



Bultmann (1884-1976) Myth and Resurrection

In 1941 Bultmann called a conference which aimed to discuss the relationship between the New Testament and the modern world. The New Testament, he argued, was alien to the scientific mind, which dismissed its relevance because of the language of angels, demons and supernatural happenings. His aim was not to destroy the kerygma, his name for the proclaimed message, but to make it acceptable to the modern age.

Bultmann defined myth in this way:

“Mythology is the presentation of the otherworldly in terms of this world, and the divine in terms of human life; the presentation of the other side in terms of this side —for example, God’s transcendence is expressed as spatial distance.”

(Kerygma and Myth, page 180)

We can apply this definition to any of the great biblical doctrines. For example – the renewal that God brings in terms of new life to the believer is expressed as resurrection. The structure of the New Testament narrative is plotted around a mythic world of heaven, earth and an underworld of hell and within this structure the great doctrines of Christianity are placed and described in an alien language.

The Mythic World

The Bible presents a mythic world, argues Bultmann. The world is a battle ground between Satan and his demons, and God and his angels in which people fall victim to disease, demon-possession and ultimately death. Incidentally, this idea is the foundation of an early view of the atonement – Christus Victor – where Christ is seen as reclaiming the territory of Satan on behalf of God. This age is presented as under the rule of Satan, but the age is passing away.

A day of judgement is coming when the ruler of the world, Satan, will be judged and God will gather his people up. At the day of judgement there will be a general resurrection of the righteous, but those who fall short will be destined to eternal fire.

Jesus, the God-man, comes to make atonement for the sins of the many and to defeat Satan by rising physically from the dead. As they await the second coming of Christ, believers enter through baptism and the shared life of the Eucharist in a new life. Jesus



lives again in the new community which then awaits the final end-time when all will be caught up into heaven.

Criticisms of this world-view

Bultmann criticises the literal account as based on an out of date view of the cosmos, and influences of Jewish apocalyptic writing (as found for example in the book of Daniel that speaks of ‘one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven’).

Modern cosmology has demonstrated that the universe is not closed, but expanding and that the earth is not under the heaven but a tiny particle in a vast universe. Human beings are understood in terms of psychology, not demon or Holy Spirit possession. Biology explains diseases that used to be attributed to evil forces. In other words, the mythic language of the Bible has shown to be just that – a mythic structure to make sense of the first century world.

Moreover, the death-resurrection myth makes no sense to the modern mind. It makes no sense to blame the whole of mankind for the sin of one man (Adam) and it seems immoral of God to require one man (Jesus) to take on himself the sins of the whole world. The resurrection is another impossible nature-miracle where normal laws of science are upended.

But it is the nature of myth to explain truth not in terms of a testable objective reality, but in terms of picture language. So as one Catholic commentator, Myles Bourke, explains:

“Myth is an expression of man’s conviction that the origin and purpose of the world are not to be sought in it, but beyond the realm of known and tangible reality; that he is not master of his own being; that he can be delivered from the forces within the visible world which now dominate him.”

Resurrection as a personal experience

For Bultmann, belief in the Resurrection of Christ’s physical body is completely unnecessary to Christian faith. In fact he cannot see how a man who accepts twenty-first century reality can accept it and still keep their integrity intact.

What then is the meaning of resurrection to Bultmann? Christ triumphed over death,



and that his death saves those who, on hearing the preaching, will accept crucifixion with him:

“Faith in the resurrection is really the same thing as faith in the saving efficacy of the Cross.” (KM I, 46)

The purpose of the kerygma (gospel) is to announce God’s judgement, but this judgment frees us from sin and death if we will be crucified with Christ, if we renounce worldly passions and lusts, overcome our natural dread of suffering, and live in detachment from the world.

The decision on our part to do this causes us to pass from a life of sin, a life in which he puts his trust in visible, tangible reality. By this decision he will experience God’s pardon, and be enabled to live a life based on unseen, intangible realities— a “life in faith.” When this happens, the saving act of God has taken place in us. Resurrection becomes an existential reality in us – and this is all that resurrection means.

Existential Reality

The interpretation we provide therefore needs to be existential not objective. It needs to be made in terms of underlying truths of human existence, experience, and meaning. Our aim is not to destroy the myth, but to interpret it and so bring out its hidden meaning. Bultmann claims that, as with much theology, he is merely bringing reason to bear on the truths of Scripture. And the truths of Scripture remain true – but in a different sense than literal, objective truth.

Here Bultmann invokes Heidegger’s concept of Dasein or the essence of human existence. According to Bultmann, Heidegger’s task, which he shares in, is to bring a scientific understanding to pre-scientific ideas of existence.

“Human being as distinct from all other being, means existing—a form of being which assumes complete responsibility for itself.”

(Kerygma and Myth, page 194)

The ultimate aim of human beings is to find authentic existence and not fall back into the crowd consciousness and the influences of our peer group.

Existentialism is in the end a philosophy about choosing a mode of existence



for ourselves which is true to our own understanding of who we are. And in demythologising the resurrection we are making it easier for the modern mind to accept the great truth of the resurrection – that I can be born anew into a better form of existence.

References

Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (Joanne Cotler, 2003).

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