

JOHN 1:14a AND RUDOLF BULTMANN'S  
HERMENEUTICAL METHOD

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**JOHN 1:14a AND RUDOLF BULTMANN'S HERMENEUTICAL METHOD**

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## ABSTRACT

**“Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο”--“and the Word became flesh” (John 1:14a)-**  
**-is a key verse in the thought of Rudolf Bultmann. His interpretation of this verse**  
**is, in fact, paradigmatic for understanding his whole hermeneutical method. Yet**  
**the conventional understanding of his interpretation of 1:14a and, consequently,**  
**his hermeneutical method, is beset with misunderstandings.**

**The difficulty of understanding Bultmann’s hermeneutical method results**  
**from placing it in a Cartesian context, which seeks a clear and objective**  
**interpretation. Bultmann’s thought, however, resists such Cartesian**  
**contextualization. A post-structural context, which similarly rejects Cartesianism,**  
**is better suited as a context for understanding Bultmann’s thought.**

**It is imperative, however, that John 1:14a and the theological principle of**  
**justification by faith be shown as the core of his thought, rather than reducing his**  
**hermeneutical method to a philosophy. By the juxtaposition of a post-structural**  
**context, John 1:14a, and justification by faith, a renewed and more fruitful**  
**discussion of Bultmann and his hermeneutical method may follow.**

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JOHN 1:14a IN THE THOUGHT OF RUDOLF BULTMANN**

### **Introduction**

**“Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο”--“and the Word became flesh” (John 1:14a)-**  
-is perhaps the key verse in the Gospel of John, and as such it played a significant  
role in the formation of Rudolf Bultmann’s thought. It has also been the  
traditional verse by which the Christian tradition has affirmed a realistic  
incarnation in reaction to docetic claims. It is not surprising, then, that much of the  
discussion of Bultmann’s thought revolves around his exegesis and/or source  
criticism of 1:14a. But often such studies reject Bultmann’s Gnostic source theory  
and his incarnational exegesis and then proceed to reject his entire thought on the  
basis of this rejection of his source criticism and exegesis. The present  
examination of Bultmann, however, will not examine the exegesis or source  
criticism of Bultmann, but rather will focus on his hermeneutic. Bultmann states  
very well the intended aim of his task, “Our task is to discover the hermeneutical

principle by which we understand what is said in the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the question of this thesis will not be what is the source material behind 1:14a, or for that matter the source material of the prologue itself, but rather: “what is the relation between 1:14a as it stands and Bultmann’s hermeneutic?”

The question may well be raised, if it is shown that Bultmann’s foundational assumptions are flawed, that is, those dealing with his exegesis and source criticism, then is it credible to focus exclusively on his hermeneutic? A simple answer to this question is yes. If it is the case that Bultmann’s gnostic source theory is incorrect it does not necessarily add or remove any weight from his interpretation of 1:14a that focuses on the “flesh.” In other words, it is legitimate to differentiate between the origins of Bultmann’s thought and its substance. Just as the text of John itself is often interpreted as it stands,<sup>2</sup> so now Bultmann’s thought will be discussed as it stands. The above mentioned critiques of Bultmann do not, therefore, negate the viability of examining his hermeneutic.

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<sup>1</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) , 54.

<sup>2</sup>David Hawkin, *The Johannine World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996) , 60.

As Ashton notes Bultmann's work is difficult to access because it exemplifies the 'hermeneutical circle'.<sup>3</sup> The hermeneutical circle means that "we can understand the whole only in terms of its constituent parts and the parts only in terms of the whole."<sup>4</sup> To access this circle the first chapter of this thesis will focus upon Bultmann's interpretation of 1:14a, and in order to fully show the significance of 1:14a in Bultmann's thought we will focus on Käsemann's critique of Bultmann. For it is Käsemann, himself an outstanding student of Bultmann, who sees more clearly than most the significance of John 1:14a for Bultmann's thought. Käsemann deals with this verse explicitly in *The Testament of Jesus*. The question to be raised first, then, is not what is the source behind 1:14a, but what is the interpretation of 1:14a as it now stands in the Gospel?

The contrasting interpretation between Bultmann and Käsemann is specifically based on the interpretation of "ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο." For example, is it an unquestioned humanity--"flesh"--that the Word becomes, or is it simply a manner of asserting that the Word entered the world? Bultmann

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<sup>3</sup>John Ashton, *Understanding The Fourth Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) , 45.

<sup>4</sup>Hawkin, *The Johannine World*, 45.

maintains that the Word does indeed become flesh literally, while Käsemann considers flesh to be a figurative expression.

These differing interpretations of 1:14a point to a paradigm of interpretation that carries beyond 1:14a itself. Bultmann's interpretation of 1:14a is, in fact, the best entry into his hermeneutical circle and is the paradigm of his historical method and theological understanding. Accordingly, the second chapter of this thesis will continue the investigation of Bultmann with a more detailed look at his method of interpretation in relation to his historical and theological thought.

The first two chapters, then, examine the significance of 1:14a for Bultmann as a paradigm of his method of interpretation. The third chapter will discuss Bultmann's method of interpretation, which has been brought to light through the study of 1:14a, and his historical and theological thought, in a post-structuralist context by showing that he has an anti-Cartesian influence in his method. It will then be shown that a post-structuralist context, in contrast to a Cartesian context, is a fruitful context for a discussion of Bultmann and 1:14a. Yet the significance of 1:14a will distance him from post-structuralism and will point to the core of his hermeneutic.

We may thus proceed to the task of Bultmann, to find the method of interpretation with which to interpret the Bible, and to the question, “What is Bultmann’s method?”

### **Bultmann and the Paradox of John 1:14a**

To understand Bultmann’s hermeneutical method it is necessary to first examine his interpretation of 1:14a which is, in essence, the paradigm of his method. As the paradigm of his method 1:14a is not, in any manner, underrated by Bultmann. He ranks 1:14a as the most significant verse of the Gospel, and, moreover, he says that “the main theme of the Gospel is ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο.”<sup>5</sup> No matter from which direction a study of Bultmann is ventured it is evident that an examination of 1:14a is necessary as a result of the great significance that Bultmann himself places upon it.

Bultmann considers 1:14a, as the main theme of the Gospel and its most significant verse, to be more than a speculative comment. Rather than 1:14a being a general principle or abstract concept, Bultmann maintains that there is a singular

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<sup>5</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 64. See also Bultmann, *Theology of The New Testament*, vol. II, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 40.

distinctiveness and great significance in the verse. More specifically, Bultmann states, “now the riddle is solved, the miracle is proclaimed: the Logos became flesh!”<sup>6</sup> The significance of this statement is conveyed most accurately through an examination of what Bultmann means by “flesh.”

The importance of this comment, “the Logos became flesh!” and the significance of the “flesh,” can be demonstrated by contrasting it with, for example, Gnosticism. Bultmann understands the Revealer to be a particular body and flesh, not body and flesh in general; hence, unlike the Gnostic redeemer, for whom place and time are of no importance along with the historical tradition, the Revealer, as Bultmann understands him, is a particular body of flesh in space and time.<sup>7</sup> What is passed on through 1:14a is not a timeless idea, but a particular body/flesh and an historical event.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the particular Revealer does not merely present an occasion for reflexion after which the individual can do without as is the case in Gnosticism, but rather is a decisive eschatological situation.<sup>9</sup> This decisive situation posits a

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<sup>6</sup>Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 61.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 66.

particular person and history that Bultmann considers necessary if 1:14a is to be significant.<sup>10</sup> Bultmann states that “revelation is an event with an other-worldly origin, but this event, if it is to have any significance for men, must take place in the human sphere.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, Bultmann is saying that if 1:14a does not take place in “the human sphere,” or if it is only a general concept, then it is essentially of no importance or relevance to humans. However, since Bultmann considers 1:14a to point to a particular person and history he maintains that “the Revealer appears not as man-in-general . . . but as a definite human being in history.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite being the main theme of the Gospel and its most significant verse, according to Bultmann, 1:14a incongruously reveals nothing more than “the word became flesh.” It does seem peculiar that for all the emphasis of flesh, history, and particularity that Bultmann places on 1:14a, it reveals nothing more than the

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<sup>10</sup>This ‘decisive eschatological situation’ will be examined in more detail in chapter two where it will be shown to be a decision, or faith. For the moment let it suffice to show that the event itself of John 1:14a is necessarily occurring in the ‘human sphere’.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>12</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 41.



statement that “the word became flesh.” Yet Bultmann insists that “Jesus as the Revealer of God reveals nothing but that he is the revealer.”<sup>13</sup>

This insistence of Bultmann that what is revealed is only that Jesus is the revealer raises the question, for example, of what has happened to the glory? Can it be seemingly dismissed so easily? Bultmann says that the Revealer does not fill others with an awe of the glory, but rather, “according to John, the Divine is the very counter-pole to the human, with the result that it is a paradox, an offense, that the Word became flesh” He then continues by commenting that in fact the divinity of the revealer is hidden.<sup>14</sup> Despite the hiddenness of the glory it is important to note that Bultmann is not negating the glory since he says that the Revealer “really” possesses the glory,<sup>15</sup> but rather is placing it outside of human understanding.

This is the paradoxical nature of the revelation, that the flesh is not the temporary container of glory, nor does it show the glory.<sup>16</sup> Bultmann comments that it is in sheer humanity that the Revealer exists, “the logos is now present in the

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>15</sup>Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 68.

<sup>16</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 50.

Incarnate, and indeed it is only as the Incarnate that it is present at all.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the glory, in conjunction with 1:14a, creates a paradox as noted by Bultmann, “this is the paradox which runs through the whole gospel: the δόξα [glory] is not seen alongside the σὰρξ [flesh], nor through the σὰρξ as through a window; it is to be seen in the σὰρξ and nowhere else.”<sup>18</sup> If the glory is to be seen Bultmann points, paradoxically, to the Passion, not a “heavenly luminosity.”<sup>19</sup>

The above paradox of the hidden glory--which would not be a paradox at all if Bultmann negated the glory--arises from Bultmann’s interpretation of 1:14a and is directly connected to “an offence.” Bultmann states that “the event of the revelation is a question, is an offence. This and nothing else is what is meant by ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Bultmann states that, contrary to seeing the divinity, “to be confronted with the Revealer is not to be presented with a persuasive set of answers [or an overwhelming glory] but only to be faced with a

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<sup>17</sup>Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 63.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>19</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding I*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM Press, 1966), 281.

<sup>20</sup>Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 62.

question.”<sup>21</sup> This question is not answered with either general propositions or with an overwhelming glory.<sup>22</sup>

The result of the offensive and paradoxical nature of 1:14a, and the resultant lack of answers, is the need to separate the flesh and glory. The paradox is muted and the offensive nature of 1:14a is dulled if the glory (incarnation) is denied or if the humanity is negated. Bultmann, for example, regards the offense of 1:14a--that the glory is the flesh--to be the main reason for the desire to place the Revealer in a costume:

His humanity must be no more than a disguise; it must be transparent. Men want to look away from the humanity, and see or sense the divinity, they want to penetrate the disguise--or they will expect the humanity to be no more than the visualization or the ‘form’ of the divine.<sup>23</sup>

In effect, if the humanity is a “disguise” then 1:14a is answered with glory, and conversely, if the glory is a sham then the humanity is the answer.

Thus, throughout John--not to mention interpreters of John--Bultmann considers any misunderstandings to be an expression, or direct consequence, of the

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>22</sup>The exact nature of this question is developed in chapter two.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 63.

offence of “the word became flesh.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, since 1:14a yields no answer in the form of a didactic proposition or unmistakable glory, it is a paradox and offensive. Therefore, any claim upon propositions or glory is erroneous and, consequently, can only lead to misunderstanding.

### **Käsemann and the Naive Docetism of the Fourth Evangelist**

Käsemann, a former devoted student of Bultmann, considers it important to understand Bultmann’s interpretation of John. More specifically, he states:

The first thing to be said is that this interpretation [Bultmann’s interpretation of John] will still be studied and have influence when even the names of Bultmann’s contemporary opponents are scarcely remembered. It belongs to the line of classic interpretations even if the fourth-form mind of our time does not recognize this.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, Käsemann says that “according to my own analysis of the structure of the Prologue, I must first of all say that I can no longer accept Bultmann’s interpretation as correctly distributing the stresses.”<sup>26</sup> And this unacceptable stress

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<sup>24</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 46.

