

# “ MYTH ” IN THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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THE question to which I shall address myself in this lecture is this : is the category of “ myth ” one that can contribute usefully to the constructive work of the contemporary theologian? The word “ myth ” is not, of course, new to theology ; indeed one might say that it already has a somewhat notorious career in the history of the subject. Nevertheless, a theologian may still be encouraged to take its claim seriously when he sees in how wide a range of disciplines it is used today. It plays an important and constructive role in the work of anthropologists and sociologists, of many psychologists, literary critics and historians. But the ways in which it is used are very varied, not only between, but even within disciplines. If the theologian is to consider making use of it in his work he needs to recognize the loose and illusive character of the terminology he is adopting ; it is not something to be taken in hand lightly, unadvisedly or wantonly. So I propose to approach my central question by a gradual and circumspect path ; I shall begin with the introduction of the term into theology in the nineteenth century, then go on to give a brief survey of its use in some more recent theological writing, before finally attempting to answer directly the question I have set myself.

## I

Myth relates primarily to pre-history. But the English word “ myth ” belongs to comparatively recent history. Mythology, mythological, mythical—all these go back many centuries, but “ myth ” itself is less than 150 years old.

The opening words of the first edition of Keightley's *Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy* (published in 1831) were these :

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester on Wednesday, the 5th of May 1976.

The mythology of a people consists of the various popular traditions and legendary tales which are to be found among them.

In the second edition (published in 1838) those opening words were changed to read :

Mythology is the science which treats of the *mythes*, or various popular traditions and legendary tales, current among a people and objects of general belief.

Keightley was well aware of the novelty of the word for we find him in 1846 complaining “ From the Greek *μῦθος* I have made the word *mÿthe*, in which however no-one has followed me, the form generally adopted being *mÿth* ”. He argues that no parallel derivation from a Greek or Latin root can be produced to justify the adoption of the form *myth*, but concludes sadly :

I am not simple enough to expect to alter the usual practice, I only want to show that analogy is on my side.<sup>1</sup>

The absence of any well-established English word “ myth ” at the time is well illustrated by the earliest English reactions to Strauss’ *Life of Jesus* which was published in 1835—midway between the two editions of Keightley’s *Mythology*. In both W. H. Mill’s extended attack upon Strauss, which appeared in various parts between 1840 and 1842, and in George Eliot’s translation, published in 1846, the word regularly used is the transliterated *mythus* with its plural *mythi*, though strangely each author on one single occasion (as far as I have noted) uses, presumably through inadvertence, the Anglicized form “ myths ”.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly the ensuing discussion of Strauss’ thesis did much not merely to establish the word more firmly in the English language but also the concept at the heart of theological study and debate.

A number of issues about the nature of myth arise in those early discussions which continue to figure in contemporary debates about myth. Strauss himself, drawing upon the classi-

<sup>1</sup> T. Keightley, *Notes on Virgil’s Bucolics and Georgics* (1846), p. vii. The one earlier occurrence given by the Oxford English Dictionary is from an article on Buddhism in the *Westminster Review* for 1830 (xii. 44). The word is there in the English form *myths*, but is italicized. The form *mÿthe* was in fact used by some other writers of the period, such as Grote and Müller.

<sup>2</sup> W. H. Mill, *Observations*, i. 118 ; D. F. Strauss *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (SCM, 1973), p. 57.

fication of earlier philologists and biblical scholars, distinguishes three main kinds of myth—historical, philosophical and poetical. These he defines as follows :

Historical : “ narratives of real events coloured by the light of antiquity, which confounded the divine and the human, the natural and the supernatural ”.

Philosophical : “ such as clothe in the garb of historical narrative a simple thought, a precept, or an idea of the time ”.

Poetical : “ historical and philosophical myths partly blended together, and partly embellished by the creations of the imagination, in which the original fact or idea is almost obscured by the veil which the fancy of the poet has woven around it ”.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever qualifications one might want to make of the specific distinctions and definitions that he adopts, it seems to me reasonable to insist that myths may be basically historical in origin but that their historical basis may be either very slight or entirely non-existent.

