

**Bonhoeffer's Concept of the Weakness of God  
and Religionless Christianity in a World Come of Age**

**Pierre-André Duchemin  
Faculty of Religious Studies  
McGill University, Montreal  
August 2009**

**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of  
Graduate Studies and Research of  
McGill University in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the degree of Master of Arts**

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## Abstract

This study focuses on three basic issues raised in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945): (1) The “weakness of God,” which goes hand in hand with the “scandal of the cross”; (2) Freeing Christianity from the concept of religion; (3) The “world come of age”: its relevance for believers and non-believers alike.

An enlightened critique of religion in no way equates joining the ‘death of God’ school; and the current demise of the visible church does not herald the downfall of Christian faith. The conclusion expresses the firm hope that a world shaped by two thousand years of Jesus’ influence will find the basic orientation it needs for a renewed Christianity.

## Résumé

Cette étude axée sur l’héritage de Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) examine trois questions : (1) la « faiblesse de Dieu », étroitement reliée au “scandale de la croix” ; (2) le christianisme libéré du concept religieux ; (3) le « monde parvenu à maturité » et sa pertinence pour le croyant et pour le non-croyant.

Une critique éclairée de la religion ne signifie pas qu’il faille joindre le mouvement dit de la « mort de Dieu », et l’actuelle pauvreté de l’église visible n’annonce en rien la fin de la foi chrétienne. La conclusion exprime l’espoir qu’un monde modelé sur l’enseignement de Jésus pendant deux millénaires trouvera les réponses fondamentales dont il a besoin dans un christianisme renouvelé.

## Acknowledgements

I thank Professor Maurice Boutin, with whom I first shared my concerns over the issue of whether Christianity was a religion or not. Also, it seemed to me that the contemporary world is not so indifferent to God as it pretends to be. Dr. Boutin immediately brought to my attention the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), a Lutheran pastor and University scholar. From that moment on I have been relentlessly pursuing the subject of religionless Christianity in a world come of age.

Dr. Boutin helped me clarify and rephrase concepts difficult to express. I am thankful for his patience as he read over my few drafts before it was delivered in its present state. The orientation this work has taken reflects, of course, my own queries and concerns.

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## Abbreviations<sup>\*</sup>

BWCA	P. Vorkink II, ed., Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age, 1968.
CoB	Tillich, The Courage to Be, 1980.
CC	Bonhoeffer, Christ the Center, 1966.
CD	Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, 1996.
CUPP	Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, 1992.
DBTC	Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1970.
DBTR	Dumas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Theologian of Reality, 1971.
DG	Vahanian, The Death of God, 1961.
E	Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 2005.
EpR	Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, 1933.
FeT	Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 2005.
HCT	Tillich, A History of Christian Thought, 1968.
JeCM	Bultmann, Jesus Christ and Mythology, 1958.
KBTF	Barth, Karl Barth, Theologian of Freedom, 1991.
KaM	Bartsch, ed., Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate, 1964.
LPP	Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, 1971.
MLKa	King, Jr., A Testament of Hope, 1986.
MLKb	King, Jr., The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., vol. 3, 1992.
NOG	Vahanian, No Other God, 1966.
NRS	Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, 1965.
TeF	Bonhoeffer, Testament to Freedom, 1995.
TNC	Altizer, Toward a New Christianity, 1967.
WE	<i>Widerstand und Ergebung</i> , 1957.
WoCA	Smith, ed., World Come of Age, 1967.
WWI	Vahanian, Wait Without Idols, 1964.

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<sup>\*</sup> See also bibliography. – Other abbreviations are indicated in Siegfried M. Schwertner, *International Glossary of Abbreviations for Theology and Related Subjects*. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992.

## Introduction

In *Letters and Papers from Prison* Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) raised the question, “Who is Christ for us today?” (LPP 279) With that question in mind, this study concentrates on three basic issues raised in Bonhoeffer’s writings. The first is the ‘weakness of God,’ which goes hand in hand with the ‘scandal of the cross’ as Christianity sees it so graphically depicted in Isaiah 53. The second focuses on the claim that Christianity was originally meant as a counter-religious movement, and that it should have remained ‘non-religious.’ The third addresses the issue of the contemporary world viewed as ‘world come of age.’

1. The weakness of God - We open the discussion on how the ‘power’ of God was perceived in the biblical world before and during Jesus’ time. God’s self-revelation in the Jewish Bible can understandably confuse a reader who pays close attention to the texts. What was then God’s method of self-revelation? The texts bear witness to multiple demonstrations of God’s overwhelming power (e.g. Ex 19: 16; Dt 4: 34), but they also hint at the ‘way of weakness’ as a means to overcome inimical forces (e.g. 1 Samuel 2: 4; Isa 40: 29; 1 Kings 19: 12; Judges 7: 1-7).

Then follows a more in-depth presentation of how Jesus’ advent has transformed our traditional perception of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues that God’s choice of weakness is the only valid option since the advent of Jesus the Christ.

His claim is that the weakness of God in Jesus is *the* source of God’s true power. “The meaning of history is tied up with an event which takes place in the depth and hiddenness of a man who ended on the cross. The meaning of history is found in the humbled Christ,” he says (TeF 118).

It is in this context that one comes across what some call ‘Bonhoeffer’s paradox’ (e.g. van Buren) expressed in the following passage taken from Bonhoeffer’s letter dated 16 July 1944:

The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross.

He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8: 17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering. (LPP 360)

According to Bonhoeffer, Christ's love for the world (Jn 3: 16)—and consequently his followers' love for the world and their authentic freedom “before God, with God” and at the same time “without God” (LPP 360)—implies, even demands weakness and vulnerability (see Mk 15: 34; 1 Co 13). It is in weakness that God and his people conquer and reign (see Mt 26: 53-56; 1 Co 1: 18-31; 2 Co 12: 9; Col 2: 15).

“Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” (LPP 279) For Bonhoeffer this is a mere rhetorical question, when from the confinement of his cell he puts it to his friend Eberhard Bethge (1909-2000). He had his answer: Christ is first and foremost the “man for others” (LPP 381-2; see E 275). This way of being really is the Christian earmark (see LPP 381 and E 241). Central to Bonhoeffer's theology is the idea that “Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving” (LPP 349). In his biography on Bonhoeffer Bethge writes:

Bonhoeffer regards the characteristics of religion [...] as failing to recognize not only the presence, but also the person of Jesus. The basic thing is always simply him and the way he is present to us: 1. he, Jesus, does not call for any acceptance of preliminary systems of thought and behaviour; 2. he is anti-individualist, and, in a totally exposed and unprotected way, the man for others; 3. he does not pray as if he made part payment by instalments, but with his life; 4. he turns away from the temptation of the *deus ex machina*; 5. he turns away from the privileged classes and sits down with the outcasts; and 6. he liberates men to find their own responsible answer to life through his own powerlessness, which is both shaming and utterly convincing. (DBTC 781)

This perspective on Jesus and his followers distances the church from religion (see E 97), since no religion has ever fostered teleological realization through ‘the will to weakness’ on the part of both its god(s) and its followers. Even when Paul does invoke power, he emphasizes that it is “in weakness” that God's “power is made perfect” (2 Co 12: 9). The point is to determine, as André Dumas suggests in his in-depth study of Bonhoeffer's theology, “how to live paradoxically before God without God, with God though apart from God; how to identify oneself with the reality of the world while still holding on to the identity of faith in the reality of God; how to be faithful, with God, to the reality of the world without God” (DBTR 165).

2. Religionless Christianity - In his extensive International Bibliography on Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1998) Ernst Feil listed 3907 articles and books on Bonhoeffer. In 2009 the debate is as lively as ever in academic circles, and an increasing number of the general public is made aware of it as the issue of religion versus 'religionlessness' gets more and more publicized.

We hear from Paul Tillich (1886-1965; see HCT 537), and also from Bonhoeffer (LPP 280, 286, 328) that Karl Barth (1886-1968) was the first contemporary theologian to focus on the incompatibility between religion and Christianity. The second chapter of the present study looks at Barth's commentary on Paul's *Letter to the Romans* and its relevance to Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer's defence of the concept of a "religionless Christianity" (LPP 280-282) is a source of confusion for communities unfamiliar with having to distinguish between genuine faith in God on the one hand, and religious dogmas and practices on the other; between religion as 'power' on the one hand, and the way of Christ on the other (see LPP 361, and also Mk 10: 42-45).

3. A world come of age - In this context, the general perception that Christianity is 'just another religion' needs to be corrected if Christianity is to be relevant in a 'world come of age' that rejects religion. This coming of age is relevant to both believers and unbelievers alike. Bonhoeffer's use of the expression 'world come of age' (LPP 326-9) in the context of Christ's role today raised Karl Barth's suspicions in 1956: "There can be no counting seriously on a 'world come of age,'" Barth protested, "but only with one that thinks itself of age (and daily proves that that is just what it is not)" (KBTF 61). This issue is being discussed in the third chapter.

Bonhoeffer made us aware of the fact that the contemporary world is ready for a non-religious interpretation (see LPP 328) of the "wider human problems of death, suffering, and guilt. It is now possible to find, even for these questions, human answers that take no account whatever of God. In point of fact, people deal with these questions without God [...] and it is simply not true to say that only Christianity has the answers to them" (LPP 311).



Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer did not have time to work out the consequences of his insightful view; he died in prison on 9 April 1945, at the early age of 39. He repeatedly confessed to his friend Bethge that the answers eluded him: "How this religionless Christianity looks, what form it takes, is something that I am thinking about a great deal. [...] It may be that on us in particular, midway between the East and the West, there will fall a heavy responsibility" (LPP 282). "I am thinking about how we can reinterpret in a 'worldly' sense [...] the concepts of repentance, faith, justification, rebirth, and sanctification" (LPP 286-7). "You now ask so many important questions on the subjects that have been occupying me lately, that I should be happy if I could answer them myself. But it's all very much in the early stages; and, as usual, I'm being led on more by an instinctive feeling for questions that will arise later than by any conclusions that I've already reached about them" (LPP 325). "If you want of your own accord to send [...] extracts from my letters, you can, of course, do so. I would not do it myself as yet because you are the only person with whom I venture to think aloud, as it were, in the hope of clarifying my thoughts" (LPP 346). "I am only gradually working my way to the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts; the job is too big for me to finish just yet" (LPP 359). This 'blurred vision' nonetheless left a deep impression on scholars who either simply comment on it or struggle to understand it.<sup>1</sup>

One thing we can be certain of is that to the very end Bonhoeffer remained anchored to his belief in Jesus' divine nature, place, and role in the world.

In this study, little sympathy for 'religion' is expressed. Some fear that taking one's distance from religion means joining the 'death of God' movement or the ranks of Christianity's opponents. It will become clear that the present study does not share that view.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance E. Bethge, DBTC 766-7; W. David Hopper 1975, 20, 27-28; R. Winling 1983; Gregor Smith in WoCA 20; Karl Barth in WoCA 90-91; Peter Vorkink in BWCA ix-x; Paul van Buren in BWCA 2; André Dumas, DBTR 237; Richard Weikart 1997, 57.

## CHAPTER 1

### 1. The Weakness of God

Two modes of God's self-revelation in the Old Testament appear to be in contradiction. On the one hand, God's show of power subdues and even terrifies the people: "On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled" (Ex 19: 16). Again and again victory is secured through direct and powerful divine interventions: "Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?" (Dt 4: 34)

On the other hand there are cases where victory relates more to a paradoxical concept of weakness: "The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength" (1Sa 2: 4). It is "to the weary that he gives strength, and he increases the power of the weak" (Is 40: 29). In the book of Judges we find the Lord addressing Gideon in the following terms: "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people: 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" As a consequence, twenty-two thousand men left the troops, while ten thousand remained. But they are still too numerous, and Gideon's contingent is gradually reduced to a mere three hundred, with whose help Gideon finally overcomes the enemy (Jdg 7: 2 ff.). Our final example is taken from the first book of Kings where Elijah flees from King Ahab and the wrathful Jezebel. The prophet takes refuge in a cave at Horeb. "Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. [An earthquake followed, but] the Lord was not in the earthquake. [Then a fire erupted, but] the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave" (1Kg 19: 12).

Except for the reference to the *gentle whisper*—which could be interpreted as weakness—it is obvious that in all these cases the authors speak of God summoning his *servants* to ‘put on weakness’, as it were; only after they do so does God intervene on their behalf. There is no convincing witness in the Jewish Bible to God himself ‘putting on’ weakness.

### 1.1 Jesus as Divine Paradigm

It is not therefore in the previous dispensation but in the new that Bonhoeffer’s concept of the weakness of God finds its most convincing source. Until the advent of Jesus and his own paradigmatic life and death, the key to the interpretation of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53 was missing. It is God’s “rejection of God on the cross of Jesus Christ” (E 158, see n. 51) that brings it to light. The New Testament places before the world the following paradox: whereas the Jewish Testament suggests victory through weakness for some of its human heroes, God now demands and expects it *from God himself*. Bonhoeffer writes,

Ecce homo—behold the *one whom God has judged!* [italics in text] The figure of misery and of pain, this is how the reconciler of the world appears, upon whom humanity’s guilt has fallen, pushing Christ into shame and death under God’s judgment. [...] Only by executing God’s judgment on God can peace grow between God and the world, between human and human. [...] Only as judged by God can human beings live before God; only the crucified human being is at peace with God. (E 88)

The execution of the plan aimed at final victory falls on the shoulders of the “very God [... who is] of one substance with the Father,”<sup>2</sup> the incarnate God himself. Worldly power and strength are excluded; the comforting support expected of his disciples, both moral and physical, is denied as he watches them flee the scene of his arrest; and a few moments later the most eloquent among them refuses to admit he even knows him (Mt 26: 56, 69-75). The suffering Servant of Isaiah (chap. 52: 13 ff. and chap. 53) is revealed

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<sup>2</sup> *The Creed*. The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Anglican Church of Canada Together with the Psalter as It Is Appointed to Be Said or Sung in Churches (The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 1962): p. 71.

as the suffering incarnation of God himself (Ph 2: 6 ff). Were it not for Christianity's declaration of faith in the divine nature of Jesus, the weakness of God as a means to victory would be inconceivable.

God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8: 17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering. (LPP 360-1)

Bonhoeffer insists that Christians walk in these steps: "Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world. [...] He must share in God's sufferings. [...] It is [...] participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. [...] allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ,<sup>3</sup> into the messianic event, thus fulfilling Isa. 53" (LPP 361-2).

The burden borne by God in the Son will be made manifest even in his bodily traits. It is as if weakness in the divine archetype could not be fully realized unless even his physical appearance was not below popular expectations. Our 'strong' heroes are often endowed with an impressive physical stature (see Saul in 1Sa 9: 2), eye-catching beauty (David in 1Sa 16: 12) or bodily strength (Samson in Jdg 14: 6). By contrast the Messiah "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (see all of Isaiah 53: 2b -12).

Victory is found not only in humanity's submission to the way of weakness (2Co 12: 9-10) but also in divine submission to it (Ph 2: 6 ff). Paul makes literal use of this expression when he says: "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1Co 1: 15). Facing his arrest in Gethsemane, Jesus asked, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then would the Scriptures be ful-

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<sup>3</sup> The expression 'the way of Jesus Christ' is at the origin of 'the way of weakness' found throughout this paper.

filled, that say it must happen in *this way?*" (Mt 26: 53-54). *This way* is that of surrender: turn the other cheek; hand over your cloak to one who demands your tunic; walk two miles if forced to walk one (Mt 5: 39-41). Christianity thus teaches that ultimately the Father required of himself, through the Son, that which he once required of his former servants, and that he still requires today: Be weak and I'll be strong.

## 1.2 The Sword

Bereft of worldly power and strength—even of physical beauty if the text is to be taken literally—the Messiah is left with his Word and his Love. Even where traditionally the church has invoked the overwhelming power of Christ's sword, one of steel was not intended. The traditional interpretation of the "sharp sword with which he strikes down the nations" (Rev 19: 15) needs reviewing in many quarters of Christianity. "He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the 'Word of God,'" writes the Patmos exile (Rev 19: 13). In a literal sense, the ordeal Jesus went through at the hands of the Roman soldiers and his subsequent crucifixion are sufficient to explain the grim spectacle. Yet there is more, for this grim spectacle also takes readers back to Psalm 58, where they encounter a parallel vision. Here it is the righteous that "bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked" (Ps 58: 10). To anyone who takes Jesus seriously—even as "the wrath of the Lamb" is fully contemplated (Rev 6: 16)—it seems unimaginable that he, the Prince of Peace (Is 9: 6; Ac 10: 36), should take positions so contrary to his own teachings, at the same time as avoiding the demands he makes on his followers who, as Bonhoeffer says, "preserve community when others destroy it. They renounce self-assertion and are silent in the face of hatred and injustice. That is how they overcome evil with good" (CD 2001, 108). Indeed, the Messiah's followers are called upon to conform to the divine paradigm (see Mt 24: 9; Lk 21: 12; Jn 15: 20; 16: 2-3; 2Ti 3: 12; Rev 2: 10). How then does Bonhoeffer resolve this apparent contradiction?

