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The Basically Supernatural Character of the Christian Gospel

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I

ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL TRENDS in present-day theology is the "demythologizing movement," inspired by the work of Rudolf Bultmann of Marburg. As is well known, its main contention is that, in order to commend the Christian gospel to the modern mind, the Church must lay aside traditional religious thought and language—which, it is claimed, is largely "mythological," scientifically primitive, archaic or antiquated—and express the Christian message in terms more intelligible and relevant to present-day thought and life.

To begin with, it is asserted that the Church must lay aside the scientifically obsolete three-storey or three-decker view of the universe, which lies behind biblical and traditional Christian thought—the picture of the heavens above, with God "up there" or "out there," the underworld beneath, and in between, in the centre of things, the earth, open to intervention by super-human powers both from above and from below—and must express gospel truth in terms more in accord with modern, up-to-date, scientific thinking. Further, it is claimed that what is true of traditional Christian thought and language is true also of the Christian religion in its traditional, organized and institutionalized, outward expression. The forms and practices inherited from the past must be revitalized and re-expressed in ways more congenial to the thought and life of our day.

This viewpoint has been given popular expression in the English-speaking world by Dr. John A. T. Robinson, a respected New Testament scholar, formerly a Cambridge don and now Bishop of Woolwich, in his recent paperback, *Honest to God*.¹ His book has received wide publicity and, despite some imprecision and ambiguity—indeed, confusion—of statement, has appealed not only to many outside the Church but also to many who, while professing members of the Church, are yet dissatisfied with prevailing representations of Christian faith and patterns of Christian worship. It is a frank, courageous, stimulating little book, with much of which we may agree. It is somewhat disturbing, indeed, yet timely in its challenge to the Church to a radical rethinking and recasting of our inherited faith and worship in the present science-dominated age—a *radical* rethinking and recasting in the literal and positive sense of getting down to the roots of Christian faith and

1. J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963).

worship. We must acknowledge (I believe) that one of the great needs of Protestant teaching and preaching today is to relieve our statement of the Christian gospel, not only of scientifically antiquated and outmoded ways of thinking, but also of the traditional theological language in which it is expressed—which is largely strange and meaningless to the ordinary man—and to state it in as simple and properly religious language as possible. Theology is the endeavour to give a systematic intellectual expression to religious truth and doctrine. It varies from age to age with the developing thought-forms of the ages. The theological formulation of one age often seems irrelevant, or even unintelligible, to a following age, and must be, if not discarded, yet renewed and revitalized by emphasis on the properly religious convictions which are the abiding essence of the Christian gospel behind varying theological formulations—convictions based on the experience of God's saving revelation or disclosure of himself in Jesus Christ. These convictions constitute "the faith once-and-for-all entrusted to the saints," as the writer of Jude (v. 3) puts it,² not to theologians but "to the saints," to Christian believers.

II

With the professed motive or aim of the movement stemming from Bultmann, as I have just tried to express it, I think that we should find ourselves, in great measure, in sympathetic accord. The Bishop of Woolwich expresses the positive, constructive, missionary, or evangelistic aim of the movement in these terms: "I want God to be as real for our modern secular scientific world as he ever was for the 'ages of faith.'"³ With this aim we must sympathize. But with the main contention advanced by the leaders of the movement we must (I think), in the interests of the full New Testament gospel, definitely and unambiguously disagree. The basic affirmation of the Christian gospel is that "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son that everyone who has faith in him may not die but have eternal life" (John 3:16). In proclaiming this gospel, the New Testament writers laid their main stress on the facts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through which (they claimed) God had made, in human history, a unique, "once-for-all," redemptive revelation or disclosure of himself and his love-purposes to the world. In the words recorded of Peter, they declared that "there is no salvation in anyone else at all, for there is no other name under heaven granted to men by which we may receive salvation" (Acts 4:12). Bultmann, however—the great German pioneer of the "demythologizing movement"—as a result of his critical analytic examination of the New Testament documents calls into question the factual historical reliability of the New Testament narrative of Jesus' life and ministry,

2. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the New Testament are taken from the New English Bible.

3. J. A. T. Robinson and D. L. Edwards (eds.), *The Honest to God Debate* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), p. 279.

and claims that all we can reach through investigation of the documents is the faith or belief which the early Christians came to hold in the crucified, but now risen and living, Christ. "The historical person of Jesus," he says, "was . . . turned into a myth in primitive Christianity."⁴ The Christ who was preached by the early apostles was not the historical Jesus but the Christ of faith—represented, largely under the alleged influence of a Gnostic redeemer-myth, as a pre-existent, divine being, who became incarnate, worked wonders or miracles among men, by his life, ministry, and death atoned for the sins of the world, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and would shortly return to judge the world and bring in a new age. A twofold task must now be undertaken, if the essential Christian message is to be rightly presented to the men of our day. Not only must the gospel be "demythologized," in the sense of being relieved of the mythological elements attached to it in primitive Christian preaching, but its message must be reinterpreted and re-expressed in terms more acceptable to modern scientific thinking.

