

Articles

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If there is no Religion – L. Kołakowski’s Defence of the Sacred

Part 1

Abstract

This article is an attempt to present the views of the Polish philosopher on the phenomenon of religion. L. Kołakowski devoted almost all his professional life to the issue of religion. He places the area of religious experiences and beliefs within the framework of transcendentalism, one of the basic and mutually exclusive options: “transcendentalism – empiricism”. Empiricism is the sphere of naturalistic views and contents, and their most radical representatives are empirical sciences and philosophies related to them. L. Kołakowski points out that there is no reason for the naturalistic option to exhaust the cognitive content. However, a philosophical attempt to go beyond naturalism in grasp-

ing the Absolute and the self, ends in metaphysical horror. Hence L. Kołakowski points to religious perception as an area that remains non-scientific but this fact does not contradict its value. A special place in L. Kołakowski's analyses is occupied by the anthropological argument under which the biologisation of human existence is unjustified.

Keywords

Absolute, God, subject, the sacred, naturalism, empiricism, transcendentalism, religion, reductionism, truth.

In the book *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation That Sparked an Atheist Revolution*, the following question is asked: “[...] Is there any argument for faith? Any challenge to your atheism that has given you pause? [...] Dennett (laughs): I can't think of any.”¹ The purpose of the remarks presented here is to indicate that indeed there is a challenge to atheism, and that it is quite serious. We will base our reflections on the analyses of the philosopher who devoted almost all his professional life to the problem of religion – L. Kołakowski.² The analyses presented here will be divided into two parts. In the first part, we will focus on the entirety of L. Kołakowski's work spanning over fifty-years, on the

¹ C. Hitchens, R. Dawkins, S. Harris, D. Dennett, *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation That Sparked an Atheist Revolution*, Random House, New York 2019, p. 79.

² Leszek Kołakowski, a Polish philosopher, was born on 23 October 1927 in Radom and died in Oxford on 17 July 2009. He is mainly known from his monumental study *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*. L. Kołakowski was a theoretician whose work encompassed the history of ideas, epistemology, axiology but, above all, reflection on religion. His views evolved from empiricism (naturalism in the form of Marxism) to transcendentalism in which religious positions occupy the main place. L. Kołakowski studied philosophy at the University of Łódź and at the University of Warsaw, where he continued his academic career at the Department of History of Modern Philosophy, as well as at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. His lecture delivered on 21 October 1966, in which he criticised the government of the day with respect to the political, economic, as well as cultural matters, was met with a strong reaction of the authorities; the philosopher was expelled from the Polish United Workers' Party. In 1968, after his participation in the March events, he was deprived of the right to lecture and publish. This forced him to emigrate. During his exile, he taught philosophy at universities in France, Canada and the USA. In 1970, he went to England, where he continued his professional career at the University of Oxford. This was also where his main works were written, especially *Religion. If there is no God...*, Oxford University Press, New York, or *Metaphysical Horror*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford. In the 1990s, L. Kołakowski popularised philosophy in 30 short lectures on its main problems and in the cycle *What Great Philosophers Ask Us About*.

phenomenon of religion, while in the second part we will present polemical remarks. The period of Marxist dogmatism will be omitted, as it has no continuation in the mature analyses of the Polish philosopher.³

The works of L. Kołakowski, with the exception of a very short period of Marxist dogmatism,⁴ could be viewed as an attempt to show that atheism must face serious challenges – atheism understood by the philosopher as an empirical option. The empirical paradigm is identified with broadly understood naturalism and is in contradiction with transcendentalism which preserves the idea of truth and goodness that are irreducible to efficiency or pleasure/pain.⁵ J. Życiński presents a similar distinction.⁶ There is a conflict between the naturalistic (empirical) and the supranaturalistic option (transcendentalism, including religious beliefs), and L. Kołakowski's theoretical effort is an attempt to define the value of the options that are so important in the dispute, that it is impossible to "support both sides at once."