In a chapter taken from his collected works entitled *Vengeance and Deliverance*, Bonhoeffer contrasts the wrath of God with the innocence of Christ. In front of his class at Finkenwalde (1937) Bonhoeffer quoted and expounded on this same Psalm 58: "Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O Lord, the fangs of the lions! [...] The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the

wicked” (vv. 6 & 10). For Bonhoeffer humanity’s “spiritual indolence, [...] open or inward disobedience, profound lack of discipline in our everyday lives under God’s Word” (TeF 278) bear consequences that in and of themselves *constitute* the wrath of God. God’s hand is raised “to afflict us with our own sin.” The affliction of humanity’s own sin is “God’s righteous punishment which strikes and humbles us sinful people” (TeF 278). In this psalm, Bonhoeffer argues, Jesus plays the role of *innocence engaged in prayer*. It is Christ’s very innocence that, in contrast to humanity’s guilt, exercises judgment: “The innocence of Christ steps before the world and accuses it. We do not accuse it, Christ does.” Bonhoeffer sees Christ as that “perfect innocence look[ing] into this abyss of evil. [...] Innocence alone knows that everything has to happen here just as it does happen. [...] At the same time, innocence gains complete peace of mind in this abyss of knowledge. It has to be so, and it does not change” (TeF 279). Bonhoeffer joins three passages together - Ps 58: 10, Rev 19: 13, and Rev 6: 16 - to make his point:

Whoever recoils from this expression of joy at God’s revenge and the blood of the godless still doesn’t know what happened on the cross of Christ. God’s righteous vengeance on the godless one has already come over us. The blood of the godless one has already flowed. God’s death sentence on the wicked is pronounced. God’s justice is fulfilled. That has taken place in the cross of Jesus Christ. [...] “The righteous will rejoice when they see such vengeance; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.” Is not the true delight in God? Is not that the joy of the righteous at the triumph of God’s justice on the cross, joy at Christ’s victory? God’s vengeance has died and the blood of the godless one in whom we bathe ourselves gives us a share in God’s victory; the blood of the godless one has become our redemption, it cleanses us of all our sin. That is the miracle. ¶ Thus the image of the bloodstained Saviour emerges from the midst of this psalm, the Saviour who died for the godless, struck down by God’s revenge, for our salvation. (TeF 281-2)

Thus, Bonhoeffer affirms that “the blood of the godless one” is both that of Jesus and that of his enemies: “God made him who had no sin *to be sin*” (2Co 5: 21). Both were shed on the cross: “What happened to and in Christ has happened to all of us” (E 88). “No one is excluded. Christ bore all of God’s vengeance for everyone,” Bonhoeffer says (TeF 282). Christians, their scriptures say, have been crucified and they have died with Jesus (Ro 6: 6; Gal 2: 20 & 5: 24). “Here human glory has come to its final end in the image of the beaten, bleeding, spat-upon face of the crucified” (E 158). The believer “found

his life when he was justified by Christ in Christ's *own way*. He lost his life to Christ, and now Christ became his life. [...] Christian life is life in Christ." (E 149; italics added)

The relation the *sword* has to the *word* is made clear in the Christian scriptures: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4: 12-13). Commenting on this verse 12, Bonhoeffer says that "Only as Word is the Spirit also power and action. God's Word creates and destroys. [...] As Word it destroys and creates the truth" (CC 49). What lays at the disposal of Jesus' followers bears the same trademarks: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace at their feet; the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God (see Eph 6: 10-17).

Through love and the word the Christian Messiah wages battle. A war waged by Jesus, were it no different from a re-enactment of humanity's conquests and struggles for hegemony or vengeance or domination could never bring peace and stability. World history has confirmed time and again that inflicting bloodshed, death, and tears on others leads to more of the same. The cycle must be stopped; and the incarnate God teaches the world how. Reciprocity is implied in the word, "All who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Mt 26: 52). The new way then is: he who "takes on the cross" (Mt 10: 38) "triumphs by the cross" (Col 2:15).

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) contributes to the debate when he says, "The glorification of God's name [...] begins with exaltation by crucifixion" (TNC 180). The glorification of the Father is dependent on the simultaneous humiliation-exaltation of the Son: "At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, *to the glory of God the Father*" (Ph 2: 10-12). The real scandal to the Greeks, to the Jews (1Co 1: 20 ff.), and to the rest of our pragmatic and rational world is this: divine honour is given to one humble carpenter-preacher hanging on a cross in apparently total defeat and who, from that accursed perspective in time and space, claims victory. Jesus said, "when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself." Being *lifted up*, as Jesus meant it, was not a reference to worldly honours nor even, as one would think, to his resurrection and ascension:

“He said this to show *the kind of death* he was going to die" (Jn 12: 32-33). This ignominious position was and is for the glorification of the Father's name. "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (Jn 12: 27-28). We always come back to this paradox: *the way of weakness equals ultimate victory*, Bonhoeffer says:

Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. (LPP 361)

In an essay entitled *Bonhoeffer's Paradox*, Paul Van Buren (1924-1998) wrote,

Bonhoeffer's God was powerful, but it was that odd sort of power that takes the form of weakness. [...] God's power according to Bonhoeffer was in fact the power of powerlessness. He was a weak God, and that is exactly what Bonhoeffer liked about him. [...] Bonhoeffer thought there was much to be said for what weakness could accomplish in this world. (BWCA 7-8)

In 1931, about twelve years before writing his now famous *Letters*, Bonhoeffer gave a lecture to American students on Karl Barth's *Theology of Crisis*. The lecture is indicative of his earlier acquaintance with the concept of the 'weakness of God':

But of course, who is willing to see in these facts God's Word? Who is not offended by the foolishness of such a claim? God revealed in the poor life of a suffering man; God revealed on the cross; God revealed in the depth of history, in sin and death; is this a message worth hearing by a wise man, who really would be able to invent a nobler and prouder God? Karl Barth finds the Bible full of the testimony of the awkwardness and foolishness of God's revelation. [...] faith which sees God coming most closely to man where a man hanging on the cross dies in despair with the loud cry: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' [...] This is the real world of biblical faith, which sees God's work not on the top, but in the depth of mankind. And because faith sees God in Christ, it sees God, the same God of Christ, in man's own life, in man's own sin, weakness and death as judgment and as grace. (NRS 363-4)

It is not in this light that Jesus has usually been presented in the past two thousand years. The sort of power the Jesus of the gospels wields in hagiography bears little resemblance to his asking for the warmth of a human presence at his moment of agony (Mt



26: 38-40). That is also part and parcel of the scandal of the cross (Gal 5: 11). Bonhoeffer wrote a poem that causes discomfort in the hearts of many:

Men go to God when they are sore bestead, / Pray to him for succour, for his  
peace, for bread, / For mercy for them sick, sinning, or dead; / All men do so,  
Christian and unbelieving. ¶ Men go to God when he is sore bestead. / Find  
him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread, / Whelmed under weight of  
the wicked, the weak, the dead; / Christians stand by God in his hour of griev-  
ing. ¶ God goes to every man when sore bestead, / Feeds body and spirit with  
his bread; / For Christians, pagans alike he hangs dead, / And both alike for-  
giving. (LPP 348)

Under Bonhoeffer's influence, Dorothee Sölle (1929-2003), a Christian scholar and social activist, wrote the following poem in which she appears to be dangerously going further than Bonhoeffer,

He needs you / that's all there is to it / without you he's left hanging / goes up  
in dachau's [*sic*] smoke / is sugar and spice in the baker's hands / gets reval-  
ued in the next stock market crash / he's consumed and blown away / used up  
/ *without you // Help him / that's what faith is* / he can't bring it about / his  
kingdom / couldn't then couldn't later can't now / not at any rate without you  
/ and that is his irresistible appeal. (Sölle 1977, 7; italics added)

More than Bonhoeffer's, Sölle's lines make Christians, and triumphalists in particu- lar, very uncomfortable. Yet her lines find support in Jesus' parable of the *Sheep and the Goats* (Mt 25: 41-46). A paraphrase of this parable could go like this: When you let one of these little children go up in Dachau's smoke, it is I who, without your protest— perhaps even with your approval—goes up in it. Bonhoeffer clearly understands the point of the parable of the *Sheep and the Goats*: "People can encounter Christ only as a person in relationship with other people" (TeF 112). The word 'only' is capital. Jesus himself finds his true meaning as "the man for others" (LPP 382). Commenting on Bonhoeffer, Van Buren says, "Jesus as 'the man for others,' the behavior of Jesus within the biblical story as Bonhoeffer read it, was the key to understanding, the first principle, that which he said we must first be able to speak of before we can properly speak of other matters" (BWCA 14). Also commenting on Bonhoeffer Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926) chimed in,

Christ, the brother, is the Christ with us—tormented among the tormented, suffering injustice among the victims of violence, forsaken among all the other forsaken people. But the brother in our distress also makes us his brothers and sisters in his distress. [...] And it is true that a God who cannot suffer,

and suffer with us, could not even understand us.<sup>4</sup> That is why Christians then ‘stand by God in his suffering’, as Bonhoeffer says in one of his poems. Unlike the notion of ‘Christ the Lord’, the idea about ‘Christ the brother’ brings out the deep community and mutuality in this fellowship with Christ. (Moltmann 131)

Other voices have been heard; some even take the discourse to the brink of disrespect, to say the least, even if scripture does make allowance for them. Before Bonhoeffer and Sölle, William James (1842-1910) wrote: “[...] but whatever the God of earth and heaven is, he can surely be no gentleman. His menial services are needed in the dust of our human trails, even more than his dignity is needed in the empyrean” (quoted *in* Van Buren, BWCA 16). This affirmation stands because the ‘gentleman’ willingly renounced his status (Ph 2: 6-8). In both Bonhoeffer and James, Van Buren notes, “there is serious language about God, and in each man the sweat and dirt of this real world gives us the terms for speaking of God. In each God is weak and man is called to full responsibility for what is to come of things” (BWCA 16).

We cannot ignore the one critic that condemned in no uncertain terms this vision of the humbled divinity. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) made no allowance for any form of respect in the face of it. He fiercely denounced, expressed disgust for, even insulted not the concept but the person. Paul Ramsey (1914-1988) tells us that for Nietzsche this was

too much God-with-us, God in human, all-too-human form. He [Jesus] mixed too much in human affairs, even manifesting himself in this miserable flesh. In a sense, God's fellow-humanity killed him. Such a God must be wholly done to death, Nietzsche believed, else man as he now is would be certified from on high. ¶ Man in his misery and weakness had a hand in this. Such was Nietzsche's vision of 'the ugliest man,' the epitome of all that would not receive divine endorsement but should be surpassed, 'something sitting by the wayside shaped like a man, and hardly like a man, something nondescript.'

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<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 2: 18 comes to mind, “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

God's all-too-human pity and very un-Godlike demeanour was an offence to modesty. Therefore he had to be slain. (DG xv)<sup>5</sup>

### 1.3 A Conciliatory Disposition

There is another aspect to weakness that is also divine, which is regularly neglected, and which is not threatening to one's life and very little to one's comfort. It consists in adopting a conciliatory disposition, in seeking dialogue with one's opponents or adversaries. These are often viewed as 'cowardly' acts, even in Christian circles, and in spite of the wide acceptance of the *Sermon on the Mount*.<sup>6</sup> Clark Pinnock, a fundamentalist scholar, discusses this divine quality:

God is very different from the gods of the nations. Among them there exists an almost universal stereotype of God as One who is high above the world but who has little real interest in or concern for it. The God of the gospel of Christ is significantly different. Though all-powerful, God lets man take away his own initiative to some extent. [...] He is willing to let man become his competitor, if he will not be his partner. [...] We could call him the defenceless superior power. (Pinnock 66)

We seldom hear fundamentalist leaders express Pinnock's views that God "lets things affect and even change him" (Pinnock 66).

Partner with humanity, God's being, Pinnock suggests, entails exchange, which in turn necessitates dialogue and adjustments on both sides, or else the relationship becomes meaningless. "God's knowledge changes concerning the things that become actual through our decisions. [...] God [...] is involved in our lives and open to our input, not overruling our contributions."<sup>7</sup> Pinnock deplores that since the Reformation "we have

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<sup>5</sup> See W. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin, 1982) 378-9.

<sup>6</sup> The conciliatory approach towards one's adversaries is consistently denounced within the ranks of the American Right, a group of people who nonetheless constantly boast of their Christian values.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) gives an illustration of God's taking human initiative seriously. At the beginning of biblical humanity God destined it to a garden (Ge 2: 8); at the end it is given a "city come down from heaven" (Rev 21: 2). In Ellul's opinion Babylon is the archetype of all cities, the *loci* of humanity's obsession with sin. But he convincingly argues that our insistence from the beginning on building and living in cities (Ge 4: 17; 10: 11) has made us the agents of God's granting it in the end (J. Ellul, *Sans feu ni lieu* [Paris: Gallimard, 1975], 99, 116, 125, particularly 249 ff.).

been strongly influenced by a ‘virile’ model of God who manipulates his creatures” (66-67).

#### 1.4 Some Resistance to the Concept

Bonhoeffer meets resistance from some Christian circles. We will take only one example since it covers the most important aspect of the concept. Gabriel Vahanian (b. 1927), even as he manages to dampen his criticism, partly objects to Bonhoeffer’s judgment. He opens the fifth chapter of his book *No Other God* with this assertion: “In spite of the valid and even seductive intuition of the Bonhoeffer program, it is nonetheless true that his proposal of a religionless Christianity merits as many reservations as eulogies” (more on this # 3). What is important for now is paying attention to what he says about Bonhoeffer’s “error”. It is, he writes,

to continue to consider the problem of faith under the aspect of an antinomy, that of the Church and men or that of God and the world, in which the roles are reversed: it is not the wretched sinner who stands before the majesty of God, it is man in all his strength who stumbles against the weakness of God. That this means the abandonment of all claims to triumphalism can be willingly admitted, but what is the need of replacing triumphalism with a kenotic Christianity? (NOG 21)

In the face of such criticism, it is worth paying close attention to Bonhoeffer’s words: “Men go to God *when they are sore bestead*, / Pray to him *for succour*, for his peace, for bread” (LPP 348). Thus *man in his distress* is calling upon God, and not man in all his strength. Hanging on a cross at Jesus’ side was the “good thief” in his most distressed hour: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom,” begged the man to the publicly humiliated God (Lk 23: 40-43). The relationship is not one of power-to-weakness or weakness-to-power, as Vahanian implies, but one that is initially offered on a weakness-to-weakness plane so as to eventually lift up the believer to a relationship of power-to-power. The *Letter to the Ephesians* underlines this hope: “But because of his great love for us, God [...] made us alive with Christ even when we were dead [...] And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2: 4-6).

When Bonhoeffer says, “only the suffering God can help” (LPP 361), he makes clear who the helper and who the helpless respectively are. His unequivocal statement, “but all

the time God still reigns in heaven” (LPP 384), also situates Bonhoeffer as a theologian who knows God’s place in glory and humanity’s place in creation. When he quotes Isaiah 55: 11<sup>8</sup> to make his point that “preaching has the promise that the word shall bear fruit” (CD 232), he attributes to God a power that no human voice has had outside the Word now and in future generations. Moreover, when he says, “seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness” (LPP 361), he is perfectly in line with the gospel (Mt 5: 5-11; Lk 23: 40-43), and also with Paul who was made to understand his own weakness as strength (2Co 12: 5).

David Hopper (b. 1927) quoting Hanfried Müller (b. 1925) seems to better situate Bonhoeffer:

It is simply a matter of acknowledging that it pleased God to oppose in weakness the godlike strength of sinful man, that precisely this is God's grace. Because man in his sin is not weak but strong [defying rather than submitting], and because God in his grace is not strong but weak [loving rather than striking down], therefore Bonhoeffer is concerned not to confront man in his weakness with an omnipotent God. [...] That means [...] that the grace of God, which is grounded in God's weakness and suffering, is not to be turned aside for the sake of the majesty of God, a majesty before which man can only perish. Bonhoeffer is concerned rather that the strong, mature man meet God in his suffering in the world, which is, in this life, the hidden strength of God. (Hopper 55)

And Hopper concludes, "Thus Müller in the end finds in Bonhoeffer a kenotic Christology,<sup>9</sup> one that emphasizes the surrender by God of all ruling attributes in the assumption of the human form of Christ. It is in this form that God is 'for all men'" (idem).

### 1.5 Has the Cross Not Changed Everything?

Has the power of the cross not replaced the call for weakness by a call for strength? The objection is often raised: did not something powerful happen *after* the cross? What

<sup>8</sup> “[My word] will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

<sup>9</sup> One will note that Vahanian speaks of kenotic “Christianity”, not “Christology”. However, Paul’s “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” immediately preceding Philippians 2: 6 annuls this apparent distinction.

about the power of the resurrection (Ph 3: 10)? Granted that it is qualified as power, nowhere in the New Testament do we read that it was the resurrection that achieved the ultimate results. Redemption is exclusively the *res gestae* of the cross (Col 2: 14-15). On the cross Jesus exclaimed, “It is finished!” (Jn 19: 30) The resurrection is not the agent or instrument of redemption; for Paul it is the ‘proof’ of redemption (Ac 17: 31). See also in Peter’s use of it in Acts 2: 36 the confirmation that the cross is the weakness of God triumphant.<sup>10</sup> In line with Philippians 2: 5 comes the first *Letter of Peter* who directs the faithful to “Put on humility, for God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble” (1Pt 5: 5). What role do the church and the Christian play in the world? “The Bible directs man to God’s powerlessness and suffering,” answers Bonhoeffer, “only the suffering God can help” (LPP 361). Jesus admonished his disciples:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mt 20: 25-28)

Bonhoeffer contends that the church is to “give away all its property to those in need,” and “clergy must live solely on free-will offerings [...] or possibly engage in some secular calling” (LPP 382; see 1Co 9: 14, 2Co 11: 8, and also Ac 18: 3 and Ac 20: 34). In this way Bonhoeffer passes judgment on the church for her lack of response to her Master’s injunction. Thomas F. Torrance observes, “How do the churches become the Kingdom? How do they overcome? [...] ‘By the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.’ That is the [...] paradox. It is by suffering that the Christian Church exerts power over the nations. [...] When shall we Christians really believe that?” (Torrance 1960, 28) In the same spirit that opposes reliance on a *deus ex machina*, Torrance continues:

And so people in our modern world imagine that God’s power is like the bare power we use in science, only absolutely almighty, and we think of the action

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<sup>10</sup> Simone Weil said, “And if the gospel omitted all mention of Christ’s resurrection, faith would be easier for me. The Cross by itself is enough” (TNC 115).

of God's power in terms of mechanical action and of the sheer crushing weight of the atomic energy. ¶ [...] ¶ Thank God His power is revealed to us in this vision [Rev 5: 5-6] as absolutely different. God's almighty power, God as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, is revealed as the Lamb as it had been slain. He is God who has stooped to enter into our weakness and into our guilty past, in order to break its power from within. [...] A little babe was born despised and rejected of men. On the Cross He became the weakness of God, a sacrificial Lamb, but as such the mightiest power in heaven and earth. (47-48)

## 1.6 Embracing the Way of Weakness

Confessing the redemptive act of Christ with the intention, the hope or even the idea that one's confession will confer worldly privileges, power, and riches is a corruption of the originally intended message. Being in the weakness of God implies total abandonment of ulterior motives. The disciple who plans to use divine weakness as a means to triumph over whatever obstacle comes his or her way is *de facto* missing the point. The British essayist Erich Heller (1911-1990) points out that, strangely enough, Nietzsche suspected Jesus of harbouring this very motive: "Caesar—with the heart of Christ!" he once exclaimed in the secrecy of his diary," writes Heller who then asks:

Was this perhaps a definition of the Superman, this darling child of his imagination? It may well be; but this lofty idea meant, alas that he had to think the meanest thought: he saw in the real Christ an illegitimate son of the Will to Power, a frustrated rabbi who set out to save himself and the under-dog humanity from the intolerable strain of impotently resenting the Caesars: not to be Caesar was now proclaimed a spiritual distinction—a newly invented form of power, the power of the powerless. (*in* TNC 101)

Only a post-Enlightenment mind could ascribe such devices to a first-century carpenter.

