would be reduced to the mere anthropology of modern philosophies. On the other hand, the divine event as proposed in Scripture is bound up in mythological representations. Is it possible to demythologize it completely? And after the demythologizing, what is left of the act of God in which the event that the message offers to our faith consists?

The earthly life of Jesus is inserted by Scripture in the history of salvation, but it is clothed in a mythological form. Bultmann thinks that the New Testament itself begins the process of demythologization. Thus Christ in the New Testament, unlike the gods of the mystery religions, receives a precise historical existence. History and myth are mixed in a very particular manner, in such a way, in fact, that the New Testament has not shied away from contradictions: pre-existence, birth at a precise date; kenosis, and yet a divine being performing miracles, signs.

There is a definite intention in this mixture. The *raison d'être* of the myth here is to underline the importance of the historical form of Christ and his history, to express the meaning of this human form in the history of salvation. Bultmann wants to say that in the history of Christ God has intended to notify us that He Himself works out our salvation. The Christian mythology has been chosen as the instrument of this notification.

This is clear in the affirmation of the pre-existence and the virgin birth. The meaning here is that the significance of Christ and of his history is not exhausted in his human appearance, as in the case of other men. Christ cannot be understood in terms of his intra-worldly milieu. We must try to uncover what God wants to say to us by this form, by the history of Christ, since in this history God wants to speak to us. It is to enter into this spirit and attitude that the New Testament has clothed the form of Christ in mythological representations. But these are only the covering and not the salutary act itself. They do not enter into the object proposed to our faith.

The New Testament concentrates the salvation-event in the death of Jesus on the cross and in his resurrection. To understand Bultmann's demythologization of the story of the cross, we must investigate a distinction he makes but does not explain. Fr. Malevez enlightens us on this distinction between *historisch* and *geschichtlich*. *Historisch* indicates an event, a fact, dated in time and subject to our experience and to the findings of the historical method. *Geschichtlich* is likewise an event, but it does not necessarily bear a date, nor does it offer itself to our experimental findings, e.g., creation, the divine work of salvation. The world and man that are the content of the divine events make up the *Geschichte*, and they are called *geschichtlich* when considered in their relation to the divine action.

This distinction is to be applied to the cross. It is an *historisch* event; the crucifixion is a fact. But the message has conferred on it cosmic dimensions which are announced in the mythological representations. It is a means of getting at the *geschichtlich* significance of the cross. For the New Testament the cross has the value of a *geschichtlich* event; it interests all humanity in its relation to God. Its value lies in the fact that in it is effected the liberating judgment on ourselves, on men who have succumbed to the powers of the world. God judges us, reveals us to ourselves, shows us our condition as sinners and our powerlessness to triumph by ourselves over our sin, to make our way under our own power toward the authentic existence. It is a liberating judgment in that it does not reveal our impotence to save ourselves without at the same time revealing our salvation in grace. This does not mean that Christ has merited our salvation; this would be to reintroduce the notion of vicarious satisfaction, which for Bultmann is mythological. The judgment of God is an act of God which is beyond time as far as He is

concerned. The cross accomplishes this judgment in the sense that it gives it a temporal expression. On Christ's cross God manifests the condemnation that hangs over man. He tells us of our personal condition as sinners. Hence the cross of Jesus is less an accomplishment than a notification.

This notification is prolonged by God throughout our history. The act of God, after bringing about the cross of Christ in history, brings about the kerygma in the apostles, the message of the cross; and in the Church it brings about the preaching of Christ crucified. Through this apostolic kerygma the judgment never ceases to be present to us. It becomes, in the preaching, an event that is truly *geschichtlich*, since it accompanies us all through our history and never ceases to call us in the *hic et nunc*.

This judgment, enunciated in the message, is appropriated by us in faith, or rejected in incredulity. The event takes place outside of us, but it does not manifest in this "outside of us" any trait of its transcendence; for it would then be mythological. This is why it escapes all observation, particularly the neutral, speculative, and indifferent consideration of the historian who sees in the cross only a simple past fact like so many other purely human dramas. He does not seize the *geschichtlich* character of the crucifixion. It is only in actual faith that we apprehend the act of God. Here we reach the authentic existence.

The mythological terminology of the New Testament has the purpose of bringing about the understanding of the *geschichtlich* and eschatological meaning of the *historisch* fact. The historical fact of the cross has opened a new *geschichtlich* situation.

Thus the cross, the divine event of salvation, is fully demythologized for Bultmann. The price he pays is extremely high; for the Christian can no longer find in Christ his saviour; there is no redemption objectively accomplished by and in Christ. Christ, for Bultmann, is merely the origin, the point of departure, the beginning of the notification made to us of the liberating judgment. Christ has inaugurated salvation; he has not accomplished it.

This does not mean that for Bultmann there is no act of God outside of us and that the whole work of salvation is in us. It is only the appropriation of the judgment by faith that gives it its full actuality. But this subjective faith is the appropriation of an objective act, the cross of Christ, known to us by the apostolic kerygma and the preaching of the Church. It is not exact to say that nothing has been produced by God in the death of Christ, outside of us and without us.

What of the resurrection? Its soteriological role comes to this, that in the cross of Christ God in some way accomplishes in time the liberating judg-

ment. He pronounces from eternity on our existences. The cross saves us, raises us to the authentic existence. But while manifesting very well our condemnation to death, the cross does not manifest our salvation or the triumph God has granted us over death. The introduction of the narration of the resurrection into the content of the kerygma is to notify us of this triumph.

When the message invites us to confess in faith the resurrection of Christ it will not ask us to affirm a marvelous fact accomplished and manifested in our empirical world, or an event that is distinct from the cross. It will simply tell us to open our eyes of faith, with the disciples, to the triumphant meaning of the cross. There is but one act, one event—that of the death on the cross. The resurrection is only the expression of its liberating value.

The cross of Christ and his triumph over death are only an expression of the event of grace which is accomplished every hour for each of us. The essence of the message is that the liberating judgment of God, timeless on His part, is also effected in time in the faith of those who accept the notification of it. It is this realization in our faith-full existences which constitutes the salvation-event in the full sense and transforms history (*die Historie*) into *Geschichte*, the divine history of the redemption. Christ's cross and the triumph it contains, enunciated in the message under the form of the resurrection, are an exposition—the first exposition—of this cosmic salutary event. This event is distributed over the whole sweep of time.

Fr. Malevez makes a very strong case for his interpretation of Bultmann. Clarifications are brought in from later works; objections are met and dealt with; and all is done with a constant reference to Bultmann's text.

The last chapter of the book is a critical appraisal of Bultmann's work. After indicating the possible gains to be culled from Bultmann, it points out the weaknesses and errors. The reaction of the Christian reader is summed up nicely in the plaintive and surprised note: "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have placed Him."

Fr. Malevez's study is a rich, scholarly contribution, written in an engaging style, with verve, and with a clarity that has not been bought at the expense of depth. Bultmann's thought is explained from his text, examples are fittingly used, and the objections levelled against Bultmann are met head-on and explained in the terms of Bultmann's own thought. No one, Protestant or Catholic, can neglect this work in any discussion of Bultmann. It deserves the wide circulation it cannot fail to obtain.