

Deworlde*d* within the World: Bultmann's Paradoxical Politics in an Age of Polarization

Theology Today

2022, Vol. 79(1) 52–66

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DOI: 10.1177/00405736211065468

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Abstract

Rudolf Bultmann has long been criticized for failing to reflect theologically on political life, and even for developing an apolitical theology that many consider to be supportive of the political status quo. This article challenges that reading by examining Bultmann's account of eschatological existence as a form of social identity set in contrast to what he regarded as the gnostic form of identity: an apocalyptic mode of existence that separates between an objectively redeemed community and an unredeemable world. The gnostic bifurcation between in-group and out-group represents a kind of social polarization that Bultmann rejects in favor of a paradoxical form of existence that is “deworlde*d* within the world.” Bultmann's theology generates a paradoxical politics that becomes highly relevant in light of the apocalyptically polarized nature of contemporary American political life.

Keywords

eschatological existence, apocalyptic, gnosticism, tribal politics, political polarization, social identity, paradox, American evangelicalism

Introduction

North American readers of Rudolf Bultmann understandably come away from his work with the impression that he has little to say to our contemporary world. Bultmann's wariness about speaking theologically on political matters often seems to leave him woefully

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out of touch with those seeking a more robust political theology to speak to our current moment. As James Kay points out in his response to Dorothee Sölle, “Bultmann’s concern over pressures to politicize theology” led him to declare that “the church’s task is to proclaim the word of God, not to pronounce political judgments.”¹ Moreover, his writings on existential decision and individual freedom appear to be arguing earnestly for something that is already the dominant cultural and political paradigm in the West, especially for readers in the United States. While there are certainly valid criticisms of Bultmann’s social thought, many of his critics have failed to appreciate not only the existential similarities between his context and the United States today, but also the resources that Bultmann’s existentialist analysis offers for addressing these political challenges. Rather than reducing theology to an apolitical interiority, I argue instead that Bultmann’s account of eschatological existence is best understood as a theological account of social identity developed in response to rival accounts of identity formation that contribute to a violent political order. In particular, Bultmann constructs his paradoxical, Johannine model of eschatological existence in response to a gnostic account of apocalyptic existence that frames the social order in terms of a static polarization between in-group and out-group identities. Placing Bultmann’s theology in conversation with the highly polarized nature of American society illuminates the contribution of his thought to contemporary political life.

Polarization and American Apocalyptic Politics

The world-picture of the United States in the twenty-first century is deeply polarized. The two-party system has created a binary culture, one where the world is seen in terms of blue and red, right and wrong, insider and outsider. As Christopher Hare and Keith Poole observe, polarization of the Democratic and Republican Parties is “higher than at any time since the end of the Civil War.” The polarization among political elites began in the mid-1970s as the parties became more aligned with ideologically conservative and liberal positions in reaction to the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. As the focus of political friction shifted from economic concerns to sociocultural issues (e.g., race, sex, gender, religion, etc.), matters that have been the source of greatest conflict and division, partisan and ideological polarization increased dramatically. American politics is now “not only more fiercely contested, but also fought over a wider range of issues.”²

Polarization is hardly limited to elites. Survey data from the Pew Research Center shows that this divide characterizes the American populace as well. In a study of polarization between 1994 and 2014, Pew found that the share of Americans who express consistently conservative or liberal opinions doubled from 10 percent to 21 percent. There is

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1. James F. Kay, *Christus Praesens: A Reconsideration of Rudolf Bultmann’s Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 144. See Rudolf Bultmann, “Theology for Freedom and Responsibility,” *The Christian Century*, August 27, 1958, 967–69, at 969.
 2. Christopher Hare and Keith T. Poole, “The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics,” *Polity* 46:3 (2014): 411–29, at 411.

now almost no ideological overlap: 92 percent of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, while 94 percent of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican. Moreover, the share of those who view the other party as a threat to the nation has more than doubled, from 16 to 38 percent among Democrats and from 17 to 43 percent among Republicans.³ A new study in 2017 revealed that the gap had grown considerably wider. The divide is particularly noticeable on key social issues. On the question of whether immigrants strengthen the country, the partisan gap was only 2 points in 1994 but was 42 points in 2017. With respect to whether racial discrimination is the source of racial inequity, a gap of 13 points in 1994 has become 50 points in 2017.⁴