To accomplish the latter purpose Bultmann turns for help to the non-theistic type of existential philosophy associated with the name of Martin Heidegger, for some years his colleague in the University of Marburg. I say "non-theistic" rather than "atheistic," because I believe that Heidegger himself has on occasion disclaimed the term "atheistic" as a proper description of his philosophical position, which might better be described as one of "affirming the absence of God" rather than "denying his existence." The distinction is somewhat cryptic and enigmatical. The essence of Heidegger's philosophical view has, however, been less cryptically and enigmatically expressed by Heidegger himself, in the statement that there is nothing beyond man himself—nothing higher than man, nothing superhuman—which can solve the problem of his existence. Under the influence of this secular-humanistic way of thinking (an outlook essentially equivalent to what is sometimes termed "scientific humanism") Bultmann suggests that for us today, in a "world come of age,"⁵ what is important is not belief in any allegedly objective facts of past history, events which occurred once-for-all, but the subjective, existential experience of the influence of those events in the present. He holds that the past historical events alleged in the New Testament narratives of Jesus have meaning for us today only in so far as they take place and have influence in the experience of believers here and now. Thus he minimizes the significance of the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension or exaltation of Jesus, as events which, in so far as they can be said to have happened at all, took place on a datable occasion some two thousand years ago, and he contends that what should be emphasized is rather the possibility that what they stand for may occur in lives submitted or committed to Jesus in the present.

4. R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 200.

5. This expression comes, of course, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was martyred by the Nazis.

III

In contrast to some other radical New Testament critics of our day, Bultmann is true to the New Testament in recognizing that the primary purpose of the Gospel narratives of Jesus' life and work is not historical or biographical but evangelical; that is to say, they were written to record the faith of the early apostles in Jesus and to promote a like faith in him in others. This part of the significance of the distinction which Bultmann draws between *Historie* and *Geschichte*—a distinction often expressed in the statement that biblical history is *Heilsgeschichte*, not objective, factual history, but subjective salvation-history. But granted that the Gospel narratives are indeed salvation-history, and not bare, factual history, still a fundamental question cannot be evaded: If it was the faith of the early apostles in Jesus that created the Gospel narratives, what was it that created this faith? What was sufficient to explain the extraordinary psychological transformation effected in the disciples? Dejected followers of a crucified Master, their faith shattered, after the crucifixion we see them hiding themselves for safety behind closed doors. Yet only a few days later they are facing their accusers, both Jewish and Roman, with a message which they declare "with boldness" (Acts 4:31)—a message of such a momentous character as to bring the Christian Church into existence and set it moving and energizing with that transforming vitality and power which the New Testament portrays. So amazing a change demands no less amazing a cause. The New Testament answer alone seems adequate to satisfy the principle of sufficient reason, the fundamental principle of rational, scientific thinking.

This answer was affirmed already in the sermon of Peter at Pentecost, the first recorded sermon of the Christian Church: "God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). God, the Father, the Creator of the universe, whom Jesus had claimed to be revealing, had acted to transform Jesus's tragedy into triumph. Jesus's accusers had put him to death and sent him to the tomb, and had thought that this was the end of him. But God had acted—and acted in such a way as to vindicate him and his claims, not only "raising him to life again" (Acts 2:24), but "exalting him with his right hand" (Acts 2:33) to a place of authority and power, making him "Lord" of heaven and earth, giving him (as Paul put it later) "the name above all names," the name of "Lord," "to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9ff.). That is to say, according to the early apostles themselves it was God's mighty act in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, God's mighty, declaratory act, that created Christian faith. In this act and through this act, God not only gave his verdict on Jesus and the significance of his life and death, over against the verdict of his enemies, but in so doing showed that he was able to triumph over the worst that sinful men and nations could do to defeat his love-purposes for the world—the purposes revealed in Jesus Christ.

The heart, the central core, of the Christian gospel founded on the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus was, to begin with, expressed concisely and

briefly in these terms: "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9), or "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:11). A little later, when this first brief and basic Christian creed or "confession" (as it is called in both the New Testament passages just quoted) came to be drawn out and expressed in more detail, as it was in what is now known as the "Apostles' Creed," the first article of the more detailed creed was: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." It is important to interpret this article correctly. It means: "I believe in Almighty Father-love over all"—"Almighty," not in any mere philosophical or metaphysical sense, but in the properly biblical and religious sense of "sovereign over all," able to overrule all, even the worst that sinful man could do in the crucifixion of God's own Son, for the accomplishment of his fatherly redemptive purpose.⁶ This was the gospel, the marvellous, new "good news," which the apostles proclaimed. What we call the "Gospels," the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were so many man-made narratives,⁷ written later—the earliest, Mark, some thirty-five or more years after the death and resurrection of Jesus—for the benefit of those who had already accepted the gospel or might come to accept it through their commendation. That gospel was itself essentially the message of God's action; as preached by Paul, it was briefly described as the gospel of "Jesus and Resurrection" (Acts 17:18).

