



## *Chapter Seven*

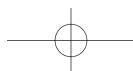
# **Demythologizing as an Intercultural Hermeneutic**

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Nearly eighty years have passed since Rudolf Bultmann delivered his programmatic lecture on demythologizing in Alpirsbach in the spring of 1941.<sup>1</sup> This chapter argues that the key to a new perspective on his controversial program comes from the burgeoning field of intercultural hermeneutics. The work in this field is the result of an interdisciplinary (and increasingly also interreligious) dialogue between missiology, cultural anthropology, and biblical studies. The issues and questions raised by scholars in this field would seem to be miles away from—not to mention, at times sharply opposed to—the concerns operative in Bultmann’s work. A careful look again at his writings on demythologizing, however, proves this initial impression to be misguided. The program of demythologizing is best understood as a *hermeneutic of intercultural encounter*—in this case, the encounter between the ancient culture of the biblical text and the contemporary culture of its readers today.

### THE PROGRAM OF INTERCULTURAL HERMENEUTICS

Intercultural hermeneutics is still relatively unknown in anglophone theology and missiology.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to the intersection of mission and interpretation, the North American conversation has focused on the idea of “missional hermeneutics,” for which James Brownson and Darrell Guder are the leading representatives. Recent work in intercultural theology and hermeneutics, however, expands and nuances the effort to think hermeneutically about mission and culture. The term “intercultural theology” is an increasingly common way of clarifying the field of missiology.<sup>3</sup> As Klaus Hock notes in



his recent introduction to intercultural theology, too often the field of mission studies is “positioned beyond or outside of the theological disciplines.”<sup>4</sup> Intercultural theology thus recognizes that the questions raised by intercultural research are crucial for the entire theological curriculum and for the nature of theological discourse as such. In this sense, the term “intercultural theology” serves the same function as “missional theology,” while avoiding the pejorative connotations of the word “mission.”

Intercultural theology, as the name suggests, gives more sustained and sophisticated attention to the theory of culture itself and the relation between theology and culture. As a normative enterprise it seeks to address the problem of cultural imperialism, which we can define theologically as the binding of the Christian norm (i.e., the Gospel) to specific cultural norms, thus leading to the absolutizing of a particular culture. According to Hollenweger, “intercultural theology is that scientific, theological discipline that operates in the context of a given culture without absolutizing it.”<sup>5</sup> It avoids cultural absolutization by making its object of theological inquiry the “processes of translation, adaptation, reformation, and appropriation that are produced in the encounter between persons of different cultural backgrounds.”<sup>6</sup> Intercultural theology, we might say, is the process of understanding our talk about God in the context of encountering those who are culturally foreign. As a process of understanding, such theology is perpetually engaged in the act of interpretation. Intercultural theology is therefore essentially intercultural *hermeneutics*, or, to put it another way, hermeneutics forms the underlying logic of intercultural theology. This represents the most significant advance upon traditional work in missiology.

As Theo Sundermeier notes, “‘hermeneutics’ was not a theme of mission studies.” The only real question was one of “communication,” not interpretation, since “there was obviously no doubt about *what* was to be proclaimed,” only *how* to proclaim it.<sup>7</sup> The problem with this model of communication—and thus with related terms like contextualizing and indigenizing—is that it does not recognize the way interpretation and contextualization are already involved from the very start:

Contextualizing thus does not take place afterwards, after the [biblical] text is fixed, but is already involved in the initial witness, because it is inherent in the process of understanding and passing on. It is therefore inadequate to speak of “contextualizing” . . . since it is in truth a matter of *recontextualizing* in the particular appropriation of a text. Recontextualizing is less a problem of communication; it rather belongs centrally to hermeneutics.<sup>8</sup>

The work of contextualization is internal to the very message of the Gospel, and thus theology cannot but be hermeneutical. Intercultural theology aims to overturn this misconception of mission as a merely secondary and “practical” discipline by redefining mission as the task of understanding and interpreta-

tion, and thus redefining theology itself as an exercise in hermeneutical reflection.

The hermeneutical problem of mission thus does not merely concern the *form* of theology but also and especially its *content*. Whereas an imperialistic understanding of mission promotes a unidirectional movement of a fixed content *from* the cultural-linguistic form of the missionaries *to* the cultural-linguistic form of the recipients, intercultural theology locates Christian self-understanding within a *multidirectional* context of intercultural dialogue. “An intercultural hermeneutic is essentially relational,” according to Sundermeier. “It is a process of understanding in the context of a relation between people who are strangers to each other.”<sup>9</sup> Borrowing from recent research in communication studies, Sundermeier points out the way “the receiver as hearer of the message is not an object of the sender, not even just an object of the message, but is at the same time the subject and corresponding sender.”<sup>10</sup> The hermeneutical problem of intercultural understanding requires rethinking the very nature of Christian witness. Missionary witness “does not mean the delivery of a message, like the way the mail carrier passes on a package,” but involves “concern for and loving treatment” of others.<sup>11</sup> Theology is thereby defined as an enterprise of mutual understanding in which each dialogue partner is, in effect, a missionary to the other. This process of understanding has significant ethical implications. A theology of intercultural understanding aims at a “free living-together” that Sundermeier calls *Konvivenz* or *convivencia*, a term he takes from Latin American liberation theology.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to a colonial mission that was often “culture-destroying,” a mission of *Konvivenz* leads to ongoing “cultural innovation” through intercultural dialogue and engagement.<sup>13</sup> Such a mission necessitates hermeneutical reflection since it is already an interpretive process: it is an understanding of the other that leads toward a liberating life together.

