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Some Thoughts on 'Religionless Christianity'

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer is being hailed on all sides as *the* prophet for our generation. It would be difficult to name four or five other modern theologians who are so widely known and whose work is equally discussed. But it is interesting to note how much of the Bonhoeffer cult is based on one of his books—*Letters and Papers from Prison* (S.C.M., 1953)—and from that rather fragmentary work it is one theme, discussed here and there with tantalizing incompleteness, which arouses most of the discussion: the idea of 'religionless Christianity'. The very phrase itself seems to call forth such an immediate response from the ordinary man that theologians are encouraged to try to carry to a conclusion what Bonhoeffer had begun, to suggest where his remarkable insights might have led him had he lived to complete his last theological project.

Such reconstructions, however, cannot but be highly conjectural. Dr. J. A. T. Robinson, for example, in his recent book, *Honest to God* (S.C.M., 1963), takes Bonhoeffer as his starting-point, but to the trunk of Bonhoeffer is added a shady array of leafy boughs borrowed, for the most part, from the theologies of Bultmann and Tillich. But this grafting operation seems unsuccessful for, as Bonhoeffer himself shrewdly says, 'Tillich set out to interpret the evolution of the world itself—against its will—in a *religious* sense, to give it its whole shape through religion'.¹ And as regards Bultmann, although Dr. Robinson quotes Bonhoeffer's remark that Bultmann 'did not go far enough',² he does not give weight to the assertion that 'the full content (of Christianity), including the mythological concepts, must be maintained' but 'interpreted in a non-religious sense'.³ Apparently for Bonhoeffer both Tillich and Bultmann are 'religious' thinkers because they speak 'on the one hand metaphysically and on the other individualistically'.⁴ Furthermore, the rejection of Bultmann's notorious separation of the existential and the cosmological would seem

¹ *Letters and Papers from Prison* (L.P.P.), pp. 147-148.

² L.P.P., p. 125.

³ L.P.P., p. 149.

⁴ L.P.P., p. 125.

to be a cardinal point in the theology of Bonhoeffer. Tillich and Bultmann are surely blind guides to the unmapped religionless tracts 'beyond Bonhoeffer'. It seems to me that the radicalism of *Honest to God* and the radicalism of Bonhoeffer are for the most part worlds apart.

Another recent attempt to continue along Bonhoeffer's line of thought is to be found in Dr. Vidler's amusing essay on 'Religion and the National Church' in *Soundings* (Cambridge U.P., 1962). Bonhoeffer's vision of a 'religionless Christianity' had already, says Vidler, been seen long ago in England by F. D. Maurice.⁵ Furthermore, the Church of England, because of its very absurdity, provides a fitting vessel for Christianity without religion:

'The very fact that nobody in his senses can suppose the Church of England to be anything like the final embodiment of the Kingdom of God or of the Christian movement in history should make it easier for its members to acknowledge the need for radical change than it is for the members of churches that have kept more up to date as efficient organizations and so can regard their present condition as defensible or worthy of preservation' (p. 257).

The Church of England is therefore fortunate that it has 'archaic and ill-defined standards of doctrine' and 'an indeterminate membership'. Vidler appears to answer the question of Romans 6:1 in a rather different manner from St. Paul! One is almost reminded of Karl Marx's suggestion that the pauperization of the working class and the growth of colonialism are to be encouraged in so far as they bring closer the day of revolution. But we may legitimately doubt whether Bonhoeffer, the leader of the Confessing Church, would have felt much sympathy with Vidler's argument in favour of an outmoded religious establishment as the proper vessel for religionless Christianity.

These two examples illustrate some of the difficulties in proceeding in a consistent way along the road to which Bonhoeffer pointed. 'Religionless Christianity' seems today in danger of becoming a vague but appealing slogan to be used freely by all manner of contending parties. Is it possible to give more content to the fragmentary suggestions in *Letters and Papers*, examine their implications, and place them in the map of modern theological discussion? I think it may be if we pay more attention to the sources from which Bonhoeffer borrowed this theme, and examine whether the almost contemporary *Ethics* (S.C.M., 1955) may not provide some better light on at least one side of religionless Christianity—the question of obedience to God in a world without religion. From such a study we may hope to find where

⁵ If we are to indulge in this theological one upmanship, a Scotsman would be tempted to quote the remark of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, the mid-nineteenth-century Scots theologian: 'Those who make religion their god will not have God for their religion!'

