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Relativism and Absolutism In Bultmann Demythologizing Hermeneutic

Comments

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RELATIVISM AND ABSOLUTISM IN BULTMANN'S DEMYTHOLOGISING HERMENEUTIC

by PROFESSOR JOSEPH RUNZO

... the reliability of the kerygmatic tradition must not be questioned, for otherwise the eschatological event to which the kerygma testifies would be implicated in the relativity of all historical knowledge.¹

EVER as Rudolf Bultmann's demythologising hermeneutic has irresistibly revolutionised biblical criticism, it has remained an uneasy alliance between historical criticism and philosophical insight, and an uneasy duality between the exigencies of historical relativism and the claims of the kerygma. An initial examination of Bultmann's demythologising program will expose a remarkable tension between the relativism of his philosophy of history and the absolutism of his Christian existentialism. I will then assess several *prima facie* contradictions which arise within Bultmann's thought from this relativist-absolutist tension. I will conclude with a suggested resolution of this tension between historical relativism and the absolutist claims within Bultmann's theology. For only by clarifying and dealing forthrightly with the serious conflicts within the demythologising hermeneutic can we retain the spirit of Bultmann's own admonition that in approaching the mythological elements of the biblical world-view, 'absolute clarity and ruthless honesty are essential both for the academic theologian and for the parish priest'.²

I

Bultmann's demythologising hermeneutic evolved from his pastoral concerns. 'The real problem', he says in reply to Karl Jaspers' critique of demythologisation, 'is the problem of interpreting the Bible and the teachings of the Church in such a way

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, 'A Reply to the Theses of J. Schniewind', in Rudolf Bultmann *et al.*, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 116.

² Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 9.

that they may become understandable as a summons to man.¹ For 'at all costs the preacher must not leave his people in the dark about what he secretly eliminates, nor must he be in the dark about it himself'.² And despite the use of the negative locution of elimination—'demythologising'—Bultmann's hermeneutic, motivated by this pastoral concern, is one of positive construction: 'Its aim is not to eliminate the mythological statements [from the Bible] but to interpret them.'³

The demythologising hermeneutic was initiated through this pastoral concern as Bultmann, looking back to Ernst Troeltsch, confronted the acute 'problem of history':⁴ the problem of relativity, raised by the historicity of human experience and compounded by the strictures which historical-critical methodology places on any interpretation of the Bible as a historical document.⁵ Let us define a 'world-view' as the conceptual schema of all the cognitive elements which the mind brings to experience—viz. primarily concepts and beliefs and their interrelationships, the syntax and semantics of language, and logic. Bultmann holds that each person, living within history, lives within the world-view(s) of his or her age. Thus as the historian investigates the historical biblical documents, his perception of them is delimited by the conceptual structure of his world-view.⁶ Yet the historian is looking at documents which were created within the conceptual crucible of a very different world-view. For the cosmology of the New Testament, Bultmann says, is mythological (essentially being the mythology of Jewish apocalyptic and the Gnostic redemption myths); but the modern person is a technological person with a modern, scientific world-view. Hence, if the modern person 'is prepared to take seriously the question of God, he ought not to be

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, 'The Case for Demythologization', in Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth*, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Noonday Press, 1958), p. 60.

² Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 9.

³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 18. cf. Bultmann, 'The Case for Demythologization', in *Myth and Christianity*, p. 59.

⁴ See Bultmann, 'The Case for Demythologization', in *Myth and Christianity*, p. 58.

⁵ See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), vol. 2, p. 251.

⁶ See, for example, Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lanterio (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 3.

burdened with the mythological element in Christianity'.¹ And so the very historicity of both human experience and the Bible necessitates a demythologisation of the Bible—a process which Bultmann feels was begun within the New Testament itself, first by Paul and then more radically by John.² Precisely what does it mean, though, as Bultmann proposes in his famous essay, 'New Testament and Mythology', to 'strip the kerygma of its mythical framework' in order to 'demythologise it'?

