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# Don't Throw the Baby out with the Bathwater: The Meaning and Purpose of Demythologizing

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**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** I'm Nancy Boyle and I have the pleasure of introducing you to Dr. Lou Bolchazy of Loyola University, and a program which I am sure you will find stimulating, controversial, and definitely thought provoking. This first program deals with the meaning and the purpose of demythologizing of the Bible. Dr. Bolchazy, you've chosen a rather unusual title for this program, namely "Don't Throw the Baby out with the Bathwater."

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Well, let's look at it this way. The bathwater is the myths in the Bible which can no longer be of any use to us. The baby, covered with the bathwater, is the true message of God, the kerygma. That always has intrinsic value.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Then, are you saying that the Bible contains myths?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Both the Old and the New Testament contain myths.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Well, you're going to have to prove that to me. Give me some examples of myths in the Bible.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** At the very beginning of the book of Genesis, there are two different stories, which allegedly tell us how the world was created. And, throughout the rest of the Old Testament, there are several dozen other stories of how the world (and all that's in it) was created.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Well, are there myths in the New Testament too?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Well, of course. For example, in John<sup>1</sup>, there's also another story of how the world was created. All these are different accounts of how the world came to be. Which one is true? None of these stories is original or unique.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** If they're not original, then what are they, really?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Well, they're a compilation of old myths of the Mesopotamian world. I'll give you another example: The story of the flood. This story is not original. It's similar to the story of the flood found in the epic Gilgamesh.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** I have to plead ignorance here. What is Gilgamesh? It sounds like a synthetic fiber.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Not in this case. The Gilgamesh epic is our oldest ancient epic that we have in western culture; it goes back to about 2,500 B.C.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Okay. So you say there's an account of a flood in Gilgamesh?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Yes. And in the New Testament there are many myths which were popular in the Mediterranean world long, long before Christianity came into existence.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Well, again you're going to have to prove it to me. Give me some examples.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** To mention just a few: The virgin birth, the death and resurrection of a god, sacramental communion, the myth of the cosmic man or the myth of the savior. All of these stories are myths which the authors of the Bible borrowed, either in their entirety, or with slight modifications. Or, they would invert mythological symbols, as in the case of the serpent who tempted Eve.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** I've got to stop you right there and say that this is a very challenging idea to people who don't believe as you do. Before we go any further, you've got to define demythologizing for me.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Well, let's start with this. The word "myth" comes from the Greek mythos and ultimately from the Indo-European word which means to reflect, to think over, to consider. Now, in the religious sense, it is difficult to define a myth.

It is certainly not a false story. It is not "a disease of the language" and it is not a mistaken explanation of human or natural phenomena.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** You're speaking in negatives. Is there a positive way of expressing this?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** There certainly is. Myth is a symbol, which attempts to express the other worldly in terms of this world.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** You're talking about your concept, right?

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<sup>1</sup> John L. McKenzie (1911–1991) was considered a pioneer in Catholic biblical scholarship. He was the first Catholic, in 1965, to join the faculty at the University of Chicago Divinity School. The following year, he was the first priest elected president of the Society of Biblical Literature. Though he left the Jesuits in 1979, he continued to serve as a priest. The New York Times noted, "Through scholarly and popular writings, Father McKenzie helped bring about the general acceptance by Catholic scholars and church authorities of scientific techniques of investigating Scripture, which had been highly suspect in Catholic circles when he began his career."

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** By no means. Maslow, who taught psychology at MIT, defined myth as “ethnic phrasing.”

By “ethnic phrasing” Maslow meant that we all have peak experiences in which we experience, feel, touch reality that is not of this world. And because the reality we experience transcends the here and now, the concrete, the worldly, we are unable to communicate this experience to others in ordinary language.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** And why is that?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Because ordinary language deals with the concrete, with the here and now, with ordinary daily experiences. So, as a result, we resort to symbolic language. We use mythopoetic language. We use myths to communicate these peak experiences. We use, in other words, ethnic phrasing. Let me put it another way. Father John McKenzie, S. J.,<sup>1</sup> defines myth in the following words: “Myth is a symbolic expression of a religious truth or experience or transcendental reality which lies beyond the phenomenal world and which is therefore ineffable.”

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Well, that’s a phrase to set you singing. But what does it mean?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Simply this: Moses, Buddha, Jesus, you and I experience God. We cannot express this experience in human language. We resort to symbolic language. In other words, we use mythopoetic language or myth to communicate this experience.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Okay. I can understand that. Now I’ve got to bring you back to a term that you used earlier: demythologizing.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Demythologizing is a technical term coined by Rudolf Bultmann<sup>2</sup> in 1941. And by the way, Rudolf Bultmann was a Lutheran minister and a scriptural scholar of great faith.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** But, what did he mean by demythologizing?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Simply put, it’s the interpretation of the New Testament—in terms that contemporary men can understand.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** I can’t believe that it’s that easy. There have to be problems involved.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** The problem is with the New Testament. The New Testament speaks to us in ethnic phrasing, that is, it speaks to us in mythopoetic language of the New Testament, which we no longer understand. The mythopoetic language of the New Testament, in other words, is a stumbling block to understanding and faith. Jesus spoke in mythopoetic language. The evangelists spoke in mythopoetic language. Their language is no longer understood by us. It is obsolete.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Obsolete! That seems like a very harsh term to use.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Not really when you consider, for example, that demythologizing is an attempt to uncover the real message contained in the myths that Jesus and the evangelists used.