James Morone describes today's hyperpolarized environment as "tribal politics," a war between "us" and "them." He connects the development of tribal politics especially to the issue of race, since "race, more than anything else, stirs up passion, riots, and violent reactions of 'us versus them.'"⁵ After the realignment of the parties that took place between 1948 and 1965, the Democrats began to form a coalition around a broad range of social issues, including women's rights in the 1970s and immigrant rights by the twenty-first century in addition to racial justice.⁶ Consequently, Democrats became liberals and Republicans became conservatives, something that is "genuinely new," the result of an active campaign to create more ideologically consistent parties.⁷ The result of this ideological sorting is that the polarization is nearly absolute: the partisan gap reflects what each side sees as a moral gap, even an ontological one. "The two parties," Morone writes, "now reflect different worlds."⁸

Not only does a significant portion of each party view members of the opposing party as a threat to the nation, but members of a party are far more inclined to view those of the other party as morally and intellectually deficient. Surveys in 1960 and 2008 asked respondents to rate members of their own party and those of the opposite party regarding how "intelligent" and "selfish" they were. The gap between the in-party and out-party doubled in that span of time. Even more pronounced is the increase in the percentage of those who would be unhappy or displeased if their child married someone from the opposite party. This increased from around 5 percent in 1960 for both parties to 27 and 20 percent, respectively, for Republicans and Democrats in 2008. In 2010, only

3. Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," *Pew Research Center*, June 12, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

4. Pew Research Center, "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," *Pew Research Center*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>.

5. James A. Morone, "The Rise of Tribal Politics in Historical Perspective," in *Dynamics of American Democracy: Partisan Polarization, Political Competition, and Government Performance*, ed. Eric M. Patashnik and Wendy J. Schiller (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2020), 11–39, at 13, 20.

6. Morone, "The Rise of Tribal Politics," 12, 19.

7. See Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), 2; Sam Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of our Partisan Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2018).

8. Morone, "The Rise of Tribal Politics," 11.

two years later, this had increased to 49 and 33 percent, respectively.⁹ Political and partisan loyalties have become integral parts of people's social identity, according to Lilliana Mason, thus activating our "primal human tendencies toward group isolation and group comparison." This in-group/out-group mentality leads to hostility and violence "under circumstances of perceived threat or competition," and these perceptions have been stoked by political elites and corporate media for years.¹⁰ Repeated examples of such violence were seen throughout the presidency of Donald Trump, from the August 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, to the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

We could accurately describe the American political world-picture as apocalyptic. The term "apocalyptic" in this context does not mean we are nearing the end of the world—though that could well be the case in light of climate change and other very real threats to the earth, including systemic racism, economic inequality, and global pandemics—but rather that the social environment is one that fosters what we might call *apocalyptic identity formation*. Scholars of social identity theory have long noted that extreme contexts, or what Mason above called "circumstances of perceived threat or competition," act as "pressure cookers" that make teamwork more important and thus heighten in-group/out-group binaries, resulting in a tribal mentality of "us versus them." While most research in this area focuses on singular emergency events, "life under constant existential threat is likely to produce similar behaviors regardless of the source of the danger."¹¹ The political polarization in the United States is creating the perception on both sides of a constant existential threat, regardless of whether there is any increase in actual threat.¹² The architects of the Christian Right orchestrated this perceived threat by combining white panic about racial integration and civil rights "with evangelical concerns of morality, economics, and social order." This combination "mobilized white Christians and at the same time demonized those who would not vote based on their morality or the Republican party line."¹³ We can see the apotheosis of this apocalyptic identity in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election. Michael Anton, writing under the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus (the Roman consul who sacrificed himself in battle), sought to drum up Republican support for Trump by comparing the election to the emergency of United Airlines Flight 93, whose passengers sacrificed themselves to keep the plane from

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9. Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76:3 (2012): 405–31, at 415–21.
 10. Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 12. See Rachel Kleinfeld, "The U.S. Shows All the Signs of a Country Spiraling toward Political Violence," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/america-political-violence-risk/2020/09/11/be924628-f388-11ea-999c-67ff7bf6a9d2_story.html.
 11. Markus Hallgren and David Buchanan, "The Dark Side of Group Behavior: Zombie Apocalypse Lessons," *Academy of Management Perspectives* 34:4 (2020): 434–57, at 436.
 12. To be sure, the increase in white nationalist violence against Black Americans, Asians and Asian Americans, and Jews is a genuine threat facing minoritized groups. Yet, ironically, it is the white nationalists who believe themselves to be under threat and thus decry the "white genocide" brought about by increased immigration and policies that encourage a pluralistic and diverse society.
 13. Anthea D. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2021), 74–75.

hitting its target.¹⁴ Anton, and those like him, see themselves as the last remnant of humanity in the face of a cultural apocalypse.

