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Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Man of Faith in a World Come of Age

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THE CHURCH must get out of her stagnation. We must move out into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world and risk shocking people if we are to cut any ice." This Bonhoeffer said, and he was a man who practised what he preached. In the things he ventured to say about the man of faith in a world come of age he certainly shocked some people, while his development of the theme gave him a theological perspective for intellectual discussion with the world.

The readers of this *Journal* have been introduced in a previous article to some aspects of Bonhoeffer's thought.¹ We recall here a few of the main events in his life. He was born in 1906 in Breslau, Germany. He was brought up in a cultured home and in the intellectual environment of the University, his father being a professor of psychiatry in the University of Berlin. In 1931 Bonhoeffer became a professor in the same University in the field of systematic theology. On the very day that Hitler came to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer gave a talk over the radio, criticizing the cult of personality in which he read already the threat of his country's doom. This broadcast branded him from the outset an enemy of the Nazi regime. In 1939, just before the outbreak of the war, while on a lecture tour in the United States, to which as a pacifist he had been enticed, he resolved to return to Germany, having come to see in his pacifism what he called a pietistic escape from responsible action in the world in obedience to God. He threw himself courageously and whole-heartedly into the resistance movement, until in April 1943 he was arrested and sent to the Tegel prison in Berlin. On April 9, 1945, in Flossenburg, after periods in several other prisons, including Buchenwald, he was hanged for the part he had played in the plot on Hitler's life. Three days later his prison was liberated by the Americans.

During the year and a half that Bonhoeffer was in the Tegel prison he wrote, and got sent out in one way or another, a number of letters addressed to his parents and his closest friends. These letters, together with a few short papers and poems, have been published in an English translation, entitled in the British edition *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and in the American edition *Prisoner of God*.² There are several other

1. Cf. Pieter de Jong, "Camus and Bonhoeffer on the Fall," *CJT*, 7 (1961), 245-57.

2. *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1954); *Prisoner of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1954).

works of his available in English translation, including his fragmentary but weighty work on ethics.³ Our present essay is based almost entirely upon material contained in his letters and papers from prison.

A debate continues in theological circles about whether what Bonhoeffer wrote in his letters on our subject represents a break with or an extension of his earlier thought. He himself suggests that he was breaking new ground. He wrote to his friend: "You would be surprised and perhaps disturbed if you knew how my ideas on theology were taking shape." However, it is our conviction that there is an inner consistency in his theological development despite the new, and at first glance startling, notions which appear for the first time in his letters. Such ideas as "the world having come of age," "the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts," "the this-worldly character of the Christian faith," could not have been anticipated perhaps by those who knew his former writings. But in these ideas Bonhoeffer believed he was finding a corrective balance, and a movement towards wholeness, in his Christian thinking—and not a contradiction.

Before proceeding to an analysis of these notions in their bearing on our theme, we wish to add one further word of personal history. A reader of the letters and papers from prison will constantly be surprised at the sheer objectivity and catholicity of interest shown by this imprisoned man. In some of his poems, it is true, Bonhoeffer speaks movingly of his inner experiences. But even then his thought is cast in the large mould of man's life in the everyday world. Devotees of Norman Vincent Peale's brand of Christianity could learn from him the "power of positive thinking" at a level of thought and life that many of them have not yet dreamed could exist. But then, Bonhoeffer was a truly remarkable man. Intelligent, cultured, in love with life, courageous in death, man of thought and action—all within the context of lively faith and costly service—he exemplified in his own person that freedom for, and wholeness in, a multi-dimensional life which he believed to be the mark of the Christian man. Thus at a time in his life when one might have expected an exclusive concentration on the comforts and consolations of religion, we find him instead calling into question this boundary-line, up-against-it use of the Christian faith. At a time when one might have expected to hear a victim of the regime indicting the godless folly of man which had brought his country to ruins, we discover him speaking of the modern world in its maturity and of the cultured men within it (his humanist partners in prison) who had "come of age." At a moment when one could have expected to find a Christian thinking and speaking of the "other-worldly" dimension of a religious man's believing, Bonhoeffer is found concentrating on the "this-worldly" meaning of the biblical witness to revelation and its call to a full life of service in the world. In view of the fact that in his earlier writings Bonhoeffer had shown himself to be a theologian of Barthian sympathies, there is an arresting quality in these facts. We are incited by

3. *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

them to attempt to understand what he means by the man of faith in a world come of age.