When it comes to the status of science (naturalism), L. Kołakowski's views have not changed since *The Presence of Myth*. Science as a set of constructs in the form of theories can, according to the philosopher, be understood as an extension of biological protective tools transmitted and accumulated in a linguistic form.⁷ Modern science (naturalism) remains a style that has an overwhelming and non-debunkable value.⁸

And yet there is a problem connected with the reasons according to which only the model of explanation applied in empirical sciences is cognitively valuable. What makes the criteria used in modern science define the boundary between results that are cognitively valuable and those that should be rejected?

³ An excellent introduction to this period is the chapter "Wobec marksizmu", J.A. Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit. Leszka Kołakowskiego spory o religię*, Znak, Cracow 1994.

⁴ C. Mordka, *Od boga historii do historycznego Boga. Wprowadzenie do filozofii Leszka Kołakowskiego*, UMCS, Lublin 1997, p. 129.

⁵ L. Kołakowski, *Reprodukcja kulturalna i zapomnianie*, in: *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony i 27 innych kazań*, London 1984, pp. 77, 61.

⁶ J. Życiński, *Transcendencja i naturalizm*, Copernicus Center Press, Cracow 2014, p. 15.

⁷ L. Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu*, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, Wrocław 1994, p. 7; also: L. Kołakowski, *Husserl i poszukiwanie pewności*, transl. by P. Marciszuk, Warsaw 1990, p. 13.

⁸ L. Kołakowski, *Jeśli Boga nie ma... O Bogu, Diabie, Grzechu i innych zmartwieniach tak zwanej filozofii religii*, transl. by T. Baszniak, M. Panufnik, Cracow 1988, pp. 78–79. A similar position is taken by A. Flew in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. by A. Flew and A. MacIntyre, New York 1964, pp. 98–99.

The answer seems trivial. We owe our medicine, technology and inventions to science.⁹ We can describe how a living cell is able to reproduce itself, foresee a solar eclipse, and the most magnificent temples were built on the basis of engineers' calculations, not on their prayers.¹⁰

However, as L. Kołakowski says, no one seriously claims that faith can replace scientific knowledge. The problem is whether all knowledge comes down to what we can justify using scientific methods. The possible answer that these methods lead to effective results, is not a good answer, because the question is precisely whether only cognitive content that is technologically effective, predictive or empirically confirmed, has a cognitive value.

We do not have a theory of cognition that would be indisputable, without assumptions, and not susceptible to future changes – and only such a theory would provide an answer to the question about the ultimate cognitive value of our theorems. At most, we have a certain *consensus omnium*, the consent of a given scientific community, and this consent is always susceptible to change.¹¹

Where does the truth lie, then? What is the truth? L. Kołakowski's understanding of the concept of "truth" is similar to that of E. Husserl and W. Alston. When we ascribe the property of truth to a given statement, we assume that what it states is an actual fact regardless of whether we know it or not, and whether or not we are able to ascertain it.¹²

In such an approach, the effectiveness of science (its prognostic powers and efficacy) cannot, according to the philosopher, be understood as a criterion of truth. This cannot be for a banal reason. It is because theories that postulate the existence of specific beings in the world may be effective or order a large number of phenomena, but sometimes they become forgotten (along with their ontology), which cannot be said about the truth of a given judgement.

According to L. Kołakowski, maintaining the meaning of the concept of truth and its applicability to cognitive results requires accepting the following

⁹ C. Hitchens, R. Dawkins, S. Harris, D. Dennett, *Cztery jeźdźcy apokalipsy. Jak zaczęła się ateistyczna rewolucja?*, Wydawnictwo CiS, Stare Groszki 2019, p. 53.

¹⁰ L. Kołakowski, *Religion. If there is no God... On God, the Devil, Sin and other Worries of the so-called Philosophy of Religion*, New York, Oxford 1982, pp. 79–80.

¹¹ H. Putnam, *What is Realism?*, in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1976), p. 194, transl. by M. Szcubińska.

¹² L. Kołakowski, *Jeśli Boga nie ma....*, p. 85.

reasoning: in order for the content of a judgement to be true at all, there must be an infallible and all-knowing subject thanks to the presence of which the value of judgements will not change, which is a frequent phenomenon in science. In such a mind however, there is no difference between the cognising subject and the object of cognition; otherwise, it would be prone to error. The absolute subject must therefore be all that it knows.¹³

By postulating the absolute subject as a condition for there being sense in speaking about truth, L. Kołakowski obviously realises that this will not allow us to state which sentence is true.¹⁴ But what are the conditions for recognising the existence of the Absolute Mind? According to L. Kołakowski, we have four paths: through the analysis of the Absolute, through investigations into the nature of the self, through the indirect anthropological argument, and through the “religious path.”

