

# The Mission of Demythologizing

Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology

David W. Congdon

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## THE MISSION OF DEMYTHOLOGIZING

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## Preface

The present study is an expanded version of my dissertation. The oral defense occurred in January 2014 at Princeton Theological Seminary. I must begin by acknowledging my gratitude to my advisor, Bruce L. McCormack, who, over lunch in April 2008, proposed that I write on Rudolf Bultmann. I could not have asked for a more supportive *Doktorvater*. I also wish to thank the other two members of my dissertation committee, James F. Kay and Darrell L. Guder, for their guidance during my research and their assistance in the revision of the manuscript.

I am indebted to Kate Skrebutenas, the reference librarian at Princeton Seminary, for assisting me in my research. I am additionally appreciative of the Special Collections staff at the Princeton Seminary library, especially those who oversee the Center for Barth Studies, superbly curated at the time I was in Princeton by Clifford Anderson.

In the summer of 2012 I left Princeton for another community in Downers Grove, Illinois, where I joined the editorial team at InterVarsity Press. The bulk of this dissertation was written after I joined IVP, and that is a credit to the support I have received from my coworkers.

I am grateful to the Bultmann heirs for permission to publish an English translation of “Der christliche Sinn von Glaube, Liebe, Hoffnung: Skizze des am 11. Juni 1925 vor der 50. Versammlung evangelischer Religionslehrer an den höheren Lehranstalten der Rheinprovinz gehaltenen Vortrages.”<sup>1</sup> I am also grateful to Mohr Siebeck for permission to publish English translations of two essays by Bultmann: “Leitsätze von Univ.-Prof. D. Bultmann (Marburg)”<sup>2</sup> and “Über den Begriff ‘Mythos.’”<sup>3</sup> The latter essay long remained unpublished as part of the Bultmann *Nachlass*; it deserves a wide audience, and I am glad it now has the chance to be read by many more people. Additionally, my thanks to the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*—in particular to its publisher, Jim Eisenbraun, and its editor, Joel Green—for permission to use material previously published in an article with that journal.<sup>4</sup>

Several people deserve special thanks. Christophe Chalamet was an external reader of my dissertation and provided immensely helpful feedback; he also kindly sent me an early article by Bultmann. John Flett gave me valuable comments on two chapters and introduced me to the field of intercultural theology. Nathaniel Maddox assisted my research after I left Princeton and served as my liaison with the PhD Studies Office at Princeton Seminary. Alexander Massmann assisted

1. Rudolf Bultmann, “Der christliche Sinn von Glaube, Liebe, Hoffnung: Skizze des am 11. Juni 1925 vor der 50. Versammlung evangelischer Religionslehrer an den höheren Lehranstalten der Rheinprovinz gehaltenen Vortrages,” *Zeitschrift für den evangelischen Religionsunterricht an höheren Lehranstalten* 36 (1925): 170–72.
2. Published originally in Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Feigel, “Die neueste Wendung der evang. Theologie (K. Barth, Gogarten usw.) und der evang. Religionsunterricht an höheren Schulen,” *Monatsblätter für den Evangelischen Religionsunterricht* 18 (1925): 180–82. Reprinted in Rudolf Bultmann, “Leitsätze R. Bultmanns,” in Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten, *Briefwechsel 1921–1967*, ed. Hermann Götz Göckeritz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 279–80.
3. Rudolf Bultmann, “Über den Begriff ‘Mythos’ [ca. 1942–1952],” in *Bultmann–Althaus Briefwechsel 1929–1966*, ed. Matthias Dreher and Gotthard Jasper (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 89–96.
4. David W. Congdon, “Kerygma and Community: A Response to R. W. L. Moberly’s Revisiting of Bultmann,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8 (2014): 1–21.

me in translating several German passages. James Gordon generously allowed me to use his carrel at Wheaton College and requested many books that were essential to my research. Oliver Crisp kindly agreed to paint a portrait of Bultmann for the cover, for which I am most obliged; it is a striking image. My editor at Fortress Press, Michael Gibson, showed keen interest in this project from the start, and I am thankful to him and the whole Fortress team for their help in bringing the work to publication.

I am deeply thankful for two friends in particular: Travis McMaken and Chris TerryNelson. There is hardly a page that has not been worked out in conversation with them. I owe them both profound debts of gratitude for their honesty, humor, and wise counsel.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Jon and Harriet Congdon, and especially to my wife, Amy, whose forbearance, generosity, and succor have been the buttress of my life and work.



