

MAN COME OF AGE:
BONHOEFFER'S RESPONSE TO THE GOD-OF-THE-GAPS

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ABSTRACT

The fallacy of the God-of-the-Gaps has been often expounded in treatments of science and Christian faith. These discussions usually consider the fallacy in terms of the activity of physical or life scientists who properly do not need the "God-hypothesis" to fill the gaps in their physical or biological knowledge. In this paper the radical concepts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his letters from prison: "man come of age," "religionless Christianity," "without God before God," are considered as the results of his attempt to envision the consequences of an extension of the fallacy of the God-of-the-Gaps into the religious area as well. When viewed in this perspective, it is easier to see how the evangelical author of *Cost of Discipleship* is related without a profound change in thinking to the radical author of the letters from prison. The questions Bonhoeffer raises are of increasing importance for us as scientists and Christians.

INTRODUCTION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned on April 5, 1943 in Tegel prison in Berlin. His first letter to his parents was dated April 14, 1943. In it he remembers the celebration of his father's 75th birthday two weeks earlier and the hymns they sang; particularly he mentions,

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation . . . Shelters thee under his wings, yea, and greatly sustaineth.¹

Then he adds,

That is true, and it is what we must always rely on.²

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Note: All references to Bonhoeffer's prison letters are from *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Rev. Edit., ed. by Eberhard Bethge, New York: the Macmillan Company, 2nd printing (1968). Where only page numbers are given below, reference is to this book.

1. p. 19

2. p. 19

In his last letter from Tegel, written on August 23, 1944, he writes,

I am so sure of God's guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty. . . . My past life is brim-full of God's goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. . . . May God take care of you and all of us, and grant us the joy of meeting again soon. I am praying for you every day.³

A few days earlier in his last days at Tegel, he wrote similarly,

God does not give us everything we want, but he does fulfill all his promises.⁴

If Jesus had not lived, then our life would be meaningless, in spite of all the other people whom we know and honor and love.⁵

It is reported that in the morning service that Bonhoeffer conducted on April 8, 1945, the day before his execution at Flossenbürg, he gave a sermon on the text of the day, "and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5), and "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter 1:3). There is no sign from these comments embracing his prison days of a profound change in the theological attitude of Bonhoeffer, nor from that of the author of *Cost of Discipleship* published in 1937, which he reaffirms with some reservations in his prison letters.⁶

And yet in brief correspondence with his friend Eberhard Bethge—in 11 letters from April 30 to August 3, 1944—Bonhoeffer gave expression to such theological conceptions as "man come of age," "religionless Christianity," "without God before God"—conceptions which have served as the rallying point for a variety of radical theologians and proponents of "God is dead" in the years since. With such phrases Bonhoeffer demonstrates his fondness for paradox and leaves us with the problem of distinguishing between overstatement and a balanced perspective. What is it that Bonhoeffer meant to say? Why was he driven to this apparently radical formulation? Does his thought have anything to say to us today?

We cannot claim that Bonhoeffer's statements only appear to be radical and have simply been misunderstood. Bonhoeffer himself realized the radical nature of the things he was saying and commented on it several times in the course of his letters from prison.⁷⁻⁹ In many of the letters with the deepest theological import, he wrote in German script, emphasizing the personal and soul-searching character of the effort.¹⁰ Yet he

3. pp. 208, 209

4. p. 206

5. p. 207

6. p. 193

7. p. 139

8. p. 144

9. p. 208

10. p. 145

did not write in some proud and self-creative way as though he were rejecting the historic Christian faith, but rather strove to relate his statements to the Biblical revelation.^{11, 12}

In this paper I wish to discuss one key to the interpretation of the "radical" Bonhoeffer. It is certainly not the only key, for a variety of theological influences must be added to the effects of a year's life in prison under the most trying and difficult of situations. It is significant that the first of Bonhoeffer's "radical" pronouncements occurs in the letter of April 30, 1944, over a year after his initial imprisonment. Fearful for friends, hopeful of a master plot to overthrow the Nazi regime, subjected daily and nightly to bombings, screaming prisoners, bullying guards, extreme heat in summer and cold in winter, it would be no wonder if the thoughts of this sensitive theologian might have been directed in different channels from that cultivated in the genteel life of Berlin society. Yet it would be a mistake to suppose that the prison Bonhoeffer was a different man from the world-respected theologian; there is a continuity from the most conservative expositions of *Cost of Discipleship* to the most radical statements of his letters from prison. His friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, emphasizes this continuity time and again, pointing out how the ideas expressed in the prison letters have their roots in Bonhoeffer's earliest writings. There is, in addition, a thread to be followed, a thread that provides additional insight into not only the reasons that may have motivated Bonhoeffer, but also into our interpretation of what he meant by his "radical" statements.

