

Rudolf Bultmann and Reinhold Niebuhr on Myth and Eschatology

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Bultmann's demythologization is criticized as dealing inaccurately with the miraculous and fantastic in the New Testament. A contemporary of Bultmann, Reinhold Niebuhr also understands these fantastic and miraculous events recorded in the Bible as myths and points to God's action *within* history.

We first look at Bultmann's understanding of myth, at the nature of interpretation, then at the nature of myth and how myth informs Bultmann's understanding of eschatology. The second part of this paper analyzes Reinhold Niebuhr's use of myth, his doctrine of history, and then how myth informs his view of eschatology. The conclusion will contrast and compare Bultmann and Niebuhr.

1. Bultmann: Demythologization at Work

Bultmann's method for understanding the New Testament, his project of demythologization is an attempt to get at the meaning of the text, to unfetter it from mythological language, which only serves to hinder understanding. While the Hebrew narratives speak of God's intervention in history, the science of history cannot assert such an act of God; it only claims that there are people who by faith believe that God acts in history. While the science of history examines the biblical texts as historical documents, it must be kept in mind that they do not claim to be historical documents even though they are historical documents in the sense that

they were written in a given place and at a certain time, though not always verifiable in instances of authorship and composition. The biblical documents are, more accurately, witnesses of faith and proclamation. These documents come to us in a strange and foreign language (in concepts of faraway lands: both spatially and temporally) in need of translation, which is the work of the science of history. It is the work of the existentially involved historian who through an existential concern is able to understand history's objective content.¹ Another reason Bultmann demythologizes the biblical text is because modern humanity finds "it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world" (NTM, 4). We no longer believe in the three storied universe which the creeds take for granted.

"No one who is old enough to think for himself supposes that God lives in a local heaven. . . . And if this is so, the story of Christ's descent into hell and of his Ascension into heaven is done with. We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air" (NTM, 4). Before we accuse Bultmann of unabashedly removing all that is sacred from the biblical text, one should look closer at Bultmann's "practice of demythologization," for example, the way Kendrick Grobel did with reference to Bultmann's sermons.² "Interpretation, for Bultmann, is a servant discipline ancillary to the church's proclamation. Interpretation is not complete until it issues from the pulpit, and not even then! . . . All biblical interpretation is complete only when it has brought the proclamation effectively into the man in the pew" (PD, 29). Whose proclamation is it? "The preacher's? Only on command. The church's? Only as a loan. God's? Yes, His alone. Bultmann's doctrine of the Word of God is just as high as Karl Barth's, but with almost exclusive emphasis upon Barth's third form, the living Word speaking now through Scripture and preacher to living men" (Ibid). A more pertinent reason for Bultmann's demythologization rests in the interpretation of the Word of God (Ibid). "All interpretation is for God; all interpretation is for the man in the pew; it is an indispensable link in bringing them together. Interpretation *matters supremely!* If the sermon has soteriological significance, so has the

interpretation which mediates it. Bultmann claims that the sermon (every *true* sermon, as released Word of God) is part and parcel of the salvation occurrence itself indeed *the* really *relevant* aspect of it to men today" (Ibid). So then, Bultmann believes in expository preaching and also in the adequate interpretation of the Word of God.

Demythologizing the Scriptures makes them more accessible to moderns; the miracles of the New Testament have ceased to be miraculous, and to defend their historicity by recourse to nervous disorders or hypnotic effects only serves to underline the fact." (NTM, 5). Bultmann does not wish to make an outmoded cosmology an article of faith. Struggling with how a Christian ought to believe, Bultmann says that Christians want to hold on to Christian faith but they suppose that as a Christian one is obliged to regard such stories as true "and since they *cannot* do that, they fall into doubt whether they have the right to be called Christians" (PD, 29). Regarding the New Testament miracle stories as true is certainly not what the Christian faith means. "Christian faith *does* mean: faith in the grace of God as it presents itself to us in Christ" (PD, 29). What of those who nevertheless insist that believing in miracle stories belongs to the Christian faith? "In fact, they say, Christian faith manifests itself precisely in so regarding them!" It does so, "because Christian faith means letting God take captive not only all our will but also all our *thinking* so that it will not assert itself against God's Word. Since we must sacrifice to God, as men of faith, all we have and are, we must also sacrifice to Him our thinking. Consequently, they conclude, if miraculous occurrence . . . is impossible to modern thinking, then what is wrong with modern thinking! We must sacrifice *it*" (PD, 29; Grobel is quoting Bultmann's *Marburger Predigten*, 93-95)! There is truth in these words. It is true that we must let God take our thinking captive. But we must ask more exactly what that *means*. It simply cannot mean that we are to give up thinking entirely, that we are to choke truthfulness to death.³ Myth, according to Bultmann, is not to be rejected but interpreted. The problem is one of hermeneutics, and Bultmann's view of interpretation informs his handling of myth.⁴

1.1 The Nature of Interpretation

The twentieth century has seen a shift in emphasis from an attempt to demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith to the clarification of the meaning of the Christian faith. Demythologization is Bultmann's response to the basic problem of meaning. What does the biblical text mean for us today?