A second distinction is between the conscious and unconscious origination of myths. In the first edition of his *Life of Jesus* Strauss had regarded the myths of the New Testament as having a gradual and unplanned origin in the life of the early Christian communities. “ It is ”, he wrote

by no means conceivable that the early Jewish Christians, gifted with the spirit, that is, animated with religious enthusiasm as they were, and familiar with the Old Testament, should not have been in a condition to invent symbolical scenes such as the temptation and other New Testament mythi. It is not however to be imagined that any one individual seated himself at his table to invent them out of his own head, and write them down, as he would a poem ; on the contrary, these narratives like all other legends were fashioned by degrees, by steps which can no longer be traced, gradually acquired consistency, and at length received a fixed form in our written Gospels.<sup>2</sup>

But under pressure of criticism he came later to regard the process as a much more deliberate one. In acknowledging this change in his views in the introduction to his radically revised *New Life of Jesus* of 1864, he goes on to justify the retention of the word “ myth ” to designate these more conscious creations :

In this new edition of the *Life of Jesus* I have conceded far more room than previously—mainly as a consequence of Baur’s investigations—for the acceptance

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. p. 58.

of conscious and intentional mythologizing ; but I have seen no reason to change the term itself. On the contrary, to the question whether conscious fabrications of an individual are also properly to be called myths, I must—even after all the previous discussion on this point—still always reply : absolutely, as soon as they have been believed and have passed into the history of a people or a religious sect ; at the same time, this also shows that they were formed by their author, not merely according to his own fancies, but in close association with the consciousness of a majority. Every unhistorical narrative—however it may have originated—in which a religious community recognises a constituent part of its sacred origins as an absolute expression of its fundamental sentiments and ideas is a myth ; and if Greek mythology is desirous of distinguishing a more limited concept of the myth, which excludes conscious fabrication, from this wider concept, critical theology, conversely, is desirous—over against the so-called believers—of including all those Gospel narratives to which it ascribes only an ideal significance, under the general concept of myth.<sup>1</sup>

It is not my purpose here to discuss the relative plausibility or implausibility of the two versions of the mythologizing process as Strauss describes it in relation to the Gospels. But I think he has a strong case in insisting that if something has the general character of myth and functions as a myth in the life of the community, the degree of intentionality in its origination ought not to be the decisive factor which prescribes whether or not it is to be regarded as a myth, and also that the exact use of the term in any one discipline cannot be absolutely determinative of its use in all others.

A third issue that arose early on was the relation between myth and miracle. One of the attractions of the mythic approach to the Gospels was that it provided a way out for those who were unable to accept the miracles as literally true accounts but who were also unhappy to have to choose “ between un-miraculous miracles and lying evangelists ”.<sup>2</sup> Was then any story of a miracle that was not in fact true to be regarded as a myth? The point is brought out in another of the earliest English discussions of Strauss which appears as an Appendix in Milman’s *History of Christianity*, also published in 1840 but earlier than Mill’s book. Milman, who treats Strauss’ arguments with greater understanding than Mill, challenges the claim, essential to Strauss’ position, that the age of Christ was a mythic

<sup>1</sup> Strauss, *New Life of Jesus* (1865), i. 213-14 (cited by H. Harris, *David Friedrich Strauss and his Theology* (C.U.P., 1973), p. 203).

<sup>2</sup> W. O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church* (London, 1966), i. 531.

age. The claim, he says, would be true if by a mythic age one meant simply "any age, in which there was a general and even superstitious belief in wonders and prodigies". "But if the term mythic be more properly applied to that idealisation, that investing religious doctrines in allegory and symbol; above all, that elevating into a deity a man only distinguished for moral excellence . . ., this appears to me to be repugnant to the genius of the time and of the country".<sup>1</sup> Once again I am not now concerned with the relative merits of Strauss' case and that of Milman. But Milman seems to me to have put his finger on a distinction that is important for theology. The concept of myth impinges most vitally on theology not in relation to particular miracle stories but rather in relation to the whole structure of belief in divine action and divine incarnation.

From the very beginning, then, the discussion of myth in theology has recognized the imprecision of the term. It seems to me important to be aware of this imprecision so as to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding, though impossible to eradicate it. Insistence on a very precise definition of myth usually turns out to be part of a Pyrrhic victory in which the author succeeds in proving the points he wants to make about myth by the simple process of making them true by definition. But even where confusion about the range and meaning of the term has been safely avoided, the response to its use in theology has from the very start been violently divided. The sense of outrage which attended much English reaction to Strauss was enhanced by the fact that the use of mythology in interpretation of the Old Testament was still comparatively little known in this country. British scholarship was largely textual and philological in character. An attempt to get the work of Eichorn, the outstanding German Old Testament scholar in this field at the turn of the century, translated into English was frustrated by lack of support from Church and university authorities.<sup>2</sup> So in England the issue arose almost from the start in relation to the even more contentious area of the Gospels. Mill indeed comments that "plausible as it might appear to carry" the

<sup>1</sup> H. H. Milman, *The History of Christianity* (1840), i. 120.