Certain situations that are an anthropological constant which generates specific questions are placed by the scholar in the philosophical perspective. Thus, people wonder if our cognitive acts are able to achieve reality itself (and not what is the physiological or psychological genesis of illusion), what is goodness (and not what is “good” for survival), what being identical with something consists (distinguishable from a historical genetic relationship), what is the status of scientific theories; or about the reality of the world we live in.

These are not problems for which we expect to find solutions quickly, and the history of philosophy does not leave much hope here. Neither are they scientific problems – Kuhn’s puzzles solved by scientists. Of course, from the point of view of activities aimed at predicting, manipulating, and explaining physical events, the above anxieties are simply futile. But they are not so from another point of view.

When we experience contingency (i.e. the non-necessity of the existence of ourselves and the world, or more precisely the difference between existence and essence), and realise that justifying something by postulating the existence of beings that are just as contingent is explanatorily empty – then the idea of a non-contingent, necessary being emerges.¹⁵

Thus, in order to explain this contingency, the experience of contingency leads to a being that must exist and is not contingent. However, the importance

¹³ L. Kołakowski, *Jeśli Boga nie ma...*, p. 93.

¹⁴ L. Kołakowski, *Jeśli Boga nie ma...*, p. 94.

¹⁵ L. Kołakowski, *Jeśli Boga nie ma...*, p. 27.

of the Absolute's existence as an explanation of contingency and truth, results in what L. Kołakowski calls *metaphysical horror*. For the Absolute, as a condition of truth and existence *per se*, remains and must remain pure actuality i.e. it does not allow for distinguishing between what it is and what it may be); it is changeless, complete, perfect, timeless and perfectly simple.

Do we understand these terms, however? After all, they are words which have a relatively known meaning (simple, complete, permanent, etc.), but in this form of use their meaning is stretched to the limit. The Neoplatonist Damascius probably went the furthest in refusing to ascribe these notions to the Absolute which are stretched to the limit and when absolutized (absolute simplicity, absolute completeness), cease to mean anything or, as in Hegel, they mean everything and nothing – pure Being and pure Non-Being are the same.¹⁶

One can still try looking at it the other way – look for the intuition of existence and thus reach what really exists in the subject that is, after all, undoubtedly given. L. Kołakowski directly refers to Descartes' theoretical effort, linking its results to existential thought. Descartes points out that *Cogito* can only be expressed in the first person singular and cannot be described using terms such as soul, body, or social roles. Kierkegaard, following Descartes' intuitions, tried to reveal subjectivity as a world that cannot be described in any categories relating to an objective being, and in particular as a kind of "substance". Existence is what I am. There is not much more that can be said.

The theme of the subject, as existentialists perceived it, remains important to L. Kołakowski because it is related to his understanding of time. For if human existence is "temporal", that is, it anticipates and remembers – it is never genuine! The only thing that can be real – because it is timeless – is the Absolute. But in philosophical analyses, like in Damascius, it turns into the Hegelian Nothing. Thus, the possibilities of philosophy are exhausted. It finds the Unconditioned but cannot fill it with intelligible content: it finds existence, but it also has no content. This is *metaphysical horror*.

L. Kołakowski's analyses also include an anthropological perspective. The human subject, unlike other living beings, is able to relate objectively to himself or herself, which results in the fact that all types of "animalistic" qualities of human life acquire a meaning that is other than biological. Thus, death is a common phenomenon, but for humans, acts of anxiety (not fear) modify the topicality of the experience by relating it to the dimension of being-toward-death (*cursus*

¹⁶ L. Kołakowski, *Horror*, pp. 46–47.

ad mortem).¹⁷ L. Kołakowski believes that Love ceases to be only sexual desire and good becomes something other than mere utility.

