

# DEMYTHOLOGIZING AND NON-RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION: A COMPARISON OF BULTMANN AND BONHOEFFER

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The age in which we live, according to Rudolf Bultmann, is a post-mythological one; according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it is a post-religious one. What are the implications of this situation for the Christian faith? As Bultmann sees it, what is problematic is myth; we need to identify the mythological elements in the New Testament, and then re-interpret them in a non-mythological (i.e. existentialist) way. As Bonhoeffer sees it, what is problematic is religion; the biblical message must therefore be understood in a non-religious way.

What is the relationship of Bonhoeffer's call for a "non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts" to Bultmann's program of demythologizing the New Testament? Despite Bonhoeffer's criticism of Bultmann in the prison letters, it has frequently been claimed that demythologizing and non-religious interpretation are fundamentally similar. It is the thesis of this paper that, in spite of certain superficial similarities, the two proposals are radically different. After reviewing Bultmann's statement of the case for demythologizing and Bonhoeffer's response to it, I shall set forth Bonhoeffer's view of religion and the consequent need for non-religious interpretation, which leads to the conclusion that Bultmann is still essentially religious.

## I. BULTMANN'S PROGRAM OF DEMYTHOLOGIZING

Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann identified himself during the Hitler years with the Confessing Church in Germany. In 1941, at a meeting of the Society for Protestant Theology (a group of Confessing Church theologians), Bultmann presented his now-famous paper entitled "The New Testament and Mythology."<sup>1</sup> In this lecture, as is well known, Bultmann argues that the language of the New Testament creates a serious difficulty because it is "mythological" language. Both the world view which the New Testament writers presuppose and the salvation event which forms the consent of their witness are presented in mythical terms.

The mythical character of the New Testament worldview involves not only the familiar picture of a three-story universe, but more

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<sup>1</sup>Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 615.

fundamentally the assumption that there are supernatural powers which intervene in the natural course of events — and, what is even more disturbing, they intervene also in the lives of men. No modern man, Bultmann assures us, can believe these unbelievable things. In the modern scientific view of the world, history is understood as a closed cause-and-effect continuum which super-natural forces do not interrupt. It is not, moreover, simply the cosmology of modern science which makes myth impossible for us; myth also conflicts with the self-understanding of modern man. We know that man is “a self-subsistent unit immune from the interference of supernatural powers.”<sup>2</sup> Cosmologically speaking, then, myth is that which offends our modern scientific view of the world; anthropologically speaking, myth is that which clashes with the way we understand ourselves as human beings.

What is mythical, however, is not just the framework of the New Testament story, but the New Testament story itself — the news that a pre-existent divine being becomes incarnate, dies for the sins of the world, and rises again from the dead. Incarnation, atonement, resurrection — all this and more is mythology, and therefore unreal for modern man.

Since all this is incredible, the only real question on Bultmann's terms is, must we abandon the New Testament message when we (necessarily) abandon myth? Or is there some deeper meaning to it which can be retained even though we can no longer regard the mythical meaning as literally true? It will not do, Bultmann insists, to attempt a compromise — to try to reduce the amount of mythology in the kerygma by eliminating some mythical features while preserving others. Where mythology is concerned, there can be no picking and choosing; it is all or nothing. Thus we cannot ask what mythological elements can be salvaged — none of the myth can be salvaged as myth. The only question is whether the message which the New Testament proclaims mythologically is nothing but myth, or whether there is something behind the myth which could be expressed in some alternative way. The latter is the route which Bultmann believes the interpreter must take.

It is his contention that the New Testament message “demands the elimination of myth if it is to be understood as it was meant to be.”<sup>3</sup> The task of demythologizing is posed by the nature of myth itself. “The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the

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<sup>2</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in Hans Werner Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 16.

world in which he lives.”<sup>4</sup> If this is the case, then it is obviously a mistake to accept myth at face value as a description of the way things are. The meaning of mythology is not its “imagery with its apparent objectivity” but the understanding of human existence it is trying to express.<sup>5</sup> We therefore misunderstand myth if we understand it literally — if we fail to perceive that what it is really about is not cosmology or objective truth at all, but rather the way man understands himself. A right interpretation of myth, then, will have to learn how to distinguish between the mythological language and the existential truth it contains.