Bonhoeffer believed that the age of religion was over. With its passing man had arrived at intellectual maturity. Religion belonged to those earlier periods in man's cultural development when he believed it necessary to have God as a metaphysical principle, a hypothetical key to understanding his world, or a *deus ex machina* to rescue him out of his distresses at life's extremities. Modern man has outgrown any such need of God. First of all in science, later in politics, then in morality, and finally now in philosophy and, since Feuerbach, even in religion, man has discovered that he has no need of God as a necessary idea. All the advances in man's knowledge and control of nature, and in man's understanding of himself and the world, have taken place as if there were no such God as earlier epochs had conceived him to be. Bonhoeffer was convinced that both as honest thinker and as Christian believer he must assent to this development. So we find him saying that in the name of intellectual honesty God as a working hypothesis "should be dropped or dispensed with as far as possible."⁴ He fully recognized that in saying so he ran counter to the general attitude of the Christian Church towards the intellectual history of man. For the Church has ever been wont to confuse the Christian God with the God of religion and thus to feel her faith and life threatened at every stage of man's maturing growth.

When God as a necessary idea was banished from the quest for scientific knowledge and mastery of nature, religious man within the Church was inclined at first to denounce the whole endeavour. Then, when intellectual honesty, and irrefutable evidence, forced him to acknowledge science's achievements, religious man became concerned for the God who seemed to have been banished without loss, but only with gain. He sought to preserve a place for him in certain left-over areas of knowledge where nature's secrets lay still undisclosed. The idea of God was used as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of man's comprehension. God occupied the area of the inexplicable, or at least the area of the as yet unexplained. With what result?

The frontiers of knowledge are inevitably being pushed back further and further, which means that if you only think of God as a stop-gap, He also is being pushed back further and further, and is in more or less continuous retreat.⁵

God is more and more shoved out of the centre of man's thought and life to an ever-receding periphery, and the church is made frantically to search for the next emergency exit through which it can rescue him. In view of modern man's cultural developments the Church has been forced to ask nervously, "What room is there left for God now?" as one after another

4. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 163.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

of the areas preserved for him have been invaded by man's autonomous reason. Now in our own day the Church, with something of a sigh of relief, believes herself to have found an answer. A sure foothold for God—the God of religion—is to be found at the outermost, or rather innermost, boundaries of man's spiritual life. We have need of God, and always will have need of him, as an answer to the *ultimate* questions of human existence. Man, who may no longer need God for living, experiences a need for him as an answer to the problem of dying; man, who can get along without God in health and strength, finds a need for him as comfort and stay in time of sickness. Moral man may no longer need God as source and guarantee of his morality, but he does find a need for him as an answer to the problem of a guilt-laden conscience. Here surely, at the utmost limits of human existence, where he stares into the abyss of nothingness, with the spirit filled with dread, modern man discovers still some religious need of God—if not in the outer sphere of his existence, then in the inner, secret places of the soul. And this, says modern religious man, is why the Church and pastors still are needed.