Bultmann is incautiously ambiguous in his use of 'demythologising'. He uses the locutions 'mythology' and, consequently, 'demythologising' in two different ways. Sometimes he defines 'mythology' in terms of an imagistic way of using language, and 'demythologising' as the attempt to eliminate that imagistic usage in the biblical documents in order to make the underlying intended meaning of those texts evident. In this usage, Bultmann says that 'mythology is the use of imagery to express the other worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life',³ and he refers to mythological language as 'metaphorical'.⁴ Besides this imagistic sense of 'mythology', Bultmann also uses what we can refer to as the 'scientific sense' of 'mythology'. In this sense, 'mythological thought regards the divine activity, . . . as an interference with the course of nature, history, or the life of the soul . . .—a miracle, in fact'.⁵ Bultmann says that we can call this conception of the world mythological because 'science does not believe that the course of nature can be interrupted . . . by supernatural powers'.⁶

However, whether 'mythology' is understood in the imagistic or scientific sense, and whether one concomitantly 'demythologises' the Bible by eliminating metaphorical talk about the divine or by eliminating unscientific conceptions and explana-

¹ Bultmann, 'A Reply to the Theses of J. Schniewind', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 122.

² See Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, pp. 32-4.

³ Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Kerygma and Myth*, note 2, p. 10. cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1957), p. 12, and 'The Case for Demythologization', in *Myth and Christianity*, p. 61.

⁴ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 21.

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, 'Bultmann Replies to His Critics', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 197.

⁶ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 15 (cf. p. 38). Bultmann is careful to say that myth is not simply what later turns out to be false: e.g. old and now rejected scientific views are not 'myths'. (See Bultmann, 'A Reply to the Theses of J. Schniewind', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 103.)

tions, the reason for employing this hermeneutic is that the world-view which the modern person possesses, and possesses *just because of* his or her place in history, is incompatible with the biblical world-view.¹ Foundational, then, to Bultmann's demythologising hermeneutic is his recognition of historical relativity. Demythologising is necessary, Bultmann argues, both because God should not be 'objectified' as he is in the ancient world-view as a fixed entity whose revelation is permanent and petrified,² and because humans, as historical beings possessing the world-view(s) of their own age, cannot actively confront God by attempting to use a world-view which is not their own.

II

We can use 'relativism' in its broadest sense to refer to any epistemological position which holds or entails that the correctness or incorrectness of *judgments* about matters of truth or value varies with which individual cogniser, or which larger set of cognisers such as a particular society or the human race, is making the judgment. We can then refer to epistemic claims which deny this as 'absolutist'. Bultmann himself is never clear about the meaning of 'relativism', but he essentially agrees with this definition when he says in *History and Eschatology* that relativism denies 'the absolute value of judgments and knowledge, and . . . [confirms] the dependence of all thinking and valuing on their time and culture'.³

Although, for reasons which will become clear below, Bultmann resists the application of the term 'relativism' to his own thought, he is a relativist in his general epistemology and, more particularly, he is a relativist in his philosophy of history. (Actually, since Bultmann holds that humans are ineluctably historical beings, the relativism of his philosophy of history becomes essentially the relativism of his general epistemology,

¹ For a discussion of some difficulties not considered here which arise from Bultmann's ambiguous usage of 'myth' see Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Demythologizing and the Problem of Validity', in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 227-42. It should be noted that Bultmann holds that certain mythological concepts—e.g. transcendence—can never be dispensed with ('A Reply to the Theses of J. Schniewind', in *Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 102-3).

² Bultmann, 'The Case for Demythologization', in *Myth and Christianity*, p. 67.

³ Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, p. 78.

since the former thus largely implies the latter as well as the latter implying the former.) Bultmann says that 'every interpreter brings with him certain conceptions, . . . as presuppositions of his exegesis'.¹ And in *History and Eschatology*, his most systematic statement of his philosophy of history, Bultmann says that 'every interpretation of history presupposes a hermeneutic method' and that, because of our 'pre-understanding' of the matter under consideration, each interpretation of history is guided by the manner in which questions are put to the historical documents in question.² Consequently, Bultmann can say, 'the subjectivity of the historian is a necessary factor of objective historical knowledge'.³

From this basic epistemological position that one *necessarily* always approaches a subject matter, historical or otherwise, from one's own (historically determined) point of view, Bultmann draws the relativist conclusion that there is no objective historical knowledge in the sense of 'absolute ultimate knowledge'.⁴ And thus for biblical criticism, the theological thoughts in the New Testament have meaning for us

not as . . . timeless general truths, but only as the expression of an understanding of human existence which for the man of today also is a possibility for his understanding of himself.⁵

Truth and value are, then, relative—relative to one's historically determined world-view. We can summarise and give a more precise formalisation of Bultmann's relativist philosophy of history by characterising the logical form which truth and value statements would thus have as follows. On the view which Bultmann expresses here, the form of a truth statement for a sentence, *S*, is:

It is true . . . on world-view *W* . . . that *S*.

