

Review Article

THE KERYGMA AND MODERN MAN

WILLIAM STEWART

The controversy about 'demythologizing' was launched in Germany in the middle of World War II by an essay by Rudolf Bultmann. When Karl Barth recently published his remarks on the subject, he entitled them: *Rudolf Bultmann—ein Versuch ihn zu verstehen* ('An Attempt to Understand Him'). If such be the position of a Karl Barth, we more ordinary mortals might well ask to be excused from even making the attempt! That, however, would be wrong, for these controversies have a way of making their sound heard in all the world and we may be sure that the repercussions of this particular one will in due course affect alike the dogmatic, the evangelistic and the apologetic task of the Church in India. The *I.J.T.* (Book Review in Vol. 3, No. 1) has already taken note of the theme.

There is now a considerable literature on the subject (cf. the bibliography at the end of Bartsch's volume¹) and English readers are better served since the publication of the two books before us. Besides, we still have Henderson's useful guide: *Myth in the New Testament* (S.C.M.), while the B.B.C., London, has had both Bultmann and others speak about it in their Third Programme.

Bartsch's book provides 'source material', for it prints Bultmann's original essay: 'New Testament and Mythology', criticisms by the theologians Schniewind, Lohmeyer, Thielicke and Schumann together with Bultmann's replies, and an 'English Appreciation' by Austin Farrer. The translation is well done but there are some printing errors to be set right in a later edition.

Gogarten², in his book, boldly undertakes to explain the whole business to us and to correct misunderstandings alike of Bultmann's critics and supporters. Alas, much of the 'explanation' is couched in remarkably obscure language and it is not made easier for us by the fact that in effect the translator, despite many gallant attempts, sometimes frankly gives up the struggle. We are presented with such statements as this:

... they understand *existential* either in the sense of existentialism or else in the sense of *existentiell*: and here Bultmann quite often comes in for some praise, but only because of a misunderstanding. For with him the term *existentiell* has a considerably deeper, and, if I may be allowed the word, more *existentiell* meaning . . . (p. 56 f).

It is hard to recognize this either as clear statement or as successful translation!

Nevertheless, Gogarten is worth grappling with and does help us to see what the controversy is all about. It is he who shows that the heart of Bultmann's concern is not the problems of modern man's special needs, but the nature of the Gospel itself. His purpose is a 'study of the nature and essence of Christian belief'. Gogarten is alarmed that so much theological and evangelistic work should overlook the unique character of the Word of God, which cannot be reduced to any familiar categories, as is attempted when the Faith is spoken of as given in concrete, objective form, subject to human inspection. The attempt so to bind it is not an act of faith but of denial: 'To objectify God and His Word is to deny Him' (p. 87). Consequently, what Bultmann is trying to do is to 'determine the *genus* of the Word of God'. In underlining this, Gogarten shows that it is faithful to the spirit of

¹ *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*; edited by H. W. Bartsch and translated by R. H. Fuller. S.P.C.K. 22s. 6d.—obtainable from the S.P.C.K., St. James Church Hall, Kashmere Gate, Delhi 6.

² *Demythologizing and History*: by Friedrich Gogarten, translated by Neville Horton Smith. S.C.M. 7s. 6d.—obtainable from the Y.M.C.A. Publishing House, 5 Russell Street, Calcutta.

Luther, for whom the centrality of the 'for me' and the 'for us' of the Gospel makes it meaningful. It is the truth of the familiar lines:

Though Christ our Lord a thousand times in Bethlehem be born,
And not in thee, thy soul remains eternally forlorn.

Gogarten traces the Greek (and Mediaeval) view of reality which sought it not in events but beyond them in the unchanging, the metaphysical. By contrast he shows the modern 'historical understanding' which finds reality in events. He then goes on to recognize that the pursuit of neutral 'historical fact' has proved to be vain, for man is always involved in history so that 'historical understanding' means man's understanding of himself—man is responsible for the world. Having set out this theme, Gogarten then sets the problem of the relation of faith to historical fact in a balanced statement built up from two quotations, both of which have to be honoured:

For on the one side we are assured that 'faith, as faith, knows itself to be motivated, supported and substantiated by facts' and on the other side it is maintained that 'it is certainly correct to say that the objective factualness of these objective occurrences cannot as such be the basis of faith' (p. 45).

He believes that our difficulty in tackling this problem is largely because of the Cartesian heritage of a sharp subject-object antithesis. He underlines the fact that there is actually neither any 'subject in itself' nor any 'object in itself' in human experience. Man is always involved.

