

## 2. The Enigma of Myth

Psalm 23 has been a favorite Scripture of many people, but it has often been cheapened through a sentimentalized understanding of the word "God" or "Lord." The richness of this Psalm only appears when we view this "shepherd" as the Reality that creates, sustains, and terminates all realities, as the Reality that we confront in all the ups and downs of our daily lives. So here is my very slight rewording of this Psalm in order to emphasize its original meaning:

Reality is my shepherd, so I lack nothing.  
This shepherd provides green pastures,  
and leads me to peaceful drinking water.  
This Ground-of-all-being persistently renews life within me,  
and guides me step-by-step on the path of righteous realism.  
Even when I walk through a valley dark as death,  
I fear nothing, for the Great Shepherd is leading me.

Dear Shepherding Reality, my devotion, when Your staff pushes me  
or Your crook holds me back,  
I see these actions as my comfort.  
Indeed, Oh Final Mystery, You spread a picnic for me,  
even in the presence of my enemies.  
My head is anointed in Your oil of honor.  
My cup of aliveness runs over.

So I say to all of you here listening:  
Goodness and love unfailing will attend me,  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall abide happily within this Enduring Wholeness  
my whole life long.

I am convinced that the above understanding of this Psalm is the understanding meant by whoever it was that wrote this Psalm. Though the original vocabulary was different for this ancient poet of realistic living, I believe that his or her deep awareness about realistic living was the same as the one I am attempting to express.

Jesus was surely familiar with this Psalm. Indeed, I believe that Jesus added nothing to this Psalm except a full devotion to living it. Jesus was nothing more than a good Jew in the terms meant by this Psalm. Such a happily devoted trust of Reality is the basic attitude that could unite Jews and Christians and both Jews and Christians with Muslims.

I mean this seriously; Jesus was nothing more than a good Jew, where "good Jew" means living Psalm 23.

### Demythologizing the Bible

The above example of biblical interpretation illustrates a sophisticated and controversial type of theologizing that Rudolf Bultmann called "demythologizing." Demythologizing may have occasioned more ink and more misunderstanding than any other theological insight in the history of Christianity.

If "myth" means metaphorical thinking, we cannot demythologize our speech. Metaphor is basic to the functioning of human language and of the human mind, so any attempt to rid ourselves of metaphor is to rid ourselves of all the arts, all contemplative inquiry, and all communication about the Awe, Wonder, and Mystery of our profound

lives. Such de-metaphorizing of human speech would reduce us to a strictly literalistic style of scientific thinking. However valuable scientific thinking is, no one lives his or her entire life in that style of thought. Even a Nobel prize-winning physicist, when telling us about the meaning of his objective, literal, scientific research, will revert to metaphor to communicate the meaning of his carefully objective experimental work.

By "demythologizing" Bultmann *does not mean* ridding us of thinking in metaphor. He was a lover of all the arts and of metaphorical thinking in philosophy and theology. His strict historical science focused on finding for our century the actual use and meaning of the great metaphors of the New Testament texts as they functioned in their first century cultural setting and how that meaning might be communicated in our current contemporary setting. Doing this task required of him great scientific exactitude, but also metaphorical understanding and the existential insight needed to restate old metaphors in contemporary metaphorical usage.

So what does Bultmann mean by demythologizing? He means moving our theological thought beyond the double-deck myth of "Heaven and Earth." That myth was not about sky and ground, but about a realm of Eternal stuff alongside our ordinary realm of temporal stuff. This myth has had many forms and is not unique to Christianity. Both ancient Judaism and ancient Athenian philosophy had versions of it. Pre-civilization humans spoke of trance space and ordinary space, of spirit beings and ordinary beings, of spirit dynamics and ordinary dynamics. In Aboriginal Australia the old sages spoke of dreamtime and ordinary time. Western Medieval philosophy and theology took for granted that profound thought had to reckon with the supernatural as well as the natural.

So, it is a huge step to fully understand that this thirty-thousand-year-old (or even a hundred-thousand-year-old) basic cultural metaphor is now obsolete. Why is it obsolete? Because we modern humans have killed it. We have killed it in two ways. We have killed it by forgetting that it is a metaphor, by supposing that "heaven" is a literal place like Olathe, Kansas. Secondly, we have killed it by denying the existence of the truth about living that this metaphor was created by humans to express to other humans.

This second killing is more difficult to understand, for to understand the truth of this obsolete metaphor we have to do what Bultmann was doing; that is, we have to "demythologize" it. We have to say in contemporary speech the truth that this ancient metaphor expressed for human beings during so many millennia of religious reflection. So, with what sort of contemporary thought do we express this truth in order to say to our age what earlier humans were saying to their age, using this now obsolete (i.e. killed) metaphor? "Existential thought" is Bultmann's answer. Existential thought describes our primal existence in a contemporary mode of expression that can handle the meaning that was meant by those who first used the now defunct two-story metaphor.