Perhaps the ultimate manifestation of this apocalyptic identity formation, at least during the years of Trump's presidency, was the conspiracy theory phenomenon known as QAnon. The details of the QAnon "theory"—namely, that wealthy elites engaged in satanic practices are secretly pulling the strings of the government and economy in order to run an international sex trafficking ring—are essentially irrelevant. The predictions of the pseudonymous "Q" never came to pass and the logic of the conspiracy was nonexistent, but that did nothing to dampen the commitment of its followers. That is because, as Adrienne LaFrance points out, QAnon is best understood not as a far-right conspiracy theory but instead as a cultic offshoot of American evangelicalism carrying on "a tradition of apocalyptic thinking that has spanned thousands of years. It offers a polemic to empower those who feel adrift."¹⁵ QAnon provides solace and simplicity to those who see themselves as a beleaguered minority, a righteous remnant surrounded by godless elites hell-bent on destroying their way of life. Those who subscribe to QAnon see themselves as possessing the truth about the world around them, a truth that will eventually receive public confirmation when the apocalypse arrives—which, after November 2020, was understood as Trump's return to power. The storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021 was thus an effort to hasten the apocalypse. Writing in the wake of the failed insurrection, Adam Kotsko observes that "apocalyptic literature always finds its society and historical moment to be corrupt and decadent." Not only is QAnon the perfect crystallization of white evangelical apocalypticism, but it also embodies the apocalyptic rhetoric of politics within our neoliberal age, in which "both sides insist that every election is an apocalyptic confrontation" while both parties advance policies that sustain the status quo.¹⁶ The result is the nihilistic impression that politics is fixed, that our society is unchangeable by the usual mechanisms of democratic activism. Within that context, apocalyptic identity formation flourishes and conspiracy theories run wild.

By and large, the religious and theological response to QAnon and related theopolitical ideologies and movements, such as Trumpism and white Christian nationalism more generally, has focused on the elements within white evangelicalism that have generated such widespread support for these developments. For instance, Anthea Butler has focused on the racism that is "a feature, not a bug, of American evangelicalism," while Kristin Kobes Du Mez has explored the militant patriarchy that US evangelical leaders have inculcated for decades.¹⁷ While these and other historical analyses help to explain the particular dynamics of American religious and political culture, more

14. Publius Decius Mus, "The Flight 93 Election," *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-flight-93-election/>.

15. Adrienne LaFrance, "The Prophecies of Q," *The Atlantic*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>.

16. Adam Kotsko, "An Apocalypse About Nothing," *The Bias Magazine*, January 11, 2021, <https://christiansocialism.com/trump-capitol-gop-neoliberalism-adam-kotsko/>.

17. See Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 2; Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

attention needs to be given to LaFrance's observation that Trumpism and evangelicalism—and thus the current political environment more widely in the United States—participates in a long tradition of apocalyptic thinking. A more thoroughgoing critique of the American political scene thus needs to interrogate the apocalyptic identity formation that characterizes American polarization. Toward this end, the work of Rudolf Bultmann can provide unexpectedly insightful assistance.

Judaism, Gnosticism, and Eschatological Existence

One of the challenges readers of Bultmann face is the often invisible triangulation between three perspectives: history-of-religions research, normative Christian theology, and the contemporary sociopolitical context. Bultmann became very skilled at veiling his critique of the Nazi regime in the garb of his scholarly work. While this is fairly obvious in his account of the confrontation between Jesus and Pilate,¹⁸ I want to suggest the same holds true for Bultmann's discussion of gnosticism, though the connection to politics here is more oblique. The historical veracity of his gnostic research aside, the political associations become more apparent when we interpret Bultmann's account of gnosticism existentially by viewing it in relation to his normative concept of eschatological existence and the account of Christian identity formation that this existence implies.

Bultmann developed his mature account of eschatological existence in the context of Nazi rule, though the key elements were in place by the late 1920s. "To be in Christ," he writes in 1929, "means to stand in this new history, which is not world history and the history of sin, but is an eschatological event."¹⁹ Bultmann describes this as a "new mode of being," a mode of historical existence "in a new aeon." Consequently, the church as the community of those who share this new mode of being is "an eschatological entity" that is simultaneously visible and invisible.²⁰ The rise of the German Christian movement in 1932 afforded Bultmann an opportunity to put his eschatological conception of Christianity to sociopolitical use. On December 22, 1932, Bultmann sent to his publisher an essay on "The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith." The political import of this widely misunderstood essay appears in two claims. First, Bultmann argues that the Old Testament shares the same historical understanding of existence (*Dasein*) as the New Testament, so that "in the Old Testament existence [*Sein*] under the law is already understood as an existence under grace."²¹ Here

18. Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941), 508 (hereafter *Evangelium*); Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 656 (hereafter *Gospel*).

