

# Some Philosophical Aspects of Demythologising<sup>1</sup>

What I have to say has no exclusive reference to biblical scholars or theologians. Even most of the mistakes and fallacies I want to point to and investigate are shared by others who also operate in a theological frame of mind, such as members of eschatological or gnostic political movements which are characterised by the claim that their legitimacy derives from a special knowledge, teaching or message.

Otherwise the problems I want to raise are familiar problems of philosophy. They are problems we encounter in the philosophy of history when we distinguish between the actual occurrence and documentation of a happening, and the significance, meaning and interpretation of that happening; between establishing, for example, that someone did put an end to another person's life, and asking whether it was killing, execution, murder or sacrifice. Again we encounter similar problems in the philosophy of sociology or anthropology when we distinguish between observing and understanding, or ask what performances in societies different either in space or in time have the same meaning; when we distinguish between the content of a theory and its significance and message, and ask what theories with a different content have the same significance or message. On a smaller scale all these problems are similar to those we encounter when we distinguish between movements and actions or performances and their significance.

I emphasise that we are dealing with problems that are somewhere within this whole family of problems not just as a reassurance that I am not going to discuss some esoteric problems of biblical criticism. I must emphasise this because I think one of the reasons why some theologians commit some of the fallacies I am going to point to, and why others do not clearly see what they are confronted with when they are confronted with these fallacies, is that they think the problems are peculiar and special to them. In the study of Greek philosophy, for in-

stance, we distinguish between the questions involved in first establishing the accurate reading, authenticity and date of a text, then its correct interpretation in the context of contemporary philosophical arguments, and finally the questions involved in the possible restatement of that philosophical theory in present-day terminology. The theologian or biblical scholar, however, when confronted with equivalent distinctions in his own field, is quite likely to regard the first type of question as one of historical science and the second and third as matters peculiar to believers who sometimes *are* believers or are thought to be believers because they do not stop at the first type of question. To go back to my previous example: only questions equivalent to whether someone in fact died at a certain date in a certain place are regarded as belonging to history; but questions equivalent to whether it was killing, murder, execution or sacrifice are often thought to be questions peculiar to believers, or questions to which certain answers would establish one as a believer. I do not wish to eliminate faith. There is plenty of room for faith even after all philosophical problems have been resolved or at least sorted out, but I do not want faith to interfere with or to be a substitute for tackling certain philosophical problems. In particular I think that the move from describing a happening to deciding what event it constitutes, or from describing a physical movement to deciding what action it constitutes is *not* an act of faith but is a matter of philosophical analysis. Although the problems raised by demythologisers are complex and interesting, they are quite ordinary problems.

Another reason why the entanglements I try to talk about may not at first look familiar to philosophers is that they are created by the kind of modern biblical scholars or theologians for whom it is important to preserve the legitimacy derived from or attributed to an original teaching, but who at the same time feel inclined or compelled to change that teaching.

I want now to explain briefly some philosophical tools or philosophical mini-theories that I shall need later.

One tool or mini-theory that we shall need is the distinction, and the one-many relationship, between movements and actions, or between what is given to sense experience and what an object or state of affairs is. This one-many relationship exists both ways: the same action can be performed by different movements, and the same movement can amount to different actions. This can be illustrated by the

familiar example of the movement of your pen on the paper which can amount to writing your name or signing your name; again you can sign a document in a number of ways, and I do not mean that you can change the style of your signature, but if, for instance, you cannot write, you can sign a document by putting a cross in an appropriate place in the presence of a Justice of the Peace.

I want to add three small points to this.

(a) One is that one way of finding out what someone does in doing action A is to ask what else he would do instead, as an equivalent action, if for some reason he cannot do A. Thus, if we want to find out what someone who is trying to buy flowers is doing, we should ask what else would be appropriate if he could not find flowers. If he buys some coloured crêpe paper instead, then we can say that in looking for flowers he was looking for decorations. But if he settles for some chocolates instead, we should not be surprised by this unexpected alternative but understand that in looking for flowers he was looking for something to give as a present.

