

BULTMANN'S PROGRAM OF DEMYTHOLOGIZING:  
DIALECTICAL THEOLOGY VERSUS PHILOSOPHICAL EXISTENTIALISM

by

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## **Introduction**

### **1. Benefits of Studying Bultmann's Program of Demythologizing**

In studying a synthetic program such as Bultmann's demythologizing, self-reflection on faith is benefited from an understanding of the significance of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth in relation to Christ of the New Testament kerygma, is deepened by the challenge from the dialectical claim to the radical otherness of God, and is enriched by a viable dialogue with contemporary philosophy. Few theologians' work covers and thus requires in the researcher three related but still distinct areas of study.

### **2. Thesis Statement**

Of the three elements of Bultmann's synthetic program of demythologizing of the New Testament (historical criticism, dialectical theology, and existentialist philosophy), it is the dialectical theology that plays a decisive, predominant role in the retrieval of the kerygma as the true meaning of the gospel message of the revelatory act of redemption by God through Jesus Christ.

### **3. Structure and Resources**

This paper is divided into three main chapters. In Chapter 1, an overview of demythologizing attempts an adequate understanding of what Bultmann means by mythology. In Chapter 2, de-mythologizing in focus intends to reveal the kerygmatic principle, that is, the dialectical theology, in the program of demythologizing. It is argued that this principle plays a predominant role in the synthetic task of demythologizing which also taps into resources from historical criticism and philosophical existentialism. Chapter 3 seeks a deepened understanding of the primacy of kerygma as the dynamic event of the redemptive act of God that defies the tendency to fossilize the basis, object, and truth of faith in static, external, objective terms. With regard to secondary resources, this paper mainly relies on those produced in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Chapter 1 Demythologizing: Overview

### Introduction

Bultmann's program of demythologizing deserves sympathy from any thoughtful Christian believer, since he addresses a shared, simple, and serious question about the grounds for the confidence a believer finds in one's profession of faith. In addressing this question of confidence or assurance, Bultmann radically questions the relation between Scripture and faith, between kerygma and myth, and more specifically between an historically derived kerygma clothed in mythology and existential, personal faith in the here and now.

Bultmann's central question is profoundly theological, probing how a decisive Word of God as witnessed in Scripture is at the same time couched in an anachronistic mythology. In other words, for Bultmann it is by grace that faith is enabled and sustained as response to the decisive call of the Word of God in the kerygma of the New Testament. For some, the call is immediate; for others, it is mediated. In any event, it will be a great moment of courage for a modern person to decide, in the face of this confounding and challenging grace, to subject one's innermost life to the divine judgement, commandment, and will of the Word enshrouded in anachronistic, mythical terms, in one's pursuit of the ultimate truth about and meaning of one's existence.

One must decide if one's own Christian beliefs necessarily embrace such mythological stuff as a three-storied universe or evil spirits. Further, to confess one's faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, it will become a matter at issue whether, for example, Jesus of Nazareth and the miracles he reportedly performed are also part of the object of one's Easter faith. In this connection, demythologizing of the New Testament, in its widest range of definitions or applications, originates from the efforts to do away with possible stumbling blocks from the

mythology that could repel modern people from their access and commitment to the Word of God.

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The thesis of Chapter 1 is that, according to Bultmann, New Testament mythology must be retained, not eliminated, but also reinterpreted by existentialism in the interest of kerygmatic theology.

This chapter is composed of three sections, with a view to clarifying the controversial concept of mythology in order to reveal the kerygmatic nature of the overall program of demythologizing. Section 1, drawing on the definition of myth, shows that demythologizing aims at de-objectifying of the divine from earthly attributes. Section 2 continues to examine the value of mythology, in order to show that New Testament mythology is entirely retained in demythologizing as an object for existentialist interpretation. Section 3, by emphasizing the kerygmatic nature of the New Testament proclamation of act of God in mythological language, briefly touches upon the relationship between dialectical theology and existentialist philosophy in demythologizing.

### **1. The Concept of Mythology**

By “mythology,” Bultmann actually responds as an inheritor to the major achievements, conclusions, methodology, and unsettled legacy in the historical-critical study of Christianity. That means, an adequate analysis of the demythologizing architecture places its focus upon its stance about the God-human relationship in history, i.e., eschatological history. This principle is in agreement with James C. Livingston’s diagnosis of the breakdown of the camp of Dialectical Theology as growing conflict on the issues of revelation and history and especially on the place

of anthropology in theology.<sup>1</sup> Little in Bultmann's task of demythologizing falls short of historical consciousness embedded within the New Testament. It cannot be absent in a critical survey of demythologizing either. However, the impetus for Bultmann's interest in demythologizing is not solely historical critical analysis of the thought-forms of ancient texts. Dialectical theology and philosophical existentialism are key to Bultmann's program of demythologizing.

Bultmann provides both descriptions and formal qualification of the concept of mythology, namely, the mythical view of the world, the mythical event of redemption, and miracles. A typical instance of the formal definition of myth is its use of temporal-spatial categories to express divine transcendence.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, this classification is too wide for Ronald Hepburn, too narrow for Ian Henderson, and a very heterogeneous collection of items for H.P. Owen.<sup>3</sup>

This alleged confusion is largely cleared away due to Ogden's successful defense of "objectification" as central to Bultmann's concept of mythology. Bultmann "can include 'miracle' within the terms of his formal definition of 'myth' without confusion because miracle involves the same 'objectification' of the divine reality and action that is myth's chief defining characteristic."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, "de-objectifying" seems to have become an acknowledged synonym of demythologizing and also a prevalent one among Bultmann's critics.

The adequacy of Ogden's critical appraisal of the intrinsic objectifying in myth can be confirmed in Bultmann's own analysis of the Kingdom of God as a mythological conception.

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought*, vol. 2 (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 75.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ without Myth* (NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), 167. Also compare John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1960), 200ff.

<sup>4</sup> Ogden, *Christ without Myth*, 168.



“Just as mythological are the presuppositions of the expectation of the Kingdom of God, namely, the theory that the world, ... is ruled by the devil, Satan, ... .”<sup>5</sup> In mythological thinking, the Kingdom of God is conceived of in objective attributes we apply to this world, thus being conceived spatially as a higher place, as heaven is above the earth, with its coming conceived temporally as later, as tomorrow is later than today.

“This hope of Jesus and of the early Christian community was not fulfilled”,<sup>6</sup> and it won’t be---“The course of history has refuted mythology.”<sup>7</sup> Weiss rightly points out,

...the Kingdom of God is not immanent in the world and does not grow as part of the world’s history, but is rather eschatological; i.e., the Kingdom of God transcends the historical order. It will come into being not through the moral endeavor of man, but solely through the supernatural action of God. God will suddenly put an end to the world and to history, ...<sup>8</sup>

As Bultmann’s quotation from Weiss shows, Bultmann’s interest is theological, seeing such concepts as eschatology, transcendence, grace, and the Kingdom of God as a refutation of mythological objectification. Without grace, the Kingdom of God (the transcendent) will not be realized by any means that belongs to this world (the material). The utterly radical distinction between the other-worldly and the this-worldly may be, perhaps, comparable with the saying of Jesus about paying imperial tax to Caesar (Matt 22:15-22). This is in effect an instance of retrieving from mythology the proper relationship between God and all-in-this-world.

No doubt the awareness of the transcendent power is well preserved in mythology, but the mythological language in speaking about the Wholly-Other reality, as Ogden puts it, “reduces it to just one more factor in the known and disposable world. It ‘objectifies’ the

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<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12.

transcendent and thereby transforms what is really a qualitative difference from the world into a mere difference of degree.”<sup>9</sup>

Roger A. Johnson’s way to discuss what is to be removed in demythologizing is of considerable explanatory force,<sup>10</sup> though the phrase “be removed” and similar reductionist expressions in his writing constantly arouse suspicion whether he somehow holds on to what Bultmann actually refutes, i.e., that Johnson sees Bultmann as “removing” rather than “interpreting” mythology.

Johnson’s positive contribution is that he also thinks there are two distinct parts in the New Testament mythology, the pseudo-scientific world view and an objectified understanding of God. His contribution lies mainly in a lucid articulation of the synthesis between the two parts.

