The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann’s Dialectical Theology


The literary critic Terry Eagleton once remarked that there are always topics on which even the most scrupulous minds will cave in to the “grossest prejudice” with “hardly a struggle.” For academic psychologists it is typically Jacques Lacan, he says. For “Oxbridge philosophers” it is Martin Heidegger, Marx for “former citizens of the Soviet bloc.”¹ We might continue this line of thought and say that for Evangelicals, Barthians, and really the current world of academic theology at large—it is Rudolf Bultmann. Though ignorance is undoubtedly often to blame here, misunderstanding the “Father of Demythologization” (as Bultmann is called in the textbooks) is itself quite ironically due to a myth that needs to be demythologized (xxvii).

The “myth of the whale and the elephant,” as David Congdon calls it in the opening movement of his massive first book on Bultmann, The Mission of Demythologizing comes from language Karl Barth himself used in a letter written to Bultmann on the eve of Christmas, 1952 (9). In the letter, Barth related to Bultmann that “we are like a whale . . . and an elephant, who have met in boundless astonishment on some oceanic shore” (quoted on 10). The meaning behind this whimsical imagery is, of course, that the two great creatures lack all context for communication or understanding. “In vain the one sends spouts of water high in the air,” writes Barth. “In vain the other beckons with his trunk, now amicably, now menacingly” (10).

Residing within this picture is an elaborate story reliant on periodizing the work of both Barth and Bultmann to plot a deviation: differences between the two giants of theology are largely explained, so goes the common story, by Bultmann ultimately turning away from his early dialectical theology held in common with Barth. In Barth’s own words, Bultmann “returned to the fleshpots of Egypt” (230), and subverted the authentic theological task by prioritizing an “individualist, existentialist anthropology” later in his career, thereby ranking an alien philosophy over the kerygma (12). While Congdon’s is not the first to attempt to reinterpret this divide—he spends the first chapter covering two particularly powerful attempts in the work of Eberhard Jüngle and Christophe Chalamet (14–75)—he presses beyond them while building on their edifices.

Congdon spends nearly a quarter of his book paralleling the development of both Barth’s and Bultmann’s theologies to determine where the real transitions, differences, and similarities lie (75–237). This re-periodization is the wedge he ultimately uses to drive open the cracks of the received

story of Barth and Bultmann’s relationship (revealing, ultimately, the true character of Bultmann’s œuvre which lay obscured beneath the myth). In particular, the chronology of this section extends far beyond where most studies end, making a point to analyze the mature thought of both theologians. Congdon notes that while both Jüngel and Chalamet “recognize that Barth and Bultmann operate at a basic level of agreement despite their many disagreements,” they nonetheless both still fail to try and reconcile Barth and Bultmann “in terms of their mature theology” (14). This charge is also leveled at others like James Smart and Bruce McCormack, who end their periodization “before some of the key changes in Barth’s theology that greatly impacted his relationship with Bultmann” (77, with particular reference to Smart).

Congdon concludes that Barth’s opinion of Bultmann was “largely shaped by outside factors” like his initial association of Bultmann with Friedrich Gogarten, Barth’s conflict with Emil Brunner, and additionally later with Erich Przywara. “The point is that Barth’s dispute with Bultmann has to be situated within a long history of disputes that Barth saw as a single theological trajectory, even if the facts on the ground prove otherwise” (230). Provocatively, Congdon also concludes that “the real basis for the dispute between Barth and Bultmann—and thus the origin of the myth—lies in Barth’s own changing understanding of the kerygma itself [emphasis in the original]. This is the main lesson of the periodization” (229). What was this change? Instead of Bultmann abandoning dialectical theology, it is actually Barth who does so!

This reversal becomes even more ironic later in the book, when Congdon notes as well that in Barth’s disagreement with Bultmann over Bultmann’s concept of “preunderstanding,” Bultmann actually thought he got the idea from Barth: “in other words, Bultmann not only claims that his position is in continuity with Barth, but he even credits Barth with the very position Barth saw as the basis for the divide between them. The concept that led Barth to posit the myth of the whale and the elephant is an idea that, in Bultmann’s view, originated with Barth himself!” (713).

As fascinating as it is in itself, this periodization is ultimately a propaedeutic for the real heart of the book’s thesis: Rudolf Bultmann’s theology is a consistently eschatological dialectical theology, and the essence of this dialectical theology is ultimately missional (here especially see 305–439). “We defined dialectical theology . . . as a modern reformational theology in an eschatological or apocalyptic key, and for that reason a missional theology” (309). Thus the core of Bultmann’s program of demythologization is driven by the engine of mission and evangelization. Ironically then, the moments of Congdon’s work most deconstructive of the many myths surrounding Bultmann are not necessarily the explicitly deconstructive sections, but rather the portions in which Congdon lays out with thoroughness and clarity the actual constructive nature and purpose of Bultmann’s research. Here the myths surrounding Bultmann are not pruned
haphazardly, but replaced root and branch as fundamental misunderstandings, and the logic of Bultmann’s missional theology is allowed to sprout and grow in their place.

The knife Congdon does wield to cut away misunderstandings of Bultmann, though, will no doubt also prick many Evangelicals in a particularly tender area: mission has always been a core Evangelical concept, while Bultmann has been the bogeyman warded off by inerrancy used as an apotropaic. Nonetheless, Congdon throws down his apologetic gauntlet for demythologizing early on by saying you cannot have one without the other (xviii-xix).