The weakness of God is not to be *used*, for "My power is made perfect *in* weakness" (2Co 12: 9). This state of being-in the weakness of God in the world must become, as it were, ontological. "The capacity of mature religious faith to lift persons above the realm of petty self-interest and even to transform their lives is a consequence [...] of its functional autonomy." (Wulff 1997, 587)

Invoking the *Book of Revelation* to call God's wrath upon one's enemies deserves the same rebuke from Jesus as that directed at the brothers James and John (Lk 9: 54-56; see Rm 12: 17; 1Pt 3: 9). It also means getting in league with Jonah who went sulking under

the gourd plant because he would have the wicked Nineveh destroyed rather than saved (Jn 4). Weakness, vulnerability, childlike love, and generosity (Mt 11: 25-26; 1 Co 13) are components of the strength Jesus expects from his disciples.

This raises important questions: Can the ‘will to weakness’ be found in the human heart or in the human psyche? Does Jesus make a claim to which only the ‘religious’ or the mind preoccupied with the transcendent will respond affirmatively? Is a positive response possible outside the strength Christianity claims is found in Jesus? A self-proclaimed atheist, André Comte-Sponville, gives us some encouraging answers—although it must be said that he admits how deeply he appreciates his Christian upbringing (Comte-Sponville 2006, 10 & 42). In the last chapter called “L’amour” (Love) in his book *Le petit traité des grandes vertus* (1995 - The Small Treatise on the Great Virtues), he argues convincingly in favour of the human heart’s positive disposition toward love (*agape*). The core of his argument is found on pages 362-363. Our capacity to love enables us to welcome and practice of the way of weakness. We do it with children: even if the human instinct is to ‘occupy all the space’ and to exercise power over children, we find ourselves willing to practice self-restraint and let them infringe on our freedoms so as to allow them room to learn, to experiment, to develop and to grow. Parents limit their power because children are weaker. Parents practise self-restraint so as not to crush or hurt their children, their fragility, their helplessness. Even their love is controlled so as not to stifle their children with it. This behaviour is not limited to family ties. Outside of parenthood, who does not tread cautiously around children, around a newborn? “Weakness commands,” Comte-Sponville writes, “and this is the meaning of love.” He quotes Simone Weil who wrote, “It happens, though it is extremely rare, that through pure generosity, a man will not command where he has full authority. Because whatever is possible to man is also possible to God.” Then Comte-Sponville writes:

Benevolence is nonetheless present, so is joy—but in hollowed-out form [as a footprint in the sand], especially confirmed by this power that is not exercised, by this restraint, by this kindness, this gentleness, by this force that seems to empty itself of itself, that limits itself, that prefers to deny itself



rather than to affirm itself, to contract instead of to expand, to give instead of keeping or taking; even to prefer loss over possession. (363; my translation)<sup>11</sup>

### 1.7 Martin Luther-King, Jr.

Considering the almost irresistible attraction that power exercises in the private as well as the public spheres, considering the instinctual aversion for weakness in the natural world, considering the generally admitted principle that victory does not belong to the weak, is there a possibility that being-in weakness still moves a heart confronted with the enemy, with fierce opposition? To conclude this chapter, it is required that at least one extraordinary example be called upon to illustrate Bonhoeffer's concept.

In 1956, the eyes of the world began to turn toward Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his struggle for civil liberties in America. Among those paying attention was the Reverend J. Martin England. In 1933, this man had studied at a multi-denominational religious institution located in Pennsylvania called Crozer Theological Seminary. During his last year as a student, Martin England had played a major role in integrating Black students at that school. A decade and a half later, at this same college, Martin Luther King Jr. was elected president of his senior class, "the first black student ever to have won that honour at Crozer" (Edmund 1976, 56-57).

Like Dr. King, Martin England was familiar with Gandhi's work and the nonviolent teachings of *Satyagraha*. In April of 1956 England wrote King a letter in which he reminded the activist that Satyagraha also calls for "accepting responsibility for helping the opponent find release for the violence in his nature"; England further explained that some people use nonviolence "to conquer the opponent, rather than redeem him," and that it was "much easier to defeat segregationists than to transform them" (MLKb 233). Already by this time King—spurred early on by his faith in the ultimate triumph of his cause—was instructing his followers on how to behave when the time of victory would finally

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<sup>11</sup> "La bienveillance est là pourtant, la joie est là—mais en creux, mais attestées surtout par cette force qui ne s'exerce pas, pas ce retrait, par cette douceur, cette délicatesse, par cette puissance qui semble se vider d'elle-même, se limiter elle-même, qui préfère se nier plutôt que s'affirmer, se retirer plutôt que de s'étendre, donner plutôt que garder ou prendre, et perdre, même, plutôt que posséder."

arrive: “And when that moment comes, go into the situations that we confront with a great deal of dignity, sanity, and reasonableness. We never intend to get on the buses kicking people over and trying to show that we had won a victory. [...] Let us not abuse our new rights and privileges by overdoing them” (MLKb 232).

King was inoculated against other Black movement leaders who held in contempt his ‘weak and unworthy’ methods. Stokely Carmichael got his inspiration from Che Guevara’s battle cry, “We must develop hatred in order to transform man into a machine for killing,” and Rap Brown proclaimed: “I am full of hatred, and so are the other Blacks. Hate, like violence, is necessary for our revolution” (Ellul 1969, 104). In stark contrast, we read in a collection of King’s works, in a chapter called *Facing the Challenge of a New Age*:

[...] the Christian virtues of love, mercy and forgiveness should stand at the center of our lives. There is the danger that [...] those of us who have had to stand amid the tragic midnight of injustice and indignities will enter the new age with hate and bitterness. But if we retaliate with hate and bitterness, the new age will be nothing but a duplication of the old age. We must blot out the hate and injustice of the old age with the love and justice of the new. (MLKa 139)

As a Christian, Martin Luther King was daily confronted to the choice between divine weakness on the one hand, and human means of retaliation on the other. King had the opportunity to dramatically demonstrate Bonhoeffer’s point: on the morning of September 1962, in the city of Birmingham, he was delivering his keynote address as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, when suddenly

a beefy white man [...] walked onto the stage and belted King several times in the face. Delegates and reporters were amazed to see the SCLC president, once a wrestler, take the blows without shielding his face. As [two men] jumped up and readied their fists to strike back, King stared down his attacker and soothed him, protecting him from his colleagues’ wrath. As if he were an honored guest King introduced the man, who lived in an American Nazi Party hostel. The young Nazi wept in King’s arms. (Burns 177)

Such men and women we call heroes; and Søren Kierkegaard explains why we like to call them such: “What are heroes made of, and who can imitate them?” asks Kierkegaard. Why does

Socrates compare himself to a gadfly? Because he wanted his influence only to be ethical. He didn't want to be an admired genius standing apart from the rest, who therefore simply makes life easier for them, for they say, 'Yes, it's all very well for him, he's a genius.' No, he did only what everyone can do, understand only what everyone can understand. [...] He dug his teeth hard into the individual, constantly compelling and teasing him with the commonplace. It was thus he was a gadfly, causing irritation through the individual's own feelings, not letting him go on leisurely and weakly admiring, but demanding of him his very self. If a person has ethical powers, *people will gladly make a genius out of him just to be rid of him, for his life contains a demand.* (Søren Kierkegaards Papirer; Entry 46 VII I A 74 (1846); italics mine)<sup>12</sup>

Dr. King once said, "I know non-violence will work, I know it'll work because it works with children, it works in relationships, and it works in schools."<sup>13</sup> This is what Bonhoeffer calls the weakness of God, and what the world often condemns as weakness.

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen James Minton, "Kierkegaard and Truth As Subjectivity," *Practical Philosophy, The Journal of the Society for Philosophy in Practice*, Vol. 3.2 (July 2000): 22-30. < <http://www.practical-philosophy.org.uk/Volume3Articles/Minton.html> > 15 May, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Documentary Series on Dr. King, TVOntario, December 2007.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2. Freeing Christianity from the Concept of Religion

#### 2.1 Christianity and Religion

In 1927 Sigmund Freud published *The Future of an Illusion*, a title that reflects the author's view that religion, this 'illusion', will eventually end. His concerns were not unique; they reflected questions also raised in Christian circles<sup>14</sup> in the Western world around this time concerning what Bonhoeffer called "the western form of Christianity."<sup>15</sup> The main difference is that Christians were struggling for a "non-religious interpretation of Biblical concepts"<sup>16</sup> that would not present a threat to their faith. This 'future' Freud was talking about has not ceased to preoccupy believers and non-believers alike today.<sup>17</sup>

Freud opens on a well-known human condition: everywhere a minority of individuals exercise control over the majority; the masses accept the minority's coercive measures for the benefits their submission brings. Yet at the same time they cringe and rebel against the said measures. Should civilization some day reverse the trend in such a way that it is no longer the majority but the minority that finds itself unhappy or dissatisfied,

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<sup>14</sup> Gerhard Ebeling names Friedrich Gogarten and Emmanuel Hirsch, and he then adds: "[...] the questions which troubled [Bonhoeffer] and the insights he was moving towards are really not after all solely his own" (Ebeling 1963, 104). See also Paul Tillich's claim that Bonhoeffer dealt with matters he himself dealt with "in all my books" (HCT 359).

<sup>15</sup> (LPP 280). - The church "is the body of Christ—corpus Christi. It is the true unity of the West" (E 112). "The French Revolution was and remains to the present day the herald of the modern West. [...] Intellectual honesty] has belonged ever since to the essential moral requirements of Western humanity" (E 115). Bethge: "Bonhoeffer explains 'religion' in its 'Western form' [...]" (DBTC 781). Altizer: "The majority of Christian theologians [...] acknowledge the end of Western Christendom [...]" (TNC 1). Vahanian: "Christianity [...] the trademark of Western culture" (TNC 256).

<sup>16</sup> LPP 359. – See Ebeling 1963, 98-161.

<sup>17</sup> For instance in 2008, Gabriel Vahanian (b. 1927-) writes: "Memory hoarding itself, religion has been oblivious of the fact that, for a religion, the future consists precisely in not having any. Indeed had religion shed itself of such a fear, it would have kept with the biblical tradition, which holds precisely that true religion has no future and none certainly beyond this world—the *saeculum*" (Vahanian 2008, 14).

then a ‘golden age’ would dawn upon us. According to Freud, this is not mere wishful thinking; “perhaps all that *can* be accomplished” (Freud 1978, 3-5; italics in text).

Freud says religion is an instrument of choice in the hands of those wishing to exercise domination: “Religious ideas in the widest sense—in other words [... a civilization’s] illusions” are and always have been instruments of coercion (Freud 1978, 10 & 14-15). About the origins of religious ideas and practices inherited by Western civilization Freud says: “Comparative research has been struck by the *fatal* resemblance between the religious ideas which we revere and *the mental products of primitive peoples and times.*” (Freud 1978, 34; italics added)

Freud’s book could not be more relevant to Bonhoeffer’s concept of ‘religionless Christianity.’ Some seventeen years after it appeared, Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter dated 30 April 1944,

The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over and so is the time of inwardness and conscience—and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. Even those who honestly describe themselves as 'religious' do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by 'religious'. (LPP 279)

The difference between Freud and Bonhoeffer is the following: the former sees the demise of religion in the future, and the latter says it has occurred in his own day.

Another partner in the discussion contends that the demise of religion took place—or given the historical data: *should have taken place*—long ago. Five years before Freud’s book appeared, Karl Barth had published a commentary on Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans*.<sup>18</sup> Puzzling to a broad range of readers, the seventh chapter entitled “Freedom” (pp. 229-270) goes into a detailed analysis of ‘religion.’ Bonhoeffer was well acquainted with this book (LPP 280, 286, 329). What came as a surprise was Barth’s assertion that a chasm exists between religion and Christianity. “If, therefore,” he writes, “the experience

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<sup>18</sup> Barth’s book was first published in 1918; only in the 1922 re-edition did the ensuing discussion begin. The present study refers to the sixth edition of 1933.

of grace be thought of as the prolongation of already existing religious experience, grace ceases to be grace, and becomes a thing *on this side*. But grace is that which lies *on the other side*, and no bridge leads to it.” He ends with the question: “How are we to think of religion, if it be also the most radical dividing of man from God?” (EpR 240; italics added). Yet, some ten pages earlier Barth had argued that “we cannot hope to escape the possibility of religion” (EpR 230). The paradox of religion, in his view, lies in that even if it is “the noblest, the most necessary, most hopeful of all human possibilities, [...] the religious man [must] agree that sin celebrates its triumph in religion. [Through it] he is branded as a slave and handed over to death (Rom 7: 13)” (EpR 257). And Barth adds:

Religion is aware that it is in no wise the crown and fulfilment of true humanity; it knows itself rather to be a questionable, disturbing, dangerous thing. [...] Religion, so far from being the place where the healthy harmony of human life is lauded, is instead the place where it appears diseased, discordant, and disrupted. Religion is not the sure ground upon which human culture safely rests; it is the place where civilization and its partner, barbarism, are rendered fundamentally questionable. (258)

Eight pages later, Barth says: “Religion spells disruption, discord, and the absence of peace” (EpR 266). In 1928, as assistant pastor in Barcelona, Bonhoeffer echoed Barth’s views: “[...] with religion unhappiness, unrest, become mighty in the world [...] the cross of Christ destroyed the equation religion equals happiness”.<sup>19</sup> Sixteen years later Bonhoeffer wrote, “The ‘religious act’ is always something partial; ‘faith’ is something whole, involving the whole of one’s life” (LPP 362). With the publication of Barth’s book, Paul Tillich said, “began the fight against the use of the word ‘religion’ in theology” (HCT 537). Ebeling identifies the “more recent developments in theology which began with Karl Barth” as “the antithesis between Christian faith and religion” (Ebeling 1963, 99).

For Barth, then, the end of religion took place at the very dawn of the Christian era: Christianity means—or should have meant!—the end of religion. If then the end of relig-

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<sup>19</sup> DBTC 80. - On this page of his biography of Bonhoeffer, Eberhard Bethge offers several quotes from Bonhoeffer instructing his listeners on the divide that separates faith from religion.

ion is here as Bonhoeffer contends, or not too far off as Freud is hoping for, is it because the West is abandoning faith in favour of a return to paganism? Or is Christianity finally taking a cold hard look at the discrepancy between Jesus and religion?

## 2.2 Abandoning Faith?

What then is the state of faith in the West? Bonhoeffer is witnessing the gradual abandonment of religious elements grafted onto Christianity with the passing of time, and which many theologians now see for what they are.<sup>20</sup> For Bonhoeffer, if people who call themselves religious live in a non-religious manner “it means that the foundation is taken away from the whole of what has up to now been our ‘Christianity’” (LPP 280). Three observations are in order here: Firstly, Bonhoeffer does not say, “taken away [...] from Christianity”, but “from *what has up to now been our* ‘Christianity’”. Secondly, putting the word ‘Christianity’ in quotation marks<sup>21</sup> means for him that ‘our’ Christianity is not up to what it should be. And thirdly, the “foundation [that] is taken away” is not that on which Christianity was initially based, but that on which “our Christianity” has been standing from some point in the past “up to now” – namely, religious elements gradually grafted unto or confused with the foundation. Once these elements crumble due to people’s lack of trust, what has up to now been our Christianity also flounders. The ‘true’ foundation, however, which for Bonhoeffer cannot be taken away, is unquestionably the rock of faith: “In Jesus God has said Yes and Amen to it all, and that Yes and Amen is the firm ground on which we stand” (LPP 391; see 2Co 1: 20).

Are there any signs that the West is not reverting to paganism, as some believe it is? There are indications that the majority of the people in the West would prefer to remain faithful to their roots.

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<sup>20</sup> Some of Bonhoeffer’s questions do show a certain degree of satisfaction: “How do we speak [...] in a ‘secular’ way about ‘God’? In what way are we religionless-secular Christians, in what way are we [...] those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favoured, but rather as belonging wholly to the world? In that case Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, really the Lord of the world. But what does that mean?” (LPP 280-1)

<sup>21</sup> The emphasis is present in both the English and the original German editions (see WE 145).

On Easter morning 2007 the front page of the Montreal *La Presse* carried a headline that, freely translated, reads “Quebecers believe in God but stay away from churches.” This article was based on *The Bibby Report* on Catholicism in Quebec indicating that in 1961 eighty-eight percent of Quebecers said they were Catholics. Forty-six years later—after the *Quiet Revolution*, after worldwide protests against every possible representation of authority, after the triumph of feminism, after so-called free sex, the pill, and the right to abortion have become the norm, after gays and lesbians have achieved (almost) equality status—the article says eighty-five percent of Quebecers still say they are Catholics. A significant majority believe in the divinity of Jesus and in life after death. We are informed that three out of four say they pray privately on occasion, and that two out of four say they do so at least twice a week.<sup>22</sup>

No additional survey has been conducted for the purpose of the present essay, but after hearing from similar ones held through the Western world (see Wulff 1997, 175), there is little room for doubt as to where its populations stand. The same is reflected in groups traditionally viewed as outside the mainstream. Wulff reveals that “Among the seventy percent [of Harvard students] who claimed to have [religious needs], dissatisfaction with institutional religion was widespread and most of them deviated from theological orthodoxy.”<sup>23</sup> Theologians have also stepped outside the tradition, as Gabriel Vahanian observes:

There is some irony in pointing out that for the first time we have theologians without churches or theological systems without their corresponding ecclesiastical apparatus. ¶ Without doubt, it is permissible to consider today’s theological renewal as a part and preparation or even a precondition of the cultural reconversion without which there can be no further Christian development, no new Christian historical departure. At the same time, one must also

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<sup>22</sup> *La Presse*, dimanche 8 avril, 2007, p. A8.