After giving this account of what myth is and why it must be overcome, Bultmann proceeds to analyze the liberal attempt to overcome myth and its failure. Liberalism made the mistake of discarding not only the mythology but the kerygma itself. It supposed that it could dispense with the temporary elements in biblical faith (the husk) and retain only the abiding, timeless truths (the kernel). The result, however, was that the kerygma *qua* kerygma was eliminated. No longer was there a decisive act of God to be proclaimed, but only eternal principles. Such a reduction loses the central New Testament emphasis upon an event, which in Bultmann’s judgment is crucial.

Instead of dissolving the kerygma, Bultmann proposes to liberate it from its mythical form in order to uncover its real meaning. If the New Testament message can be reclaimed from mythological misunderstanding, then it can once again genuinely challenge men to a decision of faith. The only way to do this, Bultmann believes, is to substitute the language of existentialism for the mythological language of the Bible. Once this is done, the kerygma will be free to speak to modern man as it was originally intended to speak.

Understood in this way, the kerygma offers us the possibility of moving from inauthentic to authentic existence. The word of the cross and resurrection of Christ, no longer understood as the primitive mythology of atonement or the equally incredible resuscitation of a dead man, challenges us instead to understand ourselves in a new way. It confronts us with the question whether we are willing to understand ourselves as men who are crucified and risen with Christ.<sup>6</sup>

## II. BONHOEFFER’S RESPONSE

What did Dietrich Bonhoeffer make of all this? His biographer, Eberhard Bethge, tells us that he “urgently recommended” that his

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42.

former students read Bultmann's essay.<sup>7</sup> And when a pastors' convention seemed on the verge of judging Bultmann a heretic, Bonhoeffer reacted angrily. In a letter, he wrote: "I am delighted with Bultmann's new booklet. I am continually impressed by the intellectual honesty of his work. . . . I should like to know whether any one of these people have worked through the commentary on John. The arrogance that flourishes here . . . is a real scandal for the Confessing Church."<sup>8</sup> Then, when one of his students wrote asking what he thought of Bultmann's thesis, Bonhoeffer replied:

. . . I am one of those who welcomed this treatise, not because I agree with it; I regret the double line of approach in it (the argument from John 1:14 and from the radio ought not to be mixed up; I consider that the second, too, is an argument, only the separation would have to be plainer) . . . To put it crudely: B. has let the cat out of the bag, not only for himself, but for a great many people (the Liberal cat out of the Confessional bag), and for that I am glad. He has ventured to say what many people inwardly repress (I include myself) without having overcome it. In that way he has rendered a service in intellectual integrity and honesty. The dogmatic pharisaism that many brethren are now calling up against it I regard as fatal. The questions now have to be answered plainly, I should like to talk to B. about it, and I would willingly expose myself to the draught of fresh air that he brings. But then the window must be shut again, or the susceptible people will catch cold too easily . . .<sup>9</sup>

Bonhoeffer thus speaks appreciatively about Bultmann's work, praising him in particular for his intellectual honesty. But he clearly has some reservations. What those reservations are becomes clear

<sup>7</sup>Bethge, *op. cit.*, p. 615.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 616.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.* Gerhard Krause, in his article "Dietrich Bonhoeffer und Rudolf Bultmann," in Erich Dinkler (ed.), *Zeit und Geschichte* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1964), pp. 439-60, contends that this letter "will have to provide the norm for understanding the relevant prison letters, whose exact sense is less clear." Krause argues that this letter must be normative because it was written when Bonhoeffer still had access to the text of Bultmann's article, whereas in prison he had to depend upon his recollection of what Bultmann had written. That this difference is not at all decisive, however, becomes apparent when Krause later complains that Bonhoeffer's criticism of Bultmann in this letter is wide of the mark because Bonhoeffer apparently did not bother to check what Bultmann actually wrote.

