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Topalović Vladislav*

University of East Sarajevo
Faculty of Orthodox Theology
"Saint Basil of Ostrog," Foča

Golijanin Vedran**

University of East Sarajevo
Faculty of Orthodox Theology
"Saint Basil of Ostrog," Foča

Demythologizing Messiah
From Albrecht Ritschl to Richard Dawkins

Abstract: The authors analyze the development of the cultural and theological image of Jesus from Albrecht Ritschl and the early days of Cultural Protestantism to the modern New Atheism movement. The image of Jesus in Richard Dawkins' writings is a logical conclusion of the abandonment of the messianic idea, as dictated by specific Christ–culture dynamics that H. Richard Niebuhr described as "Christ of culture." Following Niebuhr's idea, the authors follow the evolution of this model across the illustrative examples of Ritschl, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Gordon Kaufman, and Richard Holloway, demonstrating how the "Christ of culture," if consistent, leads to atheism.

Key words: Christ, culture, New Atheism, Cultural Protestantism, messianic idea

The fact that Richard Dawkins, the harshest atheist critic of religion in our age, started describing himself as a "cultural Christian" (although not as a "believing Christian") hardly left anyone familiar with his thought unsurprised. While extremists on the Christian side of the science–religion controversy claimed Dawkins was a repentant prodigal son, their atheist counterparts felt somewhat betrayed: how was it possible that a man who for many years preached the idea of religion as the ultimate evil suddenly found himself appreciative of the cultural heritage of Christianity? On the surface, it seems that Dawkins has merely picked a side in the ongoing struggle against Islamic extremism in Great Britain. Regardless of the past intolerance of Christianity, its current diluted state is undoubtedly far more convenient for Dawkins' beloved science than any cultural frame that might spring from

* vladislav.topalovic@bogoslovski.ues.rs.ba; https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6554-8029
** vedran.golijanin@bogoslovski.ues.rs.ba; https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5808-5670

Islam. But this would be an oversimplified explanation of Dawkins' sudden change of heart. Such an impressive scientist and author as "Darwin's rottweiler" deserves a more thorough analysis, and there seem to be several clues in his writings that point to a kinship with a specific school of Christian thought.

An often over-looked example of Dawkins' praise for Richard Holloway, the former Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, seems particularly illuminating in this regard. Although one cannot state that Holloway decisively influenced Dawkins (since it would be more appropriate to postulate Dawkins' influence on Holloway), the fact that he is the only theologian for whom Dawkins does not spare compliments speaks for itself: Holloway's Christianity is the only acceptable religious option in Dawkins' utterly atheistic worldview. It is not surprising that this option presumably fits into one of H. Richard Niebuhr's five models of the Christ-culture dynamics, namely the "Christ of culture": here we find Jesus adapted to the cultural framework of every age, from early Christian Gnostics to the "Cultural Protestantism" of Albrecht Ritschl and his followers, i.e., Jesus who champions the most progressive and intellectually fashionable ideas and does not force us to rethink our loyalty to superior human cultural (and scientific) achievements. Of course, Dawkins is hardly identical to Gnostics, or Ritschl, and his placement in the "Christ of culture" model seems excessive. This does not, however, mean that the image of Jesus in Dawkins' writings completely escapes Niebuhr's classifications. It certainly is quite similar to the Jesus images proposed in the Cultural Protestantism movement and, if we also take Holloway into account, we can follow the evolution of this particular image from Ritschl to Dawkins. Assuming that Niebuhr himself would not admit Dawkins into his "Christ of culture" model, a proposal for defining a new model seems appropriate.

As we shall see, the formation of the sixth Christ–culture model, which would accommodate both Dawkins and Holloway, is necessitated by the total abandonment of the messianic idea. Their Jesus is not Christ in the traditional Christian sense of the word. Starting from the era of Cultural Protestantism, liberal and revisionist theologians saw this title either as a mythological concept that we should liberate from all eschatological implications or as a sad remnant of the human Jesus' religious delusion. If one insists on speaking about Jesus as Christ, then one should find in that name personal (often purely moral or psychological) meaning, preferably without absolute claims that might endanger the climate of religious pluralism by reanimating old and apparently deceased eschatology. Cultural Christianity, which Dawkins embraces, thus appears as the only possible Christianity in a worldview shaped by distaste for anything supernatural. Jesus is Christ, but only as a cultural figure or as a personal role model, while his general significance is determined by the flow of cultural processes. What differentiates Dawkins and Holloway from authors like Ritschl and Bultmann is, however, doubt in the existence of any transcendent reality that Jesus might have represented. In other words, their Christ –culture model is atheistic and thus represents the end product of the "Christ of culture" model's evolution as described by Niebuhr. Inverting the name

of another Niebuhr's models, we might call it "culture above Christ" and investigate how liberal Protestant theology (perhaps unintentionally) gave birth to this idea.

Dawkins' Jesus

The implication that liberal Christianity produces atheism will surely raise some eyebrows. Can one not be liberal in moral and cultural outlook and remain a theist, namely a Christian theist who believes in Jesus as Christ? Of course, the answer is yes. Far from embracing fundamentalist positions, we simply state that adopting a modern liberal worldview can also lead to atheism. Richard Dawkins surely thinks so: "Whatever its cause, the manifest phenomenon of Zeitgeist progression is more than enough to undermine the claim that we need God in order to be good, or to decide what is good" (Dawkins 2006, 272). If one reads the Bible in the way Dawkins and some Christian fundamentalists do, the only intellectually consistent outcome is rejection: we should either reject modern culture (that to which the "Zeitgeist progression" led us) or the biblical idea of God. For Dawkins, there is no dilemma, since the biblical God, especially the God of the Old Testament, is "arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully" (Dawkins 2006, 31). This "monster of the Bible" (Dawkins 2006, 46) who, in Dawkins' view, is nothing but a "psychotic delinquent" (Dawkins 2006, 38), deserves no voice in the enlightened cultural and moral discourse of our age.