Bonhoeffer's biographer Mary Bosanquet points out that Bonhoeffer avoided almost intentionally through most of his life any serious consideration of the interaction between science and theology.¹³ This omission was remedied when Bonhoeffer read Weizsacker's book, *Das Weltbild der Physik*, while in prison. He first mentions reading this book in his letter of May 24, 1944, but it is perhaps no coincidence that his "radical" speculations are mentioned first in his letter just 24 days earlier. He refers to the book by Weizsacker again in his letter of May 25 with some development of his inferences from its reading. It appears quite likely that the thoughts of a lifetime were given new impetus and clarity by this sudden introduction to the worldview of modern physics and its philosophical implications, and that the "radical" statements of Bonhoeffer are to be interpreted in the light of this interaction.

How quickly Bonhoeffer comes to the central issue of concern to him! His very first sentence on the subject in his letter of April 30 sums up completely the problem he sees,

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today.¹⁴

11. p. 177

12. p. 187

13. Bosanquet, Mary, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Harper and Row, New York (1968), p. 259

14. p. 139

Why is this a problem? Bonhoeffer replies that it is a problem because 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."¹⁵

The days when "people could be told everything by means of words,"¹⁶ when the preaching of Christianity could rest upon the "religious *a priori*" of men,¹⁷ were coming (had come?) to an end. As long as religious modes of thoughts were part of the common culture, then Christianity could be advanced as the best form of religion. But when religious modes of thought had become irrelevant relics to the common man, what then became of Christianity? Who is Christ for us today when religion no longer has acceptance?

Perhaps it seems as if Bonhoeffer overstated the loss of religious *a priori* for modern man. In a day when, at least in some parts of the world, *homo religiosus* seems as alive as ever in his indiscriminating search for religious experience not only in the framework of the traditional religions of the world, but also in astrology, scientology, Zen, Satan-worship and countless other religious forms, it may seem as if Bonhoeffer was at least premature, if not basically in error. Yet, there is certainly a sense in which he was and is right; his own conviction was heightened by the realization that the war in which his country was engaged had aroused no religious reaction.¹⁸ Present signs of religious revival may turn out to be no more than a backwash of the increasing secularization of the common man.

THE KEY: GOD-OF-THE-GAPS

In his letter of May 25, 1944, Bonhoeffer indicates the key to his developing conceptions of man come of age and religionless Christianity.

Weizsacker's book *Das Weltbild der Physik* is still keeping me very busy. It has again brought home to me quite clearly how wrong it to use God as a stopgap for the incompleteness of our knowledge. . . . God is no stopgap; he must be recognized at the center of our life, not when we are at the end of our resources.¹⁹

Bonhoeffer makes the connection between the fallacy of the God-of-the-Gaps in physical science with the fallacy of the God-of-the-Gaps in all of life.

There is a long history of the attempt by Christians to prove or at least to defend their belief in the existence and activity of God by pro-

15. p. 139

16. p. 139

17. p. 140

18. p. 140

19. p. 164

posing that it is God alone who acts in areas in which man is ignorant of any natural mechanism. The argument runs in this way: man may now know much about physics, chemistry, biology and the like, but there remain certain key physical mechanisms, chemical mechanisms, or biological mechanisms, which must forever elude him because such mechanisms do not in fact exist. These gaps in natural description are filled only by the recognition that God acts in these gaps above and beyond any physical, chemical or biological mechanism. In this interpretation God remains the Great Mechanician, and the possibility of a complete physical, chemical or biological description—even in principle—is forever ruled out by the very existence and activity of God.

