



# The End of Religion: The Beginning of Faith

NED P. WISNEFSKE

We are proceeding towards a time of no religion at all.<sup>1</sup>  
—Dietrich Bonhoeffer (April 30, 1944)

Some people are not very religious. It is not that they are opposed to religion, but they simply do not feel religious, or do not see the need for religious answers to life's questions. Pious? Not them. Seekers? Not really.

What do we make of such people? We commonly suppose that the pathway to religion is the inner life and that traveling it leads inevitably to religion. But many find probing and monitoring the inner life fruitless and, when done by others, manipulative. Or, we suppose that people need spiritual experience or belief in a transcendent reality to ground their lives. But many find themselves spiritually tone deaf or doubt speculative solutions to life's deepest mysteries, finding them too rarefied and too remote from their lives.

In view of the common assumption that humans are religious beings who long for God, what are we to make of such people? Do we insist that they really are religious—even if they don't know it—and so claim to know them better than they know themselves? Do we try to raise their religious consciousness—even though

<sup>1</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1953) 162.

*In a time with much emphasis on spirituality and on humans as religious beings, a reconsideration of Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity is warranted. It may be necessary to set aside religion in order to make room for faith. Faith may have more kinship with unbelief than with religion.*

the appeal to have a “personal relationship with God” and the invitation to cultivate their “spiritual life” leave them cold—and so presume that their lives are deficient? Christians who claim that unless we have a certain religious experience we cannot have faith or that unless we reach a certain religious decision we cannot be faithful are captive to this religious assumption. But perhaps we can be faithful without being religious.

The fact that many people are not religious should lead us to question the assumption that all humans are by nature religious. Perhaps being religious is not essential to our humanity. In his letter from prison, that is the hypothesis Dietrich Bonhoeffer developed. Being religious might be a temporary phase in human history, one through which we are now passing: “The time when men could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or simply pious, is over”; “How do we speak of God without religion, i.e., without the temporally influenced presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on?”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps being religious—having pious sensitivities or a taste for the transcendent—is a possibility for us, but not essential to us, and so hardly prerequisite for Christian faith. Bonhoeffer developed this thought into the concept of a “religionless Christianity.” As he did, he realized that the notion that being religious is a presupposition for Christian faith parallels the misconception Paul faced that circumcision was required for being a Christian. Just as Paul proclaimed the freedom from such religious practices, so now we must proclaim the freedom from religion. Or again, just as Luther battled the view that works make one worthy of God’s grace, so too, we must contest the view that religious experiences and decisions are necessary for faith.

---

*“one does not have to be a religious person in order to be a person of faith”*

---

This essay takes up Bonhoeffer’s hypothesis that we are not by nature religious and defends the thesis that one does not have to be a religious person in order to be a person of faith. Indeed, the way religion is understood today, we might be better off without it. This essay proposes that the substance of religion is not piety and inwardness, and it is not spirituality and metaphysics. Religion’s reason for being, rather, is to put forward the goal or end of the *moral* life. Religion is the *telos* of morality. The purpose of religion is to solve concerns arising from our moral life. In that way, religion gives hope that the goals of morality will be realized. Finally, this essay will propose the thesis that the end of religion can be the beginning of faith. The *end* of religion, understood both as the breakdown of the assumption that humans are religious beings seeking God and as moral goal, can help us see what Christian faith truly is.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 164.

## THE WAY OF RELIGION

Generally speaking, we can say that religion as it is understood today seeks to establish a relationship with the divine or that which is holy. So understood, we should ask how religious seekers know that it is the divine they are in relationship with and not simply a more exotic aspect of themselves or the world. Consider the results of this British study on the implicit religion of contemporary society: “The self was clearly the primary reality, ontologically and evaluatively. When the Britisher was scratched (s)he too (like Americans, and orthodox Hindus) required the Self to be given an initial capital.” The one single focus integrating the results of three empirical studies was called “creating our own identities.” It was hypothesized that this experience is comparable to what other societies have called “a sense of the sacred” and an “encounter with the holy.”<sup>3</sup> This is a dubious hypothesis. Is it not more plausible to conclude that our sense for transcendent reality or our capacity for awe before the holy has dissipated and that we mistake our own potential or nature’s powers for God? In fact, these studies suggest Bonhoeffer’s hypothesis that it is no longer natural or perhaps even possible for many people to understand religion in terms of a relationship to transcendent reality.