What about the God of the New Testament? More precisely, what about Jesus? He did not demand animal or human sacrifices and most certainly did not propose genocide of the Amalek. Dawkins cannot but conclude that "Jesus is a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the Old Testament" (Dawkins 2006, 250). The God that Jesus revealed was a loving Heavenly Father who cares for the poor and neglected, who demands peace and blesses the peacemakers, and who wants us to abandon racial and ethnic prejudice so that we can embrace all of humanity as equal brothers and sisters. Dawkins, however, does not accept the possibility of God's gradual revelation fulfilled in Jesus as Christ. What is gradual is the evolution of human morality, i.e., the progression of Zeitgeist: "But the moral superiority of Jesus precisely bears out my point. Jesus was not content to derive his ethics from the scriptures of his upbringing" (Dawkins 2006, 250). Needless to say, Dawkins also has many objections to the moral teachings of Jesus but does not question the revolutionary significance of his ethics in the 1st century Roman Empire. The real problem is the early Christian *understanding* of Jesus.

Can we not appreciate Jesus as a progressive moral teacher, without supernatural claims that, in Dawkins' opinion, only distort his actual significance? For Dawkins, who does not believe in the existence of God or anything supernatural, the early Christian messianic additions to the image of Jesus, which are es-

sentially supernatural, not only downplay his historical significance but also stand in opposition to the rigorously materialistic worldview of modern science: "When pressed, many educated Christians today are too loyal to deny the virgin birth and the resurrection. But it embarrasses them because their rational minds know it is absurd, so they would much rather not be asked" (Dawkins 2006, 157). As soon as religious people start talking about miracles, they step into the territory of natural sciences which, by a simple application of their theories to miracle stories, declare that these are impossible. In other words, when Jesus dons his messianic robe, with miracles naturally attached, he trespasses the border between ethics and science and thus becomes an object of scientific assessment:

> Did Jesus have a human father, or was his mother a virgin at the time of his birth? Whether or not there is enough surviving evidence to decide it, this is still a strictly scientific question with a definite answer in principle: yes or no. Did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead? Did he himself come alive again three days after being crucified? There is an answer to every such question, whether or not we can discover it in practice, and it is a strictly scientific answer (Dawkins 2006, 59)?

Even if Christians were eager to abandon the lesser miracles but keep the essence of the messianic idea — Christ came to free us from slavery to sin in the act of salvation – Dawkins would still raise scientific and even moral objections. The very idea of sin, especially the one that includes the redeemer, is repugnant to Dawkins, and it is "almost as morally obnoxious as the story of Abraham setting out to barbecue Isaac, which it resembles" (Dawkins 2006, 251). Thus, the belief in Jesus' redeeming death and resurrection, which most Christians understand as the crucial part of the messianic idea in the New Testament, turns out to be scientifically, morally, and logically inconsistent:

> Progressive ethicists today find it hard to defend any kind of retributive theory of punishment, let alone the scapegoat theory – executing an innocent to pay for the sins of the guilty. In any case (one can't help wondering), who was God trying to impress? Presumably himself – judge and jury as well as execution victim. To cap it all, Adam, the supposed perpetrator of the original sin, never existed in the first place: an awkward fact – excusably unknown to Paul but presumably known to an omniscient God (and Jesus, if you believe he was God) – which fundamentally undermines the premise of the whole tortuously nasty theory. Oh, but of course, the story of Adam and Eve was only ever symbolic, wasn't it? Symbolic? So, in order to impress himself, Jesus had himself tortured and executed, in vicarious punishment for a symbolic sin committed by a non-existent individual? As I said, barking mad, as well as viciously unpleasant (Dawkins 2006, 253).

These words betray Dawkins' embarrassing ignorance of the Christian theology of salvation, although we may safely suppose that he would not change his opinion even if he was more than scarcely familiar with the Eastern Christian

understanding of Christ's sacrifice. All the objections of Christian theologians and philosophers regarding his catastrophically bad understanding of Thomas Aquinas' "Five Ways" made no impact: since science does not affirm God's existence, any philosophical argument to the contrary must be useless. The same goes for the messianic idea: since there is no God, Jesus could not have been any kind of supernatural entity, i.e., he could not have been the Messiah, which makes different theological positions equally meaningless.

Nonetheless, Dawkins is not ready to reject Jesus completely. The ironically entitled article "Atheists for Jesus," published approximately at the same time Dawkins was writing his bestselling book the *God Delusion*, contains both the rejection of messianic supernaturalism and praise for Jesus. Here, Dawkins is ready to "forgive" Jesus for believing in God: "Of course Jesus was a theist, but that is the least interesting thing about him. He was a theist because, in his time, everybody was. Atheism was not an option, even for so radical a thinker as Jesus" (Dawkins 2005). The more interesting thing about Jesus was his moral inventiveness, i.e., his ability to influence people to stand against the selfishness of their genes and be nice (morally good) to others. Being a faithful follower of Darwin, Dawkins felt obliged to admit that this niceness is a "perversion of Darwinism" and "just plain dumb," but still useful. What atheists should learn from religion is the way to spread "dumb but useful" ideas, which might even entail accepting a specific image of Jesus: "It has become a commonplace that, were he to return today, he would be appalled at what is being done in his name by Christians ranging from the Catholic Church to the fundamentalist Religious Right. Less obviously but still plausibly, in the light of modern scientific knowledge, I think he would see through supernaturalist obscurantism" (Dawkins 2005).

We should draw several important conclusions from this brief review of Dawkins' "Christology:" Jesus was a progressive moral teacher, he was not God nor the Messiah, all talk about miracles (including the incarnation and the resurrection) should be completely abandoned as unscientific and mythological, and his moral teachings might still be useful for building up a better, more humane society. Eschatology should not even be mentioned, since it turns Christianity, as Dawkins and his atheist colleagues often claim, into a "death cult." This is a sufficient outline of Dawkins' cultural understanding of Jesus. Now we must investigate why some Christian theologians like Richard Holloway did not recognize Dawkins as an enemy but hailed him as a precious ally.