The synthetic character of Bultmann’s concept, its union of two distinct issues of world view and of God-understanding, becomes apparent in those uses of the term which embrace only one or the other of these two meanings. For example, when Bultmann cites evidence for demythologizing in Paul and John, ...he clearly does not intend to claim that either of them has abandoned the mythological world view. In a similar way, Bultmann will give examples from the eighteenth and nineteenth century of thinkers who have demythologized the Christian message by repudiating its pre-scientific world view, but they, however, have not gone on to a “de-objectified” (or existentialist) interpretation of faith. Usually, Bultmann’s use of mythology embraces both meanings: ...But sometimes it is restricted to the one or the other, as is apparent by the context of its usage.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship is helpful in illustrating the extent of demythologizing. On one hand, it is possible to demythologize from within a heterogeneous medley of mythological elements; on the

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<sup>9</sup> Ogden, *Christ without Myth*, 26. According to Ogden, Bultmann’s understanding of myth has three aspects. First, it is objective in that it objectifies the reality of which it speaks. Second, it fulfills an etiological function in the explanation of miracle, serving a purpose of causal explanation. Third, simply put, myth is history of gods. For the mythological mind, there is always a “second” history alongside the history comprised of ordinary events. Of the three aspects, the first two of them are almost the same as my own. I myself use a term “quantitatively different” for what Ogden means by “a matter of degree.” To the second aspect (p.26) I will return in my discussion of mythological view of the world as opposed to the modern scientific one. However, as for Ogden’s observation of “a second history,” I have not given much thought to it.

<sup>10</sup> Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 40-41.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, 41.

other hand, especially in the examples of Paul and John, two evangelist-precursors of demythologizing, it has proved historically possible that the message of Gospel stays intact in spite of a revolutionary interpretation of the deposit of objective categories from which it finds its first expressions. This is an indicator not only about the scope of demythologizing but also, perhaps more important, about the crux of the task, i.e., the possibility and necessity of retaining the mythology of the New Testament beyond both world-view and objectification.

## **2. The Positive Value of Mythology**

In this section, it will be argued that New Testament mythology is of value as a “world-view” of different order over against its modern scientific counterpart. Therefore, it is to be retained, in entirety, as an object for Bultmann’s task of demythologizing.

New Testament mythology is far from being an obsolete view of the world, as most modern people inadvertently presume.<sup>12</sup> This view assumes that mythology is solely cosmological.

Rather, the mythological understanding of the world has three parts, cosmology, anthropology, and eschatology.<sup>13</sup> Cosmologically, the universe is understood to have a three-story structure, with the earth being the stage for the drama of the supernatural forces who abide in heaven; human beings are subject to the intervention in the domain of earth from the evil spirits, Satan, but God as well; the history of both nature and humanity are under the control of these supernatural powers. In particular, history will soon come to its end in cosmic catastrophe and in the form of final judgment of salvation or condemnation.

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<sup>12</sup> Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

It is evident now that absence or presence of a causal system is not what distinguishes mythology cosmologically from science. To quote Bultmann, modern science is in essence that of a “closed continuum of cause-effect nexus,” and human nature is conceived as “a self-subsistent unity immune from the interference of supernatural powers.”<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the mythological distinguishes itself by remaining open<sup>15</sup> to, in its own distinctive cause-effect flux, the intervention of the transcendent powers *within* nature and history. Therefore, it might be all too natural for people then to think of the transcendent in this-worldly terms, and *vice versa*!

“The unity of natural law does not allow for the introduction of causal agencies which are themselves not a part of the world as a whole.”<sup>16</sup> In any event, “The only assumption the scientist makes is that, in the search for the natural explanations of types of event, considerations of divine intervention are largely irrelevant.”<sup>17</sup>

Bultmann calls this scientific, conceptual shift “irrevocable.”<sup>18</sup> A modern mind that has been shaped by a closed system of causal continuum can find no slot left for the supernatural to exert its influence for fulfilling its will either in nature or in history, public or personal. If a modern mind approaches the Bible as an object of scientific, historical inquiry, it will end up only in an impasse of the natural law juxtaposed with forces unnatural or supra-natural or supernatural. In this regard, biblical mythology becomes intelligible and meaningful only by virtue of a hermeneutic shift to somewhere else than science. In daily life terms, the Bible is not a textbook of science.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ogden, *Christ without Myth*, 26. This is the second aspect I share with him. In his terms, because myth serves explaining some transcendent causality, it is plausible to regard it as primitive science. However, in mythical thinking, the world and its occurrences are open to the incursion of transcendent powers. For scientific thinking, they are closed against an incursion of unworldly agents.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> David Fergusson, *Bultmann* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 122.

<sup>18</sup> Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 3.

Far from being an outmoded view of the world, however, mythology “should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically or better still, existentially.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, by becoming a hermeneutical object, the cosmic mythology gives itself to an existentialist presupposition, being opened up to a recovery or reinforcement of existential significance that is embedded within the New Testament.

Karl Jaspers’ criticism of Bultmann failed to recognize how Bultmann too found mythology to be of continuing existential (and therefore anthropological and eschatological) importance. As Fergusson observes,

Karl Jaspers argued that the myth and the message were inseparable for any religious outlook. The transcendental dimension of human experience can only be articulated through the medium of myth. While myths have their limitations and their dangers they cannot be discarded. They are necessary ciphers for evoking an awareness of the deepest realities in human experience.<sup>20</sup>

Jaspers fails to see that mythology for Bultmann *as well* is the locus to search for what Jaspers himself advocates in the deepest realities of human experience. In his efforts to recover the transcendent as the ultimate and exclusive ground of meaning (Lordship) available to humanity who lives only within the reach of this reality, Bultmann rejects both selection and subtraction of the mythological elements, asking for acceptance of them in *entirety* by way of a thoroughly existentialist hermeneutics.

### **3. Scope and Nature of Demythologizing**

The two previous sections are mainly discussions of the concept and value of mythology in general terms. From now on, mythology will be examined in relation to the New Testament as witness and profession of faith. Mythology does not stand alone and apart from the attempt by

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>20</sup> Fergusson, *Bultmann*, 114.

demythologizing to understand the object and ground of Christian faith. In short, this section tries to delve into the controversy over what is to be demythologized as Bultmann understands it.

First, it is argued that the concept of myth is an indicator of the extensive scope of demythologizing. In particular, since Bultmann makes it very clear that mythology is not to be eliminated but interpreted, the anthropological dimension of myth underlies Bultmann's demythologizing with a presupposition of an individual-in-nature-and-history. Second, it is argued that the scope of demythologizing is all of a piece with de-objectifying, a fundamental, existentialist insight Bultmann has applied to his program of demythologizing. Third, it is pointed out that the essential in the program of demythologizing is kerygma, the nature of which, i.e. the dialectical distinction between the divine and human, determines the scope of demythologizing.

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Roger A. Johnson proposes that, since the conflicts between world views are irrelevant for the actuality of faith, the mythological world view of the kerygma can be abandoned.<sup>21</sup> Part of demythologizing is to do away with the pre-scientific world view. Meanwhile, it is argued that, at the point of self-understanding, the "faith-modernity conflict" becomes decisive and therefore necessary for demythologizing.

My view is that the mythological cosmology of the New Testament, an inclusive (if not integral) panorama of the universe, humanity, and (essentially eschatological) history, does not dislodge itself from any of the three parts. They are retained as a whole in the process of demythologized interpretation. This is also how I embrace the notion of "entirety" in Bultmann's project of demythologizing.

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<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, 36-37.

Simply following the “pre-scientific” mythological view of the world, it can be seen that universe is meaningful for humanity in that it is where the supernatural powers exert their influences onto nature and themselves; history is meaningful for humanity in that one finds in history (both public and personal) the intervention of the supernatural powers that will continue to influence the process of reality in a given direction towards a given end. Humanity finds/understands itself both in nature and in history, invariably being subjected to the control of the ultimately supernatural.

Therefore, to detract the universe and history from a tripod of mythological world view or to place them in parallel to humanity will finally result in humanity stripped of its relation to nature and history, both of which are nevertheless crucial for Bultmann’s existentialist interpretation of mythology.<sup>22</sup> Or put this way, the cosmological dimensions of the universe and history are not stripped from Bultmann’s focus on humanity, but are interpreted existentially as a whole. The mythical view of three-storied universe is a token of the “awareness of the deepest realities” as we have seen in Jaspers’ pro-myth defense.

Therefore, retaining the New Testament mythology has a most direct bearing on the anthropology in Bultmann’s program of demythologizing. The charge has been often made against Bultmann that his approach of demythologizing probably entails a personalistic/individualistic faith out of a premature self-understanding impoverished by the absence of social dimensions one acquires from relationship to nature and history.

However, for Bultmann, faith is personal only to the extent that an individual responds to the challenge from the call of God on one’s own and in one’s own terms. This lonely and

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<sup>22</sup> Perhaps I can use as a loan word in this context what Dr. Baird designates as the historical absolute. William Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1977), 117.

independent moment of faith does not presuppose an individual in a vacuum removed from any social dimension.