In this sense, demythologizing has a cultural and a political function of “de-Constantinizing.” Those who have grown allergic to the general overuse of “Constantinianism” following its popularization by John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas may groan at this less than euphonic term, but Congdon is deeply aware that he is not using it to index a precise historical sense that maps onto Constantine or post-Constantinian Christianity per se. Rather, it is a helpful heuristic that parallels “demythologizing” by bringing out its anti-imperial aspect (see 532n.67: “deconstantinizing” is not only formally convenient but is materially accurate in terms of the concerns Bultmann seeks to raise at the hermeneutical level”).

Perhaps the most pleasantly surprising aspect of this volume is Congdon’s venture into the milieu of recent post-colonial missional theology (utilizing especially the work of Theo Sundermeier), pairing it with his analysis of demythologizing and dialectical theology. This sets up a contrast with what he terms the “ecclesiocentric and antithermeneutical turn” in recent Christian theology, represented especially by communitio ecclesiology in Catholicism, the movement of post-Liberalism, the Cambridge-born Radical Orthodoxy, among others (545–546). They are all of course profoundly aware of the hermeneutical problem (of translating the gospel into new contexts), yet “respond to the problem by neutralizing it via recourse to the church and its tradition” (546n.95).

One should not just hear a theoretical conflict but a very real one, ringing in Bultmann’s ears with all of this. “All of this bears a striking similarity to the function myth served in Nazi Germany . . . Indeed, the grounding of German identity in ‘blood and soil’ is precisely a move from history to nature, thereby essentializing a contingent and oppressive political arrangement.” Of the utmost significance is the fact “that Bultmann’s response to National Socialism in 1933 took the form an appeal to the historical over against the natural. In his lectures on theological study, Bultmann says that God cannot be known ‘from out of the situation’ but only on the basis of the ‘special claim’ and ‘special truth’ of revelation that addresses us within a contingent moment of history and illuminates a particular situation” (590). As Congdon put it earlier in his work: “The implication is clear: submitting to God means overturning the natural bonds
and allegiances that stand in the way of loving one’s neighbor in the present situation” (180).

It is certainly not that Congdon is paralleling Radical Orthodoxy and others, with Nazism. The larger point is that all of these trends have the tendency to conflate historically contingent cultural forms with the essence of Christianity itself, making evangelization hermeneutically insensitive to new cultures, which must now be imperialistically integrated into the frozen form of a cultural moment to be seen as Christian.

As Congdon’s argument goes, demythologizing, in its “deconstantizing” and “dewordviewizing” aspects, is not a reactionary attempt to make Christianity palatable to the modern mind (though there are bits of this, as Congdon admits is impossible to avoid). Discriminating between the essential content of the kerygma and its embedding in cultural forms (“myth”) should not be reduced to its initial affinity to the religionsgeschichtliche Schule (611) or a supposed reliance of Bultmann on Martin Heidegger (cf. 376–382; and esp. 597n67: “Contrary to widespread opinion, Heidegger was citing Bultmann well before Bultmann was citing Heidegger”).

Rather, demythologizing is a “theological” and “specifically dialectical” hermeneutic (617) based on a robust commitment to the radical soteriological and eschatological transcendence of God. All Christian theology, including demythologization, “is normed by the first commandment” (628).

As noted above, the kerygma that is this proclamation is never without culture, but is never identical to the culture through which it is communicated: “what Bultmann’s dialectical theology recognizes is that the kerygma (qua eschatological occurrence) is essentially transcultural not in the sense that some human expression of the kerygma is universal, but rather in the sense that the God who speaks in the kerygma relates to each person in a singularly divine way, namely, in the christological-kerygmatic act of judgment against sin that is at the same time the justification of the sinner” (518).

As such, it is certainly not the case that Bultmann rejects all human speech of God (619–620); rather, Bultmann, like Barth “both criticize a pseudotheological form of analogy [or myth] in order to open a space for a nonobjectifying mode of analogical God-talk, what Barth calls the analogia fidelis” (626). Demythologization is in one sense the “hermeneutic of the analogia fidelis” (629); it is “the normative procedure that lets God come to speech as God” (629–630). In this, demythologization shares affinities (whatever their differences) with patristic modes of allegorical interpretation: “both [Bultmann and the Fathers] find the world-picture of scripture to be incredible if taken literally, and yet both believe the theological purpose or intention of the text is capable of being truly grasped in non-literal ways” (692).
Congdon thus re-attunes our attention to the main context in which Bultmann saw himself working:

Most associations of demythologizing with mission assume that the connection is merely apologetic in nature, that Bultmann is trying to represent an apology for Christian faith in a modern world. While this is not entirely misguided—certainly some level of apologetics is involved in any attempt to preach or think theologically, insofar as one understands such tasks to be a matter of addressing the present situation—this understanding of Bultmann is often framed in an erroneous way, as if his project is an attempt to make Christianity palatable to modern ears. . . . This way of viewing demythologizing misses the indigenizing and pilgrimizing aspects of missional hermeneutics. (575n7)

This is truly an exhilarating investigation. Congdon demonstrates not only his mastery of Barth and Bultmann but also an impressive awareness of the span of current discussions on topics as various as missional theology, to theology and philosophy of science, to recent philosophers like Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux. Moreover, he somehow manages to press this into service with clarity and superb organization (I would be remiss not to mention how helpful the table of contents and index were in writing this review) to create a volume that reads at a surprisingly brisk pace despite its mammoth size and the complexity of the task at hand. Given the current spate of interest in ressourcement movements of all sorts, it is refreshing to see the retrieval of a modern theology that not only saves such a major figure as Bultmann from misunderstanding, but also tackles major issues head on with precision and fairness. Agree or disagree with its material positions on Bultmann and others, it is impossible to deny that this is a pristine example of how theology should be done. Do not let its size scare you off: if you are interested in wrestling with perennial issues in theology, this should be on your shelf.

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