Denial: the Ritschlian Crisis

When exploring the evolution of the "Christ of culture" model, we get the impression that many liberal Christians understood secular scientists' skepticism regarding the Bible as a diagnosis of some terminal disease. They were faced with the fact that Christianity, at least in the minds of progressive men and women, was slowly dying (and, considering the ideas of people like Dawkins, they were not mistaken).

Thus, the process of adapting Christ to modern culture in order to make him survive a bit longer somewhat resembles the stages of grief as described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The limited scope of an academic paper allows us to describe only three out of five (denial, bargaining, and acceptance), but these would be enough to demonstrate how the "death of God" theology, in one form or another, ripened from Ritschl to Dawkins. Indeed, Kübler-Ross' denial, which "functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news" (Kübler-Ross 2009, 32), is evident in the Ritschlian school: Christianity is not terminally ill, the diagnosis is mistaken, and we must simply rearrange our mindset (understanding of the Bible) to convince ourselves that the precious faith will not die. Thus begins Cultural Protestantism.

Niebuhr mentions early Christian Gnostics, Abelard, Albrecht Ritschl, and the "Lives of Jesus" movement as prime examples of the "Christ of culture" model. What all of them have in common is the feeling of cultural pride, a sense that human intellectual achievements are not just adaptable to the Christian faith but a necessary measure of its validity in the lives of individuals and communities. In other words, culture should not adapt to Christ as described in the New Testament; it is Christ whom we should adapt to culture. Thus, as Niebuhr states, "the cultural answers to the Christ-culture problem show a consistent tendency to distort the figure of the New Testament Jesus" (Niebuhr 1956, 109). Not surprisingly, the glorification of human reason, accompanied by great scientific achievements, led to the implementation of new scientific criteria in Bible studies and subsequent disappointment in the results. Some were ready to abandon Christianity due to its supernatural (unscientific, irrational) claims. Others were eager to preserve the Christian faith by emphasizing those features of Jesus that were acceptable to modern man's rationalistic worldview. It is for this reason that not only Niebuhr but also Karl Barth understood Ritschl's theology as the perfect incarnation of the spirit of that age: "Nobody either before or since Ritschl, perhaps (…) has expressed the view as clearly as he, that modern man wishes above all to live in the best sense according to reason, and that the significance of Christianity for him can only be a great confirmation and strengthening of this very endeavor" (Barth 1959, 391).

Indeed, Ritschl rejects mysticism and (false) metaphysics, i.e., he rejects "scientific theology" that presupposes that we can say something about God in himself. Ritschl's epistemological position is that "one cannot authenticate the impact of others upon the human spirit except in the context of active and conscious sense-impressions" (Ritschl 2005a, 193–194), which, in the case of theology, means that "we can only perceive God in his actions toward us, which correspond to his public revelation, so it is that we perceive God's presence for us precisely in these actions" (Ritschl 2005a, 194). Thus, an honest theologian should not claim any knowledge about God's nature or Christ's divinity since such claims stand outside the scope of sense impressions and our immediate experience. As for God's actions, Ritschl is primarily interested in his dominion over the world as exemplified in Christ's lordship, but which is also our true purpose: "The recognition of

Jesus as the Christ has for us no meaning unless through Him we know ourselves raised to kingship or dominion over the world, and to priesthood or undisturbed communion with God" (Ritschl 2004, 418). Theology, therefore, starts with us – not with God in his unknowable self in an also unknowable eternity – and our need to overcome the evils of the world. It is Jesus' fulfillment of his kingly vocation – the establishment of his dominion over the world – that allows us to recognize him as Christ. The New Testament writers asserted this fact through the miracle stories, but these are, as Ritschl admits, inexplicable from the scientific point of view. Nevertheless, the unscientific character of miracles does not endanger Ritschl's primary interest:

> However, the significance of the supremacy which Christ asserted over the world is not affected thereby, nor is our comprehension of this attribute rendered impossible. If, as we cannot but assume, this attribute stands in connection with the religious destiny of man, as that destiny was first realized by Christ Himself, we may expect that Christ's position of supremacy toward the world finds application also to other men, who, within His community and in accordance with the view of the world which He proclaimed, enter into that relation to God which was His aim for them, and which has been made possible to them through Him (Ritschl 2004, 456–457).

This is where Ritschl's Christology finally diverges from eschatology. Since Ritschl rejected the doctrine of the original sin, he could not interpret the messianic idea in accordance with traditional Christian dogma. Instead, he proposed another rendition of Jesus' messianic vocation: "The business of His vocation was the establishment of the universal ethical fellowship of mankind, as that aim in the world which rises above all conditions included in the notion of the world" (Ritschl 2004, 449). Again, theology starts with us and our need to establish the dominion over the world. At this end we find the full meaning of God for us, and it is this goal that, according to Ritschl, the New Testament authors called the "Kingdom of God." Since we cannot speak theologically about any otherworldly meaning of this concept, we are left with the Kingdom of God as "the union of subjects bound together by righteous conduct" (Ritschl 2005b, 223). As for eschatology, Ritschl does not have much to say: "This form of future expectation has not maintained itself in the church, though it is still held in sectarian circles. (…) Since a consistent eschatological theory cannot be gained from the data of the New Testament, the hints of the New Testament as to the condition of the blessed and the lost lie beyond the possibility of a clear presentation" (Ritschl 2005b, 254).