# Abbreviations

- GuV* Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*. 4 vols. Tübingen: Mohr, 1933–1965.
- KD* Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*. 4 vols. Zollikon–Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1932–1970.
- RI* Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*. Edited by Hermann Schmidt. Gesamtausgabe 2. Zürich: TVZ, 1985.
- RII* Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*. Edited by Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja. Gesamtausgabe 2. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2010.
- RGG* *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*
- WA* Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883– .



## A Note on Translation

Rudolf Bultmann fared better than most German scholars when it came to English translation, but translations of his writings were still often inconsistent or misleading or simply wrong. For this reason, all translations in this work are my own. I have followed three basic principles: (a) accuracy according to material content, (b) consistency in expression, and (c) gender inclusivity. The first principle simply means that I have made my decisions based on an overall understanding of Bultmann's theological project. The second principle means that I have attempted consistently to translate the same root words with the same English counterparts. For instance, I have translated *Geschehen* as "occurrence" and *Ereignis* as "event" in order to help readers identify which German word is being used. The terms *existential* and *existentiell* are consistently translated as "existentialist" and "existential," respectively, according to the convention of earlier Bultmann scholars, even though the distinction is largely ignored today. In continuity with more recent scholarship, I have *not* maintained the earlier tradition of differentiating between *geschichtlich* and *historisch* by using the terms "historic" and "historical." I have instead used "historical" for both and indicated the German term where context alone did not clarify the meaning. I have generally translated *Dasein* as "existence," though on other occasions I have left it as

“Dasein” in order to distinguish it from *Existenz* or to highlight Bultmann’s engagement with Heidegger. The third principle means that I have used gender-inclusive expressions for both God and human beings. I have employed reflexives like “Godself” when speaking of God and often used plural expressions in place of Bultmann’s singular where human beings are concerned. This has often meant abandoning a literal rendition of Bultmann’s text, but the result is more faithful to his meaning.

# Introduction: Bultmann—Missionary to Modernity

What is the condition of possibility for a *modern* theology? In pursuing this question, we are not asking what it is that makes a theology modern as opposed to, say, premodern. We are rather asking, in typical transcendental form: Given that there is such a thing as modern theology, what must be the case in order to make such a theology possible? What must be true about the Christian faith to make sense, for example, of Karl Barth’s “reconstruction of Christian orthodoxy” under the conditions of modernity?<sup>1</sup> At a minimum, an answer to this problem must be that *Christianity is intrinsically capable of being reconstructed*. But then, what is it about the Christian message, the gospel, that permits, even empowers, this process of reconstruction?<sup>2</sup> How does one carry out this process responsibly?

Assuming that the notion of modern theology is not dismissed outright as oxymoronic—on the basis of the false belief that the conditions for modernity are antithetical to the conditions for Christianity—a typical rejoinder is that this line of inquiry is nevertheless

1. Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 17.

2. The concepts of “gospel” and “Christian message”—used as synonyms for “kerygma”—will be defined in later chapters. In essence these terms identify what is permanent or transcultural in Christianity.

asking about the conditions of possibility for *liberal* theology, understood as a modern reinterpretation of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> The assumption is that such a theology is beyond the bounds of genuine Christianity. Liberalism is repudiated as an “accommodation” to modernity, which conforms the gospel to an alien context that demands a thorough reconstruction of traditional doctrines.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, at the same time that liberalism is disparaged as an accommodation to modernity, mission is praised as a “contextualization” of the gospel for a particular culture. This presents us with a dilemma: the same logic rejected under the name of liberalism is affirmed under the name of mission. The only discernible difference, it seems, is chronological.<sup>5</sup> Rein-