<sup>25</sup>Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W.J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 15-16.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

makes, as Käsemann comments, 1:14a the “fulcrum of its exegesis”<sup>27</sup> and eventually led to his break with Bultmann.<sup>28</sup>

Käsemann considers the  $\sigma\alpha\rho\xi$  concept to be unable to justify Bultmann’s interpretation of, and emphasis upon, 1:14a. For Käsemann  $\sigma\alpha\rho\xi$  is nothing else than “the possibility for the Logos as the Creator and Revealer, to have communication with men.”<sup>29</sup> In effect, Käsemann considers 1:14a to be a transitional point to the real theme of the Gospel, namely, 1:14c, “We beheld his glory.”<sup>30</sup> It is because of the significance of the glory that Käsemann cannot understand why Bultmann places such a great emphasis on “pure and simple humanity.”<sup>31</sup> Rather, Käsemann says “the Evangelist allows the weight of his propositions to fall not on 14a but on 14c.”<sup>32</sup> Käsemann says:

For what reason is this statement [‘The Word became flesh’] almost always made the centre, the proper theme of the Gospel? . . . we must also ask: In what sense is he flesh, who walks on the water and through closed doors . . .

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 153.

<sup>28</sup>Ernst Käsemann, “What I Have Unlearned in 50 Years as a German Theologian” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15 (August 1988) : 330.

<sup>29</sup>Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, 159.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 159.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 161.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 164.

how does all this agree with the understanding of a realistic incarnation? . . . does the statement 'The Word became flesh' really mean more than that he descended into the world of man and there came into contact with earthly existence, so that an encounter with him became possible? Is not this statement totally overshadowed by the confession 'We beheld his glory'?"<sup>33</sup>

It is obvious that Käsemann's interpretation of 1:14a is contrary to Bultmann's since he regards the flesh as unintelligible and negligible when compared to the glory.

These questions regarding the humanity of Jesus lead Käsemann--just as Bultmann stated would happen as a result of the offensive paradox--to allude to the body of Jesus as being a costume and not being subject to earthly conditions.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Käsemann says, "the disguise, the hiding, of a divine being in lowliness may appear paradoxical, but it is not really paradoxical at all."<sup>35</sup> Käsemann continues by commenting that "incarnation in John does not mean complete, total entry into the earth, into human existence, but rather the encounter between the heavenly and the earthly."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: a Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (London: SCM Press, 1968) , 9.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 65.

This brings to light another important point, namely, Käsemann's emphasis on the "encounter between the heavenly and the earthly." This comment of Käsemann is in contrast to Bultmann who focuses on a particular person in history. Käsemann says that flesh is where the Word of God is recognized, and, more specifically, is "creatureliness in the whole range of its possibilities."<sup>37</sup> However cryptic "creatureliness in the whole range of possibilities" is, let it suffice to say that Käsemann is interested in a general humanity, not a particular person, when discussing the incarnation of 1:14a.

Accordingly, Käsemann perceives Bultmann as incorrectly understanding the incarnation radically as an entry, of the Logos, into a "totally human life."<sup>38</sup> Consequently, it is obvious that Käsemann does not think the incarnation is a "totally human life." Bornkamm aptly comments that according to Käsemann "there is no trace in John of a truly human Jesus . . . so in light of John 1:14 . . . it is meaningless to speak of a genuine paradox."<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Bultmann's position would be that the incarnation is a radical paradox and not an "eschatological

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<sup>37</sup>Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, 158.

<sup>38</sup>Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, 17.

<sup>39</sup>Günther Bornkamm, "Towards the Interpretation of John's Gospel: A Discussion of the Testament of Jesus by Ernst Käsemann," in *The Interpretation of John*, ed. J. Ashton (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 80.

occurrence as a process of nature by which the union of the essentially opposite natures . . . is dissolved.”<sup>40</sup> Further, Bultmann says “according to John, the divine is the very counter-pole to the human, with the result that it is a paradox, an offense, that the Word became flesh.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, one could speak of Käsemann’s understanding as dissolving the opposites, the paradox and, consequently, the offense.

Since Käsemann does not understand the flesh literally he then focuses on the glory and avoids the offensive nature of the paradox. He does so by avoiding the confrontation between the heavenly and the earthly. Käsemann states that “his [Jesus’] glory is perfected through his death, since his limitations cease and the realm of lowliness is left behind.”<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Käsemann says, “his death is rather the manifestation of divine self-giving love and his victorious return from the alien realm below to the Father who had sent him.”<sup>43</sup> Käsemann notes that “John understands the incarnation as a projection of the glory of Jesus’ pre-existence and passion as a return to that glory ‘which was before the world

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<sup>40</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 40.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>42</sup>Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, 20.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 10.



began’.”<sup>44</sup> It is obvious that Käsemann places the essential nature, so to speak, of Jesus within the glory and the flesh is simply a momentary privation.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Käsemann, in contrast to Bultmann and the prevalent tradition,<sup>46</sup> considers John to postulate a naive form of docetism.<sup>47</sup>

Bultmann rejects the claim that the essential Jesus, so to speak, is in the glory; he says that “the exalted Jesus is at the same time the earthly man Jesus; the ‘glorified one’ is still always he who ‘became flesh’ . . . Jesus’ life on earth does not become an item of the historical past, but constantly remains present reality.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, Bultmann comments that “never can faith turn away from him, as if the ‘glory’ --or ‘truth’ and ‘life’ --could ever become directly visible, or as if the Revelation consisted of a certain thought-content, and the incarnation of the ‘Word’ were only a device, henceforth superfluous, for transmitting that

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<sup>44</sup>Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, 20.

<sup>45</sup>There are obvious affinities with Gnosticism here.

<sup>46</sup>This view of Käsemann has provoked considerable debate. Bornkamm, speaking for the ‘Old Marburgers,’ notes that “even from the point of view of history the thesis that the Christology of John is naively docetic seems to me to be false.” G. Bornkamm, “Towards the Interpretation of John’s Gospel,” 92.

<sup>47</sup>Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, 26.

<sup>48</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 49.

content.”<sup>49</sup> Once again Bultmann insists on the necessity of a particular person and history that is found only in the flesh and is not a momentary sojourn into the “alien realm.”

Nevertheless, Käsemann disagrees with his former mentor Bultmann and says that “what is to be proclaimed and should be taken with utmost seriousness is the Nazerene’s path to world lordship.”<sup>50</sup> According to Käsemann 1:14a is insignificant when compared with 1:14c. Flesh is subsumed under the glory and the paradox and offense are eradicated. It is then ironic, in light of Käsemann’s emphasis of the glory and lordship, in opposition to Bultmann’s flesh and passion, that Ashton says:

Bultmann’s severely uncompromising christology is not substantial enough to stand up to the attacks [of] Käsemann [since] the humanity of Jesus is itself altogether too scrawny and spindly to stand a fighting chance against the power and the glory of Käsemann’s ‘*über die Erde schreitender Gott*’ (God striding over the earth).<sup>51</sup>

Is it not the very glory that Käsemann emphasizes that reduces the humanity of Jesus to a momentary disguise? The humanity of Jesus appears more spindly in Käsemann’s view than in Bultmann’s. Bultmann would likely attribute this

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>50</sup>Käsemann, “What I have Unlearned in 50 Years as a German Theologian,” 331.

<sup>51</sup>Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 66.

comment of Ashton's to the paradoxical nature of 1:14a which has led, and will lead, to many misunderstandings in interpreting 1:14a.

### **Conclusion: the Significance of John 1:14a**

The difference between Bultmann and Käsemann in regard to 1:14a has been shown to be most pointed in reference to the emphasis on the flesh or glory respectively. This distinction is important for continued study of Bultmann since 1:14a is the paradigm of his hermeneutical method. In fact, the paradoxical and offense nature of his interpretation of 1:14a--and perhaps the misunderstandings that arise from being paradoxical--carries through into his historical thought.

Note the similarity between Bultmann's notion of 1:14a and his historical view. He says that "the community which speaks is not constituted by an idea and by eternal norms, but by a concrete history and its tradition."<sup>52</sup> For Bultmann both the Revealer and history are concrete, in contrast to Käsemann for whom the revealer is a general mode. Thus, "the paradox is that the word of Jesus does not find its substantiation by a backward movement from the attesting word to the thing attested--as it might if the thing itself were confirmable irrespective of the

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<sup>52</sup>Bultmann, *The Fourth Gospel*, 70.

word—but finds it only in a faith-prompted acceptance of the word.”<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, Bultmann defines the paradox thus:

Jesus is a human, historical person . . . his work and destiny happened within world-history and as such come under the scrutiny of the historian who can understand them as part of the nexus of history. Nevertheless, such detached historical inquiry cannot become aware of what God has wrought in Christ, that is, of the eschatological event.”<sup>54</sup>

In contrast to Bultmann, Käsemann says, “I learned to regard the question of the meaning of universal history as the key to the problem of existence and as the centre of the New Testament.”<sup>55</sup> This centre, for Käsemann, blends together the universal history and the glory and lordship of Jesus. In fact, Käsemann’s view of the non-paradoxical nature of the flesh and glory leads to his understanding of a universal history, while Bultmann’s view of the paradoxical nature of the flesh and glory leads to his conception of the problem of historical investigation.

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<sup>53</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 69.

<sup>54</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 80.

<sup>55</sup>Käsemann, “What I have Unlearned,” 329-330.

Käsemann considers an understanding of history to be important to afford a better understanding of Bultmann.<sup>56</sup> Yet just as Käsemann could not accept Bultmann's paradoxical interpretation of 1:14a he also does not accept his historical view. He states, "I simply do not understand the extraordinary radical antithesis of historical and material continuity . . . ."<sup>57</sup> For example, in light of Bultmann's insistence on the flesh, it is important to note that he comments, concerning historical investigations in the life of Jesus, that "I calmly let the fire burn, for I see that what is consumed is only the fanciful portraits of Life-of-Jesus theology, and that means nothing other than 'Christ after the flesh'. . . how things looked in the heart of Jesus I do not know and do not want to know."<sup>58</sup>

This statement raises an interesting question: just what is the historical view of Bultmann if on the one hand he is intent on a definite historical person, yet on the other allows that very history to "burn"? It is evident that there is a radical antithesis in Bultmann's interpretation of 1:14a by emphasizing the radical discontinuity between flesh and glory and in his historical method. Consequently,

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<sup>56</sup>Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W.J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) , 16.

<sup>57</sup>Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, 36.

<sup>58</sup>Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 132.

Bultmann's interpretation of 1:14a is paradoxical and offensive and does not afford didactic propositions or universal ideas to grasp; it is also analogous to his historical view, in so far as both his interpretation of 1:14a and his historical view posit what Käsemann would call a "radical antithesis."

The next question to be asked, then, is "what is Bultmann's view of history?" A discussion of Bultmann's view of history not only follows well after the preliminary discussion of 1:14a as the paradigm of his thought, but continues to develop that very interpretation itself in the fashion of the hermeneutical circle toward a better understanding of his method.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY AND THEOLOGY IN BULTMANN'S THOUGHT

Bultmann's interpretation of John 1:14a is based in the paradoxical identity of flesh and glory in spite of the radical discontinuity between the two. This paradoxical interpretation of 1:14a, as the paradigmatic basis of Bultmann's hermeneutical method, carries into his investigation of history. More specifically, the paradox finds expression in Bultmann's historical thought in his insistence on historical research and his simultaneous rejection of the results of historical research. Bultmann states that "since the New Testament is a document of history, specifically of the history of religion, the interpretation of it requires the labor of historical investigation."<sup>59</sup> Yet he is not disturbed if the discoveries of historical investigations are "burned" to the ground.<sup>60</sup>

This paradox in Bultmann's conception of historical research, which both affirms and negates historical study, follows from Bultmann's understanding of

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<sup>59</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 251.

<sup>60</sup>Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 132.

1:14a. Simply put, he thinks that the event of the Word becoming flesh is an historical fact, yet he is sceptical about the importance of the recovery of the past particulars of history. More specifically, he considers 1:14a to be an actual event in history in which the Word became a man with a history, yet he also denies that 1:14a is simply an historical event that can be remembered.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Bultmann admits that he creates a paradox. He states that “the paradox is the claim that a historical event [John 1:14a] is at the same time the eschatological event.”<sup>62</sup> Just as Bultmann considers 1:14a to be a paradox by joining the divine and flesh, he also considers it a paradox to join eschatology (the ‘Wholly Other’) with a specific historic event.