This is particularly applied to the Proclamation (*Kerygma*), for Proclamation is the work of a herald, and a herald is not a mere reporter or narrator. He is charged with a message and a message has always a person to whom it is addressed. Therefore in the *Kerygma* we are certainly not concerned with mere neutral 'past history', but with the living God who addresses us *now*. In the *Kerygma* the Word of God directly encounters us:

Christ the crucified and risen one comes before us in the Word of the proclaimed message and nowhere else. Nothing other than faith in this Word is in truth the Easter faith.

It is the *Kerygma* which we objectively encounter, but in it the living God is addressing men, nor can we ask for independent proof of this, for (to quote Bultmann himself):

The Word of preaching confronts us as the Word of God. It is not for us to question its credentials. It is we who are questioned (Bartsch, p. 41).

Gogarten thus helps us to understand the issues, but probably the larger volume will more quickly convey to readers an impression of Bultmann's purpose. It is a pleasure to read his own lucid and vigorous exposition, and his warmth of conviction carries us along. He does not shrink from controversy on his theme, and from another book (*Die Frage der Entmythologisierung*) we may draw this statement of his aim:

Not to make the faith acceptable to modern man but to make clear to him what Christian faith is and thereby to set him before the question of decision.

We observe first the more obvious side of the term 'demythologizing', namely the attempt to interpret the word of the Bible, in the peculiar language of its own time, so that it becomes meaningful today. Thieliicke (p. 142) notes Bultmann's presuppositions, namely that the Biblical presentation of the faith is inextricably entangled in a pre-scientific, mythological view of the universe and in the thought forms of Jewish apocalyptic and Greek Gnosticism. There can be no question of separating the message from these forms (the old 'Liberal' attempt), but there is a task of interpretation. Ought we not to add to these the fact that Bultmann as a New Testament scholar has long accepted critical conclusions far more negative than the majority of scholars find justified? Taking this along with the patent fact that he is a deeply sincere Christian believer, we find less ground for surprise at his emphasis on what seems to him to be beyond the reach of historical criticism. This was already apparent in his book *Jesus* written in 1929. Today in his writing about the *Kerygma* he gives hardly any place to the Synoptic record and deals in a highly cavalier fashion with Johannine eschatology. With a more sober acceptance of the findings of scholarship, we are at liberty to prefer with D. M. Baillie (*God was in*

Luther, for whom the centrality of the 'for me' and the 'for us' of the Gospel makes it meaningful. It is the truth of the familiar lines:

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Christ) to believe that the face of the Jesus of History is not so entirely hidden from us.

As to the assumption that modern man is entirely a creature of the scientific age, we can only agree with those who hold that Bultmann has grossly overstated his case. He says:

It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of daemons and spirits (p. 5),

to which Jaspers' dry rejoinder is: 'das kann man sehr wohl' (one can very well do just that)! Modern man has shown a capacity for accepting myths quite comparable to that of pre-scientific man, and little evidence that he has become an essentially different creature. In addition, as Schniewind points out, the Bible itself shows full awareness that its 'three-storeyed' universe and other imagery do not adequately describe things which eye has not seen nor ear heard, and Jaspers reminds Bultmann that the announcement that a dead man was alive was no more credible to the Athenians of St. Paul's day than it is to the modern unbeliever.

This, however, is not the heart of Bultmann's concern. His real purpose is to find the proper meaning of the *Kerygma* as it is addressed to man today or in any generation. In his task, he has drawn heavily on existentialist philosophy, especially that of Heidegger, and he seems assured that his understanding of man is no mere theory liable to be supplanted or supplemented but a finally valid insight into reality itself. This is daring; how long is it since there were Christian thinkers who thought the same about Hegel?

Bultmann accepts the existentialist diagnosis of man's distress, seen in the 'anxiety' of modern man, and he finds meaningful Heidegger's picture of deliverance as freedom from the past and complete openness to the future. What he does not accept is man's ability to find this deliverance by his own act. The answer comes only through the Word of God, received through the *Kerygma*. The conclusion, however, that what is thus given to man is a proper 'self-understanding' certainly looks inadequate and makes the whole picture highly anthropocentric.

We are indeed told that Barth's criticism is that Bultmann has substituted anthropology for theology, and while he says this is a misunderstanding, he goes far to accepting the criticism:

I am trying to substitute anthropology for theology, for I am interpreting theological affirmations as assertions about human life (p. 107).

