

The Presbyterian

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Umdeutung

"The modern form of allegorization may be expressed by the German word *Umdeutung*. We would call it reinterpretation."

By C. VAN TIL

Philo Judaeus was a Jew who lived c. 30 B.C.—c. A.D. 45. The five books of Moses were his favorite study. He regarded the Bible, i.e. the Old Testament, "as fully inspired in the sense that God used its authors as passive instruments for communicating his will" (J.N.D. Kelly: *Early Christian Doctrines*, New York, 1958, p. 19).

Living in Alexandria, Philo had also learned to love Greek philosophy. So he set out to harmonize Greek philosophy and the teachings of the Old Testament. How did he do it? He did it by the method of allegory. "He compares the literal sense of Scripture to the shadow which the body casts, finding its authentic, profounder truth in the spiritual meaning which it symbolizes" (*Ibid* p. 20). Thus, "while adhering strictly to the letter of the law, he can regard it as a divinely authorized veil covering the whole complex of Greek philosophical ideas which he found intellectually congenial" (*Idem*).

The modern form of allegorization may be expressed by the German word *Umdeutung*. We would call it reinterpretation.

Modern theologians do not flatly reject the Bible as the Word of God. On the contrary they affirm it to be such. They are *Christian* theologians as Philo was a *Jewish* theologian.

At the same time modern theologians are committed to the principles of modern philosophy as Philo was committed to the principles of Greek philosophy. Accordingly modern theologians use *Umdeutung* in the way that Philo used allegorization.

I—Bultmann

One of the most obvious forms of *Umdeutung* in our day is that employed by Rudolph Bultmann. His brand-name for it is *demythologizing*. Only by demythologizing the New Testament, argues Bultmann, can we get its real, its deeper, its spiritual, its authentic message. Orthodox theology, in refusing to demythologize the New Testament, misses the real message of the gospel, Bultmann insists.

II—Tillich

A little less obvious form of *Umdeutung* is found in Paul Tillich. His brand-name for it is *Symbolism*. There is, says Tillich, only one point "at which a non-symbolic assertion about God must be made." Such an assertion is "that everything we say about God is symbolic" (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, Chicago, 1957, p. 9). To get the real, authentic meaning of any particular doctrine it must be symbolically expressed. And then the general rule holds that "every religious symbol negates itself in its literal meaning, but it affirms itself in its self-transcending meaning" (*Idem*).

The "Symbol" of the Fall

Thus the Fall of man must be taken "as a symbol for the human situation universally, not as the story of an event that happened 'once upon a time'" (*Ibid* p. 29). "It is, so to speak, a 'half-way demythologization' of the myth of the Fall" (*Idem*). Only by this half-way demythologization can we see "the transhistorical quality of all events in time and space" (*Ibid* p. 40).

The "Symbol" of Condemnation

Refusing to take the Fall symbolically orthodox theology also refuses to take the idea of condemnation symbolically. Orthodoxy speaks of "eternal condemnation." "But this is a theologically untenable combination of words. God alone is eternal" (*Ibid* p. 78), Tillich writes. Therefore "eternity is the opposite of condemnation" (*Idem*). Thinking symbolically enables us to see that we must think of God as a God of wrath "in

This is the type of article that for some of our readers may stretch the muscles of the mind, but the exercise will be rewarding. All who read it will be indebted to the author for the insight here given toward a better understanding of modern theology. Dr. Van Til is professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary.

preliminary terms" not in "ultimate terms" (*Ibid* p. 77).

The "Symbol" of Christ

A literalistic orthodoxy, argues Tillich, has no way of properly connecting the Christ and his work to the fall of man. The symbolic approach enables us to see that the finite does not limit God "but belongs to the eternal process of his life" (*Ibid* p. 91). Thus the symbol of the Christ enables us to understand "what man essentially is" (*Ibid* p. 93).

By thus "analyzing the differences between historical, legendary, and mythological elements in the Gospel reports, historical research has given systematic theology a tool for dealing with the christological symbols of the Bible" (*Ibid* p. 108). Only thus can we show the "rationality" of the Christian religion. And this is what the principles of modern thought require of us, according to Tillich.

III—Barth

One of the least obvious forms of *Umdeutung* is that employed by Karl Barth. His brand-name is *Geschichte*. And that, any first year German student will tell you, means history. When Barth therefore insists against Bultmann that we must believe in the resurrection of Christ as a real Event, as real *Geschichte*, shall we not rejoice? Does not *Geschichte* mean history? Does not Barth, therefore, defend the real historicity and with it the true objectivity of the resurrection of Christ?

Unfortunately Barth also uses the word *Historie*. And that, looking a little puzzled now, the first-year German student will say, also means history.

In what way then do *Geschichte* and *Historie* differ for Barth? In general we may say that for Barth *Geschichte* is the genuine, the real, the objective history primarily back of though also found in *Historie*, the ordinary events in space and time.

The resurrection of Christ as the great objective and all-illuminating

Event on which all Christianity is based, is therefore primarily a matter of *Geschichte*, in Barth's view.