<sup>2</sup> See T. K. Cheyne, *Founders of Old Testament Criticism*, p. 22.

concept of myth from the study of heathen mythologies “ as several predecessors of Strauss have ventured to carry them . . . into the region of the earlier Old Testament history, it required more hardihood than some of the boldest of them possessed, to extend the application to the period of the Gospel ”.<sup>1</sup> For Mill to call something a myth was different only in appearance but not in substance from calling it a deceit. “ The word *mythus* ” he wrote, “ is a milder as well as a less definite term than *delusion* or *imposture* ; and though the assertions are perfectly equivalent, it shocks less to be told that Christianity stands on the same footing of mental truth with heathen fables, than to be told, as by the sceptics of a former age, that it is based on falsehood like them ”.<sup>2</sup>

The positive evaluation of myth found clearest expression in the writings of Baden Powell, one of the contributors to *Essays and Reviews*. In a work published the year before *Essays and Reviews*, he cites with approval “ the remark, that parable and myth often include more truth than history ”. A myth he defines in his discussion of Strauss as “ a doctrine expressed in a narrative form, an abstract moral or spiritual truth dramatised in action and personification ; where the object is to enforce faith not in the *parable* but in the *moral* ”. “ Thus ”, he concludes, “ every dogma is more or less a myth, as it is necessarily conveyed in analogical language and anthropomorphic action ”.<sup>3</sup>

## II

So the debate has continued. It flourished with particular intensity in the demythologising controversy precipitated by Bultmann’s famous essay in 1941. But so much has been written about that particular controversy that it would be difficult to say anything at all fresh about it as one item in a single lecture. Instead I want now to go on to give a general account of the use of the term in contemporary theology, very briefly in relation to biblical studies and somewhat more fully in relation to doctrine.

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Mill, *Observations*, ii. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* ii. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Baden Powell, *The Order of Nature* (1859), pp. 275, 340 and 341.

The Old Testament is clearly a collection of literature of a kind that includes a good deal of mythology and for whose interpretation an understanding of myth is essential. How mythological a person finds it will depend on two factors. It will depend in the first place, as with other forms of ancient literature, on the breadth or narrowness of the definition of myth with which the particular interpreter is working. But it will depend also on the prior expectations or the criterion of comparison with which he comes to it. If he feels, as so many nineteenth century divines felt, that ideally Scripture ought to consist of accurate historical writings, he will be likely to stress (if he is a careful observer) how mythological the Old Testament is. If on the other hand he has in mind by way of comparison the cosmogonies of other ancient societies, he is likely to be struck by the restrained character of, for example, the Biblical creation stories and to emphasise their comparatively unmythological character.

The New Testament is not quite so straightforward. Strauss was concerned with the mythic character of the various discrete Gospel stories. In the passage that I quoted he cited the Temptation story as a prime example. When I look at the Lukan commentaries on my book shelves to see how they regard the incident, I find a wide range of judgement. "We may be sure that, if the whole had been baseless invention, the temptations would have been of a more commonplace and probably a grosser kind. No Jewish or Christian legend is at all like this. It is from Christ Himself that the narrative comes; and He probably gave it to the disciples in much the same form as that in which we have it here".<sup>1</sup> "The picture", whatever its origins, "has been filled in by the imagination of the early Church".<sup>2</sup> "For many modern readers the mention of the devil invests the story with an air of unreality and even of superstition. Let us grant that the devil is a mythological figure. But myth is not to be confused with legend or fairy-tale. Myth is a pictorial way of expressing truths which cannot be expressed so readily or so forcefully in any other way".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A. Plummer, *St. Luke* (I.C.C. Commentary, 1910), p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Creed, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (London, 1930), p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> G. B. Caird, *St. Luke* (Penguin, 1963), p. 79.

“The testing of the hero is a favourite theme in Bible and fairy tales. . . The presence of the devil as a character in the drama is a strong indication that we are in the region of fairy-tale”.<sup>1</sup> The fact that those four citations are arranged not merely in thematic but also in chronological sequence is due neither to chance nor to manipulation on my part, nor on the other hand should it be taken to imply that there is a steady evolution in the direction of more mythical interpretation of the New Testament narratives. For the most part commentators today are inclined to give the meaning of the story in the thought of the Gospel writer and to leave on one side questions of its precise source and status as questions which we lack the evidence to answer with any confidence. To use the categorization of G. V. Jones in his book *Christology and Myth in the New Testament* (London, 1956), there is less interest in the legend-myths of particular narratives than there is in the broader metaphysical-myths of the word-made-flesh or the apocalyptic hope.<sup>2</sup> And at that point the work of the New Testament scholar relates much more closely to the work of the doctrinal theologian which is my primary concern.