In the article *Reprodukcja kulturalna i zapominanie (Cultural Reproduction and Forgetfulness)*, the philosopher also draws attention to various styles of expansion of culture. In natural sciences, expansion occurs by recognising as valuable only the newest theories, whereas in the humanities what is present somehow stores historical content, creating different types of invariants.¹⁸

Of course, cultural invariants can always turn out to be only biological invariants, which is objectified today in expansive sociobiological (psycho-evolutionary) theories that are a form of naturalism. Nevertheless, naturalism does not explain how creatures whose needs were limited to finding food, acts of copulation, and protecting themselves from the elements, and which supposedly invented art and religion to better satisfy the necessities of life, for unknown reasons began to value these inventions for themselves. According to the philosopher, cultural invariants are certain standards that define the boundaries of history and anthropology; and renouncing these standards destroys the continuity of human history, and introduces an uncoverable distance between civilisations, epochs or nations by removing the concept of humanity as something meaningless.¹⁹

L. Kołakowski accepts the trans-biological nature of the invariants that determine the fundamental difference between man and animals although, of course, the language in which they are expressed has a historical form.

The philosopher often uses the concept of “additional sense” following the interpretation of hermeneutics, where this additional sense is neither psychological (subjective) nor can it be reduced to what already exists (objective) – the sense that Hegel was probably the first to identify as a separate domain of being!²⁰

Although L. Kołakowski here presents an interpretation of the metaphysical background of hermeneutics, it is hard not to notice that this is a proposal which is entirely consistent with his analyses. L. Kołakowski sees an alternative to this approach in the consistently scientist-image of the world. However, radical philosophical reflection leads to *metaphysical horror* as mentioned/stated

¹⁷ L. Kołakowski, *Śmierć jako własność prywatna*, Znak, Cracow 2021, p. 15.

¹⁸ L. Kołakowski, *Reprodukcja kulturalna i zapominanie*, in: *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony i 27 innych kazań*, London 1984, p. 77.

¹⁹ L. Kołakowski, *Reprodukcja kulturalna i zapominanie*, p. 77.

²⁰ L. Kołakowski, *Reprodukcja kulturalna i zapominanie*, p. 140.

above – in the end, nothing can be said about the Absolute or about the subject (I) itself. But we still, and perhaps above all, have religion which is described by L. Kołakowski as “a socially established cult of eternal reality.”²¹

More precisely, we have many religions, but their source, as L. Kołakowski seems to think, is the same: the specificity of man as a trans-biological being. “Religious ways of perceiving the world, institutions of worship, beliefs, are never born of analytical reasoning and need no ‘proofs’ of their veracity unless they are attacked on rational grounds.”²²

People are initiated into a specific cult and assimilate its language through participation in the life of the community and not through rational persuasion. Faith in God who created the best of all possible worlds, is understood as trust and precedes all reasoning, says L. Kołakowski. But the trust necessary for an act of faith is an act of moral rather than intellectual commitment.²³ The very word “faith” is ambiguous.

One can speak of faith or believing not only in a religious context. I believe someone as long as I have grounds, although unreliable, to make such an act. However, as L. Kołakowski assumes, there are also acts of faith or trust that are fundamentally different in nature – personal in nature. “But personal trust is something different [...] In general, it is not a conviction but the acceptance of another person in toto, without reasons, without the need for justification or calculation.”²⁴

The above sentence is crucial for L. Kołakowski’s understanding of religion, faith and, to some extent, philosophising, if such acts are extra-empirical. In the empirical sense, the philosopher claims, only those behaviour patterns are “given” that provide reasons for predictions, which is sufficient for trust in things. There is, however, the experience of the other as a whole given “[...] directly in [...] nonempirical personal properties, in its freedom, and its absolute Being.”²⁵

Those who do not perform such acts, or do not suppose they make sense, will never “enter” the world of religious faith. However, the believer who embraces

²¹ The problem of defining religion is discussed in detail by W. Cohen, M.E. Sapiro, E. Pine and F.J. Streng. See also: S. Kamiński, Z.J. Zdybicka, *Definicje religii a typy nauk o religii*, “Roczniki Filozoficzne” (1974), XXII, iss. 1, pp. 69–81.

²² L. Kołakowski, *If there is no God...*, p. 59.

