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ROBERT MACSWAIN

Solved by Sacrifice

Austin Farrer, Fideism, and the Evidence of Faith

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Why not, 'Stalin is risen!'

PAUL R. HINLICKY

WHEN I WAS INVITED to respond to David Congdon's book on Bultmann I was eager to take the assignment. Bultmann was formative for me as a young theologian emerging from the train wreck of Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod fundamentalism. Scales fell from my eyes reading his *Theology of the New Testament*, a book which I still assign to upper level undergraduates. While I came in time to agree with certain critiques of his program of demythologizing—the beating heart and enduring legacy of Bultmann's theology in Congdon's account—I have devoted major portions of my books to continuing debate and dialogue with Bultmann in recognition of his fundamental significance for theology after Christendom in Euro-America. I am also a product of the “apocalyptic” school at Union Theological Seminary, New York, where the work of Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ernst Käsemann and Jürgen Moltmann, as filtered by Paul Lehmann, Christopher Morse, Dorothee Soelle, James Cone, and J. Louis Martyn provided those aforementioned critiques of Bultmann's program (as Congdon is aware, 591n48). Finally, the “best” contemporary critics of Bultmann with whom Congdon ends his book—Moltmann, Oswald Bayer, and Robert Jenson—are theologians with whom I have affiliated through the years. I mention all this at the outset to make clear that as Congdon treats Jenson as a “most sympathetic” critic of Bultmann, readers might also take what follows as “most sympathetic” criticism of Congdon's proposed retrieval of the mission of demythologizing.

Broadly, Congdon shows how Bultmann's program is predicated on the crisis of Christendom that dialectical theology embraced in the 1920s and remained faithful to it. True to the dialectical theology of crisis from the 1920s, it is quite erroneous to see the later Bultmann of the demythologizing program as retreating to theological liberalism. In fact both liberalism and fundamentalism are equal and opposite attempts to preserve Christendom (“constantinianism,” as Congdon calls it). Neither of these nineteenth-century theologies have a future consonant with the kerygma of the New Testament, which, in Bultmann's discovery, impels and propels the mission of translating the saving message of

God across all would-be human boundaries while settling down in none. In this cause of the kerygma, the *truth* of the Christian myth in which it is cloaked is not to be vacated or abandoned, but rather interpreted intra-culturally. That is the *missionary* task of theological exegesis of the New Testament, indeed of *Christian* theology as such.

Prior to reading Congdon, I had frequently commented that Bultmann asked the right question, even if his own answer to it was inadequate. I was not disappointed, then, in working through his book to appreciate once again the rightness of Bultmann's questioning of the mythical picture of the world in which the New Testament kerygma is clothed. Briefly put, to the extent that mythical elements are primitive science, they simply are antiquated by today's science (though the question might remain whether we would then be justified in pursuing the scientific ["aitiological"] intention of this aspect of myth). More importantly for Congdon, however, to the extent that elements of a culture's picture of the world are absolutized, as if ingredient to the saving kerygma of God, they are idolatrous. Indeed, the pluralism of New Testament mythical motifs—think of the varying Christological titles—already relativizes each one of them over against the others. There is a mythical multiculturalism present in the New Testament itself; knowing this, none of the myths can as such claim normative status, as if a "canon within the canon." This observation indeed poses the right question for theological understanding of the kerygma's—for Bultmann, "normative"—claim about God's saving deed in Christ.

Thanks in part to Bultmann, such critical understanding of New Testament mythology is widely received today, although it was a matter of bitter controversy within the Confessing Church and thereafter when Bultmann insisted on intellectual honesty in this regard. But how to understand this criticism theologically is still a matter of dispute. Congdon denies that the distinction between kerygma and myth is to be understood on the metaphor of kernel and husk, but the alternative remains murky in that there is no way to state what the kerygmatic content, *die Sache*, is apart from some myth, i.e., some "story of the gods." To affirm howsoever minimally that "God speaks" or "God acts" is all the same "mythical" speech, which would imply, as Congdon also expressly affirms, that we will also have to demythologize God. Perhaps, but this sure sounds like diving down the rabbit hole! While Congdon dismisses Helmut Thielicke's objection along these lines as that of a mere "conservative," the deeper point is that the program of demythologizing founders here on an aporia. The kerygma—the proclamation of God about God for us in the man Jesus Christ—is itself "myth." The very distinction founders. *Back* to the drawing boards!