In this broader sense one may speak of four basic Christian myths or of one myth with four principal moments—the Creation, the Fall, Christ’s incarnation and work of atonement, the resurrection of the dead and final judgement. A contemporary consensus of critical opinion would, I suppose, speak quite readily of the first two and the last of those as “myths” but feel some serious hesitation about the application of the term to the third. The sort of position that I have in mind is well set out by Norman Pittenger in his book *The Word Incarnate* (Welwyn, 1959) and I shall therefore quote his statement of it at some length :

However, the Incarnation of God in Christ and the Atonement wrought by him are in a different category. When we speak of these, we are not talking about things which like the creation and the consummation are “before” or “after” history. Nor are we talking about universal truths which are applicable to all men, as we are doing when we speak of the “fall of man” into his present

<sup>1</sup> J. Drury, *Luke* (J. B. Phillips’ Commentary, 1973), p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 30.



sinful situation. The stories of the Incarnation and the Atonement are tied up with a specific historical event; they have their grounding in something that actually happened in the course of human history; on the one hand they are not *outside* history, and on the other they are not true of *all* history. They are concerned with what Christians believe was done *in* history and through the factuality of *particular* historical happenings. Of course they are told to us, whether in the gospels or in the early Christian preaching, in language which has a metaphorical or "mythological" quality. That is to say, they are told in the form which we must necessarily employ when we make God the subject of a verb and discuss in the only terms we possess our relationships to the realm of the divine, the infinite, and the eternal.

But it seems to me quite misleading to put the life of Christ in the same category as the "myth" of creation, or to put the redeeming work of Christ in the same category as the "myth" of man's sinfulness. I realize that some theologians would do this. But it is not only misleading; it is also dangerous to Christian faith because it is untrue to the real situation. By lumping all these materials together in one category, we may succeed in suggesting that the incarnate life of Christ and his redemptive work are nothing more than types or helpful representations of what is universally true of human experience in relationship with God. Hence we shall seem to deny the particularity of Christ—which is in fact the chief reason for the vividness of the faith; or we shall imply that what is ultimately true in Christianity is supra-historical.<sup>1</sup>

Pittenger's point is a fairly obvious and fairly traditional one—which should not be taken to mean that I regard it as lacking in force. The incarnation is related to datable events in a way that the others are not and that relation is integral to its traditional theological meaning. It is therefore perhaps worth giving another example of very much the same point from the pen of a theologian of a very different tradition. Wolfhart Pannenberg has written :

The idea of the incarnation of the Son of God, regarded as a myth, contains an extremely odd and disturbing element. For it does not merely state that God *appeared* in human form, but that he became *identical* with a human being who actually lived, a historical person, and even suffered and died as that person. . . The idea of the incarnation linked the substance of the myth, the nature of deity itself, to a historical event, a historical person. It has rightly been stressed, time and again, that this amounts not just to an arbitrary variation of basically mythical conceptions, but to something which is contrary to the nature of myth itself. For what is historically unique is as far as anything possibly can be from myth, which expresses what is archetypal and valid for every age.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* pp. 39-40.

<sup>2</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, iii ("Myth in Biblical and Christian Tradition"), 71-72.

Do we then have simply to acquiesce in this diversity of type within the central structure of Christian theology? It may be that in the end we should decide that that is what we ought to do. But there is an untidiness about such a solution that prompts the reflective mind to seek for some greater unity of structure. I want, therefore, to outline the approach of three scholars who have attempted to provide this greater unity, and then to comment on the implications of this whole debate.

In the first place we might choose to call into question the ready use of myth in relation to creation, fall and eschatology as too facile a categorization. I have already commented that the mythology of the Old Testament, when compared with the related mythology of other near-Eastern peoples, may appear more remarkable for the lack rather than for the profusion of its distinctively mythological features. Does this indicate that the characteristic direction of biblical thought, and derivatively of Christian theology, is to be seen in a move away from myth towards history? This approach is developed systematically by Gordon Kaufman in his book entitled *Systematic Theology, A Historical Perspective* (New York, 1968). He argues that there is a radical inconsistency in the position I have outlined, with its central historical drama set within a framework of timeless myths. The biblical writers, he argues, in their determined attempt to provide a “ pre-historical ” framework for the historical drama were “ more acute at this point than their modern critics ”. “ An adequate reconciliation ”, he concludes, “ between the biblical and modern historical perspectives cannot be achieved by recourse in this way to the category of myth, which really goes counter to both. A thoroughly historical perspective must be maintained throughout ”.<sup>1</sup> So he goes on to develop an understanding of creation not as “ a mythical expression for the relationship of finite being to the infinite ” but as affirming a purpose of God in the actual emergence and development of the world as science and history depict it. The fall is a long drawn out historical event by which the natural struggle for survival attains “ the moral level of bitter hatred and jealous

