

Bonhoeffer's Christology

and His "Religionless Christianity"¹

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In the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer there exists an intimate connection between Christology and a non-religious expression of the witness for Christ, although the specific formulation "non-religious interpretation" did not originate until near the end of his life. There was, to be sure, a kind of joyful surprise about his new point of de-

¹ The phrase "religionless Christianity" has been included in the title of this essay because the English-speaking world discusses Bonhoeffer's later utterances under this formula. Throughout this essay, however, I prefer to use the phrase "non-religious interpretation," since the German discussion concentrates almost exclusively on this formula.

The difference is not merely one of terms or phrases. It reflects a difference in theological orientation, and Bonhoeffer cannot help but be interpreted in terms of the orientation of each of his interpreters. This tendency however—for the English-speaking world to concentrate on matters of worship, institutions, and social action, and for the German-speaking world to focus on matters of exegesis and preaching—does not always do justice to the total Bonhoeffer, for it isolates and sometimes manipulates him to fit within the particular tradition of his interpreters.

Bonhoeffer himself used the term "religionless Christianity" only in the first theological letter from Tegel, April 30, 1944 (twice there), i.e., just when starting his new approach. The phrase used in all the following letters is "non-religious interpretation" or some closely connected derivative (about eleven times).

Bonhoeffer's term is in no sense limited to exegesis and better preaching, for his attack on present institutional and creedal establishments of Christianity was no less than revolutionary. But in his task he preferred the more modest label of "interpretation." Interpretation begins with careful listening to the apostles and to the Fathers; never would Bonhoeffer claim that his theological position originated *de novo*.

Therefore, in August, 1944, when Bonhoeffer began the manuscript for his book which was lost in prison, he said both that "the Church must come out of its stagnation" and that "it is only in the spirit of prayer that any such work can be begun and carried through" (LP 208). Or, as he put it in an even more urgent double question, "How do we speak . . . in a 'secular' way about 'God'? In what way are we 'religionless-secular' Christians . . . ?" (LP 153).

parture in April, 1944, when Bonhoeffer formulated the new task. But even he sensed that its newness could not deny what was surely continuous in his life and thought. His mind had been occupied with the issue for many years. It can be shown today that the theme of non-religious interpretation is present and working in the many different approaches he took in his writings, no matter how conservative or "religious" those writings may now appear.

The thesis of this essay, therefore, is that Bonhoeffer's non-religious interpretation is first and last "christological" interpretation; and, in reverse, that his Christology always tried to present itself in the form of non-religious interpretation. This interrelation was so vital for Bonhoeffer that he lost interest when the two elements were separated: Christology not qualified by something like non-religious interpretation became an unrelated entity and suffered a fatal loss of reality; non-religious Christianity without Christocentrism became a Sisyphean endeavor of modern man to adjust to a newly discovered self and world.

The Thoroughgoing Theme: Christology

For the first claim, that non-religious interpretation means christological interpretation, there is agreement among the few serious experts on Bonhoeffer. John Godsey was the first to inform the English-speaking world about the foundation of Bonhoeffer's late utterances in his earlier christocentric books. Gerhard Ebeling and Ronald Gregor Smith have drawn Bonhoeffer's christological efforts into Bultmanian and Gogartian channels. Hanfried Müller, the Marxist theologian, has translated "religionless Christianity" directly into "churchless Christianity," but in contrast to the optimistic theologians of the secular at work in America, he has developed his anti-ecclesiasticism out of a deep-rooted Lutheran and Barthian *theologia crucis*. More recently, J. A. Phillips has found two contradictory Christologies in Bonhoeffer.² And Heinrich Ott has recently uncovered elements of neo-thomistic and de Chardinian Christo-universalism.³

There is indeed no difficulty in demonstrating explicitly Bonhoeffer's essential Christocentrism which, to be sure, remained trinitarian, as the main trend in his writings. In 1927, in *Sanctorum Communio*, the quest for Christ's presence is developed under the formula

² J. A. Phillips, *Christ for Us in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

³ Heinrich Ott, *Wirklichkeit und Glaube, I—Zum theologischen Erbe Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (Zurich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966).