²³ L. Kołakowski, *If there is no God...*, p. 31.

²⁴ L. Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, transl. by Adam Czerniawski, the University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1989, p. 45.

²⁵ L. Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*.

religious faith begins to literally see the signs of God in their life and environment. They see them in the same way as the doctor sees that the wound is infected and the physicist sees that a given object is a cathode ray tube.²⁶

Moreover, the language of religion has its own standards of intelligibility. L. Kołakowski refers, among others, to the analyses of Evans Pritchard, who noted that religious language remains particularly specific. For example, the copula “is” has a different meaning from its colloquial usage. For example, one can say that rain is God and a bird is a spirit, but not that God is rain or a spirit is a bird.

The wafer (oblatum) may be Jesus, but Jesus is never the wafer. Christians have never claimed that there is some mysterious chemical transformation of bread into flesh while refusing to accept that the wafer is a kind of reminder. Although Luther stated that “bread is flesh”, he changed the meaning of Jesus’ logion, which did not say “*panis est corpus meum*” but “*hoc est corpus meum*.”²⁷ “Under particular conditions set by religious tradition, signs – rather than represent – simply are what they mean.”²⁸ When explaining the meaning of the Eucharist, Christians do not express themselves metaphorically, they refer to real, although of course empirically unverifiable, events.²⁹

It is, thus, a specific language – the language of the sacred. It is not worse off than the language of physicists or doctors. L. Kołakowski ascribes to this language also and perhaps above all an epistemological sense. This is because when experiencing sacredness, we experience a certain synthesis: participation in the ultimate reality (which does not necessarily refer to a personal God) and at the same time a moral obligation to behave in a particular way.³⁰

When Jesus said that “the truth will set you free,” he did not mean mastering certain skills, like an algorithm that leads to a certain effect.³¹ The experience

²⁶ L. Dupré demands that religious experience be verified in terms that are relevant to that experience: *Ukryty wymiar*, transl. by S. Lewandowska, Cracow 1991, p. 58.

²⁷ There were also explanations based on the idea of substance and the Aristotelian accident, but they never made any empirical sense.

²⁸ L. Dupré, *Ukryty wymiar*, transl. by S. Lewandowska, Cracow 1991, p. 111.

²⁹ The ritual celebration is not only a commemoration: J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Zabawa jako źródło kultury*, transl. by M. Kurecka, W. Wirpsza, Warsaw 1967, p. 30.

³⁰ L. Kołakowski, *If there is no God...*, p. 117.

³¹ L. Kołakowski, *Religion. If there is no God... On God, the Devil, Sin and other Worries of the so-called Philosophy of Religion*, New York, Oxford 1982, p. 145; L. Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony. Esej apologetyczny i sceptyczny*, transl. by D. Zańko, Znak, Cracow 2014, p. 9.

of the sacred is closely related to the concept of taboo, and neither of them falls within the scope of empirical science. Nevertheless, they constitute the quality of “good and bad” which is different from suffering, pain or death, which we know as natural facts.

By breaking a taboo (by sinning), we experience something specific to religious perception. We experience a kind of “decay of the world” which, given the fact that being and good are interchangeable, is according to L. Kołakowski, nothing other than the destruction of being itself. Conversely, doing good, in a religious sense creates being.³²

L. Kołakowski introduces here the idea of *Deus historicus*, God who is “immersed” in the world and who grows or decays with it (as a being). This “immersion” is not a traditional emanationism denied by many theologians, but only an emphasis on the dependence of individuals on God. The philosopher also devotes a great deal of attention to the mystical experience. It is a necessary though elite part of the religious experience.³³

Regardless of the problems posed by the religious approach, L. Kołakowski believes that it is deeply and exclusively human. It allows one “[...] to escape the misery of contingency, to force the door to a kingdom which resists the voracity of time.”³⁴

Of course, for an empirically oriented subject, all of the above “does not make sense”. It cannot. The language of myth, as L. Kołakowski thinks, is a “different world”, the description of which seems to be untranslatable into the language of physical events – it has specific forms of interpreting the connections between phenomena, as well as distinct laws of causality.³⁵ There is no straightforward transition from secular joys and desires to what is at the core of religious life – divine infinity, eternity, the randomness of the world, mystical illumination, and the distinction between good and evil. In conclusion, what does being religious bring into one’s life, what does religion open up the person to, and what, according to L. Kołakowski, does it close the person to?