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. p. 271.

conflict and warfare". The incarnation and atonement are that historical event which "resulted in the successful establishment of a historical community of reconciliation among men." And "Christian hope is that the goal toward which history is moving is the transformation of this present world into God's perfect Kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

Alternatively we may accept the word "myth" as appropriate throughout. My second and third examples are both of scholars who do this, but who do it in radically different ways. Emil Brunner, in an appendix to his book *The Mediator* (London, 1934), entitled "The Mythology of Christianity"<sup>2</sup> accepts the word "myth" as applicable to all four moments of the one Christian myth (I took that particular phraseology which I used earlier from him) but gives to "myth" a thoroughly idiosyncratic definition. "The Christian "myth" is neither the abstract conceptual statement of the philosophy of religion, nor is it "mythological" in the sense of pagan mythology. . . It belongs to an entirely different category".<sup>3</sup> He speaks of the Incarnation as an event but it is not a historical event, for then it would be just one factor in the universal order of history; it belongs to the same dimension to which the Creation, the Fall, and the Resurrection belong—the dimension of super-history. It is "the crossing of that frontier which separates all history from God", "that event which takes place between time and eternity".<sup>4</sup>

My third example is the work of John Knox. Like Brunner he argues in favour of using the term myth with reference to the Incarnation but his actual position is very much closer to that of Kaufman than to Brunner's. In his little book *Myth and Truth* (London, 1966) he takes issue directly with the position of Pittenger that I have already outlined and in his later book *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ* (Cambridge, 1967) he works out his approach in relation to the early development of Christian belief about the person of Christ. The three "acts" of the Christian drama, to use his phraseology (three, because he subsumes the Fall under the heading of the Creation)

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. pp. 274-87.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 378.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. pp. 377-96.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 391.

are too interdependent for it to be at all satisfactory for us to categorize them in such essentially disparate ways. Moreover, he insists, while the Creation and the Consummation are outside “ history ” they are not outside “ time ”. Thus all the acts of the drama are concerned with happenings, and while the fact that only one of them is linked with events for which we have documentary records, makes a difference, it does not separate it in kind from the other two.<sup>1</sup>

Now, as I have already suggested, although Kaufman is the odd man out as regards terminology, it is really Brunner who is the odd man out in terms of theological substance. It is not very easy to give precise meaning to Brunner’s talk of “ super-history ” and of “ that event which takes place between time and eternity ”. But it is not so difficult to grasp his general intention. The basic thing that he is seeking to do, as it seems to me, is to preserve for Christianity all the benefits of its traditional links with history while at the same time keeping it free from all the risks that appertain to normal historical study. The special sense of Christian “ myth ” that he postulates is intended to have all the sense of reality that appertains to the happenedness of historical events (indeed, have it to an enhanced degree, since they are in fact super-historical) while being unaffected by the acids of actual historical criticism. There are not many today who would try to maintain Brunner’s specific position, and I do not propose to give it any more detailed discussion. But we still need to be on our guard against an appeal to the category of “ myth ” which seems to use it as a way of meeting the challenge raised by critical historical study without at the same time having to admit the need for any actual modification in traditional Christian doctrine.

Kaufman and Knox, as I have already indicated, do not seem to me to be very far apart in the actual substance of their positions. Both of them distinguish between the mythological and the historical, but both see an important relation between them ; in both cases, for example, the actual historical establishment of a reconciling community is part of the meaning of the mythological accounts of the atonement. The Christian myth

<sup>1</sup> J. Knox, *Myth and Truth*, pp. 56-58.

does not consist of super-historical events ; it is a way of conveying the meaning of historical events. The faith is thus less insulated from history and historical study than in the case of Brunner. If then their positions are rightly grouped together over against that of Brunner, what is the difference between them? I think it is mainly a matter of terminology and of emphasis. In his insistence on maintaining a historical perspective throughout, Kaufman says of the fall that "to regard it as myth rather than in some genuine sense history shatters both the consistency and the meaning of the Christian faith".<sup>1</sup> But the sense in which Kaufman claims it to be historical seems to me to be a tautological sense by which everything that is the case in an evolutionary world is historical, because it has come to be what it is gradually. I do not think that Knox would wish to deny the "historicity" of the fall understood in Kaufman's sense. His contrasting insistence on the mythological character of Christian doctrine throughout derives from the greater value that he places on the creative and expressive power of the Christian message in its traditional narrative form.