3. This is an intentionally broad definition of “liberal theology.” Bultmann refers to liberalism in generally pejorative terms to indicate a very specific form of theology against which he and Barth were reacting, one marked by idealism and historicism in particular. But Bultmann also acknowledges that his own theology contributes to a broader and less problematic conception of liberal theology, and it is the positive sense of the term that I have in mind here.
4. This view is represented most recently by Roger E. Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013). According to Olson’s narrative, modern theology is a struggle between those who “accommodated” modernity (liberals) and those who “rejected” it (conservatives and fundamentalists), while dialectical theology offered a third way that neither accommodated modernity nor rejected theology’s responsibility in the world. Karl Barth, on this reading, “held firmly to the gospel of Jesus Christ, within a supernatural frame of reference, seeking to communicate it in as relevant a way [as] possible to contemporary culture” (*ibid.*, 712). Adherence to the supernatural, however, is a mark of the rejection of modernity, and mere “relevant communication” does not count as genuine interpretation. Conservatives would never say their talk of God is irrelevant to the modern world. As we will see, Olson has missed the fact that what differentiates dialectical theology from liberal theology is *not* whether it accommodates modernity. Whereas liberalism reconstructs Christianity in *response* to modernity, dialectical theology claims that ongoing reconstruction and accommodation has always been basic to Christian faith as such.
5. Another possible point of difference between the two is that crosscultural mission today does not change the (traditional, orthodox) content but merely the linguistic mode of expression. By contrast, so the thinking goes, liberalism is a change in content as well as form. But this begs a number of questions. Most importantly, it assumes we know what the content actually is, as if the substance of the faith is a universal, self-evident given. Consequently, it also assumes we know that liberalism *does* change the content. But this ends in a vicious circle. Liberalism is defined as whatever changes the content of the faith, but the content of the faith is defined over against the changes of liberalism. The result is that the goalposts continually shift: we define as “liberal” whomever we do not like by defining as “gospel” whatever it is we think that person has reinterpreted. To define the content in terms of some set of conciliar dogmas or confessional doctrines is no clarification, since those dogmas and doctrines still have to be interpreted and are just as culturally situated as the biblical text. Beyond the question of content, there is

terpreting crossculturally is the gospel; reinterpreting crossculturally *over time*, apparently, is heresy. Christianity can be reconstructed synchronically but not diachronically. Matters are only made more confusing when we find Paul's method in 1 Cor 9:19-23 defined as "missionary accommodation."<sup>6</sup> Where exactly does mission end and the threat of liberalism begin?

The problem represented by the apparent tension between liberalism and mission comes to expression, however obliquely, in Joseph Cahill's retrospective on Rudolf Bultmann's legacy. "All forms of liberalism, be they political, social, economic, or religious," he writes, "are ultimately based on accommodation—accommodating old truths to new realities."<sup>7</sup> Later in the article, he then situates Bultmann in the context of "missionary efforts at propagating the gospel":

[Matteo] Ricci's visit to Nan-ch'angin in 1595, to Nanking in 1597, to Peking in 1601, and [Roberto] de Nobili's work in India, beginning in 1610, were brief and early flashes across the religious sky—efforts at accommodation to the realistically pluralistic world which have only recently begun to have a permanent effect. The basic question they and

the additional issue that the form-content distinction wielded by conservatives in these debates is culturally and hermeneutically naïve, as if there is any content not already shaped by cultural presuppositions and norms. Indeed, the great irony of this approach is that it is formally identical to Adolf von Harnack's husk-kernel distinction, which is a hallmark of classic liberal theology. The conservative defense of mission against liberalism ends up only repeating liberalism—and, in particular, one of its more problematic instances. The point is that the logic supporting mission is essentially identical to the logic supporting at least a basic form of liberal theology (understood as theology reconstructed within modernity). Rejecting liberalism *tout court* means either rejecting mission altogether or defining it in such a way that one ends by endorsing an imperialistic (i.e., noncontextualizing) mode of mission.

6. Michael Barram, "The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic," *Interpretation* 61, no. 1 (2007): 42–58, at 55. Certainly missiologists are keen on differentiating contextualization from accommodation, but the distinction is a slippery one. Contextualization is a broad, ambiguous concept whose meaning is contested by those on the "right" and "left." The very attempt to differentiate it from accommodation is itself motivated by the desire not to be perceived as "liberal." The assumption is that liberalism surrenders the gospel to culture and thereby exchanges orthodoxy for some kind of heterodoxy. This raises questions about whether the motivation to preserve orthodoxy (whose orthodoxy?) is a valid motivation and constraint on the theological and missionary endeavor.
7. P. Joseph Cahill, "Bultmann: Reminiscence and Legacy," *Theological Studies* 47, no. 3 (1986): 473–96, at 483.