To understand Bultmann’s conception of the relationship between eschatology and history it is necessary first to discuss his understanding of history. Bultmann’s historical understanding is admittedly complex; however, he says it is actually “extremely simple . . . [but] of course the understanding of simple things can be difficult, but such difficulty is due not to the nature of things but to the fact that we have forgotten how to see directly, being too much burdened with

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<sup>61</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 162.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 163.



presuppositions.”<sup>63</sup> And as we shall see, presuppositions are the important contingent factor—other than the historical fact—when investigating history, and they determine the complex (yet simple?) historical understanding of Bultmann.

### **The Problem of History for Bultmann**

The problem of historical studies, according to Bultmann, is the continual attempt to eliminate subjectivity, in pursuit of assumed objectivity, and the avoidance of the question of what historical facts are.<sup>64</sup> It is thereby apparent that Bultmann rejects a neutral standpoint from which history can be an object of study, and argues that any objective historical facts are not sufficient for understanding history. In fact, according to Bultmann, there is no neutral standpoint from which to determine history and guarantee an objective approach. He says that “the historian himself stands within history and partakes of it . . . he cannot take a stand outside history at an ‘Archimedean point’,”<sup>65</sup> primarily because there is no universal world history which would require an “Archimedean point”

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<sup>63</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958) , 15.

<sup>64</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975) , 78.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 127.

perspective.<sup>66</sup> In other words, not only is an “Archimedean point” impossible, but there is no use for such a perspective since there is no universal world history either.

Since there is no “Archimedean point” from which to investigate history there is always a particular view-point, question and/or methodology that the interpreter brings to historical investigation. Bultmann says that “each interpretation is guided by a certain interest, by a certain putting of the question.”<sup>67</sup> The view-point, question, and/or methodology that the interpreter brings to interpretation is a result of the basic fact, as Bultmann says, that the “seeing of history is itself an historical event.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, Bultmann says that one “cannot observe this complex [history] objectively . . . for in every word he says about history he is saying at the same time something about himself . . . there cannot be an impersonal observation of history.”<sup>69</sup>

Because there is no escape from history itself to enable one to take an Archimedean perspective Bultmann comments that:

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 128.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>69</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 3.

The demand that the interpreter has to silence his or her subjectivity and quench any individuality in order to achieve objective knowledge could not be more absurd. It makes sense and is justified only insofar as it means that the interpreter must silence his or her personal wishes with respect to the results of the interpretation . . . .<sup>70</sup>

Even if one could escape one's own subjectivity one would never be able to escape the subjectivity of method.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Bultmann says that "every interpretation of history presupposes a hermeneutic method."<sup>72</sup>

The problem that Bultmann thus sees in historical studies is the forgetting of the impossibility of an "Archimedean point." Consequently, historical investigations often lead to problems of method such as "the historical pantheism of liberal theology [which is] a murky mixture of romantic and idealist motifs."<sup>73</sup> More specifically, he considers any method that posits data in such an Archimedean fashion, to interpret or reconstruct eschatological history, to lead to a number of errors--such as an Hegelian idealistic interpretation, a naturalistic (materialistic) interpretation or a psychological (history-of-religions school)

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<sup>70</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 85.

<sup>71</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 5.

<sup>72</sup>Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 110.

<sup>73</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *What is Theology?*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel and Klaus W. Müller trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 87.

interpretation.<sup>74</sup> Bultmann considers such historical methods to be reductive systems which find an “Archimedean point” and make the assumption of knowing God through history into a pantheism of history.<sup>75</sup> These methods cannot grasp history, only their own methods.

The prime tool used by Bultmann to critique the reduction of God to historical investigations--the pantheism of history--is the Logos, which Bultmann considers to be its stumbling block.<sup>76</sup> Hence, 1:14a is of prime importance in understanding Bultmann’s historical understanding. The underlying concept for Bultmann in regard to 1:14a as applied to history is the tension between eschatology and history. It is this tension, and as will be shown this paradoxical union, that delineates Bultmann’s historical understanding.

Bultmann states that:

The Christ occurrence means the eschatological occurrence through which God has put an end to the world and its history. Therefore, this paradox is

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<sup>74</sup>Bultmann, “The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,” in *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, ed. Roger A. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 130.

<sup>75</sup>Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 32f. See also Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 5.

<sup>76</sup>Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 35

the claim that a historical event is at the same time the eschatological event.<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, Bultmann says that in John “eschatology as a time-perspective has dropped out because he has so radically transposed eschatological occurrence into the present . . . he sees the peculiar paradoxical tension.”<sup>78</sup> More specifically, Bultmann adds that the paradox is that the Logos--as the eschatological event--is not capable of historical proof, yet the person Jesus is in the nexus of history.<sup>79</sup> Further, Bultmann says that “God’s eschatological act takes place in history, in the fact that ‘the word became flesh’.”<sup>80</sup> Even more explicitly, Bultmann says that “the eschatological now . . . is strictly bound to the ‘Word became flesh’.”<sup>81</sup> This is analogous to the Word which is both flesh and divine at the same time. In other words, 1:14a is a paradox in the nature of the person Jesus (flesh in union with divine) and in reference to history (historic event in union with eschatology), the latter of each binary in the union being incapable of objective verification.

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<sup>77</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 163.

<sup>78</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 79

<sup>79</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 80.

<sup>80</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 61.

<sup>81</sup>Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 175.

It is thereby apparent that Bultmann understands and accepts the historic event of the “Word became flesh.” Yet at the same time Bultmann says that “for John, from beginning to end, Jesus is not meant to be the ‘historical Jesus’; he is the ‘Word’, and with this ‘Word’ history begins now.”<sup>82</sup> This tension between the historic event, the present, and eschatology is summarized by Bultmann: “the now of ‘the Word became flesh’ is always present in the now of the proclamation, in the moment.”<sup>83</sup> Thus Bultmann says of the Word that it can be, and is, spoken of in the aorist and the perfect and therefore Jesus is present through proclamation, not reconstruction.<sup>84</sup> The historic event of 1:14a is made present in its eschatological union through proclamation. An example of the proclamation, according to Bultmann, is found in the words “we have beheld his glory” by which the historic event is made contemporary; when the “Word” is proclaimed the “eschatological now stands over every present.”<sup>85</sup> The paradoxical union for Bultmann is that the Logos is the “once for all” and also an historical event.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 310f.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 177.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 177.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 178.

<sup>86</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 82.

It is now apparent that Bultmann's understanding of history is far from a basic reconstruction of historical facts. Since Bultmann is not using the building blocks of historical events he criticizes the method of objective historical research, along with the human reason that assumes it is mounted on an "Archimedean point" when trying to interpret "the Word became flesh." It is true, according to Bultmann, that the historical event can be viewed historically in the sense of chronology, but exclusive use of chronology is not an interpretation. John 1:14a can be interpreted solely as the historical birth of Jesus, but exclusive chronological data, according to Bultmann, miss the significance of the historical fact of the divine.

Thus far a critique of objective historical inquiry has been discussed by placing an emphasis on the nature and role of presuppositions, but the question still remains, "what is Bultmann's historical method?"

### ***Historie and Geschichte in Bultmann's Thought***

Bultmann raises the question of the possibility of objective historical knowledge if interpretation is not objective or from an "Archimedean point."<sup>87</sup> From the previous discussion of the problem of history it would appear that

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<sup>87</sup>Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 115.

Bultmann is excessively critical of objective historical study and would deny the possibility of any objective historical knowledge. This would suggest that his method leads to scepticism and/or confusion since he maintains that we cannot know history through objective chronological data. In fact, the question may be legitimately raised: "Does Bultmann even have an historical method?"

It is necessary to dig deeper before we reject Bultmann as a sceptic or muddled philosopher. In spite of the lack of a neutral standpoint from which to study history there is chronological data of the life of Jesus, and this data is surprisingly significant for Bultmann.

Bultmann does not simply rest upon sceptical grounds alone by rejecting historical methods; rather, his critique of history is a critique of the method of objective historical research more than historical data *per se*. Bultmann says that "there can be no question of discarding historical criticism."<sup>88</sup> Also, "since the New Testament is a document of history, specifically of the history of religion, the interpretation of it requires the labour of historical investigation."<sup>89</sup> Such

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<sup>88</sup>Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 31.

<sup>89</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 251.



investigation necessitates an historical method.<sup>90</sup> Hence, his whole study is based on understanding the historical context of the text within the historical-critical and history-of-religion schools.<sup>91</sup> For Bultmann “God is the God of history.”<sup>92</sup>

This leaves a question that Bultmann raises, namely, if objective historical knowledge is possible, and necessary, then is history sufficiently seen?<sup>93</sup> In other words, after discrediting the objective study of history with all its inherent problems, as discussed earlier, then how is history seen through the problems? Bultmann seems, on the one hand, to be very critical of history, and yet on the other to embrace it. To ease this dualistic tension between the problem of history and the use of history, or conversely between the observer of history and historical facts, Bultmann posits two modes of historical understanding: *historie* and *geschichte*. This distinction is the key to understanding Bultmann’s simultaneous rejection and use of historical investigation.

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<sup>90</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961) , 291.

<sup>91</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 250.

<sup>92</sup>Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 96.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

The distinction between *historie* and *geschichte* is explained as follows by Bultmann: “The goal of history [*historie*] is not an eschatological future but is the historical process itself.”<sup>94</sup> Despite the fact that the historical Jesus cannot be known through the text or objective data, Bultmann still states that “the revealer appears as a definite human being in history: Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>95</sup> *Geschichte*, however, unlike *historie*, cannot be reduced to casual connections or psychologism; rather, it is the interpretation of the observer regarding natural events in relation to one’s life. Indeed, Bultmann states, “history [*geschichte*] as the field of human actions cannot, however, be cut off from nature and natural events.”<sup>96</sup> For example, “as the salvation occurrence, then, the cross of Christ is not a mythical event but an historical (*geschichtliche*) occurrence that has its origin in the historical (*historische*) event of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>97</sup> It follows that the chronological events of Jesus’ life, for example, are necessary, but not sufficient, for *geschichte*--which itself requires the subjectivity of the observer. This is the difference between Bultmann and the traditional historical approach of

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<sup>94</sup>Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 68.

<sup>95</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 41.

<sup>96</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 139.

<sup>97</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 35.

the historical-critic and the history-of-religions school since he emphasizes the subjectivity of the observer in contrast to the objective study itself.<sup>98</sup>

Consequently, Bultmann's theory leads to the conclusion that *geschichte* is dependent on *historie*, but *historie* alone can only yield objective idols and is the base problem of assumed objectivity in historical interpretation.

Bultmann's use of *geschichte* and *historie* leaves the tension of the subjective (interpreter's subjectivity) and objective (historical facts), without siding with one or the other. This tension, however, is itself misplaced for Bultmann since he considers the subject/object relation of classical science, which maintains a separation between the subject and object, to be of no value for historical science which must not hold such a distinction between the subject and object.<sup>99</sup> Bultmann states that "it needs to become clear that the genuine relation of historians to history cannot be understood according to the traditional scheme of the relation of subject to object."<sup>100</sup> Since Bultmann emphasizes both the subjective interpretation and the objective data he comments that "the most subjective interpretation is the most objective, because the only person who is able

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<sup>98</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, 252.

<sup>99</sup>Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 133.

<sup>100</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 137.

to hear the claim of the text is the person who is moved by the question of his or her own existence.”<sup>101</sup> This paradoxical statement is amplified by Bultmann’s comment that objective history is only understood subjectively.<sup>102</sup> This assertion of Bultmann is seemingly contradictory, but it is only contradictory if one interprets it through the traditional scheme of the subject/object relation. Thus, the only way to understand Bultmann is to investigate his own pre-understanding.

Bultmann states that:

The point then is not to eliminate the pre-understanding but to risk it, to raise it to the level of consciousness, and to test it critically in understanding the text. In short, in questioning the text one must allow one-self to be questioned by the text and to give heed to its claim.<sup>103</sup>

He comments in another context that being:

Deeply disturbed by the problem of our own life is therefore the indispensable condition of our inquiry. Then the examination of history will lead not to the enrichment of timeless wisdom, but to an encounter with history which itself is an event in time. This is dialogue with history.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup>Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 122. See also Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 138f.

<sup>102</sup>Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, 294.

<sup>103</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 84.

<sup>104</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 11-12.

Objective historical research necessarily entails historical data, but it is through subjectivity that questions are asked, and it is through these questions that history is seen as *geschichte*.<sup>105</sup> Thus, Bultmann maintains that if one is aware of one's own pre-understanding (subjectivity) then objectivity is possible.<sup>106</sup>

Nevertheless, the question will be raised: "does Bultmann's method really end with objectivity through subjectivity?" If Bultmann rejects assumed objective historical research as *historie* alone, but uses historical research through *geschichte*, which places a great emphasis upon the interpreter's subjectivity, then it must be the case that his method leads to solipsism or subjectivism. His method must be one of subjectivism since pre-understanding is so important. Bultmann's dialogue with history must only be a dialogue with oneself.