¹ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 48.

² Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, pp. 110, 113.

³ *ibid.*, p. 119. It is this recognition that *every* interpretation of history involves the presuppositions of the interpreter which provides the philosophical foundation for Bultmann's pioneering work concerning the necessity of using form and redaction criticism to investigate the early church's *own* historical interpretation of the Christ-event in the biblical texts.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 121. The beginnings of this position were stated much earlier in *Jesus and the Word* (see p. 11).

⁵ Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 251.

And the corresponding logical form of a statement of valuation, for a sentence, *S*, would be for Bultmann:

It is valuable . . . on world-view *W* . . . that *S*.

If Bultmann is consistent in his relativist epistemology, (nearly)¹ every statement of truth and of value will follow the appropriate form of these two logical forms for sentences.

Thus, Bultmann's general relativist position would require a sentential operator with two components for (nearly) every sentence. Those two components would be either the noetic operator, 'it is true', or a valuation operator (e.g. 'it is valuable'), and the relativising operator, 'on world-view *W*'. By a 'relativising operator' I mean an exclusionary sentential operator which contrasts one set of cognisers, such as one's own society, with all other cognisers. The relativity of the correctness of judgments which the consistent application of these noetic, or valuation, and relativising operators entails is a type of the relativity of correctness of judgments about matters of truth and value which constitutes relativism broadly conceived.

With this formalisation of the logic of Bultmann's general relativist epistemology, we can see why he declares in 'New Testament and Mythology' that 'the only criticism of the New Testament which is theologically relevant is that which arises necessarily out of the situation [particularly the world-view] of modern man'.² A person possesses a specific world-view, which has been shaped principally by the historical forces of his or her place in history. That world-view delimits the presuppositions and conceptions, arising out of one's 'pre-understandings', with which one will approach the biblical texts.

Now, one might alter portions of one's world-view if confronted with sufficiently significant and persistent phenomena which are not satisfactorily accounted for under one's old world-view. Yet we must always use, and so retain, portions of our current world-view in order to assess and appropriate new elements for that world-view. One cannot, therefore, trade world-views *in toto* the way one trades suits of clothes.³ But then,

¹ In order to prevent logical contradictions, there will necessarily be statements which will be excepted from the strictures of these relativising sentential operators: e.g. the law of non-contradiction.

² Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 7.

³ See *ibid.*, p. 3.

the attempt to interpret the Bible by demythologising it, so as to make the Bible meaningful to modern people, does not impose a superadded and nonessential item of hermeneutical baggage. For *if* one's world-view is formed within, and thus informed by, the modern scientific world-view(s), that very fact must determine, in part, the epistemic starting-point of historical inquiry into the Bible. One cannot simply eliminate one's own world-view and replace it with some composite of the world-view(s) of the early church. To reject the demythologising hermeneutic *totally* is effectually either to deny the relativist epistemology which the historicity of human experience seems to force upon us, or to deny that there is any literal sense in most of the mythological elements of the Bible. Conversely, to accept a demythologising hermeneutic is, and is no more than, in itself just to hold that the message of scripture and the church is not bound to *any* specific, historically determined world-view; it is to say (following Matt. 28.19) that the kerygma is for 'all nations', whatever their place in history.