(b) The second addition is that this one-many relationship exists on a whole hierarchy of levels and not only between what is empirically given and what this amounts to—not only between observable movements and actions, or between observable properties and objects. Already in my example there were two actions, not mere movements, that fell under yet higher order concepts. Each of these higher order concepts is of course an instance of still other concepts: decorating a room can be either a way of earning one's living or of welcoming one's parents, and moving down again, there are a number of other ways of earning one's living. Similarly, giving a present could be an act of kindness, or an expression of respect, or of returning a kindness, and again each of these actions can be performed in ways other than by giving a present.

Let me now give an illustration of a more complex situation. We read in the Gilgamesh epic that Gilgamesh, having been given a leaf which was the secret of eternal life or at least of rejuvenation, while on his way home puts down this leaf on a lakeside while he goes for a swim. While he is under the water a snake comes, swallows the leaf and disappears. Isn't this, someone might ask, the same as the Genesis story of Adam and Eve being deprived of eternal life by a snake?

But what is it that we could substitute for the snake in the Gilgamesh story while retaining the meaning and message of the story? Of course

we do not need to stick to the snake, it is not essential for the story. We could replace it with an earthquake which swallows up the leaf, or with a gust of wind which blows it away. If we substitute these I think the Gilgamesh story would remain the same story. But one could not substitute any of these for the snake in the story of Adam and Eve and still retain the same story. What we need to substitute for the snake there is another cunning, tempting or deceiving agent. Thus, by seeing what substitution we can make, we can see what the point and meaning of the story is.

(c) The third addition I want to make is that in order to perform an act at any of the levels of this hierarchy of concepts one has to make use of one or other acts of a lower level and then in turn, again, of a still lower level until one effects the appropriate interference in the world, which interference in turn will have to be interpreted or understood by others on the ascending conceptual levels so that the intended result would be achieved. One cannot just be *kind* without actually *doing* anything; one has to decide either to give a present or to do some useful chores; then in turn, if one decides on giving a present, to choose chocolates or flowers, or on the other alternative between, say, doing the shopping or doing the dishes; then in turn one has to make the appropriate moves towards shop or sink. But the choice has to be such that the movement will move up the conceptual levels again in such a way that it will be understood by the other person as an act of kindness.

Even God, if he ever wanted to communicate with us, would have to observe this conceptual requirement. This is not a limitation on his omnipotence but a logical requirement. If, according to the conceptual framework of a community, the devil usually speaks from the moon, then, although God has the ability to make any sounds or other signals come from the moon, he could not communicate with that community from the moon. Even his shouting 'I am God and not the Devil' would be understood as the Devil trying to deceive. If in that community's understanding God always speaks from a rosebush, then even God would have to communicate through a rosebush. But he would have to perform some interference in the physical world which could be understood as his communication. For instance, if after having been on earth he wanted to communicate that he was going to resume the ontological form and status appropriate to a Deity, he would have to use a spatial expression of this, appropriate to the people he wanted

to talk to. In fact he would have to use a spatial expression in any case since he had abandoned his appropriate ontological form in order to assume a spatial-temporal existence. But he would further have to use the particular spatial expression of a particular community. Thus, in ancient Greece he would probably have to get into a chariot and disappear towards Mount Olympus. Outside Jerusalem he would have to go up on a hill and disappear behind the clouds. But he would have to do something of this sort if he wanted to communicate a change in his ontological status.

Now perhaps this is the place to make a very important point which is one of my main arguments about the demythologising project. It is one thing to say that when Jesus disappeared behind the clouds what he wanted to convey was that he had resumed his proper ontological status, not that from now on he would be somewhere behind a cloud; it is quite a different thing to say that the early Christians, *by saying* that Jesus disappeared behind the cloud, wanted to express that Jesus had returned to his heavenly Father, so we do not need to believe that he *did* disappear behind the cloud, since in fact nothing of the sort happened.