Sundermeier defines the hermeneutics of mission in terms of understanding (*Verstehen*) and translation (*Übersetzung*).<sup>14</sup> Understanding takes place in an encounter with the cultural other that dialectically maintains both distance and nearness. The two culturally distinct subjects are simultaneously separate and together. Strangeness and sameness exist “in a relational, interdependent relationship,” and for this reason an intercultural hermeneutic is “essentially relational.”<sup>15</sup> Sundermeier calls the process by which understanding occurs “appropriation,” which he clarifies does not mean the annexation, expropriation, or assimilation of the other, but rather involves a critical self-distancing—a distinction of oneself from one’s cultural presuppositions—that frees one for new understandings and translations.<sup>16</sup> Translation then names the process of inculturation, in which the Christian message or kerygma takes on new forms. Heinrich Balz calls this process “transappropriation” (*Übereignung*) as a counterpart to “appropriation” (*Aneignung*).<sup>17</sup> Whichever term we use, transappropriation or translation is “not the transport-

ing of cargo unchanged from one shore to another. New pictures, new idioms, new comparisons must be found, which transfer the subject matter in such a way that it can be received on the other shore.” This process of translation, he says, necessarily involves syncretism.<sup>18</sup> An intercultural hermeneutic embraces this creative pluralism, recognizing that the truth is found precisely in the “interplay of different interpretations.”<sup>19</sup>

The program of intercultural hermeneutics therefore has a twofold character. Negatively, intercultural hermeneutics rejects the absolutizing of culture. Positively, intercultural hermeneutics takes place within the dynamic space of understanding and translation, of appropriation and transpropriation. As we will see, this is precisely the space that Bultmann’s program of demythologizing opens up and in which it operates.

### THE PROGRAM OF DEMYTHOLOGIZING

To understand how Bultmann’s program of demythologizing is a program of intercultural hermeneutics, we must begin by looking at the twofold definition of demythologizing that he provides in his 1952 essay, “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung”: “Negatively, 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> The negative and positive aspects of demythologizing correspond, respectively, to (a) the criticism of cultural absolutization and (b) the intercultural hermeneutic of appropriation and transpropriation.

#### The Criticism of the Mythical World-Picture

Bultmann defines myth as an objectifying thinking situated within an antiquated world-picture (*Weltbild*). Myth “is an objectifying thinking like that of science,” he says in 1952,<sup>21</sup> while in 1941 he begins his programmatic essay by stating that “the world-picture of the New Testament is a mythical world-picture” and thus “mythological speech . . . is hard for people to believe, because for them the mythical world-picture is a thing of the past.”<sup>22</sup> Both parts of this composite definition are significant and merit close attention. In order to clarify the intercultural aspect of Bultmann’s program, we will focus our attention on the idea of the mythical world-picture. Ulrich Körtner rightly points out that “the concept of world-picture is a key to Bultmann’s concept of myth.”<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, many scholars—including Körtner himself—have misunderstood Bultmann’s use of *Weltbild*, often confusing it with the notion of objectification (*Objektivierung*).<sup>24</sup>

The reason for this confusion seems to be the overestimation of Heidegger’s significance for Bultmann, and in this case, the assumption that Hei-

degger's 1938 essay, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," determines the meaning of the term *Weltbild*.<sup>25</sup> But Bultmann's development of *Weltbild* predates Heidegger by well over a decade. Moreover, Bultmann specifically differentiates between world-pictures and objectifying modes of thought, whereas Heidegger collapses them. The more important source for Bultmann's work is Wilhelm Dilthey's worldview theory (*Weltanschauungslehre*), according to which *Weltbild* refers to the general perceptions and representations of the world that are derived from one's cultural context, and which form the underlying basis for the more systematic evaluation of meaning that constitutes a *Weltanschauung*.<sup>26</sup> Bultmann employs this distinction between a cultural world-picture and an ideological worldview in his 1925 essay on speaking of God, and it remains operative throughout the rest of his career.<sup>27</sup> Especially notable in this regard is a conversation that took place on July 31, 1953, between Bultmann, Günther Bornkamm, and Friedrich Karl Schumann, where Bultmann made the following statement:

I am of the opinion that all people, whether they live in a mythical age or an enlightened age, have a *Weltbild*, live in a *Weltbild*, by which I naturally do not mean that this *Weltbild* must be a closed and systematic *Weltbild*. The fact that people can go about their daily activities and communicate with their fellow human beings all presupposes that a definite *Weltbild* is taken for granted.<sup>28</sup>

The category of *Weltbild*, as Bultmann uses it, thus refers to the general cultural framework—the shared assumptions, practices, customs, and concepts—that people presuppose in their everyday lives. A world-picture is the native milieu into which one is born. While it shapes how one exists in the world, it is spatially and temporally relative and open to change and hybridization. No world-picture—whether mythical or scientific, ancient or modern, Western or non-Western—is ever final or secure. As Bultmann puts it, everyone "knows that all of the results of science are relative and that any world-picture worked out either yesterday, today, or tomorrow can never be definitive."<sup>29</sup>

Because the *Weltbild* is as natural to us as our mother tongue, it is easy to absolutize what is in fact relative and provisional. We are constantly prone to shielding ourselves from cultural pluralism and avoiding intercultural encounters with those who seem foreign, because of the threat such pluralism poses to our traditional and self-enclosed plausibility structures. Wolfgang Gantke thus warns against absolutizing "culturally-conditioned partial truths about the world," which leads to a lack of openness to new and foreign experiences and reduces religion to political ideology.<sup>30</sup> Following Gantke, we can thus define *Weltbild* as a culturally-conditioned perspective on the world. While there is no acultural standpoint from which a person can survey the world as a neutral observer, we must be careful not to absolutize our

standpoint and so close ourselves off from what is culturally alien and historically new.