³² L. Kołakowski, *Jeśli Boga nie ma... O Bogu, Diabie, Grzechu i innych zmartwieniach tak zwanej filozofii religii*, transl. by T. Baszniak, M. Panufnik, Cracow 1988, p. 114; Cf. H.R. Niebuhr, *On the Nature of Faith*, in: *Knowledge and Truth*, London 1962, pp. 94–95; R. Bultmann, *Gnosis*, English translation, in: *Bible Key Words*, vol. 2, New York 1948, p. 50.

³³ L. Kołakowski, *If there is no God...*, p. 104.

³⁴ L. Kołakowski, *If there is no God...*, p. 184.

³⁵ L. Kołakowski, *If there is no God...* (Cracow), p. 181; J. Tischner, *Perspektywy hermeneutyki. Semantyka symbolu religijnego*, in: *Myślenie według wartości*, Cracow 1982.

First of all, religion determines what the world is and what is the purpose of being human (the purpose – not the cause!). Religion outlines the existing plan of salvation, giving meaning to life.³⁶ According to the religious message, man as such is so irreparably weak that certain sources of suffering are somehow inscribed in human nature. At the same time, it satisfies the need to escape the poverty of “being historical”, from randomness, and points to what is unchangeable.

It is thanks to religious approaches that the idea of good (bad) different from empirically experienced suffering, pain or pleasure makes sense. Without such an idea, nihilism can always be victorious.³⁷ Religion, with its idea of the taboo, calls for not bringing chaos into the world (in the ontological sense). Without the Absolute, the idea of (transcendental) truth makes no sense, and if there is no God, everything is allowed. Participation in the religious order enables personal relationships, in contrast to those based on expected profit. By experiencing its own fragility, the human mind opens up to the perception of the environment as contingent, and contingency as such can only be explained by the acceptance of a non-contingent being.

The very idea of proving one's faith is self-contradictory. Since it is based on personal trust, it would be contradictory to legitimise such trust. Religion (and some philosophies) arise as a result of the specificity of being human. And the human cannot be reduced to a collection of atoms, nor determined by the imperative of survival and reproduction. As a result of this situation, people have to be trans-empirical.

On the other hand, L. Kołakowski says that the believer cannot rationally explain their view of the world, is unable to say why the self-sufficient Absolute created the world, and how to understand that God is both the Absolute and a person. The believer also does not know how God interfered with evolutionary processes by modifying natural selection, nor how to reconcile God's grace and the blind laws of nature. Religion also does not know why nature produces so much suffering without any apparent need.

³⁶ “Sacrum jest sensem, Bóg jest sensem, nawet śmierci.” B. Piwowarczyk, *Odczytać Kołakowskiego, Problem Boga, człowieka, religii, Kościoła...*, Edycja Paulińska, Częstochowa 1992, p. 133.

³⁷ It is worth emphasising, as J. Kłoczowski noted, that embedding ethics in the experience of the sacred does not have to lead to a repressive form of religion. J.A. Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit. Leszka Kołakowskiego spory o religię*, Znak, Cracow 1994, p. 299.

The believer should admit that the contents of their faith are not and cannot be a scientific hypothesis. Thus, we have two main options: empiricism and transcendentalism. As soon as we make a choice, a given option will immediately appear to be more valuable.³⁸

The choice between these two options, however, is not arbitrary or random, according to L. Kołakowski. Obviously, one is not guided by previously acquired knowledge about the advantages or superiority of one over the other. Usually, the choice is made by given civilisations, i.e. the subject follows the trends characteristic for the period in which they live and theorise. But, according to L. Kołakowski, the basic principle is the same – the act of faith always precedes understanding (*credo ut intelligam*).³⁹

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³⁸ L. Kołakowski, *Jeśli Boga nie ma...*, p. 221.

³⁹ On the dialectic of decision and grace in the act of faith. Cf. B. Bultmann *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Tübingen 1958, pp. 325–326.

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