Bultmann, however, reacts as strongly against unfettered subjectivism as he does against assumed objectivity. He says that "genuine freedom is not subjective arbitrariness . . . the freedom of subjective arbitrariness is a delusion."<sup>107</sup>

Bultmann considers such subjective arbitrariness to lead to nowhere but relativism

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<sup>105</sup>Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 119.

<sup>106</sup>Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, 64.

<sup>107</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 41.

and nihilism.<sup>108</sup> Bultmann comments, regarding the interpreter's decision, that "it does not arise by a man's wavering in his security and getting bewildered at the world and so turning away from it to waft himself up into a world beyond by speculative thought or devout silence."<sup>109</sup> It should be clear that Bultmann will not accept the label of subjectivist.

So we see that Bultmann's method is not intent on a radical scepticism of silence or a thought project of subjectivism taking comfort in a solipsistic world; neither is he an historicist or an objectivist. Bultmann is not intent on negating the objectification of history, but rather wants to negate any exclusive claim for the objectification of history that excludes the subjectivity of the interpreter and consequently *geschichte*.

The guiding question of the problem of history and the use of history in Bultmann's method ends in contradictory confusion if it is interpreted within a traditional schema of the subject/object relation, but if Bultmann's understanding of history is investigated further it leads to a mutual and necessary dialectical

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>109</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 76.

relationship between subject and object.<sup>110</sup> And this relationship is analogous to the initial investigation of 1:14a.

### **Bultmann's Theology and His Demythologizing Project**

The above investigation of Bultmann's historical method leads us naturally to his use of demythologizing. Bultmann states:

This method of interpretation of the New Testament which tries to recover the deeper meaning behind the mythological conceptions I call de-mythologizing--an unsatisfactory word, to be sure. Its aim is not to eliminate the mythological statements but to interpret them. It is a method of hermeneutics.<sup>111</sup>

This "unsatisfactory word," demythologizing, is the summation of Bultmann's method. Indeed, Bultmann's task, to discover the method by which we can interpret 1:14a, is at last found in demythologizing. The term itself does not arise out of thin air; rather, it is the synthetic composite of Bultmann's historical study and theological understanding.

Bultmann considers the method of demythologizing to be an imperative hermeneutic today and justifies its use as it was also necessary for the writing of

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<sup>110</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 158.

<sup>111</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 18.

John. He states, “demythologizing has its beginning in the New Testament itself, and therefore our task of demythologizing today is justified.”<sup>112</sup> More specifically, Bultmann states that “John demythologized the eschatology in a radical manner.”<sup>113</sup> In other words, the only way of expressing the other-worldly is through myth; consequently, the eschatological preaching of Jesus is retained and continued by the early Christian community in mythological form, but is demythologized by John.<sup>114</sup> Demythologizing is necessary since “the transcendence of God is not made immanent as it is in myth; rather, the paradox of the presence of the transcendent God in history is affirmed: ‘the word became flesh’.”<sup>115</sup> Without demythologizing the other-worldly is left with worldly objectivity,<sup>116</sup> and then the historical problem returns of reducing 1:14a to a chronology of the life of Jesus. The problem is that “myths give worldly objectivity to that which is unworldly.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>115</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 42.

<sup>116</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 19.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid., 19.



To reject a demythologizing hermeneutic is to deny either relativistic world-views, or to deny meaning to mythological elements in the Bible, whereas to accept it is to say that the revelation in the Bible is not historically determined by a world-view, but is found in many world-views. And if it is found in many world-views it is important that revelation not be lost in the archaic myths of any one world-view.

It was shown previously that it is easy to interpret Bultmann's method as subjectivism, and now it would be easy to interpret his demythologizing method as a rational destruction of myth. However, it is important to note that Bultmann says that "to demythologize is not to reject Scripture or the Christian message as a whole, but the world-view of Scripture . . . ." <sup>118</sup> Thus, Bultmann is not originating a rational view point that destroys the mystery of God, but rather he considers his method to maintain the mystery of God. <sup>119</sup> Further, Bultmann states that "its [demythologizing] criticism of the biblical writings lies not in eliminating mythological statements but in interpreting them; it is not a process of subtraction but a hermeneutical method." <sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>120</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 99.

To further understand Bultmann's demythologizing it is useful to look at his comparison of demythologizing with theology. He comments:

In point of fact, radical demythologizing is the parallel to the Pauline-Lutheran doctrine of justification through faith alone without works of the law. Or, rather, it is the consistent application of this doctrine to the field of knowledge. Like the doctrine of justification, it destroys every false security and every false demand for security . . . .<sup>121</sup>

This destruction of security, according to Bultmann, will raise anxiety. He notes that:

Anxiety about demythologizing may be due in part to the unquestioned assumption that there is an either/or between mythology and science, where by 'science' is understood the science that objectifies existence into being within the world . . . [but] on the contrary demythologizing wants an understanding of scripture that is free of every world picture projected by objectifying thinking, whether it is that of myth or that of science.<sup>122</sup>

This assumed either/or between myth or science is analogous to the either/or of flesh/divinity and that of subject/object. Bultmann makes it clear that his method of interpreting John 1:14a is not to discover the solitary truth; rather, it is to continue the discussion regarding the interpretation of John 1:14a. This continued discussion of John 1:14a, or dialogue with history, stops once myth, science, objective historical research, or subjectivism is considered as absolute. This is the

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<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., 101f.

problem that Bultmann wants to avoid in his method of demythologizing. Yet this understanding is not readily apparent if an interpreter of Bultmann approaches the study with a pre-understanding which makes myth, science, objectivity or subjectivity absolute. Since Bultmann will not admit to an either/or between the above distinctions there is a paradox in his method. Bultmann admits to this paradox in his research which requires the text of 1:14a, yet at the same time must be critical of the text.<sup>123</sup>

This continual interplay of interpretation and the text is very similar to post-structuralist thought. More specifically, 1:14a as the paradigmatic cornerstone of Bultmann's hermeneutical method has led from a discussion of Christology, to historical studies including hermeneutical methods, to the basis of Bultmann's method, namely, an anti-Cartesian hermeneutic which is very critical of either/or categories that could accept as absolute myth, science, object or subject. It is thereby beneficial to discuss Cartesianism to clearly silhouette Bultmann's anti-Cartesian hermeneutic.

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<sup>123</sup>Ibid., 60.

## CHAPTER 3

### JOHN 1:14a AND BULTMANN'S THOUGHT AS ANTI-CARTESIAN

Bultmann's interpretation of John 1:14a has been shown to rest in a paradox. His affirmation of the paradoxical union of the opposites flesh and divinity (glory) was in contrast to his best known student Käsemann who sees the emphasis fall upon the glory, and who thus diminishes the paradox. Bultmann, moreover, asserts that the Revealer only reveals that he is the Revealer. He states that "Jesus as the Revealer of God reveals nothing but that he is the Revealer."<sup>124</sup> Hence, 1:14a leads Bultmann to his paradoxical interpretation of the union of opposites in the revealer, and to the paradox of the Revealer not revealing any specific knowledge or wisdom other than that he is the revealer.

Since nothing other than the event of 1:14a (ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο) is revealed it would seem that historical research on that definite person would be of paramount importance for Bultmann. To this end Bultmann does make use of the historical-critical method, the method of liberal theology. He states that "since the

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<sup>124</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 66.

New Testament is a document of history . . . the interpretation of it requires the labor of historical investigation.”<sup>125</sup> In fact, Bultmann is sometimes considered (mistakenly) to be a Liberal theologian.<sup>126</sup>

However, despite the value Bultmann places on the historical-critical method he renounces any foundational claim that could be made from the historical-critical method. He acknowledges that liberal theology does offer certain insights, yet he remains critical of its methods, such as historical-critical investigations.<sup>127</sup> The goal of liberal theology, for example, to find through historical criticism the personality of Jesus as the ground of faith, is rejected by Bultmann. Despite the fact that Bultmann insists on a definite human being in history, and that no knowledge other than 1:14a (that the Word became flesh) is given, Bultmann, nevertheless, lets history “burn.”<sup>128</sup> Thus, as was seen in chapter two, not only is the element of paradox of paramount importance for Bultmann in the interpretation of 1:14a with respect to the union of flesh and divinity, it also is

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 251.

<sup>126</sup>Reginald H. Fuller, *The New Testament in Current Study* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962) , 11.

<sup>127</sup>Walter Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (London: SCM Press, 1967) , 12f.

<sup>128</sup>Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 132.

inherent in his simultaneous confirmation and rejection of historical interpretation. Bultmann posits an historical event and definite person, but lets that history--of the historical Jesus--"burn." Bultmann maintains that "historical research can never lead to any result which could serve as a basis for faith, for all its results have only relative validity . . . here research ends with a large question mark--and here it ought to end."<sup>129</sup>

It is not surprising, then, with paradox being of such primary importance in Bultmann's thought, and his seemingly negative view of history and interpretation which constitutes demythologizing, that Bultmann has many critics, and is often misunderstood.<sup>130</sup> If 1:14a reveals nothing other than the Word became flesh, and the historical element that this entails is inaccessible or "burned," then negation seems the only alternative, apparently leaving the interpreter with subjectivism. Thieliicke, for instance, regards Bultmann's use of demythologizing as a project of

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<sup>129</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>130</sup>Other critics of Bultmann include, for instance, Hans Joachim Iwand who "believed that he had detected 'signs of senility' in the author [Bultmann]." Also, a circulated pamphlet in 1951 was of the opinion that demythologizing was a "poison." See Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Born Before All Time* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 154, 159.

negation and subjectivism.<sup>131</sup> However, although demythologizing does not produce any concept or knowledge it does not therefore follow that demythologizing is nothing other than a method ending in nihilism and/or subjectivism.

It is the ingrained influence of Cartesian thought which forces this illusory choice between Bultmann the historical-critic or Bultmann the subjectivist and thereby misrepresents Bultmann's thought entirely. Here it is instructive to compare Bultmann's paradoxical interpretation of 1:14a, which has forced many to this false dichotomy, with post-structuralism. Yet it is an uneasy comparison. It would be exceedingly naive to equate Bultmann with post-structuralism, yet it would be negligent not to note the distinct similarity and effective dialogue that may proceed from such a comparison.

One argument which would suggest a dissociation of Bultmann from post-structuralism would be that post-structuralism entails an entirely open-ended interpretation which is incompatible with Bultmann's hermeneutic. And it might conversely be said that Bultmann's demythologizing and post-structuralism are similar in that both are subjectivistic and negating. However, neither of these

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<sup>131</sup>Helmut Thielicke, "The Restatement of New Testament Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: a Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), 147.

criticisms stand up to close scrutiny. A discussion of Derrida and deconstruction (as a particular example of post-structuralism) reveals the inaccuracy of attributing an antithesis, or synthesis, between Bultmann and deconstruction on the basis of negation and indeterminacy. It will be argued that neither Bultmann through demythologizing, nor Derrida through deconstruction, necessarily lead to negation and indeterminacy. In fact, the argument that both Bultmann and deconstruction are nihilistic is a misleading generalization.

Once demythologizing and deconstruction are free from the charge of nihilism and subjectivism, then they can be fruitfully contrasted with Cartesian-based interpretation. Cartesian interpretation is, in fact, the stance against which both Bultmann and Derrida are reacting. It follows that liberal theology, as a particular method that is closely allied to Cartesianism, will necessarily have a difficult time when discussing demythologizing.

This parallel anti-Cartesian thought of Bultmann and post-structuralism points to a renewed possibility of effective dialogue with Bultmann's thought, avoiding the Cartesian error of positing the false choice between Bultmann the historical-critic or Bultmann the subjectivist. It is time to revisit Bultmann from a perspective other than Cartesianism, which has often left Bultmann misunderstood. As Kuschel expresses, "Bultmann's demythologizing programme must be thought



through again today.”<sup>132</sup> This new perspective can be found in post-structuralism, and it is a promising path to a renewed understanding of demythologizing and Bultmann’s anti-Cartesian hermeneutic.

We began with a discussion of Bultmann’s distinctive interpretation of John 1:14a and now we must return to that. The real significance of Bultmann’s hermeneutic is found in his understanding of 1:14a. Bultmann’s hermeneutic is a result of his interpretation of the verse, and not a mere trend in philosophical currents, as is perhaps the case in some post-structural hermeneutics. Furthermore, the principle working within demythologizing is not a variant of post-structuralism, but will be shown to be the theological principle of justification by faith. Nevertheless, we will venture into Cartesianism and post-structuralism, specifically Derrida’s deconstruction, in order to clarify the very significant nature of 1:14a in Bultmann’s thought. The goal is a clarification of Bultmann’s thought, not a reduction of his thought to another philosophy or person.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup>Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?*, 161.