As soon as one undertakes to interpret a written text in an ancient or foreign language, one must be aware of and follow the rules of the grammar used in the text. It simply will not do to impose our modern grammar on these texts (HE 139). There is also the attention to the [historical context] (Ibid, 139). The objectives of interpretation may be a reconstruction of the continuum of past history, whether political history, the history of forms and problems of social life, intellectual history, or the history of culture in the broadest sense. In this case the interpretation is always determined by the understanding the interpreter has of history. The objective of interpretation can also be based on a psychological interest (individual, social, or religious). In these cases the interpretation is guided by a preunderstanding of psychological phenomena, but preunderstanding is not limited to only the psychological. It is also possible to give interpretation an aesthetic interest which subjects the text to a formal analysis and questioning. The objective of interpretation also can be based on an interest in history as "the sphere of life in which human existence takes place, in which we acquire and develop our possibilities, in which, by reflecting on these possibilities, we each come to an understanding of ourselves and of our own possibilities. In other words, the objective can be given by the question about human existence as one's own existence" (Ibid., 157).

1.2 Existential Interpretation

Bultmann is most interested in this existential component of interpretation, and here he is indebted to Martin Heidegger. Although it is of crucial importance to mention Heidegger along with the emphasis on understanding of Scripture, this essay does not take up this subject since the scope is Bultmann's understanding of myth and its influence on his

eschatology. Almost all the authors who appraise Bultmann's theology acknowledge his indebtedness to Heidegger for his existential interpretation of the biblical literature. Although, Leopold Malevez notes in 1954⁵ that Bultmann is consciously influenced by the philosophy of Heidegger and tends toward his earlier nihilistic thought.⁶ Ogden and Maquarrie agree that Bultmann's theology of human existence presupposed in almost all his theological works is precisely the one developed by Heidegger.⁷ Bultmann writes that Malet correctly shows "that my theology does not depend on Heidegger's 'philosophy'; that on the contrary the significance of his existential analysis, so far as I am concerned is that it provides an adequate terminology (*Begrifflichkeit*) for setting forth the New Testament and the Christian faith."⁸ Malet contends that if "Bultmann has been able to adopt Heidegger's analysis because on the ontological plane Heidegger is more faithful to the New Testament than many a professional exegete and theologian;" while "using Heidegger, Bultmann does not depend on him in the slightest, since on the one hand Heidegger has only rediscovered New Testament ontology, and on the other hand ontological analysis does not take into account man's concrete footing with God."⁹

As noted already, it is not Bultmann's aim to simply eliminate myth, but to interpret the mythical passages of Scripture. "Of course it may still be necessary to eliminate mythology here and there. But the criterion adopted must be taken not from modern thought, but from the understanding of human existence which the New Testament itself enshrines" (NTM, 12). Interpretation, we noted, is about asking the right questions of the text. Each person who questions the text is in one way or another guided by a preunderstanding of human existence that alone makes the questioning possible, as when one asks, for example, about "salvation", or about the "meaning" of one's personal life or of history, or about the norms of moral action and of order in human community (HE, 151). Because texts remain silent without this preunderstanding, the point is not to get rid of preunderstanding but to raise the level of consciousness, and to test it critically. In questioning the text, one must be questioned by the text and give heed to its claim (HE, 157). According to Bultmann,

then, if we are to avoid the mistakes of liberal theology and yet at the same time deal with the problems presented by the biblical world picture, "we must devote ourselves to interpreting the biblical myths critically in terms of the *existentiall* understanding of existence they basically seek to express."¹⁰ The "real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially" (NTM, 10). Myth is used here in the sense popularized by the "History of Religions" school.

Mythology is the use of imagery to express the other worldly in terms of this world and then the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side. For instance, divine transcendence is expressed as spatial distance. It is a mode of expression which makes it easy to understand the cultus as an action in which material means are used to convey immaterial power. Myth is not used in that modern sense, according to which it is practically equivalent to ideology (NTM, 10). Malet states, "The *purpose* of myth is altogether different" from science, which tends to reduce the "other" to the "same." By contrast, with rational thought, myth seeks to stress the fact that the world and its events are "open" to one *Dass*, or more that are not part of the world. It attributes certain phenomenon to supernatural powers, whether envisaged in animist or dynamist fashion, or else to personal spirits and gods. Thus it presupposes the existence of an entire sphere beyond man's control, which he can never fathom or master. It intends to express what is wholly other than man and man's world: there is its real significance."¹¹ Malet continues, "the' scientific scheme expresses man's will to grasp everything, to owe everything to himself alone. Contrariwise the mythical scheme expresses man's conviction that he depends on a power to which he owes his being now and in the time to come."¹² Myth points beyond the mundane to the transcendent. Myth allows us to understand that human life is surrounded by the enigmatic and the uncanny; as at the mercy of nature and other men.

