

**Leaders  
of Theological  
Thought:**

**DIETRICH  
BONHOEFFER**

*by Klaas Runia*

The name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer has become more widely known than ever before through the use made of his works in the *Honest to God* controversy. The author of this appraisal, Dr. Klaas Runia, was born and educated in Holland. He is now Principal of the Reformed Theological College, Geelong, Australia. It may help if readers have a copy of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* at hand. The references are to the Fontana (paperback) edition of the English translation.

In his provocative booklet *Honest to God* (1963) Dr. J. A. T. Robinson says of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*: "One felt at once that the Church was not yet ready for what Bonhoeffer was giving us as his last will and testament before he was hanged by the S.S.: indeed, it might be understood properly only a hundred years hence. But it seemed one of those trickles that must one day split rocks" (p. 23). There can be no doubt that in the last ten years Bonhoeffer and his theology have increasingly been at the centre of theological thought. And not only that, but many who are not theological students as well are reading and studying his books.

Who is Bonhoeffer and what are the new ideas put forward by him?

#### BIOGRAPHY

Unfortunately, space does not permit us to give an extensive biography. This would not only be highly interesting and moving, but also of great importance for the understanding of his ideas. The cover of his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Fontana, 1962) gives the following summary. "Born in 1906, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the son of a professor of Psychiatry. He grew up in academic surroundings and in 1930 was appointed a lecturer in systematic theology at Berlin University. In 1933 he denounced Hitler and his ideas on the wireless. Two years later, after a period spent in England, he was forbidden to teach and banned from Berlin by Nazi authorities. At the outbreak of war, against the advice of all his friends, he gave up the security of the U.S.A., where he was on a lecture tour, and returned to

Germany to work for the Confessing Church and the political opposition to Hitler. He was arrested in April 1943 and, two years later, after imprisonment in Buchenwald, he was hanged at Flossenberg (a few days before the end of the war!)" For more information on his life we refer to the *Letters*, pp. 7-12, 176-182, *The Cost of Discipleship* (S.C.M. 1962), pp. 9-27, and John Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (S.C.M. 1960), pp. 19-26, 80-95, 195-203.

#### THEOLOGY

It is equally impossible within the space of a short article to review his whole theology. Bonhoeffer wrote several important theological works. The first was his doctoral thesis, *Communio Sanctorum, A dogmatic Investigation of the Sociology of the Church*, written in 1927 at the age of twenty-one. Barth once called it "a theological miracle". In 1930 he wrote *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, the inaugural dissertation, which won him a position as lecturer in systematic theology at Berlin University. Later on, other smaller or larger volumes followed: *Creation and Fall*, *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Temptation* (published after the war), and *Life Together*. Some of them are real gems and should be read by all students, especially *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937), one of the most penetrating expositions of the Sermon on the Mount. After the war two more volumes were published posthumously: *Ethics* (fragments written during his last years and collected by his friend and pupil Eberhard Bethge) and his by now famous *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

In the remaining part of this article we shall concentrate on these *Letters*,<sup>1</sup> for it is here we find the startlingly new ideas which Bonhoeffer worked out in the solitude of his prison cell. Unfortunately it is not easy to summarize his views. Not only are they spread over several letters but in many respects they were unfinished in his own mind. In these letters he was, as it were, "thinking aloud", trying to clarify his own thoughts by writing them down for his friend (cf. pp. 95, 119). The S. S. finished his life before he could finish his thoughts.

Putting it all in a nutshell we can say that the tremendous problem that burdened Bonhoeffer in the last years of his life was, How can we be Christians in a world that has "come of age", i.e., a world that can do very well without God as a "working hypothesis"? The answer he gave was: we need a "religionless" Christianity. The two terms, "religionless Christianity" and "a world come-of-age", are the two foci in the ellipse of his thinking.

When we read his letters carefully, we notice that, in spite of the many "concentric" repetitions, there is a certain development in his thoughts.