Bonhoeffer differs from his sources, and how far his own contribution is distinctive and convincing.

Bonhoeffer himself acknowledges that it was Karl Barth's attitude to religion which suggested to him the possibility of a 'religionless Christianity'. Barth perhaps drew his own initial inspiration from Kierkegaard's contrasting of 'Christianity' and 'Christendom', but Bonhoeffer does not feel that he has gone far enough, because he 'has still not proceeded to its logical conclusion, but has arrived at a positivism of revelation which has nevertheless remained essentially a restoration'.⁶ Bonhoeffer's comments seem to be based mainly on the early Barth of the *Romans*, but Barth's mature discussion of the subject is to be found in his *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I/2 (Edinburgh, 1956), pp. 280-361: 'The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion'.⁷ Barth's analysis here of the nature of religion and his negative evaluation of it are in some interesting ways parallel to Bonhoeffer's thought. But the theological methods of the two thinkers are rather different, and while Barth has a clear and unambiguous conclusion, Bonhoeffer's early martyrdom has left us with the difficult task of carrying his seminal ideas to any convincing 'logical conclusion' at all. Furthermore, Barth's treatment of this theme raises some very fundamental questions about Bonhoeffer's approach, just as Bonhoeffer questions Barth's conclusion.

For Karl Barth 'religion is unbelief', man's misdirected, fallen striving after a god made in his own image, and his attempt to justify himself before this god. In religion 'man tries to grasp at the truth of himself, he tries to grasp it *a priori*. But in that case he does not do what he has to do when the truth comes to him. He does not believe. If he did, he would listen; but in religion he talks. If he did, he would accept a gift; but in religion he takes something for himself. If he did, he would let God Himself intercede for God; but in religion he ventures to grasp at God'.⁸ Religion is 'the one great concern of Godless man'. Barth quotes Luther's saying that 'The piety of man is vain blasphemy and the greatest of all the sins that he commits'. He has no hesitation in asserting that the Christian religion is in fact religion, and therefore fully subject to every criticism that may be brought against religion as such. For him to assert an absolute qualitative difference between Christianity and all 'religions' would be no less facile and misleading a solution of the problem than to examine and compare the so-called higher religions, including Christianity,

⁶ *L.P.P.*, p. 123.

⁷ Useful summaries of this section together with some critical comments are to be found in John Baillie: *The Sense of the Presence of God* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 177-195, and Daniel Jenkins: *Beyond Religion* (S.C.M., 1962), pp. 26-33.

⁸ Karl Barth: *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 (C.D.), p. 302.

with the intention of proving an inherent superiority of the Christian religion.⁹ Religion, all religion, is a flight from the one true God.

Over against religion in Barth's theology is the concept of revelation. It is only from the standpoint of revelation that it is possible to grasp the true nature of religion. The analysis of religion must be a theological analysis. Revelation is not religion, it is not even the Christian religion: it is God's gracious speaking and acting in Jesus Christ. And as such it convicts *all* religions of unbelief and disobedience. Revelation is the crisis of religion, because religion contradicts revelation. Had man by means of religion been able to grasp the truth of God, revelation would have been unnecessary. But the fact of revelation demonstrates the futility of man's religious striving. Religion is not only different from revelation, it is utterly opposed to it. Revelation does not differentiate good and bad religion, higher religion and lower religion, for it is opposed to religion *as such*, it proclaims that religion is untrue: 'Here the cry must be: *Ecrasez, l'infame!*'¹⁰

Barth's argument concludes not with religionless Christianity, as one might expect, but with a remarkable section on 'True Religion', and the key here is the doctrine of election, in particular his own Christological interpretation of that doctrine.¹¹ Jesus Christ, the Elect Man in Whom mankind is elected by God, exists by the grace of God alone, in utter dependence on, and perfect obedience to, the Father. Christianity as the true religion exists only in as far as it is elected by God. The truth of Christianity is something extrinsic to it, a gift not a secure possession, and not only a gift but a challenge to live by grace alone. 'The hands into which God has delivered Himself in His revelation are thoroughly unclean',¹² but these hands are chosen vessels which He can make clean and fit. The Christian faith is only true in as far as it receives and lives by revelation. The truth of Christianity may be mysterious, but it is mysterious because election itself is a mystery. Election is a fact, but it is also a challenge, the challenge to obedience, to live by the grace that is in Jesus Christ, to purify the Christian religion of all in it which deafens the Church to the revelation of Jesus Christ and defends it from His grace. The Christian religion is true, and it is true in an exclusive sense: truth is not carefully parcelled out among the 'higher religions' so that they may properly be thought of as complementary or as steps in a ladder, any more than one can think of one man as being 'more elect' than another. But Christianity is not true because it deserves to be, because it is a fitting