But, Bonhoeffer asked, what if one day these ultimate questions no longer exist as such? What if man finds a way to master them without any experienced need of God? There are some men, it would seem, who have discovered that such is possible. Socrates long ago mastered the problem of dying, and noble men in our day have met their end with no frantic search for God. There are good men of courage who have learned to live, and live creatively, with sickness and despair without experienced need of God. If God is thought of religiously, as a *deus ex machina* for an otherwise unmanageable life, has the Church anything at all to say to those who have discovered resources in themselves to come to terms with life? Will she not (and here for Bonhoeffer is the rub!) be driven, in her quest for a point of contact for her religious message, to a questionable search for tell-tale flaws in the brave armour of such self-reliant men? If she can relate herself only to those whose experienced need is great enough to welcome some religious word concerning God, will she not be drawn into a tasteless, un-aristocratic sniffing-about in the inner, secret life of adult men for signs of weakness, hypocrisy, and moral fault?

It is not only of the Church that Bonhoeffer asks such questions.

We have of course the secularized offshoots of Christian theology, the existentialist philosophers and psychiatrists, who demonstrate to secure, contented, happy mankind that it is really unhappy and desperate, and merely unwilling to realize that it is in severe straits it knows nothing at all about from which only they can rescue it. Wherever there is health, strength, security, simplicity, they spy luscious fruit to gnaw at or lay their pernicious eggs in. They make it their object first of all to drive men to inward despair, and then it is all theirs. That is secularized methodism. And whom does it touch? A small number of intellectuals, of degenerates, of people who regard themselves as the most important thing in all the world and hence like looking at themselves.⁶

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 146f.

Must the Church, then, in her attempt to make some place for God in modern man's world, ally herself with such as these, dragging men into a burning consciousness of their inadequacy and perversity, in order to find a point of contact for belief in God?

[This] attack by Christian apologetic upon the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second ignoble, and in the third un-Christian. Pointless, because it looks to me like an attempt to put a grown up man back into adolescence, i.e. to make him depend on things on which he is not in fact dependent any more, thrusting him back into the midst of problems which are in fact not problems for him anymore. Ignoble, because this amounts to an effort to exploit the weakness of man for purposes alien to him and not freely subscribed by him. Un-Christian, because for Christ himself is substituted one partial stage in the religiousness of man, i.e. a human law.⁷

Now what are we to make of a Christian thinker with such thoughts as these? Did not the German pastor have a good reason when he said one day to Bonhoeffer's closest friend: "It is to be hoped that at least at the very end Dietrich found his way back to his faith"? Does not the way through his thought that we have travelled thus far lead in the direction of a godless humanism to which a man of faith through pride of reason has surrendered?

Bonhoeffer would no doubt answer: This way does indeed lead in the direction of godless humanism, if by "godless" you mean "non-religious," and if "humanism" spells intellectual honesty and respect for man. But Bonhoeffer's intention is not to leave man godless in the world but to help man to know who the true God is.

A number of searching questions occupied Bonhoeffer's thinking: What is it that Christians really do believe concerning God? What is the significance of the Church in a religionless world? How do we speak about God without religion? How do we speak in a secular fashion of God. What we call Christianity, he said, has always been a pattern, perhaps a true pattern, of religion. But religion is only the garment that faith has worn in its reflection upon and witness to God as revealed. In the worship of the Church there will always be need for religious expressions of thought and devotion. But the question would seem to be: (a) Is the Object of these religious expressions identical with the God of religion which man in his intellectual and spiritual development seems to have outgrown? (b) Is the Church in her witness to God as addressed to the world bound to religious forms of witness, and must she make religion a presupposition for faith? If an answer must be given in the affirmative, the Church is indeed faced with the serious problem: What does it mean to be the Church in a religionless world?

Bonhoeffer believed that Karl Barth had made a great contribution towards answering these questions. The Church, Barth taught, is wrong to confuse her God with the God of religion. Barth was among the first to

7. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

call into question the worried, fretful quest of the Church to preserve a place for God, and incidentally for herself, in a world that seemed intent on getting rid of him. The God of the Christian faith is not the God of nature, or philosophy, or pious inwardness. If in his cultural history man has thought it well to give the name of "God" to forces in nature, to metaphysical ideas of a certain height, or inward experiences of a certain depth, that is man's affair. But if he eventually grows out of calling these by the name of God, and finds no longer any need for such a God, that also is his affair. He has simply set aside his own creation. He has not thereby outgrown or discarded the one true God, who is not man's creation and over whom man has no such powers of discovery or disposal. The true God is the revealed God of biblical witness, known only through his own act of gracious self-disclosure. He is the transcendent Creator of the world, who is in the world only at one point of his own choosing, namely, in Jesus Christ and thereafter in the Church which is his Body.