Krause further claims that, while there is a mixture of appreciation and criticism in this letter, the dominant note is one of affirmation of Bultmann. It is not at all clear, however, that the letter is as positive as Krause thinks. Bonhoeffer thinks Bultmann's essay ought to be taken seriously because it is stimulating and calls attention to a real problem, but the solution proposed is not finally satisfying. A little fresh air is a good thing, but we do not want people to catch cold. This letter does not enable us to reach firm conclusions about Bonhoeffer's estimate of Bultmann's proposal for demythologizing. For that we must turn to the prison letters.

when we examine two of the prison letters where Bonhoeffer explicitly criticizes Bultmann's project in connection with his own reflections on the need for non-religious interpretation.

In his important theological letter of 5 May 1944, Bonhoeffer writes: I expect you remember Bultmann's essay on the 'demythologizing' of the New Testament? My view of it today would be, not that he went 'too far', as most people thought, but that he didn't go far enough. It's not only the 'mythological' concepts, such as miracle, ascension, and so on (which are not in principle separable from the concepts of God, faith, etc.), but 'religious' concepts generally, which are problematic. You can't, as Bultmann supposes, separate God and miracle, but you must be able to interpret and proclaim *both* in a 'non-religious' sense. Bultmann's approach is fundamentally still a liberal one (i.e. abridging the gospel), whereas I'm trying to think theologically.<sup>10</sup>

In the letter of 8 June 1944, after criticizing Barth for his "positivism of revelation," Bonhoeffer makes these further comments about Bultmann:

Bultmann seems to have somehow felt Barth's limitations, but he misconstrues them in the sense of liberal theology, and so goes off into the typical liberal process of reduction – the 'mythological' elements of Christianity are dropped, and Christianity is reduced to its 'essence'. – My view is that the full content, including the 'mythological' concepts, must be kept – the New Testament is not a mythological clothing of a universal truth; this mythology (resurrection etc.) is the thing itself – but the concepts must be interpreted in such a way as not to make religion a precondition of faith (cf. Paul and circumcision).<sup>11</sup>

It will be observed that there are two grounds on which Bultmann's demythologizing is criticized in these passages: on the one hand, it is liberal; on the other hand, it is religious.

The first charge is made because the idea of stripping the kerygma of its mythological form in order to interpret it existentially strikes Bonhoeffer as an instance of liberal reductionism. Kerygma and myth simply are not separable in the way Bultmann supposes. There is no way to divide such "mythical" elements as miracle or resurrection from categories like God and faith – they are inextricably bound up together

<sup>10</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Enlarged Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1971), p. 285.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 328-39.

in the New Testament. The attempt to disentangle them and so break this indissoluble unity amounts to abridging the gospel.

Objections have been raised against Bonhoeffer's assessment of Bultmann at this point. Gerhard Ebeling, for example, one of Bonhoeffer's students who has also been strongly influenced by Bultmann, protests in these terms: "Bonhoeffer's reproach that Bultmann succumbs to the typical liberal reduction process fails to recognize Bultmann's express intention."<sup>12</sup> Ebeling calls attention to the way in which Bultmann differentiates his own enterprise precisely from that of the liberals, claiming that while they eliminated myth, he wants to interpret it.<sup>13</sup>

Inasmuch as Bultmann declares that his purpose is not to get rid of myth but to understand its true meaning, it does seem that Bonhoeffer is not being quite fair when he simply equates demythologizing with the 19th century efforts to strip away the historically conditioned "husk" in order to arrive at the "kernel" of timeless truth. Yet it will not do simply to dismiss Bonhoeffer's assessment as a misunderstanding. On the contrary, one may well ask (as Götz Harbsmeier does) whether there is not some justice in Bonhoeffer's verdict after all.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, Bultmann's approach differs from that of the old liberals, but it also resembles it insofar as he sees the mythology of the New Testament as a vehicle, not indeed for eternal principles, but for an understanding of human existence. And, in describing his project, Bultmann does in fact use the word "eliminate" with reference to myth.<sup>15</sup> Whether that is significant or not, a "kernel-husk" pattern is clearly evident in the way Bultmann speaks about the existentialist understanding expressed in the mythical form, in striking contrast to Bonhoeffer's insistence that the mythology is the thing itself! Bultmann makes no attempt to conceal the fact that something is being eliminated. Everything depends upon whether the real meaning of the mythological elements is preserved in the existentialist translation. Thus it is by no means inappropriate to ask the question put by Karl Barth: "Does the removal of the New Testament forms of expression enable us to

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<sup>12</sup>Gerhard Ebeling, "The 'Non-Religious Interpretation of Biblical Concepts,'" in *Word and Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 139.