Or, perhaps, *forward!* I was taken by Congdon's bold thesis that Bultmann's program of demythologizing is missiological, rather than apologetic, in nature and thus theologically, even "dogmatically" motivated as normed by the *offense* (cf. 1 Cor 1:23) of the kerygma (see, i.a., 637). This thesis challenges my own critique of Bultmann even as it puts Bultmann's answer to the problem of Christian mythology in the new light of an intracultural theology of mission. For that kind of challenge good theologians are grateful. A deliberation along these lines has hope of advancing the argument in which we are all engaged about how to understand the New Testament "myth," or, less melodramatically, "story" of Christ theologically. My point will be that the gospel narrative of Jesus, his Father, and their Spirit is not ultimately translatable, but must rather be learned on its own scriptural terms—the

"catechetical" way to theological subjectivity that extends pneumatologically through time, not by a random series of punctiliar kerygmatic interruptions, but by the gospel's mission to the nations.

II

This first work of a young theologian is as impressive as it is ambitious. Consequently, it must be evaluated on at least three levels that I can see. First, in featuring Bultmann and his relation to Barth, the book is a historical-theology account of the rise of dialectical theology. In a nutshell, dialectical theology is the theology that asserts in Christ an infinite *sic et non*, such that in the evanescent event of revelation human language is captured to assert the divine subjectivity, "I am the Lord your God!" Dialectical theology thus resists the capture of revelation by human language, as in the notorious *Gott mit uns* inscribed on the Wehrmacht belt buckle. In terms of Protestant tradition, dialectical theology continues the so-called *extra-Calvinisticum*. That is to say, while the divine Subject truly expresses itself in the Christ event, it is not confined or exhausted in the man Christ. According to Congdon's richly, even exhaustively detailed account, Bultmann aligned himself with the early Barth's dialectical theology in the 1920s and never deviated from it. Indeed, if anyone deviated from it, according to Congdon, it was Barth in his turn in *CD II/2* to a protological doctrine of divine election!

Congdon's historical-theology work on this first level of his book rivals Bruce McCormack's *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* and supplements it in important ways. That is no small praise, for the book lays bare Barth's subsequent misunderstanding of Bultmann as if he were retreating like erstwhile fellow travelers in the 1920s theology of crisis to nineteenth-century apologetics in order to connect theologically with the "new thing God was doing" in the rise of National Socialism. When Bultmann's comportment during the Church Struggle did *not* match this assessment of his theology, however, Barth was pleased but flummoxed. In spite of every subsequent effort to understand Bultmann, Barth finally likened the two theologians to a whale and an elephant at the shoreline gazing upon each other in reciprocating cognitive dissonance.

So, second, the book attends to the mutual incomprehension that developed between Barth and Bultmann by carefully teasing out all the many threads woven into Bultmann's account of myth: Platonic, Kantian and modern scientific threads but also hermeneutical, *religionsgeschichtliche*, and existential threads. This allows Congdon to differentiate precisely the crucial notions of *Weltbild* and *Weltanschauung*. *Weltbild* is the tacit precognitive understanding of the surrounding world shared in any culture to which the kerygma comes. *Weltanschauung* is the articulate ideological sacralization of such a cultural picture of the world as if permanent and superior which the kerygma puts into crisis when it comes as the crisis-event of eschatological revelation.

As a result of this important differentiation, the theologian comes to understand the kerygma as Word of God precisely in the act of translation into cultural intelligibility that simultaneously destabilizes cultural self-idolization. One does not dance a two-step, first understanding historically *what it meant* and then deciding theologically *what it means*. Rather, one understands historically and theologically together, and only together, and thus ever anew since both culture and kerygma are in perpetual motion.

Congdon explicates Bultmann's hermeneutical program this way with the expert aid of Eberhard Jüngel's studies (see inter alia the summary on 629 or the note on 754–55n149). This resource is not surprising. Jüngel himself was motivated by the desire to reconcile his teachers, Bultmann and Barth, showing their programs to be two versions of the same dialectical theology. We should observe, however, that this procedure does some violence to both Bultmann and Barth in the sense that Jüngel-Congdon have repeatedly to say about each: "This is what they (misleadingly) said, but here is what they (in fact) meant." Demythologizing the tale of the whale and the elephant thus has to work a kind of hermeneutical violence. Nevertheless, it has the conceptual merit of imposing retrospectively a certain consistent trajectory, especially on Bultmann's side, regarding those many threads woven together in his ideas of myth and mythology. In absence of this reconstruction, those loose threads, construed polemically and taken in isolation from each other, have continually misled Bultmann's readers (beginning with Barth) into regarding him as an Enlightenment liberal, or a Heideggerian existentialist, or apologetic mediating theologian, or just incoherent rather than a consistent dialectical theologian.

