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MYTHOLOGY, KERYGMA AND DEMYTHOLOGIZATION:

A positive introduction to Rudolf Bultmann's hermeneutics

Adriano da Silva Carvalho¹

ABSTRACT

The work of theologian Rudolf Bultmann is often judged without due consideration of the historical and personal circumstances in which it occurred. It is forgotten that theology is always carried out in a specific context. Thus, this article aims to do justice to this theologian by recognizing the relevance of his hermeneutical method. It will be demonstrated that demythologization is a powerful exegetical-apologetic operation, because, at the same time that it points to the mythological layer that covers the text of the New Testament, it emancipates it from myth. The next step will be to show that by recognizing a mythological envelope covering the text of the New Testament, Bultmann intended to prove that the mythological vision itself had a fundamentally existential purpose. This is because mythological language does not present an objective image of the world as it is; on the contrary, it seeks to communicate the understanding that man has of himself in the world in which he lives. Therefore, the myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially. It is, therefore, from this perspective that Bultmann seeks to highlight the relevance of the message of the New Testament.

Keywords: Rudolf Bultmann, New Testament, Existentialism, Martin Heidegger, Demythologization, Mythology, Kerygma, Interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Rudolf Bultmann has been described as one of the most controversial theologians of the 20th century.² But many of those who consider him a controversial thinker have

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² BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Crer e Compreender: ensaios selecionados*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2001, p.5.

never even read any of his books.³ Bultmann himself complained about this fact.⁴ Furthermore, his works are often judged without due consideration of the personal and historical conditions in which they were developed. It is forgotten, for example, that when he was born, a new worldview was already underway: a period in which the historical and natural sciences were destroying access to the foundations of the Christian faith.⁵ Furthermore, the positive aspect of his hermeneutical approach to the New Testament text is often ignored. It was a positive approach, because, unlike the worldview of those days, it sought to recognize the permanent value of the Christian message. And, to this end, he begins by emphasizing that the text of the New Testament was printed under two layers, an external and superficial one, which was mythological and reflected the worldview of its authors, and an internal and profound one, where the kerygma was located, a message addressed not to reason, but to the listener himself, and therefore of existential value. It is at this level, Bultmann taught, that the reader must arrive to hear the essential message of the Gospel. It is from this existentialist starting point that the mythology of the New Testament must be interpreted.

1. LIFE AND INFLUENCES

Rudolf Karl Bultmann was born on August 20, 1884, in Wiefelstede, at the time, a village in the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg.⁶ He was the eldest son of Evangelical Lutheran pastor Arthur Bultmann and his wife Helena.⁷

His early years were spent in the countryside, from 1892-1895, he attended primary school in Rastede, and from 1895 to 1903 the humanistic Gymnasium in Oldenburg.⁸ He remembered with pleasure both his years in elementary school and high school.⁹

³ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Crer e Compreender: ensaios selecionados*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2001, p.5.

⁴ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Crer e Compreender: ensaios selecionados*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2001, p.5.

⁵ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Crer e Compreender: ensaios selecionados*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2001, p.6.

⁶ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xix.

⁷ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xix.

⁸ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xix.

In 1903, he passed his final examination at the Gymnasium and began studying theology at the University of Tübingen.¹⁰ After three semesters, he went to Berlin, stayed there for two semesters, and finally went to Marburg, where he stayed for another two semesters.¹¹ In Tübingen, Bultmann studied with the church historian Karl Müller; in Berlin with the Old Testament scholar Hermann Gunkel and the historian of dogma Adolf Harnack; in Marburg, he was a student of the New Testament scholars Adolf Jülicher and Johannes Weiss, and of the systematic theologian Wilhelm Hermann.¹² Johannes Weiss was the one who encouraged him to prepare for his doctorate and to qualify as a lecturer in the area of the New Testament.¹³ Before doing so, Bultmann passed his first theological examination at the High Consistory in Oldenburg in 1907 and, for reasons of convenience, remained there for a year (1906–1907) as a teacher at the Gymnasium.¹⁴ In the autumn of 1907, he received a scholarship in Marburg (at the Seminarium Phillipinum) which enabled him to pursue work towards his degree and qualification as a lecturer.¹⁵

