



Living without God: Bonhoeffer and Religionless Christianity

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One could embark on a journey of discovery regarding the theme, “living without God,” at any number of points in the history of civilization. While less frequent in the ancient and medieval worlds (prior to the rise of science and humanity’s “Enlightenment”), most intellectual disciplines since the eighteenth century included practitioners who challenged the supernatural dimension of life, questioning the reality of God. And, alongside that inquiry within the halls of academia, there has always been serious doubt and disbelief within the broader culture. While one would naturally expect such discussions to be held in philosophy and seminary classrooms, interest has also existed among those focused on psychology, astronomy, and medicine, to name just three. And hence our topic, “living without God,” would appear to be perennial, pervasive, and persistent. Let us remember that any discussion about a topic of such breadth and depth ought to require humility and modesty; not only the Divine itself, but discussion regarding life with—or without—the Divine far exceeds one volume or one article. At best we can only approach, modestly touch, and humbly reflect on

Starting with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s challenging descriptive phrase, “Before God and with God we live without God,” John Matthews explores the question of belief in God and its religious expressions in light of the modern, Western world. Matthews calls for a new understanding of Christianity in the context of other world faiths.

only one small piece of our topic. Yet, approach, touch, and reflect we can, even should.

I would like to embark on this particular journey of discovery, “living without God,” with the now iconic words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written to his friend Eberhard Bethge, from Tegel prison on July 16, 1944: “Before God and with God we live without God.”¹ Here, one year after being imprisoned (1943) and one year before being hanged by the Nazis (1945) for complicity in the plot to kill Adolf Hitler, pastor/theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was sharing his reflections on the world’s evolving autonomy. His observation, shaped in part by his reading of the contemporary physicist/philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (*World View of Physics*), was that science was increasingly filling in the gaps formerly understood to be the places reserved for God (i.e., people’s unanswered questions and unsolved problems). In many areas of human activity (e.g., law, politics, science) God was increasingly seen as less and less relevant, less and less necessary. Rather than simply resist such an evolution toward greater autonomy, as the religious establishment was often prone to do, Bonhoeffer used such an occasion to reflect theologically. In that letter of July 16, he wrote:

So where is any room left for God? Ask those who are anxious. . . . And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world—*etsi Deus non daretur* - . . . God would have us know that we must live as those who manage their lives without God. . . . Before God and with God, we live without God.²

Earlier in this same letter Bonhoeffer referred to his topic as striving for a “non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts,” a concern he shared with Karl Barth, who two decades earlier had powerfully brought to contrast the difference between (Christian) faith and religion. Bonhoeffer’s interest was to experience God’s presence in the midst of life, in what we know, not as just a “stopgap” for things we didn’t know.

We should find God in what we know, not in what we don’t know; God wants to be grasped by us not in unsolved questions but in those that have been solved. . . . Here too, God is not a stopgap. We must recognize God not only where we reach the limits of our possibilities. God wants to be recognized in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering. . . . God is the center of life.³

Bonhoeffer strove to know the true God at the “center” of life, not the god of religion who filled gaps and was only “beyond.” Such a god we humans were learning to live without. What made this topic/concern somewhat unique was that, unlike earlier—or subsequent—efforts at “living without God” among self-conscious atheists, here was serious reflection within the bosom of Christendom, articulated by a con-

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison,” *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works: Volume 8*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) 479. (hereafter referred to as DBWE).

²DBWE 8, 478–479.

³DBWE 8, 406.

fessional Lutheran. Not just “living without God,” but “before God and with God.” Dialectical indeed. Disturbing, without a doubt!

The next major stop on our journey of discovery is the cover of *Time* magazine on April 8, 1965. Two decades after Bonhoeffer’s prison reflections and well into America’s radical ’60s, the cover of *Time* read: “Is God Dead?” in bright red letters on a black background. In the accompanying article by John T. Elson, the emerging, radical “death of God” theology was discussed, with particular reference to the writings of Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton, and Paul van Buren. Three years earlier Bishop John Robinson’s *Honest to God* (1962) had made use of the theological insights of Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to address the restlessness of Christian people with traditional images of God, much as Harvey Cox’s *The Secular City* (1965) used Bonhoeffer’s phrase “coming of age” to speak of secularization as a God-willed evolution of humanity. There Cox wrote: “Pluralism and tolerance are the children of secularization.”⁴ Interestingly, this topic/concern of “living without God” was not confined at that time only to the Christian realm. No doubt a result of the dark cloud lingering over the Jewish community after Auschwitz, as it should have over all of humanity, *Night* (1960) by Elie Wiesel, *Faith After the Holocaust* (1973) by Eliezer Berkovits, and *After Auschwitz* (1966) by Richard Rubenstein reflected similar doubts and despair about the reality of God. No small thing that a major periodical (*Time* magazine) would give voice to such radical stirring.

