

E. New Theological Issues and Interpretation

Bonhoeffer's Strong Christology in the Context of Religious Pluralism

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Bonhoeffer's circumstances were different from ours. Most people in the western world at that time were Christians. In Germany, almost everybody belonged to the Protestant or the Roman Catholic church. Jews lived in Germany too—half a million at the beginning of the Third Reich, distressingly almost none at its end. In Bonhoeffer's time, *Islam*, *Buddhism*, and *Hinduism* were religions of people living far away from Germany.

Our circumstances are different from Bonhoeffer's.¹ A high percentage of people in the western world still belongs to one of the Christian denominations (in Germany around 62 percent, in the United States 76 percent). Nevertheless *religious pluralism* is the signature of today.² Through the mass media, other countries with different religious traditions are present in our living rooms every day; movies and books introduce us to their thinking; we travel to countries that have been shaped by different religious cultures—and enjoy how colorful and various they are. While all this somehow has the character of observing something interesting from a distance, the fact that many people of other faiths have immigrated into former “Christian countries” has changed

1. See David H. Jensen, “Religionless Christianity and Vulnerable Discipleship: The Interfaith Promise of Bonhoeffer's Theology,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38 (2001): 151–67, 151.

2. See Christoph Schwöbel, “Religiöser Pluralismus als Signatur unserer Lebenswelt,” in Schwöbel, *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus: Studien zu einer Theologie der Kultur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 1–24.

our societies. In New York City for example, the population nowadays is comprised of 169 different religions and denominations—not to mention the large numbers of agnostics and atheists.

Two issues arise from this new situation of religious pluralism. On the one hand, intense interreligious dialogue about our different traditions and about how we want to live together becomes necessary. On the other hand, our own homogenous view of the world is questioned, our assumption that it is natural to be *Christian*. The new situation raises the question of truth: Is my religious tradition the only true one or are other religious traditions true as well?

Different answers to the question of truth in a setting of religious pluralism are on the market: Some argue *agnostically* that we just don't know the answer, only God knows, therefore we have to qualify our own faith. Others argue *exclusively*, that only Christianity is true and all other religions are false. Some argue *inclusively*, that there is some truth in other religions, but Jesus Christ is the highest form of truth and only in him is comprehensive salvation possible. Finally, some hold the *pluralistic* view that all religions, or at least all the world religions, are true. All these concepts develop a *theology of religions*, a theological approach to the phenomenon of the plurality of religions.³ Yet there are also scholars who criticize such a theology of religions as an impossible attempt to achieve a metatheory. It ignores that we already belong to a certain religious tradition, which means that we cannot abstract from our concrete religious worldview and take up a bird's-eye view in which we judge from outside about the truth of religions.⁴

Bonhoeffer developed neither an elaborated “theology of religions,” nor a detailed discussion on how to deal with the plurality of religions. But the theme of other religions and the relation of Christianity to them is nevertheless present in his thinking. And his Christology contains a Christian perspective on religious pluralism. In the first part of this article, I will discuss Bonhoeffer's own awareness of other religions. In the second part I will develop his Christology in the context of religious pluralism.

3. Cf. as introductions in German Christian Danz, *Einführung in die Theologie der Religionen* (Wien: LIT, 2005); Ulrich H. J. Körtner, ed., *Theologie der Religionen: Positionen und Perspektiven evangelischer Theologie* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 2005); and Reinhold Bernhardt, *Ende des Dialogs?: Die Begegnung der Religionen und ihre theologische Reflexion* (Zürich: TVZ, 2005).

4. So Klaus von Stosch, “Komparative Theologie—ein Ausweg aus dem Grunddilemma jeder Theologie der Religionen?,” *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 124 (2002): 294–311.

I. BONHOEFFER'S OWN AWARENESS OF OTHER RELIGIONS

Bonhoeffer was of course aware of the existence of other, non-Judeo-Christian religions.⁵ He sometimes referred to *Islam*. When he visited North Africa in 1924, after a very short glance at Islam, he tried to grasp essential elements of Islam and quickly compared Islam and Judaism: "In Islam, everyday life and religion are not separated at all. . . . To a great degree this is due to their strong and overt pride in their race. This same trait is exhibited by the Jews and the Arabs."⁶ He continued, comparing world religions not carefully but in broad strokes: "Both Islamic and Israelite piety must, of course, be expressly law-oriented. This is the case because the national and cultic moments are so heavily mingled that they coalesce, so to speak. It is the only way that their sharp separation from other races and religions can be achieved. A religion that would be a world religion, like Christianity or Buddhism, can't be a religion of law at all."⁷