<sup>23</sup> Wulff 1997, 586. - This opens up a whole new discussion on what constitutes orthodoxy. Given the low level of catechistic knowledge across Western populations since the sixties (students or otherwise), a high percentage of Harvard students born and raised in one or another of the Christian traditions would declare positions similar to those found among Quebec Catholics.



point out it seems, that our Christian institutions have not yet proved themselves worthy of such a magnificent renewal. (WWI 239-240)

For Bonhoeffer the abandonment of religion is a consequence of maturation (LPP 360-1; DBTC 781). ‘Coming of age’ compels the West to rethink its origins. Theologians such as Barth and Bonhoeffer are rediscovering the intended effect of Christianity’s message, which is victory over religion. Bethge writes,

the characteristic of Bonhoeffer’s concept of religion as it emerges in the letters from prison [is] that religion is passing away. [...] Can faith ever escape becoming a religion, whether Western, Eastern or African? But precisely in order to make faith possible, Bonhoeffer explains ‘religion’ in its ‘Western form’ as something we can do without and as a relic of past ages. His judgment here is so sure because he regards the age of Jesus as something different from the age of religion. (DBTC 781)

### 2.3 Jesus’ Legacy

If these theologians are good judges of the situation, we should find seeds in the teachings of Jesus that have the potential to defeat religion wherever they are free to grow. Indeed, Jesus did plant such seeds, for instance in his conversation with the Samaritan woman,<sup>24</sup> also when he urges his listeners to abandon public spiritual practices for private ones,<sup>25</sup> and again when he predicts the destruction of the temple, and foresees the impending upheaval heralding the imminent new order (Mt 24). Subsequent historical events have confirmed his sayings.<sup>26</sup> By the time Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 CE) was a

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<sup>24</sup> “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain,” says the woman, “but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” – “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. [...] A time is coming and *has now come* when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (Jn 4: 21-24).

<sup>25</sup> “When you pray, don’t be like those show-offs who love to stand up and pray in the meeting places and on the street corners. [...] When you pray, go into a room alone and close the door. Pray to the Father in private. He knows what is done in private and he will reward you” (Mt 6: 6). One may object: ‘Jesus does not condemn public prayer, only those who do it for show.’ And yet, there must be more to it. Would Jesus not then simply admonish his followers to refrain from imitating instead of telling them to pray privately? The debate is still open.

<sup>26</sup> Here is not the place for a debate on ‘who’ wrote the gospels or part of them, and when; the point is how well the texts are reflected in those historical events. The issue of religion versus Christianity is not depending on whether historical events were actually foretold or retrospectively inserted in the texts. The contention is that the old ‘religious’ stream was interrupted by Jesus’ influence on events.

fully grown man, Judea and Galilee had known two major Jewish uprisings (66-70 CE, 131-135 CE), both of which were drowned in blood, and the split between Judaism and its offspring, the church, had reached the point of no return. Also—and this is a more convincing argument—by the time of Justin Martyr, Tillich says, “we find [...] the *negation of the concept of religion* with respect to Christianity. [...] This is more than religion. This is truth appearing in time and space. [...] The word Christianity is understood *not as a religion but as the negation of all religions*. In virtue of its universality Christianity is able to embrace them all” (HCT 28; italics added).

Consequently, it would have to be through some corrupting process that “the mental products of primitive peoples and times,” to borrow Freud’s phrase, came to infiltrate what should otherwise have developed into a *religionless*<sup>27</sup> “European Christian civilization.” Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) explains how this represented an inherent threat to Christianity itself: “The unity in temper and disposition resting on faith in the saving revelation of God in Christ, permitted the highest degree of freedom in knowledge, *the results of which were absolutely without control* as soon as the preacher or the writer was recognised as a true teacher, that is inspired by the Spirit of God.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, Harnack says,

With the freedom that still prevailed Christianity was in danger of being resolved into a motley mass of philosophic speculations or of being completely detached from its original conditions. It was admitted on all sides that Christianity had its starting-point in certain facts and sayings; but if any and every interpretation of those facts and sayings was possible, if any system of philosophy might be taught into which the words that expressed them might be woven, it is clear that there could be but little cohesion between the members of the Christian communities. The problem arose and pressed for an answer: What should be the basis of Christian union? But the problem was for a time insoluble. For there was no standard and no court of appeal. (Harnack, Vol. II, 23)

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Religionless’ in the sense that Bonhoeffer understood it. See last pages of this # 2.

<sup>28</sup> Harnack 1905 – vol. 1, 166-7; italics added.

Life “by faith alone” (Ro 1: 17) is, as it were, a socially and spiritually unstable state to find oneself in.<sup>29</sup> Such a life was difficult to imagine then—and it remains so today—, challenged as it was by a world theretofore plying under a plethora of regulations,<sup>30</sup> locked in step for millennia in organized religious rituals, practices, and institutions. Without a system of *organized restraints* the multifaceted and unpredictable effects of the new faith and the freedom it afforded threatened the church itself as a collectivity. Consequently, to realize a sustainable movement the incipient church chose to *absorb* and *convert* already existing rituals, practices, and institutions. Vahanian speaks of “the syncretistic religiosity of the Mediterranean world” as a consequence of baptizing the pagan, thus “creating its own religiosity, [...] the religious monstrosity it conceived” (TNC 257). Pointing not to the Roman Catholic Church, but rather to Christianity’s ‘catholic’ or ‘universal’ claim, Harnack says:

The older Catholicism never clearly put the question, ‘What is Christian?’ Instead of answering that question it rather laid down rules, the recognition of which was to be the guarantee of Christianity [*sic*]. [...] In throwing a protective covering around the Gospel, Catholicism also obscured it. [...] It permitted the genesis of a Church, which was no longer a communion of faith, hope, and discipline, but a political commonwealth of which the Gospel merely had a place beside other things. (Harnack, Vol. 2, 4)

The church gradually took the shape of a well-organized, identifiable entity.<sup>31</sup>

This in a sense was the path of least resistance; the familiar path of religion traced along the lines of the all too human “religious *a priori*” (LPP 280), the path that for thousands of years had favoured “the mental products of primitive peoples and times”

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<sup>29</sup> As Rudolf Bultmann says, “The man who desires to believe in God must know that he has nothing at his own disposal on which to build his faith” (JeCM 84-85). For Tillich, absolute faith ‘is not a place where one can live, it is without the safety of words and concepts, it is without a name, a church, a cult, a theology. But it is moving in the depth of all of them’ (CoB 188-9).

<sup>30</sup> To this day practicing Jews strive to uphold the 613 laws that the Talmud says God gave Moses. See Harry Gersh, *The Sacred Books of the Jews* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), 57.

<sup>31</sup> See Harnack 1905 - vol. 1, 332-4. - Harnack is a mine of information on the subject of incipient Christianity and its difficult evolution from a poorly organized faith-energized movement to a powerful politico-religious institution.

(Freud). Tillich says that in the church, as early as a few decades after Justin Martyr's death, i.e. by the end of the second century, already "we have a very impressive system of authorities: the Bible, the apostolic tradition, the rule of faith, the baptismal creed, and the bishops, created in the struggle against the Gnostics."<sup>32</sup>

Eventually, the Christian religion gave its adherents a superior status over the pagan, the atheist. Christians formed an upper class; they acquired "bourgeois respectability," which was not initially intended:

The Christian religion had set up guardianship relations to men, held under tutelage of priests as the mediators of life and of pastors and theologians as the administrators of truth. The patronizing, feudalistic character of Christian institutions and creeds had transformed the freeing majesty of the powerless servanthood of Christ into power structures of sterilizing dependencies. (Bethge, BWCA 56)

Bonhoeffer's questioning precisely goes back to those times,

Our whole nineteen-hundred-year-old Christian preaching and theology rest on the 'religious a priori' of mankind. [...] But if one day it becomes clear that this a priori does not exist at all, but was a historically conditioned and transient form of human self-expression, and if therefore man becomes radically religionless—and I think that that is already more or less the case [...]—what does that mean for Christianity? (LPP 280)

A world no longer fearing the unknown is ready, so it seems, for meticulous scholars who are no less ready to explore Christianity's religionless roots. In the process of maturation, however, "nothing will be as difficult as overcoming the monarchical and patriarchal structures of hierarchies, theologies and, indeed, dogmas, for coming of age has an element about it that is alarmingly unreassuring" (DBTC 780-1).

## 2.4 Three Keys to Non-religious Interpretation of Biblical Concepts

Bonhoeffer offers three main grounds for his argument concerning a "non-religious interpretation of Biblical concepts" (LPP 359): Jesus himself, intellectual honesty, and the elimination of the 'two realms'.

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<sup>32</sup> HCT 39. See also Harnack 1905 – vol. 2, 84.

### 2.4.1 Jesus

“But for Jesus I should be an atheist” Johannes Gottschick (1847-1907) reportedly said. Wilhelm Herrmann (1846-1922), a Reformed German theologian “made the problem of theological certainty depend solely and entirely on the encounter with Jesus Christ” (Ebeling 106). Bonhoeffer would be in that league, says Ebeling. Jesus held the highest position in his thought,

The key to everything is the 'in him'. All that we may rightly expect from God, and ask him for, is to be found in Jesus Christ. The God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with what God, as we imagine him, could do and ought to do. If we are to learn what God promises, and what he fulfils, we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings, and death of Jesus. [...] But the truth is that if this earth was good enough for the man Jesus Christ, if such a man as Jesus lived, then, and only then, has life a meaning for us. (LPP 391)

That was the character of Bonhoeffer’s genuine encounter with Jesus, and for him this would apply to all believers. In an essay on Bonhoeffer Paul Van Buren writes:

Moreover, what we mean by the word ‘God’ must be learned from how we speak of Jesus. That is to say, we shall not properly speak of God unless we have first learned to speak of Jesus, and we shall then speak of God in terms of Jesus, not the reverse. Jesus, or more strictly, the behavior of Jesus, Jesus as ‘the man for others’ now displaces God as the root metaphor, now takes the place of ontological priority. (BWCA 14)

Because of this, some would accuse Bonhoeffer of Christomonism (see Ebeling 1963, 106). However, Bonhoeffer’s commitment and devotion find ample support in the Christian writings themselves—for instance the well known, “Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Ph 2: 11).

The church’s traditional views on Jesus’ high position, her affirmation that he is ‘of one substance with the Father,’ has not kept her from adopting innumerable ‘religious’ objects and concepts that make Jesus appear as ‘just one among many’. Bonhoeffer says: “The church’s concern is not religion, but the form of Christ and its taking form among a band of people. If we let ourselves stray even the least bit from this perspective we fall unavoidably into those programs of ethical or religious world-formation from which we departed above” (E 97). What he had previously said was, “[Formation] is not primarily concerned with formation of the world by planning and programs, but in all formation it

is concerned *only with the one form that has overcome the world*, the form [*Gestalt*] of Jesus Christ” (E 93; italics added). This is at the heart of Bonhoeffer’s answer to the question, “who Christ *really* is for us today” (LPP 279).

Assuming its dogmas, traditions, and rituals were removed from “what has up to now been our ‘Christianity’”, would it affect Jesus’ *Gestalt*? Would there be need to reinsert them so as to help us understand who he really is for us today? Why were they imposed in the first place? This is the weak point Bonhoeffer discovers in Barth’s theology, namely his *revelational positivism*.<sup>33</sup> It consists in a positivist attitude toward certain assertions and dogmas that “must be believed [or practiced]<sup>34</sup> if we would be Christians” (Ebeling 1963, 110 n. 1). Bonhoeffer would have preferred Barth did not insist, for

Barth was the first theologian to begin the criticism of religion, and that remains his really great merit; but he put in its place a positivist doctrine of revelation which says, in effect, ‘Like it or lump it’: virgin birth, Trinity, or anything else; each is an equally significant and necessary part of the whole, which must simply be swallowed as a whole or not at all. That isn’t biblical. There are degrees of knowledge, and degrees of significance; that means that a secret discipline must be restored whereby the *mysteries* of the Christian faith are protected against profanation.<sup>35</sup> The positivism of revelation makes it too easy for itself, by setting up, as it does in the last analysis, a law of faith, and so mutilates what is—by Christ’s incarnation!—a gift for us. In the place of religion there now stands the church—that is in itself biblical—but the world is in some degree made to depend on itself and left to its own devices, and that’s the mistake. (LPP 286)

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<sup>33</sup> LPP 280 & 328-9. – According to Bethge, revelational positivism is “Proclamation of the revelation of God presenting its truth for sheer acceptance without being able to explain its relation to the life of man in a world come of age” (WoCA 86). For Regin Prenter, “The content [of faith] would lead us to think of the profanation which occurs in positivism of revelation, which presents the mysteries (e.g. trinity, virgin birth) to the world for mere acceptance, without showing clearly how they are related to the life of the world come of age. This only distorts ‘religiously’ the sense of the mysteries which consists in the being for the world on the part of God and the congregation” (WoCA 102-3).

<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer gives the following example: “The Pauline question whether  $\pi\Sigma\Gamma$  | | | [circumcision] is a condition of justification seems to me in present-day terms to be whether religion is a condition of salvation. Freedom from  $\pi\Sigma\Gamma$  | | | is also freedom from religion” (LPP 281).

<sup>35</sup> This will be addressed in # 3 below.

God is not to be understood as an *abstract God up there*. This is not “a genuine experience of God,” because that sort of God is “but a piece of extended world” (LPP 381). Jesus is the paradigm of religionlessness in that he calls his followers *away from* “a ‘religious’ relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable, that is not authentic transcendence, but our relation to God is a new life in ‘existence for others’, through the participation in the being of Jesus” (LPP 381). The requirement for participation is simply “being there for others.” “Jesus is there only for others”. In his outline for a book, chapter 2 paragraph (b) begins with the question: “Who is God?” (LPP 381) Bonhoeffer insists heavily on the expression “being there for others”. It is repeated five times in this paragraph, either applied to Jesus or to his followers, insisting that this experience *IS transcendence!* That IS participation in the being of Jesus, in his incarnation, cross and resurrection. No mysticism, no metaphysics, no inwardness, rather outwardness.<sup>36</sup> In connection with this, Dorothee Sölle (who rarely hesitates to add a more daring twist to Bonhoeffer) said: “The Samaritan tries to be more completely present for another person. He doesn’t stare at Jesus as if he were a mighty superstar who will put everything right. Even less does he look towards God Almighty. But he is going to act like this Jesus. In this sense he is a Christian, who needs no formal confession of faith in Christ” (Sölle 1981, 76).

In most Christian circles today, her last words are anathema; yet Sölle cannot be far off the mark if faith is to be found ‘in what one does.’ Many will say: “We preached in your name, and in your name we forced out demons and worked miracles. But I will tell them: I will have nothing to do with you!” (Mt 7: 22-23) In what way have these people deserved a severe rebuke from Jesus, even total rejection, after they have worked these wonders? A perfectly prepared sermon, nay, even working miracles and exorcising demons will not compete with feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, comforting

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<sup>36</sup> “How do we speak of God—without religion, i.e. without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on? How do we speak ... in a ‘secular’ way about ‘God?’” (LPP 280)

the sick and the outcast. Bonhoeffer articulates the same in one paragraph worth quoting at length.<sup>37</sup>

This being caught up into the messianic suffering of God in Jesus Christ takes a variety of forms in the New Testament. It appears in the call to discipleship, in Jesus' table-fellowship with sinners, in 'conversions' in the narrower sense of the word (e.g. Zacchaeus) [Lk 19], in the act of the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7)—an act that she performed without any confession of sin, in the healing of the sick (Matt. 8.17; see above), in Jesus' acceptance of children [Mt 19: 14]. The shepherds, like the wise men from the East, stand at the crib, not as 'converted sinners', but simply because they are drawn to the crib by the star just as they are [Lk 2]. The centurion of Capernaum (who makes no confession of sin) is held up as a model of faith (cf. Jairus) [Mt 8]. Jesus 'loved' the rich young man [Mk 10]. The eunuch (Acts 8) and Cornelius (Acts 10) are not standing at the edge of an abyss. Nathaniel is 'an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile' (John 1.47). Finally, Joseph of Arimathea and the women at the tomb [Mk 15, 16]. The only thing that is common to all these is their sharing in the suffering of God in Christ. That is their 'faith'. There is nothing of religious method here. The 'religious' act is always something partial; 'faith' is something whole, involving the whole of one's life. Jesus calls [people] not to a new religion, but to life. (LPP 362)

Consequently, Bonhoeffer said, "this world must not be prematurely written off; [...] in this the Old and New Testaments are at one. [...] Christ takes hold of a man at the centre of his life" (LPP 337). The following will illustrate this further.

