Speaking differently about God. Bonhoeffer and the future of Christianity in post-secular Europe

Frits de Lange

‘Reject God, Follow Jesus’

London, Hyde Park, Speaker’s Corner, the place where anybody who thinks he has anything to say, can address the world. You just need a chair to stand on. You raise your voice and an audience gathers, ready for discussion. Politics is a hot item. But also the saving of the soul is a much-loved theme.

My personal favourite is a man with the billboard ‘Christian Atheism’ around his neck and the text ‘Reject God but Follow Jesus’ at his feet. Surrounded by fanatic Muslims gesticulating with the Koran and Christian doom preachers, a remarkable presence. He cannot count on a large audience. Nevertheless, the man and his message, they gained my theological sympathy. Because ‘Reject God and follow Jesus’ it might be – in a sense to be qualified later – a plausible direction for the Christian tradition in a post-secular Europe that lets itself inspire by the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. What does Bonhoeffer’s critical distinction between faith as discipleship of Jesus Christ and Christendom as ‘religion’ – a constant throughout his theological career – mean for the theological policy of churches in post-secular Europe? At least this: if the God represented in the life and death of Jesus Christ is different from the ‘God’ of theism, than the post-secular is not a threat to Christian faith, but a challenge for the churches to reinvent what discipleship means.

A new language - A paradigm shift

From a church point of view, recent European history of church and Christian tradition sounds as a story of decline. Churches massively lose members, especially under the younger generation. Sociologically it is interesting, to speculate on causes, trends and prospects of the process of religious transformation Europe goes through. The master narrative of the ‘secularisation thesis’ in its pure form, defending the ‘end of religion’, has been abandoned. Religion in Europe is not ending, but transforming and recomposing itself in various ways. The result is an exciting spiritual landscape, which one may interpret not as the ‘end of religion’ but rather – as Charles Taylor does in his magisterial A Secular Age – as ‘the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee’. But one thing is clear. Taylor writes, one assists at least at a ‘retreat of Christendom’. Christendom understood as a civilization where

society and culture are profoundly informed by Christian faith. Here Europe differs from the USA. One might speak of the ‘European exception’ in the process of global religious transformation: as the American society understands it religious identity in majority as ‘one nation under God’, many countries in Europe are confronted with radical decline in institutionalized Christian practice. Amidst of a proliferation of religious orientations, Christian tradition seems to lose public relevance.

Following Bonhoeffer, the key theological question however is not how the empty European churches can be filled again with the masses but how the spoken language of God can be heard and experienced once again as ‘liberating and redeeming – as was Jesus’ language’. Is it possible still, or again, that the proclaimed word of God will ‘shock people and yet overcome them by its power’? Theology cannot do that job, it is up to the Spirit of God itself, that ‘bloweth where it listeth’ (John 3, 5-8). Theology has a more serving task: to analyze the processes of religious transformation adequately, and to develop creative proposals and normative models for reinterpreting Christian tradition. The crisis that churches and theology experience today in many European countries invites us to rethink traditional paradigms and imagine new ones. We have to learn to speak differently about God. This process will take several generations. We will perhaps experience the loss of familiar ways of believing, and mourn about images of ‘God’ we have to leave behind. But we will also experience joy in new revealing insights, hope on the renewal of our faith.

I think Dietrich Bonhoeffer can be one of our guides and a companion in this reorientation process within our post-secular European context. Theologically – as we shall see in a moment – but also spiritually. In his work no atmosphere of catastrophe, no apocalyptic, ‘Titanic’ like rhetoric. Bonhoeffer speaks the language of desire, confidence and hope. He is expecting, as he writes in his ‘Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge’:

‘eine neue Sprache (...), vielleicht ganz unreligiös, aber befreiend und erlösend, wie die Sprache Jesu, dass sich die Menschen über sie entsetzen und doch von ihrer Gewalt überwunden werden; die Sprache einer neuen Gerechtigkeit und Wahrheit, die Sprache, die den Frieden Gottes mit den Menschen und das Nahen seines Reiches verkündigt.’ (DBW 8, 436)

