

Demythologization, Theology of the Cross and Christ's Virgin Birth

Colleagues,

For the academic year 1968-69 our family moved from Valparaiso University in Indiana to St. Louis, Missouri, for my one-year stint as guest-professor at Concordia Seminary. It was the first year of a proposed ongoing professor-exchange between the two schools. The fact that it ceased after that first year has been variously interpreted. Two years later (1970 after 14 years at Valparaiso) I did receive a call—and accepted it—to join the Concordia faculty. That lasted for less than three years as the Wars of Missouri rolled over the seminary and Seminex emerged from the rubble in February 1974.

Today's ThTh post is the item, mentioned last week, that Fred Danker found as he was reducing his archival accumulations. It's a paper—from that year as guest-prof—a paper of which I have no memory, that I presented to a joint meeting of the Biblical and systematic theology departments at Concordia Seminary. Even apart from all the foreign words (which I'll try to put into English), it's laden with chutzpah. I was the new kid on the block. I was only 38 years old. Here it is.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Memorandum

From: E. H. Schroeder

To: Exegetical and Systematic Dept. Staffs

Re: Next Wednesday's Joint Meeting of the Two Depts.

Here are my reflections on the subject "Demythologization, _Theologia Crucis_ [=theology of the cross], and Christ's Virgin Birth," to serve as grist for our discussion on Wednesday. If you can read this before then, we won't have to take meeting time to do that.

The need for demythologization is usually specified by calling attention to the fact that the writers of antiquity (Biblical writers included) sought to engage in "God-talk" by using human grammar, logic, and rhetoric for reality-referents that are exterior to man's operational and envisionable universe, exterior to what Bultmann labels "das Vorfindliche, das Verfügbare" [= 2 German terms for what we find at hand, what's available to us]. The term God in such God-talk is applied to a referent that is viewed as exterior to terrestrial reality. This can be envisioned as temporal exteriority (eschatology-as-time is _totaliter aliter_ [=totally different] to normal history-as-time) or as spatial exteriority (the long Western tradition of a super-nature above and qualitatively different from normal nature).

In the language of the scriptures the referent for most (perhaps all) God-talk is not envisioned in this kind of exteriority. Perhaps it is the implicit or explicit presupposition of the creator/creation matrix which renders the Biblical authors unreceptive to the above _totaliter aliter_ model, since for them the creator/creation matrix of thought does not _separate_ the two realities, but intimately _connects_ them to each other. In response to the previous paragraph, they tend simply to say:

That's not the way it is. God is not on his own so exterior to the world; the world is not on its own so god-less.

In the perspective of the first paragraph above it is the exception when God comes into man's sphere – whether that sphere is envisioned as a finite space or a finite time. For the Biblical authors the opposite is the case. For them the _given_ is that the creator is normally here down on the ground, in, with, and under the components of his creation. THE question for them is not: Is God really here or not? And is that even conceivable? but, What is God up to? What _opus_ [=work] is God doing? Illustrative of this functioning presupposition, it seems to me, is the way Amos presents the upcoming famine of the words of God (8:11f.) or Paul's way on Mars Hill of presenting his thesis on God's proximity.

The god-referent in the rhetoric of the demythers is the god which Luther designated the subject matter of _theologia gloriae_ [=theology of glory]. Much of the medieval tradition envisioned God as portrayed in the first paragraph above. The _gloria_ of that theology which vexed Luther was not merely the distortions of triumphalist ecclesiology or razzle-dazzle divinity, but rather the whole frame of reference that relegated God "by nature" into a _totaliter aliter_ realm. It took God in _principle_ out of the world and thereby encouraged man literally to "work out his own salvation", but without the "fear and trembling" which the apostle originally added – added because he saw it and said it "like it really was".

And the way it really was was _theologia crucis_. For Luther this term capsuled the Biblical way of talking about God from the very outset. It was not confined to Paul's perspective in I Cor. whence Luther admittedly had gotten his contrasting terms. _Crucis_ here to be sure is a reference to Calvary, but an expanding reference. To wit, on Good Friday we finally see (if

we have been missing it all along before this) what theology is all about, what God is about, what He is up to. In the crucified Christ we see that God acts in creation in contradiction to what men naturally and reasonably expect of Him. What they expect, of course, is cast in some kind of *_theologia gloriae_* – with a God who is “by nature” extra-terrestrial, a God to whom all the super- and omni- predicates automatically apply. But this is not the “God (who) was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.”

Now of course even those theologies whose basic model is a *_theologia gloriae_* do present the god of their theology getting into the affairs of men and of the world. But that fact itself usually constitutes the central problem for their theology to cope with. Thus it seems to me that the problem of demythologization is built right into every *_theologia gloriae_*. It is that theology’s central question. Perhaps it is its only question.

Not so *_theologia crucis_*. Because its model operates with the premise that God is (by definition?) operational in, with, and under his creation, it may not even have to wrestle with the demythologization issue at all – or if so, in a considerably different way. Let’s take a look at the issue of the virgin birth of our Lord.