their immediate followers raised (now surfacing in serious fashion) was whether or not different styles manifested in varying religious conventions, genres, habits, and linguistic modes of expression could conceal similar religious substances. In his own way, Bultmann raised the same question but confined it to the Bible and “modern man.” Could Christianity, by contact with supposedly alien religions, be subject to creative transformations? Could divergent axial mythologies be modified by deferential encounter? Could the assumed hegemony of one culturally postulated form of claimed transcendence create a common universe of discourse with another form? These questions posed by de Nobili and Ricci were logical extensions of the Bultmannian problematic.<sup>8</sup>

While the notion of “religious substances” is not exactly faithful to Bultmann’s thought, the problematic that Cahill describes certainly is. Unfortunately, he does not go on to thematize the question of mission and accommodation. He instead fleshes out the present cultural situation in terms of a “new axial period,” that is, a period shaped by new convictions, assumptions, and myths that shape one’s self-identity and consciousness. Cahill describes this new age as “dominated by historical consciousness.”<sup>9</sup>

By referring to historical consciousness Cahill draws on themes developed extensively by Bultmann’s contemporaries and students, especially Friedrich Gogarten and Gerhard Ebeling. According to Gogarten, the old metaphysical and teleological interpretation of the world and our existence in it, which understood the world to be the unfolding of an overarching divine plan, was replaced by a historical interpretation:

Just as the contents of a play are established beforehand in the major and minor roles which appear in it, so too the occurrences in this history are predetermined in the “spiritual substances of all hierarchies,” which “are united in the church into a mystical body, which extends from the trinity and the angels that are nearest to the trinity down to the beggar at

8. *Ibid.*, 491–92.

9. *Ibid.*, 494.

the church door and to the serf kneeling humbly in the furthest corner of the church to receive the sacrifice of the Mass.” But since history is understood in this way as a kingdom of metaphysical essences or substances, moved teleologically in itself and encompassing the entire world in this teleology, we lose precisely what we understand as the actual occurrence, namely, the living personal experiences of particular individuals in their distinctiveness and responsibility, their historical significance. Their historicity is taken away when history anticipates them by occurring within the framework of metaphysical essences. And it is only because this metaphysical framework contains the life of human beings with all that has happened that they have a part in the history which takes place there.<sup>10</sup>

Modernity is the age in which this metaphysical understanding of history was called radically and irrevocably into question, as indicated paradigmatically by the rise of the historical-critical method. “Only with the collapse of traditional western metaphysics, i.e., with the loss of its self-evident character, did the historicity of existence fully enter into consciousness,” out of which arose “the freedom, but also the absolute necessity, to regard the historical [*Historische*] in its pure historicalness [*Historizität*].”<sup>11</sup> No longer was the hierarchical and essentialist “chain of being” taken for granted. No longer was the ecclesiastical tale of our given place in God’s order accepted on faith. It was no longer assumed that the old stories could narrate each person’s identity. For those institutions and ideologies that depend on this authority, new strategies were devised to shore up faith: most notably, Roman Catholics put forward the doctrine of papal infallibility in the early 1870s, while Reformed Protestants formulated the doctrine of biblical inerrancy in the early 1880s. Both sides were able to claim that such views were held long before they were codified in

10. Friedrich Gogarten, *Entmythologisierung und Kirche* (Stuttgart: Vorwerk, 1953), 32. Gogarten is here quoting from Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* 1, 337.

11. Gerhard Ebeling, “Die Bedeutung der historisch-kritischen Methode für die protestantische Theologie und Kirche [1950],” in *Wort und Glaube I* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960), 1–49, at 33.

their modern form, and yet it is significant that these doctrines were codified when they were.

This brings us back to our starting question: what is the condition of possibility for a modern theology? To put it another way, what enables theology to address the collapse of traditional metaphysics and the rise of modern historical consciousness while remaining in genuine contact with the kerygmatic content of faith? How is it possible, to use Cahill's phrase, for Christianity to "be subject to creative transformations?"<sup>12</sup> The only satisfactory answer to this question is one that understands the logic behind such creative reconstruction as *internal* to Christianity. Understood appropriately, *mission* is this logic. It is what makes the transformations of Christian faith possible, insofar as mission is essentially the pursuit of vernacular modes of Christian existence. Mission is the daring venture of theological reconstruction. It articulates the possibility and process of (re)interpreting the faith for a new time and place. The task now, following on Cahill's suggestive remarks, is to understand this missionary impulse at the heart of Christianity in conjunction with the hermeneutical problem posed by historical consciousness. In order to address the new mission situation of modernity we need a theology, conditioned by historical consciousness, that incorporates this missionary, and thus hermeneutical, logic into its very understanding of the gospel. This brings us to the immediate concern of the present study.