In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer argued in a similar schematic manner that only in the West (*Abendland*), on the basis of Christianity and Reformation, technical development was possible. Only the "liberation of reason for dominance over creation," which took place in the western world, led to the "triumph of technology."⁸ Wherever *oriental countries* import modern technology, it "remains completely in the service of belief in God and the building of Islamic community."⁹

Bonhoeffer's schematic and typological view on Islam represents the type of religious studies existing at that time. In Bonhoeffer's library one can find religious studies books, for example, of Helmut von Glasenapp, Friedrich Heiler, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Rudolf Otto, and Johannes Verweyen.¹⁰ Heiler, famous for his book on prayer,¹¹ worked with *typologies* (e.g., naïve

5. I will not analyze Bonhoeffer's view on Judaism, because there have been several studies about that already.

6. DBWE 9:118. He continued: "The Arab stands apart from every person of a different race as a person stands apart from an animal. Mohammed is the prophet of the Arabian tribes. This is why the tendency to propagandize is now totally absent, as in the past when they didn't attempt to evangelize Christians but simply did away with them as non-Arabs, i.e., unbelievers." And he described some folkloristic singing of the Koran on the streets.

7. DBWE 9:118. He confessed: "It would really be interesting to study Islam on its own soil, but it really is very difficult to gain access in some way to the cultic aspects."

8. DBWE 6:117.

9. *Ibid.*, 117.

10. Others are P. Feldkeller and P. Hofmann.

11. Friedrich Heiler, *Das Gebet: Eine religionsgeschichtliche und religionspsychologische Untersuchung* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 1918).

prayer of the primitives, mystical prayer, and prophetic prayer) under which he *subsumed* different religious phenomena. Van der Leeuw, quite similarly, searched for universal structures in religious thinking¹² that help *classify* religious phenomena.¹³ Otto started with the idea of a general religious a priori and developed a concept of *the holy*, which he understood as present in the core of all religions.¹⁴ All these authors represent a type of religious studies which, since it uses general terms that are developed from a western framework, and aim at homogenizing the religious variety through a certain typology,¹⁵ is today considered problematic.

Bonhoeffer uses this general, typological perspective quite often. He describes “the desire in *all religions* to have the *spirit* become visible in the *sacrament*”¹⁶—here he uses *Christian* categories (spirit, sacrament) to analyze all religions, including religions that may not have those categories at all. He also compares *Christianity* with all other religions and diagnoses big differences.¹⁷ In his lectures in Barcelona, he argues that all other religions conceive revelation as revelation of new ideas or new moral imperatives that are part of the general truth, but not as revelation in historical facts as Christianity does: “. . . God’s revelation in Christ is revelation in concealment, secrecy, all other so-called revelation is revelation in openness.”¹⁸ In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, he

12. So Willem Hofstee, “Art. Leeuw,” in RGG⁴ 5:174.

13. So Johann Figl, ed., *Handbuch Religionswissenschaft: Religionen und ihre zentralen Themen* (Innsbruck/Wien/Göttingen: Tyrolia/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 25.

14. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Breslau: Trewendt und Granier, 1917).

15. Understood as self-description of religious science of that time [Joachim] Wach, “Art. Religionswissenschaft,” in RGG² 4:1954–59.

16. DBWE 8:107 (my emphases).

17. As in DBWE 4:183f.: Jesus “could not consider isolating himself aristocratically with his disciples and transmitting to them in the manner of great founders of religions the doctrines of higher knowledge and more perfect way of life separated from the mass of the people.”

18. DBWE 10:465. Krötke, who is referring to this, continues: “Bonhoeffer’s theology is . . . a critique of religion, because in his opinion the religions show a tendency away from the concretely near mystery of God in history. Insofar as the religions . . . do not permit God to come near in the concrete sense, they miss the reality of God by veering off instead into the most plausible and likewise fanciful conceptions about God. Quite opposed to this is faith in God on the basis of God’s own revelation as a God-given capacity of the human person to allow God to approach.” Wolf Krötke, “Die Bedeutung von ‘Gottes Geheimnis’ für Dietrich Bonhoeffers Verständnis der Religionen und der Religionslosigkeit,” in Krötke, *Barmen—Barth—Bonhoeffer: Beiträge zu einer zeitgemäßen christozentrischen Theologie* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 2009), 333–55, esp. 348. Krötke continues: “The world of religions brings into clear focus the other aspect of the truth of God’s revelation, that the human person is related to a mystery that has something to do with him and out of which he lives. The religions are all orientated to the presence of

speaks of “the crucial distinction between Christianity and *all religions* [in regard to the suffering, not omnipotent Christ]. Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as *deus ex machina*.”¹⁹