Where we have difficulty today conceiving of a reality prior and transcendent to us, mysterious in its power as creator and finisher of all things, the Bible assumes a God whose holiness and glory are overwhelming and unapproachable. “No one shall see me and live” (Exod 33:20); “for indeed our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12: 29); “It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen” (1 Tim 6:16). In the same vein, Bonhoeffer wrote in Advent of 1943, “It is only when one knows the ineffability of the Name of God that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Contrast this with the familiar way the name of God is tossed around today. A true sense for transcendent reality, for that which is beyond us and our capacities, would be cautious in its claim to know and experience it. Yet we see little reticence in today’s religious seekers. This makes one question whether they know what it is they are seeking.

Given the Bible’s understanding of God’s holiness—it is after all the very first petition of the Lord’s Prayer—such familiarity with God ought to raise questions for us as it did for Bonhoeffer. No longer conceiving of a God before whose mystery and holiness we can only be unworthy and dumb, establishing a personal relationship with God becomes easy and routine. We do not understand, as Isaiah did, that familiarity with God is sharply limited: “For my ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts” (Isa 55:8). We forget that Paul concludes his weightiest theological reflection exclaiming, “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33). We fail to realize that Isaiah’s words,

<sup>3</sup>Edward Bailey, “The Implicit Religion of Contemporary Society: Some Studies and Reflections,” *Social Compass* 37/4 (1990) 483-497.

<sup>4</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 50.

“Truly, you are a God who hides himself” (Isa 45:15), alert us that God does not want us to become too familiar, at least not yet.

Further evidence that we do not think God is ultimately unfathomable and unsearchable, really God and not only a god, is that the very thought of God standing apart from us and judging us—me and mine included—has become foreign to us. If we cannot grasp what it means that God’s ways are not our ways, we surely will not comprehend that God’s judgment can oppose our ways. But the Bible makes plain that God judges all human beings. Christians especially need to hear: “For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God” (1 Pet 4:17); “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Mark 10:31). Are religious people concerned about God’s judgment on *them*? If anything, a presuming overconfidence clouds the way we see our relationship with God.

If God judges us now as in the Bible, moreover, God’s judgment is not merely a verbal admonition or an entry into a heavenly account, but a real and present reckoning that may punish in this life. God also forgives, but with judgment often comes punishment. God forgave David for his sins in his affair with Bathsheba, but also punished him severely. Punishment can bring about repentance or make amends for harm done. Accordingly, the following reasoning should not be unfamiliar to us: “I do not live as I should; God holds me accountable for what I have done and left undone; God’s judgment, therefore, could meet me at any time, from punishments in loss of time and treasure as penance for my sin to the removal of responsibilities—even my replacement by others who will better fulfill God’s will.” Yet, all will agree, such reasoning is not familiar. That is because religion as we often see it, seeking a familiar relationship with God, cannot comprehend the holiness and judgment of God.

Some people are not very religious. Concern for the inner life, or speculations over life’s mysteries do not interest them. Those who consider themselves spiritual typically confuse transcendent reality with their own; and religious enthusiasts fail to see that the familiar god of their piety is not the holy, judging God. All this adds up to the end of religion: the breakdown of the assumption that humans are spiritual beings seeking God.

#### RELIGION, FAITH, AND MORALITY

The end of religion, though, does not mean the end of Christianity. One does not have to be religious to be Christian. Christian faith has no prerequisites. “Faith comes from what is heard” (Rom 10:17), and all humans, having the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:22), can hear the good news. Religiousness, in fact, can deafen us to the good news. If being religious is the way we establish a relationship with God or join our spirit with the divine, then it presumes to have quasi-divine capacities. But in the biblical tradition the relationship is established from the other side, by the divine. As Luther explained, “I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy

Spirit has called me through the Gospel...”<sup>5</sup> All our religion will get us, all we can grasp on our own, is a god who remains hidden and unknown (Acts 17:22-31). We will never close the gap between the divine and ourselves by utilizing our spiritual capacities and experiences or intellectual insights and decisions. It may be necessary, therefore, to set aside religion in order to make room for faith.

---

*“it may be necessary to set aside religion in order to make room for faith”*

---

The *end* of religion can be the *beginning* of faith. Stopping our quests for the divine gives us pause to hear the news that it is God who is after us. And when our religious seeking ends, the moral demands of our everyday lives summon us and get our attention. Then we may understand what Bonhoeffer meant when he wrote that he wanted to speak of God in the middle of life, not in the rarefied air of religion or rare times of spiritual crisis. *Moral* concerns take us into vital matters of life that are the end—understood now as goal or *telos*—of religion. The future of humanity, retribution for the wicked, vindication for the righteous, and the hope of liberty and justice for all, these moral matters are our vital concern, and it is the goal of religion to resolve them. *The end of religion*, then, means the waning of individual quests for the divine, but also the waxing of our common moral hope.