### III

The vital problem facing anyone who approaches Christian theology in this way is what sort of link is there between the myth and the history? Is there a basic element of historical factuality that is necessary to warrant continued affirmation of the Christian myth? Does affirming the myth involve making truth claims for it? And if so what sort of truth claims?

Alasdair McIntyre, writing primarily about Platonic myths but with a wider intended reference than Platonic myths only, denies the applicability of truth claims at all. He writes :

A myth is living or dead, not true or false. You cannot refute a myth, because as soon as you treat it as refutable, you do not treat it as a myth but as a hypothesis or history.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> "Myth" in ed. P. Edwards, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, v. 435 (cited by I. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, p. 24).

That seems to me too sweeping a judgement. Clearly, a myth is not true or false in the way that straightforward empirical statements of “ the cat sat on the mat ” variety or directly testable scientific hypotheses are true or false. For one thing myths, like poetry, can be interpreted at a variety of different levels and can have more than one legitimate interpretation even at the same level. Nevertheless, they are not indefinitely significant. In so far as they express certain fundamental aspects of the human condition, they may do so in a way which (apart from extremely far-fetched and implausible interpretations) turns out to be false. Thus while it is bound to be extremely difficult to apply the categories of truth and falsity with any confidence, I do not think it is a procedure which ought to be ruled out in principle in advance. Moreover there are likely to be a good many midway cases, where we may judge that there are possible ways of understanding a myth that are true but that they are not the most obvious or natural interpretations of it. In such cases we may need to speak of certain myths as more or less appropriate.

I want therefore at this point to try to clarify some of the issues involved in raising questions of this kind about the various moments of the Christian myth other than the incarnation itself—leaving that central and most controversial instance until last.

If the universe as we know it is a wholly self-contained and self-evolving system, in no way dependent for its existence on anything other than itself, then the creation myth would seem to me to be religiously inappropriate or false. But if the world is in fact dependent on a transcendent, creative source, as the Christian theist claims, then the myth would be appropriate or true. The degree of correlation, if any, between the order in which the world is created in the story and the order of its evolution as a matter of historical fact is irrelevant to its truth or falsity as myth. But I acknowledge that if someone were to claim that he had a powerful (but in his judgement cognitively delusive) sense of a transcendent source of the world’s existence and that the creation myth gave valuable expression to this inchoate but potent feeling, I could not in the strict sense of

the word refute his interpretation of the myth. What I could and would say would be that if the world is in fact as he believes it to be then the creation myth seems to me to be a misleading and inappropriate one—and in that sense false.

The Fall myth has frequently been treated as a form of theodicy, or myth of the origin of evil in a world of God's good creation. Understood in that way it seems to me clearly to be false. For even understood as myth—i.e. with no claim implied about the historical existence of Adam and Eve or even more generally about monogenism—it would have to be the case that the evil we experience was wholly the result of wrong human choices. I am still prepared to treat it as religiously appropriate or true, because I believe it is true that men fall below the highest that they see and that they could achieve. But I do so with misgiving, because there are very reasonable interpretations of the myth which I believe to be false. I have already referred to its possible abuse as a complete theodicy. Another equally reasonable interpretation which is also in my judgement equally false is one which sees in it the conviction that the essence of man's moral failure lies in a refusal to accept and to obey an externally imposed, deontological ethic.

The myth of the resurrection of the dead and the final judgement poses even greater difficulties—not only for the obvious reason that we are even less able to check up on the truth or falsity of our beliefs on that topic but also because of the great variety of belief that is in fact felt to be consistent with the affirmations of the myth. In my judgement, for the myth to be religiously appropriate or true, it would need to be true that in some sense man lives on beyond his physical death. But other scholars deny that survival of bodily death is necessary to a validation of the resurrection myth. This is in fact Kaufman's position, but the point is made more explicitly by Lloyd Geering in his well-argued book, *Resurrection—a Symbol of Hope* (London, 1971). He writes :

The term "resurrection of the dead" should not be interpreted as a hope for the prolongation or restoration of our own conscious existence. It is a hope for the world in which we live, a hope for the meaning of human life, and a hope that when our conscious existence is ended, the historical life we have lived may

be raised before the eternal Judge, and may be vindicated, as being of some value for that Kingdom which is eternal and for whose fuller manifestation on earth we pray.<sup>1</sup>

It would no doubt be possible to go even further than Lloyd Geering and find some continuing meaning in the myth, even without the belief in God and in the Kingdom that he affirms. There are those who wish to speak of the fundamental significance of a sense of hope in human life, even though they believe such hope to be ultimately delusive. If they were to claim that the myth of the resurrection of the dead was valuably expressive of that sense of hope, the position would be the same as in the parallel case of the creation myth. I could not in any formal sense refute their use of the myth, but I would regard it as a highly inappropriate myth for their purpose.