The heroes of faith in Old Testament hagiography hardly have more to show than very basic, unadorned human traits. The letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11, lists an impressive number of them, whose main virtue was faith. The author opens the chapter with those whose reputation appears to have been perhaps more obvious: "By faith Abel, by faith Enoch, and Noah, and Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses." Then come individuals whose good reputation is not as well established—ordinary people, more or less suffering from common emotional foibles. Some appear not to have much of a clue as to what their 'religion' requires from them; people who prayed on occasion (although in some cases the word 'prayer' is not even mentioned), who apparently would not and did

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<sup>37</sup> Biblical references in square brackets are added.



not deny their faith, but who arguably would prefer not to discuss it. They are taken out of a variety of social milieus. We need not go over each of the names; three should suffice to make the point. – Rahab, we are told, was a prostitute (Joshua 2: 1 and 6: 17, 25) who trusted the Israelite spies and let them inside the walls of Jericho. Scholars say: “Most interpreters now see her as a secular prostitute without any cultic or sacred connections”.<sup>38</sup> She ended up in the genealogy of the Messiah (Mt 1: 5). – Samson (Judges 13) whose spiritual life was severely challenged and certainly questionable: a sombre character going from disaster to disaster with a penchant for dubious partners be they women or friends. He may have been history’s first ‘suicide bomber’ (Jdg 16: 29-30). – Jephthah, whose daughter had to pay the price for her father’s ignorance of what his ‘religion’ required of him (Judges 10). Yet, we are told they all acted on faith, and consequently, they are all presented to our post-Jesus era as heroes of the faith. Bonhoeffer puts this challenge to us:

Why is it that in the Old testament men tell lies vigorously and often to the glory of God, [...] kill, deceive, rob, divorce, and even fornicate (see genealogy of Jesus), doubt, blaspheme, and curse, whereas in the New Testament there is nothing of all this? ‘An earlier stage’ of religion? That is a very naïve way out; it is one and the same God. But more of this later when we meet. (LPP 157)

We do not have a record of Bonhoeffer discussing this further with his friend. But we have his appreciation of some encounters with Jesus (see LPP 362), and then this: “When Jesus blessed sinners,” he writes,

they were real sinners, but Jesus did not make everyone a sinner first. He called them away from their sin, not into their sin. It is true that encounter with Jesus meant the reversal of all human values. So it was in the conversion of Paul, though in his case the encounter with Jesus preceded the realization of sin. It is true that Jesus cared about people on the fringe of human society, such as harlots and tax collectors, but never about them alone, for he sought to care about man as such. Never did he question a man’s health, vigour, or happiness, regarded in themselves, or regard them as evil fruits; else why should he heal the sick and restore strength to the weak? Jesus claims for

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<sup>38</sup> David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5-611.

himself and the Kingdom of God the whole of human life in all its manifestations. (LPP 341-2)

One important lesson learned from trying to understand the unity of the Jewish Bible and the New Testament is this, that in the former dispensation ‘sinners’ of one chosen nation who happen to have done “more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed before” them (2Ch 33: 9), and who were meant to stand as a holy nation before God and the world, have failed, and are replaced by ‘sinners’ who are no different, but who are now of every nation under the sun, all distinction between them eradicated (Gal 3: 28). Contrary to the former, these are now commanded not to destroy each other for the glory of God, but to love one another (Mt 5: 43-46) under the Prince of Peace (Is 9: 5). To take Bonhoeffer’s lines, “Christ is the center and power of the Bible, of the church, of theology, but also of humanity, reason, justice, and culture” (E 341). Bonhoeffer understands this extraordinary shift as happening in Christ, who now is and should be the true and only object of universal faith. He asks: “In what way are we ‘religionless-secular’ Christians, in what way are we the εκκλησια [ecclesia], those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favoured, but rather as belonging wholly to the world? In that case Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, really the Lord of the world. But what does that mean?” (LPP 280-1)

Perhaps this last question has been answered: in the gospels there is never any hint of Jesus “sniffing-around-after-people’s-sins in order to catch them out,” as Bonhoeffer hints that some so-called spiritual leaders do (LPP 345). “We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer. The only profitable relationship to others [...] is one of love” (LPP 10). Elsewhere he says:

The commandment of God revealed in Jesus Christ embraces life as a whole. It does not merely guard, like the ethical, the boundaries of life that must not be crossed, but it is at the same time the center and fullness of life. It is not only ought, but also allowed. It not only prohibits, but also liberates us for authentic life and for unreflective doing. (E 381)

The terms ‘allowed’, ‘liberates’, and ‘unreflective’ should hardly be interpreted as ‘given permission’; but rather, “be ye perfect as your Father is perfect” (Mt 5: 48), but if

you fail at it, you are not under the law, you are blessed: rejoice in that privilege, and take responsibility for your failings (1Jn 1: 8-10). “The Bible’s words that ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (Ps 111: 10) tell us that a person’s inward liberation to live a responsible life before God is the only real cure for folly” (LPP 9). Those who try to go beyond this responsible life and think they must first “be religious in a particular way, by means of some method or other making something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint)” (LPP 361), soon encounter frustration, and find that “God alone is righteous” (LPP 286). Bonhoeffer makes no difference between sinners of the Old and the New; Romans 3: 24 (LPP 286) reminds us, “God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus he freely accepts us free from our sins.” Jesus approaches each one from a *locus* situated outside of any and all religious frameworks. However, “there are degrees of knowledge and degrees of significance,” and that is why “a secret discipline must be restored whereby the *mysteries* of the Christian faith are protected against profanation.”<sup>39</sup> Bonhoeffer does not condone irresponsibility.

New Covenant heroes start from Jesus to God, not from God to Jesus. Christians are “shifting ontological priority from God to Christ”, writes Paul Van Buren in his essay on “Bonhoeffer’s Paradox” (BWCA 15). In this sense those who accept the divinity of Jesus are not really left “without God in this world,” since Jesus said to them, “I am with you always” (Mt 28: 20). But they are living and struggling and overcoming their difficulties without any empirically identifiable divine intervention. There is no *deus ex machina* (LPP 361): this *was* religion. The world that comes after Christ assumes responsibility. No more “be led with ropes to make them obey, as is done with horses and mules” (Ps 32: 9). To quote Bonhoeffer’s famous dictum: “Before God and with God we live without God” (LPP 360).<sup>40</sup> The parable of the *Sheep and the Goats*, also known as the parable of the *Last Judgment* (Mt 25: 33-45), makes it clear: Jesus is counting on his followers to

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<sup>39</sup> LPP 286. – More on this in # 3.

<sup>40</sup> Simone Weil goes further: “We have to believe in a God who is like the true God in everything except that he does not exist” (TNC 111).

“be there for others” (LPP 381);<sup>41</sup> he will not have them count on him to make sure they themselves are well looked after.<sup>42</sup> This ‘being in Christ for others’ characterizes faith and love. That which remains—and is no less worthy of attention—is hope, on which one may find rest,<sup>43</sup> but upon which one may not constantly and immaturely rely, as children are wont to do. (Heb 5: 13-14; see 1Co 13: 13)

### 2.4.2 Intellectual Honesty

In his *Ethics*, after extolling the merits and gauging the dangers of the French Revolution, Bonhoeffer rejoices in the fact that,

Liberated *ratio* achieved an unanticipated importance. Its free use created an atmosphere of truthfulness, light and clarity. A fresh wind of bright intelligence cleared up prejudices, social conceits, hypocritical proprieties, and stifling sentimentality. Intellectual honesty in all things, including questions of faith was the great good of liberated ratio. It has belonged ever since to the essential moral requirements of Western humanity. (E 115)

In post-Enlightenment yet pre-Modern society, intellectual honesty demanded that reason be given its rightful place in human affairs. The reign of spiritual leadership over political and business matters ended; the pope’s interference in the secular in the name of God became irrelevant, a broken arrow. Science and reason now occupied their rightful places. Bonhoeffer observes that by the time of the Middle Ages, what he calls a “mature worldliness” had already been “conditioned,” thanks to “the struggle between the *idea of the emperor* and the papacy. [...] This worldliness is not ‘emancipated’, but ‘Christian’, even if it is anti-clerical” (LPP 229). Then, “It seems that in the natural sciences the process begins with Nicolas of Cusa [1401-1464] and Giordano Bruno [1548-1600] and the ‘heretical’ doctrine of the infinity of the universe” (LPP 359-60).

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<sup>41</sup> Simone Weil: “God is absent from this world except through the existence of those in this world in whom his love lives” (TNC 111).

<sup>42</sup> “There is no religion in the New Jerusalem or in Jesus’ parable of the Last Judgment. Nor is there any [...] in the world come of age celebrated by Bonhoeffer” (Vahanian 2008, 14).

<sup>43</sup> Psalm 23 & Mt 11: 28. - “Faith would be a false, illusory, hypocritical self-invention, which never justifies, were it not accompanied by love and hope” (E 148).

Religious authority, however, be it represented by priest or church, still held sway over the souls and consciences of the masses, and as a rule over emperor and king, even when—grudgingly in many cases—it was accepted and even respected because it had long been internalized.<sup>44</sup> Consequently most people still felt more or less comfortable with their ‘religious’ beliefs, e.g. the dogmas of their church, its ceremonials, and its rituals over and above a simple act of faith and a humble walk with God (see Micha 6: 8).

Intellectual honesty moves or evolves with time; it is not immune to historical influences.<sup>45</sup> The changing, contingent nature of intellectual honesty appears to have been one element the Enlightenment did not see, as Ebeling notes.<sup>46</sup> It can dwell in one that is deeply religious as well as in one that is not. How we formulate the questions of our time and how we respond to them determine the degree of one’s freedom and the sincerity of one’s claim to it.<sup>47</sup> The Enlightenment had a potent effect on the collective consciousness; a serious examination of one’s ‘religious’ beliefs and motivations took place in light of the challenges it presented. As a consequence desertions from the churches proved massive. Finally, Bonhoeffer contends,

This movement that began about the thirteenth century [...] towards the autonomy of man [...] has in our time reached an undoubted completion. Man has learnt to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the ‘working hypothesis’ called ‘God’. (LPP 325-6, see also 360)

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<sup>44</sup> “It is in keeping with human development that external coercion gradually becomes internalized; for a special mental agency, man’s superego takes it over and includes it among its commandments” (Freud 1978, 7).

<sup>45</sup> As Ebeling explains, Bonhoeffer’s praise of intellectual honesty in the wake of the Enlightenment does not mean one should doubt the intellectual honesty of the people of the preceding centuries; “[...] it does not express a judgment on the men of the Middle Ages, but only on our relation to the Middle Ages at a time that in point of fact is not ours” (Ebeling 1963, 111 n. 3 & 112).

<sup>46</sup> “To be clear in our minds that the human *ratio* is itself historical, is indeed the best way of showing that when we speak of intellectual honesty, we are not [...] connecting it with the ideals and illusions of the Enlightenment and its unhistorically applied concept of reason” (Ebeling 1963, 112).

<sup>47</sup> “This rightly understood autonomy of the reason “is so much a part of the reality of modern man that he is not even asked whether he is willing to make use of it but only how in fact he does make use of it, namely, whether he lets its use be subject to the precept of intellectual honesty [...]” (Ebeling 1963, 114).

The point at which this evolution has arrived causes insecurity in ‘religious’ circles: many feel uncomfortable and threatened, and they try to find a place for God in the midst of this change (more on this # 3). Bonhoeffer says how he felt calm and natural whenever he spoke of God in the company of ordinary folks who lived healthily preoccupied with their daily responsibilities. He was not so comfortable in the company of ‘religious’ people. Why does ‘God’ not “ring true” in their company, he asked? They “speak of God when human knowledge [...] has come to an end, or when human resources fail—in fact it is always the *deus ex machina* that they bring on the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure—always, that is to say, exploiting human weakness or human boundaries” (LPP 281-2). It was his personal experience that if one is comfortable with God at the centre of one’s life, such ease and confidence attract people, nay, invite them to listen and to partake. “People here keep on telling me [...] that I’m ‘radiating so much peace around me,’ and that ‘I’m always so cheerful’” (LPP 279).

For Bonhoeffer, internalization of one’s faith, a faith that causes the mind to be free from ‘religious’ matters at the same time as it is profoundly active, is the basis of true freedom and spells the end of religion in the soul. “People are not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath is made for them; the son of man is made Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mk 2: 27-28). Paul’s setting circumcision aside guided Bonhoeffer in his dealing with ‘religion’: “The Pauline question whether [circumcision] is a condition of justification seems to me in present-day terms to be whether religion is a condition of salvation” (LPP 281). Faith freed from religious demands has nothing to fear from ‘reason’; the only thing it has to defend in the face of scepticism, if at all, is ‘itself’ and the hope it carries (1Pe 3: 15). It need not argue or prove, it remains constant and intellectually honest. The intellect is not a challenge to faith, and the reverse is also true. When believers do not feel their faith is at risk, they feel no need for challenging the well-being of those who feel no need for God to fix their world (see LPP 327; more on this # 3).

In a short section entitled, “Who stands fast?” (LPP 4-5), Bonhoeffer speaks of different categories of believers. Some are led by ‘reason’, but they fail at convincing the world.

With the best of intentions and a naïve lack of realism, they think that with a little reason they can bend back into position the framework that has got out of joint. In their lack of vision they want to do justice to all sides, and so the conflicting forces wears them down with nothing achieved. Disappointed by the world's unreasonableness, they see themselves condemned to ineffectiveness; they step aside in resignation or collapse before the stronger party. (LPP 4)

Others are 'fanatics': with "single minded principles" they feel qualified "to do battle with the powers of evil." Then comes the "man with a *conscience*, who fights single handed against heavy odds. [...] But the scale of the conflicts he has to face—with no advice or support but his conscience—tears him to pieces." Finally comes "the man with complete *freedom* to stand foursquare to the world, who values the necessary deed more highly than an unspoilt conscience or reputation [...] let him beware lest his freedom should bring him down." One would think this one deserves praise. Not so. Bonhoeffer issues a general warning and concludes this short section with what he himself must have struggled with:

Who stands fast? Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God—the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God. Where are these responsible people? (LPP 5)

What are the channels leading to one's acceptance of one's responsibilities? Is this wishful idealism? What is it that in Bonhoeffer's conception of things makes possible this naturalness in a life of faith? Would not all believers wish they had it?

His views on the fusion of the "two realms"<sup>48</sup> lay out before us his canvas for success.

### 2.4.3 Two Realms into One: Participation

As we travel along this road, a large part of traditional Christian ethical thought stands like a Colossus obstructing our way. Since the beginnings of Christian ethics after New Testament times, the dominant basic conception, consciously or unconsciously determining all ethical thought, has been that

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<sup>48</sup> *Ethics*, pp. 55ff.

two realms bump against each other: one divine, holy, supernatural, and Christian; the other worldly, profane, natural, and unchristian. This view reached its first peak in the High Middle Ages, and its second in the pseudo-Reformation thought of the post-Reformation period. (E 55-56)

More succinctly put, the two realms consist of ‘faith’ and ‘reason’. Consequently we should try to uncover the nature of ‘faith’ since we rarely question the nature of ‘reason’. Ebeling writes:

The right understanding of the relation between faith and reason has to prove itself by its ability to maintain two statements in all their fullness and to interpret them each in its own distinct reference as valid without limitation, viz.— Faith is the death of reason, and: Faith stands in agreement with reason. But to do that it is necessary to know what faith means. (Ebeling 116)

Ebeling then tries to define faith by proposing things faith does, or demands, or promotes, or is interested in. Then he says, “faith can and must become the advocate of reason against human irrationality” (Ebeling 1963, 116-8).

However, this does not provide a definition of faith. In order to understand why, as Ebeling says, “an irrational faith is just as nonsensical as a rational faith” (116), one may call on Kierkegaard’s shortest, yet most accurate definition of faith: “Faith is a passion.”

When Socrates believed that there was a God, he held fast to the *objective uncertainty* with the whole passion of his inwardness, and it is precisely in this contradiction and in this risk, that faith is rooted. Now [i.e. once faith has set in] it is otherwise. Instead of the objective uncertainty, there is here a certainty namely, that objectively it is absurd; and this absurdity, held fast in the passion of inwardness, is faith. ¶ [...] The absurd is—that the eternal truth has come into being in time,<sup>49</sup> that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth, precisely like any other individual human being, quite indistinguishable from other individuals. (CUPP 188)

On the following page Kierkegaard adds this: “For the absurd is the object of faith, and the only object that can be believed.” Paganism, Kierkegaard wrote elsewhere, “has no such example as Abraham, offering his son for no other reason than God proving his servant” (FeT 69). Faith may redirect its focus from any other initial object to the incarnate

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<sup>49</sup> For Christians, at any rate.



Son, humanly speaking the nature or character of faith has not changed: it still remains out of the reach of reason (see 1Co 1: 18-20). “Faith is this paradox, and the single individual is quite unable to make himself intelligible to anyone” (FeT 83-84).

Once this is admitted, everything else seems to fall into place. It closes the door to criticism, just as love and hope manage to close that door. Indeed reason loses its footing whenever it tries to criticize the latter two. Everybody loves a lover, no matter how foolish the act of love, or how undeserving its object. As for hope, it hatches slogans such as, ‘Yes we can!’ Why does not faith enjoy the same immunity? One may suspect this is due to the fact that faith is constantly being paraded as based on reason, as *rational*. Believers insist on seeing themselves as reasonable people.

Bonhoeffer has a better way. Faith takes on its own defence, finds its own affirmation, its own base in and on ‘reason’ with no outside help, provided it proves itself in ‘participation’. Outside of participation, it loses its moorings, even its meaning. Bonhoeffer says: “Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection). Our relation to God is not a ‘religious’ relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable—that is not authentic transcendence—but our relation to God is a new life in ‘existence for others’, through participation in the being of Jesus” (LPP 381). Faith is action; action is obedience to Christ. A key quotation in *The Cost of Discipleship* is this: “Only he who believes is obedient and only he who is obedient believes” (CD 1959, 54ff.). Passion thus plays a major role in ‘reason’ because it has far-reaching consequences for the real world. Uninvolved love is no love. Inert hope is no hope. Non-participative faith is no faith. “‘What must I believe?’ is the wrong question; antiquated controversies, especially those between the different sects; the Lutheran versus Reformed, and to some extent the Roman Catholic versus Protestant, are now unreal. They may at any time be revived *with passion*, but they no longer carry conviction” (LPP 382).