So, the charge above is in fact an instance of misunderstanding of the scope of Bultmann's demythologizing. When it comes to the extent, boundary, or scope of demythologizing, the key/rule to an adequate grasp is Bultmann's claim to the kerygma as proclamation of redemption as a decisive act of God. The charge that Bultmann is individualistic is misplaced; his concern rather is to specify what is involved *personally* in hearing the kerygma as a proclamation of redemption as a decisive act of God.

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The program of demythologizing is sometimes given a tentative, negative description by Bultmann's critics in their sympathetic appreciation of the way Bultmann addresses the historical bases of Christian faith. In addition to the most widely accepted one of de-objectifying, a substitute of deliteralization comes out from Paul Tillich. "He should speak not of demythologization but of deliteralization, which means not taking the symbols as literal expressions of events in time and space."<sup>23</sup>

I do not see the Tillich-Bultmann difference as a substantial one in this context, but it can be used to suggest the scope or boundary of demythologizing of the New Testament. As I understand it, it can be as wide as existence itself. It reaches out for its target anywhere in the New Testament there is an objectification of divine reality and action that blocks our way of faith. This hermeneutic mission to safeguard faith as it is witnessed in the Scripture pins down myth

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 524. Interestingly, Bultmann is reported to have rejected even the use of symbols, using "desymbolizing" (*Entsymbolisierung*) along with demythologizing. "...symbols,' too, must be interpreted so far as possible by existential 'analogies,' lest their mythological form obscure their (now) nonmythological meaning." Cf. Ogden, *Christ without Faith*, 170.



not only in primitive Jewish eschatological concepts but dogmatic theories.<sup>24</sup> “Once we realize the extent to which myth embraces all objectivizing formulations we shall cease to be surprised at Bultmann’s claim that so much of the New Testament is mythological.”<sup>25</sup>

Though this is not the place to discuss the influence of existentialist philosophy on the program of demythologizing, at least, we can say, Bultmann shares the existentialist insight of de-objectifying as essential to understanding the nature of human existence.

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The analysis of the scope of demythologizing would be incomplete without a positive quality Bultmann points out very early on. The majority of Bultmann’s critics agree that by “demythologizing” Bultmann replaces the objectivized reality of the mythological elements in the New Testament with Heideggerian existentialist categories. My observation is that, though existentialist influence is evidently undeniable, demythologizing displaces the mythological objectification in order to retrieve, *above all*, the kerygmatic character of the New Testament proclamation in mythical terms. As Ricoeur remarks about Bultmann’s demythologizing,

The intention of “the text ... speaks not of itself but of the event. In this sense, demythologizing, far from being opposed to kerygmatic interpretation, is its very first application. ... Demythologizing then is only the inverse side of the grasp of the kerygma.”<sup>26</sup>

In doing a comparative study of the methods of the Liberals and the History of Religions School, Bultmann’s diagnosis concludes invariably in the same failure, the incapacity to keep the

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<sup>24</sup> Fergusson, *Bultmann*, 109.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Meanwhile, I would not go so far as to see demythologizing as a normative principle even in Bultmann’s own hermeneutics. The real normative one belongs to Bultmann’s theological conviction of the Reformation doctrine of justification of faith. Necessary as demythologizing is, it plays a “regulative”<sup>25</sup> role in biblical exegesis and theology.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Ricoeur, ‘Preface to Bultmann,’ accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1941&C=1771>.

kerygma alive as proclamation of a decisive act of God through the historical Jesus, that is, an event, a happening God and only God initiated and continues to initiate in grace.

To break down the steps of the task of demythologizing, it can be seen that, in the wake of salvaging the otherworldly, the immaterial, the transcendent from the mythological objectification, the nonobjective character surfaces not only from the proclaimed transcendence of God (enshrined in mythical garb), an event of redemption by God, but also from the reports/accounts of an un-objectifiable proclaiming act. Kerygma in itself is such an event.<sup>27</sup>

### **Summary**

Due to the underlying theme of de-objectifying, the existential dimension of demythologizing can be ultimately ascertained. There is nothing else as significant as existence in history. Not heaven, not hell, not spirits, nor miracles. And to this extent, I have to admit the influence of philosophical existentialism. This is the closest moment between demythologizing and philosophical existentialism, between Bultmann and Heidegger. It is not merely on account of a set of existentialist terminology that their connection is to be made. Though Heidegger's early existentialism has been taken up as instrumental to interpret *part of* such a happening, an event, a confrontation, it is the retrieval of the nature of kerygma that makes the application possible. The nature of kerygma orients the program of demythologizing.

As Livingston puts it, "For Bultmann the reliability of the kerygma must not be questioned, for to try to confirm it by some historical-critical test is the very sign of unbelief."<sup>28</sup>

In Bultmann's own words, "The word of preaching confronts us as the word of God. It is not for

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<sup>27</sup> C. F. Evans, "Kerygma" in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, eds. A. Richardson & John Bowden (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 316.

<sup>28</sup> Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 16-17.

us to question its credentials. It is we who are questioned, ...whether we will believe the word or reject it.”<sup>29</sup>

It is by de-mythologizing that faith is enabled, in the sense that, between Scripture and modern people, it is not essentially about we vs. a demonstrable history of accountable conditions, but rather we vs. an absolute call, a radical address that breaks in human history from nowhere, inviting us to make a decision upon how to respond to the call. This overarching principle of revelation in demythologizing can be confirmed in Bultmann’s own words: “...his history is a history of sinful men, and therefore in actual fact enshrouds God in a veil.”<sup>30</sup>

In Chapter 2, the relationship, briefly discussed in this section, between the dialectical theology and philosophical existentialism will be given an in-depth, critical analysis.

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<sup>29</sup> Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 41.

<sup>30</sup> Fergusson, *Bultmann*, 108.

## Chapter 2 Demythologizing in Focus

### Introduction

Chapter 1 has attempted to show the value of ancient mythology in which the message of the gospel of the New Testament is enshrined. Admittedly, the mythology in itself is a synthesis of diverse, discrete elements. However, its heterogeneous character does not necessarily mean it is obsolete or false and therefore dispensable. For Bultmann, though not without producing confusion of meaning in his formulation, the New Testament mythology embodies unique awareness of the “deepest realities” in human experience of the universe and history. Therefore, they must be preserved for interpretation in existentialist terms of the enduring truth and meaning embedded in the Scripture.

The clarification of the concept of mythology also, as it will be seen in Chapter 2, lies in the fact that there is distinguishable non-mythological language or ways of talk/expression that call for an alternative theological or exegetical analysis. This remains the same with the strategy of interpretation of the mythological elements. In spite of the evident influences from philosophical existentialism, the kerygma or kerygmatic interpretation has been given a thematic spotlight as a counterpart to the philosophical description of human existence.

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Chapter 2 starts with a breakdown of the task of demythologizing, with a purpose of looking into its synthesis of philosophical existentialism, dialectical/kerygmatic theology, and historical criticism---a formula proposed by Dr. Baird. This paper places its focus upon the relationship between dialectical theology and philosophical existentialism, because it has long been a target of debate among Bultmann’s critics whether philosophical existentialism is not a

predominant factor in the demythologizing. To work on this question is a test of the adequacy of one's understanding of Bultmann's theology as well as his program of demythologizing.

This part attempts at a focused study of the scope of demythologizing and, in particular, the extent of existentialism's interpretive capacity. It is divided into two main sections, first, the ubiquity of myth, and second, demythologizing examined by its starting point, limitation, and center. Central primary resources for this chapter are Bultmann's interpretation of the event of Cross in "New Testament and Mythology" and *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. The tentative conclusion of this chapter is a negative one that philosophical existentialism is not a predominant factor but it provides a basic structure of terminology of existence more intelligible to modern people.

### **1. Ubiquity of Myth**

According to the analysis in Chapter 1, mythology in Bultmann's biblical theology refers to the objectivized elements in the New Testament that obscure or even distort the truth of Christian faith. Also, mythology represents any objectifying act or attempt in Christianity, in or outside of the New Testament, which leads to the displacement of the ground and object of faith from the revelation of God in the act of redemption through Jesus Christ. In Chapter 1, the negative side of mythological conceptuality is shown residing in the reductionist distortion of the reality and act of God as a quantitatively superior worldly power. God as such would be bound up with the causal laws assumed governing the history of the universe and humanity. Thinking in line with Bultmann, we may be able to detect that the attempt at objectifying of God the transcendent could also result in God becoming a mere absolute idol. The worship of God then would in effect become idolatry, in which human beings project on to the deity their own ambitions and desire "in the flesh." Bultmann is quoted as saying that "To frame a concept of

God is to objectify God and, hence, to make an idol.”<sup>31</sup> He also adds, “Of course, God is---he exists---but I cannot frame a verbal portrait of him without making an idol. ... However, I can respond to God’s Word to me in the kerygma and know him.”<sup>32</sup> Apart from kerygma, our faith in as well as knowledge and reflection of God is at stake in the absence of the act of call from God.