III

Despite the relativism of his philosophy of history, Bultmann disallows radical relativism. (This is why in *History and Eschatology* Bultmann rejects the term 'relativism' to describe his own position.)¹ Thus in *Jesus and the Word* Bultmann offers two absolutist reasons, one of which he later rejected, for saying that historical criticism 'does not end in *complete* relativism, as if history were a spectacle wholly dependent on the individual standpoint of the observer'.² First he says that the observer's presuppositions, which are true relative to his world-view, must be suspended, 'that history may actually speak'. But as we have seen, Bultmann later does reject this view and holds instead that *any* historical investigation always involves the world-view and particular hermeneutic of the historian. Second, however, Bultmann enunciates an absolutist framework which encompasses his general relativist philosophy of history, by making the suggestion, which he retained, that *certain* parts of history can be grasped by objective methods. In *Jesus and the Word* he suggests, for example, that the correct chronological sequence

¹ Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, p. 136.

² Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, p. 4 (italics mine).

of historical events can be comprehended using objective methods. More importantly, in 'New Testament and Mythology', for instance, he talks about the use of demythologisation to preserve the *truth* of the New Testament proclamation.¹ The first of these two absolutist claims about history is untenable, and the second, while central to Bultmann's theology, cannot be maintained in the form in which Bultmann presents it.

The chronological order of historical events is not an *absolute*, objective fact. In the first place, there are no historical facts *simpliciter*; there are only historical facts *relative* to the conceptual structure of the world-view of the inquirer. I am not suggesting that it is extremely difficult or impossible to isolate objective historical events and their temporal relationships because all historical documents are themselves tightly intertwined with interpretation. Rather, since semantic meaning is relative to one's world-view, there are only historical 'facts' *qua* the way in which someone perceives them. Hence, I think Bultmann wrongly suggests that 'strict methodological research can recognise objectively . . . events in so far as they are nothing but occurrences'.² For the character, and hence the identity, of any particular historical 'event' is in part determined by the conceptual structure of the world-view of the inquirer. (For that matter, the conceptual structure of the inquirer's world-view even determines the criteria—e.g. duration, relationship of parts, etc.—for what counts as an 'event'.) As a simple example, and one which Bultmann would readily accept, it can only be a historical 'fact' for oneself that Jesus was an exorcist, if one believes that exorcism is possible.

Likewise, and in the second place, if we can make sense out of historical inquiry only in terms of the world-view of the inquirer, then in some instances a chronological order for historical events may not even be within the category of the possible. It can only be a 'fact' that certain events bear a particular temporal relation to each other if such concepts as 'chronological' are semantically meaningful within the conceptual structure of the inquirer's own world-view. Therefore, neither what historical events occurred, nor the order, if any, in

¹ *ibid.*, p. 5, and Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 10.

² Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, p. 116 (*italics mine*).

which historical events occurred, can be absolute, objective facts.

The second absolutist aspect in Bultmann's thought—the claim of the truth of the New Testament proclamation—is founded on his constructive aim of identifying the foundational meaning of the New Testament and its mythology. Bultmann does reject any claim for the absoluteness of the Christian religion. He argues directly against Troeltsch's position in, say, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*,¹ when he argues that it is meaningless to hold that the Christian religion, which is a historical phenomenon, is absolute in the sense of possessing the 'highest rank' and being of 'irreplaceable value for human culture'. Yet Bultmann subsequently asserts the absoluteness of the Christian *faith* with respect to the response which it demands of the believer.² This absolutist claim creates a contradiction within Bultmann's own thought.

Even while recognising historical relativity, Bultmann makes this absolutist claim because he wants to avoid a radical relativism which he feels would deny the compelling claims of the kerygma. Now certain kinds of absolutist claims are compatible with a relativist epistemology of the sort which Bultmann assumes in general. In this regard, it will be helpful to distinguish, following the work of Rudolf Carnap, between two kinds of questions of existence vis-à-vis world-views. 'Internal questions' are those questions which concern the existence of entities *given* the logical structure of a specified world-view. 'External questions' are questions regarding the existence of some specified world-view in itself.³ Most non-meta-logical matters of truth and value (including the presuppositions of historical inquiry) are internal questions, which presuppose the conceptual structure of the relevant world-view. On a relativist epistemology, the truth or falsity, and the logical or empirical necessity or contradiction, of answers to these internal questions of truth and value are relative to, and dependent on, the logical structure of the world-view in question. So within a relativist epistemology, *internal* absolutist claims are perfectly sensible and

¹ See Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. David Reid (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1971), p. 117.

² Bultmann, 'The Case for Demythologization', in *Myth and Christianity*, p. 71.