Newton invoked the God-of-the-Gaps when certain irregularities in the motion of the planets could not be explained by his concurrent theory of gravitation; since the mechanics of the theory of gravity could not explain this irregularity, Newton concluded that it must be a direct manifestation of the intervention of God. Newton was wrong; subsequent analysis of the details of the planetary system provided a natural mechanism for these irregularities. An evidence for the activity of God was lost.

The list of phenomena invoked by Christians to defend the God-of-the-Gaps is long indeed and still very much present with us. Only God can heal the sick or bring the rain. But soon men also could heal the sick and even bring the rain. Evidences for the activity of God were lost. Today one still hears that there could be no natural mechanism for the origin of life—only a supernatural intervention of God would be adequate. What will be said when men produce life from non-living matter in the laboratory? Only God can determine the sex or personality parameters of a fetus; what will be said when men control some or many of these characteristics?

The continuous chain of evidence in the physical and biological sciences is so compelling that most knowledgeable Christians today recognize the fallacy of the God-of-the-Gaps argument. They see that such an advocacy results in the paradox of less and less evidence for the existence and activity of God resulting from more and more knowledge of His creation. They emphasize the importance of seeing God in all phenomena, the natural as much as the supernatural, and of recognizing that the very existence of the material universe depends moment-by-moment upon the sustaining activity of God. This growing consensus can be summarized in the words of Malcolm Jeeves,

God, to the theist, while being the cause of everything, is in the scientific sense the explanation of nothing.²⁰

Today many Christians are willing to admit that a complete description in physical and biological categories may well be possible, at least in

20. Jeeves, Malcolm A., *The Scientific Enterprise and Christian Faith*, Tyndale Press, London (1969), p. 103

principle, without the "God-hypothesis" supplying a missing mechanism *in these categories*, but they do not conclude that this invalidates descriptions in other categories as well.²¹

With these conclusions recognizing the fallacy of the God-of-the-Gaps, Bonhoeffer was quick to agree. But it seemed to him only part of the picture to limit the discussion to the physical and biological sciences. If the concept of a God-of-the-Gaps was insufficient, and in fact destructive of true Christian witness, in the case of the physical and the biological, could it be expected to be any less insufficient and destructive in the case of the religious? If the search for the reality of God in the gaps of man's ignorance in physics and biology were doomed to failure, is it not likely that the search for the reality of God in the gaps of man's ignorance of religious matters is likewise doomed? Bonhoeffer maintains that the situation is quite analogous.

Religious people 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 to the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure.... It always seems to me that we are trying anxiously in this way to reserve some place for God; I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the center, not in weakness but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man's life and goodness.²²

The weakness of the physicist in physics or of the biologist in biology at one time gave the appearance of evidence for the strength of God in filling the gap of ignorance. When the strength of the physicist in physics and of the biologist in biology became known, it appeared that the weakness of the God-hypothesis had been demonstrated. Bonhoeffer argues that the search for the strength of God only in the weakness of man can have no other effect than to destroy the reality of God for us.

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.... For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated.²³

That some will argue that if the God-hypothesis is abandoned, then there will be no room left for God at all, must not be allowed to influence our response. There is no way back to the past; Bonhoeffer is reminded of the song, "O wusst ich doch den Weg zuruck, den weiten Weg ins Kinderland," but concludes that only the way ahead according to Matthew 18:3 in repentance and ultimate honesty is possible.²⁴

21. See, for example, Bube, Richard H., *The Human Quest: A New Look at Science and Christian Faith*, Word Books, Waco, Texas (1971), Chapter 7

22. p. 142

23. p. 187

24. p. 187

Bonhoeffer sees the emphasis upon the God-of-the-Gaps in the "inner" and "private" aspects of life as a natural consequence of the squeezing out of the God-of-the-Gaps from the external and public aspects of scientific life. It is a continuing attempt to preserve some small place for God where man's knowledge cannot touch, and thus to maintain an argument for the existence and activity of God immune to man's scientific advances. The seeking out of a man's inner private weaknesses as the first and essential step of relating him to God offends Bonhoeffer who describes such activity as "religious blackmail."²⁵ He sees a double theological error in such religious seeking to bring to light the inner sins of men.

First, it is thought that a man can be addressed as a sinner only after his weaknesses and meannesses have been spied out.²⁶

That man is a sinner is true enough, but what Bonhoeffer rejects is the notion that it is his weaknesses only that make him a sinner; no, rather, it is also his strengths that make him a sinner.