Unsurprisingly, Ritschl's theology was harshly criticized. His idealization of human reason and Enlightenment values was, as Karl Barth notices, "the very epitome of the national-liberal German bourgeois of the age of Bismarck" (Barth 1959, 392). The negation of the eschatological nature of Christ's vocation and the reinterpretation of the Kingdom of God in purely ethical terms were especially problematic for the more traditional Protestant theologians. Niebuhr insisted that

Ritschl's understanding of the Kingdom of God was not informed by the Bible but completely conditioned by his cultural environment, which transformed this biblical concept into a "synthesis of values esteemed by democratic culture: the freedom and intrinsic worth of individuals, social co-operation, and universal peace" (Niebuhr 1956, 99). It was Johannes Weiss, however, who reaffirmed the importance of eschatology against Julius Kaftan and other Ritschlian theologians in his astounding work *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*. A consistent exegesis of the New Testament texts cannot but lead us to the conclusion that Christ himself understood the Kingdom of God as "a radically superworldly entity," meaning that "the dogmatic religious-ethical application of this idea in more recent theology, an application which has completely stripped away the original eschatological-apocalyptical meaning of the idea, is unjustified" (Weiss 1985, 114). Ritschl's reinterpretation is, as Weiss rightly notices, a "vestige of the Kantian idea" (Weiss 1985, 133), which made it unwanted in the emerging Neo-orthodox Protestant thought.

We can already see parallels between Ritschl's theology and Dawkins' anti-theology, most notably in the reduction of Jesus' messianic idea to a mere moral enterprise, although this is hardly an original observation. Karl Barth was the one who insisted that Ritschlian, i.e., liberal or cultural Christianity, stands dangerously close to the border with atheism. Is Ritschl's basic theological position not almost identical to that of Ludwig Feuerbach? Since Ritschl and his followers emphasize human needs and reduce God to their fulfillment, they share, as Barth claims, "a common hypothesis with those who deny the personality of God, namely, that God is to be understood as the content of the highest human values" (Barth 2009, 36). God as the fulfillment of our moral objectives or God as a projection of our moral nature (Feuerbach 1989, 46) – the difference is inconsequential as long as we confine God (existent or nonexistent) to the realm of purely human morality. In Feuerbach's words:

> God, as the object of religion, – and only as such is he God, – God in the sense of a nomen proprium, not of a vague, metaphysical entity, is essentially an object only of religion, not of philosophy, – of feeling, not of the intellect, – of the heart's necessity, not of the mind's freedom: in short, and object which is the reflex not of the theoretical but of the practical tendency in man (Feuerbach 1989, 186).

After quoting this sentence from *The Essence of Christianity*, Barth asks: "On this line you would not meet the Ritschlian theology, would you" (Barth 1962, 229)? (We might also ask whether the similarity between cultural Christianity and Feuerbach's thought could be the same line that would eventually lead to Dawkins.) Ritschl, however, was not an atheist. Claiming that we cannot know God in himself, independently of his actions in the realm of our moral life, is not the claim that God does not truly exist. But Barth warns that here lies the potential for atheism. We might say that his main objection was not significantly different from that of Niebuhr: the privilege that liberal theologians like Ritschl give to human cultural

and ethical needs in talking about God transforms both God and Christ precisely into what Feuerbach described as projections (and Dawkins as delusions). Barth concludes: "He who would honestly combat Feuerbach must attack his doctrine of salvation, his positive doctrine of the essence of man as the essence of God. If he is unassailable there, then all criticisms of his negation, of his anti-theology, dwindle to assumption and mere assertions" (Barth 1962, 223). This objection to Feuerbach should have been a lasting warning sign against further experimentation in the "Christ of culture" field, but Barth's criticism slowly faded away as the trust in human reason's supremacy gradually reemerged.

Bargaining: Myths to be Broken

The first stage of facing death is denial ("this is not really happening to me"), and the second is anger ("it is not fair that this happens to me"). The second stage already contains a degree of acceptance, although accompanied by placing the blame on others, whether people or God. The third stage is similar: a limited acceptance remains, but the coping mechanism is transformed into bargaining. In Kübler-Ross' words, we think that "maybe we can succeed in entering into some sort of agreement which may postpone the inevitable happening" (Kübler-Ross 2009, 66), similar to children who attempt to improve their behavior to get what was denied to them before. But bargaining is merely "an attempt to postpone" (Kübler-Ross 2009, 67), the last desperate effort to avoid the true cause of the problem. If in Ritschl's theology we can notice the denial of modern sciences' atheistic implications, along with the attempt to prove (to ourselves) Christ's lasting relevance by reinterpreting his messianic mission, then Rudolf Bultmann's thought fits into the bargaining stage. The atheistic implications of the scientific worldview are (partially) accepted, but God still seems too valuable to be simply discarded: maybe we can postpone the death of God by pushing him out of the world completely, and the notion of "myth" can help us preserve Jesus, even at the cost of his messianic identity.

Protestant Neo-orthodoxy relied on the horrors of the First World War to deny the superiority of pure human rationality. We were clearly not reasonable or moral enough to advance on the road of history without divine guidance, so Jesus as Christ was once again proposed as the ultimate solution. Despite the traumas of global conflicts, the advancement of science still burdened the minds of many liberal theologians, while the end of the colonial system and the following appreciation of non-Christian religious traditions raised doubts about the soteriological exclusivity of Christianity. i.e., about the traditional understanding of Jesus' messianic status. The image of the Zeitgeist was perfectly captured by a Mennonite theologian Gordon Kaufman, who in 1972 wrote: "It is hardly so obvious now that our salvation is to be found in Jesus Christ and him alone: in our day such phrases, repeated too often, have the ring of empty jargon" (Kaufman 1972, 5). A renowned German theologian Rudolf Bultmann, most famous for his idea of demythologiza-

tion, had a similar perspective. Understanding the myth in line with the German "history of religions school," Bultmann was ready to subjugate biblical faith to scientific assessment and was even grateful for the apparent scientific help:

> If God is conceived as a being who belongs to the world of beings, even as the highest being, then the science whose object of research is precisely this world is of necessity atheistic. (…) Science thus performs a useful service for theology in that it forces theology to speak of the reality of God as a reality beyond that of beings (Bultmann 1972, 331).