(i) *Emphasis on this-worldliness.* Already in some of the early letters there is a strong emphasis on the fact that we have to live in *this* world. However true it may be that "this poor earth is not our home", yet this statement should come only right at the end. "I am sure we ought to love God in our *lives* and in the blessings he sends. We should trust him in our lives, so that when our time comes, but not before, we may

go to him in love and trust and joy. But, speaking frankly, to long for the transcendent when you are in your wife's arms is, to put it mildly, a lack of taste, and it is certainly not what God expects of us" (Dec. 18, 1943, p. 56; cf. Jan. 23, 1944, p. 64).

(ii) *The non-religious interpretation.*

Soon a new idea is added to this stress on the this-worldliness of the Christian's life. In his letter of April 30, 1944 (p. 91) he writes: "The thing that keeps coming back to me is, what *is* Christianity, and indeed what *is* Christ for us today? . . . We are proceeding towards a time of no religion at all: men as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore." Our 1900-year old preaching is based on the "religious premise" of man, i.e., the idea that man is a religious being. But is this true? Bonhoeffer is increasingly becoming more convinced that the answer is No. We have to accept the fact that modern man is not religious at all. We should not try to push him into the so-called "border-situation" (e.g., by making him afraid of death) in order to create "room for God". "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 suffering and death but in his life and prosperity" (p. 93) - Note again the emphasis on this-worldliness. Continually Bonhoeffer appeals here to the Old Testament.

Later on he returns to these same ideas. We should not try to win people for God by burdening them with all possible problems and needs they do not feel. That is cheap

“methodism”. “When Jesus blessed sinners, they were real sinners, but Jesus did not make every man a sinner first. He called them out of their sin, not into their sin” (June 30, 1944, p. 115, cf. pp. 107ff, 116ff.). In other words, our whole approach to the unbeliever has to change drastically. We do not have to make the religionless man of today religious in order to open him up to the Gospel, but we have to accept his religionlessness and consequently interpret the Christian faith in non-religious terms and forms.

(iii) *A world come-of-age.*

Added to this is the idea of the coming-of-age of the world. At first this idea appears almost incidentally in a play on words in the letter of June 8, 1944 (p. 107). “Efforts are made to prove to a world thus come of age (German: *mündig*) that it cannot live without the tutelage of ‘God’ (German: *ohne den Vormund ‘Gott’*).” But increasingly the term begins to dominate his thinking. In his letter of July 16, 1944 (pp. 120ff.) he gives a most interesting historical analysis of this coming-of-age of the modern world. It started with the Renaissance, continued through the Enlightenment and has practically been completed in our day. “There is no longer any need for God as a working hypothesis, whether in morals, politics or science. Nor is there any need for such a God in religion or philosophy. In the name of intellectual honesty these working hypotheses should be dropped or dispensed with as far as possible” (p. 121). “The only way to be honest is to recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi Deus non daretur*.”<sup>1</sup>

(iv) *Being a Christian in the world come-of-age.*

But how, then, does Bonhoeffer see the life of the Christian in this situation? At first he admits not to know the answer. He himself asks the embarrassing questions: “How can Christ become the Lord even of those with no religion? If religion is no more than the garment of Christianity . . . then, what is a religionless Christianity? . . . What is the significance of a Church (church, parish, preaching, Christian life) in a religionless world? . . . How do we speak . . . in a secular fashion of God? . . . What is the place of worship and prayer in an entire absence of religion?” (pp. 91 ff.). Baffling questions, indeed. In this same letter he speaks of the “secret discipline”, a term derived from the Early Church which for a long time reserved the secrets of the Christian religion (the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the sacraments) for the initiated only. Does the Church have to go the same way again? But even this does not seem to be the solution. How can we, then, live in the world “*etsi deus non daretur*”? How can we interpret the reality of the Christian faith in such non-religious terms and forms that it is a reality in the midst of this fully secularized world, this world really and rightly come-of-age?

Gradually there comes some light in the darkness of all these questions. On July 16, 1944, he writes: “God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15: 34). The God who makes us live in this world without using him as a working hypothesis is the God

before whom we are ever standing. Before God and with him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us. Matthew 8: 17 makes it crystal clear that it is not by his omnipotence that Christ helps us, but by his weakness and suffering” (p. 122).