For the demyther Jesus’ virgin birth is a classical example of mythological rendering. It is extra-natural interference in the normal procedures of bi-sexual generation. We have here an instance of encounter between the two spheres – god’s and man’s. A typical demyther’s rendering would admit the physical impossibility of human parthenogenesis and call attention to the clearly mythological character of the Biblical witness. What Matthew and Luke intend, of course, is as follows: In rhetoric that speaks of an intrusion from outside nature, they were

witnessing to the unique eschatological “X” that characterizes this Jesus, or, if he personally is not the unique “X,” then the new age which his preaching and presence announces is.

The demythers’ concern is to get at what really happened and what the evangelists really wanted to convey to their readers. And that’s THE issue that must be at the center in theological deliberation. But as I see it, the demythers frame their deliberations in the model of a *_theologia gloriae_*, and thus seriously (if not totally) reduce their chances for getting at what really happened – especially if what REALLY happened was *_theologia crucis_*. To put it crassly, if God himself was operating in terms of *_theologia crucis_*, then not only the answer, but the initial framing of the question will be something else.

The Lutheran tradition has sought to do its theologizing with the model of *_theologia crucis_*. In the rubrics of such a theology the central question is not how to get an other-worldly god perceptibly available down here on the ground of men. Rather this theology says: Given the premise that the creator is always operating in, with, and under the elements of creation, what is he doing? The first answer to that follows the paradigm of Genesis 3. What is God doing? He is stalking his creation as its authorized and authoritative critic. He is indeed operational and active down here on the ground – too active! Man needs help vis-a-vis God’s already operational *_opus_*. Needed is not a god who will break into the law of natural causality, or the law of finitude, or even the law of my chronic addiction to “das Vorfindliche” (if that were all that there was to that). No, needed rather is rescue, *_soteria_* [salvation, rescue] “from the law of sin and death” inflicted by that very critic.

In terms of the “normal” divine data available to Adam and Eve, the prospects of anything like that last sentence are highly

unlikely, really incredible. Something like that would truly be a miracle, but not the miracle that the demythers wrestle with as they seek to get at what really happened in the event and the witness to the event from virgin birth to resurrection. (Thielicke notes that Bultmann, the lead proponent of demything the NT, bristles at the mention of the resurrection of Jesus, while he takes God's forgiveness of sinners as an "of course". Luther saw the latter to be at least as incredible as the former, if not more so.) Consequently as *_theologia crucis_* goes about its work, this becomes its central question: Why, for what reasons, on what grounds, would God break away from his critic's role as he stalks creation, and switch to a different *_opus_* – forgiving rather than criticizing sinners – as he deals with them right down here on the ground?

The following citation from a statement under discussion in the systematics department says it well:

"Systematic theology consciously and explicitly insists on asking 'Why.' It asks for The Sufficient Reason, The Adequate Basis, The _Fons_ Latin: source], never resting until it has found 'Reason Enough.' Why, for what reason finally, is this or that Christian claim made? By saying that the systematician ASKS for the 'why,' we're not suggesting that he does not know what it is. On the contrary, because he does know, at least in principle, what that sufficient reason is, his asking is meant chiefly to ask it into clarity, into the full prominence it deserves. He cannot even settle for the explanation, 'Why, because Scripture says so.' He still persists and asks again, 'And why, in turn, does Scripture say so?' His job is done only when he has traced the reason back to The Source: namely, God's reconciling the world unto himself in Christ Jesus – in other words, the gospel. The systematician's task is to 'necessitate' Christ."

With the foregoing statement in mind as well as the general remarks about *_theologia crucis_*, let us inquire into the problem presented by the virgin birth of Jesus. First of all the necessity question. What necessity do the scriptures themselves find in Jesus' virgin birth? Do they anywhere designate his virgin birth as necessary for anything? For his sinlessness? Although Augustine took this position, it is hard to show that any N.T. writer ever did. Perhaps the N.T. authors too, like Luther later (guess who learned it from whom?), were cautioned by a caveat similar to the one Luther raised as he took Jerome and the papists to task for seeking to maintain the sinlessness of Christ. This concern to divest Christ of sin, he said, "is to abolish Christ and make him useless" (LW 26, 279).

Necessary (i.e., needed) for humankind's salvation is not some break in the law of physical causality and natural finitude. Needed is some breakthrough of the law of sin and death. A naked miracle that breaks through causality and finitude does not yet break through the curse imposed by the critical creator. Is the virgin birth deemed necessary by any Biblical author for this? Not very obviously, as far as I can see. Even the Biblical presentation of the origin of human bi-sexual reproduction tends in the opposite direction. There is no intrinsic "curse" to bi-sexual reproduction. Gen. 1 and 2 suggest that this biological law is one of the operational schemata of non-fallen existence. The curse comes in Gen. 3 as God inflicts his criticism, and begins to execute it. Gen. 4 and 5, whatever else they may be witnessing to us, are graphic portrayals of the operation of the law of sin and death – in Abel's murder and in the monotonous conclusion to each segment of the "book of the generations of Adam", viz., "and he died. . . and he died . . . and he died." There are no substantive Biblical grounds for seeing a parthenogenetic birth as a conquest of this curse. Maybe male theologians are actually helpless to see that if anything, it

would be PAINLESS delivery of the child to signal that the curse was undone.