"Mythological narrative language is, first, language which itself expresses a two fold or double significance. On one level, "the significance

or intention of the language of myth is cosmological. The same language also expresses a 'latent' meaning, which Bultmann understands as existential. The language of myth expresses both these levels or dimensions of meaning."¹³ When we read Bultmann's definitions of myth, as awkward as they appear, it is helpful to remember Reinhold Niebuhr's qualifier regarding myths: that they should be taken seriously but not literally: "Not literally, because the function of the primary meaning of the myth is to refer to and manifest another meaning distinct from itself. Seriously, because the language and primary meaning of the myth is nonetheless the vehicle through which the mythic narrative itself signifies and expresses this other, latent meaning, the medium in which that latent meaning appears"¹⁴ Such narratives appear in mythical form because, according to Bultmann, these myths were created in a time when few, if any, abstract terms were available; therefore, self-understanding could find expression only in the form of a concrete story. Myth also has permanent relevance and survives even in a more sophisticated age. Macquarrie illustrates Bultmann's method of interpreting myth by looking at the Genesis narrative: "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Ge 2:7). A literal interpretation of this narrative might satisfy a natural etiological curiosity, but bare knowledge of an objective fact presents no religious, no existential, challenge.¹⁵ Anyone who takes this myth as a literal statement of something which actually happened would miss its meaning altogether. The real purpose of myth, going back to Bultmann, is to speak of a transcendent power which controls the world and its inhabitants, but that purpose is impeded and obscured by the terms in which it is expressed (NTM, 11).

1.3 Mythology and Eschatology

Bultmann's understanding of eschatology is informed by his concept of myth: "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles" (NTM, 5).¹⁶ Adjoined to this is Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God, that is, his

eschatological reign.¹⁷ However, the *parousia* of Christ never took place as the New Testament expected.¹⁸ The New Testament “grew out of the fact that the expected end of the world failed to arrive, that the ‘Son of Man’ did not appear in the clouds of heaven, that history went on, and that the eschatological community could not fail to recognize that it had become a historical phenomenon and the Christian faith had taken on the shape of a new religion” (HE, 38).

Malet defines eschatology as “the next world as contrasted with this one, eternity as opposed to time, that which is wholly other than the world” and humanity—in a word, God “and the things of God;”¹⁹ his definition of eschatology is within the limits of Bultmann’s definition of myth. We are therefore able to speak of eschatological events only in mythological language.

Offering a complete exposition of Bultmann’s understanding of eschatology is tangential to our goal. Let us concentrate on two central factors that might be seen as one: to be in Christ (J < ΟΔ4ΦΘ) may be called an ecclesiological formula, since the body of Christ is the body of the Church, but it can be called also an eschatological formula, since with the establishment of the body of Christ the eschatological event has been inaugurated (PC, 197). That is, we will look at Bultmann’s eschatological understanding of Jesus who interprets the demand of God, and at the church, who authentically appropriates this demand. Bultmann does have a theology of election, but not in the sense that the post Christ Church is an historical successor to Israel. Their continuity is in one sense broken off by the eschatological event of Christ. The Church is not an heir to empirical Israel but ideal Israel. The Christian Church is now the true People of God (TNT, 1: 96-97).

The cross and resurrection form a single event which brings judgment to the world and opens up the possibility of authentic life. The resurrection cannot be used as a miraculous proof to convince people that the cross has the eschatological significance ascribed to it (NTM, 39). It is not possible to prove the objective historicity of the resurrection by appealing to the witnesses cited by Paul, “as though once it was established it might be believed beyond all question and faith might have its

