

*Religionless Christianity:
Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Tegel Theology*

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In May 1944 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge from Tegel prison: "I am thinking about how we can reinterpret in a 'worldly' sense — in the sense of the Old Testament and of John 1:14 — the concepts of repentance, faith, justification, rebirth, and sanctification. I shall be writing to you about it again."¹ In subsequent correspondence the two friends discussed those concepts which would subsequently become so well known to us: the conviction that a *religionless time* had arrived, and that the *world had come of age* since it began to exist without God as a *stop-gap* for the incompleteness of our knowledge.

In introducing these terms, Bonhoeffer wanted to provide a hermeneutic whereby Christ would become Lord of the world again. This form of interpretation, which implies that religion is no longer a condition of justification, was designated both a *worldly* and a *nonreligious* interpretation. By this, however, Bonhoeffer, did not mean a metaphysical form of interpretation, but rather the reinterpretation of *biblical concepts*. So what, then, does it mean to interpret biblical concepts in a nonreligious way? Has the world really become religionless at this historical epoch? What does Bonhoeffer mean by the term *religion* when he writes about a nonreligious form of interpretation?

A large number of publications have dealt with these questions,

1. *LPP*, 287.

often misunderstanding what Bonhoeffer actually meant. For talking about a religionless time, some interpreters like Harvey Cox have called him an “atheist,” others a “secularist” (A. Loen).² Bernd Jaspert and John Macquarrie believed that Bonhoeffer himself had a “religious nature,”³ while for William Hamilton and others, Bonhoeffer was the “father of the God-is-dead theology.”⁴ Such interpretations clearly reflect the religious or the secular perspectives of the interpreters rather than the assumptions of Bonhoeffer himself. He was, in fact, made a participant in the debate about secularism.

Many of the misinterpretations of Bonhoeffer in the 1960s owed to the failure to take into account how profoundly his theology was informed by his Christology. As Thomas Torrance stated:

... the tragedy of the situation is that ... instead of really listening to Bonhoeffer many ... have come to use Bonhoeffer for their own ends, as a means of objectifying their own image of themselves. ... In this way Bonhoeffer's thought has been severely twisted and misunderstanding of him has become rife, especially when certain catch-phrases like “religionless Christianity” and “worldly holiness” are worked up into systems of thought so sharply opposed to Bonhoeffer's basic Christian theology, not least his Christology.⁵

Ignoring the christological center in Bonhoeffer's theology inevitably means misconstruing him altogether. The same rule applies to the nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts. Gerhard Ebeling was ultimately right to presume that the nonreligious interpretation meant for Bonhoeffer a christological interpretation.⁶ This basic insight has often been quoted in the publications of the last four decades, but it has not been put in concrete form. If to interpret nonreligiously at the same

2. A. E. Loen, *Säkularisation. Von der wahren Voraussetzung und angeblichen Gottlosigkeit der Wissenschaft* (Munich, 1965), 205ff.

3. B. Jaspert, *Frömmigkeit und Kirchengeschichte* (Erzabteil St. Ottilien, 1986), 76f.; John Macquarrie, *God and Secularity* (London: SCM, 1968), 72ff.

4. William Hamilton, “A Secular Theology for a World Come of Age,” *Theology Today* 18 (1962): 440; cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963).

5. Thomas F. Torrance, “Cheap and Costly Grace,” *God and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 56-85, 74.

6. Gerhard Ebeling, “Die ‘Nicht-religiöse Interpretation biblischer Begriffe,’” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 52 (1955): 296-360; quotation from Eberhard Bethge, ed., *Die Mündige Welt*, vol. 2 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1956), 12-73, 20f.

time means to interpret christologically, what does this form of interpretation imply in a more concrete way?

In what follows I shall focus on the content and the meaning of religionless Christianity. As a first step I will concentrate on Bonhoeffer's own writings to determine what these sources say about "religion."