In 1910, he received the degree of Licentiate in Theology (Lic.theol) after presenting his thesis entitled “Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und kynischstoische Diatribe” – “The style of Pauline preaching and the Cynic-Stoic diatribe”, whose theme had been proposed by Johannes Weiss.¹⁶ The topic of his qualifying research was “Die Exegese des Theodor von Mopsuestia” - “The Exegesis of Theodore of Mopsuestia”, proposed

⁹ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xix.

¹⁰ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xix.

¹¹ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xix.

¹² KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xx.

¹³ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xx.

¹⁴ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xx.

¹⁵ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xx.

¹⁶ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xx.

by Adolf Jülicher.¹⁷ By 1912, he was already qualified as a lecturer in the New Testament field in Marburg, and taught there as an instructor until the autumn of 1916.¹⁸ In 1908, his professor Johannes Weiss was called to Heidelberg, leaving as his successor Willhelm Heitmüller, with whom Bultmann also maintained a friendly association.¹⁹ But he spent time during these years at the home of Martin Rade. Bultmann was an avid reader of the “Journal Die Christliche Welt” – “Journal of the Christian World”, of which Rade was the editor.²⁰ He also participated in the annual meetings of the Association of Friends of “Die Christliche welt”, where theologians of free Protestantism met and discussions took place that shook theology and the church in the years immediately before and after the First World War.²¹

1.1. Theological liberalism

Bultmann was deeply influenced by theological liberalism, the dominant theological school in Germany at the beginning of the century.²²

This school was also called "cultural Protestantism" because it emphasized that the Gospel was harmonious with the realization of all the great civilized human values, such as love, tolerance, peace, freedom, kindness, etc.²³ The Gospel was summarized in three essential points: “the fatherhood of God”, “the brotherhood of man” and “the

¹⁷ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xx.

¹⁸ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xx.

¹⁹ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xx.

²⁰ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xx.

²¹ KEGLEY, Charles (ed.). *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*. Nova York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966, p.xx.

²² WEBSTER, John. *Rudolf Bultmann: An introductory interpretation*, 1986, p.2. Available at: <https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/uccf/bultmann_webster.pdf>. Accessed on: 29/10/2024.

²³ WEBSTER, John. *Rudolf Bultmann: An introductory interpretation*, 1986, p.2. Available at: <https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/uccf/bultmann_webster.pdf>. Accessed on: 29/10/2024.

infinite value of the human soul".²⁴ In one of the classic texts of theological liberalism, "What is Christianity", written by Harnack (1900) we read:²⁵

If we were right in saying that the Gospel is the knowledge and recognition of God as Father, the certainty of redemption, humility and joy in God, energy and brotherly love...

Christianity here receives a predominantly ethical interpretation. In fact, Jesus, in the eyes of the great liberal thinkers, was almost more a dispenser of general moral maxims than a divine savior.²⁶

1.2. The dialectical movement

In the early 1920s, Bultmann, already famous for his exegetical work, became sympathetic to the dialectical movement of which Karl Barth was a part. According to some authors, this implied a radical change in their view of Christianity:²⁷

Until then, God was a kind of symbol that expressed the indefinite openness of men. From now on, he will show himself as pure transcendence: that which comes from itself as absolute gratuitousness, a being that can never be objectified.

Until then, Jesus appeared as a simple witness of morality, an evoker of the religious powers of men. From now on, he reveals himself as an incarnation as a simple witness of morality, an evoker of the religious powers of men. From now on, he reveals himself as the incarnation of the Christian paradox, he is that man where the liberating and justifying gratuitousness of God becomes evident.