<sup>133</sup>Schmithals, similarly, is not concerned with the historical development of Bultmann’s thought, but in understanding the major themes in his thought. See Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*, 20.

## A Cartesian Context

Rather than rushing to the defense of Bultmann, or his critics, it is useful to first examine the root of the problem as to why Bultmann is criticized, and the presuppositions of those very criticisms. The negative criticisms of Bultmann's hermeneutical method—demythologizing—arise, in fact, as a result of viewing demythologizing from a Cartesian perspective.

Cartesianism, as the term implies, is connected to Descartes' thought.

Adam states that:

One of the pivotal moments of modernity came when Rene Descartes realized that he could not doubt his own existence; from this, he rebuilt the whole metaphysical superstructure of Western philosophy with this one axiom as his foundation. Whatever one's foundation, the philosophical tradition has customarily assumed that one needed to have some undoubtable, unshakeable truth with which to back up one's theoretical claims.<sup>134</sup>

The thought of Descartes explicitly reveals the essential foundation which is undoubtable, namely, the self. Sarup notes, "Consider the phrase: 'I think, therefore I am.' Descartes's 'I' assumes itself to be fully conscious, and hence self-knowable. It is not only autonomous but coherent . . . In his work Descartes offers us a narrator who imagines that he speaks without simultaneously being

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<sup>134</sup>A.K.M. Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) , 5f.

spoken.”<sup>135</sup> With such a Cartesian foundation the self is, as Phillips notes, the only certainty and is conceived of as separate from the body.<sup>136</sup>

Since the thinking self is the foundation of Cartesianism it follows that there are separate objects that are thought upon. Thiselton notes this distinction by defining Cartesianism as a method that posits an “active subject [who] scrutinizes the things around him as passive objects.”<sup>137</sup> Madison continues this distinction between the thinking subject and the objects thought upon in his description of the dualistic nature of Cartesianism and the result of this dualism is the alienation of subject and object.<sup>138</sup>

The Cartesian distinction between the self and the object of study develops into a hermeneutic of its own, as Bernstein notes:

Basic dichotomies between the subjective and the objective; the conception of knowledge as being a correct representation of what is objective; the

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<sup>135</sup>Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993) , 1.

<sup>136</sup>D.Z. Phillips, “At the Mercy of Method,” in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995) , 6.

<sup>137</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980) , 299.

<sup>138</sup>G. B. Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) , 58.

conviction that human reason can completely free itself of bias, prejudice, and tradition; the ideal of a universal method by which we can first secure firm foundations of knowledge and then build the edifice of a universal science; the belief that by the power of self-reflection we can transcend our historical context and horizon and know things as they really are in themselves.<sup>139</sup>

This Cartesian framework of thought leads to a Cartesian hermeneutic. As Bruns describes:

Since the power of reason is equally distributed in all human beings, interpretive authority belongs to everyone--so long as he or she approaches the text in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumptions concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrines except those which can be perceived clearly and distinctly in the light of natural reason. Call this Cartesian hermeneutics . . . in which the text comes under the control of the reader as disengaged rational subject, unresponsive except to its own self-certitude.<sup>140</sup>

It is this Cartesian hermeneutic that is pervasive in Western thought and thereby also in hermeneutics, and it is for this reason that Bultmann has endured critical and misguided reviews of his demythologizing.

Martin Rumscheidt considers a Cartesian hermeneutic to be analogous to liberal theology and comments that “‘liberal theology’, as a scholarly discipline,

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<sup>139</sup>Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983) , 36.

<sup>140</sup>Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) , 149.

and 'liberal' faith, as a faith that knows, are 'modern' since they embrace the Cartesian assertion that to be human at all is to be about the enterprise of cognitive appropriation of reality."<sup>141</sup> Harnack, for whom the picture of the historical Jesus is essential to the Christian faith as an objective "Archimedean point," is an example of liberal theology. Harnack sought the timeless truth (the ethical life) of Christianity through historical criticism in *What is Christianity?* He was concerned, for example, with cognitive constructions of God in contrast to the "wholly other" stumbling block of God epitomized in John 1:14a.<sup>142</sup>

If traditional methods of interpreting Bultmann are rooted in a Cartesian hermeneutic, then it is obvious that they will have difficulty discussing Bultmann's demythologizing as it stands outside of a Cartesian evaluative framework, such as, for example, liberal theology.<sup>143</sup> Bultmann's hermeneutic, being anti-Cartesian, is consequently better discussed in a post-structural context.

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<sup>141</sup>Martin Rumscheidt, ed., *Adolf Von Harnack: Liberal Theology at its Height* (Ottawa: Collins, 1989), 34.

<sup>142</sup>Norman Perrin, *The Promise of Bultmann* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 45.

<sup>143</sup>It is important to realize that the Cartesian hermeneutic is not limited to liberal theology; rather, it is the mainstay of most Western thought after the seventeenth century.

The main concern in Bultmann's hermeneutic, as in Cartesianism, is the understanding of the subject/object relationship and the differentiation between the text as object and the interpreter as subject. Bultmann himself admits that his hermeneutical investigation is motivated by the subject/object relation.<sup>144</sup> However, he rejects the traditional Cartesian subject/object schema of the Cartesian hermeneutic.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, Bultmann states that "it needs to become clear that the genuine relation of historians to history cannot be understood according to the traditional [Cartesian] scheme of the relation of subject to object."<sup>146</sup> This is a direct reference to the ideal posited by liberal theology, to know history through historical-criticism, just as the subject thinks it possible to know objective history.

Bultmann, in contrast to a Cartesian hermeneutic, which distances the subject and object, thinks that the dualism between subject and object leads to misunderstanding. As we have seen, he comments that "the historian himself stands within history and partakes of it . . . he cannot take a stand outside history at

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<sup>144</sup>Bultmann, "The Case for Demythologizing," in *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion Without Myth* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1966), 65.

<sup>145</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>146</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 137.

an 'Archimedean point'."<sup>147</sup> In contrast to a Cartesian hermeneutic Bultmann denies a subject's ability to objectively analyze an object. Instead of separating the subject and object Bultmann understands the two as a union (not unlike the flesh and divinity, and history and eschatology, of John 1:14a) and comments that "the most subjective interpretation is the most objective."<sup>148</sup> Bultmann thereby dissolves the clear subject/object dualism of a Cartesian hermeneutic.

### **Bultmann's Anti-Cartesian Thought**

It must be noted that Bultmann is not simply adopting a philosophy and dismissing all theological understanding. Before going too far in discussing Cartesianism and post-structuralism it is necessary to show that Bultmann's anti-Cartesian thought is based primarily in the New Testament. Thielicke, for example, considers Bultmann to inappropriately take over Heidegger's philosophy and consequently end with fatal results.<sup>149</sup> Yet as Schmithals notes:

Various statements which claim--sometimes in triumph--to have refuted Bultmann, because here and there or basically or altogether his theology fails to agree with the philosophy of Heidegger, or because Bultmann has

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<sup>147</sup>Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 127.

<sup>148</sup>Ibid., 122. See also, Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 138f.

<sup>149</sup>Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 12.

misunderstood Heidegger's philosophizing, or because he does not come up to Heidegger or has used Heidegger's analyses in a way which the latter did not intend, do not affect Bultmann's theology even if they are right; for it is not Bultmann's intention to take over the philosophy of Heidegger.<sup>150</sup>

It is common to misrepresent Bultmann by delving into modern philosophy and forgetting that Bultmann is working from the New Testament. It is, therefore, necessary to show that Bultmann's anti-Cartesian thought is based in 1:14a, not a modern philosophy.

The fact that Bultmann and Heidegger see a similar problem, namely, the traditional subject/object schema, and that Bultmann uses some of Heidegger's conceptions for clarification, does not necessitate an inherent link between Heidegger and Bultmann.<sup>151</sup> This is best explained by Bultmann himself:

I can refer to Friedreich Gogarten's work 'Demythologization and the Church', which makes it clear that we do not necessarily subscribe to Heidegger's philosophical theories when we learn something from his analysis. The fact is that Heidegger attacks a problem with which theologians have grappled since Ernest Troeltsch, namely, the problem of history . . . and the subject-object schema . . . needless to say, we may learn from others besides Heidegger. If we learn those things better elsewhere, it is all to the good. But they have to be learned.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup>Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*, 18.

<sup>151</sup>To focus exclusively on Heidegger would turn the discussion of Bultmann to abstract conceptions of 'being' and 'existence', while the intent of the discussion is, in contrast, to focus on John 1:14a and history.

<sup>152</sup>Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity*, 58.



Furthermore, Cassedy states, in regard to post-structuralism and the thought of Heidegger, that “it would be simplistic to say that all the latest postmodern, deconstructionist, and leftist theories ‘come from’ Heidegger.”<sup>153</sup> So although there is a Heideggerian influence on Bultmann and post-structuralism, it is not legitimate to simply reduce the thought of Bultmann to post-structuralism or Heidegger.

More specifically, Bultmann, in response to such attempts to reduce his thought to Heideggerian categories, said that “the New Testament is not a doctrine about our nature, about our authentic existence as human beings, but rather is the proclamation of this liberating act of God, of the salvation occurrence that is realized in Christ.”<sup>154</sup> Bultmann’s thought is to be understood through the New Testament, not through modern secular speculations on being. As Perrin comments that the distinction between Bultmann and Heidegger is “to be found in the view of the possibility for authentic existence: for Heidegger it arises ‘spontaneously out of human existence,’ for Bultmann it is ‘made possible by

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<sup>153</sup>Steven Cassedy, *Flight from Eden: The Origins of Modern Literary Criticism and Theory* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990) , 193.

<sup>154</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 26.

God'.<sup>155</sup> Once again, Bultmann's thought is bound to the New Testament and its theology.

Bultmann realizes that he is often misrepresented and his thought reduced to a particular philosophy (especially Heidegger):

Over and over again I hear the objection that demythologizing transforms Christian faith into philosophy. This objection arises from the fact that I . . . make use of conceptions developed especially by Heidegger in existentialist philosophy. We can understand the problem best when we remember that demythologizing is an hermeneutic method, that is, a method of interpretation, of exegesis. Hermeneutics means the art of exegesis.<sup>156</sup>

Demythologizing is not philosophical speculation, but is a tool of New Testament study. Bultmann is a unique and independent thinker as acknowledged by Schmithals:

His theology is independent, unmistakable, and not to be explained as an addition to the works of his teachers; we may have uncovered its most important historical roots, but that does not mean that we have explained it as a combination of liberal and dialectical theology in the garb of Heideggerian conceptuality.<sup>157</sup>

In contrast to an emphasis on a philosophical basis Bultmann says that:

When critics have occasionally objected that I interpret the New Testament with the categories of Heidegger's philosophy of existence, I fear they have

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<sup>155</sup>Perrin, *The Promise of Bultmann*, 61.

<sup>156</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 45.

<sup>157</sup>Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*, 19.

missed the real problem. What ought to alarm them is that philosophy all by itself already sees what the New Testament says.<sup>158</sup>

In other words, Heidegger does not create Bultmann's thought, it was already to be found in the New Testament. Bultmann clearly states that demythologizing began in the New Testament itself.<sup>159</sup> Thus, as Macquarrie notes, Bultmann's use of Heidegger is a matter of clarification of conceptual matters, but is not foundational: "the existential analytic [of Heidegger] is not the source of Bultmann's theology. The New Testament is the source."<sup>160</sup> The source, in the present study, is found more specifically in John 1:14a, and the exegesis thereof.

Although Bultmann cannot be simply reduced to a philosophy or philosopher, there is an interesting and fruitful comparison to be made with Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). Vico saw the problem of Cartesianism long before both Bultmann and Heidegger and thereby affords an interesting perspective on a common difficulty with Cartesianism. In fact, on the basis of their anti-Cartesianism, Paparella has noticed a link between Vico's and

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<sup>158</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 23.

<sup>159</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 32.

<sup>160</sup>John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing: Bultmann and his Critics* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 168.