Bultmann's criticism of the mythological *Weltbild* aims to prevent this cultural absolutization. What distinguishes myth qua myth is not the objectification of the divine—which occurs in every age, both ancient and modern—but the fact that this objectification is naively bound up with an antiquated *Weltbild*, that is, a set of cultural assumptions from a *foreign* historical situation. The encounter with scripture is therefore analogous to the encounter with the stranger: both are intercultural engagements in which understanding and translation are necessary moments in the interpretive enterprise. The intercultural dialogue can be both chronological and geographical in nature. Bultmann's differentiation between kerygma and myth is simply a way of saying that the kerygma can no more be conflated with the cultural situation of the prophets and apostles any more than it can be conflated with one of the various cultures of the present day. Negatively, his claim is that the kerygma is free *from* the processes of cultural formation and hybridization in the sense that the truth of the kerygma is irreducible to the matrix of cultural forces. This negative point then serves the positive claim that the kerygma is free *for* culture in the sense that the truth of the kerygma is always translatable into new cultural contexts. If the *negative* aspect of demythologizing maintains the kerygma's openness to foreign and new experiences, then the *positive* side of demythologizing—namely, existentialist interpretation—provides the hermeneutical method for this intercultural translation.

### Existentialist Interpretation: Preunderstanding as Appropriation

The first thing to say about existentialist interpretation is that, despite the semantic kinship with existentialism, the two are “not the same thing.”<sup>31</sup> Existentialist interpretation has nothing to do with conforming scripture to a new metaphysics or Heideggerian ontology. Bultmann's method of hermeneutical translation instead has two aspects, what he terms “preunderstanding” (*Vorverständnis*) and “self-understanding” (*Selbstverständnis*). These correspond to what he calls in his Gifford lectures the “two points of view in historiography”: the first is “the perspective or viewpoint” of the historian, while the second is “the existential encounter with history.”<sup>32</sup> I will demonstrate that these aspects constitute the Bultmannian parallel to the intercultural method of appropriation and transpropriation.

The concept of preunderstanding is not unique to Bultmann, but he employs it in a way that is distinctive to his project. Preunderstanding serves as shorthand for Bultmann's participatory epistemology. His 1955 essay, “*Wissenschaft und Existenz*,” describes two ways of knowing the world: the way of objectifying science and the way of participatory existence. Scientific

knowledge is a neutral observation or “disinterested *seeing*” of things in the world that captures “a certain side of the historical process,” such as “that and when this or that battle took place, this or that catastrophe happened.”<sup>33</sup> Existential understanding, by contrast, recognizes that there is no ahistorical location from which to survey history as a whole. Each perspective sees something “objective”—something that is actually already *there* in the object—but it can only see this object *in a certain way*. The truth of the object is, in a sense, relative to the context in which the object is revealed and comes to expression. Historical meaning “is only possible for the one who does not stand over against [history] as a neutral, nonparticipating spectator, but rather stands within it and shares in the responsibility for it.”<sup>34</sup> This entails the paradoxical claim that “the ‘most subjective’ interpretation of history is precisely the ‘most objective.’”<sup>35</sup> Understanding history demands an ongoing recognition of the historicity and sociocultural embeddedness of both the text and ourselves. Our participation in the existential understanding of history therefore requires the responsible *appropriation* of ever new conceptualities—that is, modes of thinking specific to particular cultural-historical contexts—that correspond to both the human subject and the historical subject matter. The exegete who exists historically “will understand the old word ever anew. Ever anew the word will reveal who we are and who God is, and the exegete must state this in an ever new conceptuality.”<sup>36</sup>

Bultmann refers to appropriation as the task of translation. The exegete encounters “a strange language” in the text that uses concepts from “a strange *Weltbild*.” In order to make sense of this language and to engage the text responsibly, however, “it must be *translated*.”<sup>37</sup> Hermeneutical inquiry recognizes that the meaning of a text is never self-evident or internal to the text itself. To interpret the text is necessarily to move beyond it, but always in dialogue with it. “Each translation signals the incompleteness of a text,” according to Sundermeier. In the same way that a person finds her identity extended and enlarged through a communal coexistence with others, so too “the text finds in translation its continuation and a secondary restating.”<sup>38</sup> The culturally alien form of speech has to be interpreted and stated anew, meaning that the hearer of the text must relate to it in such a way that she can appropriate resources from her own cultural situation for the sake of establishing a mutual understanding between past and present. The interpreter must so thoroughly participate in the subject matter of the text that she is able to hear the message of the past as a message that concerns her personally. Translation is the process by which the participating, empathetic reader *re-contextualizes* the message of the text, and in so doing creates a space of mutuality between the ancient *Weltbild* and the contemporary *Weltbild*. Translation therefore consists in constructing a hermeneutical *Konvivenz* between the reader and the strangers who meet us in the text. In order to carry this out appropriately, the interpreter must reflect on the present cultural

situation in order to properly recognize the real strangeness of the text. This requires assessing the distinctiveness of one's own preunderstanding.