"Christ existing as church" (*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*): the Church as a community of persons. In 1935, we find the same quest for Christ's presence in Bonhoeffer's emphasis on actual, visible discipleship, without any eschatological reservations—this against the early Barth. On the other hand, against Emanuel Hirsch, Paul Althaus, and Emil Brunner, he does not give way to the natural theologies; and against the German-Aryan heresy, he deliberately repeats Christ's title as "Son of David." For the same reason he even embarks upon an "unscientific" christological exegesis of the Old Testament. In 1942 we find, against static Lutheran separation of the two realms, the quest for Christ's presence in ethical responsibility for the concrete, guilt-covered world. Finally, in 1944, the presence of Christ is found in the conformation of man with Christ's messianic suffering, risking a "church" which allows itself to be drawn anonymously into the world. This is the seldom recognized but ever present combination of Bonhoeffer's non-religious interpretation with the *Arkan-disziplin*.

Analyzing Bonhoeffer's Life-Question

In Bonhoeffer's 1933 lectures on Christology (*Christ the Center*) our theme assumes the distinct form of a constant question, "Who are You?" and this question shapes the peculiar architecture of the lectures. This same concern directs more than ever the meditations of Tegel from 1944, now put in an enlarged but less generalized way: "Who is Christ for us today?" And it is this enlargement, as we will see, that makes all the difference.

Contrary to some scholarly opinion, one can see that Bonhoeffer's concern in 1944 was neither a hermeneutical device for interpreting old biblical documents, nor an outline for a program of "religionless Christianity," nor a phenomenological study of "man coming of age." Such interpretations, programs, and analyses are only subsections under the one over-arching question, which, four times repeated, puts the catch phrases in proper perspective. Bonhoeffer did not ask, "What selection of biblical treasures and ecclesiastical concepts can we still offer to the modern world?" This kind of question would turn Bonhoeffer into the reductionist he never wanted to be. Nor did he ask, "How may we better communicate to modern man the message we possess?" That question would turn the interpreter into a salesman to the have-nots. Barth did not come close to understanding Bonhoeffer when he drew a caricature of him in *The Humanity of God*:

A little "non-religious" language from the street, the newspaper, literature, and, if one is ambitious, from the philosopher may thus, for the sake of communication, occasionally indeed be in order. However, we should not become particularly concerned about this. A little of the language of Canaan, a little "revelation-positivism," can also be a good thing . . . understood even by the oddest strangers.⁴

Already in 1932 Bonhoeffer had said, "The point is not how are we to model the message, but what really *is* the message and its content?"

Bonhoeffer became "evangelistic" only by asking this one central question, "Who are You for us today?" and by pointing to an answer with fragmentary probes and with his life. For Bonhoeffer this question was based on three presuppositions: a humble one, a critical one, and a hopeful one:

First, the question is *humble* because it asks about Christ *for us today*, yet recognizes that he is the Christ who is already given. He is not the problem—we are. Bonhoeffer was not pessimistic, as Gogarten or Heim sometimes were, about this world as Christ's world. Out of an unshaken faith in the presence of Christ he neither asks nor answers the weak and pretentious question, "Does modern secular man need Christ?" Christ *is* there and we have to answer the challenge negatively or positively. This presupposition sets Bonhoeffer apart from those who still want to re-establish a place for religion in the world. He does not apologetically seek for a God in ultimate human concern or in the private spheres of a religious meaning of life. In Bonhoeffer's question there is the humility and the certainty of the man who knows whom he is going to meet.

But the question is also *critical*. It acknowledges that the old christological answers may no longer carry the meaning they once expressed. Those answers, when their vocabulary was current coinage, lifted up, corrected, and put to shame. But repetition has emptied the words. Instead of mediating genuine liberation in the Christ-encounter they have become obstacles to the discovery of Him. Christological titles have turned into expensive passports into the realm of faith.

Thirdly, the question is *hopeful*. Though deeply indebted to the language of the Fathers and impressed by the sudden discovery of their wisdom in the German church struggle, Bonhoeffer knew that the challenge of Christ's presence includes the risk and the promise of a new, relevant christological language. We will see later how he tried to meet this challenge.

⁴ Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 59.