This eases our way into Bonhoeffer’s fusion of the ‘two realms’ into one. Once faith has fused the two, there is no more quarrel over sacred and profane. By faith the sacred becomes present and real, residing as it does at the heart of temporal existence, proving itself through temporal actions and results. “Realm thinking as static thinking is, theologically speaking, legalistic thinking” (E 60; see also Ebeling 1963, 116). A deficient

faith rejoices wherever reason proves deficient, because then the threatening qualities of reason are weakened (see Ebeling 1963, 117), but then the believer's honesty becomes suspect. Bonhoeffer sums up:

There are not two realities, but *only one reality*, and that is God's reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world. We stand at one and the same time in the reality of God and in the reality of the world. The reality of Christ includes within itself the reality of the world. [...] It is a denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to wish to be a 'Christian,' without seeing and recognizing the world in Christ. [...] Rather the whole reality of the world has already been drawn into and is held together in Christ. ¶ Thinking in terms of two realms understands the paired concepts worldly-Christian, natural-supernatural, profane-sacred, rational-revelational, as ultimate static opposites that designate certain given entities that are mutually exclusive. [...] Things work out quite differently when the reality of God and the reality of the world are recognized in Christ. In that way the world, the natural, the profane, and reason are seen as included in God from the beginning. [...] Still, that which is Christian is not identical with the worldly, the natural with the supernatural, the revelational with the rational. Rather, the unity that exists between them is given only in the Christ-reality, and that means only as accepted by faith (E 58-59). [...] A world existing on its own, withdrawn from the law of Christ, falls prey to the severing of all bonds and to arbitrariness. A Christianity that withdraws from the world falls prey to unnaturalness, irrationality, triumphalism, and arbitrariness. ¶ Since ethical thinking in terms of realms is overcome by faith in the revelation of ultimate reality in Jesus Christ, it follows that there is no real Christian existence outside the reality of the world and no real worldliness outside the reality of Jesus Christ [...] there is nowhere to retreat from the world, neither externally nor into the inner life. (E 61; italics added)

Such is Bonhoeffer's secret for harmony between faith and reason in the Christian life. For sure, only passion has the power to utter such a confession. Each one is faced with the decision to heed or to discard, to join or to abstain.

Bonhoeffer's estimation of 'religion' has essentially four aspects, and they are:<sup>50</sup>

(1) calling on God in the role of the *deus ex machina* when all other avenues have been tried; God then becomes "the solution [to our] needs and conflicts" (LPP 341);

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<sup>50</sup> This list closely follows that found in R. Gregor Smith's "Introduction" in WoCA 15.

(2) “methodism,” or “individualistic piety”: individuals “must be shown that [they are], in fact, deeply involved in such problems, needs, and conflicts, without admitting or knowing it. If that can be done, [...] then this man can now be claimed for God, and methodism can celebrate its triumph” (LPP 341);

(3) a “metaphysical view of transcendence” that leads to “thinking in two realms,” i.e. the natural and the supernatural (E 55ff.);

(4) “a special compartment of life, or ‘being religious in a particular way’” (LPP 361).

For Bonhoeffer, religion fosters “an attitude which regards man’s life as being something completed by the addition of God” (WoCA 15) in the place of a fully internalized divinity. Bonhoeffer’s conception of ‘religion’ excludes Christianity’s endorsement of foundational myths and miracles: “My view is that the full content, including the ‘mythological’ concepts must be kept—the New Testament is not a mythological clothing of a universal truth; this mythology (resurrection etc.) is the thing itself—but the concepts must be interpreted in such a way as not to make religion a precondition of faith (see Paul and circumcision)” (LPP 329).

Myths create difficulties for many who, after Bonhoeffer, have tried to re-interpret them (e.g. Bultmann, Gogarten, Vahanian). In his view myths are acceptable provided one is not led victim to the above listed ‘religious’ ways (more on this # 3). Bonhoeffer makes us aware of the fact that over the centuries, religious traditions have put asunder what Christ has joined together: “In the dispensation of the fullness of the times [God gathered] together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth” (Eph 1: 10). Against the temptation to discard “this world,” it is worth repeating what Bonhoeffer said: “This world must not be prematurely written off; [...] in this the Old and New Testaments are at one. [...] Christ takes hold of a man at the centre of his life” (LPP 337). Our present *interregnum* drags on; is the world even close to maturity?

## CHAPTER 3

### 3. Answering the Spiritual Call for a World Come of Age

In 1962, William Hamilton<sup>51</sup> said: “The process of secularization has generally been treated as a calamity, or at least as a serious deviation that ought to be arrested. But in this historical survey Bonhoeffer really tries to reclaim the heritage of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment as good, desirable and necessary to the Christian” (WoCA 150-1). For Eberhard Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s idea is that the present period of our history ‘without God’ should be blessed rather than condemned” (BWCA 57).

The quest for a non-religious interpretation of Biblical concepts was made mandatory once it became clear that the world is rapidly coming of age.<sup>52</sup> The world discovers it can live without God in every area of life;<sup>53</sup> theologians mindful of intellectual integrity realize the serious implications of this for their faith and for Christianity. If, as Christians believe, God is God and Jesus is the Christ whose mission is to rule over the aeons—*a fortiori* over this maturing religionless world (LPP 281)<sup>54</sup>—the new reality commands biblical reinterpretations that will help understand “the world better than it understands itself, but not religiously” (LPP 328). To borrow from Vahanian, even if “institutions of Western culture that are catalyzing the present spiritual crisis” are the historical product of “our ‘Christianity’” (LPP 280; see above # 2.1), the other Christianity, i.e. the untainted one “hidden in Christ” (Col 3: 3), “must dissociate itself from [these institutions] in order to develop. [...] the task is to say all things in a new way without proclaiming insidious

<sup>51</sup> In the sixties, William Hamilton joined the ranks of the theathanatologists, i.e. the ‘God-is-dead’ movement. See Lloyd Steffen, “The Dangerous God: A Profile of William Hamilton”, *Christian Century*, 27 September 1989: 844.

<sup>52</sup> Vahanian: “In the Middle Ages, religion was in charge of the secular, fostering it; now it must itself come of age through the secular, should this entail its own secularization” (2008, 53).

<sup>53</sup> “God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy and religion...” (LPP 360).

<sup>54</sup> As a rule, Bonhoeffer referred to the concept as a “process within Western civilization”, as opposed to “a statistical calculation on a man-made chart of human progress” (Bethge, *in* BWCA 56).

novelties. The time has come to proclaim the gospel in a new, bold manner, yet without proclaiming a new gospel” (WWI 236).

Would it be fair to condemn the church indiscriminately for the direction it has taken? The march of humankind knows the same stops and starts as the empirical sciences do. To grow is the property of that which is imperfect, and a fixed theology or orthodoxy is a dying theology or orthodoxy.<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer makes the case for a spiritual progression in the Western world.

The following, although already quoted in a slightly different context (see # 2.3), needs to be quoted once more since it runs with the flow of events we have known since Bonhoeffer wrote it:

Our whole nineteen-hundred-year-old Christian preaching and theology rest on the ‘religious *a priori*’ of mankind. Christianity has always been a form—perhaps the true form—of ‘religion’. But if one day it becomes clear that this *a priori* does not exist at all, but has been a historically conditioned and transient form of human self-expression, and if therefore man becomes radically religionless—and I think that that is already more or less the case [...] what does that mean for Christianity? [...] If [...] our final judgment must be that the western form of Christianity, too, was only a preliminary stage to a complete absence of religion, what kind of a situation emerges for us, for the church? (LPP 280)

Perhaps the time has come for the religious *a priori* to be indeed officially declared “a historically conditioned and transient form of human self-expression.” Perhaps Christianity has in effect been the true form of religion,<sup>56</sup> but indeed a “preliminary stage to com-

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<sup>55</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, defending his own spiritual journey, contended: “The only worthwhile reality in this world is a passion for growth. [...] The origin of my faith represents but an infinitesimal element in a much wider and much more secure process, common to all mankind” (my translation. See Maurice Boutin, “*Genèse du croire – Teilhard de Chardin*,” Public lecture, Ville de Laval, March 2006, and Montréal, Oct. 2006). See also Voltaire who “argued that the history of humankind was no more than the history of a progressive understanding of ourselves and our institutions, and our efforts to adjust to that ever-clearer understanding” (Gonzalez 1984 - vol. 1, 193). Bonhoeffer even hints at a revision of the Apostles’ Creed (see LPP 382). Jesus can very well be “‘the same’ yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13 : 8); and yet, but adjusting to him and his teachings is an ongoing process.

<sup>56</sup> Keeping in mind that the incipient church failed to suppress ‘religion’ after what is perceived as a promising debut (see # 2).

plete absence of religion.” These conclusions are possible, given that so far Christianity is the only ‘faith system’ whose open-endedness makes allowance for its theologians to examine the eventually non-religious character of its own ‘religious’ texts and thereby suggest that ‘the time of religion is over’ (see LPP 279). As Bultmann says, “The Christian faith, by de-divinizing the world, allowed it to appear in its pure worldliness. It disclosed and evoked the freedom of man from the world, freedom from all powers which can encounter man from out of the world” (WoCA 260). Anyone familiar with the Christian authors quoted in the opening paragraphs of the present chapter knows that they disagree among themselves on several fundamental issues. That is in line with Christianity’s afore-mentioned open-endedness: they introduce a diversity of voices, they are representative of the progress made since the first centuries of Christianity, and they allow for the “freedom of the spirit” initially suppressed for the sake of unity.<sup>57</sup>

Let us follow the chain of events that in Bonhoeffer’s view has led to the present religionless stage, one during which Christianity is obviously meeting the coming of age of a world on its way to the universal lordship of Jesus as the Christ.<sup>58</sup> The signs first appeared, not with the Enlightenment, but in the thirteenth century, he claims. The substance of this chain of events, and the signs confirming the coming-of-age theory are pre-

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<sup>57</sup> Remember Harnack’s remarks on that period (quoted # 2.3): “The unity in temper and disposition resting on faith in the saving revelation of God in Christ, permitted the highest degree of freedom in knowledge, *the results of which were absolutely without control* as soon as the preacher or the writer was recognized as a true teacher, that is inspired by the Spirit of God” (Harnack 11905 - vol. 1, 166-7; italics added). The freedom that was shunned—although it still represents a threat: “It is a perpetual warning to the theologian of the danger he stands in, as he pursues the ends of scholarship” (KaM 2, 208)—is now welcomed in theological circles, except among staunch fundamentalists: “This is just as great a danger for conservative theologians, though no doubt they can shelter behind their orthodoxy and remain blissfully unconscious of it” (KaM 2, 208).

<sup>58</sup> Is such a prospect for a world coming of age even conceivable outside of a ‘religious’ framework? “Contrary to Bonhoeffer, the emergence of methodological atheism does not mean that we are moving toward an age of no religion at all, but that the historical consciousness of Western man has undergone such a transmutation that the traditional understanding of religiosity as a special province of being has gone through a process of obliteration. But the result will be, if indeed it is not yet, a new characterization of man as *homo religiosus*” (NOG 30). Barth says religion is not about to go, but rather that “as sin, religion can be condemned, justified, sanctified, restored, and fulfilled by grace” (DBTR 182). Dumas contends that Barth and Bonhoeffer simply misunderstood each other, given the former’s dialectical approach and the latter’s paradoxical approach (see DBTR 180-184).

sented in two letters Bonhoeffer wrote in 1944—one on June 8, the second on July 16.<sup>59</sup> Bonhoeffer begins by saying: “I’ll try to define my position from the historical angle.”

*8 June 1944* – [LPP 325] The movement that began about the thirteenth century (I am not going to get involved in any argument about the exact date) towards the autonomy of man (in which I should include the discovery of the laws by which the world lives and deals with itself in science, social and political matters, art, ethics, and religion) has in our time reached an undoubted completion. Man has learnt to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the ‘working hypothesis’ called ‘God’. In questions of science, art, and ethics this has become an understood thing at which one now hardly dares to tilt. But for the last hundred years or so it has [326 >] also become increasingly true of religious questions—it is becoming evident that everything gets along without ‘God’- and, in fact, just as well as before. As in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally, ‘God’ is being pushed more and more out of life, losing more and more ground.

Roman Catholic and Protestant historians agree that it is in this development that the great defection from God, from Christ is to be seen; and the more they claim and play off God and Christ against it, the more the development considers itself to be anti-Christian. The world that has become conscious of itself and the laws that govern its own existence has grown self-confident in what seems to us to be an uncanny way. False developments and failures do not make the world doubt the necessity of the course that it is taking, or of its development; they are accepted with fortitude and detachment as part of the bargain, and even an event like the present war [WW II] is no exception. Christian apologetic has taken the most varied forms of opposition to this self-assurance. Efforts are made to prove to a world thus come of age that it cannot live without the tutelage of ‘God’. Even though there has been surrender on all secular problems, there still remain the so-called ‘ultimate questions’—death, guilt—to which only ‘God’ can give an answer, and because of which we need God and the Church and the pastor. So we live, in some degree, on these so-called ultimate questions of humanity. But what if one day they no longer exist as such, if they too can be answered ‘without God’? Of course, we now have the secularized offshoots of Christian theology, namely existentialist philosophy and the psychotherapists, who demonstrate to secure, contented, and happy mankind that it is really unhappy and desperate and simply unwilling to admit that it is in a predicament about which it knows nothing, and from which only they can rescue it. Wherever there is health,

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<sup>59</sup> Because of their importance and clarity it is imperative that the texts be cited extensively. Page numbers are inserted within the text to facilitate access to the referenced edition. Arrowheads point to the top of the page.

strength, security, simplicity, they scent luscious fruit to gnaw at or to lay their pernicious eggs in. They set themselves to drive people to inward despair, and then the game is in their hands. That is secularized methodism. And whom does it touch? A small number of intellectuals, of degenerates, of people who regard themselves as the most important thing in the world, and who therefore like to busy themselves [327 >] with themselves. The ordinary man, who spends his everyday life at work and with his family, and of course with all kinds of diversions, is not affected. He has neither the time nor the inclination to concern himself with his existential despair, or to regard his perhaps modest share of happiness as a trial, a trouble, or a calamity.

The attack by Christian apologetic on the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second place ignoble, and in the third place unchristian. Pointless, because it seems to me like an attempt to put a grown-up man back into adolescence, i.e. to make him dependent on things on which he is, in fact, no longer dependent, and thrusting him into problems that are, in fact, no longer problems to him. Ignoble, because it amounts to an attempt to exploit man's weakness for purposes that are alien to him and to which he has not freely assented. Unchristian, because it confuses Christ with one particular stage in man's religiousness, i.e. with a human law. More about this later.

But first, a little more about the historical position. The question is: Christ and the world that has come of age. The weakness of liberal theology was that it conceded to the world the right to determine Christ's place in the world; in the conflict between the Church and the world it accepted the comparatively easy terms of peace that the world dictated. Its strength was that it did not try to put the clock back, and that it genuinely accepted the battle (Troeltsch), even though this ended with its defeat.

Defeat was followed by surrender, and by an attempt to make a completely fresh start based on the fundamentals of the Bible and the Reformation. Heim sought, along pietist and methodist lines, to convince the individual man that he was faced with the alternative 'despair or Jesus'. He gained 'hearts'. Althaus (carrying forward the modern and positive line with a strong confessional emphasis) tried to wring from the world a place for Lutheran teaching (ministry) and Lutheran worship, and otherwise left the world to its own devices. Tillich set out to interpret the evolution of the world (against its will) in a religious sense—to give it its shape through religion. That was very brave of him, but the world unseated him and went on by itself; he, too, sought to understand the world better than it understood itself; but it felt that it was [328 >] completely misunderstood, and rejected the imputation. (Of course, the world *must* be understood better than it understands itself, but not 'religiously' as the religious socialists wanted.) Barth was the first to realize the mistake that all these attempts (which were all, in fact, still sailing, though unintentionally, in the channel of liberal theology) were making in leaving clear a space for religion in the world or against the world.



He brought in against religion the God of Jesus Christ, '*pneuma against sarx*'. That remains his greatest service (his Epistle to the Romans, second edition, in spite of all the neo-Kantian eggshells). Through his later dogmatics, he enabled the Church to effect this distinction, in principle, all along the line. It was not in ethics, as is often said, that he subsequently failed—his ethical observations, as far as they exist, are just as important as his dogmatic ones; it was that in the non-religious interpretation of theological concepts he gave no concrete guidance, either in dogmatics or in ethics. There lies his limitation, and because of it his theology of revelation has become positivist, a 'positivism of revelation', as I put it.

The Confessing Church has now largely forgotten all about the Barthian approach, and has lapsed from positivism into conservative restoration. The important thing about that Church is that it carries on the great concepts of Christian theology; but it seems as if doing this is gradually just about exhausting it. It is true that there are in those concepts the elements of genuine prophecy (among them two things that you mention: the claim to truth, and mercy) and of genuine worship; and to that extent the Confessing Church gets only attention, hearing, and rejection. But both of them remain undeveloped and remote, because there is no interpretation of them.

Those who, like e.g. Schütz or the Oxford Group or the Berneucheners, miss the 'movement' and the 'life', are dangerous reactionaries; they are reactionary because they go right back behind the approach of the theology of revelation and seek for 'religious' renewal. They simply have not yet understood the problem at all, and their talk is entirely beside the point. There is no future for them (though the Oxford Group would have the best chance if they were not so completely without biblical substance).

Bultmann seems to have somehow felt Barth's limitations, but [329 >] he misconstrues them in the sense of liberal theology, and so goes off into the typical liberal process of reduction—the 'mythological' elements of Christianity are dropped, and Christianity is reduced to its 'essence'. My view is that the full content, including the 'mythological' concepts must be kept—the New Testament is not a mythological clothing of a universal truth; this mythology (resurrection etc.) is the thing itself—but the concepts must be interpreted in such a way as not to make religion a precondition of faith (cf. Paul and circumcision). Only in that way, I think, will liberal theology be overcome (and even Barth is still influenced by it, though negatively) and at the same time its question be genuinely taken up and answered (as is not the case in the Confessing Church's positivism of revelation!).

Thus the world's coming of age is no longer an occasion for polemics and apologetics, but is now really better understood than it understands itself, namely on the basis of the gospel and in the light of Christ.