From these examples we can see that Bonhoeffer does not have a very differentiated awareness of religious phenomena;²⁰ he compares other religions to Christianity by using categories from his own tradition, and by quite promptly judging that the other religions don't fulfill these categories. He looks at them from a Christian angle. Sometimes his descriptions of other religions sound almost naïve. Very simplifying, for example, is Bonhoeffer's picture of the religions of India, which he painted in 1932: India is a fertile, sunny world, in which the hand only has to reach out for fruits. Because physical life is so easy the soul lives in free devotion, breathes in unity with the rhythm of life, and recognizes itself in all that lives. In Bonhoeffer's judgment, it is this awe of the holiness of life that leads to the concept of nonviolence and to the aim of giving up oneself.²¹

But did Bonhoeffer not at least have a strong and concrete interest in the Indian religions? Did he not three times make plans to travel to India?²²

this mystery. Since the religions are as such and by the same token a work of the sinful human being, they live in the tendency to make sure that God comes into view as the highest possibility of this world” (*ibid.*, 349f.)—Editors' translation.

19. DBWE 8:479. See also DBWE 8:480: “Christians stand by God in God's own pain”—that distinguishes Christians from heathens. ‘Could you not stay awake with me one hour?’ Jesus asks in Gethsemane. That is the opposite of everything a religious person expects from God.” Some greater differentiations can be found in DBWE 8:501, where he distinguishes Christianity from the oriental religions which paint their Gods “in animal forms as the monstrous, the chaotic, the remote, the terrifying,” from philosophical concepts of religion that conceive God as “the absolute, the metaphysical, the infinite,” and from the Greek religion and its “God-human form of the human being in itself.”

20. In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer refers to studies of the sociology of religion and of philosophy of religion (Emil Durkheim, Friedrich Heiler, Georg Simmel, Max Weber), which analyze the communal character of religions in a typological manner (see DBWE 1:131–33, n. 23). But he is also aware that a “collective basis and a corresponding motivation for empirical community formation can be demonstrated only in concrete religions, since *the general concept of religion does not contain specifically social impulses*. Only observation of the concrete characteristics of the religions can discern their possible affinity to community” (DBWE 1:133, n. 23). Thus Bonhoeffer is aware that one needs to have a look at concrete religions to understand their impulses towards community.

21. See DBWE 11:250. This romantic picture is quite astonishing, because only four months before, Bonhoeffer, in a sermon, had described the current hunger crisis in India of millions starving as a “most gruesome reality” (DBWE 11:404).

22. Three times, Bonhoeffer had plans to travel to India. In 1928 his grandmother encouraged him “to get to know the counterpoint of the world of the east: I am thinking of India, Buddha and his world” (DB-ER, 105); Bethge traces this interest back to “a vague, generalized thirst for new experience that impelled him to seek contact with a different intellectual world,” but maybe also to some interest in

There are lots of documents that prove Bonhoeffer wanted to study Gandhi's concept of opposition to the colonial government, his way of following the Sermon on the Mount,²³ and the community life supporting this:²⁴ In 1934, Bonhoeffer writes in a letter: "there [in India] could be important things to be learned,"²⁵ and the context shows that he was thinking especially of how to be in opposition to government.²⁶ In Fanø he states: "Must we be put to shame by non-Christian peoples in the East? Shall we desert the individuals who are risking their lives for this message [of peace]?"²⁷ Bell, when writing to Gandhi in the same year introducing Bonhoeffer, explained: "He wants to study community life as well as methods of training."²⁸

But what about *Hindu spirituality*? It's common in Bonhoeffer scholarship to assume that this was another reason for Bonhoeffer's interest in India.²⁹ Yet, there are quotes of Bonhoeffer that point in a different direction because they indicate that Bonhoeffer hoped to find in India a new type of *Christianity*. Bonhoeffer writes: "I am becoming more convinced every day that in the West Christianity is approaching its end—at least in its present form, and its present interpretation."³⁰ Therefore he wants "to get to the Far East"³¹—to find a different form of Christianity there. From India he expects to find the solution to solve the "great dying out of Christianity."³² He reminds himself: "Christianity did in fact come from the East originally, but it has become so westernized and so permeated by civilized thought that, as we can now see, it is

Gandhi already (ibid., translation altered); in 1931/32 (see DBWE 10:272, 294; DBWE 11:55; DBWE 12:67, 71); and in 1934 (see DBWE 13:81, 136, 152, 154, 184, 217; and DB-ER, 406ff.). While at Union, he observed the development in India (see DBWE 10:431f.). He owned some studies in Indian religiosity; see Dietrich Meyer, *Nachlaß Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Ein Verzeichnis. Archiv—Sammlung—Bibliothek* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1987), 223–25.