Bonhoeffer's View of Religion

If we take into account all of Bonhoeffer's statements, we can see three quite distinct views of religion. Firstly, there is the *positive* view, which appears in his early writings and owes to the influence of liberal theology. As a student,⁷ Bonhoeffer adopted a positive understanding of both religion and culture from his teachers, notably Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg. However, from 1925 Bonhoeffer came under the influence of Karl Barth. Discovering dialectical theology meant changing his opinion of religion as well. So, secondly, there is Bonhoeffer's *critical* view of religion, which appears for instance in his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*. The year of its publication, 1927, marks the change from a positive to a more critical view of religion. But Bonhoeffer went further. From his critique of religion he, thirdly, developed his *nonreligious* interpretation. Assuming that the time of religion was finished, he proclaimed a religionless Christianity. Bonhoeffer did more than criticize religion in a *theological* way; he supposed that the time of religion had run its *historical* course. So he proposed a Christian faith that is not "anti-" but "a"-religious.⁸

In his writings, then, Bonhoeffer speaks about "religion" in three different ways — positively, negatively, and historically — as a phenomenon that has run its course. Statements reflecting these three different ways of perceiving religion appear unsystematically and at times even side by side. For instance, as late as 1944, in his letters from prison,

7. See Bonhoeffer's essays "Luthers Stimmungen gegenüber seinem Werk in seinen letzten Lebensjahren. Nach seinem Briefwechsel von 1540-1546," in *Jugend und Studium 1918-1927*, ed. Hans Pfeifer, Clifford Green, and Carl Jürgen Kaltenborn, *DBW*, vol. 9 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986), 271-305, 300; also: "Referat über historische und pneumatische Schriftauslegung," *ibid.*, 305-23, 321.

8. R. Bernhardt, *Der Absolutheitsanspruch des Christentums. Von der Aufklärung bis zur pluralistischen Religionsauffassung*, 2nd ed. (Gütersloh, 1993), 68.

Bonhoeffer still speaks of Christianity as “true religion,” though he has obviously been under the influence of Barth’s critique of religion since at least 1927. Bonhoeffer, as we have said, does not reflect on religion systematically but neither does he ever attempt to establish a theory of religion. For Bonhoeffer, religion was never a problem *of* or *within* theology; he wanted to speak of God without religion — in “nonreligious terms,” as he put it.

Bonhoeffer used the word “religion” in such a way that its content cannot be clearly determined. To put it dogmatically, the meaning of religion in Bonhoeffer’s writings is not “univocal.” In fact it seems that Bonhoeffer had no interest in describing the meaning of religion; he used the term only in a formal way. In a lecture he gave in 1931 he explicitly said that the time for theology to use a *concept* of religion was over (“keinen allgemeinen *Begriff* von Religion (kann es) mehr geben”).⁹

In not integrating religion into a theological system he distinguished himself both from the dialectical theology of Karl Barth and from the recent theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg.¹⁰ For both these theologians, though in different ways, humanity is understood religiously. Bonhoeffer, however, wanted to grasp what it meant to be human not *with* but *without* religion. According to him religion was going to disappear from theological language. Where, then, in a dogmatic system, he asked, can “religion” find a place? “What is the place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation?”¹¹ If in a religionless situation religious practices like worship and prayer have lost their meaning, how can that vacuum be filled? Bonhoeffer answers such questions with reference to the “discipline of the secret” or *disciplina arcana*.¹² He believed that the rediscovery of this ancient discipline would help to save such religious praxis from profanation. Religious practices such as worship and prayer, he argued, should not be given up but should be engaged in terms of the *disciplina arcana*.

9. “Die Systematische Theologie des 20. Jahrhunderts,” *Vorlesung aus dem Wintersemester 1931/32*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, *GS*, vol. 5 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1972), 181–227, 219.

10. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), vol. 1, 133ff.

11. *LPP*, 281.

12. *Disciplina arcana*, normally translated as “secret discipline” in the English versions of Bonhoeffer’s writings, has been more accurately translated as “discipline of the secret” in the *DBWE* [editor].