If the negative side of mythology is rightly observed in its way of expression of the transcendent in objective or cosmic terms,<sup>33</sup> then mythology is a rampant phenomenon, being persistent as the essential part of human existence. As William Baird observes,

It is a mistake, however, to characterize Bultmann’s demythologizing as essentially a shift from one world view to another, ...Bultmann is ardently opposed to the objectifying or absolutizing of any world view, ancient or modern. ... he wrote to Karl Barth, “The ‘myth’ of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’ is a perverted myth. Thus, if the true myth is the making this-worldly of the transcendent, the myth of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is making transcendent (the absolutizing) of the this-worldly.”<sup>34</sup>

In the same vein, our own past would appear to ourselves rather a Bultmannian myth than personal, individual history. It would remain no more than a neutral, silent deposit of data before they are brought to existentialists for interpretation of meanings, filtered or re-worked through the lens of a responsible subject who makes individual decision in the confrontation of possibilities from future. “This ‘being in itself’ is an illusion of an objectivizing type of thinking which is proper in natural science but not in history.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, when commenting on the limits to demythologizing, Ian Henderson rightly concludes that,

On the one hand, wherever Bultmann sees myths, he demythologizes them and to that extent there is no limit to demythologizing. On the other hand, Bultmann sees

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<sup>31</sup> Morris Ashcraft, *Rudolf Bultmann* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1972), 61.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>33</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 109.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 114. I parenthetically observe that Dr. Baird would perhaps agree with on my observation (in Chapter 1) of the difference between scientific view of the world and that in mythology. I conclude there that “it might be all too natural for men then to think of the transcendent in this-worldly terms, and *vice versa!*”

<sup>35</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 121.

the Christ event as an act of God in the analogical not in the mythological sense and therefore in the last resort as something which does not admit of demythologizing.<sup>36</sup>

Since existentialist interpretation is the only solution to the message and meaning of mythological elements in the New Testament, in the next section a survey will be done of how the existentialist philosophy plays its roles in the task of demythologizing.

## **2. Demythologizing: Dialectical Theology vs. Existentialism**

### **1) Starting Point: Kerygma**

As we have seen in Chapter 1, Bultmann identifies the previous failures of demythologizing, as in Liberalism and the History of Religions School, as the result of the absence of kerygma. “Unfortunately this means that *the kerygma has ceased to be kerygma*: it is no longer the proclamation of the decisive act of God in Christ.”<sup>37</sup> It should not escape our attention that this diagnostic formula is repeated for each of the previous attempts of demythologizing. In the case of the Liberals, the reduction of the New Testament kerygma to a few basic principles of religion and ethics simply transforms the kerygma into myth: it translates an evangelical act of proclaiming into objective rules and laws. In a different manner, the History of Religions School (HRS), who rejects all dogma and objective imagery in the New Testament, misunderstands its message about detachment from the world as mystical.<sup>38</sup> The result is, being detached from objectification of the mythical imagery, the life of faith is a sufficiently inward union with Christ. Meanwhile, the biblical eschatological meaning proclaimed in the New Testament is lost in mysticism’s carefree retreat from earthly concerns. In any case, outside the

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<sup>36</sup> Ian Henderson, *Rudolf Bultmann* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), 33.

<sup>37</sup> Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 13 and 15.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

“common zone of interest” in de-objectifying, there is no immediate or direct relationship with existentialism.

In Bultmann’s project, demythologizing is demanded by the New Testament kerygma itself, a significant parameter that steers the course of demythologizing through the edges and contradictions in the Scripture. “But the New Testament speaks of an *event* through which God has wrought man’s redemption.”<sup>39</sup> It is listed side by side with other reasons for demythologizing,<sup>40</sup> such as authorization from biblical precedence or the search for the meaning of existence obscured by the objectifying mythical language.

By kerygma, the act of proclaiming or the proclaimed message, the Christian gospel is meant essentially not as general statements of religious truth, but as the announcement of salvation in and through particular events interpreted as decisive acts of God.<sup>41</sup> From this perspective, the problem with Liberals or the HRS can be understood as inability to keep a faithful commitment to the kerygma of gospel on which the New Testament hinges.

By contrast, perhaps out of his Lutheran convictions, Bultmann invokes early on from kerygma the overriding supremacy of God’s act, while keeping the dialectical character of Word of God alive and active in the task of demythologizing. On the other hand, as equally evident in the definition is the dynamic event that announces God’s saving act.<sup>42</sup> However, the emphasis on the nonobjective nature of the event of preaching should belong to the work of existentialist influence. We may conclude here that, for Bultmann, for the vindication of demythologizing, an appeal to the biblical notion of kerygma suggests for itself a synthesis of dialectical biblical theology and existentialism.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>40</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 110-11.

<sup>41</sup> Evans, “Kerygma,” 316.

<sup>42</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 110-11.



There are immediate consequences of theological import from Bultmann's appeal to kerygma as the commanding principle of demythologizing. In this regard, it is the biblical absolute that conditions the existentialist interpretation of mythological/objectified elements. First, the kerygma that proclaims the sovereignty of salvation by God through Jesus Christ is a powerful weapon for the Church in times of crisis. "His rejection of natural theology, ... was in fact a summons to the church to break with those who claimed that God spoke to them in Adolf Hitler."<sup>43</sup>

Second, faith "in the kerygma has no objective ground; faith is rather acceptance of God's act in radical risk."<sup>44</sup> Hence, the radical character of Christian faith will never locate its ultimate ground in any objectified entities that belong to this world, be it creeds, the Church, or social-political ideologies. Faith is trustful response to the proclamation of the *Dass* of God's act, being left alone in its own dark loneliness stripped of earthly inauthentic security. Faith is personal and individual in a subject bereft in this world.

The decisive role in play here is not a set of existentialist categories applicable to the description of the faithful over against the sinful. Instead, it is again a manifestation of the dialectical theology that sets an absolute, radical gulf between the humanity and the divine.

Some left-wing Bultmannian critic perceives a certain arrogance in the autonomy Bultmann grants to kerygma, and accordingly dekerygmatising is advocated to remove the last, perhaps, obstacle on the way to a radical, full-scale demythologizing of the New Testament.<sup>45</sup>

Bultmann is prepared to enter into a conversation with certain philosophers. He finds common ground between their teaching and that of the New Testament. In particular, he finds such common ground in what they have to say about the fallenness of man, and in their quest for an authentic existence. But just as this

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<sup>43</sup> Henderson, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 31.

<sup>44</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 110.

<sup>45</sup> Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing*, 129-37.

conversation is proceeding smoothly... in existential analysis and self-understanding, Bultmann, ... suddenly appeals to the *kerygma* and maintains that it is only God's gracious act in Christ which enables any man to attain to an authentic existence.... He wants to cling to something exclusive, and represents the Christian way as quite different from the way of the philosophers.<sup>46</sup>

The point of interest here is how theology breaks up radically with philosophy (secular existentialists<sup>47</sup>) from their common ground of the knowledge of a human fall. For the philosophers, all man needs is to be shown his plight, and then he will be able to escape from it. By contrast, the New Testament regards the fall as total. That means the fall extends to the core of the human personality. Every impulse of man is the impulse of a fallen being.<sup>48</sup>

At this critical juncture of salvation from fallen, inauthentic existence, existentialist philosophers place their trust and remedy in human resolve, while the New Testament knows that self-commitment can be received only as a gift from God.<sup>49</sup> This difference can also be assessed by the extent of de-objectifying in the case of a theologian. Only by the entirety of demythologizing does the fall cease to be outside oneself as a static, historical mystery. Thus, being aware of one's own total corruption, ears are turned to kerygma.

With a commonly shared vocabulary about existence, Bultmann is able to show the drastic difference between theology and philosophy as well as his commitment to the biblical witness and traditions. On the other hand, for Bultmann, if any given theological or philosophical formulation of faith became crystalized as the deposit of faith, he would have called it

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 133-34.

<sup>47</sup> Heidegger is an example of this camp of secular existentialists who assume that authenticity *is* a possibility for *Dasein*.