Until then, man showed himself as a being capable of reaching his fullness through the path of moral or religious search. From now on, he reveals himself as a simple sinner who is crushed under the sign of impotence, frustration and death

Bultmann, in the words of John Webster, realized that liberalism had transformed the Gospel into little more than the religious counterpart of humanist European civilization,

²⁴ WEBSTER, John. Rudolf Bultmann: An introductory interpretation, 1986, p.2. Available at: <https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/uccf/bultmann_webster.pdf>. Accessed on: 29/10/2024.

²⁵ HARNACK, Adolf. What is Christianity? Lectures Delivered in the University of Berlin during the Winter - Term 1899-1900. Second Editions, Revised. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons; London: Williams and Norgate, 1902, p.320.

²⁶ WEBSTER, John. Rudolf Bultmann: An introductory interpretation, 1986, p.2. Available at: <https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/uccf/bultmann_webster.pdf>. Accessed on: 29/10/2024.

²⁷ BULTMANN, Rudolf. Teología del Nuevo Testamento. Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1981, p.14

a civilization whose emptiness had been tragically exposed by the events of 1914-18:²⁸ “liberal theology had ceased to take God seriously; its talk was of man and man's religion or man's ethics”. Liberal theologians interpreted the concept of the “kingdom of God” in fundamentally ethical and humanistic terms: “the kingdom is something that men do, it is the organization of humanity through action inspired by love.”²⁹ But Bultmann rejected this ethical view of the kingdom.³⁰ In his book “Jesus and the Word”, which first appeared in Germany in 1926, we read the following:³¹

What then is the meaning of the Kingdom of God? How is it to be conceived? The simple answer is: the Kingdom of God is deliverance for men. It is that eschatological deliverance which ends

everything earthly. It is already clear that the Kingdom of God is no “highest good” in the ethical sense. It is not a good towards which the will and action of men is directed, not an ideal which is in any sense realized through human conduct, which in any sense requires men to bring it into existence

Further on, Bultmann highlighted:³² “the kingdom of God, there, is something miraculous, in fact an absolute miracle, opposed to all the here and now; it is “wholly other...” Although he emphasized aspects of Christian life that theological liberalism had not given due weight to, Bultmann also maintained a highly critical stance toward the task of reading the text of the New Testament. For example, in “The History of the Synoptic Tradition”, published in 1921 (the classic text of form criticism) he sought to show how some literary forms in the Gospels were altered, developed, and constructed by the early Christians.³³ In this book, we can read the following about the account in the Gospel of Jesus' empty tomb:³⁴ The story is a legend, as we shall see clearly in Mark 16:8.

Paul knows nothing about the empty tomb, from which it does not follow that the story did not yet exist in his time, but rather that it was a subordinate subject of no significance for the official Kerygma.

²⁸ WEBSTER, John. Rudolf Bultmann: an introductory Interpretation. Available at :https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/uccf/bultmann_webster.pdf. Accessed on: 29/10/2024.

²⁹ WEBSTER, John. Rudolf Bultmann: an introductory Interpretation. Available at :https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/uccf/bultmann_webster.pdf. Accessed on: 29/10/2024.

³⁰ WEBSTER, John. Rudolf Bultmann: an introductory Interpretation. Available at :https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/uccf/bultmann_webster.pdf. Accessed on: 29/10/2024.

³¹ BULTMANN, Rudolf. Jesus and the word. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, p.35-36.

³² BULTMANN, Rudolf. Jesus and the word. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, p.37.

³³ BULTMANN, Rudolf. Crer e Compreender. Ensaios Seleccionados. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2001,p.9.

³⁴ BULTMANN, Rudolf. História de la Tradicion Sinoptica. Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 2000, p.350-351.

We see this also in the discourses of the Book of Acts. This is finally demonstrated by the fact that originally no distinction was made between the resurrection and the exaltation of Jesus; this distinction arises only as a consequence of the Easter legends, which finally demand a special story of the ascension of Jesus to serve as the end of his stay on earth. Now the story of the tomb has its place precisely in the middle of this development; for in it the original idea of exaltation is already modified. Consequently, motifs taken from dogmatics and apologetics essentially transformed the Easter stories. Novelistic motifs influenced the configuration of details from time to time, notably in the story of Emmaus

Bultmann, as a theologian, felt indebted to liberal theology, once writing:³⁵ “we who came out of liberal theology could not have remained theologians if we had not been met by the seriousness of the radical integrity of liberal theology.”

2. THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION OF THE 18TH CENTURY

Bultmann was a child of his time. He came into the world at a time when scientific thought was in full swing. In those days, the “philosophes” (French for “philosophers”: the intellectuals of the European Enlightenment of the 18th century) had already popularized the ideas of the Scientific Revolution and initiated a dramatic reexamination of all aspects of life.³⁶ In the Enlightenment, the rationalism of scientific thought had already been applied to political and economic ideas.³⁷ Voltaire and Diderot, for example, challenged traditional social and religious ideas.³⁸ For most philosophes, “enlightenment” included the rejection of traditional Christianity.³⁹ But before the outbreak of the Enlightenment in Europe, the biblical approach had already been placed under the scrutiny of reason, for example, with Isaac La Peyr e and his

³⁵ Apud: L DEMANN, Gerd. K rygma and History in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann. Forum. Third Series 3, 2 Fall, 2014, p.47.

³⁶ The Eighteenth Century: an age of Enlightenment. Chapter 17, p.502- 530B, 2014, p.502. Available at: https://www.auburn.wednet.edu/cms/lib/WA01001938/Centricity/Domain/2217/36692_Spielvogel_9e_AP_Update_Ch17_rev03.pdf. Accessed on: 20/08/2023.

³⁷ The Eighteenth Century: an age of Enlightenment. Chapter 17, p.502- 530B, 2014, p.503. Available at: https://www.auburn.wednet.edu/cms/lib/WA01001938/Centricity/Domain/2217/36692_Spielvogel_9e_AP_Update_Ch17_rev03.pdf. Accessed on: 20/08/2023.

³⁸ The Eighteenth Century: an age of Enlightenment. Chapter 17, p.502- 530B, 2014, p.503. Available at: https://www.auburn.wednet.edu/cms/lib/WA01001938/Centricity/Domain/2217/36692_Spielvogel_9e_AP_Update_Ch17_rev03.pdf. Accessed on: 20/08/2023.

³⁹ The Eighteenth Century: an age of Enlightenment. Chapter 17, p.502- 530B, 2014, p.503. Available at: https://www.auburn.wednet.edu/cms/lib/WA01001938/Centricity/Domain/2217/36692_Spielvogel_9e_AP_Update_Ch17_rev03.pdf. Accessed on: 20/08/2023.

book “Prae- Adamitae” - “Pre-Adamites”, Spinoza and his Theological-Political Treatise and Wellhausen with his critical studies of the Old Testament, among others. The rational and scientific exegesis of the Bible had already reached its peak at the end of the 18th century. This was the time, in the words of George Holley Gilbert, that “Biblical interpretation reached the hills of the promised land, but, no one saw or could see the heights that rose in majesty ahead”.⁴⁰ Progress happened very quickly, and before the century was out, numerous discoveries had appeared that would affect the interpretation of the biblical text. It was believed that this “progress” would herald the irremediable collapse of true religion.⁴¹ Modern-minded man was no longer willing to accept a world view that differed glaringly from that formed and developed by science since its emergence in ancient Greece.⁴² In this worldview, the cause and effect link is fundamental.⁴³ And it could no longer be believed that the course of nature could be interrupted or pierced by supernatural powers.⁴⁴

Modern man's thinking has been shaped by science, and so he only accepts as reality that which can be established by empirically verifiable facts. Furthermore, he has learned to use the technical means that are the fruits of science for his own good. For example, in the case of illness, he turns to doctors, and in the case of economic and political matters, he makes use of the results of psychological, social, economic and political sciences, and so on. It recognizes as reality only those phenomena that are comprehensible within the framework of the rational order of the universe. It does not recognize miracles, because they do not fit into this legal order. Therefore, the contrast between the worldview of the Bible and the modern worldview is the contrast between two ways of thinking, the mythological and the scientific.⁴⁵

3. MYTHOLOGY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

⁴⁰ GILBERT, George Holley. Interpretation of the Bible a short History. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908, p.260.