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In 1965 Eberhard Jüngel put forward a bold thesis regarding the theological relationship between Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann:

12. Cahill, "Bultmann," 491–92.

As paradoxical as it may sound, Barth actually accorded to his doctrine of the Trinity (1932) the same function that the program of demythologizing performs in the theology of Rudolf Bultmann. Difference of methods and results here and there cannot obscure this. This state of affairs ought to give cause for reflection to the rash and superficial among Bultmann's critics, and indeed to critics of Barth who are always ready and willing to accuse the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* of speculation, but who are unwilling and not at all ready to read it. If we understand Bultmann's program as an effort at appropriate speaking of God (and so about humanity), and if we see this effort fulfilled in not objectifying God (or letting God be objectified) as an It or He, but in bringing God to speech as You [*Du*] and thus appropriately, then we cannot fail to see a striking parallel to the meaning Barth accords (and gives) to the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>13</sup>

Since the book within which this statement appears was written as a response to Helmut Gollwitzer's supposedly Barthian critique of the Bultmannian work of Herbert Braun,<sup>14</sup> Jüngel's words, along with the overall work itself, are a rebuke to those who would pit Barth's theology against Bultmann's, as if the ostensible marginalization of anthropological relevance in Barth's dogmatics were something worthy of praise. The rest of Jüngel's short but incisive "paraphrase" of *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* aims to demonstrate the radical implications of Barth's theology in a way that brings the latter much closer to the hermeneutical theologians, even if certain key differences remain. What Jüngel does not do, save for a brief and remarkable footnote we will look at in more detail in a later chapter, is provide the other half of the argument and show how Bultmann's demythologizing performs the same function as Barth's doctrine of the Trinity. It is the

13. Eberhard Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden: Verantwortliche Rede vom Sein Gottes bei Karl Barth: Eine Paraphrase*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986), 33–34.

14. Helmut Gollwitzer, *Die Existenz Gottes im Bekenntnis des Glaubens* (Munich: Kaiser, 1963). Cf. Herbert Braun, *Gesammelte Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1962).

aim, at least in part, of the present work to supply in detail what Jüngel merely suggested.

At the same time, Jüngel's claim is not strong enough. For one thing, to say that Barth and Bultmann bring God to speech as "You" and thus "appropriately" is hardly clear. No theologian would want to say that she brings God to speech as an "It." We need much more specification about what "speaking appropriately of God" actually means in practice. Jüngel provides specification with regard to Barth throughout the rest of the book, but it is not clear to what extent we can say the same of Bultmann. Second, the doctrine of the Trinity is not the heart of Barth's theology. To be sure, it plays a vital role at the start of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, but his dogmatics as such is determined by norms that go back to the origins of his dialectical theology in 1916, well before he had developed fully-formed doctrines. Moreover, these norms, and not his doctrine of the Trinity as formulated in 1932, are what condition the later volumes of his dogmatics. So in order to make sense of the relation between Barth and Bultmann we will need to clarify what norms his dogmatic theology. In short, we need to define just what makes dialectical theology *dialectical*. Either Bultmann's program of demythologizing is only consistent with the Barth of 1932—in which case Jüngel's observation is of highly limited value—or it is consistent with Barth's entire theological project, in which case we need to understand precisely what that project is.

If the latter is the case, as we shall argue, then we are thrust into a complicated debate over the nature and development of Barth's theology. We will wade into some of these disputes in the first two chapters. The goal is to make sense of two claims, both represented well by the work of Bruce McCormack: (a) that Barth is consistently dialectical until the end, and (b) that Barth's dialectical theology goes through various stages of development.<sup>15</sup> Both claims have a unique bearing on the understanding of Bultmann's theology. For

instance, it is widely acknowledged that Barth and Bultmann were at one point close allies, even if only for a few years in the early 1920s. Presumably, then, Bultmann must have shared Barth's dialectical theology in some respect. Two questions then arise that correspond to the two claims above: (a) what was the nature of this shared theology, and (b) who departed from whom? The standard line of interpretation has been that Bultmann was a theological tergiversator who left the dialectical movement in favor of nineteenth-century liberal theology. Barth was the first to lodge this criticism. In a 1930 letter to Bultmann, Barth said that he could only see Bultmann's recent work as indicative of "a massive return to the fleshpots of Egypt."<sup>16</sup> This interpretation has remained largely unchallenged, no doubt because Barth's star has risen while Bultmann's has fallen precipitously.<sup>17</sup> Not much has changed since 1959, when Otto Schnübbe observed that "Bultmann's concept of myth and the demand for demythologizing has dialectical theology as its presupposition. Oddly enough, this has not been clearly recognized in the discussion."<sup>18</sup> The purpose of the present work is to clarify this point.