³ Rudolf Carnap, 'Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology', in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Leonard Linsky (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1952), pp. 209f.

coherent in so far as they are regarded as absolute *only from within* the world-view which they presuppose.

But Bultmann's absolutist claims are not made as internal absolutist claims, and consequently his thought is self-contradictory. For the difficulty with Bultmann's confessional claims about the Christian faith is that they involve internal questions, yet they are, ultimately, cast in unrestricted absolutist terms. Thus, Bultmann treats certain absolutist claims about the kerygma as logically prior to and as encompassing the general, and otherwise consistent, relativity of his philosophy of history.

IV

Bultmann's insistence on the inviolateness of the kerygmatic tradition—so that the eschatological event to which it testifies is not 'implicated' in historical relativity—rests on two principal absolutist claims. Bultmann holds that the truth of the kerygma, or of the Christian faith, is absolute. And, in turn, this claim is founded on as well as foundational for (there is a hermeneutical circle here) the further claim that Existentialism's, and particularly Martin Heidegger's, understanding of human existence is correct, absolutely. Bultmann goes so far as to hold that 'to speak of faith in the living God and in his presence in Christ is pure myth *unless* these things are given an existentialist interpretation'.¹

In assessing the contradiction which these absolutist claims engender within Bultmann's thought, it should first be noted that Bultmann's arguments for an Existentialist interpretation of human existence, and therefore of the kerygma, are patently circular. In *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, he argues:

every interpreter brings with him certain conceptions, . . . as presuppositions of his exegesis, . . . Man's life is moved by the search for God because it is always moved, consciously or unconsciously, by the question about his own personal existence . . . the adequate way to put the question when we interpret the Bible . . . is, how is man's existence understood in the Bible? . . . Existentialist philosophy, . . . makes personal existence my own personal responsibility, and by doing so

¹ Bultmann, 'A Reply to the Theses of J. Schniewind', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 105 (italics mine). cf. p. 110.

it helps to make me open to the word of the Bible. . . . Thus it follows that existentialist philosophy can offer adequate conceptions for the interpretation of the Bible, since the interpretation of the Bible is concerned with the understanding of existence.¹

We can formalise Bultmann's argument as follows:

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| 1. All central human questions—e.g. the search for God—in essence involve understanding one's own existence. | Presupposition |
| 2. Every interpretation of any text requires <i>some</i> presuppositions for the questions addressed to the text. | Presupposition |
| 3. Therefore, in interpreting the Bible, we must [at least] ask how human existence is understood there. | Conclusion
from 1 and 2 |
| 4. Existentialism makes the question of my personal existence my responsibility. | Definition |
| 5. Therefore, Existentialism helps the interpreter to be open to what the Bible says about human existence. | Conclusion
from 3 and 4 |
| 6. Therefore, Existentialism offers adequate philosophical conceptions for biblical exegesis. | Conclusion
from 3 and 5 |

Clearly, premise (1) is a critical premise here. It is necessary for the subordinate conclusion in line (3), and it is thereby necessary both for the second subordinate conclusion, (5), and for the principal conclusion, (6), of the argument. But (1) is simply a statement of the Existentialist position (re-expressed in (4)). Thus, Bultmann commits the fallacy of *petitio principii* by presupposing this Existentialist position as part of his argument for the adequacy of that same Existentialist analysis for biblical exegesis.

This is not surprising, however, since Bultmann himself declares that every interpretation necessarily involves *some* presuppositions, and thus necessarily involves *some* world-view.

¹ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, pp. 48, 53, 56, and 57.

Regarding his own view of biblical exegesis, he says that

I think I may take for granted that the right question to frame with regard to the Bible—at any rate within the Church—is the question of human existence. I am driven to that by the urge to inquire existentially about my own existence.¹

But this is simply an expression of Bultmann's *own* world-view. The fact that Bultmann himself feels compelled to use the Existentialist position in his biblical exegesis obviously does not entail the necessity of using *that* philosophical position as part of every foundational world-view for any biblical exegesis.