What then is the focus of N.T. witness for salvation from the curse of the law of sin and death? Even though the witness is variegated, the witnesses are unisonal in that the issue of soteriological necessity comes into focus at the conclusion, not the inception of Jesus' career. But of course right from the outset Jesus participates fully with men under this curse. So what is necessary for getting us OUT from under the curse is for him to get IN under it, and take it away. Is it not the unanimous N.T. witness that this is the "necessity-issue" of Good Friday? And then one step more. If the curse, the law of sin and death, is not just to be taken off the sinners' backs, but smashed in its very operation, then needed is the resurrection into non-nomological existence of the very one who endured the curse of the law of sin and death. What is necessary in the life and work of Jesus for our salvation? What's the sine qua non without which the N.T. witnesses themselves would not have had sufficient grounds (by their own standards of analysis) to proclaim the GOOD element of the NEWS? It's Jesus' Good Friday and Easter.

Whatever else Paul is doing in I Cor. 15, he is surely doing this very kind of wrestling with the question of necessity. Here it is explicitly the necessity of particular Good-News history to undo the "Unheilsgeschichte" [UN-salvation-history] that is the natural history of man. What is there in the history of Jesus that has to be there, has to have happened, if we are not just to know more about the ways of God with man, but actually have for ourselves a history that rescues us from that history we have "in Adam"? What's necessary for that? A resurrected Christ, and specifically a resurrected "Christ (who) died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures." "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your

sins.” His resurrection is as necessary as that. No segment of his life previous to Easter Sunday shows him immune to the law of sin and death. Easter does. He is not just immune to it, he has conquered it.

I myself have a hunch that it is this very insight operative in the theologies of many (all?) of the N..T. writers which leads them to give low-key treatment to the virgin birth of our Lord, if they were even aware of it. This is true even of Matthew and Luke, despite the coverage they give it in their opening chapters. For them it was what they had received, and in their own unique witnessing they included it. But they themselves do not portray it with Easter’s kind of necessity. The virgin birth of Jesus does not usher in non-nomological human history, least of all for him! But for the Evangelists the resurrection of the crucified one does indeed do that, for him – and for his.

And that is what is at the heart of eschatological existence, of life in God’s New Age. It is not existence derived from some transcendent divine space, or some transcendent divine time. It is rather an embodied life that transcends the law of sin and death, an existence that is curse-proof, an existence that takes its origin exclusively from the generative juices of God’s non-nomological mercy – which happened in, with, under this Jesus’ history. But perhaps right at that point we have the closest affinity of Jesus’ virgin birth to the benefits of his cross and resurrection. It is in this light that I understand Werner Elert’s two “summary sentences” on the virgin birth in his treatment of “The Incarnation.”

“A) The virgin birth cannot be understood merely as a demonstration of God’s omnipotence, for in the name of God’s omnipotence it can just as well be said that it was not necessary; nor can it be the substantive grounds for Jesus’ sinlessness (Augustine), since the scriptural testimony offers

no foundations for such a notion.”B) Its connection with the incarnation rather can only be found in the fact that the virgin “knew not a man” (Lk 1:34), that the conception of her child did not come from “the will of man” (cf. Jn 1:13), that consequently the God-man born of her has his origin EXCLUSIVELY in God (Lk 1:48ff; Gal 4:4).”

Finally, is this anything close to demything? Or is all god-talk necessarily mythological? Only so, it seems, if God is relegated in our mind right from the beginning to some a-cosmic, a-temporal, extra-terrestrial locus. But if God is right from the beginning of our thinking understood to be intra-cosmic and intra-aeonic, then as *_theologia crucis_* goes about its theologizing, there is no task of bringing God down from wherever and making him relevant and comprehensible to the world we live in. Rather *_theologia crucis_* sees natural man living every moment in a “much too intimate” relation with God already, namely, with God the critic, a mortally intimate relationship. It sees the need for de-thanatizing, de-nomologizing, de-kriminizing human life, in fact, removing death, law, and judgment from the whole creation.

That anything like that should even have happened is in principle (i.e., in nomological principle) incredible, but *_theologia crucis_* sees that that is what REALLY happened on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. And if that is what really happened, then that dare not be demythed – on the very grounds of the demythers’ own canons of operation, namely, to determine what really happened. For what the evangelists affirm about these two days is not mythological; it is what REALLY happened.

Here “God really was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”

Concordia Seminary

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