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One need not leave the decade of the 1960s to glimpse how “living without God” was also of concern outside of church and synagogue. 1967 saw the publication of Peter Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy*. Here an eminent professor of sociology, who lived in Europe during the Second World War and emigrated to America in 1946, referenced Dietrich Bonhoeffer when describing the process of secularization and, with Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and Harvey Cox, understood Bonhoeffer to be asking about the problems of (religious) plausibility and legitimation. Berger’s sociological concern was that human beings, who appeared to affirm, even desire to live in a “disenchanted world” (i.e., a world without God’s immanent involvement⁵), still appear to need “to impose a meaningful order upon reality...and conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant.”⁶ Berger

⁴Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) 3.

⁵Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1967) 111.

⁶*Ibid.*, 22, 28.

spoke about the human need for “meaning” and “significance” at a time when many entertained “living without God.”

Depending on the depth of one’s interest in the topic of secularization, one would do well to make use of the seminal work of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, whose 2007 book, *A Secular Age*, offers extensive historical perspective and insight. While Taylor’s contribution will be drawn upon mostly by academics, it does provide a solid foundation from which generations to come will benefit. More focused on religious trends and patterns in the United States among the laity is the research-driven *American Grace* (2010) by Robert Putnam and David Campbell. Here one observes an ironic religious “devotion” among large numbers of Americans, even though the statistics reveal that most all Christian denominations are declining, or (at best) remaining level. Interestingly, Putnam and Campbell also discovered that religious diversity has led to greater respect among many of the devout, not greater hostility. (This diversity factor will surface later in our discussion, as we introduce comparative theology as a way forward in a changing world where people might be open to “living with God.”) While secularism is not the primary focus of the more recent “Emergent Church” movement, the driving force behind many who find interest in this alternative form of devotion is a disenchantment with traditional images of God, church, and faith. Brian McLaren, perhaps the most well-known voice in the emergent church movement, is passionate about helping people who are “living without God” find refreshing, sometimes ancient, ways of reshaping their devotion. One ought not equate his popularity with superficiality, and hence dismiss his contribution to our discussion here. If one is interested in pursuing our topic in the lives of the younger generation, excellent research and reflection come from the significant work of Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of America’s Teenagers* (2005). Again, they conclude that devotion and spirituality for our youth, while often resisting more traditional experiences and expressions, is very important, even when reduced to a “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” We do well to remember that, alongside the strong voices of those who speak of “living without God,” there are many quiet lives who in a variety of ways are “living with God.”

Instead of interpreting our current challenges to faith, religion and “life without God” as threats, perhaps we should theologically receive them as life-giving challenges. In the past such seismic confrontations with established Christian religion (e.g., Islam, Luther, Nietzsche, Socialism) have often led to reformation and renewal. Robert Jones, in *The End of White Christian America* (2016), can be read as a threat to be resisted *or* as a challenge that is potentially life-giving. The choice is ours.

One major critique of Christianity, from non-Christians and some Christians alike, is its tribal mentality. That is, among all the faiths (tribes), the church believes it possesses God’s final revelation and that the church has a monopoly on a

proper understanding of that revelation. Admittedly, there have always been within the church those who were not tribal in their self-understanding, yet, because this overarching tribal mentality has had significant sway in the church over many centuries, the Christian God has often been rejected by those who prefer “life without God” to life with *that* tribal god. Genocides abound where religious ideologies (not only Christian) of one tribe conflict with ideologies of other tribes, both claiming divine legitimation. Christian supersessionism over Judaism is based on such a tribal mentality, reaching a tragic culmination in the Holocaust of the twentieth century.

Perhaps part of the lure of “life without God” today for increasing numbers of people is a result of a visceral objection to the church’s historic self-understanding of seeing itself as the superior tribe among all tribes. The proliferation of mass communication and ease of world travel have made it increasingly difficult for people to relegate “others,” who were always far away and far different, to error and damnation. Now many people are able to experience “others” as knowing God and equally loved by God.