<sup>48</sup> Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," 28-29.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

theological sin. Therefore, evident as its explanatory capacity is in demythologizing, the conceptual apparatus borrowed from philosophical existentialism cannot be “ultimate.”<sup>50</sup>

## 2) **Limitation: Act of God**

Ideally, by way of demythologizing, that is, the de-objectifying from the transcendent of all objective, this-worldly attributes, the biblical understanding of humanity will be restored to its essential, dialectical relationship with God. Stripped of all worldly references, contrary to the pantheistic claim to God’s immanence, God is nowhere to be found in this world, staying as the radically Other over against this world. “God does not belong to the world; nor is he the world in totality.”<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, this “hiddenness” of God is to be revealed in the proclamation of the event of redemption wrought through Jesus Christ. Again, in this understanding, the dialectic is evident in the paradox of the historical Jesus as the proclaimer and the eternity of the revelation proclaimed. In a sense, the kerygma is both the starting point and the finishing line set for demythologizing, so far as the kerygma is held up as the locus that occasions faith. “Bultmann stolidly refuses to allow his gospel to be dekerygmated.”<sup>52</sup> For that purpose, as Baird understands, demythologizing has two major limitations.<sup>53</sup>

According to Bultmann, the act of God cannot be demythologized, since it is not a mythological concept. “When we speak of God as acting, we do not speak mythologically in the

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<sup>50</sup> Aschcraft, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 59.

<sup>51</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), 166.

<sup>52</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 116.

<sup>53</sup> This paper treats only one of the two limitations, because it focuses largely on the interplay between dialectical theology and existentialist philosophy, while being aware that, as Dr. Baird observes, Bultmann’s insistence on the unique historical person from Nazareth brings tension to each integral element of as well as the whole synthetic program of demythologizing. In some way or another, the concept *historical Jesus* is related to and suggestive of the relationship between dialectical theology and secular existentialism. However, since I did not reach this point in my own research and therefore have to rely solely on secondary resources such as Dr. Baird’s, I will better save it for later study when, hopefully, I am able to address the historicity of Jesus with greater sensitivity to historical criticism and responsiveness to critiques.

objectifying sense.”<sup>54</sup> Rather, “act of God” is analogical language we use to speak of God in the personal sense of confession. Among some of Bultmann’s critics, this key biblical term is considered to be the remnant of mythology left undone in spite of the ruthless process of demythologizing Bultmann initiates. Again, in his critique of Bultmann, Tillich goes as far as to say, “He does not know that religious language is and always must be mythological. Even when he says that God has acted in Jesus,... this is a symbolic or mythological way of speaking.”<sup>55</sup>

For Bultmann, this is more than a mere matter concerning the adequacy in appropriation of a given religious language. Bultmann uses the demythologizing of the contrasting term “miracle” in order to explain the action of God as hiddenness of wonder.

Miracle is a violation of the law of this world, but it is thought of entirely in the terms of this world since it is a demonstrable achievement of God within it. But the concept of wonder radically negates the character of the world as the manageable world of everyday work. Wonder is not a demonstrable act of God.<sup>56</sup>

And similarly, “... ‘wonder’ means God’s action in distinction to the sequence of events in the natural world”<sup>57</sup>; “wonder is a violation of the conformity to law which governs all nature...”<sup>58</sup>

To sum up, the claim that miracle is an improper term for God’s action is justified by the misuse of the earthly character of “in-between.” To identify God’s nature and act with a link in between world events is to hold God accountable for, for example, personal tragedy, natural catastrophe, or social turmoil. Then, God is reduced to a variable. Not only does this corollary violate traditional doctrines of God, but in particular does it undermine the essential dialectic claim to God’s radical otherness. Therefore, Bultmann goes to great length to emphasize that act of God is not between the world events but within (in and through) them. Here, the commitment

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<sup>54</sup> Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 524.

<sup>56</sup> Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 255.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

to the essential dialectical relationship is evident. That God is the wholly other has been maintained relentlessly, giving in to no compatibility between the divine and the mundane.

The act of God thrust itself upon the world, disrupting the conformity to natural law with a happening contrary to nature, a scandal, that leaves a hearer of the gospel of forgiveness in a helpless situation, deprived of resources belonging to nature, to make a personal decision about belief or unbelief.

Fairly speaking, in “Wonder as God’s Action,” it is remarkable that Bultmann works out his argument with two parallel sets of terminology. One set belongs to Heidegger’s existentialism, loaded with “unrest,” “anxiety,” “care,” “fear of death,” “possibilities,” while the other runs on a past-present-future temporal sequence of eschatology.<sup>59</sup> In any case, it serves to bring out the radical negation of the law of the world by God’s gracious act of undeserved forgiveness. Until this point, philosophical existentialism remains descriptively<sup>60</sup> instrumental and especially so in the explanation of the bondage of sin, but it is hardly a necessary contributor to the essential, ruling dialectic in God’s action, the hiddenness in revelation.

For we are not plants, animals or machines; and our present is always qualified by our past. The critical question is whether our past is present in us as sinful or as forgiven. If the sin is forgiven, that means that we have freedom for the future;

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<sup>59</sup> To such critical questions as “Does Bultmann have a teleological-temporal eschatology, however, as, say, Moltmann and Pannenberg will later?” or “Does Bultmann think of past-present-future eschatology more as an ‘eternal now’ of the possibility of faith in any moment in time (whether in the first century or today?)?” I would respond that, briefly put, on this point, Bultmann and Tillich are interchangeable. My understanding of Bultmann is that, for him, the present aims not at chasing after the future given as a teleological promise by God, because that would, more or less, fall back into the coming Kingdom of God the historical Jesus proclaimed. That would, also, tend to objectify the future. Rather, for him, it is the now which is the given, the present is the “already” Kingdom of God (in mythological language), the eschatological present at the point of which the bondage to the past is negated by the grace of forgiveness. The “now” is eternal not merely in the sense of mercy by God’s grace, but also in the sense of newly acquired life under faith (the resurrection of Christ), where the true future (openness and possibility) is restored in Being as “not yet.” The sanctification of the faithful can be depicted in a spiral movement along an eschatological temporality. Here, though the influence of existentialist philosophy is all too evident, in this context, it still can hardly claim an (exclusively) predominant role over against dialectical theology, because it is only the latter that explicates the realizable and realized, ontic moment of faith as justification by grace.

<sup>60</sup> It is instrumental in the description of ontological but not ontic structure of existence.

that we are really hearing God's claim and can yield ourselves to him as 'his instruments' (Rom 6:12ff.).<sup>61</sup>

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There are biblical concepts that support Bultmann's argument for the speech of God in non-mythological terms. First, act of God is held to belong to the category of divine revelation, a self-disclosure by the transcendent, the hidden. This biblical thought points to the absolute authority and thus is in itself inherently dialectic.

Bultmann can speak of the exclusiveness of the Christian revelation, and this authentic revelation must be understood as event, as act of God. In biblical terms--terms familiar to Luther and the dialectical theologians---it can be called the Word of God. ... In keeping with the basic dialectic, God's Word is not manageable, but the act of the transcendent God who breaks into history, ...<sup>62</sup>

Second, act of God, also Word of God, is not communication of knowledge, not to convey information,<sup>63</sup> not human words, not something written down to be memorized.<sup>64</sup> For the Old Testament, the Word is the powerful action that brings all things into existence, the mighty command that orders Israel out of Egypt.... In the New Testament, ...the only content of the Word of God is *Christ*. The Word of God spoken in the events of Israel's history has become flesh in Jesus Christ.<sup>65</sup>

The biblical testimony to the act of God speaks to its dialectical character of transcendence and nonobjective-ness. In particular, the nonobjective-ness is reflected in the paradox, the scandal of the hidden God in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. When it comes to non-verbal quality, it is insightful biblical witness that the act of God cannot be crystalized to a formula of the rise of faith. The irreducible Word of God is to be met only in kerygma, bringing

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<sup>61</sup> Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 257.

<sup>62</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 75.

<sup>63</sup> Ashcraft, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 63.

<sup>64</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 75.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

its hearers in encounter with the grace of God. The whole process of enabling of faith by grace cannot be generalized, only “addressing the hearer personally.”

Again, the existentialist structure of being seems to have no decisive role to play in an act of God, the top-down event of revelation, though its heavy stress on subjectivity may apply to the personal particularity Bultmann grants to emphasize the situational act of God. On the other hand, leaving no place in its edifice of *Dasein* for the concept of grace, philosophical existentialism is bound to vitiate an inherent connection with Bultmann’s program of demythologizing, because the latter aims at recovery of the nature and meaning of grace in human existence.

