

THE USE OF MYTH AND SYMBOL IN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

I

A good deal has been heard recently about “demythologizing”¹ the Bible with the object of commending Christianity to the modern mind, and especially to those persons who are commonly called “scientists”.² The word “myth” has an unobjectionable meaning in itself. Originally it meant only a story, but the kind of story which was usually called by this name gave it the meaning of a story which had no relation to factual history and little relation to reality. In the writings of Plato it has the more respectable meaning of a story told to express a truth which is so abstract that it could only be made intelligible by means of a story which was, to some extent, a pictorial representation of it. The word “legend” also had a respectable origin. It originally meant “something to be read” during meals in monasteries, but, as the reading matter employed in this way consisted so largely in most improbable stories of the lives of the saints, as understood in the dark ages, the word now means something that is probably untrue, and certainly greatly misrepresented or exaggerated.

“Demythologizing” the Bible seems primarily to mean removing such expressions as describe Christ as ascending into heaven and sitting at the right hand of God, and it must be extended to all passages which speak of the arm, the hand or the finger of God and even to passages in which He is spoken of as seeing or hearing anything. It seldom stops here, but goes on to the relegation of the greater part of the matter in the Fourth Gospel to the category of myth and applying the same system of purgation to much that is contained in the Synoptic Gospels. When carried to its extreme limit, it leaves nothing in the Creed except the statement that Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. For

¹ Mr. Nunn does not deal specifically with the best known among the current “demythologizing” interpretations—that associated with Professor Rudolf Bultmann (see *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H. W. Bartsch, Eng. tr. by R. H. Fuller, London, 1953). But, as a veteran antagonist of the Modernist movement, he finds that the current “demythologizing” vogue has more in common with that earlier movement than is generally supposed. ED.

² The reason for placing the word “scientists” between inverted commas is given on p. 83.

people who believe in the Jesus of history and who accept much of His teaching the difficulty must always remain that if they are to express their thoughts about God at all, they must express their thoughts by metaphors which have the anthropomorphic tinge which is supposed to be so offensive to the modern mind. The reason for this is that human personality, with its attributes and inevitable physical concomitants, is the highest category of thought that we know. If we are to think of God as being anything else than an unintelligible abstraction, an absolute, a power not ourselves which makes for righteousness, or even as the supreme mathematician or the soul of the universe, we must use metaphors drawn from our experience of human personality. Myth, if properly regarded, is nothing more than an extended metaphor, and no intelligent person who will give a little thought to the matter has any excuse for taking such metaphors literally.

Even in the Articles of the Church of England God is spoken of as being without body, parts, or passions. Probably most of the "scientists" for whose benefit this demythologizing of the Bible is supposed to be necessary have never seriously considered the meaning of such an antiquated document and are still less likely to have studied the Greek Fathers. Yet Justin Martyr, who certainly had not to deal with the difficulties of the "scientific" outlook on life, could write: "No name can be given to the Father of all, because He is not begotten. For he who gives a name to another is prior in time to him to whom he gives the name. Father and God, Creator and Lord and Master, are not names, but titles given to Him, because of the benefits which He has bestowed upon us. But His Son, the only one who can properly be called Son, the Word who was with Him and was begotten of Him before all created things, when in the beginning He created and adorned all things, is called Christ, because He was anointed by God and adorned all things through Him. This name also has a signification beyond our apprehension just as God is a title and not a name, an opinion planted in the nature of man, a matter difficult to expound" (*Second Apology*, 6).

Origen was convinced that no sensible person would take the days of creation literally when neither sun nor moon had previously been created, nor would such a person take literally the statements that God planted a garden and walked in it, or any of the other details of the story of the fall. He also considered

that the story of the temptation in which Jesus was shown all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them from an exceeding high mountain was to be regarded as "truth embodied in a tale" (*De Principiis* iv. 16).

Augustine, in using the orthodox formula of three Persons in one God as a description of the Trinity, said: "*Dictum est tamen Tres Personae, non ut illud diceretur, sed ne taceretur.*" He knew perfectly well that the word *persona* was a most inadequate term to use in the definition of such a matter, as was also the word *substantia*, but language contained no more suitable words then, and it does not do so now; in fact the word "substance" in English is more liable to misunderstanding than the word *substantia* in Latin.