I won't have anything more to say here about these first two levels of Congdon's work other than to pronounce the happy verdict: mission accomplished! Congdon's work is a major contribution to theological scholarship. It is thus a third level of his book that I wish next to engage. Here Congdon develops his own constructive thesis for systematic theology that takes the missiology of demythologizing as its fundamental task. This thesis goes beyond the historical Bultmann, but it is consonant with him, as the previous two levels of analysis have shown. So it is Congdon, not Bultmann directly, with whom I am now engaging, though I will return in the end to the critique I hold of the program of demythologizing in favor of an alternative conception of postmodern theology as *critical dogmatics* (a terminology that intends an alternative way of synthesizing and extending the fruits of the theological labors of Barth and Bultmann).

III

It is always helpful first to articulate areas of agreement. I recognize the following virtues in Congdon's proposed missiology of demythologizing. First, the fundamental achievement that Congdon retrieves and appropriates from Bultmann is *Sachkritik*, the criticism of the biblical text by the content it bears. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels in order that you may know that the surpassing power comes from God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:7). This differentiation not only undermines impossible and hermeneutically misleading doctrines of biblical inspiration, but requires a critical discernment in our understanding that frees the "surpassing power of God" at work in the kerygma of God's deed of reconciliation in Christ from cultural or linguistic capture. Bound to Paul's gospel, we are not bound to Paul *tout court*; and if Judas or Herod or Balaam's ass proclaim Christ rightly, then we receive these enemies and strangers as ambassadors of God in the revelatory event—even as Paul was once an enemy and stranger (and sometimes also an ass).

Second, faith and God are correlative concepts, for "a god is that to which one's heart clings in every time of trouble" (Luther). Everything depends here on distinguishing, not only conceptually, false faith as self-securing ideology from genuine trust which risks and ventures in hope and love.

In this latter way, human self-understanding and theology as knowledge of true God stand and fall together, with the consequence that only the engaged believer knows God objectively, namely as God who reveals God in the interruptive address concerning the human and apparently defeated man Jesus. This true correlation is thus not a universal anthropological datum. Faith in the sense of risky trust in God's gospel word proceeding in new lives of hopeful love is precisely what mythology evades, substituting for God a myth, or a metaphysics, about God. God becomes here the idol of human self-security. Stories about God or ideas about God serve to secure against true creatureliness by fixing order at the expense of love, especially love for the stranger or enemy. But God is God in sovereign and disruptive address, laying a claim for obedient faith that "desecularizes" (*Entweltlichung*) the believer in the sense of demythologizing the ideological *Weltanschauung*. God is God in achieving God's claim in faith as the (literally) *responsible* decision to leave behind one's culturally given world to embrace the unknown future that God in his address promises.

The decisive point in understanding Bultmann here, according to Congdon, is that this correlation of faith and God is not and may not be taken as a natural theology given; it is rather given by God in the historical contingency and particularity of the kerygmatic address. As a result, with Bultmann—but against the transcendental objectivism of Barth's mature doctrine of election—the problem of theological subjectivity cannot be pushed into the background as a secondary question. The question of who believes rightly remains foregrounded as the missiological frontline of the advancing kerygma.

Third, theological cognition is perspectival. All critical thinking distinguishes appearance from reality. The classically metaphysical way of doing this is by dualizing becoming and being and then, by a kind of optical illusion, reifying the no-thing of being itself as the really real, aka, "God." This way "objectifies" God as the highest good of creatures vulnerable to non-being—what Heidegger called ontotheology. So it turns God into an idol of security for the unconverted who want to use God for their own purposes, who want to capture God in pictures or ideas or stories in service to the human, all-too-human fortresses they build.