Bultmann is adamant in carrying out a sweeping task of dialectical theology of God. After introducing the character of the hiddenness of God’s action, Bultmann adds that “faith in wonder must mean the contradiction of all that I see in the world,” just to make God, or the revelation of God, antithesis to the world, as can be seen again in “the forgiveness is a wonder, in contradiction to the world process.”<sup>66</sup>

Likewise, Bultmann addresses repeatedly the revelation in Jesus Christ as an eschatological or existential event, not only because it puts an end to our bondage to the past, but also because it brings the dialectical dimension into human existence under the grace of forgiveness. “And since he himself hears God’s claim on him and acts in obedience, his own action is no longer a part of the world process; he is doing a wonder.”<sup>67</sup> In this context, if someone charges against Bultmann for his turning theology into anthropology, or for his ending up in self-contradiction by blurring the dialectical distinction between the divine and human, the

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<sup>66</sup> Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 254.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

person misses the analogical nature of the language applied to the description of wonder, act of God.<sup>68</sup>

“The act of God is always *existentiell* happening, always occurring in the concrete, particular situation of man. ... the God who acts cannot be described in metaphysical terms, for that would involve a re-mythologizing or objectifying of the transcendent.... God can only be described in analogical terms, ...”<sup>69</sup> “...analogical statements about God’s action are already expressed in existential terms in an existential situation and cannot really be transposed out of that situation into general terms.”<sup>70</sup>

Both authors express their appreciation of the defining non-objective, *existentiell* attribute Bultmann appropriates for his task of demythologizing. The closest theological statement to this emphasis on personal, individual aspects of Christian faith may be that by Melancthon, “to know Christ is to know his benefits.” In Heideggerian terms, negatively put, the unknown God, i.e., God outside one’s care, does not exist. The Heideggerian *care* could possibly eclipse grace. At this point, though Bultmann would hardly find a more secure ground to defend his dialectical position, he is ready to concede that “God cannot be known apart from man’s existence does not mean that God does not exist apart from man.”<sup>71</sup> This is none other than a dialectical theological statement.

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<sup>68</sup> I think when Dr. Baird says God can only be described in analogical language, he in fact agrees with Tillich, who says that Bultmann does not realize religious language must be symbolic (even mythological!). Either by analogy or symbol, these efforts point to the difference between the signifier and the signified. This is how far I have come to understand and even embrace analogy as the allegedly adequate language of God, although not without doubt and reservation. In imitation of Dr. Whitehead, may I say that all of Western theology consists of footnotes to Augustine, and in particular, modern theology to Lessing?

<sup>69</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 116.

<sup>70</sup> Henderson, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 40.

<sup>71</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 116.



Hopefully from the above, it has been shown that the dialectic provides the ground for the claim, basic to demythologizing, that the transcendent should not be objectified.<sup>72</sup> In an attempt to retrieve what belongs to the divine, the infinitely qualitative distinction is kept solid and secure. As Bultmann says, there certainly are surviving traces of mythology for those who regard all language about an act of God or of a decisive, eschatological event as mythological.<sup>73</sup>

This may recall the question of the scope of demythologizing in Chapter 1, but it does more justice to the real meaning of the New Testament and to the paradox of the kerygma. In other words, if the crucial event of the Cross, (that is, the unity of crucifixion and resurrection) were merely an historical happening or miraculous happening of a supernatural force, it would have merely been an externalized, objectified event outside of a hearer of kerygma.

For Bultmann, there would be no faith rising in the hearer from things tangible and visible. Faith itself demands demythologizing to disclose its character of time and responsibility, categories more intelligible to modern mind. Kerygma in itself contains the task of demythologizing, because, in the dialectic understanding, God demands hiddenness in the dialectical event of self-revelation.

### **3) Center: Radical Transition to Authentic Existence**

This section looks into the transition from the inauthentic to the authentic existence, in the hope to come up with an idea about the relationship between Heidegger's existentialism and dialectical theology in Bultmann's program of demythologizing. My basic position is that the commitment to dialectic theology is still the decisive concern in the interpretation of the transition. Heidegger's analytic is merely used as a formal conceptuality for the theological task,

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>73</sup> Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," 43.

providing Bultmann with a set of categories for reflecting upon human existence.<sup>74</sup> John Macquarrie has a similar diagnosis. “Heidegger’s formal scheme of existence provides Bultmann with precisely that conceptual apparatus which he holds to be the prerequisite for any systematic exegetical work upon the New Testament.”<sup>75</sup>

I do not mean that the philosophy of human existence matters less than the other two constituents of the synthesis of demythologizing. Its prominence in the description of human life throughout Bultmann’s writings is undeniable. Bultmann himself also asserts that the existential analytic is the most appropriate, but few of us would conclude from it that it is necessary. For me, it is somewhat irrelevant, in the sense that, on the one hand, I accept the historical contextualization of human existence, on the other hand, I subscribe to such existential formulation as “Man does not know himself of himself, but has to be told about himself through the manifestation of Jesus Christ.”<sup>76</sup>

What matters in my research is the discovery of the significance of kerygma to demythologizing. The radical transition from unbelief to faith does not lie in Heidegger’s ontological, formal structure. “The movement of faith itself does not involve an ontological change---the structure of being remains the same.”<sup>77</sup> “...no hermeneutical method, not even

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<sup>74</sup> Fergusson, *Bultmann*, 65 and 67. Fergusson thinks Bultmann’s theological agenda was largely established prior to the influence of Heidegger. The decisive influence on Bultmann belongs to Wilhelm Hermann, from whom Bultmann reached his theological conviction that Christian faith as a personal and particular relationship with God is distorted if it is translated into an ‘objective’ idiom. The language of theology must preserve the inward and existential character of faith. Fergusson’s critique can find its echo in Eduard Ellwein’s essay “Rudolf Bultmann’s Interpretation of the Kerygma.” Cf. Carl Braaten & Roy A. Harrisville, eds. *Kerygma and History: A Symposium on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962).

<sup>75</sup> John Macquarrie, “Philosophy and Theology in Bultmann’s Thought,” in *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), 134.

<sup>76</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection*, ed. & trans. G. W. Bromiley (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), 87.

<sup>77</sup> Roy Harrisville, “Bultmann’s Concept of the Transition from Inauthentic to Authentic Existence,” 217-18.

existentialist interpretation, is in a position to bring about faith.”<sup>78</sup> It takes place as response to the demand from kerygma of the gospel. Both the vitality and problem of demythologizing have everything to do with this message, a testimony, witness to God’s act of redemption.

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Here it might be the place to point back to what is briefly touched upon in Chapter 1 about the value of mythological view of the world. It is observed there that Bultmann and Jaspers are not enemies on this point as the latter mistakenly assumes. From the mythological garb, a biblical view of humanity is retrievable. There is one God who stands in lordship over humanity, while humanity lives in this world, being responsible to God and living in “as if not” detachment from this world. In both the Old and New Testaments, the humanity as presented in each individual is conceived as essentially a historical unity, being thrown into this world but responding to a summons from God to love one’s neighbor.

In every ‘now’, man is called to abandon his past and live the future in dependence on God. This historical encounter with God’s Word calling him into the future brings out man’s sin. In dread, man cringes before his responsibility for the future and thereby rejects God, or he mistakenly tries to develop his own kind of righteousness before God and falls into pride, again rejecting God.<sup>79</sup>

In the New Testament, salvation comes as liberation from sin, the bondage to the past or this world. “The natural man focuses it [i.e., some particular object] upon security, and in proportion to his opportunities and his success in the visible sphere he places his ‘confidence’ in the ‘flesh’... and the consciousness of security finds its expression in ‘glorifying’.”<sup>80</sup> It is in this same world that humanity is confronted by the Word of God, an invitation, a call, a challenge to

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<sup>78</sup> Walter Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967), 267.

<sup>79</sup> Ashcraft, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 30ff.

<sup>80</sup> Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 18.

authentic existence. A Christian in faith chooses historical existence in each *existentiell* moment; a Christian lives eschatologically in this world.

The biblical view of humanity is thus usually interpreted as a competing parallel to its Greek or Hellenistic ideologies, which understand gods, humanity, and things as part of a harmonious whole. Accordingly, humanity is considered as one object among the others, a particular example of the general law of nature.

In this context, it is not hard to see why Bultmann makes a bold turn to Heidegger's philosophical terminology in the demythologizing, because the essentially non-objective structural ground for demythologizing owes primarily to a certain measure of affinity between New Testament understanding of existence and that of Heidegger's. It is also suggested that the distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence provides a framework within which the concrete ideas of the New Testament can be exhibited in their interconnections.<sup>81</sup> Specifically, Heidegger's constructive concepts, for example, of "*das Man*," "fallenness," and "resoluteness" have their corresponding New Testament ideas of "world," "flesh" and "sin," and "faith" or "decision."