Pure Saga

Ministers using the Heidelberg Catechism as a guide for preaching will have to learn a drastically new approach if they would follow Barth.

They must realize that though there is history in the Bible it is always history shot through with Saga and that there is much of Saga in the Bible but always shot through with history (*Kirchliche Dogmatik* III:1 p. 88).

Creation-history is, to begin with, pure Saga (*reine Sage*). It is only by thinking of it in this fashion, argues Barth, that we can think of creation as real history (*Geschichte*). It is only thus, says Barth, that we can avoid reducing the actual event-character of creation to the general idea of myth. And only thus can we avoid reducing the actual and unique event-character of creation to the historical relativism of orthodoxy, as he sees it.

The original perfect state of man is, therefore, not to be identified with something that took place at the beginning of history in the ordinary sense. When Christ is said to be the last Adam this means that he is the real and therefore the first Adam. Our participation in the history of Adam has no independent significance; it is rather an indirect witness of the reality of Christ.

Barth's Christology

Christ is the only real man. All men are men as participants in the manhood of Christ.

Accordingly sin is an "impossible possibility." God's wrath upon sin is only a particular form of the manifestation of his grace. It is, as with Tillich, a preliminary, a penultimate but never an ultimate judgment. God is his revelation in Christ. Christ is his work of atonement. And atonement is atonement for all men or it is no atonement at all.

To preach rightly on the person and work of Christ is, accordingly, to realize that the relation between God and man is that of *Geschichte*. Once the minister has this vision he will no longer speak of the steps of

humiliation and of exaltation in the life and work of Christ as though they followed one another in time. All that happens between God and man happens, says Barth, in *Geschichte* and therefore in the Pure Presence in which there is no before or after measured by a calendar.

Reinterpreting Christianity

In all three cases, that of Bultmann, that of Tillich and that of Barth, Christianity is reinterpreted in terms of the principles of modern thought. These principles require the idea that man is inherently in the process of becoming divine. The Christ of the theology of these men, as of that of many others, expresses this view of reality as process.

It is only by *Umdeutung* that these men can make what is at bottom no more than non-Christian philosophy to appear to be Christian theology. They are as skillful in their work of *Umdeutung* as Philo was in his work of allegorization. And Barth is, apparently, the most skillful workman of all. There are far more people who think that Barth's theology is basically in line with the historic Christianity of Luther and Calvin than there are that think this of Bultmann or Tillich. Yet, in reality, Barth's idea of *Geschichte* is, in its effect, just as destructive of the doctrines of grace as is Tillich's idea of Symbolism or Bultmann's idea of Myth.

To say this is not to charge Barth any more than the others mentioned with deliberate deceit nor is it, God forbid, to judge their hearts. It is just to say that as allegorization tended to reduce Christian truth to Greek speculation in the early church so *Umdeutung* tends to reduce Christianity to modern speculation. Greek speculation is, moreover, the mother of modern speculation. Both forms of speculation make God in the image of man and project a Christ who merely brings to realization the goodness already inherent in man.

As evangelicals we need no such reinterpretation of the historic Christian faith. The way to understanding lies not down the bypaths of speculation, but along the road of submission to Jesus Christ as he has spoken to us in his Word.

"It is only by *Umdeutung* that these men can make what is at bottom no more than non-Christian philosophy to appear to be Christian theology."

News of Christian Schools

Philadelphia Association

The Association of Christian Schools of the Philadelphia area held its winter institute on February 6. Teachers, board members, and some visitors, were among the nearly 100 who attended, representing most of the 17 schools in the Association. Visitors from Christian schools in Lancaster, Pa. and in Richmond, Va. were also on hand.

Professor Charles Schaufele, of Gordon College and Divinity School, gave the evening address on the topic, "What Makes a Christian School?" Christian teachers, instructing the children of Christian parents, and using a curriculum integrated with the Christian faith were the three essentials that he mentioned. He devoted most of his time to the third feature, and also answered questions in a discussion period that followed.

Presiding at the sessions was Miss Johanna Timmer, principal of the Philadelphia - Montgomery Christian High, re-elected president of the Association for the coming year. Mr. Jon Clayton of the Chester Christian School is vice-president. Miss Barbara Peters of the Willow Grove School is program chairman, while the secretary-treasurer is Miss Elizabeth Nagel of the Germantown School. The next conference is planned for May in Lancaster.

Making Money

The Christian School of Middletown, Pa. has an active PTA. Meetings have been well attended this year, with worthwhile discussions on the Ten Commandments, taking them in order. Among guest speakers have been the Rev. Robert Vining and the Rev. Raymond Zorn.

The PTA seeks to provide financial help to the school and recently purchased a new station wagon for use as a bus. This partly accounts for the jump in attendance from 90 to 122 at the present time. As with most parent-society schools, finances are an ever-present problem and the burden assumed directly by the parents themselves must be supplemented in one way or another. Middletown's PTA started a candy egg project ten years ago which has developed into a well-organized winter effort.

Starting about mid-January and continuing for ten weeks, both men and