In this second case we have to express not what Jesus *did* differently, for he did not do anything, but we have to express what the early Christians expressed, by expressing it differently.

It is vital not to confuse the two, nor to slide from one to the other, which, it seems, it is easy to do in a pious frame of mind, or in a frame of mind anxious to avoid saying things that might sound embarrassing to the 'modern ear'.

To say that early Christians wanted to express that Jesus went to his heavenly Father *by saying* that he disappeared behind the clouds is to talk not about what Jesus did or wanted to express but about what the early Christians did and wanted to express. The point of the second alternative is that originally *nothing happened*. The report that there was a happening was the early Christians' expression of their beliefs, and it is *that* that we now have to express differently. The early Christians expressed their belief *by saying* that Jesus disappeared behind the clouds. This was just their way of saying that he went to his heavenly Father. But an alternative way of expressing this act of belief is not an alternative way of expressing that Jesus returned to his heavenly Father. We are required to give an alternative response. But a response to what?

To leave this as a rhetorical question should make its point but nevertheless we should consider several alternatives as an answer.

(1) Before considering the possibility that the early Christians' response was to a non-event or to a crisis of disappointment let us consider that there *was* some happening to which this expression of belief was an answer. There are two possibilities.

(a) Remembering that Jesus himself could have chosen a different scenario to inform his followers that he was returning to heaven, we might assimilate the second alternative (that we are dealing with a response) to the first alternative (that there was an original event): there was an event, only it was not a disappearance behind the cloud but some other occurrence which indicated what he was doing. There are two difficulties about this answer. First, that other event had to be something that the early Christians did clearly understand as meaning that Jesus was returning to heaven. If they did not, then their alternative way of expressing it was misguided. If they did, why did they have to express it differently to the very same people for whom, in their own idiom, Jesus expressed what he was doing? Secondly, this possibility would not be acceptable to the demythologisers. Returning to the heavenly Father is an extraordinary thing to do, and any expression of it must be some extraordinary performance. It would not fit into the demythologiser's programme to say that the early Christians, by saying that Jesus disappeared behind a cloud, expressed that another feat, equally extraordinary, was actually performed by Jesus.

(b) Let us consider the possibility that the response (which was the claim that he disappeared behind the cloud) was to an actual event or events in the life of Jesus, but not such extraordinary events that it would be embarrassing for a demythologiser to admit them. This is indeed, as we shall see, the position the demythologiser takes and we shall consider later what is wrong with this position after an outline and some examples of the demythologising project. For the moment I want to stress again that my argument is not against faith. For the objection I shall bring against this position, that *ex hypothesi* the events in Jesus' life are no reason for saying what the early Christians said about Jesus, is not regarded by the demythologisers as an objection at all, but on the contrary is turned, on theological grounds, into a virtue—the virtue of faith. What I wish to eliminate is not faith but plain irrationality. There is not only room for faith but a great need for it even when Jesus performed feats that can be interpreted as his want-

ing to communicate that he was returning to his Father. There is a need both for an intellectual and for a moral decision. To disappear behind a cloud does not necessarily mean that the person who does it is the Son of God about to return to his Father (though even the Son of God would have to do something of the sort once he took on human existence in order to reveal some extraordinary things). And along with an intellectual decision there is also a moral decision to make as to what to do when confronted by such a state of affairs. But one makes decisions when one is in a situation or when one is confronted by an occasion calling for a decision. What I am concerned with now is not the ethics of belief, that is, not with the question of the type and amount of evidence needed for different types of beliefs and decisions. I am pointing to something quite different: that to make a decision when nothing happened or to make a response when nothing happened is not foolish or immoral, it simply does not make sense.