They share, above all, an insight into a historical, personal dimension of existence found in the expression of "being-in-the-world/situation" over against the "being-in-general." At any rate, the point here is, as Bultmann asserts, the New Testament contains the *existentiell* understanding, so that the existentialist conceptual apparatus is not an imposition onto the New Testament. Meanwhile, as the New Testament is open to the existential analytic, it subjects itself to the underlying theological postulate, that is, the dialectic about the absolute Lordship of God over against the world.

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<sup>81</sup> Macquarrie, "Philosophy and Theology in Bultmann's Thought," 133.

For example, in Heideggerian existentialism, the transition from inauthentic existence to the authentic is possible by resoluteness. In authentic *existentiell* understanding, a person acknowledges temporality of human existence, i.e., the “thrownness” and openness to death, but shoulders personal responsibility for one’s own existence. Kamlah similarly invites us to emancipate ourselves by an act of self-commitment.<sup>82</sup> Both existentialists work on what Bultmann calls the naturalness of man.<sup>83</sup> For him, this is where philosophical existentialism parts company with the New Testament, whose dialectic theology “affirms the total incapacity of man to release himself from his fallen state.”<sup>84</sup> The fallen-ness extends to the core of the human personality, so that every impulse of man is the impulse of a fallen being. “Man has lost that actual possibility, and even his awareness of his authentic manhood is perverted, ...”<sup>85</sup>

Because of total depravity, being denied possible authentic existence, humanity can only receive it as a gift, God’s grace, from without. Fergusson suggests that Heidegger’s influence leads Bultmann into a misunderstanding of reality primarily as possibility, because Paul at most sees possibility as a manifestation of reality.<sup>86</sup> In the demythologizing of “man in Christ” (2 Cor 5:17), Bultmann points out that eschatological existence has become possible. God has acted, and this world has come to an end. Man himself has been made new.<sup>87</sup> As Macquarrie states, “the Cross can have atoning power in the present when we think of it not as past event but as the disclosure of a possibility of existence, which can be a possibility for us now.”<sup>88</sup> I argue, however, that no matter how we continue to interpret these scholarly criticisms, Bultmann works

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<sup>82</sup> Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 26.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>86</sup> Fergusson, *Bultmann*, 91.

<sup>87</sup> Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 32.

<sup>88</sup> Macquarrie, “Philosophy and Theology in Bultmann’s Thought,” 135.

with an underlying dialectical theology---God is the absolute Lord of possibility. This belief cannot have its empirical evidence or proof except in the kerygma of the scandal of Cross. The New Testament does not give us a doctrine of “nature,” a doctrine of the authentic nature of man; it proclaims the event of redemption....<sup>89</sup>

Bultmann, a biblical theologian, can never detach himself from his allegiance to the most basic claims of dialectical theology. Demythologizing starts from the kerygma of the gospel but is bound to return to the kerygma of gospel. Humanity stands as sinner under the judgment of the Wholly Other God. The basic scandal of Christian faith is that God’s action of salvation occurs in the particular, historical, crucified Christ. The revelation is proclaimed to the world as the act of God’s redemption wrought in Christ.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 2, the dynamic character of kerygma has been highlighted, as it is discovered in the starting point, limitation, and the content of the radical transition to authentic existence in the program of demythologizing. The ensuing theological import will be discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to the issue of continuity in the radical transition from inauthentic to authentic existence and to the key theological concept of Word of God.

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<sup>89</sup> Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 27.

## Chapter 3 Conclusion

### 1. Further Reflections

By looking into two separate issues, “continuity” and “Word of God,” this part attempts to enhance the development of this thesis at a deeper level.

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The previous chapter briefly discusses the critical transition from inauthentic towards authentic existence, with a view to shedding some light on the fundamental tension between philosophical existentialism and dialectical theology in Bultmann’s far-reaching program of demythologizing.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, demythologizing reaches out beyond the mythical representations in the New Testament, as long as that mythical representation leads to objectivizing of the Word of God and faith in dogmas or ministry. In this regard, Bultmann’s demythologizing belongs to the anti-positivistic revolution in Heidegger’s philosophy. For Heidegger, however, the goal is the emancipation of humanity’s essential nature aimed at authentic existence, i.e., de-objectifying the existential situation in order to “Become what you are!”<sup>90</sup> As Bultmann writes of this philosophical goal, “...the authentic nature is what he never realizes, but what at every moment he is capable of realizing---you can because you ought.”<sup>91</sup>

In terms of existential structure, an *existentiell* decision is self-evident and unmediated. Its source must be embedded within human existence and only need to be awakened. Though Jaspers allows the mediating role of faith, he ultimately falls back to “philosophical faith”---the masquerade of convictions that belong to the era of Enlightenment.

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<sup>90</sup> Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 28.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

For Bultmann, due to his theological convictions, humanity remains sinner under the judgment of God, just as Paul the theologian testified that “I am of the flesh, ... I can will what is right, but cannot do it.” (Rom 7:14-19) In this regard, Bultmann remains committed to the inexorable criticism against all speculation that wiped out the infinite qualitative difference between God and man.<sup>92</sup>

For some existentialist philosophers, such as Jaspers, it has been argued that there is no room whatever for transcendence in the sense of religious transcendence as a source of power beyond human capacity. The transition from the inauthentic to the authentic existence is possible without any dependence upon grace.<sup>93</sup> This is no less than saying that man is his own God.

In stark contrast, for Bultmann, the transition, that is, theologically, salvation from the flesh to the spirit, cannot be realized without God. When it comes to radical denial of the “old” self, sheer surrender of everything in this world, the decision can only be made as response to revelation, what is necessarily outside of the totally corrupt, estranged self. Between the two options, Bultmann the theologian holds fast to a theologian’s position. In particular, it is a dialectical theologian’s position in that, as is shown in Chapter 2, God remains hidden but sought after only in the revelatory event of kerygma. Thus, this transition is presupposed by the demythologizing of the Christ event, just as total depravity (irreversible self-alienation) is presupposed by the gracious event of Christ.

### 1) **Continuity**

The subtlety of the primary concern with God’s Wholly-Otherness in Bultmann’s demythologizing can be re-examined in the issue of continuity that has caught the attention of his

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<sup>92</sup> Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, vol. 2, 65.

<sup>93</sup> James Richmond, “Existentialism,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 204.



critics. As Roy Harrisville notes, Bultmann emphasizes continuity between inauthentic and authentic existence.

The transition or new birth does not disturb or change the structures of existence--they remain the same whether in or apart from faith. ... over against the Greek, idealistic notion, the new self-understanding does indeed involve a "break," a discontinuity, but again, not in terms of a renovation of the structures of being. In support of this contention, Bultmann appeals to what he believes to be the nature of faith, as well as to the purely formal character of the philosophical analysis of *Dasein*.<sup>94</sup>

As we have demonstrated, Bultmann navigates a synthetic project of demythologization with dialectical theology as the compass. Harrisville's observation provides a good test case for exploring whether the edges of his project present problems or difficulties or new insights. I think that by presenting the continuity within the transition to authentic existence, Harrisville understands Bultmann perfectly in terms of the latter's fundamental concern with any attempt at objectification of faith.<sup>95</sup>

Bultmann is quoted as saying in *Faith and Understanding* that "faith does not change human nature, that the justified does not have new, demonstrable qualities; rather, that the sinner is the justified one. ... Justification by faith is not demonstrable in the *Dasein*."<sup>96</sup> To reach this conclusion, Bultmann rests upon the nature of faith as historical act, concrete resolve, contingent upon revelation. Bultmann's loyalty to this most fundamental dialectical insight brings him to the logical conclusion that faith has an "ontic" character. That means, due to its concreteness, contingency, and nondemonstrability, faith is "a possibility distinguishable from others only by the claim which it raises."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Roy Harrisville, "Bultmann's Concept of the Transition from Inauthentic to Authentic Existence," 217.

<sup>95</sup> Also, grace presupposes a continuing ontological structure of human existence.

<sup>96</sup> Roy Harrisville, "Bultmann's Concept of the Transition from Inauthentic to Authentic Existence," 217.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

In theological language, this is none other than the biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Humanity is thrown in the *Dasein*, being trapped as sinner in *Angst*, seeking security from the objects in this world. To the gift of salvation from the grace of God, faith makes a personal, individual, and historical claim. The dialectical, radical distinction between the contingent, historical faith and the absolute revelation, Word of God, kerygma cannot be more direct. In demythologizing language, faith does not appear in the world as an objectified, realized possibility applicable for anybody to appropriate. It is like a hermeneutic circle that starts with a dialectical *care*, by way of philosophical existentialism, but reaches back to the object of faith of dialectical nature.