"There are," said Simone Weil, "two kinds of atheism, one of which is the purification of the concept of God." The atheism of the grown-up world, which has discarded the God of man's own creating, may actually be accepted as a purification. It is a hopeful godlessness which opens the way for the true God of biblical revelation.

Twice in history man has shoved God out of the world. Once when religious man took the true God for false and crucified the Christ. The second time, in our own day, when modern man took the religious "God" for true and, finding him outgrown, thinks of himself as godless in the world. But, then as now, when the world seemed bereft of him, God was nearest at hand. This is what the Church, and the man of faith, should know, and thus understand the religionless world better than it understands itself.

How in fact is the Church reacting to this situation? Bonhoeffer asked whether the Church is not failing to understand her authentic belief and calling, in the world that has come of age, for two contrasting reasons: (a) by not having heeded Barth when he "called the God of Jesus Christ into the lists against religion"; (b) by not having gone beyond *Barth* to engage in real encounter with the world.

The Church which has not heeded Barth is the one that still takes religion as her presupposition and seeks to encounter a godless world through apologetics and accommodation. This has led her, as we have seen, to seek a place for God, and for herself, on the boundaries of human existence where human capacities come to grief. But God who is self-revealed in Jesus Christ cannot be confined to the limited space that religion has left for him. He is relevant to the *total* dimension of man's life.

I should like to speak of God not on the borders of life but at life's centre, not in weakness but in strength, not therefore in man's suffering and death but in his life and prosperity. . . . The Church stands not where human powers give out, on the borders, but in the centre of the village. That is the way it

is in the Old Testament, and in this sense we still read the New Testament too little on the basis of the Old.⁸

Bonhoeffer would not wish to deny that the Church's witness to God is relevant to these boundary situations of man's life in time. Although he was an aristocrat of the mind and spirit, he did not lack a compassionate understanding of the needs of weaker men. In his pastoral service in prison he taught the relevance of God to the physical and emotional distresses of his fellow men. But he wished, in the name of a truer understanding, to shift the emphasis from these partial, though no doubt for many crucially important, areas of human experience, to that wholeness of life in the world into which the man of faith is called and for which he has been made free. God the Creator, who has reconciled to himself the world of his creating, cannot be shoved off into some dark corner of man's inner life.

Once more, God cannot be used as a stop-gap. We must not wait until we are at the end of our tether: he must be found at the centre of life; in life and not only in death; in health and vigour and not only in suffering; in activity and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Christ. Christ is the centre of life and in no sense did he come to answer our unsolved problems.⁹

So it was with Bonhoeffer. But what of Barth? Did his teaching actually lead in this direction? Bonhoeffer answered "no." Barth served to liberate the Church from her bondage to religion, but she has not learned from him how to speak of God in worldly fashion, i.e., how to think of him in relation to man's total life in time. What began in Barth as a genuine movement of liberation has ended in conservative restoration to which men point when they speak of him as "neo-orthodox." Barth speaks from within the Church, and to the Church, in the traditional language and thought-forms of historical Christianity. That is, Barth speaks only "religiously" and says to modern man that he must receive the Christian message in these terms or have it not at all. Moreover, Barth's arrow of faith is pointed in the wrong direction—away from genuine historical existence in the secular world to a participation in the eternity of God. Barth may have been right in his indictment of nineteenth-century Christian thinkers who tried to speak of God by speaking of man with a loud voice. But Barth himself is guilty of speaking so loudly of God that the human voice is drowned out in the awesome thunder. It is interesting to note that Barth now has recognized his limitation in an essay entitled "The Humanity of God."¹⁰ Both Bonhoeffer's criticism and, perhaps, the logic of Barth's love for Mozart may have had something to do with it.