⁴¹ GILBERT, George Holley. Interpretation of the Bible a short History. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908, p.260.

⁴² BULTMANN, Rudolf. Jesus Christ and Mythology. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.15.

⁴³ BULTMANN, Rudolf. Jesus Christ and Mythology. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.15.

⁴⁴ BULTMANN, Rudolf. Jesus Christ and Mythology. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.15.

⁴⁵ BULTMANN, Rudolf. Demitologização. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1999, p.7-9.

On April 21, 1941, Bultmann spoke to the pastors of the Confessing Church in Frankfurt (Germany) on the subject of demythologization.⁴⁶ He feared that the church would become reactionary under the great stress of war and revert to some sort of previous theological stance.⁴⁷ Thus, in this lecture he sought to emphasize the need for the proclamation of the Gospel in terms of the modern understanding of men.⁴⁸ He believed that in interpreting the stories told by the New Testament it was necessary to separate what is linked to the authors' worldview from the message addressed to the listener himself.⁴⁹ The mythical eschatology taught by the New Testament authors was no longer bearable, because the parousia of Jesus never happened as expected.⁵⁰

History did not not come to an end, and, as every schoolboy knows, it will continue to run its course. Even if we believe that the world as we know it will come to an end in time, we expect the end to take the form of a natural catastrophe, not a mythical event such as the one the New Testament expects

Christians should not expect modern men to accept the mythical world view as true.⁵¹ For that cosmology, which presented the world as a three-story structure, with the earth in the center, heaven above, and the underworld below, where heaven is the abode of God and the celestial beings and the underworld is hell, the place of torment, was no longer supported.⁵² Likewise, the idea that the earth is the scene of the supernatural activity of God and his angels, on the one hand, and of Satan and his demons, on the other, no longer has a place in the modern world.⁵³

⁴⁶ PATTERSON, Bob E. (ed.). *Makes of the Modern Theological Mind: Rudolf Bultmann* by Morris Ashcraft. Waco: Word Books, 1972, p.49; *Rudolf Bultmann: Demitologização*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1999, p.5.

⁴⁷ PATTERSON, Bob E. (ed.). *Makes of the Modern Theological Mind: Rudolf Bultmann* by Morris Ashcraft. Waco: Word Books, 1972, p.49.

⁴⁸ PATTERSON, Bob E. (ed.). *Makes of the Modern Theological Mind: Rudolf Bultmann* by Morris Ashcraft. Waco: Word Books, 1972, p.49; *BULTMANN, Rudolf Crer e Compreender*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2001, p.12.

⁴⁹ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.36.

⁵⁰ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological debate*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.5.

⁵¹ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological debate*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.3.

⁵² BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate*. By Rudolf Bultmann; Ernst Lohmeyer; Julius Schniewind; Helmut Thielicke, and Austin Farrer. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.I.

⁵³ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate*. By Rudolf Bultmann; Ernst Lohmeyer; Julius Schniewind; Helmut Thielicke, and Austin Farrer. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.I.

Stories about evil spirits taking possession of human bodies and Satan as inspiration for evil behavior are no longer taken seriously. Does the modern-minded man also not believe in cherished New Testament concepts such as “begotten of the Holy Spirit” and “born of a virgin”? He simply identifies them as mythological.⁵⁴ He knows that the teaching that defended Jesus as a great celestial being, who became man for the sake of our redemption, originated in the mythologies of Jews and Gentiles, and that it was later transferred to the person of Jesus.⁵⁵ Much of this language can be traced back to the Jewish apocalyptic and the redemption myths of Gnosticism.⁵⁶ Then an inevitable question arises: what is the significance of Jesus' preaching and the New Testament as a whole for modern man? For modern man, Bultmann answers, the mythological worldview, the conceptions of eschatology, and the ideas of redeemer and redemption are over and done with.⁵⁷ Does this mean that we should set aside the sayings of the New Testament that contain mythological conceptions? For Bultmann, the mythological conceptions of the New Testament should be interpreted. He points out that myth does not intend to present an objective image of the world as it is, but to communicate the understanding that man has of himself in the world in which he lives.⁵⁸