The Pauline way of critical thinking by contrast distinguishes how the one world appears in the flesh and how the same world appears in the Spirit who voices the kerygma of "Christ crucified." In this Pauline view, there is some apprehension of truth in every perspective; everyone sees something in what appears to her or him. That is exactly why all can be guilty of suppressing the truth in idolatrous acts of self-securement that make the something that appears to oneself into a totalizing account universally valid for all. Teasing out the Pauline alternative, the problem of critical thinking turns instead on the partiality of creaturely perspective, whether naively in myth or with sophistication in the putatively critical thinking of metaphysics. In either case, what is seen from a finite perspective is absolutized. The remedy in the intracultural dialogue which is the body of Christ is to widen perspective and eliminate blind spots. But carnal humanity is incapable of this diagnosis of our human predicament, let alone this achievement of intercultural dialogue; it is trapped in its sinful egocentricity, bound to its own limited vision, desperately self-justifying and walling out other perspectives. Needed is the disruptive intervention of the kerygma which introduces the crisis of Christ crucified as the

challenge to human self-justification according to its own (sinfully egocentric) perspective in favor of God's gracious judgment on (justification of) this sinner.

In all these points, curtly reducing Congdon's rich discussion, I am in agreement with him. That is no small agreement. In the light of it, let me spell out in equal curtness my dissents.

IV

First, despite Congdon's valiant attempt to cast Bultmann otherwise, he, like Barth, remains a Kantian thinker (so Oswald Bayer) within the parameters of Euro-American modernity, even if Congdon's embrace of missiology wants to escape that intellectual prison-house and move into the fresh, clean air of postmodernity—epistemically, post-Kantianism! Dialectical theology is the dialectic of the phenomenal and the noumenal, in concepts laid down by Kant for all of "modern" theology. What I mean is this: theoretical knowledge here remains the work of science (or of bad theology that wants to be like science), while existential knowledge is practical and moral. So we have a separation of reality into two mutually delimited spheres policed by the Tribunal of Reason—the real "Two Kingdoms dualism" that ought to be critiqued!

Kantian theology thus refers to "God" and the "deed of God" like Kant referred to noumenal freedom of will to account for the impossible possibility of morally altruistic acts of pure duty against the grain of carnal inclination in the scientifically deterministic phenomenal order, where "faith" acts *als ob* (as if) there were a Sugar Daddy in the afterlife (thus, in putative radicalness, de-secured, without any metaphysical or historical assurances). It makes no difference to the structural logic of this Kantian account that what Kant mystifies as noumenal freedom Kantian theologians mystify as grace. Indeed, *this* mystification, as genuinely atheistic thinkers like Feuerbach and Marx see more clearly, is *the modern mythology* from which, pray true God, the kerygma of Christ crucified ought to deliver us!

Second, the problem with the foregoing theologially is not, as Congdon has shown, that Bultmann deviates from dialectical theology. On the contrary, the problem lies with a *merely* dialectical theology. As Jewish philosopher Peter Ochs has argued in defense of post-liberal Christian theology, dialectical thinking is a dyadic polarization or infinite juggling act between subject and object, philosophically resulting (as I have argued in my systematic theology) in the sterile and non-adjudicable choice between constructivism or naturalism (not incidentally, the two caricatures of Barth and Bultmann respectively). Under this dyadic logic, for Bultmann as for (the early) Barth, God gets to be the subject and never the object, so that transcendental subjectivity is what makes God God.

To be sure, given the Kantian parameters of modern theology, that protest of dialectical theology over against the nineteenth-century domestication of transcendence into the idol-object of human religiosity is a step forward. The problem, however, lies with the parameters of Kantianism itself, which overlook (the very thing Congdon in his missiology wants to affirm) the anti-foundationalist fact that every act of knowledge by which a subject constructs an object is always addressed *hic et nunc* to an audience as an act of interpretation, which interpretation itself becomes an artifact in turn, an object in need of interpretation, ad infinitum, pending the eschaton of judgment. So traditions of discourse and matrices of understanding are formed and bear along an embodied argument, pending an eschaton of judgment.

Such *triadic* thinking therefore goes beyond the sterile dialectic of Kantianism in a pragmatist direction; that is to say theologically, it moves beyond the abstract dialectic of deity and humanity, eschatology and history; manifestly, it moves towards Trinitarian personalism's dialectic of Word and Spirit and therewith towards a single-subject Christology (Bultmann's paradoxical Christological identity of divine and human comes close to the latter, but lacks the conceptuality of Trinitarian personalism with which to articulate it). This necessary movement beyond Bultmann (and Barth) pushes theology in the Reformation tradition beyond an abstract dialectical play of divine and human natures along modalist lines to an Incarnate Word as objectively there for faith (as also for unfaith) as the cross on which Jesus was killed and the bread and loaf by which that messianic death of his is proclaimed till he comes again—*manducatio indignorum!* The incarnation as this *objectivity* of God!