Bultmann's bargain is obvious: as long as we keep God out of the created world, i.e., out of the world of beings, we may still be able to talk about his "reality." He was, without a doubt, aware of all the negative features of Christian apologetics that relied on the "God of the gaps" fallacy. But Bultmann's solution avoids even the good apologetics and is thus a complete capitulation before the might of atheistic science. God is clearly banished from the world: "Modern men take it for granted that the course of nature and of history, like their own inner life and their practical life, is nowhere interrupted by the intervention of supernatural powers" (Bultmann 1958, 16). Quite similar to Dawkins, Bultmann places the Zeitgeist, i.e., what "modern man" thinks and feels, above theological doctrines, the sole difference being Bultmann's desire to preserve the belief in God as a rational option.

Jesus as described in the New Testament, however, remains the core problem due to the messianic claims of his biographers. This is where Bultmann introduces a specific concept of mythology: "It is often said that mythology is a primitive science, the intention of which is to explain phenomena and incidents which are strange, curious, surprising, or frightening, by attributing them to supernatural causes, to gods or to demons" (Bultmann 1958, 18-19). (Here we can again paraphrase Barth: on this line, you would not meet Dawkins' theory of religion as primitive science, would you?) Explaining the error in Bultmann's understanding of myth would take us far from the main topic, so we will only recommend the devastating critique of Karl Jaspers in his and Bultmann's *Myth and Christianity* (1958). What concerns us here is Bultmann's application of this particular understanding of myth to the messianic idea of the New Testament, and he is quite clear: "New Testament scholars are at variance as to whether Jesus himself claimed to be the Messiah, the King of the time of blessedness, whether he believed himself to be the Son of Man who would come on the clouds of heaven. If so, Jesus understood himself in the light of mythology" (Bultmann 1958, 16). Since mythology is nothing but a primitive science it cannot survive in a world where real science exists, meaning that "the conceptions of eschatology, of redeemer and of redemption, are over and done with" (Bultmann 1958, 17). What remains is an existentialist approach to faith, free from mythological burden, which turns us from this to the other world in a religious act. Here Bultmann diverges from Ritschl, accusing older liberal theology of reducing the New Testament message "to certain basic

religious and moral ideas, to an idealistic ethic that is religiously motivated" (Bultmann 1989, 12). Unlike Ritschl, Bultmann insists that religious life "has as its high point a mysticism that knows itself to be one with Christ, in whom God has taken symbolic form" (Bultmann 1989, 13). But this religion, as dictated by the rejection of myth as primitive science, has nothing to do with this world; it is "the human longing for something beyond the world, the discovery of another sphere where only the soul can abide" (Bultmann 1989, 13). Assuming that God has taken only a symbolic form in Jesus and that the mystical union with this God must be in some totally otherworldly abode – does this not show a bargaining nature of Bultmann's demythologization, i.e., a desperate attempt to postpone the death of God by apparently avoiding the illness of Christianity as diagnosed by the atheistic science?

Paul Tillich, on the other hand, did not share Bultmann's desire to get rid of myths. He understood that religious language is always symbolic, as well as that various symbols always come together in the form of myths. Thus, a myth "uses material from our ordinary experience" to express the mystery of the Divine, putting the stories about it "into the framework of time and space although it belongs to the nature of the ultimate to be beyond time and space" (Tillich 1958, 49). The stories of the Bible, and especially miracle stories, are myths in this sense. Since the symbolic nature of myths requires an interpretation that would bridge the gap between us and the time when they were first formulated, some sort of demythologization is due. For Tillich, however, demythologization is a "negative and artificial term," but not completely useless: "It must be accepted and supported if it points to the necessity of recognizing a symbol as a symbol and a myth as a myth. It must be attacked and rejected if it means the removal of symbols and myths altogether" (Tillich 1958, 50). A myth that is recognized as such, but not rejected, is a "broken myth." The process of breaking the myths is, nevertheless, yet another attempt to shield the biblical narrative from the atheistic conclusions of modern science. The other option, i.e., reading the biblical myths as historical events, is for Tillich nothing but idolatry: "The virgin birth of the Messiah is understood in biological terms, resurrection and ascension as physical events, the second coming of the Christ as a telluric, or cosmic, catastrophe" (Tillich 1958, 52). Although more elegant, Tillich's theological discourse in the end falls in line with Bultmann's bargain.

While Tillich tried to soften Bultmann's demythologization, Gordon Kaufman thought that Bultmann did not go far enough. For Kaufman, demythologization cannot be accomplished by "cutting away most of the minor mythological realities," such as angels, demons, and Jesus' miracles since this allows us to still "speak of an 'exalted Christ,' of the 'Word of God' as something that comes to man from some 'beyond,' and of 'acts of God' that *transform* men and history" (Kaufman 1972, 43). Kaufman claims that our immediate experience and scientific knowledge do not allow us to suppose the existence of anything otherworldly, including the transcendent reality of God. In other words, Kaufman enforces the acceptance of the death of God as proclaimed by atheistic science, but what keeps his theology in the bargaining stage is the idea that Christianity is somehow still viable. In

a clear "Christ of culture" manner, Kaufman states that "the notion of a culturally independent theological norm (…) simply proved unformulable and unworkable" (Kaufman 1972, 23). This means that theology should adapt to the culture shaped by scientific materialism to make the faith relevant in the modern world. The way to do this, however, is not by putting "a kind of pious frosting" on science, as apologists do, but by showing "that the facts as known are susceptible to a theological interpretation that does not distort them" (Kaufman 1972, 33).

Bringing Bultmann's demythologization to its logical conclusion, Kaufman denies the possibility of a personal God. Since mythology expresses divine realities in worldly terms, the claim that God is a person is the worst mythological sin —anthropomorphism. Thus, we cannot speak about God as Creator. But Kaufman does not follow Bultmann in banishing even this impersonal God out of this world, i.e., out of science's reach. On the contrary, Kaufman's God is completely immanent, it (rather than "he") is an "utterly amazing mystery of serendipitous creativity manifest throughout the universe from the Big Bang onward, first in cosmic and biological evolutionary developments, and then ultimately producing – in part through the emergence of human creative activity – the human world of history, culture, highly complex levels of symbolization, and elaborate technologies" (Kaufman 2006, 6). God as creativity does not need to run from science; it is rather a quasi-theological notion of a constant change in the universe, the process of becoming per se, which somehow gives birth to a religious feeling of awe.

