

Bultmann, Ogden, and the Search For A "Post-Liberal" Theology---A Review Article

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Christ Without Myth by Schubert M. Ogden,
New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961,
189 pp. \$3.75.

This book is written by one of our younger theologians who makes it clear he wishes to be aligned With "that 'liberal' tradition that counts among the great names in its history those of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Herrmann, Harnack, and Troeltsch, and more recently, Schweitzer and the early Barth and, in part at least Bultmann." For a theologian to say that he wishes to be counted in any liberal tradition is a bit unusual these days. It is to be hoped that in subsequent volumes Ogden will make more clear what he really means by this and be more explicit in setting forth a "post-liberal" theology. The present volume serves to point in a direction of interest and to set forth a proposed methodology. In the process some interesting issues are raised having to do with possible next steps in liberal theology. Because of the basic concern which the author brings to this book, his contribution in interpreting the work of Bultmann, and his apparent readiness to move beyond both the early liberalism and various orthodoxies both old and new, *Christ Without Myth* is deserving of attention.

Ogden is deeply concerned that "the Christian understanding of existence" be presented in a vital and relevant way to modern man informed with contemporary understandings of the universe and himself. He is bothered by what he believes to be the fact that "at least among the cultured elements of the population there tends to be an almost complete indifference to the church and its traditional message of sin and grace." (p. 129) He would like to throw the weight of his influence on the side of those who are trying to do something constructive about this situation.

It is Ogden's conviction that among contemporary thinkers Rudolph Bultmann is preeminent in his discernment of the contemporary theological problem. Furthermore, he believes the German scholar has given us a valid methodology in terms of which that problem may be dealt with. Thus, a major part of this volume is really an analysis of Bultmann's thought. Ogden, incidentally, wrote his doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago on Bultmann. Presumably the present volume draws heavily on the research done in that connection. The fact that Ogden

concludes that Bultmann fails to follow through on his own proposed methodology in a consistent fashion, does not minimize the importance he attaches to Bultmann's analysis of the contemporary problem together with his methods of demythologization and existential interpretation.

Christ Without Myth is divided into four sections: I The Contemporary Theological Problem; II Bultmann's Proposed Solution; III An Immanent Criticism of Bultmann's Proposal; IV The Outlines of a Constructive Alternative. There then follows a discussion of John MacQuarrie's *The Scope of Demythologizing*. In this review-article we shall note some of the major considerations dealt with in the four sections, and then make some observations on next steps in liberal theology.

I

THE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

IT is the persistent concern of the author that "the Christian understanding of existence" be communicated to modern man in a vital way, not that man may simply understand the theory of it, but that he might be confronted with the possibility of authentic existence in such a way that decision leading to faith might be realized. But here the problem emerges—the pre-scientific forms in which Christian faith found its classical expressions cannot be accepted by modern man who no longer believes in a three-story universe and who rejects the traditional idea of miracle. Thus, the contemporary theologian "must by all means do his work in obedience to the New Testament proclamation and with a critical loyalty to the entire theological tradition; and yet he can do this responsibly only by also embracing the criticism of that tradition which arises with necessity out of modern man's picture of himself and his world." (p. 17)

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It is the judgment of Ogden that the genius of liberal theology was (he speaks of it in the past tense) in recognizing the need to criticize all pre-scientific modes of thought and to present the Christian message in ways understandable to modern man. Liberalism, he believes, took science and historical criticism seriously, and rightly so. In the process, however, liberalism failed to carry on the necessary conversation with the past. Furthermore, in drawing its "critical standards from contemporary world-views" it allowed inadequate "modernizations of the Christian message." (p. 14) Thus it appears that liberalism came dangerously close to throwing the baby out with the bath.