So what is existential thought? It is a type of thought that all of us do, but most of us have not thought about thinking enough to distinguish existential thinking from scientific thinking. In fact, few of us have thought about scientific thinking enough to distinguish it from the authoritative thinking we get from both secular and religious communities. Here is the fundamental philosophical challenge we need to grasp in order to understand clearly the truth of Bultmann's demythologizing: (1) What is the scientific method and why is it valid? And (2) what is existential thought and how is it different from scientific thought and yet just as valid as scientific thought? If we are not willing to venture into this rarified atmosphere of basic thinking about thinking itself, we will not understand why that very old two-realm metaphor is dead, and why we have to replace it with other forms of metaphorical thought that connect with the lives and minds of the people of our times. When we get the hang of such metaphorical

translation, we can renew all our old religious texts by translating them line-by-line from the old two-story metaphor into contemporary metaphors that we can use to say the truth that these earlier humans were expressing by using the two-story metaphor.

If you have followed me this far, perhaps you are ready to take on a brief philosophical adventure in which I will attempt to summarize two basic human approaches to truth, the scientific and the existential (or contemplative). I will do so in a simplified, and perhaps preposterously brief manner.

**Science** is a process of guessing interpretative overviews that render predictable some specific realm of sensory experience that has been formulated into “facts” that we scientists can all agree are beyond doubt. Science, so understood, does not say anything about subjective states. In fact, the ideal of science is to stick to the facts and not let any subjective preferences interfere with the scientific quest for truth. Hence science, though impressively valid in what it accomplishes, cannot say anything authoritative about the inner life of human beings. It can only deal with human behaviors, including the reports that human beings make about their inner experience. This strictly “objective” approach to truth cannot deal with the sort of truth that is dealt with in contemplative inquiry, existential philosophy, all the arts, existential history, existential psychology, as well as the sort of truth that the ancient two-story metaphor was also invented to express.

**Existential thought** deals with the truth or untruth of those reports that human beings make about their inner experience. So we need to explore how existential thought evaluates the truth of our inner experience? To do so we have to envision our own selves looking with our own consciousness into our own inner experience of being conscious. We do know somehow when we are feeling very bad and when we are feeling very good. We do in truth realize when we are despairing over our lives and when we are released from such grim times into some sort of relief or perhaps joy of living our real opportunities for being alive. All the arts assist us in expressing to one another these complex and simple awarenesses. We often read a really good novel in order to experience with those fictitious characters something of our own experience of our own living experience. We listen to music because those abstracted flows of sound somehow correspond with flows of feelings that we recognize. We could say something similar about paintings, sculpture, and architecture, about poetry and song, about dance and drama. Existentialism is everywhere in our experience of the arts. Existentialism in philosophy and theology is also widely present. We use words to inquire into our inner experience in order to experience what is so in that experience and what is not so – that is, what is illusory, misleading, incomplete, etc.

So with this brief summation in mind, let us focus on some examples of metaphorical translation into contemporary existential discourse of some old texts in which the two-story metaphor is prominent.

### **“The Lord,” my Shepherd**

As an example of metaphorical translation, let us explore the 23rd Psalm in more detail. I will use The New English Bible translation as our version of the ancient poem.

*The Lord is my shepherd: I shall want nothing.*

Clearly “shepherd” is a metaphor. We know that the “Infinite Source” of the entire cosmos is not literally a shepherd. The meaning here is the Psalmist’s sense of being cared for like a sheep is cared for by an ancient peasant herder who stays up all night guarding his flock from the wolves.

“I shall want nothing” further elaborates this metaphorical talk. It says that this “Eternal shepherd” “provides all things well.” Nothing is missing from this sort of care.

Bultmann is not asking us to demythologize simple metaphors like “shepherd.” What concerns him is cryptic terms like “The Lord” and how that term has been passed to us along with concepts like “heaven” where this Lord’s “Almighty-ness” is assumed to “dwell.” Note also that “Creator” and “creation” are also elements of a cosmic two-level story about the relation between our existence (as well as the existence of everything else) to a heavenly Actor. So for 21st Century humans to get the full meaning of this Psalm depends upon how we translate “this heavenly Lord” for a generation of humans who do not accept a “literal heaven” and for whom even a “metaphorical heaven” is talk that it is difficult to take seriously.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures  
and leads me beside the calm water.*

“He” means “The Lord,” and the metaphor “Lord” means an Almighty-ness beyond the stars that out ranks the most powerful royalty here on Earth. So how do we experience in our everyday existence being cared for by such an all-powerful Power? This question reveals how necessary “demythologizing” is. If we cannot talk about a universe next door, then this “He” or “Lord” seems meaningless. To see the meaning of this Psalm to those who first heard it, we must describe the meaning of the term “Lord” in metaphors that we find useful for exploring our own deep life experience.