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.²⁷

But the distinction between the "inner" man and the "outer" man is non-Biblical; the Bible is always concerned with the whole man, with a man's deeds and not just with a man's motives. As good deeds do not justify evil motives, so good motives do not justify evil deeds. A man lives as much from "without" to "within" as he lives from "within" to "without." Why, then, asks Bonhoeffer do we attempt to find God in some special way in the "inner"?

I therefore want to start from the premise that God should not be smuggled into some last secret place.²⁸

For these reasons, therefore, Bonhoeffer argues that we must search out what it means to reject the God-of-the-Gaps hypothesis in all respects of life, and to ask ourselves anew the question: What is Christ for us today in a world without the God-of-the-Gaps?

MAN COME OF AGE

Although the phrase, "man come of age," has the ring of possible human exaltation about it, it should be remembered that in a profound sense, the Christian is a "man come of age" according to Paul in his letter to the Galatians 3:23-26. Formerly under the tutorship of the law, like a student to his schoolmaster, now the Christian is set free to the maturity of freedom in Christ.

25. p. 182

26. pp. 182, 183

27. p. 183

28. p. 183

It can also certainly not be denied that man has come of age in the sense that man is called upon today to make decisions about the world and himself that he was formerly not called upon and was unable to make. In Christian perspective, we must conclude that God is bringing man to the point where man has the ability and knowledge to respond to more and more human needs. If this is the case, then not only is it possible for man to make more decisions today than ever before, but it becomes wrong for him to shirk this responsibility.

Fifty years ago many diseases had no known cure; in the intervening years cures or effective treatments for some of them have been discovered. Confronted with an incurable disease fifty years ago, a doctor told the relatives that there was nothing further that could humanly be done; the ill person was now in the hands of God who could heal him if He willed. If the ill person recovered, his relatives thanked God who had healed him. Today if a doctor is confronted with the same disease for which a treatment is known, it would be wrong for him to withhold the treatment and tell the relatives that only prayer could meet the patient's needs. He must instead administer the treatment. If the relatives have been influenced by the God-of-the-Gaps fallacy, they will now thank the doctor and forget about God completely; if they have not been trapped by this fallacy, they will thank the doctor *and* they will thank God for the wisdom and skill of modern medicine. The point is that under present conditions a decision had to be made by one or more men, the doctor and the relatives, to take an action which previously they would have considered wholly within the province of God alone.

This example of medical knowledge does not ordinarily cause many problems for Christians. They accept the fact that medical knowledge should be used to cure illness. But in many other quite analogous areas, such acceptance is not so easily obtained. A whole host of questions must now be answered by man, whereas previously he could simply leave them either alone or in the hands of God. Ramm²⁹ summarizes a number of such problems as they are related to genetic engineering, the definition of death, and the electrical, chemical and surgical alteration of man's behavior. To these may be added the problems associated with birth control, abortion and population limitation, environmental control and preservation, heightened possibilities for psychological and sociological manipulation of persons, artificial insemination, organ transplants and deep freezing for the future. The essential absence of a political Christian perspective in the New Testament church can be attributed to the lack of direct responsibility of the early Christians for the political system under which they lived; contrast the potential responsibility of a citizen living in a democratic form of government which purports to represent him directly.

29. Ramm, B., "Evangelical Theology and Technological Shock," *Journal ASA* 23, No. 2, 52 (1971)

It is in this kind of a framework that we can understand Bonhoeffer's discussion of "man come of age."

The movement that began about the 13th century...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."³⁰

How, then, shall we respond to these developments, asks Bonhoeffer? Shall we accept them and continue to emphasize the reality of God at the center of life to a "world come of age," or shall we instead attempt to recover the previous dependence of man upon the "God-hypothesis" by denying his "coming of age" and seeking to restore the secret places where God can continue to reign without challenge? He argues that the common practice in Christian apologetics has all too often been the latter. And since it is no longer possible to uphold the God-of-the-Gaps in the physical and biological realms, the effort is made to find Him in the ultimate questions of death and guilt—for which surely only God has the answer. But, says Bonhoeffer, just think,

What if one day they no longer exist as such, if they too can be answered "without God?"³¹

Bonhoeffer sees the secularized off-shoots of Christianity, existentialist philosophy and psychotherapy, as related movements that seek to take the happy, healthy man-in-the-street and convince him that he is really miserable and unhappy, a victim of existential despair; the man-in-the-street is untouched by such sophisticated efforts and only a few self-centered intellectuals take themselves seriously.