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The Second Vatican Council’s 1965 declaration, *Nostra Aetate* (“In Our Time”), was a landmark statement, as it addressed the relationship between the Church and other Christian and non-Christian faiths. Beginning with Christianity’s closest sibling, Judaism, and then moving out to Islam and Eastern religions, *Nostra Aetate* encouraged respect and openness for other faiths as complementary channels of God’s revelation. While maintaining Christian priority in the realm of revelation, the way was paved for less tribal rivalry and more faith-filled cooperation.

In this age of ours, when men are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened, the Church examines with greater care the relation which she has to non-Christian religions. . . . Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture. . . . Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred Council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. . . . The Church has also a high regard for Muslims. (*Nostra Aetate*: Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, October 28, 1965)

And since 1965 (the same decade as the “Death of God” movement gained higher visibility), ecumenical and interfaith understanding and cooperation have evolved

immensely, reducing the tribal rivalry. At the same time, such understanding, cooperation, and openness have occasioned a reactionary, conservative movement of restoration, a return to a more tribal mentality for others. Newton's Third Law of Physics holds: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

One wonders what it would mean for the church, whose primary experience of God's revelation is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to view itself—and its experience of salvation—as one among others? Such a question has been asked in every time and virtually every place, yet most often a traditional, tribal answer has been given. For sure, greater openness to others would mean lowering one's tribal defenses, trusting God who is greater than all tribes and, finally, granting value to the religious experience of the "other" sixty-five percent of humanity who at this moment in history are not of the Christian tribe. So again we ask, are people today seeking "life without God" or life without *that* tribal god? Might this very challenge be the working of God's Spirit to renew a sense of "life with God," that is, the God experienced in various ways throughout humanity?

So where are the voices of such understanding, cooperation, and openness, beyond tribal apologetics and denominational retrenchment? It may well be worth our effort to seek out and cooperate with those already experiencing such blessing from God. Any survey of voices that have attempted to create authentic models of greater religious understanding, cooperation, and openness would include the work of John Hick, who opened the doors of interfaith conversation in the 1980s much as Vatican II opened the windows of the Vatican for greater ecumenical cooperation in the 1960s. Hick writes: "In due course most educated Christians will have come to take for granted a pluralistic understanding of the religious life of the world, with Christianity seen as part of that life. . . . In the meantime we have to live in the tension between the older, generally exclusivist, forms of religion and the emerging more ecumenical and pluralistic vision."⁷ Alan Race and Gavin D'Costa (1983 and 1986) introduced a tripolar typology for a more open relationship with other faiths: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. They argued for pluralism, specifically the respectful recognition of others. Although Wesley Ariarajah and Paul Knitter, respected names among interfaith proponents, have some reservations about this typology, it has served to frame the discussion and move relationships forward. Their concern is that even "pluralism" merely recognizes more than one player on the field, yet lacks a true appreciation that the "other" has intrinsic value.

Jesuit Francis X. Clooney at Harvard University argues for greater understanding, cooperation, and openness to other faiths, for a time when many people are suspicious of not only exclusivistic and inclusivistic arrogance, but even of pluralistic "recognition" of other faiths. Clooney has developed and propagated the notion of "comparative theology as deep learning across religious borders."⁸ In his

⁷John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1989) 377, 379.

⁸Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

book by that same title, he describes comparative theology as “faith seeking understanding which [is] rooted in a particular faith tradition, but which, from that foundation, ventures into learning from one or more other faith traditions.”⁹ Rather than the “replacement model,” “fulfillment model,” or “mutuality” model (Knitter’s preferred descriptions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism), all of which subordinate or merely recognize “others,” Clooney understands comparative theology as learning and benefiting from “others.” Quite the opposite of theological competition and tribal rivalry, his approach involves a more authentic and full image of God as a result of “learning across religious borders.”¹⁰ Clooney’s own personal conversation partner is Hinduism, yet he knows such learning can transpire whenever people “learn another religious tradition in significant detail.”¹¹ Clearly, such learning involves “more listening and less judging.”¹² Clooney’s proposal, however, is not to simply learn *about* other traditions, but to learn *from* them. For that reason he desires “deep learning across religious borders.” Comparative theology involves more than a study of comparative religions; it is to create a theology that has important insights from more than one tradition.

Returning to our (Bonhoeffer’s) initial concern of “living without God,” yet perhaps with God, does comparative theology offer one possible approach for recovering authentic faith and credible belief for our age?