23. See Andrews's letter to Bonhoeffer, DBWE 13:137.

24. See DBWE 13:152, where Bonhoeffer stresses that he would love to go to Gandhi directly.

25. Ibid.

26. See also DBWE 13:184, where Bonhoeffer emphasizes as well that he wants to go to Gandhi because he hopes to learn from him what "opposition" is.

27. DBWE 13:309.

28. DBWE 13:225. Gandhi responded by inviting Bonhoeffer, see DBWE 13:229f. (The answer addresses only financial aspects and issues of organizing the trip, where to stay, etc.)

29. See, e.g., Reinhold Mokrosch, "'Stationen auf dem Weg zur Freiheit.' Wie mir bei meinen Bonhoeffer-Vorlesungen in Indien der Sinn des Gedichts neu aufging," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffers Christentum: Festschrift für Christian Gremmels*, ed. Florian Schmitz and Christiane Tietz (Gütersloher: Gütersloher, 2011), 386–98, 390f.

30. DBWE 13:81.

31. Ibid.

32. DBWE 11:55.

almost lost to us.”³³ Bonhoeffer wonders if the *gospel* can be found in India, with other words and other deeds.³⁴ And he adds: “If we cannot see in our personal life that Christ has been here, then we want at least to see it in India . . .”³⁵ These quotes seem to show that Bonhoeffer also had an interest in Indian *Christianity* and in Indian interpretations of the *Christian gospel*.

But could this be possible? What was the situation of Christianity in India at that time? It is quite astonishing to learn that at that time *Christian Ashrams* were of some importance in India. Small groups of Christian men and/or women, some practicing celibacy, lived together and tried to live as conscious Christians in their special cultural context.³⁶ In these Ashrams, they had regular prayer times and meditation, held church services together, tried to organize their daily lives on a communal basis, and took their common religious praxis as basis for their social and political engagement. Interestingly, most of the Christian Ashrams were founded in the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century, by Protestants who were related to the independence movement and who had intense contacts with Gandhi and Tagore.³⁷ It's surprising how close the character of those Ashrams comes to Bonhoeffer's own ideas of Christian community and to his interest in Christian communities in England at the same time.

Could Bonhoeffer have known of Christianity in India? To be sure! The first evidence can be found in Bonhoeffer's travel to the United States in 1930. His traveling companion on the ship was Dr. Lucas, a president of a college in Lahore. What kind of college was that? When you do some Internet research you find out that Dr. Lucas was the president of the Forman Christian College in Lahore, now Pakistan,³⁸ founded in the 1830s. Today the community room of the college is named after Bonhoeffer's companion, Dr. Lucas, who actually was the first person to invite Bonhoeffer to India.

Bonhoeffer could also have known of Christian Ashrams in India because he met Charles Freer Andrews at several ecumenical meetings.³⁹ Andrews was

33. DBWE 13:152.

34. DBWE 11:55: “Is our time over? Has the gospel been given to another people, perhaps proclaimed with *completely* different words and actions? How do you see the eternal nature of Christianity in light of the world situation and our own way of living?”

35. DBWE 11:55.

36. See Hans-Peter Müller, “Art. Ashrams, christliche,” in RGG⁴ 1:811.

37. See *ibid.*

38. See <http://www.fccollege.edu.pk/>.

39. In Cambridge 1931, DB-ER, 194; in Geneva 1932, DB-ER, 249; in Gland 1932, DB-ER, 252, where the situation in India was a topic too.

an Anglican minister and one of Gandhi's closest friends. At those ecumenical conferences, Andrews asked the World Alliance for Promoting Friendship among the Churches to include the *East-Asian Christians* much more strongly than before.⁴⁰ Andrews himself was strongly committed to interreligious dialogue, while remaining a Christian.⁴¹

While these two contacts provide evidence that Bonhoeffer knew of the Indian Christians and their Indian type of Christian spirituality, Bethge mentions that Bonhoeffer during his last months in England studied books of Jack Winslow, and calls Winslow "an expert of Asian spiritual exercises."⁴² Actually Winslow's books are books about Christian Indian spirituality. Bonhoeffer owned Winslow's book on the Christian Ashram that he founded: *Christa Seva Sangha* ("Christ Service Society"). Winslow describes the aim of the Ashram as twofold: "a life of common service and equal fellowship for Indians and Europeans; and the development of Indian ways for the expression in India of Christian life and worship."⁴³