Therefore, the myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially.⁵⁹ For he speaks of the power that man supposes he experiences as the foundation and limit of his world, and of his own activity and suffering.⁶⁰

The myth describes powers in terms derived from the visible world, with its tangible objects and forces, and from human life, with its feelings, motives, and potentialities.⁶¹

⁵⁴ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.16-17.

⁵⁵ The conception of the pre-existent Son of God who descended in human form into the world to redeem humanity, is, according to Bultmann, part of the Gnostic doctrine of redemption: BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.16-17.

⁵⁶ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological debate*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.3.

⁵⁷ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.17.

⁵⁸ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological debate*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.10.

⁵⁹ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological debate*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.10.

⁶⁰ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological debate*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.10.

4. DEMYTHOLOGIZATION

According to Bultmann, the modern reader can benefit from the New Testament as long as he uses the correct methods to interpret it. He has in mind here the criticism of form and existentialism.⁶² The first method was extensively used by him in his interpretation of the Gospels.⁶³ It consisted of searching for the sayings of Jesus before they took on a fixed form and succumbed to the ideology of the copyist.⁶⁴ To do so, it would be necessary to consider the prehistory of the sources used to compose the text and the oral stage it went through before acquiring written form.⁶⁵ Through this method, it was possible to point out places in the text, such as the inclusions "on the last day" and "I will raise him up on the last day", which represented additions of "later ecclesiastical writing".⁶⁶ These two inclusions, according to Bultmann, were intended to introduce traditional futuristic eschatology.⁶⁷ The use of the method of form criticism, therefore, allowed the kerygma to be separated from its mythological envelope.

4.1. Existentialism

⁶¹ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological debate*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.10.

⁶² ARNETT, William M. *Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation of New Testament*. The Asbury Journal, 1963, p.30.

⁶³ CARVALHO, Adriano da Silva. *A interpretação crítica da bíblia: Espinosa, Gunkel e Bultmann*. Editora Reflexão, 2020, p.101-102.

⁶⁴ CARVALHO, Adriano da Silva. *A interpretação crítica da bíblia: Espinosa, Gunkel e Bultmann*. Editora Reflexão, 2020, p.102-103.

⁶⁵ CARVALHO, Adriano da Silva. *Novo Testamento da crítica da forma à história do cânon*. Editora Reflexão, 2018, p.35.

⁶⁶ Apud: ARNETT, William M. *Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation of New Testament*. The Asbury Journal, 1963, p.31.

⁶⁷ Apud: ARNETT, William M. *Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation of New Testament*. The Asbury Journal, 1963, p.31.

Another path indicated by Bultmann that leads to the meaningful message of the New Testament is existentialism. He was certain that the text of the New Testament will only have any meaning for modern man if it reaches its deepest stratum, where God is presented as a matter of personal interest.⁶⁸ It is from this point that he will be able to understand the meaning of the eschatological preaching and of certain sayings of Jesus, which appear on the surface of the text under the cover of mythology.⁶⁹ This is the path of demythologization.⁷⁰ It is not a question of eliminating mythological statements from the text, but of interpreting them.⁷¹ Bultmann reminded us that the theological propositions of the New Testament can never be the object of faith.⁷² Rather, "they can only be the explanation of the understanding that is inherent in faith".⁷³ He also recognizes the existence of incompleteness in these theological statements, as they are determined by the situation of the believer.⁷⁴ However, it should not be inferred that this incompleteness should be eliminated by future generations.⁷⁵ On the contrary, since incompleteness has its cause in the inexhaustibility of the believer's understanding, which must always be updated, the most important thing for Bultmann is that basic insight that the theological thoughts of the New Testament are the unfolding of one's own faith growing... out of one's new self-understanding.⁷⁶ He has in mind here "an existential understanding of the individual that is one and inseparable from his understanding of God and the world".⁷⁷