It is the strictly personalistic way of asking "Who is he?" that separates Bonhoeffer's work from the detached research of ultimate meaning or of still valuable provinces where "God-talk" is possible. He does not allow himself to be shifted into the question, "What is this man all about?" Rather, he constantly sticks to the question, "Who is he?" Unfortunately there are several mistranslations in *Letters and Papers from Prison*; they should read "Who," not "What." (This has been corrected in the new translation.) In his Christology lectures of 1933, Bonhoeffer made a strong point about the basic importance of the Who-question, resisting the objectifying, self-integrating How- and What-questions:

The question "Who?" is the question of transcendence. . . . The question "Who?" expresses the strangeness and otherness of the encounter and at the same time reveals itself as the question of the very existence of the enquirer himself. . . . It is the question about love for one's neighbor. The questions of transcendence and existence become a personal question. That means that man cannot answer the question "Who?" by himself. . . . The question "Who?" presupposes an answer that has already been given. . . .

And again,

The question is reversed. . . . "Who are you, to ask thus?" . . . "Who are you, who can still only inquire after me when I restore you, justify you, and give you my grace?" The christological question "Who?" is finally formulated only where this reversed question is also heard. (CC 30-34).

This matter was in Bonhoeffer's mind in the letters when he asked again, "Who is He?" and when he asked for a new encounter in which one is to risk his own structures and be drawn into His being. In the *Ethics* he called this being conformed to Christ's *gestalt*; and in the letters, being drawn into his messianic suffering. He considers this to be more of a question of faith, as distinct from questions of "religion."

While still grounded in the principles of 1933, Bonhoeffer's question assumed a new form in 1944: "Who is He 'for us today?'" This indicates that the 1933 Bonhoeffer might be characterized by a lack of questioning (*Frageversäumnis*) and a lack of reality-relatedness (*Wirklichkeitsbezug*); Heinrich Ott recently accused Barth of that very thing. But now in 1944, Bonhoeffer says, "for us today."

Of whom is Bonhoeffer speaking when he refers to the contemporary "us"? Bonhoeffer literally thinks of himself and his ecclesiastical friends and the non-ecclesiastically minded co-conspirators in his family who were willing to serve a coming society. "Us" refers to

men who are related to each other in sharing guilt for the past and in common destinies for the future. Yet on a deeper level the "us" includes men who understand themselves as (a) heirs of a specific Christian religious tradition; (b) members of a society in the process of coming of age; and (c) as such, men called to faith in the presence of Christ.

It is necessary that we understand Bonhoeffer's specific usage of the term "religion." He had ceased to differentiate between false and true religion; rather, he drew a distinction, learned from Luther, between faith and religion—religion coming from the flesh, but faith from the Spirit. Like some European contemporaries, Bonhoeffer could call men's ultimate desires for meaning and confirmation "religion." Yet the adjective "religious" had, since 1927, become for him a purely critical label, as is evidenced by his use of the term throughout his writing—from *Act and Being* to the *Letters*. A quarrel about the suitability of this terminology, however, may lead us away from the points he did make, for we have not been able to replace satisfactorily the controversial label until now.

Bonhoeffer's religious Christianity can be summarized in line with some of his explicit definitions and some implicit conclusions drawn from his thoughts in *Letters and Papers from Prison*: Bonhoeffer calls the *metaphysical* dressing of biblical faith "religion." Metaphysics here means a conceptualization of the message within the philosophical framework of both the Greeks and the idealistic philosophers of the nineteenth century. Once bold and conquering attempts to express the relevance of the gospel, those conceptualizations have become preconditions for faith. Their character of additive superstructure, providing meaning and ultimacy for life, made them guarantors and protectors of existing orders and establishments, pacifying the disturbing revolutionary elements of the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. Christianity had come to mean thinking in terms of two static realms, while it emphasized its own character as a religion of deliverance from this world. Religion as an additional factor of life had become a partial province of the whole, which resulted philosophically in the subtle doctrine of a religious a priori in man. Bonhoeffer calls metaphysical religion "a partial extension of the world" (LP 209), which has lost its threatening and uplifting transcendence. He wished, however, to relocate genuine transcendence in this world—in the person next to me.

Bonhoeffer describes the *individualistic* handling of the message as "religion." The Lutheran emphasis on soteriology had resulted in a "My-Lord-and-me and me-and-my-Lord" piety. The final privacy of faith led to an elimination or sterilization of basic elements in the Bible. Many find this individualistic privacy still at work in Bultmann's existential interpretation of *Selbstverständnis*; therefore Bonhoeffer can say, "Bultmann did not go far enough." Again, "religious Christianity" is made a partial province of life, its domain cut out from the relevant spheres of life by the secularization of even the last unenlightened provinces of individual life. Against this, Bonhoeffer wrote, "the 'religious act' is always something partial; 'faith' is something whole, involving the whole of one's life" (LP 199). In this process of provincialization, all attention is focused on the boundaries of the realm of religion; they must be properly watched and preserved, and they foster a spirit of defensiveness as a result of which there is "no taking risks for others" (LP 209).