In all these three cases, then, which I described as less controversial than the case of the incarnation, there are considerable difficulties in determining how the myth is to be understood. The criterion by which I have been trying to distinguish between true and false interpretations of them might be expressed something like this. There must be some ontological truth corresponding to the central characteristic of the structure of the myth. But such a criterion is not at all easy to apply. For one thing if the ontological truth were one that could be expressed with full clarity and precision, there would be less need for the myth. In the case of creation I have spoken of the dependence of the world on a transcendent creative source other than itself. In the case of the fall I have spoken of men's falling below the highest that they see and could achieve. In the third case I have spoken of some kind of survival of human life beyond physical death. Thus, while I would wish to allow room within Christianity for a wide range of interpretations of these central myths of the faith, I also want to claim that where interpretation of them abandons any ontological element of the kind I have tried to delineate, then the myths are being interpreted in what seems to me an inappropriate way and it would be better to abandon the use of them.

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. p. 215.



## IV

What then would be involved in a mythological understanding of the incarnation? I have been insisting that there will need to be some ontological reality corresponding to the central character of the structure of the myth. This, of course, is a fundamental characteristic of traditional interpretations with their insistence on an identity between the personhood of Jesus and the second person of the Godhead. But there are serious difficulties inherent in this direct, metaphysical understanding of the incarnation. I have written about them elsewhere and I cannot develop them again here. Even those who do not find them as severe as I do myself are usually prepared to admit that they are real and not simply fabricated. So the question I want to raise now is: Could there be other, less direct interpretations which would still retain the kind of ontological correlation which seems to me to be required?

The incarnation has never been proclaimed simply as an account of something that happened at a point in past history. It has also been seen as that which makes possible a profound inner union of the divine and the human in the experience of grace in the life of the believer now and more broadly in the life of the Church as a whole. So close are the links between the past event and present experience that the Church has frequently been spoken of not only as "the body of Christ" but even as "the extension of the incarnation". Now if this union of divine and human at the heart of the human personality is a reality, however hard to identify or to describe, may that not be the ontological truth corresponding to and justifying a mythological understanding of the incarnation?

The obvious difficulty about such an approach is that the incarnation is linked with the particular historical figure of Jesus in a way that is not characteristic of the other three moments of the Christian myth. Would it be reasonable to continue to link the incarnation so specially with the historical figure of Jesus while interpreting it as a mythological account of a potential union of the divine and the human in the life of every man? Any answer to that question must take account both of the character

and mission of Jesus himself (in so far as those are accessible to us) and the historical relationship between Jesus and distinctively Christian experience in the subsequent life of the Church.

In considering the first issue it needs to be remembered how flexible in practice have been the kinds of historical claim that have accompanied the traditional understanding of the incarnation. In the past those claims normally included such things as the absolute truth of all that Jesus said, his awareness of his divine status and the perfection of his moral life. Yet the form of these claims has changed considerably. The kenotic controversy at the end of the last century bears witness to the difficulty that very many people felt then in combining the idea of any kind of ignorance on the part of Jesus with traditional incarnational belief. Yet today such ignorance would be readily accepted by most upholders of the traditional doctrine, indeed many would regard ignorance of his own special divine status and the absence of any distinctive or privileged sources of knowledge as essential to the concept of incarnation. The empirical correlates of a traditional doctrine are therefore very variously understood and may not in practice be noticeably different from those assumed by a mythological interpretation. At the other end of the scale, if it were true that Jesus was an unscrupulous self-seeker or that his life and teachings were fundamentally misleading as indicative of the nature and purposes of God, then any kind of link between him as a historical person and the idea of incarnation however mythologically interpreted would be wholly inappropriate or false. Is it possible to delineate in any more precise way what would and what would not be compatible with affirming the incarnation myth in relation to Jesus? We would want, I suggest, to be able to affirm two things. First that his own life in its relation to God embodied that openness to God, that unity of human and divine to which the doctrine points. And secondly that his life depicted not only a profound human response to God, but that in his attitudes towards other men his life was a parable of the loving outreach of God to the world. Now both those things are firm features of the traditions about Jesus. And while we cannot be sure how much of the detail of the accounts we have

is later interpretation, it is most unlikely that the kind of historical knowledge about Jesus available to us or that may become available to us in the future could ever deform that picture to such a degree as to rule out the appropriateness of linking the incarnation myth in this special way with the person of Jesus.