Bultmann's demythologizing.<sup>161</sup> Paparella states that "properly speaking Vico is the grandfather of modern hermeneutics even though little credit is accorded to him [nevertheless] this approach of Vico is later followed up in Bultmann's attempt at demythologizing."<sup>162</sup> Levine maintains that the thought of Vico also runs into the thought of Collingwood.<sup>163</sup> And it can be said that it is Vico who influenced Collingwood more than anyone else.<sup>164</sup> It is interesting, then, to note that Bultmann considers Collingwood to have the most accurate understanding of history, while he only refers to Heidegger in passing in the Gifford lectures.<sup>165</sup>

It is thereby appropriate to discuss the interesting connection between Bultmann and Vico, yet no intent is made to equate the two, or to reduce Bultmann to a Vicoian influence. Rather, Vico may help to further clarify the Cartesian problem seen by Bultmann, and make it evident that Bultmann did not simply

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<sup>161</sup>Emanuel L. Paparella, *Hermeneutics in the Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (San Francisco: EMTText, 1993) , 47. A case can be made, as noted by Bultmann himself, that Johann Gottfried Herder (1784-91) has parallel thought to Vico, yet Bultmann does not decide if Herder was, or was not, influenced by Vico. See Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 80.

<sup>162</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>163</sup>Joseph M. Levine, "Objectivity in History" *Clio* 21:2 (1992) : 127.

<sup>164</sup>R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: University Press, 1948) , viii.

<sup>165</sup>Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 130, 136.

adopt a contemporary philosophy. Vico, long before Heidegger, had advanced anti-Cartesian thought.

Paparella states that “it was Vico (1668-1744) who first proposed it [history as a paradigm of reality] to his contemporaries as an antidote to the, by then, rampant abstract, rationalistic philosophy of Rene Descartes.”<sup>166</sup> Collingwood also states that Vico reacted against the Cartesian claim to rational truths.<sup>167</sup> Vico reacted against Cartesianism since it led to the idea of history being composed of distinct historical facts known once for all.<sup>168</sup>

In contrast to clear and distinct ideas Paparella notes that:

As an antidote to rampant Cartesian rationalism, Vico, way back in 1725 . . . perceived that the whole of reality operates on two paradoxically related and complementary poles . . . for example . . . objective/ subjective. This complementarity issues forth not from rationalistic pseudo-unity of intellectual categories but rather from an organic unity derived from the phenomenon of its very origins.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup>Paparella, *Hermeneutics in the Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 29.

<sup>167</sup>Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 64.

<sup>168</sup>Paparella, *Hermeneutics in the Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 34.

<sup>169</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.

Vico clearly states that the subject and object are complementary in a fashion similar to Bultmann.<sup>170</sup> It is evident that Vico and Bultmann are rejecting the Cartesian separation of subject and object. Cartesianism seeks to distance itself from tradition and the myths therein which are seen as sources of deception on route to the clear and distinct “Archimedean point.”<sup>171</sup>

Vico had already discovered in the eighteenth century that myths transcend the Cartesian dualism of subject and object and that interpretation is not to simply reject history and myths, but is to overcome the reader’s estrangement from myths.<sup>172</sup> His thought is similar to Bultmann, but cannot be equated to Bultmann. Yet an interesting discussion could ensue with Vico, a figure that has often been silenced though the ages but who, as with Bultmann, can be heard more clearly in postmodernity than in his own time.

### **Is Bultmann a Subjectivist?**

It has become clear that placing Bultmann in a Cartesian context will lead to a misunderstanding of his thought. Bultmann’s hermeneutic is actually anti-

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<sup>170</sup>Levine, “Objectivity in History,” 116.

<sup>171</sup>Paparella, *Hermeneutics in the Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 42.

<sup>172</sup>*Ibid.*, 88.

Cartesian, as was shown through the comparison with Vico. If Bultmann's hermeneutic is anti-Cartesian, and not based on a foundational epistemology, must he therefore be a subjectivist? This is the conclusion of one of Bultmann's most trenchant critics, Helmut Thielicke.<sup>173</sup> Thielicke is an example of the interpretive error of placing Bultmann in the Cartesian dilemma of the either/or dichotomy: either Bultmann is a historical-critical proponent or a subjectivist. This shows how hermeneutics has been dominated by Cartesianism, and how important it is to acknowledge the problem. This problem is not simply the problem of liberal theology or evangelical theology, but the common assumption of an interpretation guided by the Cartesian hermeneutic.

Thielicke exemplifies the confusion of placing a Cartesian perspective upon Bultmann, indicating that the evangelical perspective misunderstands him. Thielicke focuses so exclusively on the Cartesian dualism that he is forced to call Bultmann a subjectivist and completely ignores Bultmann's insistence on history and the use of the historical method. By discussing Thielicke it will become evident that a Cartesian assessment of Bultmann is inappropriate, that Cartesianism will necessarily reach the conclusion that Bultmann is a subjectivist

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<sup>173</sup>Reginald Fuller, for example, in *The New Testament in Current Study*, makes use of Thielicke as one of the main critics of Bultmann's work. Also, Thielicke is included in *Kerygma and Myth*.

(or a historical critic). We will suggest that post-structuralism should be discussed as a possible avenue of a more fruitful discussion of Bultmann's thought.

Thielicke states that "Bultmann's theology is the climax of the Cartesian inquiry . . ." and thereby concludes that Bultmann's method is only "a variant of the principle of Descartes: *Cognito ergo sum*."<sup>174</sup> Thielicke describes this notion of "Cartesian inquiry" as "self-conscious existential" since Bultmann's method is found in the "subjective element."<sup>175</sup> It follows, at least for Thielicke, that Bultmann is Cartesian since he incorporates the subjective as the defining category of understanding.<sup>176</sup>

Since Thielicke considers Bultmann to operate exclusively in the subjective side of the subjective/objective dualism he thinks that Bultmann is unable to

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<sup>174</sup>Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 45-46.

<sup>175</sup>Thielicke, "The Restatement of New Testament Mythology," 146.

<sup>176</sup>At the risk of adding confusion it is necessary to clarify Thielicke's terms. He uses the term Cartesian to describe a subjectivist hermeneutic, and non-Cartesian to describe an objective hermeneutic. It is evident that Thielicke considers an objective method to be of great value, while a subjective method to be wrong headed. Thus, what Thielicke calls Cartesian would be in agreement with what Bultmann calls Cartesian, but what Thielicke calls non-Cartesian would still be called Cartesian by Bultmann. It is important, then, to understand that from a Bultmannian perspective Thielicke, despite using the term non-Cartesian, never leaves the Cartesian.



maintain any form of objective knowledge. All Bultmann has, according to Thieli ke, is a subjective consciousness, an example of being caught in the “shadows of our own consciousness.”<sup>177</sup> More specifically, Thieli ke states that Bultmann’s pre-understanding is the “exclusive listening to the voice of one’s own existence prior to the text [which] surreptitiously gives rise to a very problematic, sharply delineated, and rigid self-understanding which also becomes an arbitrary schema.”<sup>178</sup> Thieli ke’s conclusion that Bultmann’s hermeneutic is problematic and arbitrary, is a direct consequence of Thieli ke’s Cartesian perspective which necessitates a foundation; and seeing this foundation in Bultmann as resting in the subjective side of the Cartesian dualism--the pre-understanding and the self--concludes that it must therefore be arbitrary in contrast to an objective foundation.

So far Thieli ke has labeled Bultmann as a Cartesian thinker, interpreting him as operating exclusively from the subjective side of the Cartesian dualism. In an attempt to clarify the objective side of the Cartesian dualism Thieli ke actually furthers the confusion: “while the present situation and its questions have to be considered, they must not become a normative principle nor must they be allowed to prejudice the answer; they must be constantly recast and transcended in

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<sup>177</sup>Tbid., 147.

<sup>178</sup>Thieli ke, *The Evangelical Faith*, 58.

encounter with the text.”<sup>179</sup> Thus, Thieliicke’s example of good interpretation—the objective side—is what Bultmann would still call Cartesian and an illusion since it is impossible to transcend all prejudice; indeed, if one actually could there would be no interpretation. Yet Thieliicke, blind to this point, simply states that “Bultmann is not objective but is prejudiced by his self understanding.”<sup>180</sup> Hence, Thieliicke understands Bultmann’s hermeneutic principle--demythologizing--as abandoning objectivity and as finding a home in the arbitrary subjective.<sup>181</sup>

Although Thieliicke notes that Bultmann refuses to be labeled a subjectivist,<sup>182</sup> he cannot see Bultmann in any other light. Thieliicke functions exclusively within a Cartesian hermeneutic and is left with no option but to consider Bultmann as a subjectivist.<sup>183</sup> In the “violent hierarchy” of Cartesianism, Thieliicke must choose the subjective or objective as the proper mode of hermeneutics, and he chooses the latter on the grounds that it is less arbitrary.

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<sup>179</sup>Ibid., 127. Compare this to Bultmann’s comment that to silence subjectivity to gain objectivity is “the most absurd [thing] that can be imagined.” *New Testament and Mythology*, 85.

<sup>180</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>181</sup>Thieliicke, “The Restatement of New Testament Mythology,” 159.

<sup>182</sup>Thieliicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, 60.

<sup>183</sup>Ibid., 109.

Thus, Thieliicke is left discrediting any notion of subjectivity: “when theology focuses so exclusively on man’s self-consciousness and proclaims so exclusively what in the resultant pre-judgement he can regard as significant for him, the past and the contingent are banished to the realm of the irrelevant . . . all that is left is the Cartesian I.”<sup>184</sup> For Thieliicke the “Cartesian I” must be “given up to death” along with Bultmann’s hermeneutic.<sup>185</sup>

Despite Thieliicke’s critique of Bultmann he fabricates a weak attempt to give Bultmann a bit of credit, but in so doing does a great disservice to Bultmann and ends up constructing a naive view of Bultmann’s method, as is demonstrated in his statement that “it is important to keep in view Bultmann’s ultimate objective, which is to secure a firm basis.”<sup>186</sup> Bultmann is far from wanting to secure a “firm basis”; rather, Thieliicke is simply projecting his own need for a hermeneutic based on a foundational epistemology. This ultimately leads Thieliicke to reject Bultmann’s hermeneutic as based in “secular philosophy”; the logical conclusion being anti-religion with “fatal results.”<sup>187</sup> There is a real question regarding

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<sup>184</sup>Ibid., 111.

<sup>185</sup>Ibid., 159.

<sup>186</sup>Thieliicke, “The Restatement of New Testament Mythology,” 174.

<sup>187</sup>Ibid., 149.

whose method produces “fatal results”; as Thielicke says, the “Cartesian I” must “be given up to death.” The implications of Thielicke’s Cartesian hermeneutic are revealed in his statement: “the implication [of Bultmann’s hermeneutic] is that it would be nearer to the truth to say: ‘The Word did not become flesh’.”<sup>188</sup>

The above discussion illustrates how confusion tends to reign in critiques of Bultmann, due to the critics themselves being mired in a Cartesian hermeneutic. Macquarrie notes the confusion involved in the interpretation of Bultmann and states:

The result [of numerous critiques of Bultmann] is bewildering in the extreme, not only because one set of critics regards as a virtue what the other set abhors as a vice, but also because it frequently happens that contradictory charges are made against Bultmann and he could not possibly be guilty on both counts at once.<sup>189</sup>

Once again, these contradictory charges arise from the forced bi-polar decision posited by Cartesianism between the subjective and the objective. The interpreter could as easily slide to one side as the other. Since it is difficult to categorize Bultmann it follows, as noted by Ogden, that “from both the right and left responsible critics have repeatedly charged that Bultmann’s view is, strictly speaking, not a view at all, but an uneasy synthesis of two different and ultimately

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<sup>188</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>189</sup>Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing*, 30.

incompatible standpoints.”<sup>190</sup> Thielicke, as a responsible critic, has missed the base of Bultmann’s hermeneutic entirely and has shown the inadequacy and confusion that is created by a Cartesian approach to Bultmann’s hermeneutic. The confusion regarding the interpretation of Bultmann arises as a result of prying into the thought of Bultmann from a Cartesian perspective. The problem of the Cartesian perspective is noted by Ott:

[In] their rigid adherence to the subject-object pattern Bultmann’s critics are blinding themselves to the real purport of his theology . . . it becomes a ‘subjectivist phenomena’ or an ‘immanent experience’. This is because they are either unable or unwilling to realize that Bultmann is seeking to banish the complementary terms ‘subject’ and ‘object’ from the theological scene.<sup>191</sup>

In fact, Bultmann calls any objective or subjective thought Cartesian since his hermeneutic is a synthesis of the two rather than one or the other. Yet Thielicke cannot function outside of those very terms since he cannot even consider giving any credence to the subjective side of the dualism because that, he fears, would end in chaos. This fear of the subjective chaos is noted by Bernstein as the inherent anxiety of Cartesianism which:

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<sup>190</sup>Schubert Ogden, *Christ without Myth* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 99.