For Bonhoeffer the religious concept of the *Deus ex machina* stands over against the biblical breakthrough of a suffering Christ. Christian religion had become the problem-solver, the answerer of last questions, the escape into surrogate fulfillments. Religion exists by the power of God, but Bonhoeffer wrote, "The Bible directs [the Christian] to God's powerlessness and suffering" (LP 197).

Religion has shaped Christianity in such a way that it developed the *privileged* class of the initiated over the outsiders—"heathens," unbelievers, atheists—making that privileged class in the eyes of the latter the dominant imperialists. Religious activities had become the luxury of certain classes who could afford or who had to afford the time. One first *has* to be a part of this class to maintain his bourgeois respectability, and then one *wants* to belong to it in order to retain the existing orders of power and ways of thought. The Christian religion had set up guardianship relations to men, held under tutelage of priests as the mediators of life and of pastors and theologians as the administrators of truth. The patronizing, feudalistic character of Christian institutions and creeds had transformed the freeing majesty of the powerless servanthood of Christ into power-structures of sterilizing dependencies. Bonhoeffer, therefore, can speak of violation—"religious compulsion" (LP 153).

This is for Bonhoeffer the actual religious tradition which has shaped the institutions and concepts of the Christian Western world

and which has provoked a wealth of polemical reaction. He considers himself a solidaristic but critical member of that world.

Turning to Bonhoeffer's concept of a world coming of age, we see that the phrase is a description of a given process within Western civilization, not a statistical calculation on a man-made chart of human progress. Note that he usually says "world which is becoming of age" or "has come of age," and very seldom, "world come of age." In his earlier years he was able to use the term which for a long time had shaped the churches' attitude to its surrounding world, viz., secularization. In this term the churches had taken a condescending attitude toward a whole period of history. Yet after 1939 Bonhoeffer never used this term again, recognizing its deploring and degrading character. During the first month of his theological writing in Tegel (April, May, and beginning of June, 1944) he spoke of the "autonomy" of the Western trends in science, politics, the arts, and philosophy. Only in June did the term "coming of age" suddenly appear and then Bonhoeffer held onto it with noticeable joy. He used the term in allusion to what he had learned from Kant who described the Enlightenment as the "exodus of man, responsible himself, from his not having come of age. . . . Not being of age is the inability of man to use his own reason without the guidance of others."⁵

Bonhoeffer's idea is that the present period of our history "without God" should be blessed rather than condemned. The genesis of this concept is his Christology; the cross of Christ not only judges and delivers the world, but also gives it freedom to be what it is in its own worldly structures. The notion "coming of age" is for Bonhoeffer, therefore, not the sum total of all those men who have reached maturity, but a living declaration, a necessary risk in granting what, in an irreversible process of adolescence, each man and group deserves.

This means that Bonhoeffer never pointed to an optimistic analysis of man as becoming better and better, "happy in his secularity and free of guilt," as Fackenheim makes Bonhoeffer say.⁶ The main notion for Bonhoeffer is responsibility, the irreversible capability and duty of adults individually to answer the questions of life in their own particular fields and within their own autonomous structures. This in-

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Werke*, I (1960), p. 163.

⁶ Emil L. Fackenheim "On the Self-Exposure of Faith to the Modern Secular World: Philosophical Reflections in Light of Jewish Experience," *Daedalus*, XCVI, No. 1, p. 197.

cludes, to be sure, the joy which follows when human beings grow into their own manhood, but it also includes the integration of historical determinations, guilt, failures, and visions as well. Nobody makes adults children again; they stay responsible even when they turn childish, immature, or tyrannical.

Bonhoeffer wished that the contemporary church would bless those periods of earthly history which she had for the last centuries only judged, leading to fatal results for both. Similarly, she should now judge where she had blessed too long and too readily. Bonhoeffer believed that the declaration "coming of age," in close connection with and deriving from his faith in the presence of the Crucified One, prevents the blessing from becoming a cheap adjustment to modern man. Christology protects man come of age from deifying or demonizing his secularity again, and from falling into hopeless skepticism.