⁹ This latter appears to be the approach attempted by Ninian Smart in his essay in *Soundings*.

¹⁰ *C.D.*, p. 353.

¹¹ Expounded in *Church Dogmatics*, II/2—apparently one of the books Bonhoeffer read while in prison. See *L.P.P.*, p. 89.

¹² *C.D.*, p. 353.

vessel for the truth: its truth depends on the election of God. Barth's conclusion is 'true religion' rather than 'religionless Christianity' not because he shirks following his thought to its conclusion but simply because he takes the justification of the ungodly, the radical unworthiness of the object of election, seriously. The Church is the elect vessel for God's revelation of Himself to men.

Bonhoeffer's starting-point is very different from Barth's: modern man has come of age, and in this process he has outgrown religion as traditionally understood. This development shows itself in almost every field as the non-necessity of 'the hypothesis of God' becomes obvious. In ethics, philosophy, science, politics, men have learnt to do without the idea of God. 'In the name of intellectual honesty these working hypotheses should be dropped or dispensed with as far as possible.'¹³ God, argues Bonhoeffer, has been pushed from the centre of the life of the man who has come of age, and from the frontiers and boundaries of life where God is conceived of as concerned with man's failings, sinfulness, and ignorance and not with his strength, and joys, and wisdom. Theology engages in 'futile rearguard actions', denying the adulthood of man, 'snuffing around in the sins of men in order to catch them out', and waiting to pounce on weak spots in modern thinking in order to intrude a religious interpretation. God has been made a *deus ex machina*, present only at the crisis of the drama.

Thus Bonhoeffer develops his suggestive, if rather confusing, critique, not only of modern religion and theology but also of the developments which have brought it to this pass where it apparently has neither meaning nor relevance for the modern man. On the one hand we have a God-directed process—the development of man to maturity; and on the other we have religion seen as an attempt to resist the maturing of man and force him to return to mental and spiritual childhood.¹⁴ Bonhoeffer's great concern is the communication of the Gospel to this modern world that has 'come of age': 'How can Christ become the Lord even of those with no religion? If religion is no more than the garment of Christianity—and even that garment has had very different aspects at different periods—then what is a religionless Christianity? . . . I should like to speak of God not on the borders of life but at its centre, not in weakness but in strength, not, therefore, in man's sufferings and his death but in his life and prosperity . . . God is the "beyond" in the midst of our life. The Church stands not where human powers give out, but in the centre of the village.'¹⁵ This religionless Christianity was not a concept which

¹³ L.P.P., p. 163.

¹⁴ There seems to be a relation here, as in many places, between the thought of Bonhoeffer and that of Teilhard de Chardin. A proper comparison would be interesting.

¹⁵ L.P.P., p. 124.

Bonhoeffer anywhere explained systematically, but it is obviously a radically reformed expression of Christian faith. The image of God will be changed or restored (which is not clear), the Church will still exist, even if it will be 'changed beyond recognition'¹⁶ theology will continue although in a changed form, and the Christian life will be 'worldly' and far different from its traditional form.