unimpeachable guarantee" (NTM, 40). For Bultmann, faith in the resurrection is faith in the saving efficacy of the cross (NTM, 41). We cannot first believe in Christ and then upon this faith come to believe in the saving efficacy of the cross is always proclaimed together with the resurrection. Bultmann notes that for John, the Resurrection, Pentecost, and the *parousia* of Jesus are one and the same event. Those who believe already have eternal life. "Christ meets us in the preaching as one crucified and risen. He meets us in the word of preaching and nowhere else" (JCM, 33). Authoritative preaching is found only in the Church; that is, the 'ministry of reconciliation' and the 'ministry of a new covenant.' Apostolic preaching is found only within the framework of redemptive history, whose subject is the people of God.²⁰ The Church is definitely a phenomenon of the interim of history, and it abides in the eschatological position different from the way the primitive church regarded itself in apocalyptic terms as the Congregation of the end of days.²¹ "The Church is genuine Church only as an event which happens each time here and now; for the Church is the eschatological community of the saints, and it is only in a paradoxical way identical with the ecclesiastical institutions which we observe as social phenomenon of secular history" (JCM, 82-83). The early Christian community understood itself as the goal and consummation of the history of salvation, and therefore looked back into the history of Israel which has now reached its goal. Bultmann does not understand the early Christian community merely as a phenomenon of history, or the relation to the Israelite people as a historical continuity. There is no *real* genealogical connection between the new people of God and the old. "The continuity is not continuity growing out of history but is one created by God" (HE, 34-35; TNT, 96-99). Once more, central to Bultmann's eschatological thinking is Jesus Christ as the eschatological event (See JCM, 14, 25-26, 33).

The Word which the Church proclaims, the Word which is the demand of God spoken by Jesus, is an event which meets us in history.²² The Word existed before the canon of Scripture, which is itself a historically conditioned expression of the Word. There can be Word without the canon of Scripture, and no special authority can be attributed

to the canon over and above the Word. The Word, which is not exclusively the word of the canon, the Word which is preached by the Church as proclamation or handed down to people through the Church as the Word, may encounter us in many different ways. Furthermore, the Word of God is what it is only in the moment in which it is spoken. The Word of God is not a timeless statement but a concrete Word addressed to people here and now (JCM, 79). This Word is very much addressed to the individual as existential event/encounter which requires a decision. It is the Church that proclaims this Word; but it comes as a very personal event, which demands a personal decision. As an existential philosophy of commitment to God, it would seem that Bultmann is an individualist, but we can also see that he has a social view of the Church as the heirs to Israel's soteriological promise if not in historical continuity with Israel. Bultmann does understand Abraham as the father of all the believers' both Jews and Gentiles. In this sense there is rather a continuity of salvation effected by God.

2. Reinhold Niebuhr

A philosophy of history able to bring all of the various perspectives from economists and political strategists to artists and moralists into a total unity must be endowed with the highest imagination. It must be a mythology (REE, 122). Niebuhr's overall epistemology relies on mystery and meaning.²³ This way of understanding the world around him, including the interpretation of Scripture, may be called a mythological, symbolical method.²⁴ Niebuhr, however, does not join with the liberals in trying to entirely slough off myth. Their error is to disavow permanent myth with primitive myth. For Niebuhr, mythical thinking is not only prescientific, but suprascientific, vertical and transcendent thinking. "The myth alone is capable of picturing the world as a realm of coherence and meaning without defying the facts of incoherence (ICE, 16). This becomes an important distinction between the way Niebuhr and Bultmann understand myth. Religion has no right to insist on the scientific accuracy of its mythical heritage. That part of mythology, which is derived from pre-scientific thought (which does not understand causal relations in the natural and historical world), must be sacrificed in a scientific age.²⁴

“Religion seeks mythically to grasp life in its unity and wholeness. This unity and wholeness can never be expressed in terms of complete rationality (TM, 17). One cannot express God’s event in history in purely rational, historically particular terms. Niebuhr does not wish to dispense with the abiding truth as well as with the primitive in religious truth. In “As Deceivers Yet True” are told that “what is true of the Christian religion can be expressed only in symbols which contain a certain degree of provisional and superficial deception” (BT, 3). Christianity does not believe that the natural, temporal and historical world is self-derived or self-explanatory; it believes that the ground and the fulfilment of existence lies outside of existence.

The divine is revealed and expressed in the temporal, but is not exhausted in it. We are deceivers, yet true, when we say that God created the world. The idea of creation relates the ground of existence to existence and is therefore mythical rather than rational. The Christian religion is always tempted to insist that belief in creation include belief in an actual forming of man from a lump of clay, or in an actual creative activity of six days (Ibid., 9). The error of literalism succumbs to this temptation. Another temptation is to regard the relation of each fact and event in history to a Divine Creator as obviating the possibility of an organic relation to other facts and events according to a natural order (Ibid., 9-10). The myth of creation is constructed into an actual history of origins when it is really a description of the quality of existence (ICE, 35). We are deceivers, yet true, when we speak of the fall. The myth of the fall explains the perversity of humans much better than any rationalistic approach is able, for in the latter evil is either attributed to “the ultimate source of being . . . , in which case the reality of evil is really denied; or it is attributed to the world of matter, nature and historical concretion . . . in which case, the fall is equated with creation . . . , and impulses of nature are regarded as the source of evil while the direction of mind is regarded as the source of all good” (TM, 24). The idea of the fall is subject to the error of regarding the primitive myth of the garden, the apple and the serpent (Gen 2& 3) as historically true. Even if this error is not committed, “Christian thought is still tempted to regard the fall as an historical event. The fall is not