Bonhoeffer refers to the liberating power of the Word of God, but, at the same time, observes the actual impasse in the church’s speaking of that Word. The letter originates from the period in which Bonhoeffer pressed his friend Eberhard Bethge progressively with his new gained theological insights on a ‘world come of age’ and a ‘non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts’. ‘Wass mich unablässig bewegt, ist die Frage, was das Christentum oder wer Christus heute für uns eigentlich ist’, he writes as a

---

2 Taylor, A Secular Age, 514.

3 Taylor, A Secular Age, 527, 522.
running start to those theological explorations, in the famous and crucial letter bearing date April 30, 1944 (DBW 8, 402). His interest obviously is not merely sociological (in Christianity), but theological in the meaning of Christ for us today.

One might say that the distinction he makes in his latest work between Christianity as religion and discipleship of Christ as faith, corresponds with two alternative images of the divine. ‘God’ and God – they stand for two ways of believing, the former with a long history in Christianity, but leading religiously and culturally into a dead end street, the other representing the only future open for genuine Christian faith.

**Supranaturalistic theism – thinking in two spheres**

After April 30, 1944, Bonhoeffer develops some sharp observations on European Christianity: ‘Der Mensch hat gelernt, in allen wichtigen Fragen mit sich selbst fertig zu werden ohne Zuhilfenahme der “Arbeitshypothese Gott” (...) es zeigt sich dass alles auch ohne “Gott”geht, und zwar ebenso gut wie vorher. Ebenso wie auf wissenschaftlichen Gebiet wird im allgemein menschlichen Bereich “Gott” immer weiter aus dem Leben zurückgedrängt, er verliert an Boden.’ (Letter of 8 June, 1944, DBW 476v.) His diagnosis is hard: ‘God’ does not matter any more. He has become an empty symbol at the edges of life, filling up the gaps. Gaps in our knowledge: God as an explanation for what we don’t know yet. Gaps in our morality: God as a substitute for our conscience, as a final authority in an ethic not yet ready to stand on its own feet. Gaps in our technology: God as magician who hears our prayers that we send up when our technique fails. This ‘God’, according to Bonhoeffer, does not make religious sense anymore.

It seems to me that in a European context where Christendom seems to be at its final retreat, the churches may join Bonhoeffer in a farewell to this ‘God’. We should want to live ‘als solche, die mit dem Leben ohne Gott fertig werden.’ [DBW 533). For many, the abstract three letter symbol for the transcendent and ultimate power has lost its religious vitality. In some ecclesial subcultures ‘God’ still seems to functions as a group idol that binds the religious community together. But is this idea still capable of ‘shocking people and overcoming them by his power?’

Twenty-first century churches are plural institutions, a mixture of progressive and – perhaps even increasing – conservative theological outlooks. Honouring Bonhoeffer’s legacy theologically, however, means the opening of an inner ecclesial debate. A sound awareness of our late modern European context from a Bonhoefferian perspective means that we should consider to leave behind the metaphysical construction of *supranaturalistic theism* that supports the ‘hypothesis God’ talk. The traditional symbol ‘God’ stood for a super power, who governs the universe out of a second, hidden reality above or behind the reality we live
in. It presupposes an *ontological dualism*, which divides reality into two spheres, nature and supra nature, a worldly and a divine reality. In this construction, God intervenes as an ultimate Power in our world by miraculously breaking the laws of nature.