At the same time, worship and prayer in “secret” ought always to be followed by responsible action in the world. If the discipline of the secret was one side of the dialectic,¹³ the other was Bonhoeffer’s non-religious interpretation of Christianity. He proposed, thus, a dynamic dialectic of dogmatics and ethics, of indicative and imperative, of faith and deed. You cannot, he argued, have one without the other. Likewise you cannot agree with religionless Christianity and not accept prayer and worship on which the Christian indicative is based. The discipline of the secret is to religionlessness — in the language of the prison letters — as prayer is to righteous action;¹⁴ or, in the words of the *Ethics*, as “the last things” are to “the things before the last.”¹⁵ The two sides must be brought together in the Christian life.

In a first step on the way to explaining what religionless Christianity really means, I have drawn attention to Bonhoeffer’s own statements on religion, concluding that he neither defines religion systematically nor develops a theory of religion. This means two things for our understanding of religionlessness. Firstly, it means that we cannot deduce its meaning merely from Bonhoeffer’s view of religion, simply because for him a *Religionsbegriff* does not exist. Secondly, it means that we have to go a step behind the sources and ask where the critique of religion and the proposal about religionless Christianity come from. What was Bonhoeffer reading when he developed his thoughts on the “nonreligious interpretation of biblical terms”?

The Origin of “Nonreligious” Interpretation

The young Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion must be interpreted against the background of dialectical theology. His reading of Barth started with *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, in which Barth declares in an essay from 1920: “Jesus has nothing in common with religion” (“Jesus hat mit Religion einfach nichts zu tun”).¹⁶ In the second edition of Barth’s *Letter to the Romans* (1922), faith and religion were set in opposition to each other,

13. Andreas Pangritz, “Aspekte der ‘Arkandisziplin’ bei Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 119 (1994): 755–68, 765.

14. *LPP*, 300.

15. *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 120ff.

16. Karl Barth, *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (Munich, 1924), 94.

since the “Word of God” meant the judgment of all religious efforts made by human beings. The “freedom of God” stood in opposition to “human religion,”¹⁷ making sin obvious.¹⁸ “Religion” was for Barth the opposite of grace.¹⁹

In essays that Bonhoeffer wrote as a student for his seminars in 1925/26 there are a number of references to Barth’s *Römerbrief*, particularly with regard to this distinction between grace and religion. In *Sanctorum Communio* (1927), his doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Reinhold Seeberg, the influence of both Barth and liberal theologians such as Albrecht Ritschl is evident.²⁰ Dialectical and liberal theology coexisted. But with *Act and Being* (1929) things have begun to change. I shall demonstrate this with reference to the term “religious *a priori*.”

As Bonhoeffer understood it, Reinhold Seeberg took a Kantian approach to theology in arguing that “God is the supramundane reality transcending consciousness, the Lord and creator.” How, then, can man understand God? This is the point where Seeberg’s use of Ernst Troeltsch’s notion of a “religious *a priori*” came into play: “Man,” according to Seeberg, “is charged with the capacity for becoming directly conscious of pure mind. . . .” The religious *a priori* was said to be fundamentally open to the divine will. There is a mould in human beings wherein the divine content of revelation may be poured. In other words, revelation must become religion; that is its nature. Revelation is religion. But this view represents a movement from pure transcendentalism (Kant) to idealism.²¹

Kant had sought to show that human understanding is limited to the phenomena of sensory experience. Transcendent objects, such as God, freedom, and immortality, lie beyond human modes of perception and so are unknowable. Bonhoeffer detects a lack of logic in Seeberg’s Kantian approach in introducing Troeltsch’s idea of a religious *a priori*. This, Bonhoeffer argues, is idealist thought according to which God

17. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 13th ed. (Zurich, 1984), Beleg 236.

18. *Ibid.*, 228.

19. *Ibid.*, 212.

20. See *Sanctorum Communio*, ed. Joachim von Soosten, *DBW*, vol. 1, 97, and Albrecht Ritschl, *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* 3 (Bonn, 1888), 508: “Jede gemeinsame Religion ist gestiftet.”

