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Reflections on Bonhoeffer's Theology

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Reflections on Bonhoeffer's Theology

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The difficulty of presenting a "theology of Bonhoeffer" which tries to relate organically the later fragmentary writings of Bonhoeffer to the more comprehensive studies of his earlier period has been recognized in a number of major studies since 1960.¹ The famous essay on cheap grace written in 1937 protested against grace without discipleship and faith without obedience, drawing a sharp line of demarcation between the world and the community of saints. Yet seven years later Bonhoeffer meditated in his prison cell on the theme of a "non-religious interpretation of Biblical concepts" (usually referred to, in a shortened form, as "religionless Christianity"), on the dangers of "positivism in revelation" (for which he blamed his friend Karl Barth), and on "worldliness" as a proper concern of the Christian.

¹ Among the innumerable articles and essays that have been written on Bonhoeffer are five comprehensive studies: John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960); Manfred Müller, *Von der Kirche zur Welt* (Hamburg-Bergstedt: Herbert Reich Verlag, 1961); John A. Phillips, *Christ for Us in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967; published the same year by Collins in London under the title *The Form of Christ in the World*); William Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1967); Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Theologe — Christ — Zeitgenosse* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1967). Also Heinrich Ott, *Wirklichkeit und Glaube*, Vol. I, *Zum theologischen Erbe Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966). See the postscript to this article for comments on this volume.

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Dividing Bonhoeffer's life into three periods, corresponding historically to pre-Hitler Germany, the *Kirchenkampf* of 1933—40, and the wartime catastrophe, John D. Godsey tries to recapitulate the contributions of Bonhoeffer, allowing Bonhoeffer to speak for himself with a minimum of interpretation, assuming that this procedure will dissolve any inconsistencies in Bonhoeffer's thought.

Manfried Müller also emphasizes the fact that the periods of Bonhoeffer's development coincide with dates highly significant for German political and cultural history. But Müller does not want to offer an objective presentation of Bonhoeffer's theology. He does not want to make "a dead man speak again." He wants to "make use" of Bonhoeffer in order to develop his own position of a change from metaphysics to a scientific *Weltanschauung*, from the church to the world, from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from the Christian brother to the Marxist comrade. Christianity is to Müller an ethical creed, identical, if you will, with communism. A convert need not be circumcised religiously; he may remain a dialectical Marxist. In short, Müller moves, in the name of Bonhoeffer, from a "religionless Christianity" to a "churchless Christianity." In the final count there is no difference between Christians and Marxists. The church must cease to interfere in the business of the state.²

² See also Müller's "Concerning the Reception and Interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" in *World Come of Age*, ed. R. G. Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 182 ff. For a critical reply to Müller's approach, see

Godsey and Müller agree that the concept of Christ and the church, taken together as a single theme, are the clue whereby the unity of Bonhoeffer's thoughts may be discovered: "Christ exists as the Church." But the approaches of the two men are very different. Godsey concentrates on the church as a distinct body in Christ, while Müller holds that Bonhoeffer shatters the boundaries between the church as an elect community and the world, understanding the whole of society as taken up in Christ. Godsey interprets the *Letters and Papers from Prison* in the light of the prewar writings, while Müller regards the letters as the climax of Bonhoeffer's theology.

John A. Phillips is critical of both approaches. "Godsey," he says, "can hold Bonhoeffer's position together as a thoroughgoing ecclesiology only by dismissing the very important and significant final criticism of the church . . . directing us towards the latter's earlier and undoubtedly passionate interest in ecclesiology." Müller, on the other hand, maintains falsely "that Bonhoeffer was seeking a way to *replace* the church with the godless [that is, Marxist] 'world come of age'" (italics original). Erroneously, he has taken Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity" as a *last* word, while in reality it is a word of criticism not on the ultimate but rather on the penultimate situation in the life of the church. Bonhoeffer's remarks do not justify the thesis "that society may properly assume the role of the institutional church. We have enough clues (though they are no

another Iron Curtain theologian, J. M. Lochmann, in *New Theology*, No. 1, ed. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964), pp. 169 ff.

more than clues) in the prison letters to know that Bonhoeffer wanted to discuss the role of the church in the area of the 'secret discipline,' and that he regarded this as the dialectical partner and corrective of religionlessness."³

William Kuhns refers to Phillips in his bibliography, although for obvious reasons he could not avail himself of it while writing his book. The two chapters, 12 and 13, dealing with the provocative statements about religionless Christianity, lack the precision which strikes the reader in Phillips. As a Roman Catholic, Kuhns focuses his attention on Bonhoeffer's teaching of the church and of his significance for the ecumenical movement. He observes that in Bonhoeffer's view of the church, responsibility takes precedence over authority and that he "makes the authority of the church very much contingent upon its willingness to accept its present responsibilities to the world."⁴

Eberhard Bethge has the advantage of writing as a friend of the Bonhoeffer family. He was the recipient of the bulk of the correspondence published in *Letters and Papers from Prison*.⁵ In May 1943 he married Renate Schleicher, daughter of Dietrich's sister, Ursula. As Bethge says, Dietrich was brought up in a Christian

³ Phillips, p. 26. In this connection Phillips refers to a letter of April 30, 1944, where Bonhoeffer raises the question of the place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation. The answer is to be found in the place of the "Secret Discipline" (see below) in the penultimate situation of existence. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (originally printed as *Prisoner for God* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 153.