(2) What does concern me on the second alternative, and what is part of my main line of argument, is this: what would count as *the same* action or response? Since on the second alternative we are not dealing with what Jesus did but with what the early Christians did, we have to find an alternative expression not of what Jesus did but of what the early Christians did. Since the actions are different, the alternatives that would amount to *the same* action will be different.

What is it of which we should find an alternative expression? It could not be the communication on Jesus' part. Even if it sounds blasphemous I must say, in order to bring home the point, it is only from Christ himself that the demythologisers can expect an alternative expression of *that*.

It is the making-of-an-alleged-factual-claim to which we have to find an alternative, for this is the occurrence we are dealing with, not with the disappearance-behind-a-cloud. Now we have to ask: what does this making-of-an-alleged-factual-claim amount to, and what are the alternative expressions of *that*?

The making-of-an-alleged-factual-claim could be an act of self-deception, or of deception, or a special characteristic response to a disappointment, or, among other things, a creative act of myth making. The demythologiser's contention is that of all the plausible alternatives—and it is the demythologiser's elimination of any extraordinary performances on Jesus' part that makes the alternatives very plausible—we have to opt for the claim that creating a myth was the early

Christians' way of expressing their faith. And it is this act of faith that we have to express differently now. The confusion is bewildering. For centuries Christians expressed faith *in* what is now said to be only one way of *expressing* a faith. In what?—one is compelled to ask again.

Now did the early Christians themselves believe the truth of their claim? If they did we can no longer have an alternative expression of a factual claim which was believed to be true but is now known *only to be thought to have been true*. The magic is broken. We are confronted not with an alternative way of expressing the Christian claim, not even with a fundamental reinterpretation of what Christianity is about, not even with a new religion, but with a new type of religion.

The term 'myth' can feature only in an observer's terminology, not in a believer's description of his belief. If we ask the elders of a tribe to tell us their fairytales, they would go on recounting them all night. If we asked them, however, to tell us their myths they would say they have none, but they would be willing to tell us the myths of all the other tribes. It is not that they want to keep their myths secret. The point is that if they described them as 'myths' they would not be their myths. But they have to describe what the other tribes believe as myths, otherwise it would not be the other tribe's beliefs but their own.

As far as I know this is the first time in the history of religions that we are told that the acceptance of a myth, knowing it to be a myth, is a virtue, by degrading the myth into one way of expressing that for which only the truth of the content of the myth could have been a reason.

To avoid the intrusion of piety into recognising what we are confronted with, let us imagine that we read in someone's diary that there was a volcanic eruption. If we discover that there was not one, or go out of our way to claim that there was no eruption, we should consider first the possibility that our diarist made up the story for some reason, before we would say that his description of an eruption was his way of saying that he was impressed. Now if we said that he just made it up, it would be disreputable to ask that in order to imitate him we should make up another story, more acceptable to modern geologists. Nor have we any reasons for asking others to do this. It is equally shameful and just as unreasonable, but this time less obviously so, to ask others to imitate him when we describe what he wrote as his way of being impressed. For describing it as 'being impressed' does give the impression that there *was* after all something there to be impressed by;



and being asked to be impressed does not sound as disreputable as being asked to imitate someone who invented a fiction. The move from an alleged factual claim to our making just a response instead of a factual claim is conjured away *by describing the original factual claim in the first place* as merely an expression of being impressed, so we ourselves are asked only to make the respectable substitution of a proper response for a deceptive response.

On what grounds then are we expected and even asked to be impressed ourselves? The reason cannot be that there was an eruption. That was only the man's way of expressing that he was impressed. The only thing we can go on is that he was impressed and *that* is the reason for us to be impressed. We should be impressed by that man's being impressed, and this is why we should express in different terms his saying that there was an eruption.

The pious frame of mind can often act as a cushion of air for a hovercraft argument. The above secular story shows up the rough terrain on which the demythologiser's hovercraft travels. Demythologisers, along with many 'modern' Christians, live on the capital of faith which was produced by the labour of earlier generations. But arguments are not like flywheels: if you take away the impetus of the reasons for a conclusion the conclusions cannot go on turning round under their own momentum.