The term, "preunderstanding names," the fact that the interpreting subject exists in a particular historical situation that conditions her reading of the text and demands new conceptual categories. There is no "presuppositionless exegesis," he argues in 1957, in part because "every exegete is determined by his or her individuality in the sense of special biases and habits, gifts and weaknesses."<sup>39</sup> More importantly, the exegete is unique by virtue of her location within a specific cultural context, which conditions her way of seeing the world and makes an authentic understanding of history possible: "The individual historian is guided by a particular way of asking questions, a particular perspective."<sup>40</sup> This perspective gives the interpreter a relation to (i.e., a particular understanding of) the "subject matter that comes to expression (directly or indirectly) in the text."<sup>41</sup> The specific relation of the interpreter to the subject matter is the preunderstanding. According to Bultmann, this preunderstanding is "grounded in the life-context [*Lebenszusammenhang*] in which the interpreter stands."<sup>42</sup> The concept of *Lebenszusammenhang* only appears several times in Bultmann's writings but functions as a synonym for *Weltbild*. In his 1950 essay on the problem of hermeneutics, while commenting on Dilthey's hermeneutics, Bultmann says that "every interpretation includes a particular preunderstanding, namely that which grows out of the life-context to which the subject matter belongs."<sup>43</sup> And in 1933 he says that "understanding presupposes the life-context in which the one who understands and what is understood belong together from the outset."<sup>44</sup> Both *Lebenszusammenhang* and *Weltbild* thus refer to the cultural situation that conditions our thinking and speaking.

The point in clarifying these concepts is to disabuse readers of Bultmann of the widespread assumption that his talk of preunderstanding refers to a particular philosophical perspective. To be sure, Bultmann does speak of philosophy in relation to preunderstanding, but this is misleading since Bultmann understands philosophy, in this context, as phenomenology, namely, the conceptual analysis of one's cultural life-context. This is the only sense in which he is willing to embrace philosophy within theology. To appropriate existentialist philosophy is simply to appropriate the resources available in a particular cultural situation; a different situation would thus demand a different conceptuality. Bultmann nowhere makes the existentialist appropriation the final and universally valid translation of the kerygma. He in fact states explicitly that the historical picture achieved by any translation "is falsified only if a particular way of asking questions is declared to be the only way possible," that is to say, it "would be falsified if the exegete takes his or her preunderstanding to be a definitive understanding."<sup>45</sup> In other words, the cultural appropriation that is a necessary aspect of hermeneutical translation is only rightly carried out in the constant awareness that no cultural form is



superior to another or universally valid. Faith recognizes that it “has not found in our age the right forms of expression.”<sup>46</sup> The task of understanding the culturally alien past within the present situation demands, at the very same time, the recognition that our own situation is relative and provisional, subject to perpetual reevaluation in light of new intercultural encounters.

The hermeneutical task of appropriation that lies at the heart of Bultmann’s program of demythologizing is a dialectical task. It requires, on the one hand, an ongoing readiness to discern anew the conceptualities available in a particular situation and to assess their fittingness for the proclamation of the kerygma. On the other hand, the task of appropriation demands a refusal to assimilate the kerygma into the cultural life-contexts of either the past or the present; neither the preunderstanding of the ancient apostles nor the preunderstanding of contemporary readers is a definitive understanding. This dialectical mode of appropriation—with its critical freedom with respect to both past and present, both stranger and self—is a fruit of the kerygma itself as the word of one who “always remains beyond what has once been grasped.”<sup>47</sup> As an eschatological event, the kerygma demands not only appropriation but also *transappropriation* in light of “the real strangeness of Christian faith.”<sup>48</sup>

### Existentialist Interpretation: Self-Understanding as Transappropriation

A participatory epistemology must attend not only to the existential *location* of the interpreter, but also to the interpreter’s existential *encounter* with history. An authentic understanding of history—of that which is historically foreign—occurs as an encounter that transforms one’s own existence. This occurs in a paradigmatic way in the encounter with the kerygmatic Christ, namely, an encounter with what is *eschatologically* foreign.

If preunderstanding addresses the question of one’s given perspective within history, then self-understanding concerns what lies *beyond* the given. Historical occurrences, as well as those who participate in them, are not defined solely by their cultural embeddedness. History is at the same time open to the *future*. A historical phenomenon has no “being-in-itself.”<sup>49</sup> Events in the past, occurrences that are strictly *historisch*, are not truly historical or *geschichtlich* in themselves, Bultmann argues, but rather become historical “only *in their relatedness to the future*.” The future of each event is constitutive of the event itself: “to every historical phenomenon belongs its own future in which it first shows itself for what it is.”<sup>50</sup> This future only appears to the historian “who is open for historical phenomena due to his or her responsibility for the future.” In a certain sense, therefore, history always already involves eschatology.<sup>51</sup>

The simultaneity—or rather, to use Bultmann’s preferred term, paradoxical identity—of history and eschatology that characterizes historical understanding, in general, corresponds to the simultaneity of history and eschatology that characterizes the singularly decisive eschatological event of Jesus Christ. Whereas other historical occurrences are self-involving, this event alone grants a new self-understanding. Whereas other occurrences are *related* to the future, this event comes to us *from* the future; it is the eschatological reality that alone makes possible our freedom for the future. A philosophical theory or worldview is incapable of providing or replacing this eschatological self-understanding, since a *Weltanschauung* remains confined within the limits of one’s cultural horizon. True historicity is only ever a gift—“a gift from the future,” Bultmann says—while a *Weltanschauung* “serves as a flight from historicity.”<sup>52</sup> According to Christian faith, the freedom from the past—from being enclosed within the self—that is required for authentic historical decisions is only possible when a person understands herself as someone future, and this self-understanding can only come from the future; in more traditional terms, it is an act of divine grace. Bultmann thus argues that the gift of a new self occurs in the event of a radical “deworldizing” (*Entweltlichung*).<sup>53</sup> Deworldizing is the soteriological basis for the hermeneutical transappropriation that constitutes demythologizing.