19. Rudolf Bultmann, "Kirche und Lehre im Neuen Testament [1929]," in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 4 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933–1965), 1:171 (hereafter *GuV*); Eng. trans., Rudolf Bultmann, "Church and Teaching in the New Testament [1929]," in *Faith and Understanding*, ed. Robert W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 202 (hereafter *FaU*).

20. *GuV* 1:171–72; *FaU*, 203–4.

21. *GuV* 1:324, 326. Original emphasis removed.

Bultmann rejects the German Christian dismissal of the Old Testament as something alien to Christian faith.

This brings Bultmann to his second point regarding what differentiates the Old Testament from the New, because existence under the law is only existence under grace for the specific people (*Volk*) of Israel. “The law has been given to a particular people in a particular history,” and the law is grace for those who belong to this history of God’s covenant with the patriarchs and the prophets.²² The Old Testament, or rather Hebrew scripture, was written for a specific people (*Volk*) with a specific ethno-national history (*Volksgeschichte*).²³ In contrast to the Jewish *Volk*, which is constituted by a continuous sociocultural history, gentile Christianity is constituted by an eschatological act of God, and this act does not result in a community with a particular ethnic, national, or cultural identity. Whereas in 1929 he formulated the church in a positive way as an eschatological entity, here he says the same thing negatively: “The community, *the church*, is not a sociological entity, an ethnonational or cultural community bound together by the continuity of history.”²⁴ Implicit in this essay is a sharp criticism of the German Christian movement for conceiving the Christian church as an ethnonational church, a *Volkskirche* for the German people. Not only is this antithetical to the eschatological understanding of the church, but it co-opts the self-understanding of the Jewish people. The Jewish community is rightly understood as a *Volk*, but not gentile Christianity. A year later Bultmann made this critique explicit in the article he wrote against the so-called Aryan Paragraph that launched the church struggle in 1933.²⁵

By the end of 1933, then, Bultmann had two accounts of existence in the world: (1) the inauthentic existence of those Christians—particularly the German Christians—who abandoned the eschatological dimension of the faith in an effort to establish a sociological, ethnonationalist account of Christianity that associates the church with one people to the exclusion of others; and (2) the authentic existence of those Christians who understood themselves to be constituted by an eschatological act of God that differentiates the Christian community from all social, cultural, and historical factors that might otherwise divide people and thus unites all people according to faith in Christ irrespective of worldly differences. In itself, this framework had potent sociopolitical implications and formed the theological basis for Bultmann’s alliance with the Confessing Church. But the situation became substantially more complicated around the same time Bultmann was arguing over the Aryan Paragraph.

22. *GuV* 1:326. Bultmann arguably anticipates the “Paul within Judaism” school’s position that Paul held to two different ways of salvation: the path of the covenant for Jews and the path of faith in Christ for gentiles. Christian scholars tend to read this as an anti-Jewish disregard for the Hebrew scriptures, but it is just as likely to be influenced by the fact Bultmann had many close Jewish friends and respected the distinctness of their traditions. See Konrad Hammann, “Rudolf Bultmanns Begegnung mit dem Judentum,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 102 (2005): 35–72.

23. *GuV* 1:322.

24. *GuV* 1:333. All emphasis original unless otherwise indicated.

25. See Rudolf Bultmann, “Der Arier-Paragraph im Raume der Kirche [1933],” in *Die Marburger Theologen und der Arierparagraph in der Kirche: Eine Sammlung von Texten aus den Jahren 1933 und 1934*, ed. Heinz Liebmg (Marburg: Elwert, 1977), 32–45, at 37.

In September 1933, Bultmann's Jewish student, Hans Jonas, fled Germany for London. Jonas was in the process of finishing his work on gnosticism, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* (Gnosis and the spirit of late antiquity). Bultmann was connected to the project on account of his offer to write a foreword, which the publisher, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, made a condition of publication due to a negative review of Jonas's previous work. Bultmann's foreword, dated June 14, 1934, praised Jonas for showing the "fruitfulness" of the latter's method, "which involves grasping the genuine meaning of a historical phenomenon through the principle of existentialist analysis."²⁶ Jonas's achievement was to apply Heidegger's existentialist conceptuality to the interpretation of ancient gnostic sources. Jonas sees the complex gnostic mythology as the "symbolic externalization" and "objectification" of the underlying "eschatological form of existence." The term he uses to name this existential self-understanding is *Entweltlichung*, which we can translate as "deworldizing" or simply "deworlding"—an existential detachment from the world.²⁷

Reading Jonas's work clearly inspired Bultmann, who ended up applying the same existentialist method to the Gospel of John in the commentary that began appearing in 1937. One can see the way Bultmann incorporated Jonas into his work in his later *Theology of the New Testament*, where he says that "the essence of gnosticism does not lie in its syncretistic mythology but rather in a new understanding—new in the ancient world—of the self and the world; its mythology is only the expression of this understanding."²⁸ But Jonas also posed a challenge to Bultmann. Prior to this point it had been sufficient to understand Christianity as an eschatological form of existence, but now Jonas had demonstrated that this analysis was too generic and applied as well to gnosticism.²⁹ What then distinguishes the Christian understanding of existence?