Secondly, behind the concept of demythologizing is the realization that Jesus and the evangelists lived in a world different from ours. Their world was mythological. Our world is scientific.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** All right, I can accept that. But what was the difference in their view of the world, and in our view of the world? Weren’t they the same?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** No; let me give you an example. They viewed the universe as a three-tiered entity. The earth is in the middle, occupied by us human beings. Below the earth is Hell, Tartarus, or Sheol, occupied by evil spirits. Above the earth is heaven, occupied by God and his good spirits. Man on earth is not free. He is constantly bombarded by the evil spirits from below and by good spirits from above. According to the mythological view, sickness, epidemics, storms, and all other maladies are caused by evil spirits from below. God and his spirits above try to counteract the influence of the evil spirits to bring health and prosperity. This is a mythological view.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** I can see that. There has to be a difference in our modern view.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Well, of course, our modern view is different. There is no up and down. The world is not ruled by other beings but by laws. Sickness is caused by natural laws. Epidemics can be explained in terms of physical laws. Consequently when I get sick, I go to a doctor who diagnoses my sickness and prescribes either drugs or operation. I don’t go to a holy man who will try to heal me by exorcism.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Do you have any other examples of mythological view?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** According to the New Testament, God has his abode up, in heaven. He is localized.

But according to the scientific view, there is no up and down. A spiritual entity cannot be localized.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** So, what does this mythopoetic language of up and down mean?

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<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) was a German Protestant theologian and New Testament scholar who taught at the University of Marburg for thirty years (1921–51). He established his reputation with his analysis of the Gospels in *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921). Influenced by his colleague Martin Heidegger, the existentialist, he held that Christian faith should focus less on the historical Jesus and more on the transcendent Christ, and he examined the New Testament in mythical terms applying “form criticism.” During the Nazi era he supported the anti-Nazi Protestant movement, known as the Confessing Church.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Simply that God is transcendental. Also, the New Testament speaks of the devil.

Is this just a symbolic expression affirming the presence of evil? These are some examples of mythological or ethnic phrasing. But this kind of mythological worldview in the New Testament is a stumbling block to our scientifically oriented thinking. Demythologizing attempts to interpret the Scriptures. It asks for the deeper meaning of mythological conceptions. It tries to free the word of God from a bygone worldview.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Then, are you saying that to read the Bible literally is to miss the true message?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Definitely, this is the point that Bultmann makes.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Just to change the subject for a minute, Dr. Bolchazy, why is it that educated people so seldom read the Bible?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Nancy, I'm not sure if that's true. But supposing that it is, I can hazard two guesses.

First of all, the mythological worldview presented in the Old and the New Testament is a real stumbling block to the modern individual trained in the scientific method. And secondly, the educated person who has been exposed to comparative religions and comparative mythology recognizes too many myths in the Bible that were borrowed from other cultures. He wrongly, therefore, concludes that the Bible is just another collection of myths, no more inspired than the Gilgamesh, the Enuma elish, Homer, or the Vedas. In other words, he feels that the Bible is nothing but a sophisticated syncretism.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Does Bultmann believe in the inspiration of the Bible?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Yes, definitely. He recognizes, however, the fact that the Bible contains many myths, but he makes a big and important distinction.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** And what is that?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** The myths in the Bible are not the reality. Myths are mere symbols of reality. The authors of the Bible borrowed not myths but mythopoetic language in which to symbolize and communicate the divine.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Was Bultmann the first one to begin demythologizing the Bible?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** No. St. John the Apostle was the first one. He began the demythologizing process.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** How was that?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** For example, in Jewish eschatological expectations there is the figure of the Anti-Christ, some cosmic evil individual who fights against the good, like Ahriman in the Zoroastrian belief. John demythologizes this myth by identifying false teachers with this mythical figure, the Anti-Christ.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** I imagine that Bultmann has many critics.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Yes, but his basic thesis is accepted by all who understand him. Bultmann, in my opinion, has come just in the nick of time. He asks us to demythologize the Bible, that is, to interpret the Scripture, by asking the deeper meaning of the myths in the Bible, and thus to free the word of God from a bygone worldview. The concept of demythologizing makes it possible for the modern man to keep just the baby and to throw out the bathwater.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** And now I see where you got that title. Thank you, Dr. Bolchazy.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Thank you, Nancy.

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