I used as my example the story of the Ascension as recalled in the Acts of the Apostles, which is among those that have weakest textual support, and the authenticity of which might be among the least important for Christians. But I want to emphasise that I am not dealing with biblical criticism; I am not arguing about what should or should not be accepted as part of history. I am dealing with a *pattern of argument* the implications of which are not realised by Christian apologists. And I am critical of what I call a pious frame of mind only because, in a subtle way, it obscures the seriousness of the argument's implications.

But let me turn now to the actual project of and to a few actual examples of demythologising. The term was originated by Bultmann and was made current by the arguments about his project. The term is very misleading and the actual project of demythologising is really the opposite of what the term suggests, for two reasons. One reason is that far from demythologising the Christian story, the project in fact turns Christianity into a myth. The other reason why the term is misleading

is Bultmann's actual intention. He is not doing what the liberal theologians were doing and what could be described with more justification as demythologising. He is not *pruning* the gospels of mythological elements leaving the hard core of historically reliable elements and the moral teaching like the parables. He is not denying in a simple way the divinity of Christ and the resurrection while keeping the story of the Good Samaritan. Bultmann *does* make the distinction between the historical life of Jesus and mythological elements in the New Testament account. He does not, however, prune away the mythological elements. Rather, they are the most important elements of the New Testament account, for the mythological elements express, in the language of factual statements—and it is this factual form which makes them mythological—the meaning of the historical life of Jesus. It is this mythological element which has to be restated in order to express the meaning of the life of Jesus for modern man.

But now there is an important point to notice here. Alleged events like the miracles, the resurrection, the ascension, are *not* part of Jesus' life, they are the early Christians' *expression* of the meaning of his life. The historical life becomes quite uneventful, by definition. For as soon as Jesus himself tries to perform something that would indicate the meaning of his life, that would be such an extraordinary event that it could not be part of his historical life but part of the early Christians' expression of what they thought was the meaning of his life. So one could say that by definition the early Christians had no reasons to produce those interpretations because as soon as one of those reasons cropped up it could not be part of the life of Jesus that they were confronted with, but could only be part of their interpretation of that life put in mythological terms, that is, *as if* they were part of the life of Jesus, like miracles and the resurrection.

I said earlier that Bultmann, unlike some liberal theologians, does not deny in a simple way the divinity of Christ or the resurrection. To assert that Christ has risen is to assert that the cross was not an ordinary event; it is the early Christians' interpretation of that part of Jesus' life, for the crucifixion was just part of history. Now to *deny* the resurrection would amount to denying that the crucifixion was more than an ordinary event, hence he does not deny the resurrection because he does not deny that the crucifixion was more than an ordinary event. In fact it *was* that. Nothing else *happened*. It was historically an ordi-

nary crucifixion and historically no resurrection occurred afterwards, but by saying that there was a resurrection the early Christians expressed the meaning of the historical fact of the crucifixion. What is our reason for attributing meaning to the crucifixion? It cannot be the resurrection because that is the expression of the meaning, not what provides the meaning. Can the meaning perhaps be provided by the claims that it was the Son of God or the pre-existent Logos who was crucified, so that it was no ordinary person who was crucified? This cannot be so either, because the claims that he was the Son of God or the pre-existent Logos are other mythological expressions of the early Christians' interpretation of the meaning of the life of Jesus. Bultmann goes so far as to say that the resurrection cannot be a separate event, as if it were a proof that the crucifixion was a redemptive event, because that would admit that the crucifixion *was* an ordinary event which *needed* the resurrection afterwards.