Bultmann's commentary on the Fourth Gospel was his answer to this question. Johannine Christianity shares a lot in common with the gnostic account of eschatological existence, at least as interpreted by Jonas. Bultmann differentiates between gnosticism and (Johannine) Christianity in terms of the contrast between cosmological dualism and existential dualism—or what he later calls a "dualism of fate" and a "dualism of decision."³⁰ Gnosticism understands the eschaton to be a literal deworlding: a flight from the world in which the souls of the children of light are reunited with their original source. Christianity, by contrast, views the distinction between light and darkness in terms of

26. Rudolf Bultmann, "Vorwort," in *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, Teil 1: Die mythologische Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934), vi.

27. Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, Teil 1: Die mythologische Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934), 87.

28. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1954), §15, 164 (hereafter *TdNT*); Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951–1955), 1:165 (hereafter *TNT*).

29. Whether there is even such a thing as gnosticism is now also widely disputed. Scholars today prefer to speak of "Valentinian Christianity," for instance, rather than use a category that seems to have been created by orthodox Christians as a means of polemicizing against their opponents. See Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1996); Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003).

30. *TdNT*, §50, 423; *TNT*, 2:76.

the existential decision of belief or unbelief: “the existence of the believer is revealed as the eschaton.”³¹ While both communities claim to be not “of this world,” Bultmann argues that their existential unworldliness is qualitatively different. For gnosticism, the cosmological dualism is a natural or static dualism. As a result, redemption is “a great natural process,” in which those who were always going to be redeemed are freed from their bondage to this corrupt world.³² Gnosticism thus divides the world into two groups: those “from above” and those “from below.”³³ Gnosticism is a kind of apocalyptic cosmic polarization—a static reification of the divide between the gnostics and the rest of the world. Gnostics are “pneumatics” who definitively know they belong to the light and are assured of redemption.

Christian existence, on the other hand, has no such assurance, as Bultmann demonstrates in his exegesis of the farewell prayer in the Fourth Gospel. The eschatological community is constituted by the eschatological event—the event of cosmic divine judgment. What is distinctive about Johannine theology, according to Bultmann, is that this future judgment has already occurred in the mission of the Son in Jesus and occurs ever anew in the decision of faith (John 5:24–25).³⁴ The eschatological event that brings the community into existence is thus a “paradox” in which past, present, and future coincide in the moment; the event makes it impossible, he argues, to look back at achievements in the past or look ahead to effects in the future: “In the eschatological event there is neither preparation nor development.” One cannot take pride in the “world-historical effects of Christianity.”³⁵ The community of faith has no security, no definitive knowledge of their righteousness and redemption. “The community cannot prove itself before the world,” nor can they take comfort in anything they possess, including “their capacity for faith, their dogma, their cult, their organization.”³⁶ But neither can they perceive others as an existential threat because of any qualities the world possesses; there is no objective divide between community and world. The community’s deworlding is thus not the kind of static polarization that characterizes the gnostics, but instead reflects the paradox of the Logos who becomes flesh. The holiness of the community is “not its own quality, nor does it manufacture its distinction from the world through its ritual, institution, and special way of life.” Holiness is “not something static, not a given possession.” The community’s holiness is attained purely through “its deworlding posture,” which comes from “constantly attending to the word that calls the community out of the world.”³⁷

Christian eschatological existence, according to Bultmann, is thus a *paradoxical* rather than a polarized deworlding. If gnosticism is a mode of existence that separates the righteous from the unrighteous, those who know from those who know not, then

31. *Evangelium*, 451; *Gospel*, 586.

32. *Evangelium*, 41; *Gospel*, 64.

33. *TdNT*, §43, 368; *TNT*, 2:21.

34. *Evangelium*, 111, 193–94; *Gospel*, 154, 257–58.

35. *Evangelium*, 146–47; *Gospel*, 198–99.

36. *Evangelium*, 383; *Gospel*, 501–2.

37. *Evangelium*, 390; *Gospel*, 509.