Perhaps it seems that Bonhoeffer is raising unnecessary problems. Is it possible that the problems of guilt and death will be dealt with successfully without invoking the spiritual God-of-the-Gaps at the critical point? To avoid the extremism of Bonhoeffer's overstatement we need to distinguish between the ultimate guilt between man and God, with which only God can deal and has dealt in Jesus Christ, and the many manifestations of guilt, with which man may be expected to be able to deal increasingly. It is of these latter manifestations that we believe Bonhoeffer speaks here. A consideration of the interaction between scientific advances and Christian theology has led Ramm²⁹ to speak in terms very similar to those of Bonhoeffer.

In the light of developments in behavioral sciences and psychiatry we need to take a second look at our doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Put in simplest and most direct terms, many of the things we now claim *only* the Holy Spirit can do with man supernaturally, man

30. pp. 167, 168

31. pp. 168, 169

will do for himself. We see no ceiling to the control, shaping and modulation of human behavior in the future.

Ramm argues that we must think through in the light of possible developments what it means to speak of the immanence of the Holy Spirit in every dimension of the universe. While maintaining clearly the *unique-ness* and *discontinuity* of the work of the Holy Spirit in the appropriate context, we must also be careful to maintain the *continuity* of the work of the Holy Spirit with the natural mechanisms of man's growing technological control over the world.

Bonhoeffer levels a threefold attack on the attempt of Christian apologetics to deny the "adulthood of the world." Such a program, he argues is (1) pointless, because it attempts to force a dependency upon man which he truly no longer has; (2) ignoble, because it attempts to exploit man's weaknesses; and (3) unchristian, because it confuses the universal reality of Christ with one particular stage in the religious development of man.

We should frankly recognize that the world, and people, have come of age, that we should not run man down in his worldliness, but confront him with God at his strongest point, that we should give up all our clerical tricks, and not regard psychotherapy and existentialist philosophy as God's pioneers. . . . The Word of God is far removed from this revolt of mistrust, this revolt from below. On the contrary, it reigns.³²

Man has come of age. There is no turning back the clock. It is no more possible—so Bonhoeffer would argue—to deal with man today on the basis of the religious patterns of the last century than it is to deal with him using the medicines of that period. If all of man's life has been secularized, then God must be related to that secularized life.

ETSI DEUS NON DARETUR

What does it mean to live free of the God-of-the-Gaps fallacy and without the "God-hypothesis"? It means, according to Bonhoeffer, that we must live fully responsible for the course of events in the world. While we do not deny the *possibility* of God's activity in either the physical or the religious realm without us, we do not use this possibility ever to serve as an excuse or a stopgap for our own ignorance or apathy. And so we are led to appreciate the meaning of one of Bonhoeffer's more paradoxical statements.

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.³³

32. pp. 183, 184

33. p. 188

We must live in a way that is valid "even if there were no God," but we must live in this way—before God! Bonhoeffer does not call us to repudiate God; God is not dead. He calls us to recognize that we are fully responsible for what goes on in our lives and in our world, not attempting to push off unto God those responsibilities which formerly were not ours but now are.

How is God with us and how does God help us today? Bonhoeffer replies that we have the key to the power of God in the world in the cross of Jesus Christ. As far as the world is concerned the cross is a sign of weakness, evidence of the world pushing God out; yet this is the way that God brought salvation to men. God brought salvation by suffering, not by His omnipotence. By thus falling victim to the world, God remains victor over the world.

The God who lets us live in the world without making the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God.³⁴

It is this perspective that renders Christianity different from all religions. Other religions covet power and wealth, or forsake human responsibility for religious ritual.

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...the development outlined above...opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness.³⁵

Bonhoeffer would not have us believe that God is weak, that God is powerless; rather he would show us that God's program of salvation does not involve only the power play or the demonstration of omnipotence. So we Christians should also live our life before and after God, recognizing that in what the world regards as weakness and in suffering, we have the possibility of bringing to the world the real power of God.