But the appropriateness of that linking does not depend exclusively on the character of Jesus himself. It depends also on the historical relationship between Jesus and the experience of grace in the lives of believers. This can be affirmed in a weaker or a stronger form. The weaker form would simply state as a matter of contingent historical fact that this truth about man's relation to God came alive in our particular tradition through the figure of Jesus. The stronger form would give to Jesus a more indispensable role. While refraining from giving any distinctive metaphysical account of Jesus' person, it might still claim that his life and all that has stemmed from it are essential in practice to the full and effective realization of this union of divine and human in the life of man. The grounds for such a claim would have to be historical and psychological reflection on the way in which man's spiritual life has been and is formed within Christian faith. Its validity could only be tested by the course of future history.

This historical dimension is an important element in any understanding of the incarnation as mythological. The tendency in most theological discussions of myth is to think of myths as expressive of timeless truths about God and his relation to the world. And as a result many people whose attitude towards the category of myth is not antagonistic in principle have nonetheless thought it a highly inappropriate term to use of the incarnation. But, as Strauss pointed out in the analysis I referred to at the beginning, there is often a historical element in myth. Historical events may contribute to the origin of a myth, and myths may fulfil a function in historical and political life as well as in philosophical and psychological reflection. The historical or political myth develops some event of significance in the past, like the foundation of Rome, in a way which enables a community to interpret its present and give direction to its future. Such myths provide a close parallel to one aspect of

the way in which the myth of the incarnation has functioned in the life of the Church. And since Christianity is concerned not merely with declaring truths about God but with the historical existence of a particular community, it is perfectly proper that it should have myths of that kind. Perhaps we would make some progress in unravelling the difficulties involved in the idea of the incarnation linked to the historical figure of Jesus if we were more ready to recognize it as a mixed form of myth with both a more general function with regard to the relation of God and man and a more specifically historical function with regard to the Christian community.

But while wanting to claim that there are potential advantages in the approach I am suggesting, I recognize that there are a number of obvious objections that can very properly—and certainly will—be raised. In the first place the incarnation has frequently been seen as the primary doctrine that differentiates Christians from others and holds the faith together as a distinctive and coherent entity. Does not treating it as a myth, with the immensely wide range of admissible interpretation that that entails, undermine that coherence in an unacceptable and destructive way? Clearly it does lessen the nature of Christian cohesion, but I am not sure that the contrast is as great as might at first sight appear. In practice Christian belief, including incarnational belief, has been understood in very varied ways with very varied corollaries. And because it has been felt that there ought to be unity of belief, these variations have often been treated as evidence of unfaith and given rise to intolerance and persecution. If what held Christians together were seen as the use of the same myths rather than the holding of the same beliefs, it might be easier for Christians to accept the measure of variety that there both should and will be between them. There will, of course, still be grave problems, but at the very least I would want to claim that to treat the incarnation as myth does not simply destroy a coherent pattern of Christian belief and life that is at present functioning in a fully satisfactory way.

A second objection of a more general nature may be raised against any use of the concept of myth along the lines that I am

suggesting. The popular understanding of a myth today is of something delusive, not only in the sense that it is not literally true but also that it is a kind of mirage, something that leads people astray. Those who spoke of the myth of the E.E.C. were those who were opposed to it, not those who saw it as an important precursor of a united Europe of the future. This must be acknowledged, and the term may remain unusable in the general life of the Church. I simply do not know. But the important role occupied by the concept in a great variety of other disciplines suggests that it may still be a valuable tool for theological analysis. If it does prove to be so, it will, I believe, be when theologians learn to recognize the mixed character of the Christian myths and to draw upon the insights of different disciplines in their use of the concept.

The third, and possibly most searching, difficulty of all is the question whether a myth can continue to function as a potent myth, once it is acknowledged that it is not literally true. Did Romans have to treat the stories of the foundation of Rome as literally true for those stories to convey the appropriate sense of the city's destiny? Obviously myths will always be understood at different levels by different people. I would want to express the conviction that where the myth has the kind of ontological correlate that I believe the Christian myth to have and where it has the degree of historical appropriateness that I believe to have been in the life of Jesus, then the power of the myth will not be undermined by its being more widely recognized for what it is.

Simply to call something a myth does not of course in itself solve anything. I have earlier criticized Brunner for using the concept of myth in a way that provides only a specious solution to the real problems of theology. I hope I have not appeared to fall into the same trap myself. What I believe the approach to the incarnation that I am proposing can do is to provide a more creative perspective which may in the long run help us not only to see the intellectual problems more accurately but also to draw on the resources of faith more richly.