Bonhoeffer's fragmentary analysis has come as a breath of fresh air to many. Here at last, they say, is a theologian who takes modern man seriously, who thinks of Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and the other typical figures of the modern world not as bogey-men but as convincing describers of the human situation. It is not far from Bonhoeffer's 'religion of immaturity' to Freud's 'universal obsessional neurosis of humanity'. For both men religion is doomed, and the reasons they give for this are strikingly similar. 'The more the fruits of knowledge become accessible to man, the more widespread is the decline of religious belief, at first only of the obsolete and objectionable expressions of the same, then of its fundamental assumptions also' (Freud: *The Future of an Illusion*). 'The religious world', wrote Marx, 'is but the reflex of the real world' (*Capital*, vol. I). But to admit that Bonhoeffer's views on religion find wide acceptance today within and without the Church is not the same as saying they are correct; and Bonhoeffer is by no means the only theologian to have come to grips with modern thought. The question is whether his encounter with modern thought on the matter of religion is not so fundamentally apologetic that it ends in capitulation. After all, Karl Barth is as aware of the modern world as any man, and his whole theological project can be thought of as a response to its specific challenges.¹⁷ Both Barth and Bonhoeffer offer powerful criticisms of religion, but it is important to remember that their standards of evaluation are very different. For Barth the crisis of all religion, and of religion-making, or *religionless* man, is God's revelation in Christ. Barth throughout his work accepts (usually implicitly) the cogency of much of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism of Christian theology and religion. But his answer is not to compromise or reduce the Gospel to psychoanalysis or ideology, but to return to the bed-rock of revelation. For Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, what is wrong with religion is that man has grown out of it, that it does not seem necessary or useful or intelligible to him: the standard by which religion is to be judged is modern man. This standard (as much as religion itself) is relative and conditioned. Religion may once have been valid and useful, but it is so no more. Hence something new and 'religionless' must be put in its place.

¹⁶ L.P.P., p. 140.

¹⁷ A powerful development of this theme is to be found in Charles West's *Communism and the Theologians* (S.C.M., 1958).

Bonhoeffer's hesitancy to accept Barth's devastating and exclusive confrontation of religion with revelation makes him appear a less radical thinker than Barth, for the contrast between modern man's religion and modern man's thought is less total than that between God's Word and the chatter of man, ancient, medieval, or modern. 'We are proceeding towards a time of no religion at all,' writes Bonhoeffer. 'Men as they are now simply cannot be religious any more . . . our whole nineteen-hundred-year-old Christian preaching and theology rest upon the "religious premise" of man.'¹⁸ One could challenge this statement on a variety of grounds, but all we are concerned to do here is simply to ask why a theology which rests on a '*religionless* premise' of man should be in any way superior. Simply because it is up to date? Now, the confrontation of religion and revelation in Barth points to the fact that he does not start from a 'premise of man' at all, but from Christology, and this is the source of the 'positivism' to which Bonhoeffer objects. But Bonhoeffer's rejection of this methodology leaves him with no means of describing the content of religionless Christianity save its suitability to the modern situation. One feels that the inconclusiveness of Bonhoeffer's thought on this theme may be due as much as anything to his realization of the impasse in which he found himself. He is in danger of a radical historicism which seeks not only to criticize religious behaviour but even perhaps the substance of the Christian Faith by the sole standard of its appropriateness to twentieth-century man's self-understanding. Bonhoeffer's devout passion to communicate the Gospel in a world that has come of age seems to have led him on to dangerous ground: the truth of the Gospel is to be questioned in the light of modern man's evaluation of it, and the religious response is to be changed so as to make it *in itself* a proper vessel for God's truth. I feel that the proper order has somehow been reversed, and Bonhoeffer's very natural dislike of preaching which plays upon man's weaknesses has made him himself overcautious about the judgement of the Gospel upon man and his responses, religious or non-religious. Of course it is true that God is, and must be, 'at the centre of the village', that theology took a wrong turning when it allowed this to be denied and devoted itself to skirmish on the boundaries against Darwin, Freud, and Marx, and that religion is in itself a distorted and improper response to God. But does Bonhoeffer show us the way to a 'religionless Christianity'? Is not his starting-point the very one which has been responsible for the distortions of Christianity which he dislikes? And is he not in fact thinking of a new *religious* form which will not be liable to the criticisms directed against all previous forms of religion? It must surely be asserted that *no* human response, religious or non-religious, is true *in itself*, and that the only test which can be applied is that of the Act of

¹⁸ *L.P.P.*, p. 122.

God in Christ—not simple appropriateness to modern man or the modern situation.