Now we have observed that many are not religious. But most everyone is moral. They have the “knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 3:22), though they may not always be cognizant of it or act on it. They have a conscience that hearkens to the words, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt 7:12). Humanity around the world and throughout history has acknowledged the validity of the golden rule. In the Hebrew tradition the obligation to respect all life is given to all humanity through Noah (Gen 9:1-17). In the New Testament Paul claimed that those without the biblical law “show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness” (Rom 2:15). The unanswered question of our moral life is whether we will reach the good we all want and avoid the evil we all hate.

History teaches, furthermore, that for there to be liberty and justice for all, *some* individuals must make sacrifices. Whether it be the supreme sacrifice in defense of a nation, the restriction of personal prerogatives for the security of others, or the giving of energy and resources for the well-being of children, self-interest must be put aside for the good of others. We have learned, we might say, that the essence of the moral life is “a willingness to face sacrifice.”<sup>6</sup> Now it *may* turn out that those who take such risks and bear such sacrifices will benefit—but it may not. The fruits of such self-sacrifice may never be realized, or not realized until much

<sup>5</sup>Martin Luther, “Small Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 345.

<sup>6</sup>Ronald M. Green, *Religion and Moral Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 12.

later by those who come after them. These considerations, as well, raise a moral question that presses for an answer: Are there enough moral people to give of themselves, risking the pursuit of peace, justice, and liberty, to turn back the misery of violence, injustice, and tyranny?

We do not know whether we will all reach the good we want and avoid the evil we hate. We do not know whether enough people will give of themselves to seek peace, liberty, and justice so that we can live without the constant threat of domination by the powerful and the wicked. The obscure direction of moral history gives no guarantee we will reach our goal.

It is at this juncture that religion steps forward to answer these moral questions and encourage our moral efforts. Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? Will the righteous be rewarded and the wicked be punished? The major world religions all address these questions, perhaps deriving their very reason to be from them.<sup>7</sup> In Asia, for example, karma, the moral law of cause and effect, provides a mechanism to answer these questions. In Islam, history culminates in a final day of judgment that will settle the moral score, meting out rewards and punishments. In other religions as well, it is our moral conviction of how things ought to be and our moral hope for how they ought to work out in the end that press for resolution—if not now, then later in another life. Immortality, heaven and hell, reincarnation, all are religious solutions to moral problems, and serve to encourage us to strive for our moral goals.

---

*“aware of moral travails, we fervently hope that there is a  
God: a God who sees, who knows”*

---

Morality sets peace, liberty, and justice for all before us as goals. Religious beliefs give us confidence that the ends of morality will be realized. When religion provides answers to questions posed by moral striving and sacrifice, it can lead to an unselfish hope in a God who upholds justice and who fairly judges all humanity with righteousness. For example, we know for certain that countless and unknown people have sacrificed and suffered that others might live, be free, be treated with dignity, or have opportunities they were denied. They evoke our admiration, respect, and gratitude. We are most poignantly aware of this when we think of prisoners of conscience like Bonhoeffer or prisoners of war and political prisoners who suffer alone and unknown for the truth and from moral obligation. Aware of such moral travails, we fervently hope that there is a God: a God who sees, who knows what they did or refused to do; a God who will see to it that they are vindicated, who will see to it that the world will be a better place because of their sacrifice. Such disinterested moral hope is not motivated by heavenly reward for one's own deeds.

<sup>7</sup>This argument is made by Green in *Religion and Moral Reason* and also in *Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

It is born, rather, out of a visceral moral respect for those who sacrificed to resist evil or who suffered for the sake of others. It is inspired by the simple conviction that it is not right for any such sacrifice to be in vain.

There is no guarantee that the real world will conform to our moral ideals. Just because it seems right that the good shall win out over evil does not mean that it will. Just because we can with purity of heart will that there is a God who shall establish justice does not mean that there is such. Disheartening evidence abounds and can cause us to abandon hope and to wish for good fortune, leaving our chances to live in a secure and fair world in the hands of Lady Luck. But without real hope for a better world, few will pay the price or bear the burden that equal justice and opportunity require of us, and few will stick their necks out to protect the innocent from the wicked. With no basis for hope, and without the moral courage that comes from it, eventually no one will be safe from the wicked. Bonhoeffer's colleague, Martin Niemöller, memorably expressed this when he reflected, "First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me."<sup>8</sup>

#### THE WAY OF FAITH

The end of religion can be the beginning of faith. When we stop assuming that all humans are seeking God, we clearly hear the claim that a merciful God is after us. This is an overarching theme in the biblical tradition, as is the understanding that God is holy (set apart from us and a mystery to us) and just (intensely concerned about morality). Christianity claims that our hope in a divine power to right wrong and to establish peace and justice will be fulfilled—though in ways that might surprise us, as the people of God have been surprised throughout the ages.