Here we see Bultmann taking very seriously the second half of Gogarten's balanced statement and underlining the thoroughly 'existential' nature of faith, and he clearly emphasizes that the *Kerygma* is of God. But what is the ground on which he holds this? In what way is it to be differentiated from a mystic illumination such as is offered in other systems, which might well have come though Jesus had never lived? The 'historical' kernel left in the *Kerygma* has become so tiny that, while to Bultmann it may still be vital, it is difficult to see how it could appear significant to those who approach the subject with other than Christian presuppositions. Bultmann in Europe is acutely aware of the secularist whom he would address, but how far is he aware of such religious systems as are familiar today in India? There are teachers of a relativism about all religious truth who might embarrassingly hail Bultmann as an ally. Is Thielicke right in suggesting that this is the consequence of his trying to make the Gospel answer questions which have been framed by a non-Biblical system of thought (that of the existentialists)?

What matters is the Word of God, the Proclamation. It is not bare facts which have saving power, but the facts encountered by faith. Many who saw Jesus in the flesh did not believe. The resurrection was no ordinary historical occurrence subject to the observation of neutral spectators, but that to which 'witnesses chosen before' (Acts 10:41) bear testimony. This is important truth and it is well to be so strongly reminded that the living God still reaches men each time the Proclamation comes home to the heart. But what of the first part of Gogarten's sentence? Must we not give more weight, than Bultmann seems to do, to New Testament insistence that the *Kerygma* concerns things seen and heard and which hands have handled? If we minimize this and profess scepticism about all details of the apostolic record, is this not to find the apostles 'false witnesses' (1 Cor. 15:15), or at least to judge unimportant what they counted it essential to record? Kierkegaard once committed himself to some statement that we need know only that Christ was crucified and risen, but clearly the evangelists did not think so! Bultmann, however, seems to share this point of view and, as Farrer points out, limits the available evidence by an

a priori assumption that he knows what God can and cannot do. Granted the profound truth in his message that the meaning of the cross and resurrection for the believer lies in what happens to him, Schniewind is surely right to point to the Biblical stress on the brute fact of what happened at Golgotha. This is recognized in the Creedal phrase, 'suffered under Pontius Pilate', but in spite of Bultmann's disclaimers one cannot feel that he has done justice to this, to the *eph hapax* of the New Testament, or to the Reformers' emphasis on Jesus Christ as the object of the faith by which men are justified. The relation between objective and subjective, between the two halves of Gogarten's statement, is alike more complex and more important than Bultmann implies, and his virtual substitution of an anthropological for a christological key to the New Testament does not satisfy.

Nevertheless, these writings are profoundly stimulating and it is to be acknowledged that Bultmann is calling the Church to far greater concentration on the presentation of the Gospel to modern man than it has shown. It is impressive that one whose critical conclusions are so negative should remain a Gospel preacher of such sincerity and power—surely a token that it is the living God who works, giving a faith like this to one who refuses so much of what is the anchorage for others. But does God require of His servants just this kind of test? We miss in Bultmann any recognition of the way in which the spiritual life is sustained and nurtured also through the continuity of the Church's life—yet that, too, is surely part of God's plan. Again, has Bultmann reckoned enough with the sacramental principle, the glorious mystery that God so often uses material things to minister to the life of the spirit and does not ask His children to walk continually on the high peaks of conscious, existential decision? The faith is 'motivated, supported and substantiated by facts' and Dr. Farrer rightly reminds us that historical science itself can bring us into confrontation with such facts which God can use. 'The Word became flesh.' Thereby God gave the facts, and we cannot think that the Synoptic record was just an optional extra. Certainly man is not saved by brute facts of history, but only by these as they become contemporary and bearers of His Word to him. But to modern man also those facts are made open, and the *Kerygma*, the proclamation of the Gospel today, still stands or falls by the truth of that recital which New Testament Scripture contains.

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In the empty tomb of Jesus were born the paradox and power of Christianity, the flame and fire of the faith.

V. CHAKKARAI

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Intercession is the fundamental basis of missionary activity. Preaching and intercession belong together. For it is only the praying Church that finds the right word to speak. And the preaching Church will always be thrown back, with ever-increasing intensity, upon prayer—and nowhere more than in those places where its word seems to take root . . . The labours of a missionary are an acted prayer. But they must also be a praying activity.

E. STAUFFER