Orthodoxy, on the other hand, while sensitive to the central and originating faith of Christianity, has missed the liberal insight of the need for speaking meaningfully in the contemporary situation. Orthodoxy endeavors to "maintain the simple identification of kerygma with theology . . ." The author seems to agree that "the Christian faith has its own distinctive identity and . . . the sole business of the theologian is obediently to articulate this faith in and for his situation." (p. 15)

The task of contemporary theology, then, is to create a theological formulation which goes beyond both orthodoxy and liberalism. It will gather up what is valid in both orthodoxy and liberalism. The result to be sought "will in the nature of the case have to be a post-liberal and not a preliberal theology." (p. 17)

Thus, chapter one leaves the reader with the impression that the author is convinced that there is a kerygma of continuing validity; that this can be articulated for modern man; and that it is possible to be true to this traditional message while maintaining the critical approach of liberalism.

II

BULTMANN'S PROPOSED SOLUTION

In this chapter Ogden sets forth Bult-

mann's proposed solution of the contemporary theological problem. In a recent review of Ogden's book, Bultmann credits Ogden with giving "a fair description of my proposed solution." (*The Journal of Religion*, July 1962)

Bultmann's theology is kerygmatic. It is a theology of the Word declared in Jesus Christ who reveals the love of God and brings the possibility of the life of faith, free from the past and open to the future. In his *Theology of the New Testament* (Vol. I, p.3) Bultmann holds that Christian faith did not exist until there was a Christian kerygma "proclaiming Jesus Christ—specifically Jesus Christ the Crucified and Risen One—to be God's eschatological act of salvation." Presumably Bultmann's purpose is to carry on his theological work in faithfulness to that kerygma.

Major difficulties emerge, according to Bultmann, by virtue of the utilization of myth in the New Testament. The crucial difficulty with myth, according to Bultmann, is that it speaks of the divine in "objective" ways which actually are appropriate only to the data with which science deals. It objectifies that which is not object. In the process it falls into a kind of competition with science, appealing to supernatural causes and miracles and delineating things in terms of a second or sacred history. Bultmann holds that the world-picture of the New Testament is mythological in the sense that it objectifies the divine representing it as another part of the objective world in the framework of a three-story universe; happenings are referred to nonnatural yet "objective" causes, the resulting presentation taking the form of a double history. The major difficulties in this, according to Bultmann, are two-fold: (1) the nature of the divine is falsified or distorted; (2) myth puts up a stumbling block for modern man.

All of this leads to a consideration of what is said to be the *real intention* of the New Testament writings. The real intention is not to give an objective accounting of certain events or to present

explanations of this or that—but to speak to man personally of his existence and to bring the possibility of authentic existence. Thus, statements about pre-existence and the virgin birth are not basically intended to give us information about pre-existence or virgin birth but to indicate that Jesus' significance is not exhausted by ordinary historical observation. Thus, myth should be taken seriously but not literally. The true intention of the Christological statements in the New Testament according to Bultmann is existential, not descriptive or reportorial in an objective sense. The true intention of the New Testament is to present God's saving act in Jesus Christ with the attendant possibility of authentic existence (freedom from the past, openness to the future) contingent upon man's free decision.

All of this leads to the need for demythologization and existential interpretation. In its commendable attempt to speak to the modern mind early liberalism is said to have endeavored to dismiss all myth as outmoded and meaningless—but in the process to have reduced the kerygma to little more than a world-view and a body of abstract truths; Jesus is said to have been reduced to an ethical and religious teacher rather than "the decisive event through which God has achieved man's salvation." (p. 42) What is needed, therefore, is not the dismissal of all New Testament myth as irrelevant, but the existential interpretation which will disclose the significance behind and within the myth. Bultmann puts it this way: "To inquire about a valid meaning of the mythical world-picture is precisely the intention of my existential interpretation." (*Glauben und Verstehen*, Vol. II, p. 235)

