

EDITORIAL

COMFORTING MYTHS

Harold Barnes Kuhn*

"We reject the comforting myths by which our elders have lived and have rationalized their way of life." So one of the university radicals expressed himself during the melancholy events on major campuses in the late 'sixties. Apart from the merits of the statement in its context, it does lift into prominence certain factors relating to the role of pre-suppositions in human life in general. These elements may prove also to have special significance for those concerned more especially with the life of the mind.

The late Arthur Darby Nock, and more recently Dean Samuel H. Miller, both of revered memory, have analyzed with great insights the element of "myth" and have assessed the supportive role of "mythical" factors, both in society and, as well, in personal living. It goes without saying that the term "myth" is, in its strict usage, a neutral term so far as the factual content of a proposition or a set of propositions is concerned. Granted, this is a technical usage, but the currency of the term cannot be understood apart from general agreement upon some such definition.

In everyday practice, the sentiments which gather about certain terms tend to enlist common loyalties and common sentiments. Concepts, for example, of nation, of flag, or of kinship elicit feelings which are powerful as cohesive forces in group living.

More specifically, however, there are academic myths which are powerful as controlling factors in the course of the intellectual enterprise. These are at least as determinative in theological areas and for theological discussion as in the more general fields of intellectual endeavor. Such "mythology" surfaces prominently in connection with

*Professor of Philosophy of Religion, Asbury Theological Seminary

the now-dominant historically oriented critical methodology, particularly in theology.

Let it be said at once that no literate scholar wishes to hold the critical faculty in suspense, nor to disregard the role of historical research in relation to religious investigation. But this is something vastly different from the conventional two-stage methodology known as the Critical-Historical Method.

The first mythology in this connection centers in the cluster of assumptions respecting the interpretation of first-century documents. It is hypothesized that one may not only discover, almost infallibly, what the writers of (say) the documents of the New Testament intended to say, but also to determine that such meaning must differ radically from the commonly understood meaning of the text. It is assumed that the plain man's understanding is radically other than, e.g., New Testament authors intended. Thus the critical use of the myth.

At a second stage, the Critical-Historical Method operates upon the myth, that the recaptured meaning of early Christian writers (as understood by their own contemporaries) can be reinterpreted, with a minimal margin of error, to the current age. Underlying this, in its theological application, is some generalization concerning "the Word" which seems to be regarded as a free-floating and transcendental entity, essentially incapable of being verbalized in more than the most transient sense. In other words, religious truth cannot be expected to lend itself to modes of expression which conform to the generally used norms of linguistic use.

There are, of course, other root presuppositions which the theological method under discussion accepts and utilizes. Other procedural elements do, of course, belong to it. What is important is that the method as understood, is underlain by isolatable myth-elements. As one has aptly said, the assumption of a purely objective scholarship is itself the major myth of our time.

The statement quoted at the opening of this Editorial speaks of "comforting myths" upon which some persons allegedly rely. The person who uttered it saw one thing clearly, that myths serve more than an ideological purpose. That is to say, they reinforce the ego as well as controlling the mind. They may, it is suggested further, serve to afford a false and foolish sense of security.

This may lead to smugness, to a sense of self-satisfaction which closes the door, not only to self-criticism but to criticism from outside. Certainly every understanding of human personality includes a

recognition of the need for the supportive role of ideational elements. What is open to question is the uncritical dependence upon myths which are either vulnerable to criticisms at the point of validity, or open to the charge of being merely analgesic.