Let us see some passages:

Now, it is clear from the outset that the event of Christ is of a wholly different order from the cult-myths of Greek or Hellenistic religion. Jesus Christ is certainly presented as the Son of God, a pre-existent divine being, and therefore to that extent a mythical figure. But he is also a concrete figure of history—Jesus of Nazareth. His life is more than a mythical event; it is a human life which ended in the tragedy of crucifixion. We have here a unique combination of history and myth. The New Testament claims that this Jesus of history, whose father and mother were well known to his contemporaries (John 6.42), is at the same time the pre-existent Son of God, and side by side with the historical event of the crucifixion it sets the definitely non-historical event of the resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament differs from Greek myths in that side by side with myth there is also an actual historical life. The resurrection however is not part of that historical life. The historical life ended in *the tragedy of the crucifixion*. Then Bultmann goes on to ask:

We are compelled to ask whether all this mythological language is not simply an attempt to express the meaning of the historical figure of Jesus and the events of his life; in other words, the significance of these as a

figure and event of salvation. If that be so, we can dispense with the objective form in which they are cast.<sup>3</sup>

Bultmann is saying that the New Testament contains two types of statement. Both types are expressed as if they were events of history. One type apparently describes ordinary events like the crucifixion (let us call them 'O events') and the other type describes extraordinary events like the resurrection (let us call them 'E events'). One would think that one would need to understand the meaning and significance of both types of events, if they really occurred, and one would say, on the whole, that the meaning and significance of O events, if they occurred, would amount to the same sort of meaning and significance as the ordinary actions and performances in the lives of many other ordinary men; while the meaning and significance of E events, if they occurred, would require further thought: they would be candidates for interpretation as, for instance, the acts of some extraordinary man, perhaps of an extraordinary being, perhaps even of a saviour. Whether O events or E events did or did not occur is not my concern. The point I am making is that O events are *ex hypothesi* candidates for interpretation as acts of an ordinary life, as for instance Bultmann in our first passage regards the crucifixion as simply a tragic end to a life—while E events are *ex hypothesi* candidates for interpretation as acts of an extraordinary life, as, for instance, rising from the dead would call for some sort of extraordinary interpretation.

Not for Bultmann. Bultmann wants to say that E events are the interpretations of O events, expressed *in terms of events*, and that this form of expression makes them mythological. He wants to say that O events are not to be interpreted as acts of an ordinary life but as acts of an extraordinary life, though he does not give reasons why O events should have extraordinary interpretations. E events did not occur, but Christians have to affirm them because by affirming them they affirm that O events, quite ordinary events, are extraordinary events.

Bultmann's account of the resurrection deserves careful reading:

But what of the resurrection? Is it not a mythical event pure and simple? Obviously it is not an event of past history with a self-evident meaning. Can the resurrection narratives and every other mention of the resurrection in the New Testament be understood simply as an attempt to convey the meaning of the cross? Does the New

Testament, in asserting that Jesus is risen from the dead, mean that his death is not just an ordinary human death, but the judgment and salvation of the world, depriving death of its power? Does it not express this truth in the affirmation that the Crucified was not holden of death, but rose from the dead?

Yes indeed: the cross and the resurrection form a single, indivisible cosmic event. 'He was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification' (Rom. 4.25). The cross is not an isolated event, as though it were the end of Jesus, which needed the resurrection subsequently to reverse it. When he suffered death, Jesus was already the Son of God, and his death by itself was the victory over the power of death.<sup>4</sup>

This is re-mythologising. 'Modern man' cannot accept the historicity of the resurrection, so instead 'modern man' is asked to accept that the crucifixion was an even greater extraordinary cosmic event with some tremendous mythological significance, and is asked to accept this *without* the credentials of the resurrection.

Let us now consider briefly a couple of examples from the Rev. J.C. Fenton, author of the Pelican Commentary on St. Matthew. Fenton argues in his Introduction that there are several things in Matthew's gospel that a twentieth-century reader cannot accept. But it does not really matter, because they are just Matthew's way of expressing his beliefs about Jesus, they are just the way he puts the interpretation and the meaning of his life. We can express these things differently and still believe what Matthew believed about Jesus. One of the things about which Matthew was wrong was his interpretation of what is now called (largely because of him) the Old Testament. He interpreted the Old Testament as pointing towards Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies.