We do not arrive at Christian living by separating ourselves from the world, Bonhoeffer argues, but rather by living fully in all of "life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities."³⁶ We must give us the attempt to make something of ourselves, "whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman,"³⁷ but instead give ourselves wholly and responsibly to the fulfillment of those tasks in which we find ourselves.

In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God,

34. p. 188

35. p. 188

36. p. 193

37. p. 193

taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane.³⁸

By living in this way, we experience God in the totality of life, and not simply in the peripheral regions of mystical religiosity or as the answer in our moments of distress. These words of Bonhoeffer are all the more striking when we realize that they were written on the day after the final plot against Hitler's life had failed, and when his hope was at low ebb.

IS RELIGION A CONDITION OF SALVATION?

The word "religion" has a pejorative ring as used by Bonhoeffer. The religious frame of mind is to Bonhoeffer a culturally conditioned perspective on life, which can in principle be almost completely separated from Christian commitment to Jesus Christ. Thus when he asks whether religion is a condition of salvation, he is in no sense implying that salvation is possible apart from a commitment of the whole man to Jesus Christ. Nor is he putting himself into the camp of liberal theology, which he charges with conceding "to the world the right to determine Christ's place in the world,"³⁹ and hence going on to defeat. Even Bonhoeffer's celebrated reference to Bultmann must be understood in this light.

I expect you remember Bultmann's essay on the "demythologizing" of the New Testament? My view of it today would be, not that he went "too far," as most people thought, but that he did not go far enough.⁴⁰

To understand this we must keep reading,

You cannot, as Bultmann supposes, separate God and miracle, but you must be able to interpret and proclaim *both* in a "non-religious" sense. Bultmann's approach is fundamentally still a liberal one (i.e., abridging the gospel), whereas I am trying to think theologically.⁴¹

In his letter of June 8, Bonhoeffer returns to this theme and expounds still further on the meaning of his original and often-quoted comment on Bultmann's method.

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. . . . Only in that way, I think, will liberal theology be overcome. . . . and at the same time its question be genuinely taken up and answered.⁴²

38. p. 193

39. p. 170

40. p. 143

41. p. 143

42. p. 172

Perhaps what Bonhoeffer has to say when he defines what it means to "interpret in a religious sense"⁴³ causes us even more difficulty than the above remarks; for he seems to be cutting at the heart of evangelical conviction when he says,

What does it mean to "interpret in a religious sense?" I think it means to speak on the one hand metaphysically, and on the other hand individualistically. . . . Has not the individualistic question about personal salvation almost completely left us all? Are we not really under the impression that there are more important things than that question (perhaps not more important than the *matter* itself, but more important than the *question!*)? I know it sounds pretty monstrous to say that.⁴⁴

Recognizing himself the apparent monstrosity of the statement, what then did Bonhoeffer have in mind that compelled him to say it? It seems fair to propose that it is spoken in antithesis to another common position, and by way of antithesis takes the form of an overstatement (e.g., Luke 14:26). The other common position is that man's concern is primarily *only* with individual salvation, which is related to a future life and not to a life with its responsibilities here and now. Bonhoeffer calls to mind the essential absence of a focus on "saving one's soul" in the Old Testament, but rather a basic concern with "righteousness and the Kingdom of God on earth"⁴⁵ (which flow from a "saved soul" in relation to God).

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 biblical sense of the creation and of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

To separate the future from the present, the heavenly from the earthly, the spiritual from the physical, the religious from the secular, the social from the individual—all of these false separations come under the attack of Bonhoeffer in his efforts to show that a religious worldview must not be allowed to become a precondition for salvation.

Perhaps there is an analogy, suggests Bonhoeffer, between the practice of circumcision and the practice of religion. In the Old Covenant, circumcision was a sign of salvation and became considered to be a precondition of salvation. Paul, however, clearly points out that in the New Covenant no religious rite such as circumcision can be allowed to be a precondition to salvation in Christ. As justification does not depend upon circumcision, so justification cannot depend upon any particular religious perspective. This is why Bonhoeffer argues that we must interpret the

43. p. 143

44. pp. 143, 144

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Christian gospel in terms that are not absolutely dependent upon a particular religious consciousness or worldview.