historical. It does not take place in any concrete human act. It is the presupposition of such acts" (BT, 11). The fall deals with an area of human freedom "which, when once expressed in terms of an act, is always historically related to a previous act or predisposition" (Ibid). We are deceivers, yet true, when we affirm that God became human to redeem the world from sin. The idea of eternity entering time is intellectually absurd. "This absurdity is proved . . . by all the theological dogmas which seek to make it rational. . . The truth that the Word was made flesh outrages all the canons by which truth is usually judged. Yet it is the truth. The whole character of the Christian religion is involved in that affirmation" (Ibid, 13-14). The idea of the resurrection of the body cannot be literally true, neither is any other idea of fulfilment (Ibid, 290). The idea of the resurrection of the body is an essential element of the Christian worldview because it implies the unity of body and soul whereas the immortality of the soul implies a radical disjunction (Ibid, 291, and NDM, 2:294-298).

The resurrection of Christ is a different order of history than the crucifixion, and a miracle without which the church could not have come into existence. In this miracle we recognize the triumph of God's sovereignty in what seems to be very ambiguous facts of history. The church is not founded on a slowly dawning consciousness of the true significance of Christ; it is founded on the miracle of the recognition of the true Christ in the resurrection. This final revelation of God involves a radical break in the community in which the revelation occurs, creating an Israel of God which is gathered together upon the basis of accepting the revelation of truth (FH, 154). A "genuine Christian faith must move between those who claim to know so much about the natural world that it ceases to point to any mystery beyond itself, and those who claim to know so much about the mystery of the 'unseen' world that all reverence for its secret and hidden character is dissipated" (MM, 154). By faith we can see that there is meaning beyond the mystery. "A genuine faith resolves the mystery of life by the mystery of God" (Ibid). The Christian faith believes that God is made known to humanity through revelation. For now we "see through a glass darkly when we seek to discern the divine ground and end

of human experience; we see only by faith. But by faith we do see.” (Ibid, 163; cf. 1 Cor. 13). Orthodox Christianity frequently gives dogmatic answers to problems which suggest mystery, an answer which immediately obscures the mystery by a dogmatic formula. Christian orthodoxy declares people are evil because of the sin of Adam, which has been transmitted to all humanity and has been deemed an embarrassing vehicle for this transmission. The real mystery of evil is not its transmission but that sin presupposes itself; no matter how far back one traces it. “Profound scrutiny of the nature of evil reveals that there is an element of sin in the temptation which leads to sin; and that, without this presupposed evil, the consequent sin would not necessarily arise from the situation in which man finds himself” (Ibid., 166).

Another area of concern is the completeness and incompleteness of human life (Ibid). As Christians we believe “that only a power greater than our own can complete our incomplete life, and only a divine mercy can heal us of our evil” (Ibid, 169). The Christian hope expressed by Paul’s words: “We are perplexed, but not unto despair” (2 Cor 4:8), makes it possible to look at all the perplexities and mysteries of life without too much fear. We are able to divide the world into three groups: those who are not perplexed, those who are perplexed but not unto despair, those who are perplexed unto despair. Those “who are not perplexed have dissolved all the mysteries and perplexities of life by some simple scheme of meaning. . . . The Christian faith does not pretend to resolve all perplexities. It confesses the darkness of human sight and the perplexities of faith. It escapes despair nevertheless because it holds fast to the essential goodness of God as revealed in Christ, and is therefore ‘persuaded that neither life nor death’ are able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Jesus Christ our Lord” (MM, 169-170; Rom 8:38). The challenge is whether one gives these perplexities premature completeness in dogmatic expressions or wooden creeds. “A faith which resolves mystery too much denies the finiteness of all human knowledge, including the knowledge of faith. A faith which is overwhelmed by mystery denies the clues of divine meaning which shine through the perplexities of life. The proper combination of humility and trust is precisely defined when we affirm that

we see, but admit that we see through a glass darkly” (Ibid., 171; 1 Cor 13: 12). When we too optimistically point to certain historical particularities as the meaning and finality of our faith we pretend to see too clearly; mystery has no part in such a faith. Niebuhr’s understanding of myth underscores that every “Christian myth, in one way or another, expresses both the meaningfulness and the incompleteness of the temporal world, both the majesty of God and his relation to the world” (BT, 7). Niebuhr finds purely rational approaches to religion inadequate; one needs to look toward a purer mythical approach in which the transcendent is defined and ceases to be mere emptiness. Human knowledge and experience always point to a source of meaning in life. “Great myths have actually been born out of profound experience and are constantly subject to verification by experience” (TM, 30). Because “myth is rooted in historical experience, it is a concept which does not harm historical realities but . . . ascribes a meaning to history by both being born out of history and pointing beyond it.”²⁶ The experience that verifies [the myth] and saves the myth from caprice is usually in the realm of history and of freedom beyond the structures and laws of existence (SDH, 97).