⁴ Kuhns, p. 256.

⁵ *Letters*, pp. 149 ff. The letter is dated April 22, 1944.

family which, however, did not relate itself actively to a parish church. The family did not attend church services, not even on the great festival days of the church year. Dietrich decided early in life to study theology, but he too did not regularly attend church services till about 1931. Though denying any significant change in his life, Bethge quotes three letters in which Bonhoeffer bears witness to a discovery of the Gospel not unlike that of Luther's famous tower experience. Until then the study of theology had been a kind of academic pursuit; but now, he says, he has discovered the Bible as the living Word of God and the ministry as a most glorious calling. "A solution to the enigma of Bonhoeffer's life and thought may be found by looking at two turning points along his way," Bethge writes: "The first may have occurred about 1931—32 and may be formulated thus: Dietrich Bonhoeffer the theologian became a Christian. The second began in 1939: Dietrich Bonhoeffer the Christian became a contemporary, a man of his own particular time and place."⁶ The first change is reflected in *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*; the second in *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*.⁷

Phillips' interpretation of the controversial remarks of Bonhoeffer in his letters

⁶ Peter Vorrink, *Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 78 ff. This little volume has been used for supplementary information. It contains, among others, two essays by Bethge on "Bonhoeffer's Christology and His 'Religionless Christianity,'" pp. 46 ff., and "Turning Points in Bonhoeffer's Life and Thought," pp. 73 ff., and one essay on "The Other Letters from Prison" by Maria von Wedemeyer-Weller, Bonhoeffer's fiancée.

⁷ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, pp. 246 ff.

from prison as supported by Bethge is the special concern of this paper.

Both Phillips and Bethge agree that Christology is the theme that runs through all of Bonhoeffer's theology. However, Phillips' view of two Christologies, "Christ existing as the Church" and "Christ the man for others," fails in the eyes of Bethge to realize the essential unity of Bonhoeffer's thinking about Christ. In both periods Bonhoeffer's Christology was that of the Greek Fathers and of Luther. Stating the relation of the two natures in Christ in negative terms, the Chalcedonian formula left the mystery a mystery. Bonhoeffer said in 1933 that the question "How?" should not be pressed. The only legitimate question is "Who are you?" "The child in the cradle," as Luther says in his Christmas hymns, "is the whole God."⁸ Bonhoeffer's view was anti-speculative. "He does not so much reflect on the Incarnation as such, but on the humiliation of the Incarnate." Like Luther, Bonhoeffer believed that true theology can be learned only from the incarnation and cross of Christ.

In the light of this Christological overtone, how are we to understand Bonhoeffer's criticism of the church?

In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer deplored the defection of modern man from God. Secularism is godlessness. It leads to abyss and means, if its relentless march is not halted, the ultimate destruction of mankind. But Bonhoeffer also recognized "a better secularism." "When Christianity is employed as a polemical weapon against the secular," he writes, "this must be done in the name of a better secularism and above all it must

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 91, 108.

not lead back to a predominance of the spiritual sphere as an end in itself."⁹ "There is no possibility of being a Christian outside of the reality of the world and there is no real worldly existence outside the reality of Jesus Christ."¹⁰ As a person belonging wholly to Christ, the believer stands at the same time wholly in the world. This new vision of the church explains Bonhoeffer's later criticism of the defensive concentration on the internal problems of the church even among members of its own Confessing Church.¹¹

Bonhoeffer continued to think along the same line after his imprisonment. On Nov. 27, 1943, he expressed hope that the grim experiences of the war might provide men with the necessary basis for reconstructing life on Christian principles.¹² Yet the thoughts of the prisoner soon took a different direction. We see him no longer occupied with the church as the body of the Byzantine Christ the Pantokrator, but with the church as the body of the Suffering Servant.¹³

Beginning with the letter dated April 30, 1944, Bonhoeffer's thought was occupied with three phrases which have become most intimately connected with his name: the world come of age (*die mündige Welt*), religionless Christianity, and sharing in the sufferings of God.

To be sure, these formulas were, Bethge says, no more than provisional labels in his correspondence with a friend. "But Bonhoeffer wanted to specify something

in those terms to which, for the sake of the living Christ and his responsibly acting contemporaries, he attached great importance and which came to him as he put this theology to the test in his new situation."¹⁴ His friends in the Confessing Church disappointed him for, by and large, its pastors had succumbed to the threats of the Hitler regime, while his liberal brothers and friends had the courage to persist in an active opposition.¹⁵ Bethge states that, in his eyes, the new formulas do not present a mature insight into a new understanding of the Gospel; yet they are certainly more than just a cursory, vague endeavor.¹⁶ To interpret these formulas correctly, they must be seen in the light of the Christological concern of Bonhoeffer. The question is, "Who really is Christ for us today?"¹⁷ Bonhoeffer was not pondering the question "What is still acceptable of the Biblical message?" Instead, he pursued the problem, "Where is Christ's rule effective today? Where is He at work?" Bonhoeffer is not looking for a new method of speaking about Christ.¹⁸ His nonreligious interpretation is not a variant of Bultmann's existentialist interpretation. He is concerned with a new way of discovering the presence of Christ. The theme that runs through these letters is not to discover the modern world, but Christ in the modern world: to discover

¹⁴ Vorrink, p. 98.