21. *Act and Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 45f.

could be understood by human beings on the basis of their religious *a priori* rather than through God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The distance between God and human beings was bridged, therefore, by the religious *a priori*. But for Bonhoeffer the deep gulf between God and human beings can only be overcome through God's self-revelation. This, of course, is not Bonhoeffer's insight alone but reflects the influence of Barth's "Word of God" theology in its opposition to liberal theology.

For Barth, God as he is in himself (*an sich*) cannot be recognized except through self-disclosure. The gap between God and humanity can only be overcome by God. Where Hegel mixes revelation with religion and Seeberg uses the human term "religious *a priori*," Barth focuses solely on God's revelation in his Word, Jesus Christ. By 1929, when Bonhoeffer wrote *Act and Being*, he had become fully initiated into the dialectical theological movement. He was influenced not only by Barth's *Römerbrief* but also by many of his other writings, such as *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion* (1924) and *Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* (1927). Like Barth,²² Bonhoeffer argued that religion is, in the first place, a problem of modern times, that is to say, the *Religionsbegriff* had a beginning and must have an end at some stage of history. The word "religion" was introduced by the English Deists. What the Reformation called "faith" began to take on a different meaning from the seventeenth century onward when the word "religion" came into being. In fact, the term "religion" came to replace "faith." This change found its clearest expression in nineteenth-century liberal theology. Theology became anthropology, as Barth observed in his lecture on Feuerbach.²³

It is evident, then, that every critical statement on religion that can be found in Bonhoeffer's writings is based upon Barth's theology. The critique that Bonhoeffer learned from Barth is the critique of the Word of God on religion, the antagonism between religion and grace. But what is the origin of Bonhoeffer's thoughts on religionlessness?

It would seem that this question must be answered in the light of the philosophy which Bonhoeffer adopted.²⁴ Through Barth and his

22. See Prolegomena, "Unterricht in der christlichen Religion," in Karl Barth, *Gesamtausgabe* 17/2 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985), 224.

23. Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM, 1972), 534-40.

24. See Ralf K. Wüstenberg, "Bonhoeffer on Theology and Philosophy," *ANVIL* 12/1:45-56.

dialectic theology, Bonhoeffer discovered the importance of Kantian terminology and philosophy for theological statements, particularly with respect to revelation. Then in New York in the early 1930s he became familiar with a different philosophical strain. At Union Theological Seminary he discovered the philosophy of William James, labelled “pragmatism.” In a review of James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Bonhoeffer commented:

It is not true to say that the religious individual does not care as much about the reality as about the efficiency of God. The reality of God is, of course, for most religious people not a philosophical question but a basic conviction. 2. Concerning the term “subconsciousness” we must ask: if subconsciousness is to be satisfactory for the religious experience of the outside, then it must be considered really outside of the individual person. But if it is not really outside then the religious experience of the outside is an illusion. . . . So it seems to me not possible to find a mediating term between religion and science.²⁵

In this comment Bonhoeffer makes an obvious effort to include James within the framework of the philosophy with which he is accustomed. But it does not seem to work. Particularly in his second comment concerning the term “subconsciousness,” Bonhoeffer misses the transcendental aspect, that which is “really outside,” as he puts it. Subconsciousness and the “really outside” do not go together and cannot be linked within a philosophical framework. The link for Bonhoeffer is God—really outside—which leads him back to both Kantian philosophy and Barthian theology.

On the other hand, Bonhoeffer found something fascinating in James’s pragmatic philosophy. It was certainly not merely James’s view of religion—which, as in liberal theology, was still a positive one—but the way that James put religion and life together. James’s argument is the following: if religion is true, it has meaning in life, but if it has no meaning in life, then it is false. This pragmatic argument is important for Bonhoeffer in terms of the value that James attributed to life, and more generally of the earthboundness of pragmatism as a philosophy of life.

In trying to answer more precisely *what* Bonhoeffer’s observation

25. “Concerning the Christian Idea of God,” *GS*, vol. 3, 100-109, 109.

of a time of no religion is based on and *where* the roots of religionless Christianity are, I would argue, in summary, that there were three philosophers of importance to Bonhoeffer's philosophical theology, namely Kant, James, and then Wilhelm Dilthey. Discovering pragmatism as a life-philosophy in 1930 meant, for Bonhoeffer, the opening of theology toward a new philosophical strain which found its conclusion in Wilhelm Dilthey's historicism. Bonhoeffer adopted this in 1944, and Dilthey strongly influenced his view of religion and life in his prison theology.