Bultmann adapts the concept of deworldizing from his studies in gnosticism.<sup>54</sup> Whereas gnosticism, he argues, cosmically and ontologically divides humanity into those who are worldly and those who are separated from the world, the Christianity of the Gospel of John existentially divides between two modes of existence: belief and unbelief. Unbelief denies the possibility of a new existence freed from the past, while belief, for John, is an existence that remains fully in the world while being existentially distinct from it. Bultmann finds in both Paul and John a dialectical and paradoxical conception of deworldizing in which those who have faith are taken out of the world precisely in their worldliness; the believer is deworldized *within* the world. The person justified before God is simultaneously a sinner. The true church is an eschatological community that paradoxically exists as one worldly society among others. Bultmann finds this deworldized existence exemplified in the Pauline “as if not” (ὡς μὴ) from 1 Corinthians 7:29–31. For Paul the justified sinner is a new creation who exists paradoxically within “the present form of this world [that] is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31). Such a person lives as if what is the case (history) were in fact not the case (eschatology). To be deworldized is to live out of the future—that is, to live within the eschatological moment of decision in which God’s futurity breaks in upon a person in the word of the kerygma. A deworldized person sees the world and thus herself in light of God’s eschatological proximity. Faith is therefore an eschatological existence within historical existence, and this paradox scandalously disturbs all worldly norms, expectations, and demands for proof: “faith

is not flight from the world or asceticism but *deworldizing* as the breaking to pieces of all human standards and assessments.”<sup>55</sup> In this way faith corresponds to its object, that is to say, “the paradox of Christian existence corresponds to the paradox of ‘the word made flesh.’” The inner connection between these two paradoxes consists in the fact that “both are an offense to the human pursuit for security.”<sup>56</sup>

If self-understanding means deworldizing, then we cannot agree with Sundermeier’s criticism of this notion as a monological “conversation with oneself.”<sup>57</sup> The new self-understanding of faith that corresponds to the kerygmatic word is not at all a solipsistic turning in upon oneself. On the contrary, it is in fact a self-displacement and self-dispossession, in the sense that God’s eschatological action in Christ interrupts our bondage to the world and to ourselves and breaks us open to that which arrives on the scene from God’s future—and thus what meets us in the face of the neighbor and stranger. The new self-understanding is a freedom from the world that makes us newly free *for* the world. Bultmann states explicitly that “eschatological existence is not flight from the world, but rather the attitude of the ‘as if not,’ and in such an attitude it is service to the world in love; those who are liberated and under obligation live no longer for themselves but for the Lord. Faith works through love.”<sup>58</sup> Those who exist eschatologically do not thereby disdain the cultures, societies, and institutions of the world. Instead, they relate to the world in a new way, no longer regarding others “according to the flesh” (2 Cor. 5:16). They are freed for new relationships with others, both neighbors and strangers, without conflating the kerygma or the eschatological community with their particular cultural situation.

The concept of deworldizing lies at the very heart of Bultmann’s theological project: it names both the justifying action of God and the faithful mode of existence that corresponds to this action.<sup>59</sup> As such it is also the heart of his hermeneutical project. Demythologizing and deworldizing form a conceptual pair. Both have a positive content within a negative form: deworldizing means to exist in faith and love within the world, while demythologizing means to translate the kerygma within the present situation. The theological connection between these two concepts becomes most evident at the end of his 1951 Shaffer and Cole lectures. After quoting 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, he adds the closing line: “Let those who have a modern worldview [*Weltanschauung*] live as though they had none.”<sup>60</sup> The use of *Weltanschauung* can be misleading, and throughout these lectures the word is mostly used as a synonym for *Weltbild*, a distinction he is more careful about in other writings.<sup>61</sup> His point is that those who exist out of God’s future relate to their modern culture as if they did not belong to this culture. This, of course, does not mean believers are to adopt some acultural identity. Bultmann’s statement can no more be taken literally than Paul’s original. The claim rather refers to the eschatological relativization of all cultural situations; justified

sinners are liberated by God from enslavement to sin for the sake of loving the neighbor (*Entweltlichung*) and translating the kerygma (*Entmythologisierung*). Those who live by faith thus have a dialectical existence that prevents them from being confined within their context. They are now open to perspectives and preunderstandings other than their own; they are freed for an authentic intercultural encounter with the stranger. That holds as true for people within modernity as it does for those in antiquity. Faith thus demands “to be liberated from all worldviews that arise from human thought, whether they are mythological or natural-scientific.”<sup>62</sup>

We are now in a position to see the hermeneutical significance of Bultmann’s eschatological interpretation of Christian existence. Demythologizing is existentialist interpretation in the sense that it interprets the kerygma in light of the eschatological existence of faith, which is simultaneously concretized in a particular historical situation and deworldized in the face of God’s coming future.<sup>63</sup> We have already demonstrated that his concept of preunderstanding affirms the *appropriation* of a particular culture for the understanding of the kerygma. Now we can see that his concept of self-understanding—in which the one who encounters the eschatological event of Christ is liberated from her self-enclosed bondage to the world and thus from her cultural myopia—is the basis for the hermeneutical *translation* or *transappropriation* of the kerygma to new cultural contexts. Bultmann understands the deworldizing event of the kerygma as a divine power that eschatologically frees us from our cultural situation and so makes us open for new intercultural encounters. The kerygma is freed from the ancient culture of the text just as we are freed from our modern culture, and this eschatological freedom makes possible an intercultural encounter with scripture. The eschatological deworldizing of the believer is not a denial of cultural particularity; it is rather the condition for the possibility of intercultural understanding. The one who exists in faith is able to understand the stranger because she herself now lives a strange existence within the world in correspondence to the divine Stranger. The dialectical nature of the Christ-event as simultaneously historical and eschatological translates into a dialectical hermeneutic that simultaneously appropriates the kerygma to a specific historical context and transappropriates the kerygma to ever new contexts. The twin aspects of demythologizing as preunderstanding and self-understanding thus constitute Bultmann’s distinctively existentialist intercultural hermeneutic.