I do not wish to say that Bonhoeffer was only interested in *Christian* communal life in India. He obviously was interested in Gandhi and his way of lived opposition, and his way of interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. But there is evidence, from Bonhoeffer's letters and from his contacts, that he was also interested in the type of Christianity and Christian community life to be found in India. This fits with the observation that even when speaking of people of other faiths in India, Bonhoeffer does it from a Christian—and precisely from an inclusivist's—perspective. This becomes clear when we read in a letter: "[in India] there's more Christianity in their 'heathenism' than in the whole of our Reich Church."⁴⁴

II. BONHOEFFER'S STRONG CHRISTOLOGY AS A STARTING POINT FOR A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

No doubt, Bonhoeffer has a *strong Christology*, which means that Christology is the *cantus firmus* of all his thinking. Christ is in the center of his Christian worldview.⁴⁵ One quote from *Ethics* might be enough to verify this: "The

40. Cf. DB-ER, 250.

41. Cf. Daniel O'Connor, "Art. Andrews," RGG⁴ 1:473.

42. DB-ER, 407.

43. Jack C. Winslow, *Christa Seva Sangha* (London: The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 1930), 10.

44. DBWE 13:152.

45. There are some articles that use other theological themes of Bonhoeffer for a Christian theology in the context of religious pluralism: John de Gruchy uses Bonhoeffer's concept of the religious "other" as a

place where the questions about the reality of God and about the reality of the world are answered at the same time is characterized solely by the name: Jesus Christ. . . . From now on we cannot speak rightly of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus Christ."⁴⁶ The quote makes clear that when Christians discuss who God is or how the world and its manifold phenomena have to be understood, they point to Christ.

There are scholars in today's academy who argue that such a Christ-centeredness is a hindrance for interreligious dialogue. Whoever wants to enter into interreligious dialogue, they claim, has to weaken the Christian exclusiveness of Christ.⁴⁷ Yet if we would minimize Bonhoeffer's emphasis on Christ in order to use his theology in interreligious dialogue, we would lose the center and heart of his theology. Furthermore, there is good reason not to try to approach religious pluralism from a neutral perspective, but from the religious tradition that one belongs to. It is here that religious pluralism is challenging and the encounter of religions is interesting. And third: from a Christian perspective, it would not be satisfying and would be contrary to Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the comprehensiveness of the Christian faith to say: Christ has only to do with Christians, Christ has nothing to do with people from other religions. Therefore I will ask: Does Bonhoeffer's Christology itself contain constructive impulses in the situation of religious pluralism? I will do this by starting with the assumption that Bonhoeffer's *method* to look at the world come of age, which can't be religious anymore, can be used similarly when approaching a world of religious pluralism.⁴⁸

Bonhoeffer's openness for the world come of age which will soon be religionless had two reasons. *On the one hand*, he *observes* the world of his

starting point, for example, in "God's Desire for a Community of Human Beings: Religious Pluralism from the Perspective of Bonhoeffer's Legacy," in *Religion im Erbe: Dietrich Bonhoeffer und die Zukunftsfähigkeit des Christentums*, ed. Christian Gremmels and Wolfgang Huber (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 2002), 147–63, esp. 149ff. For a similar approach see Jensen, "Religionless Christianity and Vulnerable Discipleship." Christoph Schwöbel, "'Religion' and 'Religionlessness' in *Letters and Papers from Prison*: A Perspective for Religious Pluralism?" in *Mysteries in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Copenhagen Bonhoeffer Symposium*, ed. Kirsten Busch Nielsen, Ulrik Nissen, and Christiane Tietz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 159–84, uses several aspects of Bonhoeffer's concept of a nonreligious Christianity. See also Ralf K. Wüstenberg, "Religionless Christianity and Religious Pluralism: Dietrich Bonhoeffer 'Revisited,'" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 131 (2008): 4–15, esp. 13, who takes Bonhoeffer's "concept of life" as starting point. Krötke, "Die Bedeutung von 'Gottes Geheimnis,'" *ibid.*, discusses the notion of mystery in the same perspective.

46. DBWE 6:54.

47. For a summary of these arguments, see Klaus von Stosch, *Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in der Welt der Religionen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012), 42ff.

day without prejudices: in many respects, the world gets along without any reference to God. *On the other hand, he argues Christologically:* Because of the cross of Jesus Christ on which God consented “to be pushed out of the world”⁴⁹ the world come of age is accepted by God—and therefore it should be accepted by us as well. Yet the theologian’s task still is to understand the world come of age “better . . . than it understands itself, namely from the gospel and from Christ.”⁵⁰

The same approach can be taken for the world of religious pluralism. We have already *observed* that the world of today is a world of religious pluralism.⁵¹ Not in the sense that individuals are themselves pluralists but in the sense that differently convicted people exist. Can we also find any Christological insight in Bonhoeffer that helps us comprehend this situation of religious pluralism better, namely from the gospel and from Christ? It is interesting that at this point, there is no need to go “beyond Bonhoeffer.” It’s enough to look more carefully at what he has already considered.