<sup>191</sup>Heinrich Ott, “Objectification and Existentialism,” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* vol. II, 313f.

Leads us to an apparent and ineluctable necessity to a grand and seductive Either/Or. Either there is . . . a fixed foundation . . . or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelope us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos.<sup>192</sup>

The Cartesian hermeneutic necessitates reality as an either/or.<sup>193</sup> Hence, Thielicke is stuck in the either/or dualism of the subject and object and thereby is unable to understand Bultmann's hermeneutic which rejects this Cartesian antithesis between the subject and object relation, and instead accepts a synthesis of the subject and object.

This inability of Cartesianism to see outside of the subject/object dualism is a real problem in traditional discussions of Bultmann's hermeneutic of demythologizing. Yet the Cartesian habits are so ingrained in Western thought that they are difficult to ascertain and even more difficult to remove. Adam notes that it is important:

. . . to point out that the assumptions we modern biblical interpreters make are not eternal truths, but are habits that we have gotten into after an earlier period in which we had different habits. The impetus toward a postmodern approach to philosophy, to art and literature, to life in general—including biblical interpretation—comes when critics begin to see some of these habits as unnecessary, and others as downright bad.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup>Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 18.

<sup>193</sup>Paparella, *Hermeneutics in the Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 150.

<sup>194</sup>Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Interpretation?* 5.

It is the assumed acceptance of Cartesianism that makes it difficult for Thielicke to see his Cartesian habit. Further, Paparella states that “the sheer arrogance of the Cartesian mind-set is exhibited by the insistence that it is the only valid ‘objective’ view of what constitutes reality, while other views or paradigms can only proceed out of ignorance and have therefore little, if any, intellectual value.”<sup>195</sup> In other words, to accept any perspective other than Cartesianism would be seen as madness.

Yet Bernstein maintains that the concern should not be to choose the better side in the Cartesian either/or, as if one fact or another offers more security (as Thielicke chooses the objective side for security), but to “exorcize the Cartesian anxiety and liberate ourselves from its seductive appeal.”<sup>196</sup> The problem of Thielicke’s discussion of Bultmann lies in Thielicke’s normative appraisal of the objective side of the Cartesian dualism and his inability to even imagine the possibility of locating the discussion in a anti-Cartesian context.

Post-structuralism is, however, in contrast to liberal and evangelical theology, willing to so enter discussions that ‘exorcize the Cartesian anxiety’ and leave the Cartesian hermeneutic behind. Hence, it is apparent that the difficult

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<sup>195</sup>Paparella, *Hermeneutics in the Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 33.

<sup>196</sup>Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 19.

communication between Thielicke and Bultmann is analogous to that between Cartesianism (modernity) and anti-Cartesianism (postmodernity). Therefore, a post-structuralist context is a real possibility for a continued discussion of Bultmann. It will not suffice to simply label Bultmann an historicist or subjectivist simply because a Cartesian hermeneutic necessitates such a decision. Post-structuralism must be seen as a legitimate field for continued Bultmannian discussion. Yet once again, we should be careful to not reduce Bultmann to post-structuralism, but rather simply seek a better context within which to understand him.

### **Bultmann and Post-Structuralism**

Post-structuralism is, of course, to be understood as differentiated from structuralism. Structuralism bases itself on the Cartesian subject/object dichotomy<sup>197</sup> and on the project of gaining an objective description.<sup>198</sup> Post-structuralism, on the other hand, offers a critique of the Cartesian dualism of subject and object, and also the resultant illusion of “a self-foundation and self-

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<sup>197</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans., J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976) , lvii.

<sup>198</sup>Sarup, *Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 39f.



justification of philosophy.”<sup>199</sup> Moreover, Sarup defines post-structuralism thus: “reading has lost its status as a passive consumption of a product . . . post-structuralists have produced critiques of the classical Cartesian conception of the unitary subject—the subject/author as originating consciousness, authority for meaning and truth.”<sup>200</sup> It is evident that post-structuralism is reacting against Cartesianism, and it is this aspect of post-structuralism that is of most interest for our inquiry.

We have already seen that there are significant points of contact between Bultmann and post-structuralism. It may now be objected, however, that Bultmann is too dogmatic to be compared with the indeterminacy of post-structuralism. Or, alternatively, placing Bultmann in the melting pot of post-structuralism’s subjective chaos may seem apt. It will be shown that neither argument is acceptable since neither Bultmann, nor Derrida (as a representative of post-structuralism), are as indeterminate and negating as is assumed. Thus, the comparison between Bultmann and post-structuralism need not be simply rejected, but must be discussed in light of their common anti-Cartesian perspective.

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<sup>199</sup>Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986) , 176.

<sup>200</sup>Sarup, *Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 3.

Furthermore, serious inquiry excludes simply reducing either Bultmann or Derrida to normatively loaded terms, such as existential, indeterminacy or negation; rather, it is necessary to seriously discuss their view points.

Just as Bultmann has difficulties with Cartesianism, so does Derrida.

Gasche states that “in order to come to grips with Derrida’s thought, one must reject the temptation [a Cartesian temptation] . . . simply to determine it as antisystematic . . . [because] philosophy has [in the past] contained two absolutely symmetrical alternatives of a systematic and a nonsystematic thought.”<sup>201</sup> In other words, since Derrida critiques systematic thought it is assumed that it must be the case that he is nonsystematic. And, of course, nonsystematic is a pejorative term, as is subjectivism. Yet, as Norris states, “deconstruction is not just a species of deconstructive or all-purpose nihilistic rhetoric.”<sup>202</sup> To interpret Bultmann, and Derrida, it is necessary to break the habit of Cartesian thought, and anxiety, that immediately reduces any seeming attack on meaning and objectivity to nihilism or

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<sup>201</sup>Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, 178.

<sup>202</sup>Christopher Norris, *What’s Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the ends of Philosophy* (Toronto: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1990) , 150.

indeterminacy. Criticisms of Bultmann often stem from such fear rather than understanding.<sup>203</sup>

Derrida, according to Norris, runs into similar problems:

The whole charge-sheet [against Derrida] falls to shreds if one only takes the trouble to read what Derrida has written, instead of relying on a handful of simplified slogans ('all reading is misreading', 'there is nothing outside of the text', 'meaning is always indeterminate' and so forth) which are no doubt well suited to the purpose of knock-about polemics, but which just do not begin to engage deconstruction at anything like an adequate level.<sup>204</sup>

One needs to work through Derrida's deconstruction, and not rely on "simplified slogans," if Derrida is not to be unfairly dismissed as "an absurd nihilist."<sup>205</sup> And this is exactly what happens:

One could cite many passages from Derrida's work where he asserts that deconstruction is not, as his opponents would have it, a discourse with no further use for criteria of reference, validity, or truth; that it squarely repudiates the 'anything goes' school of postmodern hermeneutic thought;

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<sup>203</sup> An analogy to the problem of interpreting Bultmann and Derrida can be made with a scientist looking at a slide under a microscope, knowing that the slide is labeled as blue, but seeing it as green; then, rather than thinking it through and realizing that his eyepiece has been colored yellow, he suspects that the slide must be labeled wrong, just as Bultmann and Derrida must be wrong since their comments are contradictory. But the contradiction, as a problem, is a result of the viewpoint (eyepiece) of the interpreter, not necessarily the thought of either Bultmann or Derrida themselves.

<sup>204</sup> Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, 148.

<sup>205</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Spivak Reader*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 81.

and that to deconstruct naive or common sense ideas of how language hooks up with reality is not to suggest that it should henceforth be seen as a realm of open-ended textual 'freeplay' or floating signifiers devoid of referential content.<sup>206</sup>

Because of this problem Derrida has had the difficulty of dissociating his work from irrationalist and nihilistic views that assume truth and reason are obsolete.<sup>207</sup>

Similarly, Thielicke, in my view, misreads Bultmann and thereby labels him a subjectivist intent on the negation of history.<sup>208</sup> This then leads to a similar problem as found with Derrida, and Bultmann also attempts to defend himself. He says, "my critics have objected that my demythologizing of the New Testament results in elimination . . . on the contrary, I am convinced that my interpretation exposes its meaning."<sup>209</sup> The intent of Bultmann's demythologizing, in contrast to assumed negation on behalf of the Cartesian interpreter, is not to negate or subtract, but is to interpret.<sup>210</sup> Bultmann states that "demythologizing is an hermeneutic method, that is, a method of interpretation, of exegesis [and]

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<sup>206</sup>Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992), 17.

<sup>207</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>208</sup>Thielicke, "The Restatement of New Testament Mythology," 159.

<sup>209</sup>Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 205.

<sup>210</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 18.

hermeneutics is the art of exegesis.”<sup>211</sup> The point of demythologizing is interpreting, not negating. Furthermore, it is significant that Bultmann’s interpretation makes use of the historical-critical method, even if he does renounce any foundational claim for it.

In contrast to the Cartesian perspective, which focuses on the negative and negating properties of demythologizing, it is valuable to look at how post-structuralism can add to a discussion of Bultmann. The point that Spivak makes is applicable to Bultmann’s demythologizing, namely, that in deconstruction the emphasis should not be on the negative aspect, but on the production of meaning.<sup>212</sup> Spivak states that “deconstruction does not say there is no subject, there is no truth, there is no history . . . It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced.”<sup>213</sup> Moreover, she comments that “the task is to dismantle (*déconstruire*) the metaphysical and rhetorical structures which are at work in the text, not in order to reject or discard them, but to reinscribe them in another way.”<sup>214</sup> Once again, deconstruction does

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<sup>211</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>212</sup>Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, lxxv.

<sup>213</sup>Spivak, *The Spivak Reader*, 27.

<sup>214</sup>Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, lxxv.

not annihilate meaning, but rather is very concerned with meaning. Derrida himself comments that deconstruction is affirmative interpretation.<sup>215</sup> Hence, Derrida's deconstruction, as noted by Bruns, does not aim at nihilism: "Derrida himself insists on this . . . deconstruction is comic not tragic. It aims at emancipation, not tragic divestiture . . . so it is not as cold as cold can be."<sup>216</sup>

It may be allowed by some critics of deconstruction that it can produce meaning, but they still might insist that that very meaning is bound in indeterminacy. Yet Eco states:

Even the most radical deconstructionists accept the idea that there are interpretations which are blatantly unacceptable. This means that the interpreted text imposes some constraints upon its interpreters. The limits of interpretation coincide with the rights of the text (which does not mean with the rights of its author).<sup>217</sup>

Derrida's deconstruction is not "a species of all-licencing sophistical freeplay"<sup>218</sup>; rather, it subscribes to a certain rigour.<sup>219</sup> Deconstruction cannot be written off as

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<sup>215</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Spurs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) , 37.

<sup>216</sup>Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 219.

<sup>217</sup>Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) , 6.

<sup>218</sup>Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, 151.

<sup>219</sup>Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, 178.

engendering interpretive chaos. Derrida himself states that deconstruction is “subject to a certain historical necessity.”<sup>220</sup> In reference to critical reading he says that “to recognize and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything.”<sup>221</sup> Concerning this statement of Derrida, Norris comments:

It specifically disowns the attitude of free-for-all hermeneutic licence--or the down-right anti-intentionalist stance--that Ellis [among others] so persistently attributes to Derrida. And of course it must also create problems for those among the deconstructionist adepts who likewise take him to have broken altogether with values of truth and falsehood, right reading, intentionality, authorial ‘presence’ and so forth.<sup>222</sup>

It is only a general and naive view of deconstruction that assumes an “anything goes” mentality. Eco states that “Derrida would be--and indeed he was--the first to deny that we can always use language as an instance of drift and the first to refuse

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<sup>220</sup>Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 162.

<sup>221</sup>Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

<sup>222</sup>Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, 162.

the objection that there are no criteria for verifying the reasonableness of a textual interpretation.”<sup>223</sup>

Bultmann would concur with Derrida and maintains that if a norm is not acknowledged then relativism and nihilism follow.<sup>224</sup> In contrast to relativism and nihilism Bultmann also understands the importance of history and the tools of historical investigation. He states that “since the New Testament is a document of history, specifically the history of religion, the interpretation of it requires the labor of historical investigation.”<sup>225</sup> Furthermore, Bultmann concludes that “there can be no question of discarding historical criticism.”<sup>226</sup>

The above discussion shows that a comparison of Bultmann with post-structuralism would be fruitful, and need not be constituted by any popular notion of indeterminate meaning and nihilism. To say that Derrida ends at nihilism through deconstruction, or that Bultmann ends with nihilism as the logical conclusion of demythologizing, can only be said within the framework of a Cartesian perspective, which neither Bultmann nor Derrida accept.