Modern study of the Old Testament does not support Matthew's understanding of it, nor the use he made of it when he was writing his Gospel. It is now seen that the Old Testament was not a collection of detailed foretellings of future events, which could only be understood centuries later.... We must, however, try to see what Matthew was saying by means of these fulfilments; because it may be that what he was saying is still capable of being understood and accepted, although his way of saying it is no longer valid.... Matthew and the Christians

who used this fulfilment-method were saying by means of it: Jesus is not just an ordinary man, but a special person, the one for whom the Jews have been waiting, one sent by God to Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Fenton's solution and suggestion is this:

We might show how Jesus fulfilled other laws—moral and psychological laws, for example; Matthew did not do so, because Matthew lived in the first century. But it is still possible for us to believe what Matthew believed about Jesus, without expressing it in the way that Matthew expressed it.<sup>6</sup>

This is again the characteristic Bultmannite move of regarding the reason for saying something as being the interpretation or meaning of an event *without* however that reason and without that event. Had Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies it would have been one of the *reasons* for saying that 'Jesus is not just an ordinary man, but a special person, the one for whom the Jews have been waiting, the one sent by God to Israel'. But if he did not fulfil the Old Testament law, why should Matthew express that non-event by saying that he fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies? Did he do something *else* which could be a reason for saying that Jesus was not just an ordinary man but a special person, which Matthew then expressed by saying that he fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies? If he did, it should have been understood by his contemporaries and so Matthew could have expressed *that*. But only some extraordinary performance on the part of Jesus could have been such a reason, and had Matthew reported that, the Bultmannite would have to say of it that it is only a mythological way of expressing something which did not happen and now we have to express 'it' by saying something else.

Now turning from why Matthew should have expressed anything to why we should express anything, we should ask why, if Jesus did not fulfil the Old Testament laws, *we* should want to say that he did fulfil other laws, or why indeed we would want to say *anything else* at all? All we can go on is that for no apparent reason Matthew was so impressed by Jesus that he set about representing him as if he had been the one foretold in the Old Testament prophecies. Had he had any genuine reasons to be impressed he would not have had to resort to saying things about Jesus that we now know, according to Fenton,

not to be the case, but could have given us those genuine reasons. Why should we then believe what Matthew believed? With nothing more to go on, why should we in turn resort to expressing something by saying that Jesus fulfilled 'moral and psychological laws'?

I do not wish to dwell on the extraordinary suggestion that moral *and* psychological laws are alternative expressions to fulfilling the Old Testament law. The author of the Pelican Commentary on Saint Matthew should not be taken seriously on this. Even 'modern man' knows enough about the sort of thing that fulfilling the Old Testament law is supposed to be, to know that the suggested alternatives are not possible alternatives. And since the suggested alternatives are what 'modern man' can understand, *a fortiori* he would know that 'moral laws' and 'psychological laws' are not alternatives, nor can they be 'fulfilled'. But we should observe that Fenton began by confusing the fulfilment of prophecies with the fulfilment of the Old Testament law.

But to return to our main puzzle, someone might suggest that such other events in Jesus' life as miracles might have been what impressed Matthew so much that he presented Jesus as the one who fulfilled the Old Testament laws. Turning to miracles this is what Fenton has to say:

Again, our best method is to ask what Matthew and the other Christian writers who recorded the miracles of Jesus were saying when they said that he performed miracles, and that he was himself the subject of supernatural activity (his conception and his resurrection). They believed that Jesus was the one upon whom God's Spirit had come (3.16), and that it was through this Spirit that he was able to do miraculous acts (12.28). This Spirit, they believed, would renew the whole of creation when this age came to an end. Jesus was therefore the one who was sent by God to declare the coming of the new age, and to demonstrate it by means of miracles. He was the bringer of the complete, full, and indestructible life—the life of the age to come.<sup>7</sup>