*He renews life within me.*

The Psalmist is taking about something transformational in his or her own life. So in our own contemporary talk, what experiences symbolized by “Almighty Power” could be transformational in our lives? Surely we can see meaning in this Psalm if we simply notice that the Power of Mysterious Reality (the Every-thing-ness in which all things coexist, the Void out of which all things come and to which all things return) is an experience we have all had. Through both the sciences and our existential inquiry, we can experience a realization of an inescapable UPAGAINTNESS, the encounter with which can be experienced as transformational in the sense of being an auditing of our illusions and thereby a restoring of our authenticity.

*And for his name's sake guides me in the right path.*

This line further states the importance of this message. The right path for my life is surely serious business. “His name’s sake” probably needs some interpretation. The likely meaning is: “The Lord’s reputation among the family of humanity.” Implied here is that the reputation of the Creator of the cosmos is somehow being related to “my right path.” Being guided on “my right path” by this Lord of all is about the reputation of the Lord of All. The reputation implied includes both powerfulness and love for we humans. And also implied is that Final Reality establishes (Her, His, Its) reputation among humanity by guiding me and you in a life of realistic living that we wholeheartedly affirm.

*Even though I walk through a valley dark as death  
I fear no evil, for thou art with me,  
thy staff and thy crook are my comfort.*

We are back to the shepherd metaphor. I am a fragile little sheep on a moonless night with unknown dangers, including death, lurking around me. Life is like this. I am often in moments of extreme stress. But since I am in the fold of this Almighty Shepherd, I need have no fear because my protector is All Powerful. There is a staff beating away the wolves of illusion. And there is a crook pulling me back from the

cliffs of untruth. The shepherd metaphors do not need to be replaced. They can still speak to us. What needs to be replaced is the overall metaphor of a Divine Thou in a parallel universe. This master myth is also the myth that is prominent in the first verses of the Bible. The Creator and the creation constitute a myth, a story acted out on a double-deck stage. Your mind is sitting in a theater with two stages, stacked one on top of the other. On the upper stage a kingly figure sits with his attending angels. On the lower stage there is nothing, just darkness. Then the kingly figure yells out "Let there be light," and the lower stage is lighted. Somewhat later in this drama, the sun is created to mark the day. The science used in that ancient myth is not as clear as we now are about how electromagnetic energy is coming to us from the sun. Clearly, a modern mind cannot "believe" that ancient myth in a literal manner. So what is the Genesis creation myth saying, existentially, that can be translated into modern metaphors? Our own lives and everything that makes up our environment is being brought to be by an Almightyness with which we are inescapably related and which we can unreservedly trust because all that is being created is good. If this Almightyness is our shepherd, our God, our focus of primal trust, then the verses of Psalm 23 can make sense in our historical decade. We can translate the experience that was symbolized by a transcendent being who acts in our ordinary history to what we can best symbolized as an Everlasting Mysterious presence that is shining through every event that we face. With this way of understanding "Lord," let us continue viewing the words of the 23rd Psalm.

*Thou spreadest a table for me in the sight of my enemies;  
Thou has richly bathed my head with oil,  
and my cup runs over.  
Goodness and love unfailing, these will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.*

It may be unusual and challenging to imagine such trust in that Mysterious Almightyness we experience as the backlight to every experience of our lives, but if such trust exists at all, it is a trust that cannot fail, for the trusted Reality is Almighty.

So how can this Almightyness that every one of us has experienced or can experience be so completely trusted by us? How can it come to pass that this Almightyness we automatically dread profoundly, is viewed by us as our friend, our invincible protector? And, protector from what? Clearly, we all die eventually. The Almightyness does not protect us from dying. We also suffer many forms of negation while we live. There is no protection from that. But if we see our greatest danger as being lost in illusion and separated from what is Real, we can glimpse what trusting the Almightyness is all about. Our life and our death are indeed enriched if we are "in touch" with things, rather than "out of touch" with what is Real.

## Resurrection of the Dead

Bultmann stirred up the most fuss by demythologizing the myth of resurrection. In New Testament times, there existed a generally accepted story about how all of us were to be raised up at the end of time for a final reckoning. The wheat of human living was to be separated from the weeds of human living. The weeds were to be burned, and the wheat celebrated. Such a story, though wildly difficult for modern ears, seemed plausible to those who found such metaphors supportive of the intuition that Reality wins in the end. Reality cannot be defeated, human unrealisms can only win temporarily. Eventually, the unreal is vanquished by the Real.