II

In referring to the "scientists" for whose benefit "demythologizing" is thought to be necessary, we have deliberately put the word in inverted commas, because in modern English this word bears a meaning which is misleading. Professor F. M. Cornford well says of the word "science" from which they take their title: "In the last hundred years natural philosophy (as it used to be called) has become known as natural science, as if its characteristic method of observation, hypothesis and experiment were the only means of arriving at knowledge, and the habits of matter in motion were the only things that can be known. Since the term 'science' has now acquired these arrogant associations, the application of it to the natural philosophy of Greece is perpetually misleading the reader, since it at once suggests to his mind the whole apparatus of a modern laboratory and the whole outlook of its denizens" (*Principium Sapientiae*, p. 42). So when a thing is now said to be scientifically ascertained, many people do not stop to think what kind of thing may justly be described as "scientifically ascertained". The word "science" acts on their minds as an agent which benumbs them and precludes further thought and examination. "*Scientia locuta est: causa finita est.*"

But, as Professor Cornford says, this presupposes that the habits of matter in motion are the only things which can be known, and the method of hypothesis tested by experiment is the only way of arriving at knowledge. Strictly speaking, "science" is only another word for knowledge, and should

never be used absolutely without qualification in a sense which it does not properly possess.

Professor Cornford also points out that the Epicureans, who based all knowledge on perception by the senses, were yet obliged to postulate as the basis of their system the existence of atoms and void, not to mention their peculiar doctrine of the swerve of the atoms, which are things of which the senses can take no cognizance. They took refuge in the metaphor of a projection of the mind towards some object which was not perceptible by the senses, by which they thought they were justified in assuming the existence of atoms, their fall through infinite space in infinite time, and their collisions, due to an unaccountable swerve.

It is true that modern scientists, by means of microscopes and other means of sensual perception, and by mathematical calculations, have established the atomic theory—with its extension into theories about electrons, protons and neutrons—on a basis which seems to be as certain as anything within the capacity of the human mind and which may be called “scientific” in the generally accepted use of the term. In this narrow field it may be granted that they have reached “truth” with regard to material objects, but the methods which they use in this investigation are and must be quite different from the methods which they use in considering their relationship with their families and their fellow-men and in investigating the values of what is to be considered morally good or morally evil.

One of the deplorable results of the extension of the field of “science” is that those who would be experts in it must begin so early in life to apply themselves almost completely to the measurement of physical phenomena, to the exclusion of almost everything else, unless they make a determined effort to avoid the cramping effects of such education.

A fortiori it is obvious that if something exists to which the name God can be given in any intelligible sense, the methods by which truth about His existence and attributes is to be apprehended differ more from the methods employed to discover truth in “science” than they differ from the methods by which the truth about the relationship in which we stand towards other men can be discovered.

We may, if we please, say with Pilate: “What is truth?” But if it be granted that it is possible to attain, in some measure,

to a knowledge of truth (and it is upon this supposition that all investigations into the constitution of matter are based), then, in a sense, it is true that the more abstract and narrow the field of inquiry is, the greater the approximation to “truth” which may be expected. But this field only covers a part of human experience, and we may venture to say that it covers the least important part.

“Science” has given us many material benefits, but it has also given us the atomic bomb, and it is widely recognized that, unless the moral character of man can be so adjusted that such a weapon will never be used in war, the end not only of civilization, but also of human life, may be in sight. There may be people who can do no more than “peep and botanize upon their mother’s grave”, but such people are not likely to be drawn towards a sincere consideration of religion by any “demythologizing” that falls short of a complete elimination of the Bible, except as a piece of literature, or as a curious record of human superstition and credulity. When Socrates said that the trees would teach him nothing, he was uttering at least a partial truth.

III

In a recent address in honour of the founder of the *Hibbert Journal*, Lord Samuel stated that this *Journal* had been founded to promote the knowledge of Christianity “in its most simple and intelligible form” and also to encourage “the unfettered exercise of private judgment in matters of religion”. This is probably also the aim of the “demythologizers”. How well some of the writers in the *Hibbert Journal* applied themselves to this task can be seen in its editor’s most flattering article on Loisy’s *Naissance du Christianisme* written in 1934, but to such men as Dean Inge and Bishop Hensley Henson this book seemed to be one of the most serious attacks on Christianity ever produced. It certainly exhibited a quite unfettered exercise of criticism in matters of religion, but it could hardly be said that it presented Christianity in its most simple and intelligible form, unless Christianity is to be considered to be the history of a Jewish agitator who was born we know not where and who, though he was probably morally superior to Theudas and the fanatics who claimed to be the destined deliverers of Israel, was no less deluded than they were. He

was put to death by the Romans and his body was "without doubt" thrown into the pit reserved for criminals, so that when his disciples stated that he had risen from the dead, it was not possible to produce the body to refute this assertion, because it would be too far decomposed to be recognizable. His real teaching was never collected. Why should it be? His immediate return as the Messiah was expected by the simple and ignorant men who had deserted him when he was arrested, but for some reason certain people were interested in him and so certain "prophets" invented sayings partly taken from the teaching of the Rabbis and partly "Judeo-hellenic" and put them in his mouth, and it was from these sayings and from an abundance of mythical matter (the word "myth" being naturally taken in the worst sense of the term) that the Gospels were concocted.