Turn now to this more damaging problem: Bultmann contradicts his own basic philosophy of history, and its relativist epistemology, by arguing from the espousal and usefulness *for himself* of this Existentialist analysis, to the suggestion that any world-view which does not use such an Existentialist analysis can only produce a mythological interpretation of the Bible. The danger and inevitability of a mythological interpretation of the Bible if one uses a different world-view may appear evident from within Bultmann's *own* Existentialist world-view. Yet does the same conclusion follow from the world-view of *every* modern biblical exegete? Empirically, this question must obviously be answered negatively. But the crucial issue here is a logical and not an empirical one. Bultmann unqualifiedly accepts the Existentialist analysis as a foundation for biblical exegesis, and insists on the absolute truth of the (demythologised) kerygma. These positions are *logically* inconsistent with the relativist epistemology which he employs in claiming that, in effect, all *other* matters of truth and value are governed by relativising sentential operators. However laudable, Bultmann's move to insulate the kerygma against relativity is purely *ad hoc* once he has proposed his relativistic epistemology in recognition of historical relativity.

It is one thing for Bultmann to say that the purpose of the demythologising hermeneutic is to interpret, not eliminate, the mythological elements of the Bible and so to make the Christian faith clearer to modern people.² Some methodological frame-

¹ Bultmann, 'Bultmann Replies to His Critics', in *Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 191-2.

² Bultmann, 'The Case for Demythologization', in *Myth and Christianity*, p. 59.

work is necessary for biblical exegesis, and this is just a statement of the hermeneutical principle which Bultmann feels compelled to employ in the face of historical relativism. But it is an altogether different matter for Bultmann to hold that 'our task is to produce an existentialist interpretation of the . . . mythology of the New Testament'¹ and that

what we are concerned with is the 'right' philosophy.

. . . The 'right' philosophy is simply one which has worked out an appropriate terminology for the understanding of existence.²

Bultmann has clearly ignored his own injunction against the notion that the New Testament expresses 'timeless general truths'. Furthermore, it is just this self-contradicting attempt to make absolutist claims about Existentialism, which leads Bultmann to offer the futile circular argument, discussed above, for the necessity of employing Existentialist conceptions for biblical exegesis.

Paralleling this difficulty with his absolutist claims about Existentialism, an analogous difficulty arises with Bultmann's acceptance of the absolute demands of Christian faith. Bultmann concludes *History and Eschatology* by saying that:

*the meaning in history lies always in the present, and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning in history is realised.*³

Yet as Bultmann himself declares in his *Theology of the New Testament* about the historical inquiry involved in biblical criticism,

the theological investigator obviously cannot presuppose his own faith as an epistemological instrument and make use of it as a presupposition for methodological work.⁴

Human beings are historical beings, subject to the forces of historical relativity. How could one be certain that the Christian faith gives meaning to history *for everyone*? On Bultmann's own relativist philosophy of history, one could not

¹ Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 16.

² Bultmann, 'Bultmann Replies to His Critics', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 193.

³ Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, p. 155.

⁴ Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 241.

know this absolutely; and indeed, this claim about the absolute meaningfulness of Christian faith is simply one aspect of the Christian faith itself.

V

This conflict which arises in Bultmann's thought between the relativist impetus for demythologising and his own commitment to Existentialist principles derives in part, I think, from Bultmann's conception of 'the modern scientific world-view' as a relatively monolithic phenomenon. Bultmann draws a dichotomy between 'the' mythological-ancient world-view and 'the' scientific-modern world-view. Starting from this dichotomy, it is easy to suppose that, if focusing on Existentialist principles and the search for the meaning of human existence helps many modern people to understand the Bible, then this will help all modern people since they all share the modern, scientific world-view. However, recent developments in the philosophy of science indicate that it is not correct to speak of a scientific world-view.

Thomas Kuhn has argued persuasively in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that throughout history, science has advanced by means of successive changes in the scientific 'paradigms' of the community of scientists. Kuhn argues that science does not consist of the slow accretion of facts and ideas but of radical and revolutionising shifts of world-views. Regarding such scientific revolutions, he says that:

when the normal-scientific tradition changes, the scientist's perception of his environment must be re-educated—in some familiar situations he must learn to see a new gestalt. After he has done so the world of his research will seem, here and there, incommensurable with the one he had inhabited before. . . . [This is a] reason why schools guided by paradigms are always at cross-purposes.¹

Science has, then, evolved in such a manner that later scientific world-views are incompatible with earlier scientific world-views.² Consequently, within the complexities of science in this century, there is no single scientific world-view. Rather, there is a set of incompatible world-views, some held by scientists still

¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 111.