With this meaning of “resurrection” stirring in the minds of the earliest Christians, they said that Jesus was already resurrected, a true example of what realistic living looks like, an example that could not be destroyed by the most vicious torture and death. Indeed, these first Christ-way mythologizers viewed their own flesh and blood as “in Christ” in his resurrected reality. Whatever projections of Jesus’ post-crucifixion presence these disciples may have “seen” what they saw for sure was that this “life” was not over.

The resurrection of Jesus entailed burning up of all their contrary views of the coming Messiah, such as: “A true Messiah would throw off Roman rule.” Rather Jesus was crucified by Roman rule as well as by its Jewish collaborators. And we need to see this rejection more universally—namely that the most realistic person among us was tortured to death by an unrealistic humanity. So to see Jesus as resurrected meant a profound transfiguration in our sense of how the Final Almightyness works in doing all things well.

Also, resurrection was not just story: it was an event that really did happen in the sense that the disciples did see Jesus as resurrected. Indeed, they saw themselves as resurrected in seeing Jesus as resurrected. Insofar as we are true disciples of Jesus, we are parts of this flesh and blood bodily resurrection in history. We express, to some extent, the exemplary life of the resurrected Jesus. We, the disciples, were rescued from the unrealism that was defeated by Jesus in both his life and his death. We the disciples were restored to trusting the Almightyness to do all things well, and thus make sense of the 23rd Psalm. Indeed the disciples of Jesus are Jesus: they are his resurrected body. They are the flesh and blood body of Christ in history. They are the resurrection. They see Jesus in each other’s living flesh. Whether or not these original disciples saw dreamlike images of Jesus seated among them, we might debate. But my conviction is that at least some of them knew full well that they were writing their resurrection stories as good fiction. Such a direction of thought demythologizes the myth of resurrection and makes it an option for a contemporary self-understanding today.

Having seen this new view of the event of resurrection, we can turn loose of any remaining remnants of the notion that there was a literal return to life of a three-day old corpse—a scientifically interesting event, viewable by a video camera if there had been one. We know that if such a claim were made of someone today, we would at most submit such information to a psychosomatic investigating society. And whatever might be discovered by such an investigation, the results would not change our whole lives or start a religious revolution.

## **So what has Bultmann’s demythologizing done for us?**

Bultmann has showed us the meaning of first-century New-Testament metaphors in terms of metaphors that are understandable in our contemporary cultures. Some say he went far with this. Others say he did not go far enough.

Not all who say he went too far are crass literalists. Langdon Gilkey is one capable and liberal theologian who claims that we need the old two-realm metaphor in order to express the meaning of “God” and “Spirit” as more profound than an aspect of our temporal lives. What is lacking in Gilkey’s thinking is the experience of using a contemporary metaphor to point beyond our temporal processes. With what I call “the transparency metaphor” we can speak of God as the Eternal Mysteriousness that is “neighboring” in every event—that is shining through every neighboring being and thereby meeting us in every thing that is happening to us. In this context the word “God” can be seen as a devotional word that confesses our trust in this existentially experienced Infinite Mysteriousness. Rather than being a story about an Eternal being in an Eternal heaven, “God” becomes our confession that this Eternal Mysteriousness

we confront every day is trustworthy—is trusted by us, as loving us, as accepting us, as ordering the cosmos for us, as calling us, and auditing us, as sending us forth in the action of doing realistic speech and deeds of response-ability.

Other theologians have viewed Bultmann as having not gone far enough. Some want to eliminate the word “God” and the word “theology.” Others want to “go further than Bultmann” by using the word “God” as big idea that completes a worldview of meaning. For example, Shubert Ogden in his book *The Reality of God* attempts to “go farther than Bultmann” by using the word “God” in a super rational way. If the word “God” is simply a devotional word for Reality in its Mysterious Wholeness, then the idea of “the reality of God” is nonsense. The Final Mysteriousness of Reality is not *a reality alongside other realities*. The Final Mysteriousness is the *Ground* from which all realities come into being and the *Ground* to which all realities return. The biblical texts cannot be twisted to mean *a reality* rather than *the Final Totality of Reality* within which all realities come into being, are sustained, and pass away.

Bultmann has helped us to see “*the unseen God*” through the specific events of our lives—to see how each event can turn *transparent* to the completely mysterious, inescapable, and demanding Final Reality that can be *Present* to us in all real events.

So let us avoid hanging on to any type of theologizing that is less far-reaching than the contributions of Bultmann’s remarkably clarifying voice. Having established a solid honoring of him, we can, of course, then be willing, and even required, to move beyond him in our creative poeticizing and in our application to our ongoing living of the theological methods that Bultmann has bestowed upon us.

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