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<sup>223</sup>Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 37.

<sup>224</sup>Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 42.

<sup>225</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 251.

<sup>226</sup>Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 31.



## **John 1:14a Revisited**

Bultmann, then, has anti-Cartesian affinities which distance him from his contemporary critics, such as Thielicke, and place him within a conceptual framework which has closer ties to post-structuralist thought. It is mistaken to argue that Bultmann's demythologizing, and/or post-structuralism, can be reduced to negation and/or subjectivism and are thereby untenable or incompatible theories. Negation and subjectivism do not truly apply to Bultmann's demythologizing, or to post-structuralism, specifically Derrida's deconstruction. Hence, it is mistaken to say that demythologizing cannot be compared to post-structuralism--deconstruction--because of the latter's indeterminacy, and, conversely, it is also mistaken to say that both Bultmann and post-structuralism are compatible due to a mutual indeterminacy.

Post-structuralism can throw light on Bultmann's hermeneutic of demythologizing. However, while post-structuralism affords a most useful perspective for discussing demythologizing, there are significant differences. It would be very misleading to leave the impression that Bultmann is a post-structuralist. Instead, we find in the importance of John 1:14a for Bultmann's thought, the significant difference between Bultmann's hermeneutic and post-

structuralism. In other words, there is a textual basis to demythologizing.

Moreover, there is also a theological basis. Demythologizing is parallel to the theological principle of justification by faith. Thus, Kuschel is right in his assertion that a new perspective is required, but the focus of this new perspective is found in Bultmann's exegesis of 1:14a.

Bultmann insists that 1:14a describes an historic event, namely, the Word becoming flesh. Hence, he does not seek to demythologize this eschatological event, for he says:

Are there still any surviving traces of mythology? There certainly are for those who regard all language about an act of God or of a decisive, eschatological event as mythological. But this is not mythology in the traditional sense, not the kind of mythology which has become antiquated with the decay of the mythical world view. For the redemption of which we have spoken is not a miraculous supernatural event, but an historic event wrought out in time and space. We are convinced that this restatement does better justice to the real meaning of the New Testament and to the paradox of the Kerygma. For the Kerygma maintains that the eschatological emissary of God is a concrete figure of a particular historical past, that this eschatological activity was wrought out in a human fate, and that therefore it is an event whose eschatological character does not admit of a secular proof. Here we have the paradox of . . . the classic formula of John 1:14: 'The Word became flesh'.<sup>227</sup>

Bultmann's insistence that 1:14a cannot be demythologized may appear cryptic, particularly to the Cartesian mind set that abhors the mention of a paradox.

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<sup>227</sup>Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 43f.

Nevertheless, it stands as evidence that Bultmann is not nihilistic and that he listens to the text. Bultmann explicitly states that 1:14a is “an historic event wrought out in space and time” and is included in the “meaning of the New Testament.”

In contrast to abstract principles or timeless truths of endless indeterminate speculations, 1:14a points to the singular distinctiveness of a particular body/flesh and a radical historical event that leaves the subject/object dichotomy behind.<sup>228</sup> Bultmann maintains that the significance of the verse is directly related to its concrete history, since without the distinct nature of the verse it would have little significance for humanity. He states, “this event, if it is to have any significance for men, must take place in the human sphere.”<sup>229</sup> And once again, it is not a generality, as noted by Bultmann: “the Revealer appears not as man-in-general . . . but as a definite human being in history.”<sup>230</sup> As such 1:14a is focused on the flesh and historical event of a definite person seen only in the flesh.<sup>231</sup> It is thereby evident that 1:14a is, for Bultmann, not a matter of human wisdom, which would

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<sup>228</sup>Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 70.

<sup>229</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>230</sup>Bultmann, *The Theology of the New Testament*, 41.

<sup>231</sup>Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 63.

speculate upon what is revealed and what knowledge is gained, but rather is a radical divine paradox. As Fuller comments, 1:14a is, for Bultmann, not immersed in mythological language, but is a “concrete piece of history,” that cannot be determined through historical investigation, and as such reveals the “real stumbling block with brutal clarity.”<sup>232</sup>

To distance demythologizing from human wisdom Bultmann makes use of the theological principle of justification by faith, which is a consistent continuation of his thought. Perrin notes that any discussion of Bultmann’s demythologizing can quickly become a discussion of Bultmannian theology.<sup>233</sup> As a natural extension of a discussion of Bultmann’s thought, the theological principle of justification by faith affords insight into the function of demythologizing. Thus, rather than considering Bultmann’s thought to be based on a particular philosophy it is important to see that demythologizing is based on 1:14a and the theological principle of justification by faith.

The relation between demythologizing and justification by faith is noted by Bultmann himself:

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<sup>232</sup>Fuller, *The New Testament in Current Study*, 11.

<sup>233</sup>Perrin, *The Promise of Bultmann*, 78.

Our radical attempt to demythologize the New Testament is in fact a perfect parallel to St. Paul's and Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works of the law . . . it destroys every false security and every false demand for it on the part of man . . . The man who wishes to believe in God as his God must realize that he has nothing in his hand on which to base his faith. He is suspended in mid-air, and cannot demand a proof of the Word that addresses him.<sup>234</sup>

Moreover, according to Bultmann, the only way to find security is, paradoxically, to let all security go.<sup>235</sup> It is not surprising then, as Macquarrie notes, that the mere mention of demythologizing results in the arousal of fear,<sup>236</sup> particularly for those who adhere to a Cartesian hermeneutic which revolves around the building of security and foundations.

The resultant Cartesian anxiety of Bultmann's contemporaries is noted by Bultmann, who states:

They want to know how I rescue myself from the situation created by my critical radicalism; how much I can save from the fire . . . I have never yet felt uncomfortable with my critical radicalism; on the contrary, I have been entirely comfortable. But I often have the impression that my conservative New Testament colleagues feel very uncomfortable, for I see them perpetually engaged in salvage operations. I calmly let the fire burn . . . .<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>234</sup>Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 210f.

<sup>235</sup>Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 122.

<sup>236</sup>Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing*, 14.

<sup>237</sup>Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 132.

Bultmann's contemporaries, entrenched in Cartesianism, naturally felt uncomfortable with Bultmann's demythologizing, as it did little to contribute to their task of seeking a ground through human wisdom. In fact, it presents a threat to such a project.

In contrast to a Cartesian hermeneutic, Bultmann's hermeneutic, in a manner similar to post-structuralism, questions the ability of human wisdom to establish a foundation. In other words, just as justification by faith negates the security of works, so demythologizing undermines the epistemological security sought by the Cartesian hermeneutic. The result of demythologizing, then, is that 1:14a becomes the paradoxical 'foundation', while a Cartesian hermeneutic seeks to make the self (human wisdom) the foundation.

The fire that Bultmann allows to burn is not an annihilating fire that burns all to the ground as the Cartesian hermeneutic would insist; rather, what is burned are the false objectifications and illusory foundations of Cartesianism.

Demythologizing and justification by faith can actually be seen as the fire which burns the human wisdom and Cartesian hermeneutic which attempts to circumscribe the paradox of 1:14a, but demythologizing leaves 1:14a fully intact. Indeed, demythologizing not only leaves John 1:14a intact, but brings to the fore the very radical nature of 1:14a.

Ironically, it is liberal theology and the history-of-religions school which, according to Bultmann, “burn” the kerygma to the ground by reducing it to an absolute idea or timeless truth.<sup>238</sup> Then the essential paradox and stumbling block of 1:14a is removed. Bultmann himself states that his hermeneutic “stands, on the one hand, within the tradition of the historical-critical and the history-of-religion schools and seeks, on the other hand, to avoid their mistake which consists of the tearing apart of the act of thinking from the act of living and hence of a failure to recognize the intent of theological utterances.”<sup>239</sup> Thus, it is seen that there is an inverse relationship between Bultmann’s demythologizing and the Cartesian hermeneutic: the former burns human wisdom and the latter burns the paradox of 1:14a itself.

It is evident that Bultmann is not stating explicitly what the significance of 1:14a is other than being a paradox and a stumbling block. The “definite human being in history” gives occasion to a paradox and questioning, rather than any particular awe or timeless truth. Bultmann states that “to be confronted with the

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<sup>238</sup>Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*, 262.

<sup>239</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 250.

revealer is not to be presented with a persuasive set of answers but only to be faced with a question.”<sup>240</sup> And that is where Bultmann wants it to end, with a question.<sup>241</sup>

Going too far and speculating on indeterminate answers, the illogical nature of no answers, and other such questions is the work of a Cartesian hermeneutic, as Derrida remarks: “in classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-a-vis* but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other . . . or has the upper hand.”<sup>242</sup> The Cartesian hermeneutic attempts to gain the “upper hand” through a separation of subject and object in an attempt to gain the “Archimedean point.” In contrast to the Cartesian hermeneutic, Bultmann maintains a peaceful coexistence between the subject and object since they cannot exist independently,<sup>243</sup> they are not in a “violent hierarchy.”

Instead of seeking an “upper hand” it is necessary and sufficient to look at 1:14a itself as a paradox and stumbling block. Vico maintains that we “must

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<sup>240</sup>Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 66.

<sup>241</sup>Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 30.

<sup>242</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 41.

<sup>243</sup>Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, 133.



transcend the subject/object dichotomy of Cartesianism; however, this approach, with its ambiguities and unresolved contradictions, paradoxes, conflicts and suffering, may not be a neat, clear, clean world of scientific concepts, but it is certainly less sterile and more authentically true to existence and human experience.”<sup>244</sup> Bultmann also insists that his hermeneutic is not a matter of human wisdom that can be drawn into a concise logical conclusion through a Cartesian hermeneutic, but is an event encountered in history that is accountable to human experience.<sup>245</sup> Madison notes that this anti-Cartesian hermeneutic, and the resultant undermining of traditional oppositions of subject and object, leads to an understanding of “how the imagination is the very heart of understanding, which is not merely a matter, as the traditional metaphor had it, of ‘facing the facts’.”<sup>246</sup> Thus, rather than attempting to justify demythologizing through a Cartesian hermeneutic, Bultmann lets it stand on its own, including the paradoxes and its offense to reason. As noted by Douglas Cremer, Bultmann’s hermeneutic must be

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<sup>244</sup>Paparella, *Hermeneutics in the Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 89.

<sup>245</sup>Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 207.

<sup>246</sup>Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity*, 190.

accepted “as paradoxical, unresolved, always subject to critique, and always open to new possibilities, a frightening and insecure position.”<sup>247</sup>

Both Vico and Bultmann met general disregard because of their rejection of Cartesianism, the accepted hermeneutic of their time. Paparella concludes that Vico’s thought was ahead of its time, but thinks that now we are better able to see the value of his thought in light of becoming aware of the Cartesianism paradigm of reality which still pervades our culture.<sup>248</sup> Collingwood also considers Vico’s critique of Cartesianism to be “too far ahead of his time to have very much immediate influence.”<sup>249</sup> Likewise, Bultmann was misrepresented in his time due to the prevalent Cartesian hermeneutic and its associated epistemological habits. Funk observes that Bultmann has been distorted through the reading of him through liberal and/or orthodox eyes as though twentieth-century theology were merely an extension of the nineteenth. Moreover, he notes that if Bultmann had been seen as turning a new corner in theology he may have been better

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<sup>247</sup>J. Douglas, Cremer, “Protestant Theology in Weimar Germany,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56:2 (1995) : 308.

<sup>248</sup>Paparella, *Hermeneutics in the Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 41.

<sup>249</sup>Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 71.

understood.<sup>250</sup> Now, with the advent of post-structuralism, we are better situated to discuss anti-Cartesian hermeneutics such as those found in Bultmann and Vico.

Bultmann's distinctive demythologizing hermeneutic is, therefore, seen more clearly in a post-structuralist light, even if it is not to be equated with post-structuralism. Bultmann's distinctive demythologizing hermeneutic is built on the paradox and stumbling block of John 1:14a, and has a parallel function to the theological principle of justification by faith. Post-structuralism thus has a different agenda from that of Bultmann, but it nevertheless affords a most useful context within which to understand his truly remarkable originality and seminal thought. "*Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo, aut speculando.*"<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>250</sup>Funk, *Faith and Understanding*, 12.

<sup>251</sup>Martin Luther, *Lecture on Psalm 5 in Luther's Works V* (Weimar Edition), p. 183.

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