Christian apologetics has attempted to defend itself against the implications of a world come of age, a world in which the fallacy of the God-of-the-Gaps must be fully exposed, by opposing such developments as Darwinism, but

it has accommodated itself to the development by restricting God to the so-called ultimate questions as a *deus ex machina*; that means that he becomes the answer to life's problems, and the solution of its needs and conflicts.⁴⁷

But with this approach, what of the man who considers himself free of problems, needs and conflicts? Is it necessary that before he be brought to salvation in Christ, he must by some means or other be shown that whereas he thought he was happy, really he was miserable; that whereas he thought he was content, really he was discontent; that whereas he thought he was successful, really he was a failure?

But if he cannot be brought to see and admit that his happiness is really an evil, his health sickness, and his vigor despair, the theologian is at his wits' end. It is 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.⁴⁸

This is not the way Jesus acted, Bonhoeffer claims. He blessed sinners, and they were really sinners, but Jesus did not make them sinners first; "he called them away from their sin, not into their sin."⁴⁹ It is not that man can come to Christ in faith without the realization of his sinfulness, but what Bonhoeffer argues against is the concentration on his weaknesses and failures as the occasion of the saving process, rather than on his health, vigor and happiness equally. After all, Jesus healed the sick and strengthened the weak, thus showing that health and strength are God's will for man. Our relationship to Christ must be such that he is able to claim for himself, not just our weakness and our failure, but also our strength and our success. "Jesus claims for himself and the Kingdom of God the whole of human life in all its manifestations."⁵⁰ It appears once again that Bonhoeffer's difficult words are intended as antithetical reaction against a position, that position in which sins are ferreted out with joy while righteousness is overlooked.

Bonhoeffer is particularly anxious to maintain that Christian faith does not consist in the acceptance of a particularly religious perspective on life and is not fulfilled by the performance of particular religious acts.

47. p. 179

48. p. 179

49. p. 179

50. p. 180

The "religious act" is always something partial; "faith" is something whole, involving the whole of one's life. Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life.⁵¹

Religion deals with the periphery of life; Christ lives in the center of life. If Christ is truly to be Lord and Savior to us, then he must not be relegated to the peripheral aspects of life, to the religious thoughts and practices that mark us as pious churchmen.

RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY

And so we are brought to the final topic in Bonhoeffer's assessment of the significance of realizing the fallacy of the God-of-the-Gaps hypothesis in the religious as well as in the physical realm. If religion is not to be a precondition of salvation, then it should be possible to define and experience a "religionless Christianity." This leads us back to Bonhoeffer's first question, restated as

How can Christ become the Lord of the religionless as well? Are there religionless Christians? If religion is only a garment of Christianity—and even this garment has looked very different at different times—then what is a religionless Christianity?⁵²

"What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world?"⁵³

In what way are we "religionless-secular" Christians, in what way are we the *ekklesia*, those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favored, 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 this mean?⁵⁴

We note that in every case, Bonhoeffer does not seek to reject, but to transform and interpret anew; not to throw away, but to bring to new and vital life in a changing situation. The old truths are still true. For many years they have been cast into a religious context; what do they look like without this religious veneer?

To speak of God in a "non-religious" way is not to minimize the godlessness of the world. On the contrary,

When we speak of God in a "non-religious" way, we must speak of him in such a way that the godlessness of the world is not in some way concealed but for that very reason revealed rather in, and thus exposed to, an unexpected light. The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps its coming of age is nearer to God than before.⁵⁵

51. p. 191

52. p. 140

53. pp. 140, 141

54. p. 141

55. p. 191

Bonhoeffer can make this claim, because, as long as God is limited to the peripheral religious corners of life, He cannot lay claim to all of life; but when it is realized that no place is to be given to the God-of-the-Gaps, but rather that all of life must be yielded up to God, then truly God reigns over all.

The key to religionless Christianity must be found in the way in which God triumphed in the world, i.e., by suffering and dying. "It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life."⁵⁶ We need to put I Corinthians 1:25 into practice in a more complete way than ever before; it must become the very standard by which the Christian lives amidst the contradiction of a power-seeking and bloodthirsty world.