The possibility of demythologization and existential interpretation depends upon finding a "conceptuality" or way of speaking of and to human existence other than that of mythology or "objective science." Such a conceptuality presents itself, Bultmann believes, in Heidegger's existential analysis. Bultmann draws

heavily on Heidegger's work, holding, according to Ogden, that "what the New Testament speaks of mythologically as life in faith may be appropriately translated by Heidegger's concept of 'authentic' historical existence." (p. 64) Indeed, Bultmann writes that "philosophy all by itself already sees what the New Testament says." This does not mean that for Bultmann philosophy can replace the New Testament. What it means is that philosophy can present an analysis of existence, show what existence means, and suggest the **possibility** of authentic existence. It can give knowledge **about**. The actual **realization** of authentic existence as the life of faith (knowledge of) is dependent upon the salvation-event of Jesus Christ proclaimed in the New Testament. Bultmann insists that to speak of Jesus Christ as the salvation-occurrence is not itself simply a mythological manner of speaking. Ogden presents a rather extended discussion of Bultmann's argument at this point together with Bultmann's distinction between mythological and analogical manners of speaking of the divine action. Thus, Bultmann holds to the view that it is possible to be faithful to the kerygma at the same time that one engages in radical demythologization. Existential interpretation is the key.

Our purpose here is not to discuss Bultmann himself, but rather to see what Ogden makes of all this. That he has labored diligently to interpret Bultmann accurately and appreciatively there can be no doubt. Anyone who desires to keep abreast of the "Bultmann literature" (no easy task!) must read what Ogden has to say. He presents a discerning analysis of Bultmann's interesting experiment in being kerygmatic and modern, Lutheran and contemporary, all at the same time.

III

AN IMMANENT CRITICISM OF BULTMANN'S PROPOSAL

In this chapter Ogden considers the claim of those critics who hold that "Bultmann's view is, strictly speaking,

not a view at all, but an uneasy synthesis of two different and ultimately incompatible standpoints." (p. 99) Although the critics may move from quite different perspectives, there is said to be considerable agreement on this point. From the "right" Karl Barth is cited as one who would reject Bultmann's method of demythologization as "making impossible an adequate restatement of the Christian message." (p. 98) From the "left" of the Bultmannian center is the Basel theologian, Fritz Buri, who holds that Bultmann turns aside from the consequences of his own demythologization thesis in appealing to "God's saving act in Christ as the ground for the possibility of Christian self-understanding." Buri holds that if Bultmann is to be consistent with his own presuppositions he ought to follow through to the point of "dekerymatization."

Ogden's own approach is from the "left" as he holds that Bultmann is basically inconsistent in defining Christian faith on the one hand as man's original possibility of authentic existence, and on the other hand insisting that the realization of this possibility is dependent upon the particular historical event of Jesus Christ. Bultmann's own method and definition does not lead him to the Christ-exclusivism he espouses. If Christian faith is to be understood as man's original possibility of authentic existence, it would be more logical to affirm that the structure of authentic existence is **represented** in Jesus Christ than to hold that the **realization** of that existence is absolutely and exclusively dependent upon the Christ-event. Faith, as defined, "must be independent of an particular historical occurrence." (p. 117) It is Ogden's conclusion that "So far as his (Bultmann's) argument goes, all that is required is **some** event in which God's grace becomes a concrete occurrence and is received by a decision of faith." (p.123)

Thus, Ogden comes to a parting of the ways with Bultmann at the point of Bultmann's insistence that authentic existence is made possible and can be

realized only through Jesus Christ. He pays high tribute to Bultmann in discerning the nature of the contemporary theological problem. He accepts the validity of the demands for demythologization and existential interpretation. But he insists that one must look to another for a consistent working through of Bultmann's own proposed method and program.

IV

THE OUTLINES OF A CONSTRUCTIVE ALTERNATIVE

Ogden makes it clear that in this present volume he hopes to do no more than to suggest in outline fashion the direction of an alternative to Bultmann's position. Such an alternative position must be based upon two principles: (1) "the demand for demythologization that arises with necessity from the situation of modern man must be accepted without condition." (p. 127) (2) "the sole norm of every legitimate theological assertion is the revealed word of God declared in Jesus Christ, expressed in Holy Scripture, and made concretely present in the proclamation of the church through its word and sacraments." (p. 138) In line with these two principles Ogden writes, "theology can continue to be a relevant undertaking only insofar as the kerygma can be consistently demythologized." (p. 138) He believes this is a possibility.