¹⁵ Four of the members of the Bonhoeffer family were executed in April 1945: two sons, Klaus and Dietrich, and two sons-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher and Hans von Dohnanyi.

¹⁶ Bethge, p. 968.

¹⁷ *Letters*, p. 152. Letter of April 30, 1944. The translation in the older editions, "what is Christ?" was an unfortunate mistake.

¹⁸ Bethge, p. 970.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Macmillan Co., 1955), p. 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See footnote 38.

¹² *Letters*, p. 100.

¹³ See Bethge, pp. 964 ff.

Him not *from* the world but rather *in* the world. Bonhoeffer asks the simplest but most demanding of all questions: Who are You? Hence the writer from prison was a man of prayer.¹⁹

The expression "the world come of age" occurs for the first time in the letter of June 8, 1944. Until then Bonhoeffer had spoken of the autonomy of man and the world. He used the term in allusion to Kant, who described the Enlightenment as the movement that liberated man from the state of tutelage which he had brought upon himself. "Immaturity is the inability to use one's own reason without the guidance of another." In the past, theologians were greatly embarrassed by Kant, or by a similar rejection of religion by Feuerbach and Nietzsche. Bonhoeffer incorporates this criticism into Luther's *theologia crucis*.

In a later letter, dated July 16, 1944, Bonhoeffer reviews the development by pointing to such men as Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury with his emphasis on reason as the source of religious knowledge; to Montaigne and Bodin with their substitution of moral principles for the Ten Commandments; to Hugo Grotius with his international law as the Law of Nature which would be valid, *etsi Deus non daretur*; to Descartes, who held that the world is a mechanism which runs on its own without the intervention of God; to Kant as a deist; to Spinoza, Fichte, and Hegel as pantheists, in whose systems there is no room for a God answering prayer. Although modern physics is questioning the infinity of the universe, it is not going back to the older conception of finitude

for which God was a working hypothesis. God has let Himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross.²⁰

The radical theologians of our time are using this and related passages in Bonhoeffer to jettison, in the name of Bonhoeffer, any formal concept of God. But the whole drift of his thought makes it clear that Bonhoeffer had no such thing in mind, for he continually emphasizes that the decisive difference between Christianity and all "religions" is this that man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in this world, while the Bible directs him to the suffering God, who alone can help. In this way the development of the world's coming of age has helped to do away with a false conception of God and to discover the God of the Bible, "who wins power and space in the world by his weakness." This, he says, will probably be the starting-point for our "secular interpretation."²¹

In Scripture the term "world" has a two-fold meaning. It may designate the cosmos as God's good creation, the object of divine love, the realm of His redemptive activity (John 3:16); it may also describe humanity in its opposition to God (1 John 2:5 ff.). Speaking of a "worldly (or secular) interpretation of Christianity," Bonhoeffer had in mind the former meaning: Christianity should not be seen as opposed to the theoretical and practical conquest of nature. "The Gospel of the *theologia crucis* endures the coming and being of age of the world; it permits itself to be corrected by it, yea, to establish its own identity." Christians are called to avail

¹⁹ Bethge, p. 291.

²⁰ *Letters*, pp. 195 ff.

²¹ *Letters*, pp. 195 ff.

themselves of new discoveries in rational insights, to live in the natural realm "as if God did not exist." The time for stuffy apologetics has passed. Christ has cosmic significance. All reality exists in and through Him (Col. 1:16). Hence Bonhoeffer declines to think in two realms, the secular and the spiritual, the world and the church. The only difference between the two is that the church is conscious of the universe's existence in God. The church is the place where testimony is given to God's reconciliation of the world with Himself. The church has no intention of depriving the world of a piece of its own territory. The only way in which the church can defend its own being is by fighting not for its own self but for the salvation of the world.²²

Bonhoeffer wants to call men to the center of Biblical revelation, to Christ, His incarnation, cross and resurrection. He had no intention of exchanging historic Christianity for a humanist "Jesuanity." The "death-of-God" theologians have no right to claim Bonhoeffer as one of their own on this point. "They refuse," as Phillips observes, "to distinguish between the reality of God and the way in which that reality is conceptualized."²³ For them the coming of age of the world directly involves

²² See Bonhoeffer on "Thinking in Terms of Two Spheres," *Ethics*, pp. 62 ff. Also Bethge, p. 974. Bonhoeffer's thought bears a close resemblance to the theology of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with its emphasis on "objective justification": the whole world was "justified" on the first Good Friday. For references see Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, II (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 218; see also William Hordern, *New Directions in Theology Today*, I (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 114 ff.

²³ Phillips, p. 190.

an acceptance of the death of God in our times, or, more properly speaking, men have become aware of the fact that the God of religion never existed. Bonhoeffer's criticism on the other hand is reminiscent of Luther's and Pascal's rejection of the "god of the philosophers" who use an omnipotent God as a means of solving the intellectual perplexities of human existence.