*16 July 1944* – [359] On the historical side: There is one great development that leads to the world's autonomy. In theology one sees it first in Lord Her-

bert of Cherbury, who maintains that reason is sufficient for religious knowledge. In ethics it appears in Montaigne and Bodin with their substitution of rules of life for the commandments. In politics Machiavelli detaches politics from morality in general and founds the doctrine of ‘reasons of State’. Later, and very differently from Machiavelli, but tending like him towards the autonomy of human society, comes Grotius, setting up his natural law as international law, which is valid *etsi deus non daretur*, ‘even if there were no God’. The philosophers provide the finishing touches: on the one hand we have the deism of Descartes, who holds that the world is a mechanism, running by itself with no interference from God; and on the other hand the pantheism of Spinoza, who says that God is nature. In the last resort, Kant is a deist, and Fichte and Hegel are pantheists. Everywhere the thinking is directed towards the autonomy of man and the world.

(It seems that in the natural sciences the process begins with Nicolas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno and their ‘heretical’ doctrine of the infinity of the universe. The classical cosmos was finite, like the [360 >] created world of the Middle Ages. An infinite universe, however it may be conceived, is self-subsisting, *etsi deus non daretur*. It is true that modern physics is not as sure as it was about the infinity of the universe, but it has not gone back to the earlier conceptions of its finitude.)

God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy and religion (Feuerbach!). For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated. A scientist or physician who sets out to edify is a hybrid.

Anxious souls will ask what room there is left for God now; and as they know of no answer to the question, they condemn the whole development that has brought them to such straits. I wrote to you before about the various emergency exits that have been contrived; and we ought to add to them the *salto mortale* (death-leap) back into the Middle Ages. But the principle of the Middle Ages is heteronomy in the form of clericalism; a return to that can only be a counsel of despair, and it would be at the cost of intellectual honesty. It is a dream that reminds one of the song *O wüsst ich doch den Weg zuriick, den weiten Weg ins Kinderland* [Oh if only I knew the way back, the long way into to the land of childhood]. There is no such way—at any rate not if it means deliberately abandoning our mental integrity; the only way is that of Matt. 18.3,<sup>60</sup> i.e. through repentance, through *ultimate* honesty.

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<sup>60</sup> “I promise you this, if you don’t change and become like a child you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.”

And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do recognize—before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34).<sup>61</sup> The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8: 17<sup>62</sup> makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by (361 >) virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.

Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. This will probably be the starting-point for our 'secular interpretation'.

These pages are self-explanatory. *Honesty* under one form or another is brought up five times in these six pages, and the expression *etsi deus non daretur*, three times. And the main point, i.e. the *coming of age* of the world is mentioned five times.

"Theologians at their wits' end" (LPP 341) who fail to understand the significance of the process are disoriented. The more they apprehend society's intellectual maturity and try to convince the people that God and the Jesus of their traditions is displeased with their new direction, the more the beneficiaries of the said maturity stay at a distance. They would not allow their intellectual honesty to be questioned; they would show no interest in how or where their former teachers went wrong; they would lump the whole in 'religious' bias or *humbug* (see LPP 383), and want to have little to do with anyone who

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<sup>61</sup> "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"

<sup>62</sup> 'So God's promise came true: He healed our diseases and made us well.'

makes a show out of it.<sup>63</sup> Here is how the French historian Henri Guillemin (1903-1992) explains this reaction:

Reaching out to the human heart, and moving souls with untainted words proved a simple enough undertaking. The situation is altogether different once words are worn out, tarnished, sold out, and the listener receives them filtered through innumerable and permanent alterations. You say, ‘Jesus Christ’, and they who listen are hearing Escobar or Tartuffe. You say, ‘Sermon on the Mount’, and they are immediately thinking of Jan Hus’, Savonarola’s, and Giordano Bruno’s assassinations by fire. You say, ‘gospel’, and people understand Syllabus, and papal infallibility. (Guillemin 74-75; my translation)<sup>64</sup>

That “man *has learnt* to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the ‘working hypothesis’ called ‘God’” (LPP 325), is not due to some revolt against God or to the ‘sinful nature’ of the human subject, as so many religious circles today like to say. Humans *have learnt*, and they refuse to be intimidated into rejoining the ‘religious’ fold. Bonhoeffer’s reference to Tillich’s attempt is also most relevant:<sup>65</sup> to interpret “the evolution of the world (against its will) in a religious sense—to give it its shape through religion” (LPP 327) failed because, consciously or not, people today are often convinced that ‘religion’ cannot have been at the root of the present maturity. They know for instance that ‘circumcision’ (to use Bonhoeffer’s reference to how Paul had understood the issue, LPP 281), heeding an injunction to wear or not a hat or a scarf (see 1Co 11: 15), enforcing a woman’s silence (see 1Co 14: 34), attending services regularly, or not taking a pill, or bowing to any other ‘religious’ requirement cannot possibly be the cause of this coming of age. It is rather the heart of the kerygma heard for the past two

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<sup>63</sup> See Bonhoeffer’s own attraction to the religionless person, and his avowed discomfort when in the presence of religious people (LPP 281, quoted # 2.4.2).

<sup>64</sup> « Toucher des cœurs, remuer des âmes avec des mots vierges l’entreprise était simple. Il en va tout autrement quand il s’agit de mots usés, ternis, prostitués et que l’auditeur ne perçoit qu’à travers d’innombrables et permanentes altérations. Vous dites : ‘Jésus-Christ’, et qui vous écoute entend Escobar ou Tartufe. Vous dites : ‘Sermon sur la montagne’, et l’interlocuteur pense aussitôt à l’assassinat par le feu des Jean Hus, Savonarole et Giordano Bruno. Vous dites : ‘Évangile’, et les gens comprennent Syllabus, et infaillibilité pontificale. »

<sup>65</sup> No claim to a good knowledge of Tillich is here implied; Bonhoeffer’s word is simply accepted.

thousand years, the “claim to truth and mercy” (LPP 328), the fruit “of the gospel and the light of Christ” (LPP 329), the trials, and the results of experimenting the unadulterated claims of Jesus Christ lost in the sea of rules and regulations that have done the work. Hence, people like Bonhoeffer can claim they “know the world better than it knows itself”, because they see the roots of this evolution, while the world ignorantly lumping the treasures of Christ with ‘religion’ is unaware of it. This is why the world “felt it was completely misunderstood,” also why those who seek “religious renewal” have no future (LPP 328), and finally, why wherever Christ is insistently lumped together with ‘religion’ Bonhoeffer’s message deserves to be understood.

Bonhoeffer challenges the self-righteous: “The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age” (LPP 362). Coming of age does not represent a threat to Christianity; it is rather an integral part of its march forward, which feeds Bonhoeffer’s ‘prophecy’ that henceforth Christianity will exert an influence equal to, if not greater than, medieval Christendom has done. Bethge tells us at what point Bonhoeffer’s contribution is unique:

The devaluation of religion in favour of faith was commonplace in the Barthian group. The doctrine of the religious *a priori* is the key of R. Seeberg’s (his teacher) theology and was, as such, soon the target for Bonhoeffer’s criticism. Christ as the Lord, and not as the object of a religion, was his presupposition all the time. All this had been said or more or less explained in Bonhoeffer’s theology. ¶ If in abbreviation it can be said that Bonhoeffer’s peculiar Christology is not what is new in the letters, it is now to be said that the corresponding background, ‘the world come of age’, is new. [...] Of course, secularization had been greeted before Bonhoeffer by many other sons of Christendom, but by none with this Christology as a background, or *by doing it in the name of Christ*. The new discovery seems to be the full and positive value given to modern secularization accepted as our peculiar *Christian heritage, not in spite of, but because of, our faith*. Secularization is to be understood not just as defection and guilt but as the necessary business of Christianity. Its promise lies in throwing out all idolatries. Secularization might frighten the present churches, because they have made it a terrible demon or evil. Yet with Bonhoeffer it is no longer the menacing giant but the necessary and positive counterpoint in God’s symphony. (WoCA 76-77; italics added)

How Bonhoeffer manages this is as simple as the gospel’s simplicity. The centre of his optimism always is the person of Jesus; the God-man is alive and reigns at the centre

of the world's reality. He asks: "Aren't righteousness and the Kingdom of God on earth the focus of everything?" (LPP 286) For him, "The world has no reality of its own independent of God's revelation in Christ" (E 58). Notwithstanding his language, Bonhoeffer insists 'religion' has nothing to do with faith, even where faith is inexorably linked to mythological elements.<sup>66</sup>

The point he is making is this: if Jesus is but an object of faith standing on no other foundation than every other focus of religious beliefs known to humanity, then of course the present times call for pessimism; but Jesus is not that. Worldliness, i.e. everything that is now happening in science, politics, history, theology, the church, does not preclude Christ, and Christ does not preclude all that is happening:

The will of God, as it was revealed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, embraces the whole of reality. There is access to this wholeness, without being torn apart by manifold influences, only through faith in Jesus Christ, 'in whom the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col 2: 9; 1: 19), 'through whom everything is reconciled, whether on earth or in heaven' (Col 1: 19-20), whose body, that is, the church-community, is the fullness of the One who fills all in all (Eph 1: 23). Faith in this Jesus Christ is the single source of all good. (E 75)

Bethge said of Bonhoeffer: "It seems that he would rather fall into positivism than into idealism, in order not to lose contact with the earth. But it is not positivism, because reality is never something in itself. It is only reality under the Lordship of Christ" (WoCA 42). Thus, Bonhoeffer understands the past, present, and future of Christian faith as inextricably linked to the Christ who is gradually replacing 'religion' in the hearts of the people. It is therefore an affront to the world to view it as an object of God's wrath doomed to destruction. Modern society's unstoppable march is welcome; it is legitimate and

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<sup>66</sup> "Mythology is the thing itself," he said (LPP 329). Arbitrating a debate between Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, Hans W. Bartsch helps us understand the potential dissociation of 'religion' from a faith that remains inseparable from mythology, "Religion is *extricably* bound up with mythological language," he writes. He then adds, "Religion is *inexorably* bound to myth." The focus is on the two adverbs that define the relation. Religion *can* extricate itself from myth, even if it is *inexorably* bound to it. Once this is admitted—Bartsch makes a compelling argument—one understands Bonhoeffer's process of extricating religion from this "thing itself" that serves as the vehicle to the kerygma of the faith. "Demythologizing is faith reflecting on the language it uses, despite the fact that it goes on using that language and can never dispense from it" (Bartsch *in* KaM 2, 213-5).

healthy to challenge and recycle everything it has been fed by religion through the years. As Bonhoeffer says, “The attack by Christian apologetic on the adulthood of the world is pointless, ignoble, and unchristian” (LPP 327). This attack is indicative not of a serene faith, but of fear—the fear that *not attacking* puts faith at risk. It is the old system of defence: if your arguments are too weak to convince the party you fear, then denigrate and undermine its system. Bonhoeffer denounces this lack of intellectual honesty (see # 2.4.2). “The lack of intellectual honesty in matters of faith,” writes Ebeling,

is a symptom of secret unbelief, of an unbelief that thinks it must isolate faith from reality. [...] the question of faith is neither put in the form: What *must* I believe? [LPP 382]—that would be making faith a law to reason—nor yet in the form: What *can* I believe?—that would be making reason a law to faith. The question of faith must rather be, to turn again to Bonhoeffer’s own words: “What do we really believe—i.e. in such a way as to stake our whole lives upon it? (Ebeling 118)

Can one really stake one’s whole life on a belief that is being forced on a human mind that consciously—or even just instinctively—disagrees with its content, on a mind that honestly seeks to distance itself from a “proclamation of God’s revelation which presents its truths for mere acceptance without being able to show clearly how they are related to the life of the world come of age”? (Preter in WoCA 105) This is the more evident where it is taught that Jesus despised earthly life. Bonhoeffer suggests that Jesus’ question, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” has been wrongly interpreted. He asks:

Does the question about saving one's soul appear in the Old Testament at all? Are not righteousness and the Kingdom of God on earth the focus of everything, and is it not true that Rom. 3.24ff.<sup>67</sup> is not an individualistic doctrine of salvation, but the culmination of the view that God alone is righteous? It is not with the beyond that we are concerned, but with this world as created and preserved, subjected to laws, reconciled, and restored. What is above this world is, in the gospel, intended to exist for this world; I mean that, not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystic pietistic, ethical theology, but in the

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<sup>67</sup> “But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins. ... This also shows that God is right when he accepts people who have faith in Jesus.”

biblical sense of the creation and of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (LPP 286)

### 3.1 “*How Shall We Then Live?*”<sup>68</sup>

It is one thing to suggest that Christianity is or should be pleased with a world come of age; but it is another to try to understand the role that church and clergy, society and individual should play in it. As we look at the present situation, one might well sympathize with Karl Barth’s scepticism: “For one thing, starting out again from the humanity of God, there can be no counting seriously on real ‘outsiders,’ on a ‘world come of age,’ but only with one that thinks itself of age (and daily proves that that is just what it is not)” (KBTF 61). One might also recall Vahanian questioning the “claim that the Christian era is just about to begin” (DG 85). What are Bonhoeffer’s answers?

### 3.2 Church and Clergy

From the outset it is important to establish that the focus of our attention is Bonhoeffer’s evaluation of the church’s place and role in the world come of age as he saw it in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Unfortunately space does not allow for a study of how his views on the church evolved from more idealistic to less favourable ones. Suffice it to say that, given the political circumstances prevailing in Nazi Germany (1933-1945), Bonhoeffer had ample reason for gradual disenchantment up until he was finally hanged at Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945, a few weeks before Hitler committed suicide.

When we know the importance the church had had in his life and the role he had played in her midst prior to his imprisonment, we can appreciate what little Bonhoeffer said about it in the *Letters*. From 1933 on, a major shift in his ecclesiology did take place (see Hopper 1975, 51-52). At one point, in answer to a question put to him by Bethge, he shows a readiness to share more on the subject: “Now for your question whether there is any ‘ground’ left for the Church, or whether that ground has gone for good...” (LPP 329). As John Phillips points out, the issue was not raised again, and we are left with

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<sup>68</sup> The title of Francis A. Schaeffer’s book bearing the subtitle, “The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture” (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1976).



nothing but speculation. This shift is also confirmed by Hanfried Müller who, Hopper tells us,

underlines Bonhoeffer's growing disenchantment with the church, his recognition, especially in the prison years, of the church's self-serving character. Müller's point is that Bonhoeffer's later thought [...] as over against *Ethics* and the earlier writings—is characterized by the elimination of [...] (a triumphant Christ and church) in favour of [...] (a humiliated Christ and church). (Hopper 52)

It does not mean that Bonhoeffer discarded the necessity of the church's role in the world; only that he saw her role differently and spoke of her as a body that should reflect more the simplicity of the gospel message. Müller's reading is that in the end Bonhoeffer favoured a church rid of her clerical status and all secular privileges. What should remain in terms of visibility—insofar as prayer, meditation, and Scripture reading are visible exercises for the inner witness—is the “‘secret discipline’ in the lives of Christians. All this, Müller feels, is an aspect of Bonhoeffer's non-religious interpretation of the Biblical message in the midst of a ‘world come of age’ ” (Hopper 1975, 52).

Bonhoeffer did ask whether Christianity is a “preliminary stage to a complete absence of religion,” and he adds that if that is the case then, “what kind of situation emerges for us, for the Church? [...] In what way are we ‘religionless-secular’ Christians? In what way are we the *ἐκκλησία* [ecclesia], those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favoured, but rather as belonging wholly to the world?” (LPP 280-1) That was in April 1944. Some three months later, he gave a lengthy answer to these questions:

The Church is the Church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. In particular, our own church will have to take the field against the vices of *hubris*, power-worship, envy, and humbug, as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak of moderation, purity, trust, loyalty, constancy, patience, discipline, humility, contentment, and modesty. It must not under-estimate the importance of human example (which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so impor-

tant to Paul's teaching); it is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power. (LPP 382-3)

Bonhoeffer then expresses the hope of having the opportunity to expand later on the issue "of 'example' and its place in the New Testament; it is something that we have almost entirely forgotten," he says (LPP 383). Immediately following, he writes something that must have shocked more than one reader: "Further: the question of revising the creeds (the Apostles' Creed); revision of Christian apologetics; reform of the training for the ministry and the pattern of clerical life." These and other things "we so often like to shirk," he adds. He understands he may not have the time or the opportunity to discuss them further, let alone to realize them. He simply concludes: "I hope it may be of some help for the church's future" (LPP 383).

As we have seen (see # 2.4.2), Bonhoeffer emphasizes honesty: "The Church must come out of its stagnation. We must move out again into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world, and risk saying controversial things, if we are to get down to the serious problems of life" (LPP 378). For Bonhoeffer, the believer cannot rest on the idea that it is fine to embrace whatever the church says; on the contrary, what one believes must be the fruit of personal conviction: "Karl Barth and the Confessing Church have encouraged us to entrench ourselves persistently behind the 'faith of the Church,' and evade the honest question as to what we ourselves really believe. That is why the air is not quite fresh, even in the Confessing Church" (LPP 382).

As to the way the church and its clergy are to address the world, if "one must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one" (LPP 369), then surely it is not the role of the clergy or anyone else to push others into these categories:

There is also a parallel isolation among the clergy, in what one might call the 'clerical' sniffing-around-after-people's-sins in order to catch them out. It is as if you could not know a fine house till you had found a cobweb in the furthest cellar, or as if you could not adequately appreciate a good play till you had seen how the actors behave offstage. [...] Regarded theologically, the error is twofold. First it is thought that a man can be addressed as a sinner only after his weaknesses and meannesses have been spied out. Secondly, it is

thought that a man's essential nature consists of his inmost and most intimate background; that is defined as his 'inner life', and it is precisely in those secret human places that God is to have his domain! ¶ On the first point it is to be said that man is certainly a sinner, but is far from being mean or common on that account. To put it rather tritely, were Goethe and Napoleon sinners because they were not always faithful husbands? It is not the sins of weakness, but the sins of strength, which matter here. It is not in the least necessary to spy out things; the Bible never does so. (LPP 345)

The majority of those who nowadays confess their Christian faith (see # 2.2) would no doubt also say they live "unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities." This, contends Bonhoeffer, is their way of "throwing [them]selves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not [their] sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane." And even where they are not in a position to clearly understand the process, Bonhoeffer thinks that this "is faith, that is *metanoia*; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian (see Jer. 45!). How can success make us arrogant, or failure lead us astray, when we share in God's sufferings through a life of this kind?" (LPP 369-370) This way of evaluating the 'ordinary folk' surfaces in Bonhoeffer's weighing the concept of "Unconscious Christianity," with which I'm more and more concerned" he says. "Lutheran dogmatists distinguished between *fides directa*, and a *fides reflexa*. They related this to the so-called children's faith, at baptism. I wonder whether this doesn't raise a far-reaching problem" (LPP 373). He comes to this again later (see LPP 380).