At any rate, for Bonhoeffer the Christian revelation leads not away from time into eternity, but from eternity into the midst of time. God, for the Christian, is the beyond in the midst of our life at the point of his own

8. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

10. Cf. K. Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1960), pp. 37-65.

choosing. The being-there-for-others of Jesus is man's true experience of transcendence. "Our relation to God is not a religious relationship to a supreme being, absolute in power and goodness, which is a spurious conception of transcendence, but a new life for others through participation in God in human form."¹¹

The human form that this participation takes, after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of the Christ, is the Church. The Church is Jesus Christ existing as community. Therefore, like her Lord and Head, the Church is only Church when she is there with others, and for others, in the world, not lording it over men but simply being with them and, on the basis of a shared life within the world, serving and helping as she can. And *this* is worldly, non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts—the discovery of the meaning of the biblical words and notions through participation in the concrete, yet total, life of man in the world and thereby the discovery of the relevance of the Gospel to that life.

Bonhoeffer believed that Rudolf Bultmann asked the right question when he inquired: What do the biblical words really mean to me, a modern man, attempting to live with intellectual integrity the life of faith in the modern world? But he does not agree with Bultmann's answer. In his attempt to demythologize the Scriptures, Bultmann moves back in the direction of a liberal reduction of the Christian message, and threatens to put the biblical witness back again into bondage to culture by using existentialist anthropology as the touchstone of meaning and significance. For Bonhoeffer, the full content of the Bible must be retained, including its mythology, for this mythology is of the essence of the thing itself. It is no expendable garment that can be cast off. The myth is an essential form of witness to Reality and Truth. But it must be interpreted "non-religiously," that is in relation to man's concrete, everyday life in the world.

The Church of today may find herself unable to achieve such a non-religious, worldly interpretation of her faith. Through attempts at religious defence against the world's coming of age, her thought and life may have become too introverted. She may not have lived enough in the world, and for the world, to be ready to speak to the world meaningfully and helpfully. Therefore she may have to undergo, as an act of penitence, a period of silence as far as the world is concerned. During this time she will continue to be in the world through her members, serving it by their identification with their fellows in the full, many-sided life that belongs to their humanity. And in the cultus she will continue to bear man and his world before God in prayer. It is out of such living and praying that the Church may yet discover how to conceive and interpret the biblical witness to revelation "non-religiously"—unreduced and unprofaned. Meantime, as Bonhoeffer wrote within the context of his day, "Only he who cries out for the Jews should sing gregorian chants."

11. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 179.

It would require another article to explore further Bonhoeffer's ideas on Christian worldliness, particularly in their bearing upon the relation between theology and culture. In his *Ethics* he takes up in a provisional way many of the questions that arise in this area of contemporary theological concern. One may also find that he there anticipates many other questions which this essay may have raised in the minds of its readers.

Whatever may be one's final estimate of the validity of Bonhoeffer's theological convictions, no reader of the *Letters* can fail to be convinced that Bonhoeffer found in the Christian faith a structure of grace that set him free to engage to the full in the whole range of man's intellectual endeavour, as part of that total life lived before God which is God's gift to man in creation and reconciliation. Of course, being a man of faith, he could not accept the principle of the autonomous use of reason, which is bound to lead to all sorts of idolatries. But, as man of faith, he could and did engage in the use of autonomous reason in free and willing participation in the cultural history of man. With commendable integrity he was able to follow reason wherever it should lead—even into a religionless world. He believed that only he who confuses the Christian God with the object of reason, or the Christian man of faith with religious man, could become alarmed at that prospect, or set himself to oppose it in questionable ways.