15. For the former see Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); for the latter, see McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*.
16. Karl Barth to Rudolf Bultmann, 5 February 1930, in Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, *Briefwechsel 1911–1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, 2nd ed., Gesamtausgabe 5 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1994), 99.
17. The most notable attempt to that end is Christophe Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005). Chalamet's study will be the subject of close analysis in the opening chapter, so I will not spend much time on it here. Suffice it to say that his work suffers from an overly formal definition of dialectic that joins Barth and Bultmann by uniting them to their common teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann. While a new appreciation for Herrmann is highly significant, this approach mutes the distinctive material insights that characterize Barth's theological revolution. In particular, as I will argue, these insights are eschatological and missionary in nature. This critique notwithstanding, Chalamet's work is an excellent piece of analysis that rewards careful study.
18. Otto Schnübbe, *Die Existenzbegriff in der Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns: Ein Beitrag zur Interpretation der theologischen Systematic Bultmanns* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), 111.

In order to understand what is wrong about the standard narrative, we need to look back at the origins of dialectical theology. What is the true nature of the revolution Barth inaugurated? If Barth's theology is fundamentally about speaking appropriately of God, what does this mean? We are now in a position to unite our initial constructive inquiry into the conditions of possibility of modern theology with our historical inquiry into the nature of dialectical theology, and thus the relationship between Bultmann and Barth. My thesis is as follows: *dialectical theology is essentially a theology governed by a missionary logic, and demythologizing is the extension of this logic into hermeneutics.* In other words, dialectical theology is the consistent and systematic development of the missionary (i.e., hermeneutical) insight that forms the condition of possibility for modern theology, and Barth and Bultmann develop this insight in distinct, but not intrinsically incompatible, ways. This basic logic is what founds appropriate talk of God. We can therefore trace Barth's doctrine of the Trinity and Bultmann's program of demythologizing from this common missionary starting point. Barth and Bultmann were responding to the challenge of historical consciousness, seeking to think the gospel under the conditions of modernity. Dialectical theology thinks *within* historical consciousness *without* reducing faith to history, that is, without reducing kerygma to culture. Similarly, demythologizing does not reductively accommodate or conform the gospel to modernity, as many of its critics allege. As Bultmann states in his response to Karl Jaspers, "the goal of demythologizing is not . . . to make the faith acceptable to modern people, but rather to make it clear what the Christian faith is."<sup>19</sup> Clarifying the faith for people in a particular cultural situation is the very definition of the missionary enterprise.

19. Rudolf Bultmann, "Antwort an Karl Jaspers [1953]," in *Kerygma und Mythos, Band 3: Das Gespräch mit der Philosophie*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (Hamburg-Volksdorf: Reich, 1954), 49–59, at 50.

In carrying out his hermeneutical program, Bultmann is nothing less than a missionary to modernity.

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I will prosecute this thesis over eight chapters that fall into three parts. The first part (chaps. 1–2) sets up the problem this study interrogates and provides the necessary historical background for an appropriate response to it. The second part (chaps. 3–4) focuses on the dialectical theology shared by Barth and Bultmann, arguing for an essential continuity between them. The third part (chaps. 5–8) interprets Bultmann’s demythologizing as the necessary development of dialectical theology.

Chapter 1 begins by identifying the problem, which I call the “myth of the whale and the elephant,” based on a well-known phrase from one of Barth’s last letters to Bultmann. Barth’s description is mythological in the sense that Bultmann means the word, and thus the task of reinterpreting their relationship is itself an exercise in demythologizing. As with Bultmann’s own programmatic essay from 1941, I begin my own demythologizing program by looking at previous attempts. There is no shortage of past discussions of the Barth–Bultmann relation, but two works stand out as being of decisive significance. The first is Eberhard Jüngel’s *Gottes Sein ist im Werden* and the second is Christophe Chalamet’s *Dialectical Theologians*. Each author contributes significantly to a greater understanding of where the two theologians converge and diverge, though their respective attempts to specify the disagreement between Barth and Bultmann are unsuccessful.