Coming to what Ogden considers the method and content of a genuinely post-liberal theology, he sets forth two main theses: (1) Christian faith is to be interpreted, exhaustively and without remainder as man's original possibility of authentic existence as this is clarified and conceptualized by an appropriate philosophical analysis." (p. 146) (2) "Christian faith is always a 'possibility in fact' because of the unconditioned gift and demand of God's love, which is the everlasting ground and end of all created things; the decisive manifestation of this divine love, however, is the event of Jesus of Nazareth, which fulfill's and corrects all other manifestations and is

the originative event of the church and its distinctive word and sacraments." (p. 153)

If the work of setting forth a post-liberal theology along the lines suggested is to be carried out, Ogden affirms, basic work must be done in the area of Christology, and the resources of an adequate philosophy must be appropriated. The author introduces the reader to what he has in mind in these connections.

The post-liberal Christology toward which Ogden seems to be moving claims a **theocentric** orientation. The ground and possibility of salvation (authentic existence) is the "primordial love of God." Salvation, then, does not first **become** possible in Jesus Christ, but it is **manifest** in him. Indeed, the Christ reality is not exhausted in the Jesus of history, although the primordial love of God "is indeed decisively revealed in Jesus the Christ." (p. 143) In pressing the theocentric emphasis of his Christology, together with the freedom of God and the conviction that faith in Jesus Christ really points beyond the Jesus of history, Ogden affirms, "Not only is it **possible** to affirm that authentic existence can be realized apart from faith in Jesus Christ or in the Christian proclamation; it is, in fact, **necessary** that this affirmation be made. For only when one is prepared to make it can he possibly understand the inmost meaning of faith in Jesus Christ itself." (p. 144)

It appears that Ogden is saying that the realization of authentic existence is realizeable apart from faith in Jesus Christ or in the Christian proclamation, but that all other manifestations of God's love are corrected and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Presumably, then, **Christian** salvation is not the only authentic salvation, but is in some sense different by virtue of its Christological associations. In the light of this the reader is left wondering just what Ogden really means by such expressions as "decisive manifestation," "final manifestation," "ultimate significance for the whole history of mankind" . . . a point Bultmann makes clear in the

review referred to above. Ogden's use of language is sometimes vague and elusive at crucial points, leaving the impression that he wants to be faithful to the originating New Testament kerygma and to qualify or modify or re-interpret it all at the same time. He wishes to speak to modern man who believes in coming to truth through experimentation and who demands evidence for truth-claims, at the same time that he seems to attribute a kind of absoluteness to the apostolic proclamation. The task to which he has set himself is not simple.

A further demand of post-liberal theology, as Ogden sees it, is for a philosophical resource which is capable of providing an appropriate clarification and conceptualization of "man's original possibility of authentic existence" (p. 146) and which provides a basis of speaking of God as an **object** of thought as well as the **subject** of existential encounter. This philosophical resource, Ogden believes, is to be found in some kind of synthesis of the insights of existential philosophy and process philosophy. The philosophy of Charles Hartshorne seems to Ogden to provide the sort of resource from the side of process philosophy which is needed. Presumably, then, the present work **Christ Without Myth** is designed to lay the groundwork for further writing in the vein of post-liberal theology.

It will be interesting to see in what significant ways Ogden actually "goes beyond" some of the earlier expressions of liberal theology apart from his utilization of existential and process philosophies. Only time will tell. Incidentally, just why he wishes his theology to be called "post-liberal" rather than "liberal" is not clear in the light of his expressed desire to be aligned with that liberal tradition which includes Schleiermacher, Ritschl, etc.—unless like so many others, he insists on identifying liberalism as a dated position, rather than as an attitude, approach, or openness characterized by the free spirit.

NEXT STEPS IN LIBERAL THEOLOGY

Considerably more space has been given to a consideration of this book than would normally be given to a new volume in theology. But I think this an unusual book in its sincere concern to push ahead into a new chapter of theological work—beyond neo-orthodoxy and beyond the early liberalism. The question is: if the next steps in theology actually are to be forward, what direction can and must they take?