In the next letter he goes an important step further. It is not only the suffering of God that captivates his mind, but our *suffering with God*. On July 18 he writes: “As Jesus asked in Gethsemane, ‘Could ye not watch with me one hour?’ That is the exact opposite of what the religious man expects from God. Man is challenged to participate in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world. He must therefore plunge himself into the life of a godless world without attempting to gloss over its ungodliness with a veneer of religion or trying to transfigure it. He must live a ‘wordly’ life and so participate in the suffering of God. He *may* live a worldly life as one emancipated from all false religions and obligations. To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism (as a sinner, a penitent or a saint), but to be a man. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world” (p. 122). This is *metanoia*! It is being caught up into the Messianic suffering of God in Jesus Christ. It is not fleeing from the world and longing for the other

world, but it is living completely in *this* world.

“One must abandon every attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, a converted sinner, a churchman (the priestly type, so-called!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. This is what I mean by worldliness – taking life in one’s stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness. It is in such a life that we throw ourselves utterly into the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith, that is *metanoia*, and that is what makes a man and a Christian” (July 21, 1944, p. 125).

#### EVALUATION

This is only a brief and (we realize) very incomplete summary of Bonhoeffer’s fascinating thoughts. More than anyone else Bonhoeffer has grappled with that unmistakable fact of an emancipated, secularized world, and he has made an attempt to appreciate this fact *positively*. This is not the thinking of a defeatist who is standing on the borderline between faith and unbelief and tries to salvage some remnants of the bankrupt estate. Rather we see a man of faith, facing the facts of life and at the same time burning with the desire to claim the “religionless” man and “adult” world of today for Jesus Christ. Yes, that is his sole aim: that Christ is “indeed and in truth the Lord of the world” (p. 92), of this very same world as it exists in its adulthood. Whatever our final appreciation of Bonhoeffer’s solution may

be, we can in no way escape the problem itself. This is indeed the most burning problem of our day. How can one be a Christian in *this* world? How can *this* world be won for Christ? How can the Gospel be made relevant for *this* world?

#### THE PROBLEM OF SECULARIZATION

We emphasize the little word "this" deliberately. Perhaps no one has made the fact of the secularization of our world more concrete for us than Bonhoeffer in these fragmentary remarks in his letters. Of course, the fact of secularization was not unknown. Many philosophers and theologians before him have made penetrating analyses of this phenomenon. But Bonhoeffer was the first Christian theologian to evaluate the *whole* phenomenon (and not just some of its aspects) positively as a blessing for both the Christian Church and the world itself. For him it is the God-willed deliverance of Christianity from the bondage of false religiosity.

It is impossible in this article to give a thorough analysis and evaluation of Bonhoeffer's view of the coming-of-age of the world. This would require a broad discussion of his historical, sociological, cultural and religious analysis of the modern world since the Renaissance. At this moment we can only make some marginal notes. And then we must first of all say that we believe Bonhoeffer's appreciation of the secularization to be too "wholesale". He leaves no room whatsoever for the *tragic* aspects in this process of secularization. To be sure, the secularization has been a blessing in many

respects. There is no need for a nostalgic looking back to the "golden age" of the medieval domination of the secular world by the sacral structure of the Church. The de-sacralizing of the world in the last centuries has been a great blessing in many ways; for example, for science, art, culture, and for the Church itself as well. The situation has become more "honest", honest to the world, to the Church and also to God. But – is this all that is to be said here? Is it only a blessing? Is there not as the tragic counterpart the fact this world come-of-age is at the same time a world-without-God, a world in which the autonomy of man has the last word, with all its terrifying consequences? Man may not need the working hypothesis of God in his science, but does this give us the right to say that existentially, too, man can indeed live without God and be happy? Is Augustine's dictum, "Our heart is disquieted in us until it finds rest in Thee", no longer true for modern man? Here we disagree with Bonhoeffer.

We believe that Bonhoeffer has, unwarrantedly, concluded from the historical phenomenon of secularization (which is a brute fact – the modern scientist does his work without the working hypothesis of "God", i.e., *etsi deus non daretur*) to the theological appreciation of this fact as good and God-willed and, therefore, wholesome. Admittedly, many a man of our time is as happy as can be without God, he is not afraid even of the border-situation of death, but this is no proof of the wholesomeness of his situation. When we think in biblical terms, we should rather speak of the hardening of the

heart! Is it not rather the fulfilment of Jesus' words about the situation of the world prior to His return? It will be as in the day before the flood: they are eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage (Matt. 24: 37–39). This is the picture of a completely secularized world, a world without God, a world also without religion.

#### RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY

This leads us to the other focus of the ellipse of Bonhoeffer's thinking. To him religionless Christianity is not a necessary evil, but rather the ideal necessity. Again it is impossible to give a full-scale discussion of all the problems involved. Let us first of all say that we do believe that Bonhoeffer's negative appreciation of religion contains more truth and is of greater significance than his positive appreciation of the world's adulthood. Indeed, a thorough reevaluation of the concept of religion can only be beneficial to us all.

We should realize that religion is not necessarily identical with faith. We see that very clearly in the pagan religions, which one and all are human attempts to build a bridge from man to God. Here religion is nothing else than unbelief. And how much of the so-called Christian religion falls under the same verdict? Our Christian religion can easily become *our* bridge towards God. Our religion, too, may be nothing else than camouflaged unbelief and godlessness. It may be the bunker in which we hide ourselves before God and are erecting the toy-towers of our own self-righteousness. It is striking indeed, how little the New Testament speaks

in "religious" terms. It surely does not deny the fact of religion. Yet the heart of the New Testament is not this fact, but the doctrine of justification by faith, i.e., God's act of pure grace accepted and appropriated in faith. That is what makes a man a Christian, not a certain religious pattern or a certain moral code or a certain form of piety!

We should, further, also realize that our "religion" is often a stumbling block to the unbeliever. Often he cannot see through it, but confuses our "form" with God's content, and too often we cultivate this misunderstanding rather than remove it.

But does this mean that all religion is necessarily evil and therefore has to be discarded? We believe not. In fact, Bonhoeffer himself cannot maintain this. It is striking how in his prison-letters he again and again refers to religious actions which give him a great comfort. He speaks much of prayer, reading of the Bible, the joy afforded by the hymns of Paul Gerhard, and even of the fact "that I have found great help in Luther's advice that we should start our morning and evening prayers by making the sign of the cross" (Nov. 21, 1943, p. 44). True, he immediately adds: "Don't worry, I shan't come out of here a *homo religiosus*! On the contrary, my suspicion and horror of religiosity are greater than ever." Nevertheless, life seems to be stronger than theory! And this is no wonder, for faith will always seek expression in some religious form. We see that in our own life. We find it in the Bible. In the Old Testament we read that the Lord Himself prescribed this form. In the

New Testament we do not find such a prescription, but neither do we find a rejection of religious forms as such. The Lord Jesus Himself did not condemn the forms as such, but only their misuse. He Himself submitted to the forms of the old dispensation which were still in force in His day. At the same time He clearly intimated that new forms were to come (cf. the new wine needing new skins, Matt. 9: 14-17).

Bonhoeffer, however, seems to go much further. His desire is do away with all skins. We believe that in general this is impossible. We do not deny that there may be situations in which a man of strong faith has little need of formal religion for the day-to-day sustenance of his faith: Bonhoeffer himself was in such a situation. Many Christians belonging to the resistance groups in the occupied countries have had similar experiences. But these exceptional circumstances do not give us the right to posit a religionless Christianity as the ideal situation for our day.

#### THE CHALLENGE

Do these criticisms mean we are finished with Bonhoeffer? Certainly not! As we said before, his ideas are provocative, stimulating and worthy to be studied and re-studied. Daniel Jenkins rightly says that Bonhoeffer confronts us with a strong "plea for re-definition of the Church, of faith and of the religion of faith. It starts from a fresh insight into the nature of Christian maturity as freedom to serve with Christ in the real life of the world and it seeks to abolish much which passes for 'the life of the Church' but which, in its tired

flabbiness, is no more than a quasi-religious conformity to this world which passes away".

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term comes from Grotius, who regarded the international law as the law of nature, a law which would still be valid *etsi Deus non daretur*, i.e., even if there were no God. Note the irrealis: neither Grotius nor Bonhoeffer say that there *is* no God.

<sup>2</sup> *Beyond Religion*, 1962, p. 38.