A new understanding of “the whale and the elephant” needs to look at the entire history in a fresh way. To accomplish that I provide in chapter 2 a complete periodization of their relationship, which

serves to buttress my argument that it is *Barth* who departed from Bultmann, and not the other way around. While the periodization plays an important role at the beginning, the full support for this argument unfolds over subsequent chapters. The historical overview also addresses the debate over Barth's own theological development, which is integrally tied up with Bultmann's.

I turn in Part 2 to the task of laying the foundation for my constructive reinterpretation of Bultmann's hermeneutics. Chapter 3 provides the key to this foundation. Here I set forth a new definition of dialectical theology, what I have termed the "dialectical thesis." The basis for this new conception is an archaeological investigation into the origins of Barth's theological revolution. Most scholars, following the lead of Barth's later reminiscences, focus on the *Aufruf* of the ninety-three German intellectuals in October 1914. I argue that we ought to look instead at the *Aufruf* of the twenty-nine that appeared a month earlier. This document made the case for supporting Germany in the war on the grounds of the church's *mission*—a mission that was explicitly tied to Germany's colonialist activities. Barth's rejection of liberal theology can be understood, I suggest, as a rejection of a constantinian conception of mission, one that conflates the norm of the gospel with the given norms of culture. Dialectical theology is essentially an anticonstantinian theology of mission.

Having defined dialectical theology, we turn in chapter 4 to look at Bultmann's theology in systematic detail in order to see how he affirms and develops the dialectical thesis in his own writings. For the sake of clarity we will first examine his understanding of God, followed by his account of appropriate God-talk. This will serve to demonstrate the continuity between Barth and Bultmann in terms of both the object and the subject of theology. Bultmann's theology is, according to our analysis, a consistently eschatological, and thus missionary, theology. While Bultmann does not discuss the topic

of mission to the same extent as Barth, he does make the connection between eschatology and mission explicit in a few key writings, including an especially significant one from 1933, during the *Kirchenkampf*. Given this reading of Bultmann, we have to conclude that he, too, is a critically realistic dialectical theologian, though I propose replacing critical realism with correlationism to avoid ambiguity.

After chapter 4 our study turns from dialectical theology to demythologizing, understood as Bultmann's hermeneutical extension of Barth's theological revolution. The third and final part argues that the program of demythologizing is an essentially *missionary program*. There are four steps to this argument, corresponding to chapters 5–8. Chapter 5 begins by taking a fresh look at demythologizing through the lens of Eberhard Jüngel, specifically his 1990 lecture on the topic. The debate over demythologizing a half-century ago, particularly within anglophone scholarship, largely operated under the assumption that demythologizing is an apologetic strategy to make Christian faith acceptable, or at least meaningful, to modern people, and the only real dispute then was whether Bultmann went too far or not far enough. Lost amid the academic cacophony was the fact that Bultmann's program unfolded according to the logic of the kerygma itself, that is to say, according to the *truth* of myth. Contrary to widespread belief, demythologizing actually stands opposed to the Enlightenment notion that science has ruled out myth. Jüngel is one of the very few to have grasped the genuine basis and significance of Bultmann's hermeneutical project.

Now that we are properly oriented we are in need of a new framework within which to situate Bultmann's program. If demythologizing is governed by the same logic that makes dialectical theology a theology of mission, it follows that demythologizing must be a hermeneutic of mission. We would expect missiology to provide a

more adequate framework for understanding Bultmann's hermeneutic, and that is indeed the case. In chapter 6 we look at the burgeoning field of intercultural theology and hermeneutics, which developed out of and in some places has supplanted traditional missiological research. By making the intercultural encounter with the stranger the context within which to interpret the faith, intercultural theology rejects any acultural kernel that stands above the contextual nature of all theological discourse. Instead, all theology is essentially hermeneutics. I draw primarily on the work of Theo Sundermeier to flesh out a dialectical intercultural hermeneutic, which involves a critical anti-constantinianism and a constructive intercultural translation defined by appropriation (*Aneignung*) and transappropriation (*Übereignung*). I call this hermeneutic *translationism*. Translationism is the hermeneutical counterpart to the epistemology of correlationism.