This is only a sample of simplified and intelligible rewriting of the origin of Christianity. It ought to satisfy the most rigidly "scientific" mind, if we take this word in its narrowest sense, unless the possessor of such a mind is scientific enough not to accept hypotheses which have no documentary foundation and which entirely fail to account for historical events which no one has ever tried to disprove. Lord Samuel said that the League of Nations had failed; that the United Nations had not yet succeeded and that consequently the world had been divided into two heavily armed groups, both declaring themselves so devoted to the cause of peace that they were ready to fight one another to the death to ensure it. He dismissed "the historical process" and the "economic forces", dear to Marxists, as myths, and in using this word he must have used it in its very worst sense as meaning things which had no reality. He could find no help in philosophy, because for two centuries it had been drawn further and further away from experience through the influence of German thinkers, and lost itself in an intricate maze of artificial abstractions. He believed that the only remedy for our present discontents was to enlist every faculty of the mind—the whole human endowment—reason above all, but intuition, emotion, imagination, poetical as well as logical. If these words had stood alone, it might be imagined that the speaker was returning to the cult of humanism—the doctrine of the self-sufficiency of man—but he made his meaning quite clear by saying that he was referring to religion. He said, as is now usual in such discourses, that religion was entangled

with ancient theologies which, in a scientific age, repelled rather than attracted, and he quoted the Archbishop of York's statement that there was need for a "short, simple and authoritative statement of the meaning of Christianity".¹ Unfortunately neither the lecturer nor the Archbishop has supplied this.

If the existence of God is a matter for faith (although reason may bring forward many arguments in its favour and even in favour of the belief that God is best described in our faltering human speech as a Person) and if Christianity is a historical religion based on the fact that Jesus existed and was the express image of God's person and the only revelation of God which the mind of man is capable of comprehending, yet no short simple and authoritative statement of these beliefs and facts can be entertained by a person to whom the only possible method of arriving at truth is what is now commonly called the "scientific" method—that is the method founded on hypotheses which can be proved to be "true" by repeated experiment.

The modern theory of atoms fails as completely as that of Democritus and Epicurus to account for the human soul with its emotions and its power of self-sacrifice, even of self-sacrifice for persons who are quite unknown to it and from whom it can receive no possible help for its survival in the struggle for existence, which is supposed to account for life in all its forms. All that they could say when confronted with the problem of accounting for the origin of thought and perception in a universe consisting wholly of indestructible atoms and void was that these phenomena were produced by the finest possible atoms, as were also the bodies of the gods. The modern scientist has not advanced one step, with all his theories of electrical forces moving in infinitely small solar systems, to explaining the origin of emotion, memory or knowledge or any of the other attributes which distinguish a man and even an animal from matter, however matter may be constituted.

Nay more, if he is to talk at all about the things which surround him so as to make himself intelligible to other people or even to himself, he must take refuge in something which is unpleasantly like the type of "myth" which is supposed to be such an unsurmountable barrier to his reception of a religion which bears even a faint resemblance to Christianity as it has

¹ *Manchester Guardian*, October 24, 1953.

always been received by the Church. He has to talk about chairs and tables, but when regarded from a strictly "scientific" viewpoint these are nothing but whirling concourses of protons, neutrons and electrons. That this view of them represents one side of truth may fairly be said to be proved by the fact that, if this hypothesis is accepted, other amazingly accurate results follow which can be used both for the benefit and for the destruction of mankind.

So long as it is admitted that such hypotheses are only a part of truth or reality (if this expression be preferred) and that the method by which they are ascertained is not the only method of arriving at truth, they ought to be accepted by all reasonable people, but they afford no ground whatever for discarding the greater part of what Christians have always found to be most valuable as a motive for living a life which is not only a blessing to themselves but also the most potent agent for the transference of this blessing to those who stand most in need of it in the present age of fear (as it has been truly called), simply because this faith always has been and must necessarily be expressed in metaphors which may be expanded into what some writers are pleased to call myths.