In his letters and papers from prison, Bonhoeffer foresaw with lucidity the end of this supranaturalistic world view, and draw radical theological consequences out of it. But already in Ethics, he speaks about ‘the colossal obstacle’ that the ontological thinking in terms of two spheres means for our reflection on the powerful reality of God. ‘Sei den Anfängen christlicher Ethik nach der neutestamentlichen Zeit ist die vorherrschend, bewusst oder unbewusst alles bestimmende, Grundvorstellung des ethischen Denkens die des Aneinanderstossens von zwei Räumen, von denen der eine göttlich, heilig, übernatürlich, christlich, der andere aber weltlich, profan, natürlich, unchristlich ist. (…). Das Wirklichkeitsganze zerfällt in zwei Teile und das ethische Bemühen geht um die rechte Beziehung der beiden Teile zueinander.’ (DBW 6, 41) That the sacred and the profane meet and confront each other is a distinguishing mark of any vital religion.4 However, according to Bonhoeffers reconstruction, in the development of Christianity in Europe, both, the sacred and the profane, became eventually isolated in their own sphere. The conflict ridden confrontation between them has been regulated, formalised, and institutionalised in the long run. In the language of the Reformed tradition: their confrontation became more and more ‘law like’ (‘gesetzlich’). The shocking power of the divine became domesticated.

How modern people, Bonhoeffer asks, who do not want to withdraw themselves as monks from the world (the medieval ‘solution’ for escaping the tension between the sacred and the profane), still try to take part in the experience of the divine? By withdrawing themselves into the private sphere, he observes in Ethics as well as in his letters from prison. Their inner citadel functions as the religious refuge for the sacred in the modern world. An inner worldly, though invisible space, the monastery cell of modern people. There they spiritually lick their wounds, inflicted in the profanity of secular life; there they feed their secular personality with sacred ‘inspiration’. The distinction between the two spheres has ended up in their separation. The relationship between the sacred and the profane has become thin and powerless. The confrontation with the sacred does not transform lives anymore – , according to Charles Taylor, a characteristic of genuine, vital religiosity. 5

In Ethics, Bonhoeffer develops a severe critique on this thinking in two spheres. Not only because it is philosophically untenable, but because it contradicts the biblical experience of God’s active presence in the first place. So Bonhoeffer states: ‘Es gibt nicht zwei Wirklichkeiten, sondern

---


5 Taylor, A Secular Age, 430v.
nur eine Wirklichkeit, und das ist die in Christus offenbargewordene Gotteswirklichkeit in der Weltwirklichkeit. An Christus teilhabend stehen wir zugleich in der Gotteswirklichkeit und in der Weltwirklichkeit. (DBW 6, 43) Additionally, interiority as a last refuge for the sacred turns out to be an illusion: ‘Es gibt kein Rückzugsort des Christen von der Welt, weder äusserlich noch in der Sphäre der Innerlichkeit. Jeder Versuch der Welt auszuweichen muss früher oder später mit einem sündigen Verfall an die Welt bezahlt werden.’ (DBW 6, 47) What seems to be private in this ‘inner world’ eventually turns out to be public; what seems to be sacred is actually profane.

In the prison letters, Bonhoeffer returns to this illusionary effort to save the sacred in privatising it, and critiques the way how it even is legitimized by church ministry. One does not need Freud to acknowledge that the interior is not the dwelling place of the divine, but at the contrary the place where all our weaknesses, frustrations and obsessions meet. ‘Die Verdrängung Gottes aus der Welt, aus der Öffentlichkeit der menschlichen Existenz, führte zu dem Versuch, ihn wenigstens in dem Bereich des “Persönlichen” “Innerlichen”, “Privaten” noch festzuhalten. (…) Die Kammerdienergeheimnisse - um es grob zu sagen - d.h. also der Bereich des Intimen (vom Gebet bis zur Sexualität) wurden das Jagdgebiet der modernen Seelsorger.’ (DBW 8, 509)

Concluding, both in Ethics and in the letters from prison Bonhoeffer sharply analyses the ontological dualism as presupposed by supranaturalistic theism. Its separation of the profane and the sacred contributed to the impoverishment of a genuine religious experience of reality.