"The kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15 RSV)—this, Christianity's primal proclamation, announces that God's righteous and merciful rule has broken into the world. Faith hears this good news and acts. It believes that the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus demonstrate that God has entered into the world to defeat evil and to establish peace and justice. The faithful believe that God's righteous reign is growing in the world—sometimes hidden, sometimes visible in the life of the people of God—and join up with it.

It is not obvious that the kingdom of God has entered into and is growing in the world. Faith is not religious knowledge. Uncertainty and risk remain part of faith. Unlike knowledge, faith realizes it could be wrong. Unlike religious knowl-

<sup>8</sup>The exact wording of the quotation is disputed, since it was an oral remark. This version is said to have been supplied by Niemöller's wife (cited online by the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise at [http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Holocaust/Niemoller\\_quote.html](http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Holocaust/Niemoller_quote.html) [cited 1 August 2002]). For further reflection on the wording and links to other commentaries, see <http://www2.gasou.edu/gsufl/german/texte/niemoell.htm> [cited 1 August 2002].

edge—based supposedly on experience of divine reality or intellectual insight into it—faith believes a claim that could be false. Since faith is not knowledge, unbelief never leaves it. Faith, not religious knowledge, says, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Joining up with God’s reign, faith does not dwell on its own spiritual life, but drives and gives hope to the moral life. Such faith is necessarily active in love. Fueled by Jesus’ love, faith active in love gives itself to endeavors and to others with no guarantee of reward or self-improvement, but only in the hope that new, redeemed life might work through it. It is risky to love as Jesus loved, because it reaches out to those hard to love, even the unlovable. That means, in this context, to love the unbelievers and the unreligious, accepting them for who they are—not as prospects or potential soul mates. In loving unbelievers, faith finds itself in solidarity with them. Bonhoeffer noted, “I often ask myself why a Christian instinct frequently draws me more to the religionless than to the religious, by which I mean not with any intention of evangelizing them, but rather, I might almost say, in ‘brotherhood.’”<sup>9</sup> The faithful are kin to unbelievers. They are kindred because both groups owe their identity—whichever it is—to a common creator, and not to their own religious achievement or spiritual failure. The capacity to believe comes to some, not to many, and is even withdrawn from others. Realizing that, faith sees its kinship with unbelief.

---

*“if one has faith that the kingdom of God is at hand, then one moves to prepare the way—or may be moved out of the way”*

---

Christians pray, “Thy kingdom come.” When the kingdom comes, there will be Christians who ask, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” And they will hear the reply, “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matt 25:44-45). To pray “Thy kingdom come” may be asking for more than we bargained for. If one has faith that the kingdom of God is at hand, then one moves to prepare the way—or may be moved out of the way. To reiterate a point made earlier, our efforts to bring about the kind of world the God of justice expects may, when he comes to establish that world, be found paltry. It may be that we are not preparing the royal highway, but are a roadblock in its way.

What we have described so far is only the beginning of faith. Finally we will all be renewed, and believing will become knowing. There will be a new creation, where—as faith faintly comprehends—God will be all in all. In the end, the faithful will be drawn into the very life of God, joined into the love and righteousness that belong to the Triune God alone. In the end, all life will be transformed and made

<sup>9</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 165.



whole. This is not easy for faith to believe. It is both too good to be true and fills one with trepidation.

We will all be renewed. All our faults, shortcomings, disorders, and compulsions will be healed, made over, transformed. We will be joined in a bond of love and peace that we have imagined but never known. This is not easy to grasp. Faith needs to hear such good news again and again, because its assurance comes not from within—since religious feelings weaken, and religious decisions fade—but from continually hearing it proclaimed in word and deed. But it also hears this good news with trepidation. For why should we think that the “I,” my selfsame identity, will emerge from death intact? After all, all that I am is in need of transformation, even that which I most love about myself will be reconstituted in God’s new act of creation. I bring nothing with me into this life—even life itself is “mine” only on loan—and at death all that I am is no more. It is simply a religious conceit to presume that the self will pass unscathed through death to complete its spiritual journey to the divine. Faith makes no such presumptions. Faith hopes in the mercies of God to recreate it and all creation. For this is the supreme confidence of faith: All are in the hands of a merciful God—whether they feel it, believe it, seek it, or not. ⊕

*NED P. WISNEFSKE is chair of the department of religion/philosophy at Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia.*