This leads to the second ambiguous controversial statement: "religionless Christianity," or, more correctly, a "nonreligious interpretation of Christianity." Like the former, the term is a case of semantics: What did Bonhoeffer mean when he introduced this unusual expression? What did he mean by "religion"?

Among Bonhoeffer's teachers at Berlin were Karl Holl, the renowned Luther scholar, and Reinhold Seeberg, exponent of a "modern positivist theology."²⁴ Both set theology in an idealistic framework. Holl defined Luther's theology as a "religion of conscience." Seeberg started with a religious a priori in man. Early in his studies Bonhoeffer identified himself with Barth's protest against substituting a natural religion for Biblical faith.²⁵ He takes

²⁴ Compare Heick, II, 262 ff.

²⁵ *Letters*, pp. 152 ff. See also Bonhoeffer's article "Concerning the Christian Idea of God" in *The Journal of Religion*, (1932); reprinted in *Gesammelte Schriften*, III, 100 ff., ed. E. Bethge. The first book of the young Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1935), is already shot through with sharp taunts at an idealistic religion: "Religion and thought concerning God have never meant the same thing" (p. 54). "Religion forgets that she has a right to exist only when she continually does away with herself" (p. 67). "Our concern is God . . . and it is not religion" (p. 285). "Dead is all metaphysics" (p. 291).

up the same theme in a letter of April 30, 1944. Of the religious people as envisioned by Holl and Seeberg, he says, there are today only a few survivors, "or else one or two who are intellectually dishonest." The philosophical concept of transcendence has nothing to do with the transcendence of the God of the Bible.

In his letters from prison Bonhoeffer moves beyond the Barthian concept of religion as a perpetual and universal attempt of man to justify himself. He now considers it, in the letter quoted above, a typically western, historical phenomenon characterized not only by its metaphysical concern and by inwardness but also by a *Deus ex machina* concept as a solution for man's intellectual and moral problems. As such, religion in the West has been the private possession of an elite. But the situation has changed; religion has become superfluous. Society progresses apparently without religion. Like circumcision in apostolic times, we should no longer regard religion as indispensable for salvation. The older Barth, in Bonhoeffer's eyes, has deserted his original approach; he too has become "religious" because of his unqualified approval of the various dogmas of the past.²⁶

²⁶ *Letters*, p. 181. Regin Prenter holds that Bonhoeffer had in mind Barth's supralapsarian speculation, which is quite removed from the passion for this world. Substituting "Church" for "religion," Barth failed to show how the dogma is related to the condition of the world. Prenter, in *World Come of Age*, ed. R. G. Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 93 ff. Yet throughout the final period of his life Bonhoeffer remained in close affinity with Barth in his consistent emphasis on the Incarnation as disclosing the true nature of man and the world. Like Barth, he moved from the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed to the First. "Man became man because God became man." (*Ethics*, p. 20)

In the same letter Bonhoeffer dismisses Bultmann's attempt at making the Gospel acceptable to modern man as another version of liberalism, that is, an abridging of the Gospel. Nevertheless, in 1942 he protested against a group of Berlin pastors who moved, in convention, to anathematize Bultmann. In reply to a letter from a Finkenwalder Bonhoeffer wrote that he welcomed Bultmann's paper on demythologizing as an expression of intellectual honesty, the most cherished attitude of the liberals. In this respect, he said, I am still perhaps a disciple of Harnack.²⁷ He likewise rejected Tillich's preoccupation with the ultimate questions of life.²⁸ Bonhoeffer refused to accept the idea that the necessity for Christianity is found in man's weakness and in man's desire to overcome his weakness. He says in the letter of April 30, 1944, that modern men scarcely understand sin anymore and hardly fear death anymore. Two months later, June 30, he reemphasized the same fact by saying that theologians try hard to show that a person is mistaken if he refuses to admit that he has any problems. He also adds a word of scorn for existentialist philosophers and psychotherapists, calling them "secular Methodists." Both, he says, have "been pretty clever at this sort of thing." If a man persistently refuses to accept the diagnosis, he is, in the eyes of the theologians, a sinner "of a particularly ugly type."²⁹

²⁷ Bethge, pp. 798 ff. At Finkenwalde in Pomerania Bonhoeffer established an illicit theological school in protest against the Nazi dominated state universities. It was here that he tried to practice *Life Together*.

²⁸ For references to Tillich in Bonhoeffer's writings, see Phillips, pp. 204 ff.

²⁹ *Letters*, p. 189.