<sup>13</sup>Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 12; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner's, 1958), p. 18.

<sup>14</sup>Götz Harbsmeier, "Die 'nicht-religiöse Interpretation biblischer Begriffe' bei Bonhoeffer und die Entmythologisierung," in *Die mündige Welt*, II, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup>"The question is simply whether the New Testament message consists exclusively of mythology, or whether it actually demands the elimination of myth if it is to be understood as it is meant to be." (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 10.)

recognize more clearly the intention of the elements in question?"<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer thinks not.

The second criticism of Bultmann's program is the more fundamental one. Bonhoeffer feels that the distinction between mythological and non-mythological categories not only is impossible to carry out, but also misses the essential point: that all "religious" categories, whether mythological or not, are obsolete. For Bonhoeffer, the problem is not the incredibility of myth; the problem is the disappearance of religion. Thus he can say that the trouble with Bultmann is not that he has gone too far, but that he has not gone far enough. Bonhoeffer's own thesis, which he sees as more radical, is that the New Testament message must be severed from all religious preconditions and interpreted in a "non-religious" way.

### III. RELIGION AND NON-RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION

In order to pursue this point, let us consider Bonhoeffer's protest against religion. There are two strands in his criticism: in the first, "religious" is the opposite of "Christian"; in the second, "religious" is the opposite of "secular" (or, in Bonhoeffer's own terms, "worldly"). The first is most prominent in his early or Barthian period but continues throughout his writings, while the second appears in and dominates the prison letters. In both cases, he insists that genuine faith is different from religion. In the second attack he sees this difference in a different way, but the first establishes the principle of a difference. Thus, while the second critique is not the same as the first, he could not have had the second without the first. As James Woelfel points out, "Bonhoeffer's notion of a 'religionless Christianity' would never have occurred to him in the form it did if it had not been for his thorough grounding in Barth . . ."<sup>17</sup>

To begin with, then, one must recall that Bonhoeffer participated in the Barthian revolt against the preoccupation with religion in 19th century liberal theology since Schleiermacher. He shared Barth's enthusiasm for marking off the line of distinction between God's revelation and man's religion. Indeed, in his later reflections in prison, it is precisely this prophetic criticism of religion that Bonhoeffer regards as Barth's chief contribution, in spite of his critical comments about the latter's "positivism of revelation."

In addition to this (Barthian) distinction between religion and faith, which persists throughout Bonhoeffer's writings, there emerges

<sup>16</sup>Karl Barth, "Rudolf Bultmann — An Attempt to Understand Him," in Hans-Werner Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, II (London: SPCK, 1962), p. 103.

<sup>17</sup>James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), p. 89.

in the prison letters a different sort of polemic against religion which indicts it as irrelevant or obsolete in an adult world. Bethge identifies seven characteristics of Bonhoeffer's view of religion in the prison letters.<sup>18</sup> To begin with, religion is metaphysical, in the sense that its God is the Supreme Being of philosophy of religion, the Infinite, the Absolute, rather than the one whose genuine transcendence is revealed in the "*Für-andere-Dasein*" of Jesus. Secondly, religion is individualistic, concerned about the personal inwardness of the individual, relegating God to the private sphere. The next feature of religion, closely related to this, is its partial or provincial character: instead of being concerned with the whole of life, religion becomes a separate area among the other areas of life. A fourth mark of religion is its attempt to use God as a *deus ex machina*, a stop-gap who makes up for human inadequacies and furnishes the solution to unsolved problems. Fifthly, there belongs to the concept of religion for Bonhoeffer the fact that it becomes a form of privilege, to the advantage of those who are religious. Furthermore, religion seeks to exercise tutelage, to function institutionally as the guardian of man, thereby treating the world as though it had not come of age. A final characteristic of religion is its dispensability: it is in fact passing away, as something that belongs to a vanishing epoch in the history of mankind. Thus clinging to religion means clinging to that which has been outgrown and should be left behind.