German Bonhoeffer researchers in the early 1970s were of the view that, besides Kant, Dilthey, with his *historicism*, had a great impact on his arguments about a world that has come of age since the Renaissance and Reformation. Dilthey could be regarded as a second Kant, for he developed a critique of historical reason in accordance with Kant's critique of pure reason. Unlike Kant, however, Dilthey explained human autonomy *historically*. According to Dilthey's *historicism*, humans began thinking autonomously from the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Since then they no longer used God as a stop-gap, but began to use autonomous reason to explain politics (Niccolo Machiavelli), law (Hugo Grotius), natural sciences (Galileo Galilei), and other subjects.

Bonhoeffer read Dilthey during his imprisonment, and as Ernst Feil and Christian Gremmels have discovered, he adopted Dilthey's argument.²⁶ He began to articulate theological problems such as the criticism of religion within a historical framework. He stopped setting revelation over against religion (as Barth had done) but felt more fundamentally that the *time of religion* was over.

The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience — and that means the time of religion in general.²⁷

In particular the historical passages in Bonhoeffer's letters from June and July 1944 indicate the extent to which he made use of Dilthey's historical

26. See Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

27. *LPP*, 279; Ernst Feil has shown that the term "inwardness," like "metaphysics," has been taken directly from Wilhelm Dilthey by Bonhoeffer; see E. Feil, "Der Einfluß Wilhelm Diltheys auf Dietrich Bonhoeffers *Widerstand und Ergebung*," *Evangelische Theologie* 29 (1969): 662-74.

thinking and terminology. One of the most famous reflections on autonomy and history can be found in the letter of 8 June 1944:

I'll try to define my position from the historical angle. The movement that began about the thirteenth century . . . towards the autonomy of man (in which I should include the discovery of the laws by which the world lives and deals with itself in science, social and political matters, art, ethics, and religion) has in our time reached an undoubted completion. Man has learnt to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the "working hypothesis" called "God." In questions of science, art, and ethics this has become an understood thing at which one now hardly dares to tilt. But for the last hundred years or so it has become increasingly true of religious questions; it is becoming evident that everything gets along without "God" — and, in fact, just as well as before. As in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally, "God" is being pushed more and more out of life, losing more and more ground. . . . The question is: Christ and the world that has come of age.²⁸

German researchers discovered that Bonhoeffer's critical use of the terms "metaphysics" and "inwardness" came from Dilthey's volume *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation*. Yet, it is interesting to note that, in addition to the two terms mentioned, the word "religionless" is also used by Dilthey explicitly, namely in his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*. Bonhoeffer had known of this book from at least 1931, for he quoted it in a lecture which he gave at Berlin University at that time. In the Dilthey text, however, "religionlessness" has a meaning different from that which Bonhoeffer gave it.

Dilthey thought that a historical understanding of a "religionless time" was not possible, since humanity is always religious. For Dilthey, the positive understanding of religion and culture, as introduced to German Protestantism by Schleiermacher, was still valid. Bonhoeffer makes use of Dilthey in a critical way. He takes up the term "religionlessness" formally and fills it with new content, namely with the criticism of religion. Adopting Dilthey's historical argument, that in modern times, that is, in the *Neuzeit*, human beings have come of age, he combines it with a critique of religion. If the world came of age,

28. *LPP*, 325f., 327.

religion would lose its meaning—a time of “a religionlessness” would begin, in which Jesus could become “Lord of the world” anew.