There is, however, one aspect of 'religionless Christianity' which Bonhoeffer has developed quite fully—ethics, the pattern of obedience to God in a religionless world, 'the realization among God's creatures of the revelational reality of God in Christ'.¹⁹ Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* as we have it today is a collection, written between 1940 and his arrest in 1943 (i.e. immediately before the *Letters and Papers*), of essays and notes intended to be developed later into a major work. The *Ethics* breathes much of the spirit of the *Letters and Papers*, but on certain lines it carries us much further and it has a far more satisfactory theological grounding. In both books there is the same conviction that the world has deserted Christianity, both Christian belief and Christian behaviour. And the responsibility, says Bonhoeffer in the *Ethics*, is the Church's: 'The Church confesses herself guilty of breaking all ten commandments, and in this she confesses her defection from Christ.'²⁰ With forgiveness the Church must make an entirely new beginning. The pattern of life for the Church and for the Christian is to be a kind of 'worldliness'. For Christ is to be found in the Church of which He is the Lord. Note that now Bonhoeffer is clearly starting from Christology; his method is different from that of the *Letters and Papers*. 'As long as Christ and the world are conceived as two opposing and mutually repellent spheres, man will be left in the following dilemma: he abandons reality as a whole and places himself in one or other of the two spheres. He seeks Christ without the world, or he seeks the world without Christ. In either case he is deceiving himself.'²¹

Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is a reaction to Barth, but a clearer one than in the *Letters and Papers*. Here he shares Barth's conviction that Christian theology must be Christological through and through, that dogmatics and ethics belong together, and that there is no place for a philosophical Christian ethic. Bonhoeffer is aware that Barth has been accused repeatedly of 'obscuring the foothills where men live',²² of failing to take ethics and politics with seriousness. Bonhoeffer avoids this line of criticism by reformulating his Christology in such a way that Christ and the world are not to be thought of as 'two opposing and mutually repellent spheres'. For Bonhoeffer the recognition of the sovereignty of Christ is indeed the condition for taking the world seriously, for true worldliness: 'No man can look with undivided vision at the world of reality as long as God and the world are torn asunder . . . But there is a place at which God and the cosmic reality are

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Ethics* (S.C.M., 1955), p. 57.

²⁰ *Ethics*, p. 50.

²¹ *Ethics*, p. 62.

²² Reinhold Niebuhr: *Essays in Applied Christianity* (Meridian Books, New York, 1959), p. 175.

reconciled, a place at which God and man have become one. That, and that alone, is what enables man to set his eyes upon God and the world at the same time . . . Whoever sees Jesus Christ indeed sees God and the world in one. He can henceforward no longer see God without the world or the world without God.²³ Bonhoeffer's ethic is Christological, but it is not Barthian. It is, in fact, basically a reinterpretation of Luther. One hears clear echoes of Luther when Bonhoeffer speaks of worldliness, of the autonomy of secular institutions, of the need to retain the concepts of the natural and natural law. To reject the concept of the natural, as Barth emphatically does, is 'a serious and substantial loss to Protestant thought, for it is now more or less deprived of the means of orientation in dealing with the practical questions of natural life'.²⁴ In Christ secular institutions and modern man are set free for true worldliness. It is impossible to love and serve Christ without loving and serving the world of which He is the Lord, and this is the consequence of the Incarnation, not of any despairing attempt to make the Gospel relevant to modern man. Bonhoeffer's Christology is a warning against a Barthian ethic which dismisses worldly concerns as *spiel* and does not realize that to take Christology seriously involves taking the world seriously at the same time.

To conclude: it seems to me clear that we can only hope to understand Bonhoeffer if we study him in his relationship to Lutheran theology and Karl Barth. He does not belong with Bultmann and Tillich. This is not to deny that he is a seminal theologian, but simply to make clear that certain attempts to continue 'Bonhoefferian' theology rest on too uncritical an acceptance of the master's views, and too easy assumptions about the spirit and tendency of these views. To my mind Bonhoeffer's critique of religion in *Letters and Papers* starts from a theologically inadequate position and may, if taken by itself, lead us into the sands. But it does raise real questions, questions to which Karl Barth attempts to provide the answer. But when we move on to look at some of the ethical implications of this new attitude to religion, it is Bonhoeffer, with his constant insistence on the Christological importance of worldly realities, who provides a needed qualification of 'vulgar Barthianism', if not of Barth himself.

²³ *Ethics*, p. 8.

²⁴ *Ethics*, p. 101; cf. *L.P.P.*, p. 245.