Bonhoeffer was no friend of a puritan way of life, as the reader of *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* could surmise. To an ascetic pietist he was no religious person. His being was deeply rooted in the culture of the 19th century. He loved opera and the theater, a good cigar and a glass of Berlin beer. Christians ought to be grateful for all earthly blessings. "For a man in his wife's arms to be hankering after the other world is, in mild terms, a piece of bad taste, and not God's will . . . we must not try to be more pious than God himself."³⁰ The emphasis falls on the "this-worldliness" of the Christian life, on the penultimate as a means of witnessing to the ultimate. Transcendence is necessary, but it has its proper place and time in the Christian life. Phillips succinctly states: "'Religionless Christianity,' then, is Christianity which has had the proper meaning of transcendence and witness to the Transcendent restored to it. It does not turn man's back upon his life in the world and his face toward God, but rather directs him toward God, the Transcendent, and the world at one and the same time. God, the Transcendent, is active in the world. Therefore the Christian can and may and must live in this world and, by doing so, bears witness to God in this world."³¹ Unless this peculiar way of speaking about transcendence is recognized, confusion and misinterpretation are bound to follow. At first sight, Bonhoeffer seems to follow the antimetaphysical trend in the teachings of Ritschl and Harnack. Actually, Bonhoeffer repeated in his letters from prison what he had said earlier in *Sanctorum Communio*, where he devel-

oped the idea of a "social" or "ethical" transcendence. In the I-Thou relationship the Thou is claim, is incomprehensible, is transcendence. God meets us in Christ, the human Thou. Man as a person cannot be surpassed by an a-personal mind. God is personal, and Christ shares in the eternal, personal nature of God. Thus Bonhoeffer united in a novel way the insights of the contemporary philosophers of personalism with the theology of Nicaea and Chalcedon. His view of Christ cannot be extrapolated from its transcendent metaphysical context.³²

Christianity has been falsely regarded as a religion of salvation from death. This view divorces Christ from the Old Testament, which speaks not of eternal but of *historical* redemption. "Christ takes hold of man at the center of his life."³³ He rules the world and our lives. "Never did he [Jesus] question a man's health, vigor or happiness . . . Jesus claims for himself and the kingdom of God the whole of human life in all its manifestations."³⁴ Jesus is solely for others. "This 'being-there-for-others' of Jesus is the experience

³² Cf. Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, Eng. translation revised by R. Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 36 f. See also Bethge, "The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Theology" in *World Come of Age*, p. 34, and R. Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 190 ff.

³³ Letter of June 27, 1944, *Letters*, p. 186. According to Bethge, Bonhoeffer regarded the Old Testament as "the greatest testimony of an overcoming of the religious." Quoted from Kornelius H. Miskotte, *When the Gods Are Silent*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 83. This book is a challenging study of the Old Testament and has an answer to the atheism and nihilism of our so-called post-Christian era.

³⁴ Letter of June 30, 1944, *ibid.*, p. 189.

³⁰ *Letters*, p. 111.

³¹ Phillips, p. 189.

of transcendence. . . . Faith is participation in this being of Jesus." This means, "Man living out of the transcendence." There can be no doubt that Bonhoeffer has finally committed himself wholeheartedly to the maxim that the finite world is capable of the infinite, reaffirming his position taken earlier in his "Lectures on Christology," as referred to above.

If taken out of the context of Bonhoeffer's entire life and thought, radical theologians may claim that these and similar remarks corroborate their humanistic interpretation of the Gospel. Historically, the maxim was meant to be an affirmation of the theology of Chalcedon. This was unmistakably Bonhoeffer's view in his lectures of 1933. Is he denying this in his letters from prison? Hardly, for on May 5, 1944, he wrote: "What is above the 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 biblical sense of the creation, and of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."³⁵

The later letter of July 28 may throw some light on how Bonhoeffer understood these words: "Not only action, but also suffering is a way to freedom. The deliverance consists in our being allowed to put the matter out of our hands into God's hands."³⁶ Bonhoeffer has in mind an attitude which does not deplore the rise of modern science with all its consequences but gladly accepts the modern world and bears its burden in freedom. There is no place here for traditional apologetics or religious asceticism. We are called to imi-

tate Jesus, not John the Baptist. In Christ God "hangeth dead for Christians and heathens alike and both alike forgiving."³⁷ Discipleship now is a profound dialectical style of life. "By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world-watching with Christ in Gethsemane."^{37a}

What, then, is the place of worship in the Christian life? Bonhoeffer finds the answer in the "Secret Discipline" to which we had occasion to refer above. As in the ancient church the arcanum was introduced to protect the mysteries of the faith against profanation, so today the church must observe a period of "holy silence." Her words have become powerless. She has fought in the years of the *Kirchenkampf* only for her self-preservation, as if the church were an end in itself.³⁸ Without claiming to be a prophet,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

^{37a} Letter, July 21, 1944, *ibid.*, p. 202. In *Prisoner for God* the phrase "living unreservedly" was rendered by "taking life in one's stride." Kenneth Hamilton has published a short study on Bonhoeffer under this caption: *Life in One's Stride* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1968).

³⁸ Bonhoeffer raises this objection against the Confessing Church, of which he had been a leading figure. It also could be applied to other churchmen in Germany, Protestants and Catholics, Lutherans and pietists. Compare Rolf Hochhuth's criticism of Pope Pius XII in his drama *The Deputy*. Hochhuth seems to be vindicated by a recent publication of the Vatican (*Le saint siège et la guerre en Europe — Juin 1940—Juin 1941*), reviewed in *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt*, January 1968, p. 6. Both the papal nuncio in Berlin, Msgr. Orsenigo, and Cardinal Bertram of Breslau,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

Bonhoeffer was sure that 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."³⁹ What is not interpreted to the world, or not even proclaimed, must be retained, albeit as a "secret." "The traditional *content* of the Bible and of the *faith* of the church must be 'protected,' but in such a fashion that no special religious claims are made for them";⁴⁰ for a theoretical theism is no condition of salvation.⁴¹ In the penultimate situation, repentance, prayer, and action are the style of the Christian life.