This movement beyond dialectical theology was marked in the latter half of the twentieth century by Moltmann's critique of Kantian transcendental subjectivity in both Barth and Bultmann in favor of the apocalyptic scope of God of the gospel (cf. Romans 8); by Bayer's similar attack on the tacit metaphysics of the transcendental ego in favor of the primacy of aesthetics (i.e., turning Kant's order on its head by making the third critique precede over against Kant's ordering privileging Newtonian science as knowledge properly speaking) in that embodied beings *must* love *something*, desperately enough, *anything*; and by Jenson's important Christological critique of Bultmann's *neo-docetism* in favor of the significance of *Jesus* for saving faith in the *Christus praesens*, lest demythologizing be taken to mean the de-narrativizing of the gospel proclamation.

Commendably, in treating these three best contemporary critics of Bultmann at the conclusion of his book, Congdon tries bravely to incorporate their objections into his new missiological reading of Bultmann. The interesting exploration of intercultural missiology aside, in so doing, Congdon overrides, I fear, deeper points in these objections because of his own commitment to dyadic rather than triadic theology.

Moltmann's deeper point is that the Bible as a whole speaks *about* God as the One coming to bring the reign of righteousness, life, and peace to the afflicted creation, and that apart from this biblical *description* of the one God *clothed* in such messianic *promises*, God is reduced to the modern but not innocent cipher of transcendental subjectivity: a pure I, the sovereign Self, asserting itself like a bully in a random event rather than giving itself, indeed committing itself for those lesser and unworthy in hope against hope. Bayer's deeper point is that this Bible—the same canonical whole telling *about* God—forms the social a priori, the aesthetic matrix, within which the *Vorverständnis* of theological subjectivity arises to engage the biblical text as Word of God. (Congdon points out that Bultmann also acknowledged the culture of the church of the Word as formative of theological subjectivity; along the same lines Congdon acknowledges Jenson's comment in this regard about a tacit doctrine of the Holy Spirit that goes undeveloped in Bultmann.) Jenson's deeper point is that without the Bible playing these roles telling *about* God by the messianic *story* of Jesus in the gospel *narrative* and so forming *pneumatologically* our questions about God, Bultmann has no way of saying why *Jesus* should be anything more than the *accidental* occasion of a *timeless* kerygma that strikes home like a bolt out of the blue. Is it not the case in Bultmann that Jesus, howsoever "paradoxically," is but the

"occasion," the "presupposition," *das Dass*? Why ever should *Jesus* be the irreplaceable *content* of the kerygma of God, the Subject who speaks to be sure, but in order to be the Object who is believed?

Congdon to his credit attempts to deal with these objections before he draws his conclusions about intercultural theology as the future of the mission of demythologization. Whether he meets them, however, is another question. In my Christological view, he does not and indeed cannot meet Jenson's question, Why Jesus? In Bultmannian principle, Jesus is simply a contingent fact that cannot be further grounded or accounted. The reason is that any grounding or accounting would contaminate faith, betraying the same old sinful search for security and turning Jesus into a Christian idol. Thus Jesus must reduce to a cipher, standing for the fiat of divine subjectivity asserting itself in an arbitrary act scandalously commanding decision and obedience. Faith that would have or give any reasons for the *Jesus* in "Jesus Christ" must be suspect as wanting to master God who instead shows divine mastery by giving no reasons for his allegedly reconciling deed other than that he says so.

Thus it is Congdon's own proposal for the freedom of the kerygma *from genuine incarnation* that troubles me. Here we have a Christology of the *anhypostasis* but not of the *enhypostasis*, a sophisticated monophysitism or neo-docetism. This troubles me in a world which is troubled not only by cultural captivations of the deity with inferiorizations of others but, just so, all the more by false saviors and pseudo-messiahs (cf. Mark 13).

So I end with a parable. "I have good news. God has spoken. God has acted. His servant has risen from the dead. His servant has conquered death. Now he is on the march. He is coming again to bring us his victory. We rise to greet him. And his name is . . . Josef Stalin." Why *not*?