Christianity, on this interpretation, is a mode of existence that has no obvious separation from the world but is instead simultaneously worldly and unworldly—a paradox that corresponds to its existence as both *iustus* and *peccator*. Writing in 1958 in an essay on “The Strangeness of Christian Faith,” Bultmann speaks of “the peculiar *dialectic or paradox of the Christian relationship to the world*.”³⁸ The world for the Christian has a “dialectical meaning,” because the world is both, in a positive sense, the creation of God and, in a negative sense, the present evil age or the domain of the evil one. Since the world has an inherent complexity to it, Christian existence in the world is inherently complex and dialectical. Polarized gnosticism is not only a static view of the eschatological community but also a simplistic view of the world. Paradoxical Christianity has a dialectical view of the world and a correspondingly dialectical account of Christian existence: “Eschatological existence is *deworlde*d existence within the world.”³⁹

Paradoxical Politics in an Apocalyptic Age

The political implications of Bultmann’s account of eschatological existence become more apparent when seen against the backdrop of his polarizing apocalyptic environment. Historian David Redles has analyzed how, in the wake of the First World War, many Germans perceived the Weimar Era as a “culture of apocalypse.” They saw themselves living at the end of one age and on the cusp of a new and glorious moment. In the civil-religious ferment of that period, people converted to Nazism in order to engage in a struggle of world-historical significance, a battle against evil for the “salvation of the German Fatherland”—what he calls the process of “identity formation during apocalyptic times.”⁴⁰ As part of this polarizing conversion process, Germans identified themselves as a “chosen nation,” convinced that Adolf Hitler and National Socialism were the only means of salvation from a corrupt world.⁴¹ They viewed their racial-national community as a *Volksgemeinschaft*, “a community of pure blood,” in contrast to all foreign and impure communities that were “no longer salvageable as a people.”⁴²

It is not hard to notice the parallels between Nazi apocalyptic identity and the gnostic mode of existence. Both see themselves as an end-times community separated from the world *by nature*, whether by cosmic elements or by “blood and soil.” The polarization stems from the fact that one group *possesses* the truth, while the others do not. The implied connection in Bultmann’s work between ancient gnosticism and contemporary Nazism is enriched further by recent work on the apocalyptic

38. *GuV* 3:209.

39. *GuV* 3:207.

40. David Redles, “The Nazi Old Guard: Identity Formation During Apocalyptic Times,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 14:1 (2010): 24–44, at 25, 28.

41. *Ibid.*, 24, 26.

42. *Ibid.*, 34–5.

identity formation in Mediterranean antiquity. What Bultmann described as gnosticism was instead an apocalyptic form of Second Temple Judaism nurtured by the mix of cultural and ideological influences in the ancient Mediterranean region. As Simon Joseph points out, the apocalyptic and imperial environment led to highly polarized identities: “Ancient Jews tended to see the world in bipolar terms, that is, as Israel and the nations, or Jews and Gentiles. Similarly, ancient Greeks and Romans typically divided the world between themselves and ‘barbarians.’”⁴³ Joseph applies social identity theory to the Sayings Gospel Q to explore how the use of rhetorical violence participates in the construction of these polarized in-group and out-group identities. He argues that “the Q worldview was polarized, its symbolic boundaries clearly drawn: there were Q people and there was ‘this generation.’”⁴⁴ Elizabeth Shively has examined how apocalyptic discourse in Mark’s Gospel functions as social discourse “by revealing that those who oppose Jesus’ suffering and death are opposed to God and are, in fact, on Satan’s side,” thereby demarcating in cosmic terms who is “in” and who is “out.”⁴⁵

As these and other studies demonstrate, apocalyptic polarization was by no means distinctive of a single (“gnostic”) community. Here we have to recognize that Bultmann’s work always also had a normative dimension to it, informed both by his theological commitments and his indirect attention to contemporary political realities. His commentary on the Fourth Gospel was, despite its historical-critical apparatus, a theological commentary that aimed to articulate a constructive Christian social identity and praxis for living in apocalyptic, polarized times. The distinction between polarized and paradoxical forms of eschatological existence was less about describing the historical reality in antiquity and more about addressing the situation of the Confessing Church, much like the way his 1941 demythologizing lecture was less about mythology in the New Testament and more a response to “contemporary Christian proclamation” that was “entirely dogmatically correct in its content” but contained “no actual *preaching*.”⁴⁶ Seen in this light, Bultmann’s account of eschatological existence was an appeal to Christians in Germany to refuse the kind of hardened binary oppositions between “us” and “them” that had made it so easy for his fellow citizens to participate in both rhetorical and physical violence, as well as turn a blind eye to the institutionalized oppression and genocide of German Jews. A community that does not possess the truth and exists in worldly

43. Simon J. Joseph, “A Social Identity Approach to the Rhetoric of Apocalyptic Violence in the Sayings Gospel Q,” *History of Religions* 57:1 (2017): 28–49, at 31–32.