To whom is Bonhoeffer referring when, in the early forties, he speaks of "man come of age"? He speaks to those brothers and friends, men and women, who did not find easy access into their existing churches but who nevertheless took responsibility for the situation: modest and humble scientists, defeated politicians and desperate soldiers, those involved in the conspiracy against Hitler, and others. Bonhoeffer, the churchman and theologian, was among them.

For those whom Bonhoeffer labelled "us," there was the need to re-discover the biblical Christ without the religious bonds and outer garments. In whom was man to believe? Bonhoeffer pointed to the Christ who destroyed previous conditions and pre-accepted doctrines for faith; the Christ who made his life his prayer and not half-hearted religious acts; the Christ who did not escape into a *Deus-ex-machina* religion; the Christ who parted himself from the privileged ones and ate with the outcasts; the Christ who by his defenselessness freed man for his own responsibilities, delivering him from patronizing powers.

Bonhoeffer's quest for "Christ today" always went in the direction of the earthly Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, the man of the cross, which emphasized the revolutionary element more than it leaned toward metaphysical doctrines of God, which usually involved support of the present establishments.

The quest was somewhat pretentious but all the more significant. "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" (LP 199).

Bonhoeffer's Use of Christological Titles

The particular character of Bonhoeffer's life question, "Who is Christ for us today?" makes it clear how his christological utterances can sound so traditional and yet so provocative. What is this Christology like?

His Christology maintains its roots in the classical notions of the ecumenical creeds. In worship, confession, apologetics, teaching, and everyday conversation, we find him using the wide range of christological titles found both in the New Testament and in the Fathers.

First, one finds him worshipping Christ with the ecumenical formulas of the great liturgies and with the personal pietistic and subjective names for Jesus found in his German hymnbook. In this fashion he prayed to Christ until the end of his life, whether in the pew of a church or in his prison cell.

Secondly, one finds Bonhoeffer battling for Christ publicly wherever he finds His image vitally distorted. Out of a sudden barrage of quotations from the old confessions of his church he was able to build protective walls for the sufferers of humanity against the destroyers of humanity. Jesus, the Christ of the Old and the New Testament, was made, in spite of a certain doctrinal repetitiousness, the source of a most relevant battle-cry: "Jesus is a Jew." Thus Bonhoeffer confessed *for* Christ, battling in synods and periodicals for the old titles as legal and legitimate formulas against heresy.

One finds, thirdly, in Bonhoeffer's teaching, whether it be about the early councils or about Melancthon's deviation into soteriology, his doctrinal defense of the decisions of the Fathers against their contemporary heresies. Thus he teaches *about* Christ in the lecture room.

And fourthly, we find, in his conversations with friends inside and outside of church circles, his description of Jesus of Nazareth. This description takes form in those christological titles which do justice to Him and preserve the necessary continuity with the Fathers. It also takes form in terms which uncover his centrality afresh for the present day. Here Bonhoeffer is risking Christ for his love for Christ and for his contemporaries. He speaks *of* Christ.

This is the full aspect of Bonhoeffer's use of christological titles. In the vocative of prayer and hymns, in the polemic statement of combat, in his teaching of the Church's confessions and in the daring interpretations of present dialogue, he used the titles in a wide range, encompassing both what was accepted objective dogma yet also including lesser-known titles of his own invention. He never renounced

or repudiated the titles he inherited; but he read, applied, and selected them in his own way, and went so far as to offer a new one.

Characteristics of Bonhoeffer's Christology

Presuming that the drive which led Bonhoeffer to the last formula of "non-religious interpretation" was at work all his life, one can detect four features which characterize Bonhoeffer's Christology. First, he wanted to get away from *speculative* descriptions of the natures of Christ; second, he interpreted the traditional christological formulas *relationally*; third, he claimed that all reality was *universally* Christ-centered; and fourth, Christology is fundamentally an *open* and ever unfinished task, living in new responses to the challenge of the encounter with Christ and the world.

Antispeculative. Bonhoeffer was an admirer of the decision of Chalcedon. He defended its wisdom in not reconciling the paradoxes and its witness to the person of the God-man Jesus Christ. The decisive notion of Christ's being the "person" was explicitly developed by Bonhoeffer as early as *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*.

[Chalcedon] stated the a priori impossibility and impermissibility of taking the divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ side by side or together or as a relationship of objectifiable entities. Simple negations remain. No positive pattern of thought is left to explain what happens in the God-man Jesus Christ. . . . It brings the concept of substance which underlies the relationship of the natures to a climax and does away with it. From now on it will no longer be permissible to say anything about the *substance* of Jesus Christ. Speculation about 'natures' is at an end; the notion of substance is superseded (CC 91-92).