IV

The Israelites were forbidden to make or worship images, and this is hardly wonderful when one considers the bestial shapes under which Eastern religions, and especially the Egyptian religion, represented their gods. Moreover, as their history shows, the Israelites were always prone to follow the example of their neighbours and to worship the creature rather than the Creator. But this did not prevent even the most enlightened prophets speaking of God as if He had certain human attributes. When the early Church believed that the Word had been made flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ and it was shown to be possible for the physical nature of man to be united to the Deity; when Jesus taught that those who had seen Him had seen the Father, though no man had seen God at any time; the Church, after considerable delay, felt that it was not impious to represent Jesus as a man, though it still remained faithful unto death against the sin of idolatry. As far as we have any evidence, the art of the early Church was entirely symbolic. If Jesus was

represented directly at all, it was as an infant in His mother's arms receiving the Magi or in the presence of a Prophet pointing at a star. Both these scenes were symbols of the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles. Christ had spoken of Himself as the good shepherd; therefore, He might be symbolically represented as a shepherd and His disciples as sheep, and in rare cases, He might be represented as a sheep Himself. He had spoken of Himself as the true vine, and, therefore, the earliest decoration in the Cemetery of Domitilla consists of vine branches with other Christian symbols. The Sacraments are also symbolically represented, sometimes by a picture of the baptism of a child, though this is in certain cases made to refer to the baptism of Jesus by the presence of the Dove. More frequently, however, it is represented under the symbol of Moses striking the rock. There is one representation extant of an actual celebration of the Eucharist, but it is also represented by a fish placed over a basket containing a cup of wine and some bread, or by a man in a philosopher's cloak stretching out his hand over a table on which there is a fish and some loaves of bread. The fish was an anagram of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour". The sacrificial death of Christ was symbolized by the sacrifice of Isaac or by a fish placed on a trident.

Actual representations of the crucifixion are late, the earliest being on the doors of St. Sabina at Rome, which may be of the fifth century. Before this period and even after it the story of the Passion was commemorated by a scene of the trial before Pilate or by Christ bearing His cross. The crucifixion is not represented in the mosaics in the sixth-century church of St. Apollinaris at Ravenna, though many other incidents of the life of Jesus are depicted there, including a symbol of the Last Judgment, where Christ is shown receiving the sheep and rejecting the goats. All this goes to prove that for a long time the Church understood the suitability of symbolism to represent religious truth, although no fact set forth in the Gospels and no teaching in them was rejected as mythical, however far some of them might be treated allegorically. It was only when the barbarians had invaded the West that images of Christ became common and especially representations of the crucifixion, although in the Saxon sarcophagus at Warkworth the cross is still represented with a Lamb in its centre instead of a human figure—a symbol which may also be seen in Venice in some

early work and, according to De Rossi, in a drawing in the Catacombs.

In the end, in order to appeal to ignorant and indifferent minds and to arouse emotion, the Virgin and Child were represented under the most beautiful and sentimental form that the artist was capable of, although in the earlier figures, even in the twelfth century, the Child was represented seated on His mother's knees as upon a throne, without any display of sentiment or any tendency to put the mother in a place of honour, such as we find in many later paintings (especially those inspired by the Counter-Reformation) where she is represented as crushing the serpent's head with the assistance of the Child.

Even representations of the Last Judgment were at first symbolical and did not make the horrible attempts at realism which prevailed through the later Middle Ages and the period when the Jesuits inspired such painters as Rubens, and the evil of the times in which he lived influenced Michael Angelo. At Moissac on the pilgrimage route to St. James of Compostella the art of Cluny only showed Christ in glory surrounded by the four and twenty elders and the symbols of the Evangelists. At Beaulieu in Corrèze on the same route He is shown displaying His wounds with the instruments of the Passion behind Him and certain apostolic assessors. The dead are shown rising from their graves and hell is hinted at by a double frieze of horrible monsters, some of them devouring men, just above the door. This was a common symbol of evil among the Germanic nations, as is clearly seen in the Gloucester candlestick in the South Kensington Museum. It is not until we come to the tympanum of Conques that we find an attempt to represent the Judgment and the fate of the righteous and the reprobate in a form which is partly literal and partly symbolical. In this way the Church appealed to those who could not read, but this kind of representation lasted far too long and is not unknown even now.