44. Joseph, “A Social Identity Approach,” 44.

45. Elizabeth E. Shively, “What Type of Resistance? How Apocalyptic Discourse Functions as Social Discourse in Mark’s Gospel,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 37:4 (2015): 381–406, at 397.

46. Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1985), 14; Rudolf Bultmann, “Grußwort im Marburger Rundbrief zu Jahresbeginn (Januar 1941),” in *Feldpost: Zeugnis und Vermächtnis. Briefe und Texte aus dem Kreis der evangelischen Studentengemeinde Marburg/Lahn und ihrer Lehrer (1939–1945)*, ed. Erika Dinkler-von Schubert (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 142–45, at 143.

solidarity with others cannot render others demonic and inhuman—and therefore disposable.⁴⁷

The political significance of Bultmann's work for American Christianity today thus becomes evident. While culturally distinct from Weimar Germany and, to a much greater degree, the ancient Mediterranean, the politically polarized environment of the United States in the twenty-first century is ripe for gnostic identity formation. Partisan differences are not (yet) differences of nature, but the increasing conflation of party identity with racial, gender, and sexual identity means that partisan preferences in the United States have become far more than merely one political option among others. Partisan alignment is now an expression of one's character, experiences, and social allegiances; all politics are identity politics. To be aligned with a particular party is to take sides in the apocalyptic moral struggles of the age—a fight against racial capitalism and climate change on the one side, and a fight against elite sex traffickers and the “communist” elimination of civil liberties on the other. The latter's complete lack of veracity only highlights the fact that the divide is not over the issues themselves but over people's very identity and perspective about the world.

Bultmann's paradoxical politics could be mistaken for a “both sides” centrism that refuses to align itself with the cause of genuine social justice. Despite superficial similarities, there are subtle but significant differences between paradoxical politics and centrist politics. Centrism rejects the polarization of *policies*; paradoxicality rejects the polarization of *people*. According to the centrist, the problem is that a particular policy or ideology is too far to the left or right, and the ideal is somewhere near the middle. Centrism acknowledges the complexity of the world but uses this as a pretense for denying that one should take clear, definitive positions on one side or another. Paradoxical politics, by contrast, affirms the legitimacy of taking strong stances (e.g., in favor of racial, reproductive, and environmental justice), but it refuses to conflate the positions with the people who hold them. Bultmann, for instance, was emphatic in his opposition to the theological claims propounded by pro-Nazi German Christians, but he refused to participate in the apocalyptic identity formation that would turn policy and doctrinal differences into a rationale for excluding people as a “heretical” out-group. It was precisely the Confessing Church's growing tendency to separate people into groups based on a test of confessional orthodoxy that prompted his lecture on demythologizing and is almost certainly lurking behind his critique of gnostic existence. Götz Harbsmeier,

47. This is perhaps part of why Bultmann was resistant to Ernst Käsemann's argument that apocalyptic was the “mother of Christian theology.” Bultmann saw apocalyptic as another species of the gnostic form of eschatological existence. Whereas the pneumatic gnostics emphasize a fully realized eschatology that *is* objectively secured, apocalyptic gnostics (if we can use this term) emphasize a fully future eschatology that *will be* objectively secured. They are mirror images of each other in this sense. Both objectify salvation, but one is present and the other is future. Both are apocalyptic, however, in the more general sense used with respect to the identity formation described above. In contrast to both the pneumatics and the apocalyptics, Bultmann argues that Paul's theology is a dialectic of both present and future, a mode of existence that is paradoxically both, and thus does not objectify salvation or have any objective security. See Rudolf Bultmann, “Ist die Apokalypik die Mutter der christlichen Theologie? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Ernst Käsemann [1964].” in *Exegetica: Aufsätze zur Erforschung des Neuen Testaments*, ed. Erich Dinkler (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967), 476–82.

Bultmann's ally in the struggle against both German Christian idolatry and Confessing Church confessionalism, recognized that the latter's polarizing tactics were no different from those in the wider society: "This whole way of dealing with challenges within the community is exactly the same as what the political parties ... tend to do: mutual hatred and nothing else."⁴⁸ Bultmann's existential alternative proposed a way of seeing oneself and others as irreducible to their ideas. It was not a political program for pragmatic compromise but rather a homiletical (and hermeneutical) program for understanding others ultimately in light of Christ—thereby resisting the penultimate polarization that characterizes the world both then and now.