Therefore the problem of Christology for Bonhoeffer is not "the relationship of an isolated God to an isolated man" but the relationship of the given God-man Jesus Christ to the world (CC 46, 108). He thus does not reflect so much on the incarnation as such, but on the humiliation of the Incarnate. At the scandalous ambiguity of a humiliated Jesus, Bonhoeffer wrote that man shall "point and say he is God," this being Luther's battle-cry to which Bonhoeffer refers again and again. "In the humiliation, Christ . . . goes incognito as a beggar among beggars, as an outcast among the outcast, despairing among the despairing, dying among the dying. . . . And here the central problem of Christology lies" (CC 111).

It is not in a "metaphysical" realm but in the person of Christ that man is faced with real and afflicting transcendence; his given person

is impenetrable, inaccessible, being-free-from-others and being-for-others, opening himself to others. In his lectures of 1933 Bonhoeffer dismisses, therefore, all speculative questions which try to break open the Logos-Christ and reduce the personal element in Him to metaphysical substances and His transcendence to immanent classification.

There is in fact only one question left: "Who are you? Speak!" The question "Who are you?" is the question of deposed, distraught reason. But it is equally the question of faith: Who are you? Are you God himself? This is the question with which Christology is concerned. Christ is the *Anti-Logos*. There is no longer any possibility of classification because the existence of this Logos means the end of the human Logos. The question "Who are you?" is the only appropriate question (CC 30).

All those questions are based on the one which is forbidden: "How can you be the Christ?" This, Bonhoeffer calls the godless question—the question of immanence.

Though Bonhoeffer's presuppositions of these lectures—the person and the transcendence of the personal, human Logos and *Anti-Logos*, God—seem to be speculative, he would have nevertheless protested against that charge, because he developed his "speculations" for one reason, viz., to ask the all important non-speculative question based on the *extra me* and bearing the full *pro me*;

The only possible meaningful question is, "Who is present and contemporaneous with us here?" The answer is, "The one person of the God-man Jesus Christ." . . . God in timeless eternity is not God, Jesus limited by time is not Jesus. Rather, God is God in the man Jesus. In this Jesus Christ God is present. This one God-man is the starting point of Christology (CC 45-46).

This antispeculative quest had led Bonhoeffer to begin his theologizing with the Church as the given fact of Christ's presence and to continue with his fight for the visible church and its realm in Nazi Germany. For that reason he nearly equated Christology with ecclesiology, and thus produced in 1927 his *Sanctorum Communio* and in 1936 his embarrassing pamphlets about the identity of salvation with membership in the Confessing Church. But at the same time it was his Christology which empowered him for his bitter criticisms of the actual church, to such a degree that near the end, in 1944, nearly all ecclesiology seems to be absorbed by Christology, giving many present-day interpreters reason to translate Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity" into mere "churchless Christianity." But this is an incorrect conclusion. Bonhoeffer is quite aware that there must be an ecclesiology if there is to be a Christology, that there are always per-

sons, visibly gathered and drawn into the fate of the Christ-person. Christology without ecclesiology is endangered by abstracts. Therefore he wrote in his first theological letter from Tegel, in a positive, not dismissing, way:

The questions needing answers would surely be: What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world? . . . Does the secret discipline or, alternatively, the difference (which I have suggested to you before) between penultimate and ultimate take on a new importance here? (LP 153—54).

Relational. Contrary to the view of Melancthon, Bonhoeffer was of the opinion that "Christology is not soteriology" (CC 37); that the work does not interpret the person, but, as Luther says, the person the works; that the *extra nos* must not be dissolved into the *pro nobis* and that the *pro nobis* rests on the *extra nos*; that the Who-question preserves the priority of the christological question over the soteriological.

This, however, did not mean that there could be any christological statement which would ignore the social and ethical involvements of present-day man in distinctively human communities, in discipleship and worldly participation; Bonhoeffer stated in *Act and Being*: "The extrinsicality of the Christ-person is essentially transcendent of existence, yet it 'is' only in its action on human existence" (p. 139).