#### CONCLUSION: DEMYTHOLOGIZING AS MISSIONARY EXISTENCE

In his account of missionary existence, Theo Sundermeier defines mission as a way of being in the world that corresponds to the fact that “the Son comes

to his own, and yet it is a way into the unknown,” that is, into what is alien and strange. “Mission describes a way, a movement, a transgression toward what is other, into the strange unknown.”<sup>64</sup> Mission is always a journey “into the far country,” to borrow from Karl Barth. It is crucial to see that it is the transgression into the unknown itself that constitutes a missionary existence. There is no aim to convert the unknown to the known, the foreign into the familiar. Any such attempt would violate the paradoxical and eschatological event of Christ that commissions us as God’s ambassadors. The kerygma is permanently unfamiliar, ungraspable, and unsettling, and this demands that those who become agents of the kerygma constantly open themselves to what is unsettling. For this reason, the missionary task—as redefined within an existential, intercultural framework—is always a *conversion of oneself to the other*, and never a conversion of the other to oneself. It is the “missionary,” so to speak, who is the one being evangelized. The missionary encounter with the other therefore necessarily “signals a readiness to always keep open anew the question of identity. . . . Distance and coexistence, difference and convivence, are essential elements of the practice of missionary existence.”<sup>65</sup>

It is certainly true that Bultmann does not present his program of demythologizing in terms of encountering and understanding the cultural stranger. He does not reflect on the problem of coexistence within a pluralistic society. What he does instead is to put forward a hermeneutic—in truth, a soteriology that functions as a hermeneutic—that provides the condition for the possibility of authentic intercultural encounters. Bultmann’s program of demythologizing *thinks toward* missionary existence and thus functions as a necessary precondition for an intercultural theology that *thinks from* missionary existence. Demythologizing serves this function by accomplishing two primary tasks: as criticism of the mythical world-picture, it frees the kerygma from its assimilation to an ancient cultural context; as existentialist interpretation, it translates the kerygma into new contexts through the appropriation of our preunderstanding, while precluding future assimilations of the kerygma through the deworldizing power of transappropriation given in the new self-understanding of faith. Negatively, demythologizing rejects the confining of the kerygma to the known and the familiar, whether this is the world-picture of the early Christian community or that of the contemporary church. Positively, demythologizing keeps the kerygma open to ever new cultural situations and contextual conceptualities. And it does this by keeping those called to proclaim the kerygma continually open to the inbreaking future of God, and thus open to the neighbor in one’s midst. Just as “every moment has the possibility of being an eschatological moment,” so too every context, every encounter, has the possibility of being the occasion for the proclamation of the kerygma.<sup>66</sup> Bultmann conceptualizes this possibility as an event of God’s eschatological address that elicits the decision of faith. It is this deworldizing address that ensures “the church is always a missionary church.”<sup>67</sup>

Bultmann recognizes that the encounter with scripture is an encounter with a cultural stranger. He further recognizes that the condition for a proper coexistence with this stranger is a theological interrogation of one's own existence. Hermeneutical *Konvivenz* between the culturally alien scriptures and the reader can only occur through a decision of personal responsibility, that is to say, through an act of faithful receptivity to the word of the Bible within the parameters of one's historical situation. But this act of receptivity must occur ever anew. In a lecture given in Alpirsbach on June 5, 1941, the day after presenting his programmatic essay on demythologizing, Bultmann states that "even the most accurate translation itself needs to be translated again in the following generation." For there is no "ideal type of the kerygma," but rather every translation "is formulated for today and only for today."<sup>68</sup> Demythologizing, as a missionary hermeneutic of translation, never results in a *demythologized* kerygma. There is no final outcome, no permanent interpretation. That would, in fact, be a contradiction. Since Bultmann defines myth precisely as the conflation of the kerygma with a particular context or world-picture, a program of demythologizing can only be the repeated unsettling of the sinful human attempt to turn the kerygma into a doctrinal law, philosophical worldview, or cultural institution that has a stable and permanent form.<sup>69</sup> In a way that anticipates contemporary work in intercultural theology, demythologizing refuses to secure Christian identity "within a traditional theological frame of reference."<sup>70</sup> Indeed, according to Bultmann, "there is neither a definitive form of the Christian kerygma nor a definitive version of Christian self-understanding, but both must always appear in a new form in correspondence to each historical situation." Demythologizing embraces the radical contextuality of the kerygma for the sake of "preventing a petrification of the kerygma."<sup>71</sup>

Demythologizing has been widely misunderstood as the reduction of theology to philosophy and the confinement of the Christian Gospel to the limits of a Heideggerian ontology. Such assumptions prove quite alien to Bultmann's actual project. His stated aim is nothing less than to recover the true scandal of the Gospel message, a message that remains scandalous by resisting every attempt to secure or stabilize it. His hermeneutic is instead the method of interpretation that corresponds to the Christ "who always destroys every security, who always irrupts from the beyond and calls into the future," with the consequence that his disciples "can never hold on to whatever served as the occasion for the encounter with revelation, whether it was an experience of the soul, Christian knowledge, or culture."<sup>72</sup> Demythologizing is therefore a hermeneutic for the "continuing conversion of the church."<sup>73</sup> Demythologizing is not merely a hermeneutical task; it is a mode of faithful Christian existence. Specifically, it is a *missionary* mode of existence in the sense that it seeks to understand the kerygma in the context of each new intercultural encounter, but always in the relativizing light of God's future.