Bultmann had already identified, in the Neo-Kantian line, religion with the path of man that is made in the openness to infinity, and, however, in the later stage he broke this

⁶⁸ WEBSTER, John. Rudolf Bultmann: an introductory Interpretation. Available at:https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/uccf/bultmann_webster.pdf. Accessed on: 29/10/2024.

⁶⁹ BULTMANN, Rudolf. Jesus Christ and Mythology. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.18.

⁷⁰ BULTMANN, Rudolf. Jesus Christ and Mythology. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.18.

⁷¹ BULTMANN, Rudolf. Jesus Christ and Mythology. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.18.

⁷² Apud: ARNETT, William M. Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation of New Testament. The Asbury Journal, 1963, p.31.

⁷³ Apud: ARNETT, William M. Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation of New Testament. The Asbury Journal, 1963, p.31-32.

⁷⁴ ARNETT, William M. Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation of New Testament. The Asbury Journal, 1963, p.32.

⁷⁵ ARNETT, William M. Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation of New Testament. The Asbury Journal, 1963, p.32.

⁷⁶ ARNETT, William M. Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation of New Testament. The Asbury Journal, 1963, p.32.

⁷⁷ ARNETT, William M. Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation of New Testament. The Asbury Journal, 1963, p.32.

moralistic-religious scheme.⁷⁸ He identifies man as someone incapable of helping himself.⁷⁹ To adjust this perspective and place man before the possible revelation of God, Bultmann made use of Heidegger's existential analytic.⁸⁰ For Bultmann, only those who discover his action in their own existence can understand God.⁸¹

5. THE PRECEDENT FOR DEMYTHOLOGIZATION

Bultmann found a precedent for demythologization in the New Testament itself.⁸² He recalled that the eschatological preaching of Jesus was maintained and continued by the early Christian community in its mythological form.⁸³ But soon the process of demythologization began, partly with Paul and then with John.⁸⁴ Paul had declared that the turning point from the old world to the new was not a matter of the future, but had already occurred at the coming of Jesus: "but when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son" (Gal. 4:4). For Bultmann, this passage proved that Paul was demythologizing the primitive eschatology of the believers in Palestine.⁸⁵ He further emphasized: "Certainly, Paul still expected the end of the world as a cosmic drama, the parousia of Christ in the clouds of heaven, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, but with the resurrection of Christ the decisive event had already happened".⁸⁶ Therefore, Paul can say that the expectations and promises of the ancient prophets are fulfilled when the Gospel is proclaimed.⁸⁷ After Paul, writes Bultmann, John radically demythologized eschatology.⁸⁸ For this apostle, the coming (and departure) of Jesus is the great eschatological event: "and this is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3.19). According to Bultmann in Paul and in John, we discover (in Jewish eschatological expectations) that the figure of the antichrist is a completely mythological figure, as described, for example, in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2.⁸⁹ But in John, the false teachers play the role of this mythological figure. Thus, mythology was

⁷⁸ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Teología del Nuevo Testamento*. Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1981, p.17.

⁷⁹ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Teología del Nuevo Testamento*. Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1981, p.17.

⁸⁰ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Teología del Nuevo Testamento*. Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1981, p.17.

⁸¹ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Teología del Nuevo Testamento*. Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1981, p.17.

⁸² BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.32

⁸³ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.32

⁸⁴ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.32

⁸⁵ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.32

⁸⁶ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.32

⁸⁷ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.32

⁸⁸ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.33.

⁸⁹ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.34.

transposed into history:⁹⁰ "These examples show, it seems to me, that demythologization has its beginnings in the New Testament itself, and therefore our task of demythologization today is justified."