The weakening of ‘God’

What made this process possible? In prison, Bonhoeffer concentrates in particular on the developments in natural sciences that lead to the world ‘come of age’, ready to live without the idea of ‘God’. Yet, there might be another – political – reason why supranaturalism has become so meaningless in our experience. According to Charles Taylor the particular political history that Europe went through makes its more radical dechristianisation, compared to the USA, understandable. In the symbolic system of the Ancien Régime – that prevailed in some European countries (f.e. France) until far in the 20th century – ‘God’ represented a super power governing the universe like an absolute sovereign, according to his capricious will. This monarchical thought structure has become an atavism in modern democracy. But being literally part of ‘the old world’ for Americans, a history left behind for good, it is still a painful, haunting part of collective European memory. Again and again Europeans have to separate themselves from its continuing historical shadow. Spiritually they still wrestle with ‘the King’, on earth as it is in heaven. Consciously breaking with the church, contesting ecclesial authority in morality – it indicates that the Ancien Regime is still present. Authority that does not legitimize itself democratically, is not recognized. In such a symbolic
world, a capricious ‘God-somewhere-up-there’ has lost his power. Even ‘God’ has to move from court to parliament. In an egalitarian world order, the Monarch-God is forced to abdicate.

In concentrating on the developments in natural sciences, Bonhoeffer paid no attention to the political history of democratization that lead to the world of age he was foreseeing. Did the fact that he was quite reluctant to political egalitarianism withhold him perhaps?6

However that may be, with the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo we may describe the history of ‘God’ in European culture as a history of weakening.7 The powerful position of the ‘God’ of conventional Christendom in the symbolic universe is paled and marginalized. Once a vital symbol, these three letters don’t stand any more for the centre of symbolic integration of the totality of spheres of life, a collectively experienced moral authority, a shared ideal of the good life – as in ancient times.

How bad is this? Here the argument must come to a decisive turning point. Following Bonhoeffer, one cannot interpret anymore this process of dechristianization within the narrative paradigm of decline, well known within the churches. According to Bonhoeffer this process of weakening, ‘die Verdrängung Gottes aus der Welt, aus der Öffentlichkeit der menschlichen Existenz’ (DBW 8, 509) is not happening accidentally. ‘Gott gibt uns zu wissen, dass wir leben müssen als solche, die mit dem Leben ohne Gott fertig warden.’ (DBW 8, 533. Italics added). The weakening of God is not a tragic catastrophe. At the contrary, from a Christian point of view it should even be defended. God self is actively involved in the history of his own dethronement. As once the Hebrew prophets, Bonhoeffer tries to re-describe history in terms of Gods active presence, by giving a relevant new sense to an apparent loss of meaning. The master narrative of disaster is replaced by a paradigm of hope.

What did Bonhoeffer mean, in writing down the following enigmatic phrases? ‘Der Gott, der uns in der Welt leben lässt ohne die Arbeitshypothese Gott, ist der Gott von der wir dauernd stehen. Vor und mit Gott leben wir ohne Gott. Gott lässt sich aus der Welt herausdrängen ans Kreuz, Gott ist ohnmächtig und schwach in der Welt und gerade und

6 Politically Bonhoeffer probably stayed a monarchist. Cf. John W. De Gruchy, Christianity and Democracy. A theology for a just world order, Cape Town & Johannesburg 1995, 124f.: ‘Bonhoeffer himself, as a German Lutheran, was not a convinced democrat, at least not in the liberal variety. (...) Yet, Bonhoeffer’s theology, his understanding of human freedom, sociality, and justice, as well as his participation in the resistance, all had far-reaching democratic implications.’ Cf. Also Sabine Dramm, V-Mann Gottes und der Abwehr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer und der Widerstand, Gütersloh 2005, 204f., 238: ‘Auf der breiten Skala zwischen elitärem und egalitärem Denken wäre Bonhoeffer politisch eher der elitären, theologisch eher der egalitären Seite der Skala zuzuordnen. (...) Sein theologisches Sein war seinem politischen Bewusstsein voraus.’