Once again Bonhoeffer rejects the position that sees the redemption theme of the Bible as one that applies primarily to a life after death. Effects for eternity are certainly there, but of at least equal, if not more, consequence are the effects for time, for here and now.

The difference between the Christian hope of resurrection and the mythological hope is that the former sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way which is even more sharply defined than it is in the Old Testament. The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself ("My God, why has thou forsaken me?") he must drink the earthly cup to the lees, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ. This world must not be prematurely written off; in this the Old and New Testaments are at one.⁵⁷

How heavily this conviction bears on the imprisoned Bonhoeffer, as he reflects on the way in which exclusive concern about the eternal had led many in the evangelical church of Germany to forsake their responsibilities in the now, and hence to tolerate, even support, the Hitler regime.

In his August 3 letter, Bonhoeffer gives a brief outline of a book that one day he hoped to write. In the 2nd of 3 proposed chapters, on "The Real Meaning of Christian Faith," Bonhoeffer gives the bare sketch of what he hoped to develop into a description of religionless Christianity.

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.⁵⁸

And so Bonhoeffer introduces the centrality of the idea of a Christian being "a man for others," following his Lord, who showed indeed what

56. p. 190

57. p. 176

58. p. 202

it means to live as "a man for others." In this framework Bonhoeffer hoped to interpret the principal Biblical concepts of creation, fall, atonement, faith, the new life, and the last things. We are left with the task of discerning what I John 3:16 means for us Christians today.

On one point, however, Bonhoeffer left no doubt as to his conclusions.

The Church is the Church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need. . . . 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.⁵⁹

The self-contradiction of a wealthy property-owning Church preaching denial of self and the willingness for service to all men has been a constant stumbling-block to Christian witness. Religionless Christianity, like the best of religious Christianity, must involve a life lived not for self, but for others.

SUMMARY

In other days it was possible to sustain a religious interpretation of the physical and biological mechanisms of the world, i.e., to look directly to God as the immediate Cause of those physical and biological events which man was unable to describe or understand. In the historical context of growing physical and biological scientific description of the world, this religious interpretation became a concern with a God-of-the-Gaps, whose existence could be proved by man's ignorance of certain key physical and biological mechanisms. The consequence was that evidence for God decreased as man's scientific knowledge grew. Today we do not attempt to sustain such a religious interpretation of the physical and biological worlds. We appreciate the fact that what has happened is that God, through permitting increasing scientific knowledge, has allowed Himself to be crowded out of the physical and biological context. We no longer look for a scientific hypothesis based upon God as the sole mechanism. We do our physics and our biology without God—before God!

Bonhoeffer presses this growing relationship one step further, and inquires what will happen (has happened?) if this same kind of a continuing process applies not only to the physical and biological, but to the moral, ethical, and religious as well. He concludes that a God-of-the-Gaps position is no more tolerable here than it has been in the physical and biological spheres. Instead of seeking the main focus of Christian faith in the areas of man's spiritual weakness and ignorance, we must prepare now for God's crowding Himself out of these areas also as a sole mechanism. We must be prepared to live all of life with God as the center; without God—before God!

We are challenged to take these thoughts of Bonhoeffer, balance them carefully with the Biblical revelation as he sought to do, and answer the question that he did not live long enough to face fully. If some of the things he said sound radical and almost heretical to our ears, we can be sure that they sounded the same way to him. If we feel that his viewpoint leading to man come of age and living a life as if there were no God is in direct contradiction to the Biblical teaching that we must live each moment in complete dependence on God, then we must stop and think again. Bonhoeffer, both by his words written before and after these 11 radical letters, and most of all by his life and commitment, shows that such a dichotomy is not what he had in mind. He proved in the supreme way that his life was that of "a man for others," and he gave it into the hands of God in literal fulfilment of I John 3:16.

Could we wish that he had expressed himself more clearly, less controversially? So also did he.

Forgive me for still putting it all so terribly clumsily and badly, as I really feel I am. . . . We are getting up at 1:30 almost every night here; it is a bad time, and it handicaps mental work.⁶⁰

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the following for their helpful comments on this manuscript: Dr. Cary Weisiger III, Dr. Clifford Smith, Dr. Robert McAfee Brown, Rev. Kent Meads, and Robert Godfrey.