Always aware that such a comparative approach might appear relativistic to the point of selling out one’s own faith tradition, hear Clooney’s complete definition:

Comparative theology is a practical response to religious diversity read with our eyes open, interpreting the world in light of our faith and with a willingness to see newly the truths of our own religion in light of another.¹³

Returning to our (Bonhoeffer’s) initial concern of “living without God,” yet perhaps with God, does comparative theology offer one possible approach for recovering authentic faith and credible belief for our age? I believe it does, but not without touching on the psychological dimension of religion and faith. Because religion and faith intrinsically provide a foundation and grounding for life, such a comparative approach (as here suggested) means “our own personal religious identities are rethought and reconfigured, studying another religious tradition pa-

⁹Ibid., 10.

¹⁰Ibid., 16.

¹¹Ibid., 14.

¹²Ibid., 61. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has created an online resource titled “Windows for Understanding: Jewish, Muslim, Lutheran Relations” that is excellent for learning about Judaism and Islam with respect to Lutheranism.

¹³Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 69.

tiently and in detail changes how we experience ourselves and our world...[it] changes our self-image.”¹⁴ Clooney goes on to say that anyone doing comparative theology necessarily becomes “marginalized,” between two worlds in a “seeming multiplication of loyalties,”¹⁵ and soon enjoys a new community of “intellectual and spiritual connectedness...[such] learning needs both an established foundation of one tradition and understanding of other traditions.”¹⁶ Therefore, a certain strength of character and emotional security is needed if and when “studying another religious tradition...changes our self-image.”¹⁷ Harvey Cox reenters our discussion at this point with *The Future of Faith* when he writes:

But Jesus never met a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a Muslim. He left no clear precedent for how to live with people of other religions. Consequently, the question of what the current rebirth of faith means for relations among these different pathways requires some original thinking.¹⁸

“Original thinking” can be a threat or an opportunity. The choice is ours. Cox himself does not see such interfaith conversation as an option: “In this testy new planetary neighborhood, an honest assessment of relations [means] we can no longer avoid dealing with the ‘religious other.’”¹⁹

Clooney offers an intriguing model for authentic “living with God” in a time when “life without God” is ever more attractive. Perhaps the Alcoholics Anonymous mantra of “Let Go and Let God” would serve well here as we relax our hold (never letting go) on our particular faith tradition, yet affirm that the true God does have sheep of other folds and children of other traditions, with whom we may exchange great blessings. Perhaps the tribal god that is ever attractive to some, yet now seems unnecessary for so many others, is finally no god at all. Perhaps the true God, who is above all and beyond all, is finally known between us in many and various ways.

There remains one other dimension, ever a part of any theological enterprise, and that is the ethical. Is it not our human responsibility to view this entire conversation as a blessed occasion for sacred encounter? Marianne Moyaert of the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, uses the hospitality model of Paul Ricoeur as a reminder to always remain vulnerable:

...making room for the stranger in one’s own space... The other is received in his or her otherness. What we learn from this intertextual practice is that happiness can also be found precisely in reciprocal hospitality in becoming vulnerable to each other.²⁰

¹⁴Ibid., 155–156.

¹⁵Ibid., 158.

¹⁶Ibid., 161.

¹⁷Ibid., 156.

¹⁸Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) 130.

¹⁹Ibid., 131.

²⁰Marianne Moyaert, *Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014) 182.

Hospitality and vulnerability are here offered not only as Christian virtues but as requirements for any authentic interfaith relationship. She further says that, “Comparative theology can be thought of as a never ending hermeneutical circle that moves between identity and openness, conviction and critique, commitment and distancing.”²¹

We began this journey of discovery with a first stop at Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s observation that authentic Christian faith meant living in the world “with God, yet without God.” After a few select stops on this journey, we have arrived at a new way of possibly understanding the challenge of “living with God.” Time will ultimately tell—and judge—whether Moyaert’s hermeneutical circle of “identity and openness, conviction and critique, commitment and distancing,” and Ricoeur’s idea of “hospitality,” and Clooney’s comparative method of doing theology, like the earlier efforts of Hick, Berger, Cox, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, will assist humanity in experiencing “life with God” together, or whether the church will continue to perpetuate its tribal mentality, and either become increasingly irrelevant or potentially extinct. The choice is ours! ⊕

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²¹Ibid., 179.