7 Cf., among other works, Gianni Vattimo, After Christianity, New York 2002.
nur so ist er bei uns und hilft uns.’ 8 Apparently, the historical dynamics that lead us to a world come of age liberates us also from a false image of God. Simultaneously, it opens up our eyes for the biblical God, who regains authority in the world by his weakness. Obviously a secularizing dynamic is inherent to the internal logic of the history of Christian faith. Christianity itself contributed to the weakening of ‘God’. 9

Christian faith is a paradoxical religion. A non-religious religion, in Bonhoeffer’s wording. A ‘religion that leaves the land of religion behind’, like Israel exiled from Egypt, as the French philosopher Marcel Gauchet wrote.10 For Christian faith puts at its centre a figure, the God-human Jesus Christ, who dethrones ‘God’ in his humiliation at the cross and at the same time glorifies the human in his resurrection. In the Christian narrative, Jesus Christ becomes the source and standard of any authentic experience of transcendence. By taking the story of Jesus’ life course as a central myth, Christianity in fact seals the end of monarchical political religion. ‘Whoever saw me, he saw the Father’, Christ declares (John 14,9). Jesus’ heavenly Father gets an ordinary human carpenter face, sacred in its profanity.

**Immanent transcendence: theology as Christology**

In such a religion in the end ‘GOD’ written large, must crumble into ‘god’. By binding God in the story of the incarnation inextricably to the humanity of Jesus (kenosis), as Bonhoeffer being a christocentric theologian also did, Christian faith abolishes the ontological distance between the divine and the human. God abdicates his throne, religion ‘democratizes.’ The experience of transcendence becomes inner worldly. ‘Das Jenseitige ist nicht das unendlich Ferne, sondern das Nächste.’(DB W 8, 551) With this orientation, Christian faith pushes towards a mutation in the history of religion. Religious notions such as ‘worship’ and ‘salvation’ undergo a structural metamorphosis. Not a blind submission to a heavenly power, but the experience of friendship and suffering in the discipleship of the human Jesus – that is what is to be called divine. Christian faith humanises religion, by giving a religious value surplus to ordinary life. Gott ist mitten in unserm Leben jenseitig.’ (WE 408)

---

8 The editors remark (DBW 8, 533, note 33) that the ‘selbst’ in ‘Gott selbst’ is even later added by Bonhoeffer.

9 So the passage might be re-read and understood as follows: ‘Der Gott, der uns in der Welt leben lässt ohne die Arbeitshypothese “Gott”, ist der Gott von der wir dauernd stehen. Vor und mit Gott leben wir ohne “Gott”. Gott lässt sich aus der Welt herausdrängen ans Kreuz, Gott ist ohnmächtig und schwach in der Welt und gerade und nur so ist er bei uns und hilft uns.’

Bonhoeffer’s theology gives an account of this paradoxical non-religiosity of Christian religion. The question how the incarnation, the story of God becoming human (Menschwerdung, as Bonhoeffer consequently writes), affects our relationship with the divine, is his theme, from the beginning until the end of his theological biography. In prison Bonhoeffer sketches an outline for a book he wanted to write. The first chapter should deal with modernity, with the deconstruction of the supranaturalistic God as its conclusion. ‘“Gott” als Arbeitshypothese, als Lückenbüßer für unsere Verlegenheiten ist überflüssig geworden.’ (DBW 8. 557) The second chapter was planned to be more constructive. It should offer a new opening for faith in God, based on the incarnation. ‘Wer ist Gott? Nicht zuerst ein allgemeiner Gottesglaube an Gottes Allmacht etc. Das ist kein echte Gotteserfahrung, sondern ein Stück prologierter Welt. Begegnung met Jesus Christus. (…) Das “Für-andere-dasein” Jesu ist die Transzendenzfahrung! (…) Gott in Menschengestalt! (…) der Mensch-für-andere! Darum der Gekreuzigte. Der aus dem Transzendenten lebende Mensch.’ (DBW 8, 557vv.)