"Negatively," according to Bultmann, "demythologizing is *criticism of the world-picture of myth* insofar as it conceals the real intention of myth. Positively, demythologizing is *existentialist interpretation*, in that it seeks to make clear the intention of myth to talk about human existence."<sup>20</sup> These two aspects correspond to the two sides of translationism, and they are treated in chapters 7 and 8 respectively. These chapters are the climax of the study and constitute a reinterpretation of demythologizing as a missionary or translationist hermeneutic. Chapter 7 examines Bultmann's concept of myth. Myth is composed of two elements: (a) objectifying thinking and (b) a foreign world-picture (not a worldview, as *Weltbild* has often been wrongly translated). The opposition to the first element brings demythologizing very close to Barth, since objectifying thinking is essentially what

20. Rudolf Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung," in *Kerygma und Mythos, Band 2: Diskussion und Stimmen zum Problem der Entmythologisierung*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (Hamburg-Volksdorf: Reich, 1952), 179–208, at 184. All emphasis is original unless otherwise noted.

Barth understands by the *analogia entis* or metaphysics. The concept of *Weltbild* refers to what missiologists call culture, and in this sense demythologizing frees the kerygma from conflation with a cultural context. Bultmann's program was designed from the start to provide the methodological conditions for opposing the absolutization of German culture. Demythologizing was for the Germany of the Second World War what Barth's dialectical revolution in *Der Römerbrief* was for the Germany of the First World War.

Chapter 8 completes the reinterpretation of demythologizing by examining Bultmann's account of existentialist interpretation. Bultmann's hermeneutic, like intercultural translation, involves appropriation and transappropriation, which he calls preunderstanding (*Vorverständnis*) and self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*). Existentialist interpretation is a hermeneutic of intercultural encounter, except that in Bultmann's case it is primarily the encounter with the kerygmatic subject matter (*Sache*)—the cultural other that meets us in the biblical text—which bestows a new self-understanding in the decision of faith. Bultmann understands the term *Selbstverständnis* as an *eschatological* concept that signifies the deworldizing (*Entweltlichung*) dimension of existence-in-faith. By granting a new self-understanding, the eschatological event of the kerygma frees a person from her cultural world and thus opens her to the future, that is, to new situations. Deworldizing is the soteriological engine empowering the translationist hermeneutic of demythologizing.

The conclusion presents an appropriate coda to our study by looking ahead to the future of demythologizing. Now that the old debates have been largely forgotten, the church today is in a position to look at Bultmann's contributions with fresh eyes. There are many signs that the academic engagement with Bultmann will be characterized by light and not heat. The present work aims to show that those who

embrace dialectical theology and those who embrace the mission of the church have every reason also to embrace Bultmann's hermeneutical program.<sup>21</sup>

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Heinrich Balz opens his foundational essay on hermeneutics and mission by clarifying the necessity of interpretation. "Hermeneutics is necessary," he says, "because the truth is elusive. What is normal, commonplace, and apparently self-evident largely reveals what is false and conceals what is true."<sup>22</sup> This is as valid with respect to scripture as it is with regard to Bultmann himself. Demythologizing is necessary in both cases, and thus the present work is a demythologizing of demythologizing, an attempt to uncover the truth that has been concealed through years of error disguising itself as self-evidence.

In the introduction to his work on Barth and Bultmann, James Smart makes the following comment:

It might be thought that the intention in considering the two men together is to attempt once more to bridge the gap between them, to recognize their points both of agreement and of divergence, and then perhaps to establish a theological position in line with their points of agreement but reconciling somehow their separate contributions where they diverge. That would be much too ambitious a project even if it were practicable.<sup>23</sup>

21. Conversely, this work aims to show that those who embrace Bultmann's hermeneutical program have every reason to embrace Barth and mission. This is in contrast to Gareth Jones, who claims that in the 1960s theology had to choose between three alternative paths: "towards Barth; forward with Bultmann; or forward away from Bultmann." Jones assumes that to go with Bultmann is to abandon Barth. Even more problematically, he claims that going forward with Bultmann is to go "forward with Martin Heidegger." See Gareth Jones, *Bultmann: Towards a Critical Theology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 157.

22. Heinrich Balz, "Hermeneutik und Mission," *Zeitschrift für Mission* 14 (1988): 206–20, at 206.

23. James D. Smart, *The Divided Mind of Modern Theology: Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, 1908–1933* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 12–13.

Such a project is indeed ambitious, and it is the very one I have attempted here. Whether it is practicable or not is left to the reader to decide.