Kaufman's Christianity, which is nothing but a single voice in the choir of equally valid religious responses to the universal mystery of creativity, does not contain even a trace of the traditional messianic idea. Jesus as God incarnate is unacceptable, since this belief "presupposes both the anthropomorphic notion of an agent-God and the anthropocentric notion of God's *special love* for humankind" (Kaufman 2006, 15). Along with the idea of God's incarnation also disappears the entire traditional theology. Teachings of Nicaea and Chalcedon are expressed in "quasi-mythical language" (Kaufman 2006, 2), meaning that, at least for modern man, they are "very ambiguous and difficult, and to some persons simply incredible or even unintelligible" (Kaufman 2006, 14). All this talk about God-Man Christ is, according to Kaufman, the result of "Jesus-trajectory," i.e., of mythological interpretation of his person by apostles and other early Christians, which eventually brought about the belief in Jesus as God. The prime culprit is, of course, John's Gospel, a document completely corrupted by "Jesus-trajectory" and thus, as Kaufman thinks, unintelligible to modern humanity. He prefers the image of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels: "Rather this thoroughly *human* Jesus provides us with a picture of profound appeal, a picture in terms of which we may be drawn to measure and judge our own humanness and humaneness" (Kaufman 2006, 32). Theology as a strictly cultural response to the mystery of creativity can accommodate this non-messianic Jesus as a moral teacher whose thought formed one particular civilization. Christianity is, therefore, the frame of Western cultural creativity, without absolute soteriological claims, which enables Kaufman to conclude that "tradition-

al Christian eschatology must also go" (Kaufman 2006, 58).

Although unacceptable to traditional branches of Christianity, Kaufman's theology is more than logical in the context of Niebuhr's "Christ of culture" model. His theological method is obviously based on the assumption that the Zeitgeist has primacy even in matters of religion: "When new times, new understandings of the world and of the human place within the world, and important new problems demand attention, new *creative* responses must be sought" (Kaufman 2006, 20). But why bargaining, one might ask? If Kaufman wants to be more consistent in demythologization than Bultmann, why not, as Dawkins usually demands, get rid of God completely? Indeed, Kaufman's cultural Christianity would not raise the same scientific objections as traditional theism does, but it does not mean that his progressive and scientifically minded modern man would rush to church to worship a vague notion of creativity. This kind of Christianity clings to Western civilization as an eccentric but still tolerable cultural club. Of course, the delusion that formerly Christian civilization still needs this club comes from its inability to accept the proclaimed death of God (and Christianity) completely. The normal process of grief should end with full acceptance of the coming end, which finally takes us to Dawkins' favorite theologian.

Acceptance: Recovering from Christianity

In Richard Holloway, we find all the key departures from traditional Christianity described above. Although presumably hesitant to embrace the unrelenting atheism of Richard Dawkins, his writings betray a total disappointment in the Christian religion, its faith in God, and the accompanying (traditional) moral requirements. Dawkins sympathetically describes Holloway as a "recovering Christian" who has "outgrown supernaturalism that most Christians still identify with their religion. (…) He retains a reverence for the poetry of religious myth, which is enough to keep him going to church" (Dawkins 2005). Indeed, Holloway does not doubt the supremacy of modern science over religion, he rejects any possibility of the supernatural, and denies even the notion of traditional Christian morality as relevant and appropriate in this day and age. He does not try to bargain like Bultmann or Kaufman; on the contrary, his thought represents a full acceptance of the death of Christian God. Unlike Kaufman, Holloway does not care for Christianity as a cultural club of Western civilization but rather as a kind of artistic expression of humanity's struggle with its inner and outer evils. Unlike Dawkins, however, he thinks that the poetry of Christian myths somehow still resonates with our modern situation, meaning that an individual should not be prevented from enjoying this poetry if it is truly consoling. A man should be allowed to weep by the grave of the deceased loved one.

Holloway's biography is an interesting story about a modern, liberal, and scientifically-minded man who found himself in the Anglican Communion, by that point still mostly traditional. The murkiness of his feelings regarding Christianity

and its theological and moral claims was present even when he was appointed the Bishop of Edinburgh: "In particular, I had not unraveled the complexity of my attitude towards religion. I knew I was not an atheist. (…) What I did not know then was that I was not quite a theist either. (…) At that time I had not yet discovered I could not settle permanently on either square. I knew I was religious" (Holloway 2012, 298). He did not doubt that Christian tradition was "the great mountain of wisdom and superstition" (Holloway 2001, 158), putting in the "superstitious" basket all beliefs regarding God's literal revelation as mere myths. Of course, Holloway embraces the idea of demythologization as Tillich defined it:

> I shall attempt to break open the great Christian teachings in a way that makes them useful for our day. I shall use them as archetypes or myths, ways in which we share our own deepest wisdom and longing with each other. I shall try to show that a lot of religious language is best used as a kind of poetry that can illuminate our own existence and help us in the gaining of wisdom (Holloway 2001, 54).

After the Lambeth Conference in 1998, when the Anglican prelates debated the issue of homosexuality and subsequently voted against the ordination of homosexuals, Holloway was convinced that Christianity had a serious problem. He remembers how some students at the University of Kent were appalled by Christians who were demonstrating against homosexual marriage and ordination, which led him to the conclusion that "certain aspects of Christianity were becoming a scandal to the young" (Holloway 2001, X). It was the burden of ancient cultures as well as prelates' religious manipulations that transformed Christianity into something completely unacceptable to modern humanity: "My problem was not so much with God as with increasing disbelief in religion's claim to possess precise information about his opinions, including his sexual and gender preferences" (Holloway 2012, 356). But the Anglican bishops' negative attitude toward homosexuality was just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, religion became what it was never supposed to be, allowing itself to be "dominated by special interest groups who claimed that only their answers were true and that everyone else was in error" (Holloway 2001, 4). As we shall see, Holloway thinks that the Christian religion should have been a struggle against such special interest groups, a conviction stemming from his Marxist worldview. Instead, by claiming the divine origin to justify social injustice, Christianity betrays its purely human nature:

> Was religion a lie? Not necessarily, but it was a mistake. Lies are just lies, but mistakes can be corrected and lessons can be learned from them. The mistake was to think religion was more than human. I was less sure whether God was also just a human invention, but I was quite sure religion was. It was a work of the human imagination, a work of art – an opera – and could be appreciated as such (Holloway 2012, 375).