V

The removal from the Bible of symbolic language, or even of what some are pleased to call myth, cannot make religion acceptable to men who have not the sense to understand the limitations of the human intellect and of human language. Still less can it satisfy those who believe that the human brain

is the source of all possible knowledge, and that experiments and measurements which can be repeated are the only way in which this brain can arrive at truth.

Lowes Dickinson wrote in 1905: "Only perception and inference and logic, only, in the broadest sense, science can teach us anything about the constitution of the universe and our place in it; can teach us whether or no there be anything corresponding to what we have called God; whether or no the individual soul survives death; whether or no the process of things moves on to a good end" (*Religion: A Criticism and a Forecast*, p. viii). This is humanism in its worst sense. It does not even take account of the lessons of history or even of human relationships. It tells how certain things, of minor importance to us as living and suffering creatures, happen, but it does not tell us why they happen and it is not of the slightest use in the direction of conduct. The results of the filtering down of this attitude of mind to ignorant people and even to amoral people of limited education and faculties are obvious all around us.¹ We must prove all things and hold fast that which is good and that which is confirmed by the greatest and most reliable evidence, whatever that evidence may be, but it must also be remembered that the Church has a duty towards all men and not only towards "the modern cultivated man", who should be well able to look after himself. Many such persons have not even the wish to understand the real meaning of the Bible or anything that a study of the history of the Church might teach them.

It was not for nothing that Jesus said that no man could enter into the kingdom of heaven unless he became as a little child, a saying which Dr. Major in his book on *English Modernism* found "baffling". This saying certainly did not condemn the use of reason and the consequent attainment of knowledge, but it did not put reason in the first place as a means of finding out whether His teaching about God was true or not, but rather the willing to do God's Will. When stated in modern terms the thing which is condemned is that pride in reason which assumes that it can comprehend everything that is to be known by a method which is only applicable to things that can be measured and tested by the physical senses. Thomas Aquinas said that no philosopher before the coming of Christ, by using

¹ These reflections are not without their relevance to a recent series of broadcasts on Morals without Religion. Ed.

his faculties to the uttermost, could know as much about God and what was necessary for the attainment of eternal life as any old woman could know after the coming of Christ. This is proved to be true by the effect which the knowledge of God so gained has had on so many people, simple as well as learned, since the beginning of the Christian era. This is admitted, as we have seen, by persons who, like Lord Samuel, find in religion—which must mean at the least belief in a personal God who can and does influence the course of men's lives—the only remaining hope for the well-being, if not for the survival, of the human race. The Church has a duty towards old women as well as towards cultivated modern men.

There may be also a still more serious obstacle to religious belief than a belief in the omniscience of the scientific method. Napoleon is said to have confided to General Bertrand on his death-bed that he was glad that he had no religious belief, because the lack of such belief enabled him to die without fear. He claimed that he had reached that condition of mind which Lucretius desired to produce in his readers with regard to the cruel and licentious gods of Greek mythology and the grim beliefs of the Etruscans about the after-life. But Napoleon reached his belief—or rather lack of belief—in the face of much more cogent evidence than Lucretius could ever have imagined, and with regard to a very different object of faith. To relegate a large part of what is generally accepted as historical in the Synoptic Gospels, and a still larger part of what the Fourth Evangelist obviously wished his readers to regard as historical, and practically the whole of the discourses of Jesus preserved in the Fourth Gospel, to the working of “a powerful and independent mind” which used not only the language of contemporary philosophy, but also much of its teaching, and certainly not to Jesus; to say that the resurrection of Lazarus “doubtless happened, or so the Evangelist was persuaded”, may be one result of what is called independent criticism and profound scholarship, but it certainly cannot be proved to be anything more than a hypothesis conditioned by a certain frame of mind.¹

Bishop Butler wrote that “mere guess, supposition and probability when opposed to historical evidence prove nothing but that the historical evidence is not demonstrative”. But many

modern writers do not even mention the historical evidence for the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel, and so what they write must remain in the category of guess, supposition and probability, until this evidence is proved to be absolutely worthless, which no one has so far succeeded in doing, except by using arguments which largely rest on imagination and even on misrepresentation.

Historical evidence never is and never can be demonstrative in the sense that “scientific” evidence is. It deals with a different subject and is intended to serve a different purpose. Its relative uncertainty is a condition of a religious and even of a moral life. Here we see through a glass darkly. To endeavour to see “face to face” before we are spiritually and morally fitted to do so is to expect something which is not only unreasonable but also harmful to our growth into that likeness of God which is promised to those who through much tribulation and even doubt come at last to see God as He is and to know Him even as He knows us.

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¹ See C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 6, 439.