When writing his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer actually wanted to address the relationship between Christianity and the other religions. This is not well known, because it is part of his *notes* for the preparation of his *Ethics*. In these notes, Bonhoeffer makes it clear that he considered the chapter “Ethics as Formation” as dealing with the question of “Christianity and the other religions.”⁵² What is the content of that chapter? In the chapter “Ethics as Formation,” Bonhoeffer describes the meaning of Jesus Christ through the phrase “*Ecce homo*—behold, what a human being.”⁵³ He unfolds what God’s becoming human in Jesus Christ and Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection mean for humanity: “behold God become human”⁵⁴—“behold the *one whom God has*

48. It would not be correct to say that our world of religious pluralism is identical with the world come of age, which lives without the religious God; in many religious forms of today, even in Christianity, the religious God, the almighty *deus ex machina* (see DBWE 8:366, 450, 479), is still present.

49. DBWE 8:479.

50. DBWE 8:431.

51. Bonhoeffer did not deduce a general anthropological theory from his observation that the world is getting along without God, for example the theory that human beings as such do not need God (as some critics of religion concluded). He simply stuck to the historical observation. Accordingly, we do not need to deduce a general anthropological theory from our observation that today there exists a variety of vital religions. There is no need to argue that the recurrence of religion in its plurality proves that human beings have to be religious because this is part of their nature. Again, it is enough—and much more fair to atheists—to simply describe the current situation.

52. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Zettelnotizen für eine “Ethik,”* ed. Ilse Tödt (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), 46 (my translation).

53. DBWE 6:82.

judged"⁵⁵—“see the Risen One.”⁵⁶ Because of Bonhoeffer's note for preparing the *Ethics*, it is legitimate to read these Christological theses as a description of the relationship of Christianity and the other religions.

For Bonhoeffer, the fact that God became human in Jesus Christ shows that God loves real human beings. “What we find repulsive in their opposition to God, what we shrink back from with pain and hostility . . . , this is for God the ground of unfathomable love. . . . While we distinguish between pious and godless, good and evil, noble and base, God loves real people without distinction. God has no patience with our dividing the world and humanity according to our standards and imposing ourselves as judges over them.”⁵⁷ What does this mean? As God in Jesus Christ loves all human beings, we should stop sorting human beings into groups of pious and godless, etc. We should not sort and judge other *religious people*. This, of course, does not mean to say that all *religions* are equally pious or good or noble. Not to judge the person does not necessarily include a positive judgment on everything the other thinks or does. That is not what *God's love* means. That God loves us does not mean that God acknowledges our goodness or our piety. God's love addresses the person, yet God's love is not a sanctification of the person's convictions or deeds.

Jesus Christ also is the crucified in whom God executed the judgment on himself. All human beings are included in this event.⁵⁸ All human beings, no matter which religion they belong to, are now “judged and reconciled by God.”⁵⁹ This includes a judgment about all religions as an attempt to reach God by one's own effort and to get to God without Christ.⁶⁰ Already in a lecture in Barcelona, Bonhoeffer argued that *all religions* are a human path to God.⁶¹ Human beings can't reach God on that path, because “human beings remain human beings, and that means sinners” on that path. Thus “their religion is part of their flesh,” “of their desire . . . for their own ego”⁶² and therefore stands

54. DBWE 6:84.

55. DBWE 6:88.

56. DBWE 6:91.

57. DBWE 6:84.

58. See DBWE 6:88.

59. DBWE 6:88.

60. See DBWE 6:94: People who are conformed to the crucified “demonstrate in their lives that before God nothing can stand except in judgment and in grace.”

61. See DBWE 10:357f.

62. DBWE 10:484. See also DBWE 2:58: “The natural human being has a *cor corvum in se*. Natural religion . . . remains flesh and seeks after flesh. If revelation is to come to human beings, they need to be changed entirely. Faith itself must be created in them. . . . All that pertains to personal appropriation of the fact of Christ is not *a priori*, but God's contingent action on human beings.”

under God's judgment. Christ instead is God's path "from eternity into time."⁶³ Even Christendom stands under God's judgment; it is religion as well.⁶⁴ All religions take place in the penultimate, judged by Christ the ultimate.⁶⁵

At the same time, religions, taking place in the penultimate, should be claimed "once again for the ultimate."⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer develops this aspect through the idea of an "unconscious Christianity."⁶⁷ He considers people of other faiths as Christians—and thus claims other religions for the ultimate of Christ—if they do what is the command of Christ in this situation. Similar to Bonhoeffer's explanation of his interest in India ("there's more Christianity in their 'heathenism' than in the whole Reich Church"), he argues in his *Ethics*: "The human and the good . . . should be claimed for Jesus Christ."⁶⁸ When doing this, Christ remains the criterion for what is to be counted as "human" and as "good."