Thus the christological answer to the question "Who are You?" would on the one hand create the identity of the Christian as such, but on the other hand would also release him into identification with other persons. It had been Bonhoeffer's first thesis in *Sanctorum Communio* that there are no theological *loci* which lack the element of sociality. It is the same quest for relational sociality that in 1927 led Bonhoeffer to describe Christ as "existing as church," church primarily meaning the fellowship of persons and not the institution; the same quest that made him give precedence to the present Christ over the historical Christ in the lectures from 1933; that in 1935 turned Christology into a fellowship of men who hear a call and respond; that in Christ's name put man into worldly responsibility. Thus in the *Ethics* of 1940 and finally in the self-identifying suffering of 1944 he could have said what he had earlier written:

Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. An abstract Christology, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge on the subject of grace or on the forgiveness of sins, render discipleship superfluous, and in fact they positively exclude any idea of discipleship whatever, and are

essentially inimical to the whole conception of following Christ. . . . Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ (CD 63–64).

Universal. Compared with Teilhard de Chardin's cosmological interests, Bonhoeffer's thinking and feelings circled primarily around persons and their history, relations, and responsibilities. There is in him, nevertheless, a strong tendency to expand the centrality of Christ into universal, perhaps ontological, claims. The category of the Person (the Christ-person) provided him with a means by which man and Christ were united, but it also offered him the center point around which everything else gained perspective and enlightenment. As in previous theologies and as in the New Testament—see, for instance, the development to the secondary Pauline letters—the personal, revealing encounter led to the discovery of cosmological and historical dimensions; in classical dogmatic terms, reconciliation was followed by the vision of redemption (*Versöhnung-Erlösung*). In 1932 Bonhoeffer developed in *Creation and Fall* and in his other writings a type of Colossian cosmological Christology. In 1933 he stated that the Christ-presence *pro nobis* means His being in the center of all human existence, history, and nature. The ungraspable but self-revealing person of Christ the Lord is in Bonhoeffer's proclamation not only the limiting boundary, but also the sustaining power of all reality.

In the *Ethics* Bonhoeffer shows again the ultimate unity of all reality in Christ; there is no reality without God in Christ; and there is no God in Christ without the reality; otherwise Christ or reality remain abstractions. Christ is not absolute reality *added* to worldly reality, nor is reality just material, onto which Christ, Christian programs, or ideals are forced. The unity of all reality in Christ is not synthetic, not magical, but real and made valid by the Christ, the redeemer and vicarious deputy.

It is from the real man, whose name is Jesus Christ, that all factual reality derives its ultimate foundation and its ultimate annulment, its justification and its ultimate contradiction, its ultimate affirmation and its ultimate negation (E 228).

There are . . . not two spheres, but only the one sphere of the realization of Christ, in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united (E 197).

. . . It is only the midst of the world that Christ is Christ (E 206).

There is, in Bonhoeffer, a tendency to express the "ontological" universal centrality of Christ in anthropological terms—as in one of

his last letters he said, "If this earth was good enough for the man Jesus Christ, if such a man as Jesus lived in it, then, and only then, has life a meaning for us" (LP 214). Heinrich Ott is certainly right in *Wirklichkeit und Glaube* when he states that this notion of total reality-penetration by the Christ-event is a characteristic motif of Bonhoeffer's thought. Perhaps Ott has not shown clearly enough the danger of ontologizing which usually results in clericalization of the world, leading, in turn, to the unbalancing of the proper relation of a *theologia gloriae* with the *theologia crucis*, where the crucified Lord is the triumphant center and the triumphant one is the Crucified. But Ott is basically right: Bonhoeffer could also say in Tegel, "In the facts, there is God." The structure of this universalistic Christology, however, is basically not unhistoric ontology, for it is structured by the very notion of reconciliation and of ongoing, dynamic "acceptance."

Open. At the end of his prison letters Bonhoeffer proposed his answer to the question, "Who is Christ for us today?" He speaks in the outline for a book (August, 1944) about the God-encounter in the encounter with Christ in which there is an inversion (*Umkehrung*) of all human existence, where the genuine experience of transcendence is given in Jesus' being for others:

God in human form—not, as in oriental religions, in animal form, monstrous, chaotic, remote, and terrifying, nor in the conceptual forms of the absolute, metaphysical, infinite, etc., nor yet in the Greek divine-human form of "man in himself," but "the man for others," and therefore the Crucified, the man who lives out of the transcendent (LP 210).