2.1 Niebuhr’s Doctrine of History

For Niebuhr human history is rooted in the natural process but is something more than either the determined sequences of natural causation or the capricious variations and occurrences of the natural world (NDM, 2:1). Being rooted in this historical process, we cannot see its full meaning. “Hence the temporal problem of human history and destiny in historical religions is: how the transcendent meaning of history is to be disclosed and fulfilled, since man can discern only partial meanings and can only partially realize the meanings he discerns” (NDM, 2:3-4).

The basic distinction between historical and non historical religions may be defined as expected “wherever history is thought of as a realm of fragmentary revelations of a purpose and power transcending history, pointing to a fuller disclosure of that power and purpose” (NDM, 2:5). A Christ is not expected in cultures that see the system of nature as the final reality to which we must adjust, or as a chaos or a meaningless

order from which we will one day be freed (NDM, 2:4-7).

History is understood as a vertical rather than horizontal and temporal dialectic. "Past and future do not form the major antithesis of theology, with the result that for Niebuhr the historical future cannot and will not be identical with redemption or final fulfillment. Rather, the transcendent God impinging on all of history yet never identical with any portion of it is the principle of historical meaning."²⁷ History is of one piece and not separated into two aeons. God's final self communication points to the disclosure of history's meaning in Jesus Christ, not to the fulfillment of history's meaning in the future *parousia*.

2.2 Myth in Niebuhr's Eschatology

Niebuhr mythical interpretation pertains to the following eschatological symbols: *parousia*, Resurrection of the body, the AntiChrist, and the Last Judgment. Let us look at Niebuhr's understanding of the biblical myth or symbol. We will distinguish between permanent and primitive myths at a later point, when contrasting Bultmann and Niebuhr. For now, we note that Niebuhr wishes to take biblical symbols seriously but not literally (NDM, 2:50). "For what is true in the Christian religion can be expressed only in symbols which contain a certain degree of provisional and superficial deception."²⁸ If biblical myths are taken literally the biblical "conception of a dialectic relation between history and superhistory is imperiled; for in that case the fulfillment of history becomes merely another kind of timehistory. If the symbols are not taken seriously the Biblical dialectic is destroyed, because in that case concepts of an eternity are connoted in which history is destroyed and not fulfilled" (NDM, 2:50). As we view the *eschata*, it is important to remember that theologically, Niebuhr considers the biblical and Christian myths to have primarily an ethical meaning and a vertical dialectic (TH, 37).

2.3 The Eschatological Symbols

2.3.1 The Parousia

This idea dominates the last judgment and the resurrection. To believe

that the suffering Messiah will return at the end of history as a triumphant judge and redeemer is to express faith that existence cannot ultimately defy its own norm (NDM, 2:290). This return of Christ is located at the end of history in such a way that it appears to be a triumph within history. Yet, according to other interpretations, the fulfilment of the historical process is also its end in the quantitative sense, of which the redemption of history appears to be the culmination (NDM, 2:290-91). Niebuhr insists that a right understanding of the *parousia* opposes utopianism on the one side and a one-dimensional otherworldliness on the other. Against utopianism, the Christian faith insists that the final consummation of history lies beyond the temporal process; against otherworldliness, it asserts that the consummation fulfills rather than negates the historical process (NDM, 2:291).

2.3.2 The Last Judgment

The idea of the last judgment contains three important facets of the Christian conception of life and history. The first is expressed in the idea that Christ will be the judge of history; the second is the emphasis on the fact that the distinction between good and evil in history is not swallowed up in a distinctionless eternity (NDM, 291-92). The third facet “is to be found in its locus at the ‘end’ of history” (NDM, 2:293). The idea of a ‘last’ judgment expresses Christianity’s refutation of all conceptions of history, “according to which it is its own redeemer and is able by its process of growth and development, to emancipate” (NDM, 2: 293), humans from the guilt of sin, and to free us from judgment. Before faith can apprehend the divine mercy which completes our incompleteness and forgives our sins it must confront the divine judge. In this confrontation it is not death but the sting of death which is recognized as the real peril. We would not fear the cessation of life if we had not made ourselves the centre of life’s meaning (NDM, 2:293).²⁹