This characterization of religion is certainly not intended as a general theory of religion for the consideration of students of *Religionswissenschaft* or the history of religions. What Bonhoeffer is presenting is rather a theological critique of the historical shape of Western Christendom. He sees all these features as characteristics of the church's misunderstanding of the gospel — a misunderstanding incompatible with both the biblical message and the world come of age. When he defines "religious interpretation" as speaking metaphysically and individualistically, Bonhoeffer declares: "Neither of these is relevant to the Bible message or to the man of today."<sup>19</sup> Thus, in his view, neither Scripture nor modern man is religious.

On the basis of this analysis, Bonhoeffer calls for a "non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts" — an interpretation required both by the modern world and by the gospel itself. What is this non-religious interpretation? Heinrich Ott suggests the following definition:

<sup>18</sup>Bethge, *op. cit.*, pp. 776-81

<sup>19</sup>Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 286 (letter of 5 May 1944).



Non-religious interpretation is a problem of language which, in the encounter with concrete humanity of our day, aims at a new orientation of the language of the Church, in which the existential behaviour of the Church in the world is involved, and which reaches its final close definition of its subject in the question of Christology.<sup>20</sup>

The difficulty one faces in trying to get beyond this kind of formal definition is due partly to the nature of the sources and partly to the nature of the sources and partly to the incipient stage of Bonhoeffer's thinking on the subject. Would that we had a "programmatic essay" like Bultmann's "New Testament and Mythology" to describe this project, instead of only the fragmentary accounts of it in the prison letters! We obviously have a much clearer idea of what existentialist interpretation means than what non-religious interpretation would look like. Perhaps Bonhoeffer himself was not certain how it could be worked out.<sup>21</sup> Most of what he says about it is couched in negative terms, so that we know what he wants to achieve largely in terms of what he wants to avoid. Probably the only sure thing one can say about non-religious interpretation is that what Bonhoeffer intends is an interpretation of the Christian faith that will be the opposite of the objectionable features of religion as enumerated above. Beyond that, however, the specific form which the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts was supposed to take never quite seemed to jell. All we have to go by is a series of themes which dominate his prison meditations: the wholeness and goodness of life in the world, the importance of relating the gospel to man in strength rather than in weakness, the recognition of God not on the boundaries but at the center of life — and above all the great Christological affirmations: Christ as Lord of the religionless, not an object of religion but Lord of the world; Christ as the incarnate one, the crucified one, the risen one; Christ, the man for others, who embodies the transcendence of God precisely in his existence for others; Christ who in his suffering exhibits the weakness and powerlessness of God, and thereby calls us to share God's sufferings in a godless world.

#### IV. BONHOEFFER'S RELATION TO BULTMANN

Any attempt to delineate the theological relationship between Bonhoeffer and Bultmann cannot fail to recognize a certain parallel

<sup>20</sup>Heinrich Ott, *Reality and Faith* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1972), p. 101.

<sup>21</sup>Note the following remarks in the prison letters: "Well, it's time to say something concrete about the secular interpretation of biblical concepts; but it's too hot!" (p. 346, letter of 8 July 1944); "I'm only gradually working my way to the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts; the job is too big for me to finish just yet." (p. 359, letter of 16 July).

in their concerns. Both are moved by the problem of the *interpretation* of the Christian message in the light of the *modern* situation. For Bultmann, it is wrong to make acceptance of the mythological worldview a prerequisite for Christian faith; hence we must liberate the kerygma from pre-scientific cosmology in order to let its real meaning be heard. For Bonhoeffer, it is wrong to make religion (outgrown by a world come of age) a condition of faith; hence we must drop the religious approach and thereby discover what the Christian message really means for us today.

In spite of this parallel, however, one may still wonder whether Bultmann's program is ultimately compatible with Bonhoeffer's vision of Christian faith without religion in an adult world. The answer must be in the negative. Bultmann's effort to translate the New Testament into existentialist language is not satisfactory because it remains essentially on the level of "religion." Granted that Bonhoeffer's comments on Bultmann's program refer more to its negative side (demythologizing) than to its positive content (existentialist interpretation), it still seems clear that, in the light of his over-all argument in the prison letters, he would be as unenthusiastic about the latter as he was about the former.