² See especially *ibid.*, ch. 10.

holding older scientific world-views, and some held by scientists whose newer world-views are incompatible with other new scientific world-views. And given the historical factors affecting shifts in scientific paradigms, science, like all human endeavors, is carried on within the strictures of historical relativism: there are no scientific facts, *simpliciter*, but only the 'facts' *given* a particular scientific world-view.

Therefore, demythologising the Bible, whether in the imagistic or scientific sense, is not as simple a task as either reinterpreting language which does not talk about *this* world or reinterpreting explanations which do not correspond to *the* modern scientific world-view. If the scientific community is so divided in its world-views, how much more are 'modern people' divided in their world-views. Moreover, as Kuhn points out, for scientists resisting a new scientific paradigm there is no 'point at which resistance becomes illogical or unscientific'.¹ Both sets of scientists hold a scientific world-view. Just so, as long as their world-views are *internally* consistent and coherent, one person cannot, on the basis of his or her own modern world-view, charge someone holding another, contrary modern world-view with being inconsistent or incoherent. In sum, Bultmann can no more correctly claim that there is only one scientific world-view than he can claim that a modern person is illogical or inconsistent merely because he or she does not subscribe to the Existentialist world-view—or does not find the meaning of history in the Christian faith.

VI

Bultmann's own attempt to reconcile his general relativist epistemology with his view of the absolutist demands of the Christian faith fails. In *Jesus Christ and Mythology* he suggests that while historical relativity necessitates demythologisation of the biblical texts:

faith itself demands to be freed from any world-view produced by man's thought, whether mythological or scientific. For all human world-views objectivise the world and ignore or eliminate the significance of the encounter in our personal existence.²

¹ *ibid.*, p. 158.

² Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 83. cf. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 210.

According to Bultmann, then, even while Christian faith is an absolute, it is not subject to relativism precisely because it is not subject to the vagaries of *any* world-view. This view will not, though, enable Christian faith to escape the general relativity of Bultmann's philosophy of history, because any possible response which a person may have to the kerygmatic proclamation is delimited by that person's world-view.

The significance of the kerygma for oneself depends directly on the semantic meaningfulness of the proclamation. Otherwise, there would be no content to respond to in the 'proclamation'. Bultmann recognises this, although he does not follow out the full implications of that recognition, when he says

If faith in the Word of God can only be the work of the Holy Ghost operating through intelligent decision, it follows that the understanding of the text is attainable only in systematic interpretation, and the terminology which directs this understanding can be acquired only from profane reflection. . . .¹

But further, the semantic meaningfulness of the proclamation for oneself depends on the conceptual structure of one's own world-view. Therefore given Bultmann's acknowledgment of the historical relativity of world-views, the possibility of acceptance, or of rejection, of the kerygmatic proclamation will depend on, and vary with, one's world-view. (And quite literally, for some people the proclamation will have—barring any further enrichment of their world-view—no significance because it will be semantically meaningless.)

So the Christian faith too is caught in the relativity of our historicity. It is futile for Bultmann to enjoin 'those who have the modern world-view [to] live'—with respect to Christian faith—'as though they had none'.² But then, how can we reconcile the absolutist claims of the kerygma with historical relativity?

VII

'Objective, critical reflection' will not, as Bultmann contends, provide a set of objectively 'correct' hermeneutical principles

¹ Bultmann, 'Bultmann Replies to His Critics', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 192.

² Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 85.

for biblical exegesis.¹ We have seen that Bultmann himself fails here—as he must fail—in presupposing his own Existentialist world-view in his search for *the* 'correct' hermeneutical principles. We must assume some world-view in biblical exegesis and, to be consistent, we must acknowledge the relativity of retaining that world-view even as we confront the Christian proclamation. Thus in order to avoid self-contradiction, Bultmann's own general relativistic philosophy of history would compel him to hold concomitantly that (a) the philosophic presuppositions which one holds in one's biblical exegesis are subject to the same relativity which governs the assumption of any world-view, and that (b) response to the Christian faith is itself delimited by one's world-view. Yet here biblical exegesis and the Christian faith are no different from science or history, or any other human endeavor or faith: we can never sever ourselves from the relativity of our historicity. And, moreover, Bultmann's fundamental intentions are in fact compatible with this more radical relativity of (a) and (b) which he denies but which actually follows from his own relativistic philosophy of history.