In Christ, "God is the 'beyond' in the midst of our life."⁴² Bonhoeffer, then, did not reject the metaphysics of Scripture—the eternal Logos made flesh—but rather the abstract metaphysical speculation unrelated to man's existence here and now.⁴³

Müller writes: "In the religions of the world man transcends the boundaries of the world by making for himself a God

presiding over the Fulda Bishops' Conference, advised the Pope to retain a neutral position lest he jeopardized the structural unity of German Roman Catholicism.

³⁹ "Thoughts on Baptism" in *Letters*, p. 172.

⁴⁰ Phillips, p. 227.

⁴¹ "The Pauline question whether circumcision is a condition of justification seems to me in present-day terms to be the question whether religion is a condition of salvation. Freedom from circumcision is at the same time freedom from religion." (*Letters*, p. 154)

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁴³ Compare Luther's rejection of the "theologians of glory" who, having set their minds on high things such as God's infinite power, wisdom, and justice, despise God in His suffering, weakness, and foolishness; "yet in the crucified Christ there is true theology and knowledge of God." Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *Career of the Reformer: I, Luther's Works*, 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 40—41.

in yonder world. But it is God who transcends the world by entering the world in the incarnation: God's transcendence is his descendance. He remains the Transcendent in the midst of our life inasmuch as He really is, in Jesus Christ, delivered into the hands of men, dwelling in the midst of us, inaccessible to reason, known only in faith. This entry of God into the world in the man Jesus Christ is the ground of the this-worldliness of Christianity."⁴⁴

Phillips refers to the fact that at the beginning of our century Max Weber linked "the radical elimination of magic from the world" with what he called *weltliche Askese* (worldly asceticism).⁴⁵ Troeltsch, among others, picked up this phrase and elaborated it as a particular style of life. "Worldly asceticism" described the nature and purpose of an ethical activism which sought the realization of Christian "ideals." Bonhoeffer took up this theme. But one element "differed radically from any liberal discussion of the Christian style of life: his astonishing and unashamed desire to establish a secular style of life upon a Christological foundation."⁴⁶

Bethge concludes: The Secret Discipline without involvement in the world leads to a ghetto, but involvement in the world without the Secret Discipline would only be a boulevard. An isolated Secret Discipline leads to liturgical monasticism; an isolated nonreligious interpretation is a vain intellectual game. Realizing the difficulties, Bonhoeffer had no intention of dissolving the one in favor of the other. The nonreligious interpretation of Christianity does not make grace cheap. In fact,

⁴⁴ Müller, p. 375.

⁴⁵ Phillips, p. 222.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

grace may be considered more costly in the letters from prison than in *Discipleship*.⁴⁷ The boundary situation — Bonhoeffer's solidarity with the political resistance movement — is set forth as a valid style of Christian life in the modern world. "To be for others," is participation in the suffering of Christ.⁴⁸ The two spheres, the spiritual and the secular, do not lose their distinctive marks; neither are they kept neatly but dangerously apart; instead, political involvement may, under extraordinary circumstances, be a necessary demonstration for the kingdom of God.⁴⁹ Kuhns considers Bonhoeffer's urgency of the "penultimate" a vital factor in Bonhoeffer's doctrine of man; yet in his criticism of the Reformation Kuhns underestimates the Lutheran concern for the *usus politicus* of the Law as a potent factor for ordering the life of the community.⁵⁰

This leads us to what Bonhoeffer regarded in his prison letters as the consummation of his thinking — sharing in the sufferings of God. He developed this view especially in his letters of July 16, 18, and 21, 1941.

"Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world.

⁴⁷ Bethge, p. 992.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 994.

⁴⁹ Althaus, a Lutheran, wrote in 1940: "The Church has no political program; it is not commissioned to supervise or censor political life in the name of Jesus and the Gospel. . . . Politics follows its own innate laws and necessities." Quoted by Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 871. Luther never taught the ethical autonomy of the state. See Otto W. Heick, I, 339 f.

⁵⁰ See in Kuhns, pp. 120 ff, his discussion of Bonhoeffer's anthropology. In the concluding chapter, "A Catholic Looks at Bonhoeffer," he includes Bonhoeffer's anthropology as one of the fascinating features for a Roman Catholic.

. . . He must live a 'secular' life and thereby share in God's suffering." The Christian life is not a particular religious style of life. It is the life of a man who participates "in the sufferings of God in the secular life." Jesus does not call men to a life divided between religious and secular acts. Faith in Christ claims the whole man; it means being caught up into Christ's messianic activity, bearing the grief and sorrow of the world. Such a nonreligious way of life is not to conceal but rather to expose the godlessness of the world.⁵¹ Its denial of God notwithstanding, the world come of age is still the object of the Father's love and God's children are summoned to share His concern by participating in the complex life of the modern world.