There are several reasons for this. One is Bultmann's individualism. As Heinrich Ott puts it:

. . . Bultmann thinks as an individualist. What in individualistic religious thought had been striving for the salvation of one's soul has become in him the question of the authenticity of one's own existence. But . . . for Bonhoeffer such individualism is precisely a fundamental trait of the religious.<sup>22</sup>

Bultmann summons the individual to give up his old self-understanding and receive a new one. The word of God "calls man to his true self." It is a matter of "the self of man, his inner life, his personal existence . . ."<sup>23</sup> This amounts to a new form of pietism, locating faith in what Bonhoeffer calls the sphere of personal inwardness, which is one of the essential features of religion.

Coupled with the individualism of Bultmann's theological thought is his emphasis upon *Entweltlichung* (variously translated into English as "desecularization," "deterrestrification," or "detachment from the world") as characteristic of existence in faith. "The authentic life," Bultmann tells us, "would be a life based on unseen, intangible realities."<sup>24</sup> "Such a life," he continues, "spells deliverance from all

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<sup>22</sup>Ott, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-16.

<sup>23</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 40.

<sup>24</sup>*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 19.

worldly, tangible objects, leading to complete detachment from the world and thus to freedom.”<sup>25</sup> To be sure, Bultmann does not intend this in a dualistic or ascetic way, but such talk about freedom from the world and about being inwardly detached from all that is visible or tangible contrasts sharply with Bonhoeffer’s hearty this-worldliness. There is, at the very least, a profoundly different atmosphere in Bonhoeffer’s celebration of living this life unreservedly and Bultmann’s concern with so weaning oneself from this world that “everything in the world has become indifferent and unimportant.”<sup>26</sup> This difference of perspective is perhaps best epitomized in the two men’s contrasting attitudes toward the Old Testament. Bultmann, for his part, remains uncomfortable with the Old Testament, whereas Bonhoeffer in prison finds himself increasingly drawn to it, appreciating its earthiness as an antidote to an overly “spiritual” reading of the New Testament.<sup>27</sup>

A third way in which Bultmann’s message is religious is that it seeks to show man a need which he cannot meet without receiving God’s help. “Man’s life is moved by the search for God,” Bultmann declares, “because it is always moved, consciously or unconsciously, by the question about his own personal existence.”<sup>28</sup> Bultmann thus “makes room” for God by requiring him in order for man to move from inauthentic to authentic existence. This emphasis on the need-satisfying character of the Christian message clashes with Bonhoeffer’s insistence that faith should not be offered to man as the answer to his problems.

From Bonhoeffer’s point of view, Bultmann’s theological analysis is based on a “religious” view of man. Man still has religious needs, which he cannot meet and for the satisfaction of which God is required. There is still a religious *a priori* to which the kerygma can relate. Bultmann reminds modern man that “his life is fleeting and its end is death,” so that he cannot gain real security for himself.<sup>29</sup> Man yearns for security, but cannot achieve it; the word of God calls him away

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>For Bonhoeffer’s prison reflections on the Old Testament, see the letters of 30 April 1944 (“... we still read the New Testament far too little in the light of the Old,” p. 282); 5 May 1944 (“Does the question about saving one’s soul appear in the Old Testament at all?” p. 286); and 27 June 1944 (“... the faith of the Old Testament is not a religion of redemption,” p. 336). For Bultmann’s evaluation of the Old Testament, see his essay, “The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith,” in Bernhard W. Anderson (ed.), *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 8-35. See also the chapter on the Old Testament in Andre Malet, *The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 257-71. Malet, whom Bultmann praises as his authoritative interpreter, declares: “In regarding salvation as a complete deliverance from the cosmos, the New Testament likewise stands closer to Gnosis than to the Old Testament . . .” (*Ibid.*, p. 296.)