Concluding this second section, we are now able to say *where* the “nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts” comes from *historically*. On the one hand, the nonreligious interpretation is determined by the theology of Karl Barth, especially as far as the criticism of religion is concerned. On the other hand, the nonreligious interpretation is based upon the philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey, particularly in terms of the *historicism* which is made manifest in Bonhoeffer's prison theology by concepts like worldliness, inwardness, or metaphysics. With the concept “religionlessness,” Bonhoeffer brings together Barth and Dilthey. In presuming that the “nonreligious” interpretation comes from Barth *and* Dilthey, its origin is explained *historically*. The question then is: What does religionlessness mean *dogmatically*? What does it mean to speak of God in nonreligious terminology?

“Religionless” Christianity

Bonhoeffer learned to criticize religion in the light of faith on the basis of the antagonism between religion and grace. Yet in Tegel prison things changed. Writing to his friend Bethge, he remarked: “The ‘religious act’ is always something partial; ‘faith’ . . . is involving the whole of one's life.” Bonhoeffer thus understood faith as an act of life. He continued: “Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life.”²⁹ The antagonism between religion and grace had now become an antagonism between religion and “life.” Faith was interpreted in the light of “life”; the concept of faith had become a concept of life. How does Bonhoeffer come to this position?

In Tegel, Bonhoeffer is concerned with a this-worldly form of faith in daily life. Thus he reminds us: “I believe that we ought so to love and trust God in our *lives*, and in all the good things that he sends us.”³⁰ The quest for the “Good” brings us back to Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. At the end of 1943, Bonhoeffer expressed the opinion that his only remaining task would be to finish writing his *Ethics*. But then he changed his mind and began to read Dilthey. The preparation for studying Dilthey came

29. *Ibid.*, 362.

30. *Ibid.*, 168.

through his reading of José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish pupil of Dilthey. Under the influence of the literature that he requested for his prison cell in Tegel, Bonhoeffer began to ask new questions concerning the church and theology in the twentieth century. "What is bothering me . . . is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us, today."³¹ The quest for Jesus Christ links the prison theology with the *Ethics* manuscripts, for Christology is essential to both.

In his *Ethics*, for example, Bonhoeffer insisted that "Jesus is not *a* man. He is *the* man"³² ("Jesus ist nicht *ein* Mensch, sondern *der* Mensch"). In a letter from prison, he takes up this sentence, which was from the section "Ethics as formation," and uses it critically in relation to "religion": "To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way . . . , but to be a man, not *a* . . . man, but *the* man that Christ creates in us."³³ In contrast with what he did in the passage from his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer here combines a christological statement with a critique of religion. As far as his view of worldliness and autonomy is concerned, Bonhoeffer moves further in his letters from prison. Whereas in a manuscript from the *Ethics* the world, which is in the process of "coming of age," is regarded negatively in terms of "nihilism," in the prison letters Bonhoeffer reflects positively on the autonomy of the world, humanity, and life. What caused his view of autonomy to change?

In the autumn of 1943, Bonhoeffer requested a number of essays by Ortega y Gasset to be brought to his prison cell. Dilthey's basic insight, namely that *history* tells us what humanity is ("was der Mensch ist, sagt ihm seine Geschichte"),³⁴ Bonhoeffer learned from Ortega y Gasset's essay "Geschichte als System," which was published in 1941. This prepared the way for the Dilthey studies that Bonhoeffer undertook in the spring and summer of 1944. Bonhoeffer now began to read Dilthey in the light of the "philosophy of life" and, in a letter on 21 May 1944, he spoke about the value of "a multi-dimensional and polyphonous" life.³⁵

Studying Dilthey's volume *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation*, Bonhoeffer reflected on the historical

31. *Ibid.*, 279.

32. *Ethics*, 72. See *Ethik*, ed. Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green, *DBW*, vol. 6, 71.

33. *LPP*, 361.

34. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *GS*, vol. 8, 224.