To Bonhoeffer, theology and Christology almost became synonymous. His whole theological existence consisted of an engaged reflection on the God incarnated, crucified and resurrected. To him, Christology not only represented a part of theology, a locus in the doctrine of redemption. It forms the heart of theology, because Christology is the key to the understanding both, God and reality.11

The book never came about. But we do have enough material in hands to get more then an outline of Bonhoeffer’s reconstruction of a non-supranaturalistic understanding of God. For already in Ethics, Bonhoeffer does not limit himself to a critique on the thinking in two spheres. He also sketches a genuine Christian alternative. What does the fact that God became human in Christ mean? That no longer there exist two realities, the sacred and the profane, but that the reality of God went into the reality of the world and accepted it as his own. There is but one reality, and that is the reality of God-in-Christ. The Word became flesh. The God above us became the God among us. God is present in our reality, stronger even: he encompasses, includes our reality. Therefore, ‘Alle Dinge erscheinen ja im Zerrbild, wo sie nicht in Gott gesehen und erkannt werden.’ (DBW 6, 32)

In Ethics, Bonhoeffer elaborates an ontology of incarnated transcendence, in which God-in-Christ functions as the logos, the basic structuring principle. We cannot interpret reality, he says, without reading it through the lenses of incarnation (that leads us to a Yes to humaneness), crucifixion (that leads us to a No to evil), and resurrection (that brings us hope for the future). These three Christological principles function in Ethics as a kind of categorical grid in the Kantian sense of the word, through which reality gets religiously structured and receives meaning.

11 Cf. André Dumas, Une théologie de la réalité, Geneva 1968, 236.
Radical implications for the act of faith do follow. In supranaturalism, belief in God consists in asserting the proposition ‘God exists in heaven’ to be true. To reach God is only possible by applying for his intervening power in the act of prayer. Being ontologically separated from God, faith opens up incidentally the possibility to contact with him. If, however, our reality is encompassed by God’s reality, as Bonhoeffer says, then the act of believing consists in our participation with the whole of our existence in this reality. Faith no longer means: holding true (assensus), but is an act of fiducia: an existential trust in, a total surrender to this reality.

Participation in the reality of God, as Bonhoeffer conceives it, seems synonymous with what St. Paul called ‘living in Christ’. Christian ethics, accordingly, asks how we can live ‘in the reality of God’.

‘Die christliche Ethik fragt nun nach dem Wirklichwerden dieser Gottes- und Weltwirklichkeit, die in Christus gegeben ist, in unsere Welt. Nicht als wäre “unsere Welt” irgendetwas ausserhalb der Gottes- und Weltwirklichkeit, die in Christus ist, als gehörte sie nicht auch schon zu der in ihm getragenen, angenommenen, versöhnten Welt (…). Es wird vielmehr danach gefragt, wie die – auch uns und unsere Welt längst in sich beschlossen haltende – Wirklichkeit in Christus als jetzt gegenwärtige wirke beziehungsweise wie in ihr zu leben sei. Es geht also darum, an der Wirklichkeit Gottes und der Welt in Jesus Christus heute teilzuhaben und das so, dass ich die Wirklichkeit Gottes nie ohne die Wirklichkeit der Welt und die Wirklichkeit der Welt nie ohne die Wirklichkeit Gottes erfahre.’ (DBW 6, 40, italics added)

Pan-en-theïsm? Surrendering to the other as sacrament of God

The concept of God that Bonhoeffer here proposes radically differs from that of supranaturalism. One might call it – though any linguistic labeling remains a simplification of the divine mystery – a pan-en-theistic concept. Everything lives in the reality of God, because we live in Christ. ‘Alle Dinge erscheinen ja im Zerrbild, wo sie nicht in Gott gesehen und erkannt werden.’ (DBW 6, 32) I am convinced that we cannot take the space metaphor ‘to see in’ too serious. It helps us to understand Bonhoeffer’s theocentrism in a quasi-literal, spatial sense. To Bonhoeffer, God-in-Christ is the space in which ‘we live, and move and have our being’. (cf. Acts 17, 28).