2.3.3 The Resurrection

The Resurrection of the body is that in which modern minds take the greatest offense, and which has long been displaced by the immortality of the soul (NDM, 2:294). The hope of the Resurrection of the body

embodies the genius of the Christian idea of the historical. "On the one hand it implies that eternity will fulfil and not annul the richness and variety which the temporal process has elaborated. On the other it implies that the condition of finiteness and freedom, which lies at the basis of historical existence, is a problem for which there is no solution" (NDM, 2:295). This stumbling stone of offense, which Niebuhr and his fellow seminarians reject, was later made the head of the corner. There is no part of the Apostle's creed, writes Niebuhr, "which, in our present opinion, expresses the whole genius of the Christian faith more neatly than just this despised phrase: 'I believe in the resurrection of the body'" (BT, 290). The resurrection of the body implies the unity of body and soul. In contrast to forms of dualism, it must be recorded that the facts of human experience point to the organic unity of soul and body (292). As well, to believe that the body is resurrected is to say that eternity is not a cancellation of time and history but that history is fulfilled in eternity. To insist that the body must be resurrected is to understand that time and eternity have meaning only because they are borne by an eternity which transcends them (BT, 292).

2.3.4 *The AntiChrist*

Though treated separately from the *eschata*, Niebuhr believes the Anti Christ does belong to the 'last things' which herald the end of history (NDM, 2:316). To take this idea seriously is to understand that history does not solve the problem of its own ambiguity and that the future cannot guarantee increasing virtue or security. "The Anti Christ symbolizes that the most explicit denial of the norm of history must be expected in the most ultimate development of history."³⁰

The final evil is dependent upon the final good. Either it consciously and explicitly defies the Christ, in which case it requires Christ as a foil; or it is a lesser good, claiming to be the ultimate one, in which case it requires Christ as a cloak. The one form is the Anti Christ of the sinners, and the other the Anti Christ of the righteous. But in either case the force of the Anti Christ, though parasitic and negative in origin, is so positive in effect, and so stubborn in purpose that no force, immanent in history, is capable of

encompassing its defeat. “The Anti Christ who appears at the end of history can only be defeated by the Christ who ends history” (NDM, 2:319).

3. Bultmann and Niebuhr: Contrast and Comparison

Niebuhr, like so many others, was confused by Bultmann’s definition of myth and his project of demythologization. Niebuhr remarks that the word ‘myth’ has “subjective and skeptical connotations” and that he wished he had never used it, “particularly since the project for ‘demythologizing’ the Bible has been undertaken.”³¹ Like many others, Niebuhr believes that Bultmann’s enterprise of cleansing the message of ‘prescientific’ myths ends in equating the *kerygma* with the message of existentialist philosophy. He then criticizes Bultmann for his inability to save the permanent myth while doing away with the prescientific myth (SDH, 97).

This raises concern for anyone wanting to embrace Bultmann’s project of demythologization. We would add to this, that Bultmann’s main thrust is to save the *kerygma* while removing the myth which envelops and masquerades it. Niebuhr would use language such as permanent and primitive myth, the permanent myth being the kerygmatic element of the gospel, and the primitive myth being the archaic story which surrounds it. The two theologians are reaching toward the same end more than Niebuhr realized. Their language is different, but their understanding of New Testament mythology is similar. Niebuhr writes that virgins do not have babies, Bultmann would no doubt comply that this was a myth of primitive Christianity. They are like minded when treating the fantastic stories of the Bible. At another level, Niebuhr does say, and Bultmann may not, say that these myths are rooted in history. While Bultmann is more concerned with interpreting the mythical eschatology of the New Testament, since the end did not occur as soon as Jesus expected, Niebuhr interprets the eschatological symbols in an ethical manner, with reproaches against utopian expectations of complete fulfillment within history (ICE, 22-38). The “Kingdom of God as it *has come* in Christ means a disclosure of the meaning of history but not the full realization of that meaning” (NDM, 2:288). Bultmann and Niebuhr also diverge on the way to

understand the *parousia*. There is actually quite a difference in outlook when discussing the New Testament idea of the End. For Niebuhr, symbols are taken seriously but not literally, and it is unwise “for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell; or to be too certain about any details of the Kingdom of God in which history is consummated” (NDM, 2:294). Bultmann takes the biblical symbols seriously and appropriates them to our age. He would surely agree that we claim to know too much about our eternal destinies.³² We could probably argue, with degrees of success, to their estimable differences, but we think it better to highlight the similarities between these influential twentieth century theologians. Bultmann and Niebuhr are both concerned with the meaning of the text for Christians today. Niebuhr consistently applies an ethical reading of the biblical symbols, and Bultmann’s desire is to save the *kerygma* of the text by using an existentialist method of interpretation. Niebuhr insists that the only way to give meaning to history is through a mythology and that the mythical narratives in the Bible should not be taken literally precisely because they point to so much more than an historical particularity. These narratives speak of God entering history. For Bultmann, the mythical narrative clouds our ability to see and comprehend the *kerygma*, the soteriological element of the text. For Niebuhr, it is the permanent myth that is within the primitive myth. Both understand that there is a *kernel* of meaning within the mythical trappings. Both want to save this salvific element of the narrative. Here is the real significance of the text – its ultimate meaning.