Bultmann holds that it is 'only by faith that God is encountered as Person',² and that this faith-encounter comes through the kerygmatic proclamation. For Christ, Bultmann says, 'meets us in the word of preaching and nowhere else'.³ Now first, that *proclamation* can only come to us in *human* language, using *human* concepts with all their historical and cultural relativity. And second, relativity will also condition one's response to that proclamation. In short, the very possibility of response to the proclamation rests on internal questions involving one's own historically relativised world-view. Yet this is compatible with the pastoral motivation for Bultmann's demythologising hermeneutic—where the task is to discover how the New Testament can be meaningful, and the kerygmatic claims compelling, *for* modern people. And this is also compatible with Bultmann's insistence that 'it is only when there is no . . . objective guarantee that faith acquires meaning and strength'.⁴

¹ *ibid.*, p. 54.

² Bultmann, 'A Reply to the Theses of J. Schniewind', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 105.

³ Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 41.

⁴ Bultmann, 'The Case for Demythologization', in *Myth and Christianity*, p. 69.

Furthermore, within this more consistent adherence to Bultmann's relativistic epistemology, it will still be proper to hold that the demythologised kerygmatic proclamation is absolute. But it is only absolute in its demand for response for those who, *within* the strictures of their own world-views, can understand the demand and are able to respond. This is the only sense in which 'wherever a revealed faith speaks, it asserts, and must assert, the absoluteness of its revelation'.¹ More precisely, this relativising of the absoluteness of Christian faith has the logical form:

It is true (or valuable) . . . on world-view *W* . . . that the demand to decision of the Christian faith is absolute.

And this logical form provides a model for reconciling the central relativist and absolutist elements of Bultmann's thought. For, relative to the world-views of those who *could* believe, a consistent application of the strictures of this logical form can account both for the absolute claims of the kerygma and for a relativist epistemology like Bultmann's which acknowledges human relativity. The demands of the faith will then be accounted absolute. But as William James would have said, the proclamation is absolute, but only absolute for those for whom it is a 'live option'.²

Yet at the same time, to the extent that discourse remains within the logical (or linguistic) bounds of those world-views on which the demand to decision of the Christian faith is absolute, the relativising sentential operators of a relativist epistemology like Bultmann's need only function *implicitly*. The relativising sentential operators of a relativist epistemology derive their import from the comparison of one world-view with another, or from the examination of a single idea from the point of view of different world-views. Hence, whenever both the speaker and the hearers possess world-views on which response to the demand to decision of the Christian faith is possible, absolutist statements about the demand to decision will not contradict a relativist epistemology—as long as relativising sentential operators implicitly govern those statements.

¹ *ibid.*, p. 67.

² See Section I of William James's essay, 'The Will to Believe'.

VIII

Confronting the exigencies of historical relativism, Bultmann attempts to preserve the meaning of the New Testament proclamation by demythologising it. He specifically hopes to preserve but reinterpret the mythology of the New Testament by suggesting that for modern people the meaning of the New Testament mythology is its expression of human self-understanding. One may or may not be able to accept Bultmann's own Existentialist world-view or his view of which specific portions of the New Testament are mythological for oneself as a modern person. For the acceptability of philosophical presuppositions, and the possibility of response to the Christian faith, are relative to our own world-views. Yet it is true that we do not have the same world-views as the world-views which inform the biblical texts. 'It is only through the proclamation that the cross can become a personal encounter,'¹ says Bultmann. If this is so, then indeed if there is to be any possibility that the Christian faith will be meaningful for us, the proclamation must be demythologised—even as we recognise that any philosophical presuppositions which we employ in that task are conditioned by our own relativity.²

¹ Bultmann, 'A Reply to the Theses of J. Schniewind', in *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 111.

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