I agree that we cannot go on talking a language which simply does not make sense to informed people. We cannot go on talking in terms of a world-view or a theory of man which has long been discredited. If the church's message is dependent upon a kind of mythology which has no basis in fact, the church and its message is doomed.

But it seems to me that Ogden in this volume has not discerned just how deep the intellectual revolution of modern time goes. Not only does modern man question and reject much of the mythology in which the Church has stated its message—he very often questions the message itself. Demythologization and existential interpretation are not enough. Modern man, committed to investigative and experimental methods in his search for truth, wants evidence that the truth-claims of the religionist have some basis in fact. One may try to clear away the brush of mythological talk and make clear what the **real existential intention** of some ancient writer was—but the question still remains, was he telling the truth?

What I miss in this book, then, as it suggests possible new directions in theology, is the kind of concern for truth-seeking which is ready to challenge all axioms (including the kerygma) and to seek truth via investigative and experimental paths. Ogden seems to take it for granted that all men share in the original possibility of authentic existence, that the ground of this authentic existence is the primordial love of God, that the

“decisive manifestation of this divine love . . . is the event Jesus of Nazareth,” and that all men enjoy the kind of freedom in which they are able to make the appropriate decisions leading to faith. But these are presuppositions of the greatest importance, not to be taken lightly. Is modern man expected to accept them without question? Demythologization and existential interpretation are not enough—we need evidence on the positive side of the ledger. (Incidentally, I am troubled by both Bultmann's and Ogden's apparent assumption that the **real intention** of the Biblical writers goes deeper or is other than what they actually said. Who, after all these centuries, is capable of knowing what their real intentions were?)

We owe much to the liberal tradition in Protestant thought as it has come to expression thus far. Liberalism is not a dated position; it is the spirit of freedom in the search for understanding. The liberal spirit in theology is open to new evidence, is ready to challenge axioms long held, to reformulate theories and doctrines in the light of new information and experience. Thus, the liberal is always ready to rethink his liberal formulation of yesterday if the evidence calls for that. Our need is not for a post-liberal theology but for theological work which carries on the liberal spirit in a responsible way. We need better liberal theology.

In the next few paragraphs I should like to indicate briefly some of the factors which I think are relevant in a continuation of the liberal tradition in a new day.

I take it that we are basically concerned with religion in the life of man—religion at its creative best, relating man productively with what is deepest and most abiding in the nature of things. The fruits of functioning religion are courage, the sense of meaningfulness in existence, and the quality of wholeness (identity in relationship). We may refer to the life of religion as the life of faith, or (if the existentialists prefer) authentic exist-

ence. Religion, so understood, is a highly complex phenomenon. It will not do to go about making sweeping statements about it any more than it will do for a medical man to go about making all sorts of generalizations about a given health problem without first engaging in serious research.

We need more light on the various factors which are involved in the coming into being of the life of faith. We need to know about those processes which presumably are essential to the coming of the religious life. We must turn to many disciplines, including the behavioral sciences, to get the information we need. We need to know not only what the life of religion is, but under what circumstances it is to be encouraged or discouraged, and whether it is a possibility for all persons in greater or less degree.

Apparently there is an intellectual component in the religious life—and this is where theology enters the picture. The data of theology are dealt with within the framework of religious concern. The theologian needs to see his work within the larger framework of the coming of religious health in the life of the individual and the group. We need a functional approach both to religion and theology. Theology is the intellectual phase of religion in its individual and group expressions.

Probably the major task of contemporary theology is to show how the God-idea has a basis in fact and how it is relevant in the life of modern man. It is well enough for our theologians to keep re-iterating that the decisive manifestation of the divine is here or there; but if they really want to talk to the deep questions of multitudes of educated persons today, they must show that belief in God is more than the result of wishful thinking—a vital lie. This calls for some form of philosophical or natural theology. The philosophical orientation which seems most appropriate in this undertaking is one which recognizes the dy-

namic, relational, and emergent character of the world of experience.