So far one assumes that Jesus performed miracles and this is how he demonstrated that he was sent by God, and the disciples understood that it was through the Spirit of God that he was able to perform miracles. But the passage continues:

Here again we see that Matthew writes in the way he does because he belongs to the first century; and that this is not the way we should

write today. Nevertheless, it is possible for us today to believe what Matthew believed about Jesus as miracle-worker (i.e. that Jesus offers a full and indestructible way of living), without necessarily believing in the historicity of the miracles which Matthew records.<sup>8</sup>

Again, Fenton is not saying that *by performing miracles* Jesus wanted to communicate to us that he wants to offer us 'a full and indestructible way of living'. He did not perform miracles. We can see by now that he did not do anything else either which could have been a reason for Matthew to put any of his interpretations on the life of Jesus, interpretations that we are now requested to express differently.

Fenton's text is not the sort to be submitted to textual study; nevertheless it is worth pointing out how, in the first half of the passage I quoted, Fenton says that the early Christians believed that Jesus wanted to *demonstrate* something by means of miracles and that they believed that it was through the Spirit that he was able to do miraculous acts. Take away the miracles and we are still supposed to believe what Jesus wanted to demonstrate by means of them, and we are still supposed to have a theory as to the power through which he performed them.

In one of Schulz's delightful *Peanuts* cartoons, Linus and Lucy are looking at something on the ground. 'Well, look here!' exclaims Lucy, 'A big yellow butterfly!' 'It's unusual to see one this time of year, unless of course, he flew up from Brazil.... I'll bet that's it!' speculates Lucy in the next picture. 'They do that sometimes, you know ... they fly up from Brazil, and they ...' But Linus interrupts: 'This is no butterfly ... this is a potato chip!' 'Well, I'll be!' says Lucy. 'So it is! I wonder how a potato chip got all the way up from Brazil?''<sup>9</sup>

Only a Bultmannite could improve even on this. The Bultmannite would say that nevertheless we should still assert that it was a butterfly because only by asserting this can we assert that it was not an ordinary potato chip: Linus and Lucy expressed their response to the 'potato chip event' by saying that it was a butterfly, because this was their way of expressing that it came from Brazil, and we can now express this differently and still believe what Linus and Lucy believed about that potato chip.



7. *New Blackfriars* (May 1969). The article was printed in the same month in *Marxism Today* as part of an ongoing Christian–Marxist dialogue.
8. *Marxism and Beyond* (London: Paladin, 1968), 38.
9. *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1968), 1.
10. *Ibid.*, 16–20.
11. *Ibid.*, xxv.
12. D. Strauss, *Streitschriften* (Tübingen, 1841), III, 95.
13. I owe this point to a conversation with Professor Patrick Henry of Swarthmore College.
14. *Die Europäische Triarchie*, in *Moses Hess, Philosophische und Sozialistische Schriften*, ed. Auguste Cornu and Wolfgang Mönke (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), 77.
15. *Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*: Introduction.
16. Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 23.

## 9. Some Philosophical Aspects of Demythologising

1. Editor's note: This article was written in 1979 but never published. Later, Kovesi planned to revise the introductory section and in particular the first two pages. The editor considers that the article deserves to be published in its original form, but that Kovesi would want the reader to know that he had come to be dissatisfied with the opening passages and intended to rewrite them.
2. Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1957), 34.
3. *Ibid.*, 35.
4. *Ibid.*, 38–39.
5. J.C. Fenton, *The Gospel of Saint Matthew* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1963), 18–19.
6. *Ibid.*, 19.
7. *Ibid.*, 20–21.
8. *Ibid.*, 21.
9. *Peanuts Treasury*, Charles M. Schulz (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

## 10. The Historical Papers: Introduction

1. The account here is paraphrased from his unpublished paper 'Did Plato Turn Himself Upside Down?'