Notes

1. “Is Exegesis Possible Without Presuppositions?” The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 148-150.
2. Kendrick Grobel, “The Practice of Demythologizing,” in The Journal of Bible and Religion 27/1 (January 1959): 28-31.
3. Ibid.

4. John Macquarrie, "Bultmann's Existential Approach to Theology" Union Seminary Quarterly Review 12, no. 4 (May 1957): 18.

5. Le Message Chretien et le Mythe (Brussels: Desclée de Brouwer).

6. The Christian Message and Myth, 29.

7. Schubert Ogden, Christ Without Myth (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 45-46.

8. A. Malet. The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann. Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1969, 2.

9. *Ibid.*, 332.

10. Christ Without Myth, 44.

11. The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann, 45. *Dass*, Malet explains, on page 7, is opposed to *Was*. "The *Was* is *what* (a thing is), what it has in common with others; whereas the *Dass* expresses the *that*, sheer otherness. The "what" is the conceptual content, the nature, the essence, the substance. The *that* expresses advent and event. Every being is at once *Was* and *Dass*. What Peter and John have in common is that both are men, not trees or animals (the plane of the *Was*). But at the same time they are two beings absolutely irreducible to each other; each one is unique (the place of the *Dass*)."

12. *Ibid.*, 46.

13. Martin J. De Nys, "Myth and Interpretation: Bultmann Revisited," International Journal of Philosophy and Religion 11 (1980): 35.

14. Seinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 2:50.

15. "Bultmann's Existential Approach to Theology," 20.

16. *Ibid.*, 5.

17. Bultmann continues that the “only point in dispute is whether Jesus thought that the reign of God was immediately imminent . . . or whether he thought it was already present in his person “what today is called ‘realised eschatology’” (History and Eschatology, 31).

18. “New Testament and Mythology,” 5. See Mark 13:2627; 1 Thess
4:16f.; 1

Cor 15:51f.

19. The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann, 19.

20. *Ibid.*, 206.

21. See The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann, 206; and TNT, 1:37.

22. Walter Schmithals, An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967), 223.

23. John M. Russell, “Through a Glass Darkly: the Epistemology of Reinhold Niebuhr,” in Journal of Religious Studies 12/2 (1986): 74.

24. Kosuke Nishitani, Niebuhr, Hromadka, Troeltsch, and Barth: the Significance of Theology for Christian Social Ethics (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 104.

25. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Truth in Myths,” in Faith and Politics, ed. Ronald H. Stone (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 16. The mythical heritage of the Christian faith, for Niebuhr consists in the Creation, Fall, Atonement, Resurrection, and things eschatological.

26. Kosuke Nishitani, 108.

27. Langdon Gilkey, “Niebuhr’s Theology of History,” in The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr, ed., Nathan A. Scott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 43.

28. Reinhold Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937), 3. Niebuhr continues, “A rational or logical expression of of the relationship [between time and eternity] invariably leads either to a pantheism in which God and the world are identified, and the temporal in its totality is equated with the eternal; or in which they are separated

so that a false supernaturalism emerges, a dualism between an eternal and spiritual world without content and a temporal world without meaning or significance" (BT, 4).

29. Ibid.

30. Gordon Harland, The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 121-122. Harland is quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny II: 316.

31. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, eds., Charles W. Kegley & Robert W. Bretall, 439.

32. „Wollen wir Gott schauen, so sollen wir uns zuerst sagen, daß wir ihn vielleicht nicht so schauen werden, wie wir uns ihn gedacht haben; so müssen wir uns darauf gefaßt machen, daß er vielleicht ganz anders aus-sieht als das Bild, das wir uns von ihm gemacht haben; so müssen wir bereit sein, seinen Anblick auch mit Schrecken entgegenzunehmen. Können wir ihn in der Gegenwart nicht schauen? Ist unser altes Gottesbild in Trümmer gegangen? So wollen wir zuerst dafür danken, daß wir den falschen Begriff verloren haben; denn nur so können wir ihn schauen, wie er wirklich ist“ (Rudolf Bultmann, *Vom geheimnisvollen und vom offenbaren Gott: Pfingstpredigt. Christliche Welt* 31, [1917]: 574-575).

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