How the resurrection of Jesus was accomplished we do not know. The apostles themselves did not know. But they were sure beyond doubt that it was God's doing, and it was "wonderful in their eyes" (Ps. 118:23)—the crowning miracle of a wonder-working God. It was the manifestation of what Paul calls "the exceeding greatness of God's mighty power" (Ephes. 1:19, AV)—the "transcendent power" (2 Cor. 4:7) of the God who at the first had brought creation itself into being, and who now, through this new manifestation of his mighty power, had inaugurated a new age in human history, a re-creative and redemptive era.

What the New Testament calls "transcendent power" is what we speak of today, in more philosophical terminology, as the "supernatural" power of God (perhaps better spelled "super-natural" or "supra-natural"). The "supernatural" signifies that which is inexplicable by the powers known to science and can be explained only as a working of God "above" (*super* or *supra*) his ordinary working in nature and history. To deny the resurrection of Jesus, as some did already in Paul's day, was (Paul said) to make Christian preachers appear as false witnesses, not only of Christ but also of God: "If Christ was not raised from the dead, we turn out to be lying witnesses for God, because we bore witness that he raised Christ to life, whereas, if the dead are not raised, he did not raise him" (1 Cor. 15:15). In effect,

6. The Greek word is *pantokratōr* (Rev. 4:8), not *pantodunamos*.

7. They are "man-made," truly human records and interpretations of God's revelatory action, yet also divinely "inspired." "Inspiration" in the biblical sense may be defined as the ability so to record the redeeming revelation of God, begun in Israel's history and consummated in Jesus Christ, as to bring men into direct contact with that revelation, and thus to make them "wise unto salvation" and "equip them for good work of every kind" (2 Tim. 3: 15, 17; AV, NEB).

to deny the resurrection is to give the lie to God himself" rather than being honest to him and the wonder of his saving working.

IV

If the preceding analysis is correct, the faith of the apostles in Jesus Christ—the faith which they proclaimed as the gospel of salvation—arose from his resurrection, apprehended as an act of God's "transcendent power." To minimize or deny the resurrection, then, is in effect not only to desupernaturalize but also to dehistoricize the Christian gospel, leaving it in the air with no adequate historical basis or origin. Nonetheless, partly at least in the name of historical honesty, Bultmann and his followers do not admit the resurrection as in any sense a definite and objective historical happening. They are prevented from doing so by the assumption which underlies their thinking: that the only valid method of attaining truth in any region of experience is what is usually called "the scientific method," i.e. the method of observation and experimental verification employed in the natural sciences. On this ground the factual historicity of the alleged miraculous events of the New Testament gospel, culminating in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, is called into question. They are seen, not as "supernatural" in the sense of that term which we have just outlined, but rather as "contra-natural," involving a suspension or violation of natural law. They are thus scientifically incredible and must consequently be represented as "mythological," in the sense of "legendary" or "historically untrue."⁸ "The whole schema of the supernatural Being coming down from heaven to 'save' mankind from sin," says the Bishop of Woolwich, "is frankly incredible to man 'come of age.'⁹ "This whole way of thinking is," he claims, "the greatest obstacle to an intelligent faith."¹⁰ In like manner, Professor Paul van Buren declares that "the whole tenor of thought in our world today makes the biblical and classical formulations of [the] Gospel unintelligible."¹¹ All this, however, rests on a quite unscientific, dogmatic assumption. These writers come to an examination of the facts of religious experience, and in particular of Christian religious experience, with presuppositions, preconceptions, prejudices, which in effect rule out beforehand their genuine factuality.

That such an attitude is essentially unscientific can readily be shown. It was against just such a position that Francis Bacon, himself a pioneer of modern scientific method, long ago maintained that, in any sphere of experience, the proper scientific approach is one which comes to the facts under investigation with an open, unprejudiced mind and allows them to make

8. In proper religious usage, the term "myth" signifies spiritual truth expressed in a pictorial or figurative form, "truth embodied in a tale." It designates a fact or event which is not legendary or historically untrue, but which actually took place, though it is not described in literal, factual, historical terms. Much misunderstanding would be avoided if, in a biblical context, the terms "figurative," "pictorial," "symbolic" were used, instead of "mythical" or "mythological."

9. Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 78.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

11. Paul M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 6.

their own impression upon us. Later on, Thomas H. Huxley even more explicitly and vividly expressed this characteristic of the true scientist by saying that he must sit down before the facts as a little child, and let the facts themselves determine for him their significance. In sum, in any sort of inquiry the prime requirement on the part of the inquirer is openness to what really is.

We must now apply this basic principle of genuinely scientific knowledge to the problem of our apprehension of the supernatural. The supernatural must be approached on its own terms. As the apostle puts it, in the sphere of experience specifically called spiritual or religious, "spiritual things are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). That is to say, our knowledge of the supernatural is conditioned, not only by intellectual or conceptual, but also by moral and spiritual, factors. In the particular case of Christian truth, the basic determining condition of knowledge is represented both by the New Testament writers and by Jesus himself as "faith." This faith is not just what Newman called "notional assent," i.e. a mere intellectual belief in certain alleged facts or truths—even though the facts or truths have to do with Jesus himself. Rather, it is a personal trust in, and commitment to, Jesus as Saviour and Lord. It is only through such faith that we effectively grasp the presence of the supernatural. As John Baillie expressed it in his posthumously published Gifford Lectures, for the New Testament "faith is apprehension through commitment,"¹² a commitment motivated by and "working through love" (Gal. 5:6, RSV)—the divine love which became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Faith, then—or, at any rate, the faith which is a condition of religious, and in particular of Christian, knowledge—is not the mere assent of the intellect or reason to certain truths or doctrines about Jesus and about the God disclosed in and through him, but the consent and response of the whole personality, mind, heart, and will, to the prior love-approach of God in Jesus Christ. Indeed, the intellect or reason can take us so far and should take us so far, for if belief in God is religiously true it can be and should be intellectual or rationally supported. "Natural theology," therefore, has its place in Christianity. Yet there is a point beyond which intellect or reason cannot take us in religious proof or verification. We must go beyond the intellectual or rational to make the personal experiment of committing ourselves in faith and trust to Jesus's appeal. Only then can we attain to assured certainty of the gospel truth that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, no longer holding men's deeds against them" (2 Cor. 5:19). This personal decision and commitment in loving response to the love of God which has been beforehand with us—in other words, this experimental verification through the yielding of ourselves to the constraint of God's love—and not an approach determined by criteria drawn from natural science or from so-called "secular" (sub-religious and sub-Christian)

12. J. Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 90.

experience,¹³ is the properly "scientific" method for us to follow in the pursuit and attainment of Christian religious truth. In the words of the psalmist, spoken even before the culminating revelation of God in Jesus Christ, we must "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8), if we are to have incontrovertible assurance in this matter. As the "New Version" (Tate and Brady) of this verse puts it:

O make but trial of his love,
Experience will decide
How blest are they, and only they
Who in his truth confide.

v

From all that has been said we may derive a rule for the commendation of the Christian gospel to this modern, scientific age. We do not need to deny or call into question the traditional formulations of Christian belief, as supporters of the "demythologizing movement" suggest. The essential requirement is rather that we should look behind these traditional formulations to the fundamental New Testament gospel, historically based and experimentally verifiable, which is at their root, and should express this gospel in abidingly valid, because properly religious, terms.

The essential New Testament gospel is most briefly yet inclusively expressed in the First Letter of John—a letter which, it is interesting to note, is entitled in the New English Bible "Recall to Fundamentals"—in these reiterated words: "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). That love or *agapē*, the writer tells us, was "disclosed to us in this, that he sent his only Son into the world to bring us life" (1 John 4:9), and "that Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). This gospel of outgoing, other-regarding love is not only relevant but necessary for this science-dominated age, as for every age of human history. History and experience testify that it alone can deal effectively with the root-cause of the world's disorder and disquiet, viz. that life for self and that self-pleasing assertion of man's will against the will of God which, according to Scripture, are the very essence of sin.

The basic appeal of this gospel is the appeal of love. It calls for the commitment of our lives to the "Love Divine, all loves excelling," which in amazing, lowly, self-sacrificing grace became incarnate in Jesus Christ, for our redemption followed the path of suffering even to Gethsemane's agony and Calvary's cross, and through the resurrection and exaltation of the crucified Christ proved itself "almighty." The consequences of such a commitment are thoroughly practical and relevant to life. As 1 John puts it: "If God so loved us, we in turn ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). Or as Jesus himself is reported to have said: "A new commandment I give unto you: as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. For this all men will know that you are my disciples if there is this love among you" (John 13:34f.).

13. In the Christian view, indeed, there is no merely "secular" region of experience; the antithesis between "sacred" and "secular" is a false one.