Bonhoeffer's most basic 'definition' of a Christian is taken from what, in his view, was Christ's own vision of humanity. The role of the clergy is to bring it the Word, not force their so-called 'superiority,' or even and especially their theology on it.<sup>69</sup> Neither should they discharge their frustration on those they deem not 'religious' enough. Never should they offer God as a last resort in obviously desperate situations; they should in-

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<sup>69</sup> "Antiquated controversies, especially those between the different sects; the Lutheran versus Reformed, and to some extent the Roman Catholic versus Protestant, are now unreal. They may at any time be revived with passion, but they no longer carry conviction" (LPP 382). Vahianian: "Even granting that these divisions were at one time valid for theological reasons, today they have become purely social and institutional: they have lost their theological justification. [...] In a post-Christian era, the sociological divisions of Christianity make no sense. They should not be sanctified, but denounced" (WWI 243).

stead examine what the world has to offer for solving difficult issues (see for instance LPP 381). But what is one to do about individuals who ‘feel no existential pain,’ to use a common expression? The solution is not to try to convince them that they are miserable! It is possible to draw wrong conclusions from their happy circumstances:

If anyone has no such difficulties, or if he refuses to go into these things, to allow others to pity him, then either he cannot be open to God; or else he must be shown that he is, in fact, deeply involved in such problems, needs, and conflicts, without admitting or knowing it. If that can be done [...] then this man can now be claimed for God, and methodism can celebrate its triumph. But if he cannot be brought to see and admit that his happiness is really an evil, his health sickness, and his vigour despair, the theologian is at his wits’ end. It’s a case of having to do either with a hardened sinner of a particularly ugly type, or with a man of ‘bourgeois complacency’, and the one is as far from salvation as the other. (LPP 341)

In this context Bethge writes: “The community of Christ is not the meeting-place of those removed from life, but the centre of life, the centre of men ‘who persevere together in the midst of the world, in the depths of it, in its trivialities and bondages’” (WoCA 43). That is what Jesus encountered and what he blessed in the people he met, as Bonhoeffer pointed out, e.g. in the centurion of Capernaum, the rich young man, the eunuch, Cornelius, Nathaniel, and others. (LPP 362)

It is not with the beyond that we are concerned, but with this world as created and preserved, subjected to laws, reconciled, and restored. What is above this world is, in the gospel, intended to exist for this world;<sup>70</sup> I mean that, not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystic pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of the creation and of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (LPP 286)

Contrast this with the confessional style that “renders Barth’s thought [...] unfit for true dialogue. It tends to become unilateral, simply making declarations in monologue form, with a kind of ‘impressive closed-mindedness’” (Dumas 1971, 25). Bethge says: “To state the position in greatly over-simplified terms, while the early Barth, desiring to proclaim God’s majesty, begins by removing him to a remote distance, Bonhoeffer, inspired

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<sup>70</sup> See Peter’s insight in these “...things the angels desire to look into” (1Pe 2: 12).

by the same desire to proclaim his majesty, begins by bringing him into close proximity” (DBTC 98). These examples are meant to single out not Barth, but what he represents in circles Bonhoeffer’s approach challenges.

Christianity teaches that the difference between the world of the Old Testament and that of the New is that Christ has extended God’s embrace from one elect nation to *every* nation under the sun. He offers no rebuke to those who *are not against* him (Mk 9: 40), and he leaves with the promise of constant support (Mt 28: 18). The role of the clergy—even if the following citation is not a direct reference to it—finds a good point of departure in the question Bonhoeffer is asking and the answers he gives:

Who is God? Not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence etc. That is not a genuine experience of God, but a partial extension of the world. Encounter with Jesus Christ. The experience that a transformation of all human life is given in the fact that 'Jesus is there only for others'. *His 'being there for others' is the experience of transcendence.* It is only this 'being there for others', maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection). Our relation to God is not a 'religious' relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable—that is not authentic transcendence—but our relation to God is a new life in 'existence for others', through participation in the being of Jesus. *The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbour who is within reach in any given situation.* (LPP 381; italics added)

Georges Bernanos is one author that deeply moved Bonhoeffer (see DBTC 103-4; 470-1). “He never tired of recommending Bernanos to his Finkenwaldians”, writes Bethge. “You must surely know Bernanos’ books?” asks Bonhoeffer, “When priests speak in them, their words carry weight. The reason is that they are not the products of some sort of verbalized reflection or observation but quite simply of daily, personal intercourse with the crucified Jesus Christ. These are the depths from which a word must come if it is to carry weight” (DBTC 471). Bernanos’ novel *Diary of a Country Priest*<sup>71</sup> is also evoked in Gabriel Vahanian’s *The Death of God*, in which he discusses a dialogue between two priests; it helps illustrate Bonhoeffer’s appreciation: One priest who has re-

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<sup>71</sup> In 1936 Hegner published the German edition of this book (see DBTC 470).

nounced his position in the church says to the other, “You must have long realized, [...] that I have, as they say, left the habit. [...] My heart though has not changed. Only it is now open to a conception of life more human and consequently more generous” (DG 116).

### 3.3 The Individual

#### 3.3.1 The ‘Folk’

In a world come of age, faith is what sustains the interim spiritual chaos while a *re*-formation is churning in the wings. The institutions the people have grown up in have been marred in blood and controversies. One often hears that these should be forgotten once and for all, with our minds set on the future. While this is true, endless scandals keep coming to the surface endlessly reminding the people of their history. They vote with their feet for a faith they would wish free from scandal, from legality, and from *ex-cathedra* pronouncements. Their maturity shows in the affirmation of their faith, however weak it may be, at the same time as they feel and know they have a right to disagree. Since the time Bonhoeffer made his observations, the situation has persisted: the people have ceased to “entrench [them]selves persistently behind the 'faith of the Church', and evade the honest question as to what [they themselves] really believe” (LPP 382).

In Bonhoeffer’s scheme of things, as in every other system where growth is expected, “there are degrees of knowledge, and degrees of significance” (LPP 286; see # 2.4.1). We will address the context more in detail below, but for now let us say that this axiom has been neglected in the outward conduct of the church, which tended to require the same level of spiritual knowledge and practice across all strata. Bonhoeffer takes these ‘degrees’ seriously: “The positivism of revelation makes it too easy for itself, by setting up, as it does in the last analysis, a law of faith, and so mutilates what is—by Christ’s incarnation!—a gift for us” (LPP 286). Presently, people uninterested in ‘religious’ guidance manage nonetheless to reach different stages of understanding, and remain, as it were, indifferent to the degree they are at. They do not feel ‘inferior’ partly because they have removed themselves from the position where they were told that they were. Different aspects of Jesus’ teachings are embraced and practiced; others are ignored or even rejected. The people are not uncomfortable with their choices. And as we have heard Bonhoeffer

say, it is dishonest to try to inculcate guilt in these consciences at ease. Therefore, there may have been and there certainly are Christians who even ignore that they are followers of Jesus at the same time as they honour his teachings both in speech and action. “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you,” said Jesus to some chief priests and leaders (Mt 21: 31). And yet, as Hamilton says, “It is not clear just who it is that is radically without religion. Is it all men, is it modern man, or is it a small group of men?” (WoCA 137) Here, we do have a clue from Bonhoeffer:

The human and the good should not be made into self-sufficient values, but they may and should be claimed for Jesus Christ, especially where, as an unconscious remnant, they represent a previous bond to the ultimate. It may often seem more serious to address such people simply as non-Christians and to urge them to confess their unbelief. But it would be more Christian to claim as Christians precisely such persons who no longer dare to call themselves Christians, and to help them with much patience to move toward confessing Christ. (E 169-170)<sup>72</sup>

According to Bethge, “The notion ‘coming of age’ is for Bonhoeffer, therefore, not the sum total of all those men who have reached maturity but a living declaration, a necessary risk in granting what in an irreversible process of adolescence *each man and group deserves*” (BWCA 57; italics added). This does not mean, he continues, that humans are

becoming better and better, ‘happy in [their] secularity and free of guilt’ [...] The main notion for Bonhoeffer is ‘responsibility,’ the irreversible capability and duty of adults individually to answer the questions of life in their own particular fields and within their own autonomous structures. [...] Bonhoeffer believed that the declaration ‘coming of age,’ in close connection with and out of his faith in the presence of the Crucified One, prevents the blessing from becoming a cheap adjustment to modern man. Christology protects man come of age from deifying or demonizing his secularity again, and from falling into hopeless scepticism. (BWCA 58)

The tax collector and the prostitute are accounted for and loved just as they are (Lk 7: 37-44). If one day they see a better perspective for their lives, and should they be in a

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<sup>72</sup> See earlier Bonhoeffer’s reference to ‘unconscious’ Christianity (LPP 373, 380). “In Tegel, the question of ‘unconscious Christianity’ occupied Bonhoeffer more and more” (E 170 n. 111).

position to embrace it whenever it shows up, the kingdom of God will have gone a few steps further on its march to the New Jerusalem. The throng of those eighty-five percent is peopled with Samsons, and Rahabs, and Jephthahs; in the New Testament Jesus has expanded the list, which Bonhoeffer has adroitly brought to our attention.<sup>73</sup>

These are the majority of the people. They are ‘*das Volk*’: they pray once in a while, and have their children baptized into the faith they were brought up in. They ask the clergy to bless their unions, and they recite prayers at funerals. Their ‘arcane discipline’ (more on this # 3.3.2) is restricted; their knowledge may be limited, but not so their humanity.

### 3.3.2 The Spiritually Mature

Although Bonhoeffer does not directly address the spiritually mature, and his expectations apparently do not segregate between ‘the folk’ and the more disciplined enclaves, their differences are nonetheless present in the assumptions he makes, i.e. the ‘degrees of knowledge’ have to have practical applications. He brings this up in close connection with the “preservation of the mysteries of the Christian faith” (LPP 286). The spiritually mature can be the recipients of any of the ‘gifts’ enumerated in chapter twelve of Paul’s *First letter to the Corinthians*. (The ‘folk’ are by no means excluded from these gifts! The Samsons and the Rahabs are not excused from faithfulness). Although everyone without exception is held to the highest standard (Mt 5: 48), Jesus also says: “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Lk 12: 48). Thus, in the eyes of their peers and of the world the spiritually mature are generally held to a higher standard: “Those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1Co 4: 2).

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<sup>73</sup> Comte-Sponville (see # 1.6) calls Georges Brassens (1921-1981)—a French popular singer and composer—a mentor in Christian morals and conduct; he has learned from him “more than from any priest [...] or philosopher” (Comte-Sponville 1995,43). The lyrics to a good number of his songs carry the pure Christian message, e.g. “L’Auvergnat.” - Another example is the early Bob Dylan (1941-) in the U.S: His song “The times they are a’changing” was profoundly prophetic, and “With God on our side” remains a thought provoking sermon to all self-righteous.



Bethge tells us that the ‘secret discipline’ was inspired by the Early church’s practice of “excluding the uninitiated, the unbaptized catechumens, from the second part of the liturgy, in which the communion was celebrated and the Nicene Creed sung” (DBTC 784). Bonhoeffer was open, accessible, and widely appreciated; nonetheless, “His whole personality led him to put a protective screen around the central events of life” (DBTC 784). It is the enactment of Jesus’ intimation to “go into your room, close the door, and pray in secret to your Father” (Mt 6: 6). Dumas’ abbreviated explanation is this:

The ‘secret discipline’ is a hidden certainty, which does not thrust itself coercively on others, but offers them the fully human and available presence of the believer. Thanks to it, the relationship with Jesus Christ does not divide life into compartments, either metaphysical or inward. It is the source of an existence that is free, concrete and transcendent in the sense of a life turned toward the neighbor, rather than a life turned toward the otherworldliness of the omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence of a remote God. (Dumas 199)

The secret discipline forms believers in such a way that they offer to the world come of age the face of “the man for others” that Jesus is; hence by imitation they invite others to imitate, i.e. to discover the freedom that is found in joining the ranks of “persons for others.” *This* is transcendence, declares Bonhoeffer (LPP 381), who was able to manage this rather enviably in his own life: “People here keep on telling me [...] that I am radiating so much peace around me, and that I am always so cheerful” (LPP 279).

Let us end this chapter with a random list of several of Bonhoeffer’s suggestions and reflections:

- Govern your soul, [...] your senses, [...] your passions. [...] Chaste be your mind and your body, [...] only through discipline may a man learn to be free. (LPP 370)
- Above all, we should never allow ourselves to be consumed by the present moment, but should foster that calmness that comes from noble thoughts, and measure everything by them. The fact that most people cannot do this is what makes it so difficult to bear with them. It is weakness rather than wickedness that perverts a man and drags him down, and it needs profound sympathy to put up with that. But all the time God still reigns in heaven. (LPP 384)
- During the last year or so I have come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but simply a man, as Jesus was a man [...] I don’t mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfort-

able, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness, characterized by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection. (LPP 369)

- I believe that nothing that happens to me is meaningless. [...] As I see it, I am here for some purpose, and I only hope I may fulfil it. In the light of the great purpose all our privations and disappointments are trivial. (LPP 289)

- Those who I know are praying for me. [...] but don't forget to pray for me. [...] With gratitude and loyalty and daily prayers, I'm always thinking of you. (LPP 392, 393, 394)

- My sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. (LPP 393)

These statements show how wrong some of Bonhoeffer's so-called 'disciples' can be, who choose to go the 'atheist route' in so-called 'imitation' of him. Those who do so may say he was a milestone on their way, but they should not call themselves his disciples.

## SUMMARY

Faith is constantly under attack in the world come of age because of its constant identification with religion, and because religion has been a constant instrument of dissension and enmity. Thus, the verdict on faith is ‘guilty by association’ until the world gets to know better.<sup>74</sup> If Jesus is the Christ under whose feet all things are put (Eph 1: 22), as Christians believe, then the revolt that has erupted out of a thirst for intellectual honesty is not a defeat, but a beginning or rather an incessant expansion of the tree that will not cease until all the birds have perched in it (Mt 13: 31).

This study began with Bonhoeffer’s concept of the “weakness of God,” because growth will not happen without it. Strangely enough, it was a Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, who in modern times first made use of the concept on a grand scale so as to shame the West into concessions to his people’s legitimate demands. This attracted Bonhoeffer’s attention; he wished to pay a visit to Gandhi, but eventually had to reluctantly give up the idea (see DBTC 74). Then Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who also was an admirer of Gandhi, applied the method with unwavering determination. The three men were assassinated. From that time on, the process of the redemption of racial inequalities and cruelties took hold of America; and in spite of endless difficulties, a Black President now sits in the White House. “I know non-violence will work,” said King.

We then looked at the religionless interpretation of biblical concepts based on the fact that ‘religion’ is the enemy of Jesus’ teachings. Barth in his commentary on the *Letter to the Romans* has finalized this argument even if for him religion is inevitable—a view Bonhoeffer does not share. Still eighty-five percent of the Western populations hold to their faith while unremittingly rejecting the ‘religious’ institutions that initially shaped them. The gradual coming of age of the world has preceded this reinterpretation, which is a consequence of it. It presents a danger that we see in action today; but it is better to be

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<sup>74</sup> “O Zarathustra, with such disbelief you are more pious than you believe. Some god in you must have converted you to your godlessness. Is it not your piety itself that no longer lets you believe in a god? And your overgreat honesty will yet lead you beyond good and evil too” (Nietzsche 374).

intellectually honest than to bow to idols. This led Bonhoeffer to conclude that the world had reached an advanced stage of maturity.

If then, as Bonhoeffer believes, the world is now better prepared for the kerygma than it was two thousand years ago, it is because two thousand years of Christ's influence have prepared it for the weakness—hence the strength—of God, for the weakness—hence the strength—of love (1Co 13). A mature secular society is begging for an infrastructure, and faith is this infrastructure seeking to free it, according to Bonhoeffer:

It is not for us to prophesy the day (though the day will come) when men will once more be called so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it. It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming—as was Jesus' language; it will shock people and yet overcome them by its power. (LPP 300)

We leave the last word to Henri de Montherlant (1895-1972), a renowned French novelist, playwright and essayist, who apparently sensed the coming of this era:

And then, when this age also has vanished, as the Wheel turns we shall see a Christian era rise again. The Second Christianity, fresh and pure, washed in what? perhaps in its own blood, how beautiful to us it shall appear! how it shall have been missed! With a sob we shall welcome it. And it shall be true for a second time, as it was true then, as it had ceased to be since. [...] (How the Christianity created by those who loved it shall seem small compared to the Christianity recreated by those who persecuted it!) Shall we be there to 'betray' once more? (Montherlant 1963, 962 ; my translation)<sup>75</sup>

These lines express Montherlant's assurance that the maturity of the world is a work in progress. In reality it has been in progress ever since responsibility was assigned to humanity, according to the biblical book of Genesis. Though it is certain humankind has made significant strides toward maturity, many more years of debate will be needed before the present state of turmoil settles 'out of religion' and into the stability of faith.

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<sup>75</sup> Et ensuite, quand cet âge aura disparu lui aussi, la Roue continuant de tourner nous verrons remonter un âge chrétien. Le second christianisme, frais et pur, lavé dans quoi? peut-être dans son sang, comme il nous paraîtra beau! comme il nous aura manqué! Nous l'accueillerons avec des sanglots. Et il sera vrai une seconde fois, tel qu'il fut vrai à son aurore, tel que depuis il avait cessé de l'être. [...] (Que le christianisme créé par ceux qui l'aimaient semblera alors peu de chose auprès du christianisme recréé par ses persécuteurs!) Serons-nous là pour 'trahir' encore une fois?

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