



## Religionless Christianity?

This title may, at first, seem like a contradiction in terms to many. Generally Christianity is considered to be one of the large world religions. However, already in the 1930's, when many universities started changing their associated theological colleges into religious departments, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer made a special effort and project for a Christianity without religion. What he wanted to do was remove Christian studies from within the area of religious studies. According to him religious studies had become too focused on religion as a human trait. Moreover, he was convinced that mankind was quickly outgrowing or evolving beyond the need for religion as an opium to mask his insecurity as had been suggested by various philosophers.<sup>1</sup> He emphasised that Christianity should interact with the reality of human observation and experience.

On the one hand he therefore strongly objected to how, as it appeared to him, confessing churches dictated and imposed an interpretation of Scripture that members felt compelled to accept, but did not really believe, thus breeding a dead orthodoxy. It is here helpful to understand that Bonhoeffer had strongly opposed German Nazism, was imprisoned for it and died in a German prison. What he was really opposing was the kind of authoritarian *befehl ist befehl* (order is order) attitude imposed by the Hitler regime and defended by many as a Scriptural ordinance for obedience to all authority.

On the other hand, he also just as strongly opposed what he saw as the sentimental approach among Christian pietists and methodists. He thought that their Christianity had become an emotional narcosis that has little to do with the reality in which we live.

Bonhoeffer never had the opportunity to fully work out his plan for a religionless Christianity. His imprisonment and death prevented him doing so. Those who study his thought as ascertained from his American lectures, letters from prison and outlines for books, differ on a number of points and acknowledge that his thinking is not entirely clear and at times even appears inconsistent.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, from Bonhoeffer's background and subsequent writings it is clear he was strongly influenced by philosophy<sup>3</sup> which had questioned everything except for one's own personal existence and relation to what is outside of oneself. In this philosophy attention is focused in particular on the relationship. It does not matter so much with whom or with what this relation is. It is the relation itself that really matters.

It is from this background that Bonhoeffer apparently envisioned a religionless Christianity. All Christians are to become the real living body of Christ. This body of Christ, which is the church, he said, would become the complete self-surrender to the other. Parallel and along with Christ who surrendered His physical body for the salvation of man, so the church, in the form of its members, perfectly self-surrender to the other. Thus in practice one becomes entirely committed and consumed into the other. Initially this may sound somewhat too philosophical, which it is, but especially this emphasis on *self-surrender* has become socially and ethically very attractive. The added attraction to this theology is how Bonhoeffer himself held onto this teaching at the cost of his own life.

In the past and again recently both theologians<sup>4</sup> and politicians have expressed appreciation for this emphasis on complete *self-surrender* for the other. Although the details are confusing at times, Bonhoeffer added that this complete self-surrender of the Christian church reaches out to the real day to day issues of the human plight in this broken age. In this context he says that the Christian church needs to be re-formed by reaching out and having a better understanding of mankind as a whole. He refers to how God is known for His compassion. This knowledge of God's compassion, he points out, is found in both the things we see in creation, as well as what is revealed in

Scripture. He thinks that in the past the church has given too much time and effort to deal with questions like the reality of God's existence and who He is in contrast to God being something only of the human mind. Bonhoeffer rather focuses attention on ethics, including what the Scripture teaches regarding the law, righteousness and justice. In the end one starts to realise that Bonhoeffer's whole way of thinking influences his interpretation of Scripture. He says that the Bible does not give historic or geological facts but is all about Christ's sacrifice. From it, according to him, we are to learn about the churches' self-sacrifice for each other and mankind as a whole.

While a certain empathy may be shown for the person of Bonhoeffer and sympathy for the way he died, there is something essentially wrong and missing. He does not deny God's existence, but when putting the question and importance of God's real existence in the background, the first part of God's law as summed up appears to be missing; namely that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. The command to love our neighbour as ourselves flows from that first one. Not the other way around. Whenever the second part of God's law is put to the fore, the gospel of salvation changes into a social gospel.

Moreover, even though Bonhoeffer speaks about the Lord and what He teaches in His Word, he seems to overlook that He sent His Son to save those whom He has *chosen*. God did not send His Son to save everyone.<sup>5</sup> The church is the body of Christ but nowhere does Scripture teach that the Church, as this body of Christ, fully-surrenders herself to others in some physical-like way that is comparable to how Christ offered Himself up for our sins. While the church and her members may be as a light on a lamp stand by shining in good works (Matthew 5:16), there are also warnings for continual attacks against her (see Matthew 13:19; Revelation 12:12). Scripture is clear that Christ's victory includes the defeat and final punishment of the wicked (Revelation 18).

What then, about *religionless Christianity*? It depends on what is meant by this term. But when we read Scripture and hear what the Lord God teaches about Himself, we humbly stand in awe at His great and glorious majesty. This involves our entire being — heart, mind and soul.

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### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> In particular Karl Marx.

<sup>2</sup> The information about Dietrich Bonhoeffer was mostly obtained from Jame W. Woelfel's book. *Bonhoeffer's Theology, Classical and Revolutionary* (Abingdon Press) 1970.

<sup>3</sup> That is, existential philosophy, see for example, Martin Buber and his focus on the so-called I — Thou relation. It may be helpful to note as well that Bonhoeffer had been associated with the Tübingen School in Germany and had some contact with Rudolf Bultmann and much more so with Karl Barth.

<sup>4</sup> For example, D. Bonhoeffer received attention a number of times at the hermeneutics conference in Hamilton in January 2014.

<sup>5</sup> It is not entirely clear from his writings, but it is possible that Bonhoeffer, along with his colleague and friend, K Barth, contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture (see for example, Matthew 24:40 ff), believes that in the end God saves all mankind, regardless of their faith.