"Jesus, the man-for-others" is in fact a new christological title for Bonhoeffer. It is nothing less than an answer to his over-arching question; for it is faithful to the tradition, non-speculative, relational, and central for all being and reality. The answer is as simple as it is profound, as understandable as it is sophisticated, as anthropological as it is theological. This christological title fulfills four essential requirements: that of continuity, that of being theological, that of being existential, and that of having ethical implications.

1) Continuity. Sociality had been a leading concept of Bonhoeffer's since *Sanctorum Communio*. The Lutheran *pro me* was always central, yet counterbalanced against any individualistic narrowness. The *extra me* was always sought by Bonhoeffer in the transcendence of the Christ-person, where he found transcendence to be relevant, terribly near and tantalizingly far away. His idea of the man-for-others could

be traced to his basic concepts about the vicarious deputyship of Jesus' participation in God's powerlessness, and His interceding suffering. In this way this title of Jesus was for Bonhoeffer a more "majestic title" (*Hoheitstitel*) than some of the old ones, such as "King" or "Son."

2) Theological. This christological title was for Bonhoeffer strictly theological, expressing something about God more convincingly than many of the older revered ones. The passage just cited (LP 210) begins not with a reduction but with the claim to interpret "God," yet "in human form." Such a statement uncovers the real godlessness and guilt of man in an act which put him to shame, yet liberated and claimed him with new grace. Medieval man was either shamed or lifted up by royal imagery; his life depended on the nature of his king, yet he visualized the ideal king. Today, however, the royal image is relegated to the historical dramas at the Old Vic or to Disneyland, and with it its theological claim.

3) Existential. The theological statement must include an assertion about human existence. Its relevance reaches not only the inner circles of the Church, but the "world" as well. It is related to everyday reality and uncovers the center of creativity for today. It has no false connotations of exclusiveness for initiated groups who claim possession of certain mysteries, although the most unmysterious dimension, being-for-others, *is* the actual mystery of life. It means that the mystery of Christ's uniqueness is his being for others. This *is* his true uniqueness, viz., he has no interest in his own uniqueness. The anthropological character of the title *is* its theological essence.

The history of this title may be similar to the classical titles which came before it. The christological marriage between the person of Christ and relevant existential names is the result of a discernible courtship. One first seeks to acquaint himself with the nature of the title as such—lamb, shepherd, king, or man-for-others—but by coupling it to Christ, it becomes clear that one really did not know the true meaning of the terms. Finally the title begins to be corrected and filled in its true content by Christ himself. Thus, as with the old titles long ago, christological meaning penetrates the anthropological, and anthropological meaning penetrates the christological.

4) Ethical. This term at once unleashes ethical implications and involvements. It takes Christ out of the fairytale world and locates him in the context of the present pluralistic responsibilities of man come of age. It liberates human existence for new freedom and obedi-

ence. The character of the new title prohibits any flight from the world, and also excludes clerical or ecclesiastical world dominance.

The ethical simplicity of the title points to the actual costliness of its use; it rules out what Bonhoeffer had earlier called uninvolved "cheap grace," and it abhors the contemporary purely intellectual "God-talk" game. The title renews the *imitatio Christi*.

This title, saturated with Bonhoeffer's own experiences, praises Christ *today*, interprets his meaning, and confesses him before men of our time. In our attempt to understand the nature of a "non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts in a world come of age," we find an example in Bonhoeffer's last christological answer of what such a program might be: non-metaphysical, non-individualistic, non-sectorial, against the establishment of religious privileges, against the *Deus ex machina*, and against guardianship.

Of course Bonhoeffer's title for Christ lacks the second feature of general christological titles: acceptance by the universal church. But next to the received classical titles, one must acknowledge the existence of a wide range of personal titles, created through the centuries, sometimes received in our hymnbooks, differing in quality and strength, but all attempting to delineate a contemporary understanding of the Christ-person. Bonhoeffer's proposal, until now only a proposal, is offered to us as the culmination of intensive intellectual wrestling, committed prayer, and acting intercourse with the question, "Who is Christ for us today?"

*Men go to God when they are sore bestead,
Pray to him for succour, for his peace, for bread,
For mercy for them sick, sinning or dead;
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.*

*Men go to God when he is sore bestead,
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead;
Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.*

*God goeth to every man when sore bestead,
Feedeth body and spirit with his bread;
For Christians, pagans alike he hangeth dead,
And both alike forgiving.⁸*

⁸ "Christians and Pagans," LP 200.



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