It must not be forgotten that Bultmann's account of eschatological existence is still a *deworlding*, even if that deworlding is *within* the world. The eschatological community has no illusions about the evil against which it struggles, but it does not see itself as a pure haven of truth and goodness over against the purely immoral world. In a 1952 letter to Bultmann, Harbsmeier observes that deworlding does not provide a political program but instead rejects "the absolutization and demonization of existing differences." Deworled Christians will not "participate in a war of the alleged good against absolute evil," but will instead recognize that this is the kind of mythological interpretation of the situation that demands to be demythologized.⁴⁹ A paradoxical faith will therefore resist the "awful pleasures" of what Alan Levinovitz calls "spiritual pornography," which arouses not the love of God but the "bitter loathing of those who do not share it" and "a Manichean vision of a virtuous few battling mightily against everyone else."⁵⁰ Engaging in this kind of simplistic binary is precisely what makes the gnostic mode of eschatological existence so attractive to many Americans; not only does it neatly align with an oversimplified two-party political system, but it also frees people from the difficult work of nuanced thinking. A paradoxical politics recognizes the complexity of every situation, including the way complexity runs through each of us, thereby defusing the tendency to see others as an existential threat that leads to the authoritarianism that Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler argue has generated American polarization.⁵¹ Commenting on Anton Chekhov's "Gooseberries," the writer George Saunders says that "the story seems to want its reader to stay off autopilot, to stay alert to the possibility that it (and the reader) might be solidifying around some too-simple concept and in the process becoming false."⁵² Bultmann's account of existence is a theological way of keeping people of faith "off autopilot."

The other important factor is that deworlding for Bultmann never means a negative freedom from the world, as if the goal is escape from the contamination of

48. Götz Harbsmeier to Walter Köllner und Paul Deitenbeck, May 25, 1950, in Rudolf Bultmann, *Briefwechsel mit Götz Harbsmeier und Ernst Wolf, 1933–1976*, ed. Werner Zager (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 250.

49. Götz Harbsmeier to Rudolf Bultmann, May 6, 1952, in Bultmann, *Briefwechsel*, 295.

50. Alan Levinovitz, "The Awful Pleasures of Spiritual Pornography," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 29, 2017.

51. Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (New York: Cambridge, 2009), 3–8.


52. George Saunders, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life* (New York: Random House, 2021), 336.

society's ills. It is instead a positive freedom to live in and for the world in love of neighbor.⁵³ As Bultmann points out in his commentary on John, "it is not its world-historical achievements that legitimate the Christian faith but rather its strangeness in the world as the attitude of those whose love is grounded in divine love."⁵⁴ Put another way, "eschatological existence is not flight from the world, but rather ... 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."⁵⁵ What this looks like in practice cannot be outlined in advance of the encounter with the neighbor, but it is perhaps best expressed by Bultmann in a May 1943 letter to Harbsmeier, composed in the thick of the apocalyptic divisions created by Nazi wartime propaganda and the Confessing Church's reactionary heresy-hunting. Writing a week before he was to preach on John 16:22–33, in which Jesus tells his disciples living on the cusp of the eschatological hour that "if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you" (John 16:23), Bultmann tells Harbsmeier: "You are quite right that the attitude of the Christian can be described negatively as deworlding but must be understood positively as the attitude of prayer ... I want to try to make it clear that this eschatological existence is a life in prayer."⁵⁶

In Lieu of a Conclusion

It was in the spring of 2008, after mentioning my interest in studying Bultmann for my PhD dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary, that I first learned Professor Jim Kay was a recognized expert on Bultmann's theology. With some trepidation I approached him about the idea of an independent study on Bultmann. Studying with Kay that first semester of my PhD program was a life-altering experience. Since leaving Princeton, Kay has been a mentor and friend—reading my work, offering his constructive feedback, and providing personal support and encouragement. He not only taught me about Bultmann's theology of eschatological existence; he lived and modeled it for me on a daily basis. I remain eternally gratefully to him.

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53. For an analysis of negative and positive freedom—or rather, freedom-from and freedom-for—in the theology of Karl Barth, see W. Travis McMaken, "'Freiheit ist nicht frei': Karl Barth und die amerikanische Politik," in *Römerbrief und Tageszeitung! Politik in der Theologie Karl Barths*, ed. Marco Hofheinz and Kai-Ole Eberhardt (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2021), 235–77.

54. *Evangelium*, 406; *Gospel*, 529.

55. *GuV* 3:165.

56. Rudolf Bultmann to Götz Harbsmeier, May 23, 1943, in Bultmann, *Briefwechsel*, 33. The sermon is available in Rudolf Bultmann, *Marburger Predigten* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1956), 169–79; Eng. trans., *This World and the Beyond: Marburg Sermons*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), 189–200.

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