To sum up, the cross means: All human beings, no matter to which religion they belong, are judged and reconciled in Christ. All *religions* are judged as human *paths to God*, and at the same time, *the human and the good which are in correspondence to Christ* should be claimed for Christ.

63. DBWE 10:484.

64. DBWE 10:357f. See also DBWE 8:362f.: "Christianity" has always been a form (perhaps the true form) of 'religion.'"

65. So Schwöbel, "'Religion' and 'Religionlessness,'" *ibid.*, 183: "Witnessing to the gift of salvation in this exclusiveness includes its comprehensive inclusiveness for the world. . . . For Christians, this includes the liberating insight that the ultimate status of the deities of other religions, quasi-religions and of other spiritual paths to the ultimate goal is denied and they are firmly placed in the realm of the penultimate."

66. DBWE 6:169.

67. Bonhoeffer refers to this concept that you somehow are a Christian but are not aware of it, briefly in one letter from prison, in relation to his "theological theme" and to the distinction between *fides directa* and *fides reflexa* (cf. DBWE 8:489), but he describes it at length in the words of Christoph in his *Fiction from Tegel Prison* as people who don't go to church but have the right ethical behavior, because they still live from Christianity, without knowing it: "That's because without knowing it and certainly without talking about it, in truth they still base their lives on Christianity, an unconscious Christianity" (DBWE 7:111). Bonhoeffer's poem "Christians and Heathens" could be included here as well. While all human beings go to God in their pain and ask for help, only Christians (here probably including also the unconscious ones) participate in God's suffering, but Christ has died for all, no matter to which religion they belong (DBWE 8:460f.).

68. Bonhoeffer continues (in relation to those shaped by a Christian tradition): ". . . especially where, as an unconscious remnant, they represent a previous bond to the ultimate. It may often seem more serious to address such people simply as non-Christians and urge them to confess their unbelief. But it would be more Christian to claim as Christians precisely such persons who no longer dare to call themselves Christians, and to help them with much patience to move toward confessing Christ" (DBWE 6:169f.). Bonhoeffer also made a marginal notation at the end of the manuscript: "unconscious Christianity" (see *ibid.*, n. 111).

All human beings are judged by God, but all are also included in the event of renewal. Jesus Christ finally is the risen one. In him the “new human being has been created.”⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer stresses that this is true for all humanity: “In Christ the form of humanity was created anew. What was at stake was not a matter of place, time, climate, race, individual, society, religion [!] or taste. . . . What happened to Christ happened to humanity.”⁷⁰ The only difference between Christians and people from other religions lies in this, that “only a part of humanity recognizes the form of its savior.”⁷¹

Bonhoeffer continues by saying that when we speak of the formation of the world in Christ, we can only “address humanity in the light of its true form, which belongs to it, which it has already received, but which it has not grasped and accepted, namely the form of Jesus Christ which is its own.” In other words, every human being, no matter what religion he or she belongs to, is a member of humanity that has “already received” that new form of Christ, but those belonging to another religion have not “grasped and accepted . . . the form”⁷² which is properly their own. Accordingly, all religious efforts of human beings are now taking place in the one Christ-reality, even if they are not aware of it. Therefore Bonhoeffer does not see the others as people who do their religious practice far away from God; they do their prayers, rites, and community life in the realm of the Christ-reality.

But is this not some sort of infringement, making demands on other religions that they will surely reject, because they do not wish to be considered as unconscious Christians or as living in the Christ-reality?

III. THE HERMENEUTICAL PREMISE OF BONHOEFFER'S STRONG CHRISTOLOGY

Yes, at first sight, Bonhoeffer's Christological statements seem to be an infringement and to make strange claims on foreign religions. But one has to keep in mind how Bonhoeffer wants his Christological statements to be understood. They do not contain general truth, which can be demonstrated in an abstract, bird's-eye perspective. Their truth can only be recognized in faith, from “within,” by those who already are Christians. This is one of the basic insights of *Sanctorum Communio* and of *Act and Being*. The correct response to revelation in the Christ-event is faith. Only Christian faith understands this

69. DBWE 6:91.

70. DBWE 6:96.

71. DBWE 6:96.

72. DBWE 6:98.

event coming “‘from outside’ adequately.”⁷³ For faith does not try to deduce the correctness of the truth claim of revelation, but rather submits to revelation.⁷⁴ Everything that has been said in the second part of this chapter is true only from the perspective of Christian faith.