In an "Outline for a Book" composed in the Tegel prison, Bonhoeffer revealed some of his thoughts about the future of the church in Germany. The notes for Chapter 3 contain a far-reaching reform program. The church, he says, is the church "only when it exists for others." It should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy should live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations. The church should learn to share in the secular problems of ordinary life. It should renounce all striving after power "as the roots of all evil." The creeds should be revised and the training of ministers and the patterns of clerical life reformed.⁵² Bethge remarks that the prisoner was probably too optimistic about a new structure emerging from the old. Actually little has changed in Germany. In East Germany churchmen have tried to preserve as much

⁵¹ *Letters*, pp. 198 ff., also pp. 123 f. See Phillips, pp. 237 ff.

⁵² *Letters*, pp. 208 ff.

of the old structure as possible under a communist regime; the West is marked by a full-scale restoration.⁵³

What are some shortcomings of Bonhoeffer in the prison letters?

Bonhoeffer was certainly right in saying that our contemporaries have practically no understanding of sin. This is all too evident. But was he right in saying that they are hardly afraid of death? There are a number of references in these letters to the horror, anxiety, and fright of the prisoners, especially in times of an air raid. What were they afraid of? Why do we in our own society try to hide the effect of death on the deceased by applying all the tricks and techniques of the beauty parlor to a corpse? Is it not because we do not want to be reminded for any length of time of what Psalm 90 calls wisdom? On the other hand, Lotte Denkhaus, a pastor's wife at Bremen, Germany, expresses a thought similar to that of Bonhoeffer. Reflecting on the horrors of the war, she writes: "The worst thing was the indifference with which men faced death. They had long since learned to die without God. Hardly anyone was alarmed by the thought how to stand before the Eternal Judge in case he would be buried the next day under the debris."^{53a}

Second, does not Bonhoeffer underestimate the emphasis on sin in the New Testament? In the letter of July 18, 1944, Bonhoeffer says that what Zacchaeus, the woman in Luke 7, the eunuch (Acts 8), Cornelius (Acts 10), the paralytic, the children whom Jesus blessed, the centurion of Capernaum, the shepherds, the Wise

Men, Joseph of Arimathaea, and the women at the tomb had in common was that they all were caught up in the Messianic suffering of God in Jesus Christ, but not in a formal confession of sins nor in a conversion in the narrower sense of the word. Bonhoeffer made the same statement almost verbatim in his *Ethics*.⁵⁴ He calls it a curtailment of the Gospel if Christ is proclaimed only to what is broken and evil. The father's love for the prodigal son should not be so emphasized as to obscure his love for the son who remained at home.⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer gives credit to Adolf Schlatter (d. 1938), who maintained a critical attitude to the Reformation with its one-sided emphasis on the forgiveness of sin. Man's condition is a mixed one, Schlatter said. There is good and evil in him.⁵⁶ The Gospel was represented as a consolation to vicious sinners. It lost its power over "good" people. But "Christ belongs both to the wicked and the good; He belongs to them as sinners, that is to say, as men who in their wickedness and in their goodness have fallen away from the origin. He summons them back to the origin so that they shall no longer be good and evil but justified and sanctified sinners."⁵⁷ While Bonhoeffer seems to be more fortunate in his formulation than Schlatter, the question still remains: Did Jesus not say specifically that He had come not to call the righteous but sinners? (Mark 2:17). Did anyone come to Him without being conscious of his want or sin?

A further point is the criticism of religion as compared with the emphasis placed

⁵⁴ *Ethics*, p. 82.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁶ See Heick, II, 265 ff.

⁵⁷ *Ethics*, p. 182.

⁵³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp. 995 f.

^{53a} Lotte Denkhaus, *Wir sollen Frieden haben* (Berlin, 1968), p. 34.

on the Secret Discipline. The latter term itself seems to be in conflict with a main trend in Bonhoeffer's thought which speaks against thinking in terms of two spheres, for a "secret" is only for the few, and "discipline" separates man from his neighbor. As said above, Bonhoeffer expressed his disapproval of religion because of its persistent tendencies toward "inwardness." At the same time he stressed in the Secret Discipline the continuous need of prayer and repentance. A disciplined life of prayer remained for him an essential mark of genuine piety. Are not inwardness and prayer closely intertwined? It is easy to see that the Gospel can be preached to the uncircumcised; but can the Good News be proclaimed to people lacking inwardness? Is not repentance an inward disposition of man? An unresolved problem remains. It was felt by Bonhoeffer himself. While firmly rejecting the concept of the *homo religiosus*, even expressing doubt concerning his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, with its drift toward acquiring faith by trying to live a holy life, he says that there are times when he is content to live the simple life of faith without worrying about its problems. At such moments, he says, he takes pleasure in meditating on Scripture and the beautiful hymns of Paul Gerhardt.⁵⁸

Finally, was Bonhoeffer right in his diagnosis that "the world come of age" can get along well without God, even in ordering its moral life? Does not the whole development of our times refute this statement? Was he himself not a victim of a government that rejected right and wrong as grounded in the will of God? A statesman

without God becomes a law unto himself, arbitrarily disposing the citizens' property and life.