The mistake of Christianity – a purely human religion – is that which Til-

lich described as transforming symbols into idols. Instead of advancing along other products of the human mind, Christianity remained tied to symbols of ancient cultures, falsely identifying "previous cultural arrangements exclusively with the mind of God" (Holloway 2001, 11). Holloway does not want to deduce absolute claims from the faith in an entity whose existence is questionable. Stressing the belief in Christianity as just another human religion, he brings forth Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts, i.e., scientific revolutions, to justify the need for abandoning traditional Christianity. While Kuhn claims that paradigms are "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (Kuhn 1996, X), Holloway insists that we can also talk about traditional Christianity as a similar paradigm in the history of human morality. However, when a new scientific paradigm emerges, it inevitably clashes with the older paradigm, and this clash appears as a "choice between incompatible modes of community life" (Kuhn 1996, 94). Just as no sane person can believe in Aristotle's physics after Newton, a modern man cannot accept unscientific claims of traditional Christianity: "If religious narratives are to retain their power they must be capable of constant re-interpretation, must adapt to changing understandings of meaning. If this is made impossible, because of the anxieties of the guardians of the myth, then they will suffer the same fate as Aristotle's physics and Ptolemy's astronomy and they will be superseded" (Holloway 2001, 61).

The reinterpretation of Jesus that would be appealing to modern humanity first requires a total abandonment of the discredited paradigm. This, of course, includes all miracles and other supernatural aspects of Jesus, which are remnants of a primitive, unscientific worldview. Therefore, the belief in Jesus "as a visitant from a supernatural realm who performed wonders" is, for Holloway, merely "a scheme of interpretation, a way of responding to events that was congruent with a particular stage of understanding and development" (Holloway 2001, 131). A new interpretation is, as stated before, consistent with Tillich's idea of breaking the myths. In the case of Jesus' resurrection, we cannot know what really happened, but we can, as Holloway insists, assess the effects of that presumed event on others:

> The people who had deserted Jesus in fear and fled from his dying, somewhere found the courage to proclaim the meaning of his life; and that transformation, that turnaround, is what we mean by resurrection. I would say that the resurrection of Jesus is best understood, best used, as a symbol or sign of the human possibility of transformation. And that transformation can be experienced at both the personal and the social level; and one can lead to another (Holloway 2001, 140).

Understanding Jesus' resurrection from the dead as an event of cosmic significance with absolute soteriological implications is only logical in the context of the traditional view of the fallen state of humanity. For Holloway, this is yet another myth to be broken. This "theology of death" or "theology of anxiety," as Holloway defines it, merely produces fear of hell that, in turn, allows "guardians of the myth"

to manipulate others' religious feelings. Discarding sin and hell, Holloway simultaneously discards soteriology and eschatology: "Jesus will not return on the clouds to inaugurate a reign of righteousness on earth. The messianic hope, whether Jewish or Christian, understood as historic prediction or expectation, has clearly and repeatedly been falsified" (Holloway 2001, 154). But myths should be broken, not abandoned. Since Johannes Weiss, no serious theologian has denied that Jesus understood his messianic mission in eschatological terms. This is not a problem for Holloway, since Jesus would surely be a man of his culture, meaning that we should break the myth Jesus himself believed in. Thus, the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed "is just as world-denying as the theology of death, but the world it denies is not this world as such, the only world we know, but the usurpation of it by the forces of evil and injustice that claim it as their own" (Holloway 2001, 249). The "opera" of eschatology, if we want to enjoy it today, must not reflect the hope for eternal life (which is unscientific) but the longing of the oppressed for justice: "The enduring value of apocalyptic is that it expresses radical discontent with the world as it is, so it can be used in the creatively subversive way that is essential if societies are not to be dominated and exploited by those who control the system and make sure they benefit from it" (Holloway 2001, 191–192).

It is obvious that Holloway was inspired by Marx. For him, Marx is "the last of the prophets" (Holloway 2001, 206), a man who, although "a lousy therapist," deserves our praise because "his diagnosis of human social pathology is still powerful and searching" (Holloway 2001, 207). We might say that, due to his appreciation of Marx, Holloway was "woke" even before this postmodernist movement was in its infancy. Since his life mission was the struggle for the rights of women and homosexuals in the Anglican Communion, Holloway's "Christology" is unsurprisingly reminiscent of the "woke" social justice warfare. Holloway's Jesus wanted to "build up the fragmented morale of a broken people, and to persuade them to live a life of resistance to the system that oppressed them, *by acting as if it had no real authority over them*. He followed the path of *organic* resistance, the building of a community that would strengthen the weak in their struggle against their dominators" (Holloway 2001, 205). For all familiar with real social and religious discrimination, such as the situation of the Indian Dalits (untouchables) who even in Christian churches have no right to stand beside members of higher castes, this message is truly inspiring. Christianity did proclaim the final justice in the eschatological Kingdom of God, but it also showed a strong desire to relieve the sufferings of the oppressed in this world. Holloway, nevertheless, does not allow the coexistence of hopes for eschatological and worldly justice. He is quite aware of the implications of the abandonment of eschatology and is even supportive of that enterprise since it would represent a final blow to the malevolent "theology of anxiety." The conclusion is simple: "What is left of Christianity should be the practice of the kind of love that subverts the selfishness of power, whether it is the subtle power of spiritual or the brutal power of political institutions" (Holloway 2001, 197). Even if God is dead and Jesus has been stripped of his messianic cloak, this subversive love is for Hollo-

way somehow still Christian, although we (and presumably Holloway himself) are left wondering what makes it different from any other non-Christian notion of love.