35. *LPP*, 311.

development that led humanity to an autonomous understanding of the world in modern times. Dilthey observed the striving of humanity after autonomy in a variety of subjects. In doing so he always put the emphasis on the *actual life* of people in their period. With concepts such as *Lebensgefühl*, *Lebensführung*, *Lebenshaltung*, or *Lebensstimmung*, Dilthey unfolds his *Lebensphilosophie*³⁶ or philosophy of life. Petrarch, for instance, was to Dilthey the most original of the philosophers of life because he was prepared to give up all scholastic spider's webs for a moment of full living ("... alle scholastischen Spinnewebe für einen Moment vollen Lebens hinzugeben bereit war").³⁷ Opposite to the concept of life was metaphysics. This insight Dilthey demonstrated again and again in many examples from history throughout *Weltanschauung und Analyse*. His critique of metaphysics was determined by his philosophy, namely that there is no theoretical knowledge beyond life. To have knowledge of humanity means to have knowledge of human life depicted in history. Knowledge, life, and history are thus closely linked in Dilthey's philosophy. Bonhoeffer, in fact, not only adopted Dilthey's historicism but also his view of life.

In his letter of 8 June 1944, Bonhoeffer described the striving of humanity for autonomy in the fields of morality and law. His dependency upon Dilthey can also be shown here. "In ethics," he wrote, "it appears in Montaigne and Bodin with their substitution of rules of life for the commandments."³⁸ Bonhoeffer observed that Dilthey's historical understanding was based upon his understanding of life, which for Dilthey was not that a general meaning of morality and ethics became autonomous but that rules of life were no longer bound to the commandments.

There is no passage in the letters from prison in which Bonhoeffer speaks of autonomy in a general way. On the contrary, following Dilthey, he always had the autonomy of humanity or of life in mind. What was true for ethics also applied to law. Dilthey showed that the concepts of law as developed by Hugo de Groot are concepts of life. These concepts are meaningful irrespective of whether or not God exists and, therefore, cannot lose their meaning, even if there is no God. Quoting Dilthey, Bonhoeffer observes, "we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we

36. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation* (GS, vol. 2), 17, 18, 20, 43, 50.

37. *Ibid.*, 20.

38. *LPP*, 359.

have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*.”³⁹ Referring to Dilthey again, he writes on 21 July 1944 that “it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith.”⁴⁰ And here we observe again that Bonhoeffer is not reflecting on a mere understanding of this-worldliness, qualifying the historicism with the concept of life; Bonhoeffer is concerned with *living* in this world.

The concept of life is, however, determined by a christological framework. Bonhoeffer does not mean “the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness, characterized by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection.”⁴¹ Thus by interpreting the concept of life christologically, Bonhoeffer distinguishes his view from the philosophy of life. In terms of a philosophical understanding, life is ambiguous; in the light of revelation life is definite through Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer thus takes up the concept of life from Dilthey and gives it a theological meaning. Life thereby takes on a different meaning; it stops being merely joy and fun. Life means participation in the sufferings of God in the world. Bonhoeffer reminds us that the Christian shares “in God’s sufferings through” his life.⁴² If the Christian lacks suffering, the Bible calls for repentance. If participation in Jesus’ being for others is absent, the Christian lacks integrity. Thus the biblical concept of repentance, nonreligiously interpreted, means nothing but “ultimate honesty”—“ultimate” because it could only apply through faith.⁴³ Bonhoeffer understood by faith that “the whole of the earthly *life* is claimed for God.”⁴⁴ Interpreting in a nonreligious way means interpreting Christianity not through religion but in terms of *life*. From the concept of faith defined as participation in the being of Jesus, Bonhoeffer deduces the concept of life as being there for others. Life is ontologically linked with Christology through faith.

So, in conclusion, we have to put Gerhard Ebeling’s argument, which we mentioned at the beginning of this essay, in concrete form: to interpret nonreligiously implies a christological form of interpretation

39. *Ibid.*, 360.

40. *Ibid.*, 369.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 370.

43. *Ibid.*, 360.

44. *Ibid.*, 374.

which is made concrete by taking into account the decisive concept of life. “Nonreligious” interpretation means a form of interpretation by which modern *life* that has come of age in the modern era and Christian *faith* are brought together in a new relation. In his “Outline for a Book” Bonhoeffer describes the task of the church today in words that are easy to follow: the church “must tell men of every calling what it means to *live* in Christ, to exist for others.”⁴⁵

45. *Ibid.*, 383.