In conclusion we shall quote from Bonhoeffer's final letter to Bethge, dated Aug. 23, 1944: "My past life is brim-full of God's goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified."⁵⁹

POSTSCRIPT

While preparing the preceding manuscript, the author unfortunately had no opportunity to make an independent study of Heinrich Ott, *Wirklichkeit und Glaube*, Vol. I, *Zum theologischen Erbe Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), as referred to. This postscript is being added to include the insights offered by this author.

Ott has set Bonhoeffer in the wider context of contemporary thought. He does not follow a biographical pattern; nor does he write as a historian. Instead he tries to discuss the relevancy of Bonhoeffer in a systematic way. The "God is dead" debate, the interest in hermeneutics, the ecumenical movement as phenomena of our day, he says, have received many impulses from Bonhoeffer.

Ott would like to classify Bonhoeffer as a dialectical theologian with strong leanings toward pietism and theological liberalism (p. 127). Bonhoeffer, he says, did not turn theology into anthropology. The theme of his theology is neither that of Bishop Robinson nor that of Bultmann; nor did he, like Tillich, want to throw out the idea of a personal God. Rather his theme is precisely the redemptive act of God in Christ Jesus. This theology is an

⁵⁸ Letter dated July 21, 1944, in *Letters*, pp. 200 ff.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

incarnational theology (p.110). "Who is Christ for us today?" (P. 53)

Ott warns the student of Bonhoeffer not to build up a system too hastily around every sentence he reads, nor to blame Bonhoeffer with inconsistencies when he fails to recognize the inner connection of apparently contradictory statements. (P.58)

Bonhoeffer's criticism of Barth, Ott maintains, does not apply to the content of Barth's theology. Here the two scholars were in basic agreement. It is Barth's method, which Bonhoeffer rejected. In Barth, Bonhoeffer complained, the Gospel is like a law forced on man from the outside. In this respect Bonhoeffer was closer to Bultmann, proceeding more cautiously along pedagogical principles (pp.110 ff.). However, Bonhoeffer did not limit the possibility of an encounter with Jesus to the kerygma. Col.1:16-17 is a key passage in Bonhoeffer's theology: "God created the whole universe through him and for him. In union with Jesus all things have their proper place." Every experience of reality is in a way an experience of Jesus Christ. Where Jesus is denied or killed, reality is denied and killed. Nevertheless, in this situation too man is offered a possibility of an encounter with Jesus, although a hidden one.

But can method and content be neatly separated? By focusing their attention on Jesus as the head of creation, both Bonhoeffer and Barth projected the redemptive aspect of divine revelation into the beginning of time. The older theology restricted the knowledge of God in the universe to the revelation of divine power and justice. The revelation of power, of law and order, was regarded as primary,

the Gospel as second in time. As a well-known fact, Barth especially assigned first place to the Gospel by inverting the traditional sequence of Law and Gospel into Gospel and Law.

Ott observes in Bonhoeffer a strong trend toward a collective view of life. In his critical review of Bonhoeffer's view of religion he puts emphasis on the latter's objection to individualism. The religious person is concerned with his own salvation. Bonhoeffer clearly foresaw the end of such religious individualism. As Savior, Bonhoeffer said, "Jesus is the man for others." His life reveals His true transcendence (pp.147 ff.). The church too is by nature a fellowship. It is "Christ existing as community." Substitution, intercession, forgiveness are possible only in communal life. Though not *of* the world, the church is not separated *from* the world. It too exists for others. Bonhoeffer died as a martyr, not in his struggle for the structural integrity of the church but rather on account of his engagement in political activities which he considered necessary for the good of all people irrespective of religion, race, or color.

The two concluding chapters of Ott contain a first-rate discussion on the personality of God. Scripture speaks of God in personal terms. Prayer is an integral part of Biblical piety. But prayer presupposes a God who can see and hear. If God were only the "Ground of Being" (Tillich) or "das Woher meines Umgeriebenseins" (the whence of my restless existence, Herbert Braun), he would be only a part of the universe, a cipher for the marginal unknown. As a man of prayer, Bonhoeffer testified to his faith in a personal God. However, he did not try

to establish the truth of God by metaphysical speculation. In his search for truth he directs us to the incarnate God. God is reality, and reality is first and last not lifeless. Bonhoeffer refers to the painting *Der Totentanz* (Dance of Death) by Hans Holbein, which presents the Creation where the artist has personified the sun, the moon, and the wind. In this way, Bonhoeffer says, the artist "gives expression in a naive form to the fact that reality consists ultimately in the personal" (*Ethics*, p. 198).

Ott then draws a parallel between Bon-

hoeffer and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and enters into a penetrating discussion with Thomas, Ebeling, Gollwitzer, Panenberg, Rahner, and others. Ott realizes that the problem of the personality of God is the fundamental issue of contemporary theology.

The study is a vindication of the fact that Bonhoeffer remained unmoved in his faith in a personal God. His phrase of a "powerless God" never implied a denial of divine providence. God, in his eyes, watches also over *die mündige welt*.

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