Demythologizing thus obeys the commission of Jesus Christ by confronting every tradition, community, and individual with the challenge to participate anew in the eschatological mission of God.

## NOTES

This chapter contains material previously published in David W. Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

1. He first gave the lecture on April 21 at a regional meeting of the Society for Protestant Theology (*Gesellschaft für evangelische Theologie*) in Frankfurt/Main, and then he gave it again before the entire society on June 4 at Alpirsbach. See Konrad Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann: Eine Biographie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 308. The *Gesellschaft für evangelische Theologie* was a group of theologians of the Confessing Church who gathered to discuss questions related to academic theology and the work of the church in order to combat the rise of Nazi ideology.

2. This is changing due to the recent English translation of Henning Wrogemann's magisterial three-volume work on intercultural theology, beginning with Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Theology, Volume 1: Intercultural Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

3. See Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Missionswissenschaft, "Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology and Its Relationship to Religious Studies," *Mission Studies* 25, no. 1 (2008): 103–8.

4. Klaus Hock, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2011), 9.

5. Hollenweger, *Interkulturelle Theologie*, 3 vols. (München: Kaiser, 1979–1988), 1:50.

6. Hock, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie*, 51.

7. Theo Sundermeier, "Erwägungen zu einer Hermeneutik interkulturellen Verstehens," in *Konvivenz und Differenz: Studien zu einer verstehenden Missionswissenschaft*, ed. Volker Küster (Erlangen: Verlag der Ev.-Luth. Mission, 1995), 87–101, here 87. Emphasis added.

8. Sundermeier, 88.

9. Theo Sundermeier, *Mission—Geschenk der Freiheit: Bausteine für eine Theologie der Mission* (Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck, 2005), 82.

10. Sundermeier, "Erwägungen zu einer Hermeneutik interkulturellen Verstehens," 89.

11. Sundermeier, 90.

12. Sundermeier, *Mission*, 29.

13. Sundermeier, 118–19.

14. Sundermeier, 77–104.

15. Sundermeier, 83, 82.

16. Sundermeier, 84.

17. Heinrich Balz, "Hermeneutik und Mission," *Zeitschrift für Mission* 14, no. 4 (1988): 206–20. Technically, Balz identifies appropriation and transpropriation as the two sides of translation: "Mission is translation in a double sense: the transpropriation of the gospel to others, and at the same time the appropriation of other human languages and cultures for the gospel" (Balz, 207).

18. Sundermeier, *Mission*, 85, 88.

19. Sundermeier, "Erwägungen zu einer Hermeneutik interkulturellen Verstehens," 99.

20. Rudolf Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung," in *Kerygma und Mythos, Band II: Diskussion und Stimmen zum Problem der Entmythologisierung*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (Hamburg-Volksdorf: H. Reich, 1952), 184.

21. Bultmann, 183.

22. Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1985), 12, 14.

23. Ulrich H. J. Körtner, "Glaube und Weltbild: Die Bedeutsamkeit des Kreuzes im Konflikt der Interpretationen von Wirklichkeit," in *Kreuz und Weltbild: Interpretationen von Wirklichkeit im Horizont des Todes Jesu*, ed. Christof Landmesser and Andreas Klein (Neukirchener-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2011), 15–34, here 23.

24. See Ulrich H. J. Körtner, "Arbeit am Mythos?: Zum Verhältnis von Christentum und mythischem Denken bei Rudolf Bultmann," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 34, no. 2 (1992): 163–81, here 172–73.

25. Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes [1938]," in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1950), 69–104.

26. See Wilhelm Dilthey, "Die Typen der Weltanschauung und ihre Ausbildung in den metaphysischen Systemen," in *Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. 8. Weltanschauungslehre: Abhandlungen zur Philosophie der Philosophie*, ed. Bernard Groethuysen (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1931), 75–118.

27. Rudolf Bultmann, "Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden?," in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 4 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933–1965), 1:26–37, here 31–33.

28. Rudolf Bultmann, *Die christliche Hoffnung und das Problem der Entmythologisierung* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1954), 46–47.

29. Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung," 181.

30. Wolfgang Gantke, "Weltbild: Religionsgeschichtlich," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 35, ed. Gerhard Krause, Gerhard Müller, and Siegfried Schwertner (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 562–69, here 563.

31. Ernst Fuchs, "Was ist existentielle Interpretation? A," in *Zum hermeneutischen Problem in der Theologie: Die existentielle Interpretation* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1959), 66.

32. Rudolf Bultmann, *Geschichte und Eschatologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1958), 131.

33. Rudolf Bultmann, "Wissenschaft und Existenz," in *Glauben und Verstehen*, 3:107–21, here 108, 110.

34. Rudolf Bultmann, "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?," in *Glauben und Verstehen*, 3:142–50, here 147.

35. Bultmann, "Wissenschaft und Existenz," 115.

36. Bultmann, "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?," 150.

37. Bultmann, 145.

38. Sundermeier, *Mission*, 100.

39. Bultmann, "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?," 143.

40. Bultmann, 146.

41. Bultmann, 146–47.

42. Bultmann, 147.

43. Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," in *Glauben und Verstehen*, 2:211–35, here 218.

44. Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem der 'natürlichen Theologie,'" in *Glauben und Verstehen*, 1:294–312, here 296.

45. Bultmann, "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?," 146, 147.

46. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christus und die Mythologie: Das Neue Testament im Licht der Bibelkritik* (Hamburg: Furche, 1964), 99.

47. Bultmann, "Wissenschaft und Existenz," 121.

48. Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Befremdliche des christlichen Glaubens," in *Glauben und Verstehen*, 3:197–212, here 202.

49. Bultmann, "Wissenschaft und Existenz," 114.

50. Bultmann, 113.

51. Bultmann, *Geschichte und Eschatologie*, 137. In discussing R. G. Collingwood's position, Bultmann states: "every now is an eschatological now, and history and eschatology are identical" (Bultmann, 161).

52. Bultmann, 178–79.

53. I follow Roger Johnson in translating *Entweltlichung* as "deworldizing," though he spells it as "deworldlizing." In my previous work I followed his spelling, but I have since changed my position in agreement with the philosophical literature on Heidegger's concept of *Entweltlichung*. See Roger A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing: Philosophy and*



*Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 118. While awkward, the word is a necessary neologism, because it brings out the semantic connection between *Entweltlichung* and *Entmythologisierung*.

54. Bultmann's historical scholarship on gnosticism is quite dated and widely criticized. It does not follow, however, that his theological interpretation of John is thereby discredited. Bultmann's theology does not depend on the veracity of his work on the history of religions.

55. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1954), §50, 422. See Bultmann, *Geschichte und Eschatologie*, 183–84: "The paradox that Christian existence is at the same time one that is eschatological, unworldly, and historical is synonymous with the Lutheran statement: 'Simul iustus simul peccator.'" In a 1956 essay in honor of C. H. Dodd, Bultmann says that "the deworldizing of believers is certainly a paradox. For as long as they still live 'in the flesh,' those who are deworldized stand at the same time within a history and hear the call of God in each case within their concrete situation." Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie als Kritik: Ausgewählte Rezensionen und Forschungsberichte*, ed. Matthias Dreher and Klaus W. Müller (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 479. In 1958 Bultmann writes: "eschatological existence is *deworldized existence within the world*" (Bultmann, "Das Befremdliche des christlichen Glaubens," 207). Regarding the church, Bultmann says "the essence of the church consists in being the eschatological, deworldized community [*Gemeinde*] *within* the world," and thus "they are to realize their *deworldized* being as a *worldly* community [*Gemeinschaft*]." See Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 10th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941), 389, 384.

56. Bultmann, "Das Befremdliche des christlichen Glaubens," 204, 211.

57. Sundermeier, "Erwägungen zu einer Hermeneutik interkulturellen Verstehens," 91.

58. Rudolf Bultmann, "Der Mensch und seine Welt nach dem Urteil der Bibel," in *Glauben und Verstehen*, 3:151–65, here 165.

59. The fact that Bultmann uses the term *Entweltlichung* positively also highlights the sharp difference between his theology and Heidegger's philosophy. For Heidegger the goal is authentic being-in-the-world, and the term *Entweltlichung*, sometimes translated as "unworlding," refers to when an object loses its proper worldliness and becomes a mere object of nature to be grasped as something present-at-hand. See Magda King, *A Guide to Heidegger's Being and Time*, ed. John Llewellyn (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 73, 269.

60. Bultmann, *Jesus Christus und die Mythologie*, 101. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 85.

61. See Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing*, 782n221.

62. Bultmann, *Jesus Christus und die Mythologie*, 98.

63. Some may question whether this counts as "existentialist interpretation" since it does not seem sufficiently existentialist or Heideggerian, but that is to assume Bultmann's Heideggerianism when the truth is that he is only existentialist in the most formal and minimal way. Existentialist philosophy, as appropriated by Bultmann, serves little purpose other than to provide a way of speaking about the importance of our personal responsibility as historical creatures: "We would learn little if existentialist philosophy—as many people assume—in fact attempted to provide an ideal picture of human existence. The notion of 'authenticity' provides no such picture. Existentialist philosophy does not say to me: 'In such and such a way you must exist.' It says only: 'You must exist!' . . . While existentialist philosophy does not answer the question regarding my own existence, it makes my own existence a matter of my personal responsibility, and by doing so it makes me open to the word of the Bible" (Bultmann, 63–64). Existentialist philosophy makes it clear "that the hearing of the word of the Bible can only take place in personal decision" (Bultmann, 65–66).

64. Sundermeier, *Mission*, 97.

65. Sundermeier, 98.

66. Bultmann, *Geschichte und Eschatologie*, 183.

67. Rudolf Bultmann, "Der Arier-Paragraph im Raume der Kirche," *Theologische Blätter* 12 (1933): 359–70, here 365.

68. Rudolf Bultmann, "Theologie als Wissenschaft," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 81, no. 4 (1984): 447–69, here 460–61.

69. "The statements of scripture cannot be taken over as a doctrinal law; for God's revelation does not mean God's revealedness, i.e., God is not given directly in God's revelation, but rather God's revelation is only present *in actu*, as occurrence, an occurrence that is not available for observation as a world-occurrence but is only perceptible for the one who participates in it" (Bultmann, 461).

70. Hock, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie*, 11.

71. Bultmann, "Theologie als Wissenschaft," 466.

72. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 431–32.

73. See Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

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