Meaningful talk of God requires clarification of the meaning of the God-idea in the context of the religious life. Men refer events and experiences to what they believe to be the divine in their quest for religious values; in the light of the divine, events have changed meaning. A new and more extensive significance is manifest.

The theologian is then called upon to inquire as to whether the God-idea has basis in fact. The most promising method at this point is not that of seeking God at the end of an argument that is aiming at a first cause (a first cause external to the world order even if proved—a highly questionable assumption—would not necessarily have religious significance). Rather, we do well to inquire as to whether there is **that in man's experienced world which functions as the divine**—and then to draw the appropriate inferences. In all of this, the theologian needs to recognize that the ultimate claim upon him under which he is called to work is not fidelity to some ancient revelation or time-honored belief—but to the truth of God as that is available to him in a world about which he is continually learning more and more. The ways of God can stand scrutiny. It is a timid faith which insists that some past insight or conviction must be the norm of all future insights.

All data bearing on the way things are and the ways in which things proceed are relevant to the theologian's search for understanding of the divine. God is to be discerned in the eventfulness of things—otherwise the God-idea is nothing more than a matter of conjecture. But if one does admit data on such an inclusive basis, he must be prepared to consider the possibility that the very **dynamic** which is fundamental to the coming of religious values (the life of faith) may also be implicated in those structures and processes which seem quite impartial to man and eventually remove him from the scene. To talk only

of the primordial love of God without recognizing that the fact of love emerges out of a highly complex matrix of events—including conflict, frustration, suffering, death—is to close one's eyes to what apparently is there. Shortly before his death William Temple wrote in the **Christian Newsletter**: "It is a great mistake to suppose that God is only, or even chiefly, concerned with religion." These are interesting words to contemplate in a space age when we are increasingly reminded of the vastness of the system of things of which we are a part.

However, because the theologian works from concern for the **religious** meaning of God, he will seek to make explicit the direction of man's appropriate expectations in relation to God. There is much unhappiness in the world (sometimes encouraged in the name of religion) grounded in man's expecting and demanding inappropriate or impossible things in life.

Because he has a pragmatic concern (the coming to the life of faith) the theologian has the further responsibility of providing a rational for techniques appropriate to the religious life in the light of the reality of God. No one is religious in general. The life of religion flowers out in association with specific beliefs, rituals, commitments, traditions. It is the task of the theologian to bring the light of criticism and interpretation to all of this. However, it is a mistake to assume that the primary task of the theologian is to give reasons for believing things and doing things just the way they have always been believed or have always been done in a given tradition. Theology has conserving, criticizing, creating functions.

In connection with the pragmatic-functional concern of the theologian, he is called upon to throw light on the ever-present problem of mediation—where-

by the individual or group is enabled to appropriate the religious values and meanings of God as understood. This, of course, is related to the matter of techniques. How is the divine understood to be **extensively present in the universe** also to be understood as **intensively present in the universe and to the individual**? How is the divine who is far to be understood as being near? How does the universal become concrete? How does the individual person move beyond being simply a detached kind of spectator of things divine—to the point where there comes a kindling awareness of the claim of the divine upon **him** and the meaning of God for **him** calling for a personal response? Some there are who believe that this suggests the valid meaning of revelation in our time—not the communication of new truths from some supernatural source—but the kindling awareness of the divine at the heart of all existence, putting one's personal existence in a new light, and calling for response.

This is indeed an exciting time for theological work. Theological questions are being asked on every hand—but often not in theological language or even in the awareness that they are theological questions. Individuals in the presence of our culture's dehumanizing influences ask the age-old questions of courage, meaning, wholeness. The peoples of the earth seek those binding elements which are grounded in the realm of ideas, purposes, goals. In such a day—profoundly influenced by science, technology, and the new perspective of outer space—it is the task of theology to "make clear to popular understanding some eternal greatness incarnate in the passage of temporal fact." (A. N. Whitehead, **Adventures of Ideas**.) The next step in theology calls for "fidelity to facts" and true "openness to the future."

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