Then, Bultmann continues to make his declaration about the role of philosophy. Of course, faith must satisfy the formal, ontological structure of being, but only to that extent does philosophy take note of the theological concern. Neither the content nor the claim of faith is the object of a philosophical analysis which deals properly with the 'empty' structures of being. ... since faith and unbelief are answers to a concrete and contingent proclamation, any reflection... from the side of philosophy would be as absurd...<sup>98</sup>

Nowhere is found the predominance of existentialist philosophy in Bultmann's theology. It is observed that the tension between dialectical theology and existentialism is reflected in "a possibility in principle turns out to be an impossibility in fact."<sup>99</sup> On the one hand, I do not think Bultmann would admit he ever made a vow to existentialist philosophy. That means, he allows for an open, adaptable stance of philosophical existentialism. On the other hand, the critique fails to see that Bultmann's description of ontological and structural possibility plays a secondary role in relation to his description of the ontic, dialectical character of faith.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>99</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 125.

## 2) Word of God

In Chapters 1 and 2, the significance of the primacy of kerygma has been shown in the program of demythologizing. It is seen as the defining character of the New Testament message of salvation; it is seen in the dynamic, *existentiell* nature of kerygma as an event in itself; it is also seen as the starting point of the task of demythologizing; it is seen as the completion of demythologizing. Word of God, i.e., act of God, the *Dass*, is “crystalized” in the event of kerygma, the proclaiming of Christ.

In the ‘word,’ then, the salvation-occurrence is present. For the proclaimed word is neither an enlightening *Weltanschauung* flowing out in general truths, nor a merely historical account which, like a reporter’s story, reminds a public of important but by-gone facts. Rather, it is kerygma---herald’s service---in the literal sense---authorized, plenipotent proclamation, edict from a sovereign. ... So it is, by nature, personal address which accosts each individual, throwing the person himself into question by rendering his self-understanding problematic, and demanding a decision of him.<sup>100</sup>

Hence, an *existentiell* event in itself, kerygma demands demythologizing in order to speak to its hearer personally, who is called to faith in Christ by taking up the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. Kerygma triggers a series of events; it initiates an eschatological event in human history. A historic, punctual occurrence onto the linear flow of history, it “penetrates the whole of human history. ... the once-for-all event is ‘continually re-enacted in the proclamation.’ ... the kerygma is itself God’s revelatory action.”<sup>101</sup>

As seen in the discussion of limitation of demythologizing, the non-mythological character of speech of God belongs to the Bible itself. In the Old Testament, “a primitive conception of word as something charged with power; that is, an *act*.”<sup>102</sup> When it comes to the Word of God, it means not the fact (not *Was*) of God’s utterance; it is a command that rules the

<sup>100</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1952), 307.

<sup>101</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 77.

<sup>102</sup> André Malet, *The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 128ff.

world; it speaks about goodness and demand; it is a supremely efficacious command; it is relational, destroying humanity's "in-sistence"<sup>103</sup> and calling them into existence.

All this is kept the same for the noblest thing in the New Testament, the Christian kerygma. "The word's event is not an event of this world, though it takes place in this world. It has its origin in God."<sup>104</sup> That the event of kerygma belongs to God stipulates the absolute transcendence of kerygma. In other words, kerygma cannot be objectified by any means. The New Testament itself is not kerygma; Christ is not in the New Testament. Christ is not among the Christians. Christ can only be met in kerygma, preaching, proclamation of Christ. The Word of God, the word of Christ, precedes, as source of power, all words about Christ. In sum, demythologizing is an attempt to uphold the dialectic distinction between the Word of God and word of man.

As Bultmann shows, demythologizing is to remove the rubble of system of timeless truth from the New Testament, to distinguish the truth of a person from the truth of a statement, and to reveal the moment for a person to make decision between God and the world, i.e., the moment of faith.<sup>105</sup> To employ Bultmann's own words, demythologizing can be said to let kerygma continue to be kerygma. It is to restore kerygma, Word of God, as essentially the act and event of preaching, action of God. Whatever religious and ethical truths (as word of man) it entails are derivative of, conditioned and relativized by kerygma. None of them can make absolute claim to truth apart from kerygma. Otherwise, that would be a reversal: kerygma ceases to be kerygma.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 135. The Word of God, "an efficacious word, a creative word, ...: as many characteristics that define God's Word as a *Dass*, an ec-sistentiell determination that destroys man's in-sistence."

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 241.

Heidegger would say that the disclosed existential understanding need not be expressed in words at all, but may issue in some practical consequences.<sup>106</sup>

That the Bible is not a compendium of divine quotations is a negative, dialectical statement of the results of demythologizing. Bultmann is quoted as saying that “the New Testament is the Word of God only indirectly and not directly. As indirect Word, the revelation of God in the Bible cannot be construed as an objective body of data and doctrine whose truth can be demonstrated.”<sup>107</sup> Thus, the basic dialectic is preserved in and by demythologizing: the Word of God is spoken in the Bible, but the words of the Bible cannot be identified as words of God.<sup>108</sup> Words of the Bible as word of man lend themselves to critical-historical investigation, but as words of God they transcend empirical criticism. Thus, authority of the Word of God lies with its autonomy. The authority of kerygma is self-evident and must not be questioned.<sup>109</sup>

Kerygma, Word of God, the event of redemption wrought through Jesus of Nazareth, has its objects, crucifixion of Jesus and resurrection in Christ. Between Jesus and Christ, that is, between a historical event and a historic/eschatological event, between the reality of the cross and the possibility of Christ, is the actuality of faith by grace. However, grace does not imply an event by God of a miraculous nature in-between, that is, between the punctual transition from the old to the new, from the dying to the new birth, from the inauthentic to the authentic. This is what Bultmann argues against relentlessly, as we have seen in Chapter 2 how Bultmann demythologizes miracle from wonder. The demythologizing task is ultimately aimed at keeping the tension between the finite and the infinite, that is, the dialectical theology of God.

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<sup>106</sup> Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology*, 241.

<sup>107</sup> Baird, *The Quest of the Christ of Faith*, 79.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, vol. 2, 16.

Word of God challenges us rather than the other way around. “What the word brings them is not a knowledge of forgiveness and grace but the event of forgiveness and grace, a new *sichverstehen*.”<sup>110</sup> It was so for the first disciples or witnesses-proclaimers, but it remains the same with modern people of today. One obvious corollary from the demythologizing of the conceptualization of forgiveness is that, though we can describe the Word of God in relation to us in concrete, individual terms, there is no generalized, normative formulation about Word of God outside us. An encapsulated Word of God as an object to us is no less than word of man. “God’s command never can be equated with or reduced to a universal natural law, or to a set of rules or ethical axioms.”<sup>111</sup>

The absolute Word of God relativizes all attempts by humanity at a reformulation of the encounter with Word of God. Bultmann’s commitment to dialectical theology is reflected in the subordinate role he assigns to philosophy in the theological enterprise. “This [propaedeutic function of philosophy] is to elucidate the kerygma, ... But the kerygma itself lies beyond the horizons of philosophy. ... [it is] the heart of Christian message, is inaccessible to the philosopher.”<sup>112</sup>

## 2. Conclusion

By studying the object, scope, and the center of Bultmann’s program of demythologizing, this thesis argues for the unquestionable absoluteness of kerygma as a commanding principle governing the whole theological interpretation of the New Testament. The dialectical theology embedded in the concept of kerygma plays a decisive, predominant role in the synthetic relationship with historical criticism and existential philosophy. Especially with regard to

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<sup>110</sup> Malet, *The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann*, 138.

<sup>111</sup> Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, vol. 2, 101.

<sup>112</sup> Macquarrie, “Philosophy and Theology in Bultmann’s Thought,” 139.

existential philosophy, we must see its role as subordinate to the predominance of dialectical theology, providing mainly a descriptive instrument for the dialectical theological task.

Despite the predominance of dialectical theology in Bultmann's thought, his eclectic use of philosophy as a secondary methodology does bring about internal tension in his overall synthetic thought. However, to relativize the role of philosophy, i.e., to subordinate philosophy to the absolute supremacy of the kerygmatic nature of the New Testament may possibly bring about parallel interpretations. One is existentialist, and the other is kerygmatic. Foreseeably, at certain points, Bultmann would find himself in an ambiguous position in answering the question that he asks about the necessity of an existentialist interpretation of the New Testament mythology. In other words, it seems that the kerygma can drive out existentialist philosophy.

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