What does this mean? This Christological perspective on the world of religion cannot be presented to other religions as if it would be possible to recognize its truth from the outside, from the perspective of other religions. Christians cannot approach people from other religious traditions demanding that they recognize the Christian truth. Christians can be witness to their own faith, and they might also from time to time invite others to participate in that faith; but this participation would mean stepping inside Christianity, would mean becoming a Christian; and this we cannot expect of people faithful to their own religious convictions.

That the whole world is reconciled in Christ is the Christian perspective—and if Christians believe in Christ as the Lord of the whole world, they cannot leave other human beings out of the Christ-reality. But they cannot expect that people of other religions see it similarly—because without being a Christian believer this is impossible.

A second insight follows from Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutical perspective and his emphasis on faith. From the outside, on the level of reflection and phenomenological analysis, Christians are religious people like all the others; and the Christian community, the church, “viewed from the outside,”⁷⁵ is a religious community similar to other religious communities. That I *have* faith in Christ, that the church *is* “God’s church,”⁷⁶ the community of those who believe in Christ and are formed by Christ as the revelation of God,⁷⁷ cannot be demonstrated from the outside. “God alone knows whether I have believed; this is not accessible to my reflection. Faith rests in itself as *actus directus* . . .”⁷⁸ “*The church . . . logically establishes its own foundation in itself*; like all [!] revelations, it can be judged only by itself. What is to be found is presupposed. Knowledge and acknowledgment of its reality must exist before one can speak about the church.”⁷⁹

73. DBWE 2:89.

74. See, e.g., *Sanctorum Communio*, DBWE 1:202; *The Young Bonhoeffer*, DBWE 9:500, and *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*, DBWE 11:260.

75. DBWE 1:126.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Cf. DBWE 6:93.

78. DBWE 2:128.

79. DBWE 1:127.

From this follows, that the truth of a religion cannot be conceived through comparing religious phenomena. The truth of a religion cannot be judged from outside, it can only be experienced from within, by accepting that truth claim. And it is impossible to argue: My religion is true and yours is not, because I am not able to say something about the truth of the religion of the other from outside.

IV. PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES FOR INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER FROM BONHOEFFER'S CHRISTOLOGY

In conclusion, Bonhoeffer's strong Christology can be summarized in three theses as follows:

a) I cannot consider myself as a better believer in God than people of other faith traditions. If Christians are aware that only through Christ they are able to stand before God, then they neither idolize themselves nor have contempt for other human beings.⁸⁰ Christians cannot "lift themselves above other people or establish themselves as models because they recognize themselves as the greatest of all sinners."⁸¹

Consequently, Christians cannot consider other religious communities as less close to God than the church but also not as close as or as closer than the church. All these judgments would be comparisons of religious communities from the outside. Of course you can compare religious communities from the outside (e.g., size, aim, rites, etc.), but this comparison does not touch the reality of God; only faith from within a community does.

b) If Christ is the one who is there for others, no matter who the other is, the same should be true for Christians. Christians should be there for others, "even if they do not belong to the Christian community."⁸²

c) From a Christian perspective, the other religions take place in the Christ-reality, just as Christianity itself does. Therefore Christians should not be afraid of encountering other religions. No religion belongs to an evil world, for all religions participate in the Christ-reality.⁸³ Encountering religious people from other religions can include learning⁸⁴ from them, being questioned by

80. Cf. DBWE 6:94.

81. DBWE 6:95.

82. DBWE 12:365.

83. "... it is just the 'evil world' that is reconciled in Christ to God and has its ultimate and true reality not in the devil but, again, in Christ. The world is not divided between Christ and the devil; it is completely the world of Christ, whether it recognizes this or not. . . . The dark, evil world may not be surrendered to the devil, but [must] be claimed for the one who won it by coming in the flesh, by the death and resurrection of Christ" (DBWE 6:65).

them—and questioning them: learning, where they unfold the human and the good; being questioned by them, because they may understand the human and the good better than Christians do; and questioning them, where they contain elements that the Christian cannot understand as human and good.⁸⁵ One important result of this is that Christians can work together with people from other faiths to turn the world into a more human place.

84. See Krötke, *ibid.*, 351: Christian faith “. . . judges human ways of life as they actually present themselves according to whether they equip the human person for bearing living witness to God’s truth or not.”

85. DBWE 6:90, for example, where they adore success or where those who failed hate the successful; and Jesus’ “concern is neither success nor failure but willing acceptance of the judgment of God.”