6. CRITICISM

Karl Barth criticized Bultmann for his existential approach to the biblical text.⁹¹ Barth once said the following: "after having intuited the radical transcendence of Jesus Christ, he runs the risk of denying it again, introducing it into purely anthropological schemes."⁹² Bultmann responded to Barth by stating that his approach was not intended to dilute revelation, but to understand it: "it is not a question of denying the gratuitousness of God's justification in Christ, but of making it a real reality for men".⁹³ Another objection often raised against Bultmann's hermeneutical method is that he takes the modern worldview as the criterion for interpreting the Scriptures and the Christian message, and, for this reason, the Scriptures and the Christian message cannot say anything that is in contradiction with the modern worldview.⁹⁴ Bultmann responded to this with the following words:⁹⁵

It is, of course, true that de-mythologizing takes the modern world-view as a criterion. To de-mythologize is to reject not Scripture or the Christian message as a whole, but the world-view of Scripture, which is the world-view of a past epoch, which all too often is retained in Christian dogmatics and in the preaching of the Church

According to Bultmann, the attempt to demythologize begins with this important insight:⁹⁶ "Christian preaching, in so far as it is preaching of the Word of God by God's command and in His name, does not offer a doctrine which can be accepted either by reason or by a *sacrificium intellectus*". Furthermore, the mythological worldview itself

⁹⁰ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.34.

⁹¹ Apud: BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Teología del Nuevo Testamento*. Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1981,p.17.

⁹² Apud: BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Teología del Nuevo Testamento*. Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1981,p.17.

⁹³ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Teología del Nuevo Testamento*. Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1981,p.17.

⁹⁴ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.35.

⁹⁵ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.35-36.

⁹⁶ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958, p.36.

had an existential purpose.⁹⁷ Therefore, it was not the communication of theoretical knowledge about the world, but an attempt to impress upon man his personal situation in the universe and his relationship to the powers that govern it.⁹⁸ If the New Testament is to be interpreted in this sense, Bultmann argues, there is no danger of losing its essential truth.⁹⁹ On the contrary, it is only through such interpretation that the true meaning of the New Testament can be revealed and made accessible to those who would otherwise find its mythological elements a stumbling block.¹⁰⁰

CONCLUSION

Bultmann was convinced that the text of the New Testament should be interpreted according to the Christian understanding of human life revealed by its message.¹⁰¹ For him, this interpretation presented two advantages: first, it assured the essential truth of the Gospel message, and second, it emancipated it from myth, particularly Jewish apocalyptic eschatology and Gnosticism.¹⁰² Therefore, interpreting New Testament mythology is, at the bottom, a question about the correct way to talk about God and man. Although Bultmann positioned himself against the traditional reading of Christianity, his hermeneutical method nevertheless represented a great effort to make the message of the New Testament relevant to men and women of all ages.

⁹⁷ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate.* By Rudolf Bultmann; Ernst Lohmeyer; Julius Schniewind; Helmut Thielicke, and Austin Farrer. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.177.

⁹⁸ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate.* By Rudolf Bultmann; Ernst Lohmeyer; Julius Schniewind; Helmut Thielicke, and Austin Farrer. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.177.

⁹⁹ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate.* By Rudolf Bultmann; Ernst Lohmeyer; Julius Schniewind; Helmut Thielicke, and Austin Farrer. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.177.

¹⁰⁰ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate.* By Rudolf Bultmann; Ernst Lohmeyer; Julius Schniewind; Helmut Thielicke, and Austin Farrer. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.177.

¹⁰¹ BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate.* By Rudolf Bultmann; Ernst Lohmeyer; Julius Schniewind; Helmut Thielicke, and Austin Farrer. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.177.

¹⁰² BARTSCH, Hans Werner (ed.). *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate.* By Rudolf Bultmann; Ernst Lohmeyer; Julius Schniewind; Helmut Thielicke, and Austin Farrer. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p.177.

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