<sup>28</sup>*Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 53.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 39.

from this futile effort. "Faith is the abandonment of man's own security and the readiness to find security only in the unseen beyond, in God."<sup>30</sup> Lest anyone suppose that man in a world come of age can no longer be described (in terms of St. Augustine's famous prayer) as restless until he finds his rest in God, Bultmann asserts that "every man is basically moved by the question of God," and equates "the question of God that drives human existence" with man's awareness of his finiteness.<sup>31</sup>

Here we have the very thing which Bonhoeffer repeatedly polemicalizes against. Bultmann is still presenting God as the answer to man's religious needs. He can still presuppose man's need for God. Thus, in spite of its anti-mythological and pro-scientific stance, Bultmann's existentialist interpretation fits the pattern of what Bonhoeffer terms "the attack by Christian apologetic on the adulthood of the world . . ."<sup>32</sup> It appeals to man's weakness, whereas the gospel confronts man in his strength, at the center of his life rather than at its limits. Bonhoeffer considers the "need-fulfiller" or "problem-solver" notion of God demeaning and typically religious.

Most fundamental of all, however, is the basic Christological difference between Bonhoeffer and Bultmann. While Bonhoeffer was certainly no doctrinaire Barthian, he shared Barth's concern for the reality of Jesus Christ as opposed to Bultmann's concentration on the event of preaching and the achievement of self-understanding. It is with the person of Christ himself that Bonhoeffer begins, alike in his Christology lectures of 1933 and his latest writings.<sup>33</sup> Where Bultmann can say that "the saving efficacy of the cross is not derived from the fact that it is the cross of Christ: it is the cross of Christ because it has this saving efficacy," Bonhoeffer asserts "the theological priority of the christological question over the soteriological question," and declares at the outset of his lectures: "To begin christology with this statement of one who is present, has the advantage that Jesus is understood from the start as the Risen One who has ascended to heaven."<sup>34</sup> If this way of posing the Christological question would be regarded by Bultmann as hopelessly mythological, the same verdict would have to apply to both the *Ethics* and the *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The Christo-

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>31</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, "The Idea of God and Modern Man," in Ronald Gregor Smith (ed.), *World Come of Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), p. 265.

<sup>32</sup>Letter of 8 June 1944, p. 327.

<sup>33</sup>See Andre Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1971). In his excellent book, Dumas follows his analysis of the prison letters with a discussion of the 1933 lectures precisely because they sum up the lifelong concern of Bonhoeffer's theology.

<sup>34</sup>Bultmann's famous dictum is found in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 41; the Bonhoeffer quotations are from his *Christology* (London: Collins, 1966), pp. 40, 49.

logical character of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, with its repeated stress on the incarnation, cross, and resurrection, is one of its most striking features. And Christ's presence and Lordship, with which Bonhoeffer began his 1933 lectures on Christology, is still his theme in his last letters, in which the attempt at non-religious interpretation is prompted by the question, "Who is Christ for us today?"<sup>85</sup> Ebeling expresses the situation well:

The problem of non-religious interpretation arises for Bonhoeffer not from any doubt of Jesus Christ, but precisely from faith in Jesus Christ. It is not Jesus Christ, but the word God, indeed all religious concepts as such, that he finds problematical. The question of non-religious interpretation derives directly from the foundation and heart of his theology, from his Christology. Non-religious interpretation is for Bonhoeffer nothing other than Christological interpretation.<sup>86</sup>

To sum up: Bonhoeffer differs from Bultmann in holding that mythology is not the problem, and existentialism is not the answer. Where Bultmann wants to replace biblical ("mythological") categories with better (existentialist) ones, Bonhoeffer seeks to replace traditional Christian ("religious") categories with more biblical ones. Non-religious interpretation is more radical than demythologizing in the sense that it forswears reliance on metaphysics and inwardness, and focuses instead on God's identification with the world in Christ, culminating in the cross. At the center of Bonhoeffer's theological vision is not the question of authentic self-understanding, but the reality of Christ. What this reality means in the adulthood of the world is the issue with which Bonhoeffer calls us to wrestle.

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<sup>85</sup>Letter of 30 April 1944, p. 279.

<sup>86</sup>Ebeling, *op. cit.*, p. 107. Compare Bethge's similar remark: "Theologically the 'non-religious interpretation' is clearly prepared for in the Christology that Bonhoeffer had followed since his early days." (Bethge, *op. cit.*, p. 760.)

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