Conclusion

There is no significant distinction between Holloway's "theology" and Dawkins' anti-theology. In both cases, the nonexistence of God is an a priori fact, the only (slight) difference being Dawkins' cynical usage of Jesus as a "meme" for spreading "dumb but useful" niceness and Holloway's attempt to transform Jesus into a social justice warrior. In the end, both Dawkins and Holloway practically return to Ritschl's notion of the ethical and worldly Kingdom of God, i.e., the kingdom of niceness or social justice, as a final result of demythologizing the Messiah. Any critique of this idea from the standpoint of traditional Christianity is predictable and thus unnecessary. One does not need to be an especially educated theologian to notice how the entire process of liberal theology's demythologization, from Ritschl's Cultural Protestantism to Dawkins' cultural Christianity, reanimates ancient Christological heresies. The critique would be pointless since none of these authors take traditional Christian doctrines seriously; for all of them, the messianic and divine nature of Jesus' proclamation is a remnant of the long-dead culture, the preservation of which is outrageous in the eyes of a modern observer.

The only valid critique of liberal Christian theology and its outcomes must include the point of consistency. When these authors write about modern humanity's cultural inability to accept incarnation, resurrection, and other miracles, why do most of them still think that this modern man would be inclined to preserve the idea of God? The fact that Ritschl, Bultman, and Tillich indeed retain the belief in the existence of God while downplaying or rejecting the messianic aspects of Jesus is the main reason why we compared the evolution of demythologization to the process of grief. Denial and bargaining are the initial and middle stages of facing the inevitability of death, and it is quite clear that the mentioned authors understand that God, transcendent or immanent, is dead for their archetypal modern man. But Holloway is immune to this critique; in his case, the final acceptance of God's death is evident. The same would apply to Kaufman if he did not try to replace God with the notion of creativity, which is somehow still deserving of religious and theological appreciation. Holloway, however, has no need for this kind of replacement. The abandonment of God and Jesus' messianic status is final, entailing the rejection of traditional Christian religion and a full turn to humanity. He is, in other words, far more consistent in applying demythologization to Christianity than his liberal counterparts, while the fact that his conclusions are acceptable to an atheist like Dawkins justifies our initial proposal: liberal or cultural Christianity, when consistent, leads to atheism.

There are, of course, many problems with the starting point of liberal theology that undermine the entire process of demythologization. The assumption that modern, scientifically minded humanity simply cannot accept the possibili-

ty of God's interventions in this world is probably best understood as the projection of liberal theologians' inner crisis: torn between their loyalty to the Christian message and an equally strong loyalty to the scientific worldview, they seem to think that modern people will simply abandon Christianity as intrinsically irrational. Even if we overlook the fact that it is precisely liberal theology that most believers find distasteful, we cannot ignore another error in their thinking, which makes them, as Niebuhr noticed, surprisingly similar to the fundamentalists they abhor. The "Christ of culture" model is, in other words, not so different from the contemporary versions of the "Christ against culture" ideology. We find both sides defending cultural assumptions, whether ancient or modern, while subjugating God – who, as both sides claim, should be above all cultures – to their preferred cultural outlook. The only true "victim" of this war is Jesus: "To all this it will be objected that culture is so various that the Christ of culture becomes a chameleon; that the word 'Christ' in this connection is nothing but an honorific and emotional term by means of which each period attaches numinous quality to its personified ideals" (Niebuhr 1956, 107). This is where Tillich's notion of symbols turning into idols seems most appropriate. It would also be appropriate to once again listen to Barth's warning: the only correct way to criticize Feuerbach (and, with him, all representatives of the "Christ of culture" model) is to attack the false assumption that the nature of God is a projection of man's own nature.

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Демитологизација Месије
од Албрехта Ричла до Ричарда Докинса

Резиме: Аутори износе преглед и критику процеса демитологизације хришћанске месијанске идеје у оквиру тзв. „културног хришћанства“. Посматрајући овај процес кроз призму Нибурових модела односа Христа и културе, конкретно модела „Христос културе“, аутори показују како је одбацивање изворног значења Месије и признавање доминантног статуса савременом научном светоназору (чак и у оквиру теологије) временом довело до подударности између закључака либералних теолога попут Ричарда Холовеја и атеиста попут Ричарда Докинса. Кључни моменти овог процеса илустровани су примерима практично кантовске теологије Албрехта Ричла, затим проблемом разумевања мита у мисли Рудолфа Бултмана, Пола Тилиха и Гордона Кауфмана и, на крају, сасвим разводњеном идејом хришћанства некадашњег поглавара Шкотске епископалне цркве Ричарда Холовеја. Ослањајући се на Нибурово промишљање о моделу „Христос културе“, аутори указују на неколико битних недостатака оваквог приступа месијанској идеји и традиционалној теологији уопште, првенствено на проблем доследности: уколико се библијски наратив потпуно сведе на једо погрешно разумевање мита које је неприхватљиво у контексту савремене науке, због чега се, након демитологизације месијанске идеје, задржава и сама идеја о постојању Бога? Борба са унутрашњом недоследношћу модела „Христос културе“ је из тог разлога упоређена са процесом суочавања са смрћу (што би, у случају „културног хришћанства“, била смрт Бога) који је описала Елизабет Киблер-Рос. У финалној критици, аутори се враћају на примедбу коју је Карл Барт упутио Фојербаху и њему сличним теолозима из Ричлове школе: једина адекватна критика у овом случају мора да се односи на лажну претпоставку о Богу као пројекцији људске моралне природе.

Кључне речи: Христос, култура, нови атеизам, културни протестантизам, месијанска идеја.