Bonhoeffer’s pan-en-theism however, is not meant as a philosophical doctrine of God, based in a cosmological theory.12 It roots in the particularity of Gods revelation in Christ. However one might have

thought about God, since the ‘Christ event’ Jesus is to be considered and worshipped as the decisive sacrament of God. We, Christians believe and enact, participate in God only if we take part in the event of the Jesus narrative. For Bonhoeffer, the striving for the good life (the classical question ethics starts with) gets identical with the question how to participate in Christ, as the reality we live in. ‘Das Gute ist die Wirklichkeit selbst und zwar die in Gott gesehene, erkannte Wirklichkeit selbst.’ (DBW 6, 37) ‘Gutseinwollen gibt es nur als Verlangen nach dem in Gott Wirklichen.’ (DBW 6, 35) ‘Nur an der Wirklichkeit teilnehmend haben wir teil am Guten.’” (DBW 6, 35)

If ‘sacrament’ stands for the mediation of the sacred, a sharing in the life of God, then to take part in Christ is the sacramental experience par excellence. In his Ethics and letters and papers from prison, Bonhoeffer develops his critical alternative for an inward directed spirituality. God is not to be found in the inner citadel of our interior. Bonhoeffer’s spirituality is. At the contrary, outward directed: having faith in God stands for taking part in his suffering in the world. Life means to be involved in the incarnation of God. ‘Der Mensch wird auferufen, das Leiden Gottes an der gottlosen Welt mitzuleiden. (...) er muss “weltlich” leben und nimmt eben darin an den Leiden Gottes teil (...) Nicht der religiöse Akt macht den Christen, sondern das Teilnehmen am Leiden Gottes im weltlichen Leben. Das ist “metanoia, nicht zuerst an die eigene Nöte, Fragen, Sünden, Ängste denken, sondern sich in den Weg Jesu mithineinsen lassen, in das messianische Ereignis’. (DBW 8, 535f.) Faith consists not in the partial withdrawal in private interiority, but in the total surrender (‘an act of life’) to life with others. ‘Jesus ruft nicht zu einer neuen Religion auf, sondern zum Leben.’ (DBW 8, 537).

But living in the reality of God, how does is work out concretely? In Bonhoeffer’s view, God is effectively present among us as human beings in the way we are there for each other. That is the way he is fully present among and for us. He incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth, not because of a previous ‘monarchical’ decision taken in heaven, but because of Jesus’ unconditional ‘being there for others’. Being there for others is God’s interpretation of divine egalitarianism. The sacred is relocated in the profane act of investing oneself unconditionally in others. ‘Das Jenseitige ist (...) das Nächste’, we already heard. ‘Gott ist mitten in unserm Leben jenseitig.’ (DBW 8, 551, 408) Where do we find God? Not in the cognitive act of belief in a reality above our reality, but in an act of unconditional trust, in which we surrender ourselves to a shared life with others. Devotion to common life with others is, according to Christian understanding, the consecration of the sacrament of God. God is to experience in, with and under our daily life in the world.13

Perspectives

In his farewell to supranaturalistic theism and in his commitment to a christologically based pan-en-theism, Bonhoeffer is creating innovative concepts that might help us to experience the active and salutary presence of God within our post-secular age anew. He has the courage to accomplish the break with a long European history in which the powerful and absolute God-above-us slowly weakened. He dares to speak instead of participation in the life of God by following Jesus’ act of surrender to others. Discipleship as the embodiment of immanent transcendence.

His reflections are mostly – the judgment might be applicable to the whole of his theology – essayistic, fragmentary, and provisional. At some points, we may have to go further than Bonhoeffer did. I mention three of them.

1. I think that his concept of God needs further theological reflection. It could be deepened in the direction of a pan-en-theistic doctrine of God. Bonhoeffer’s hesitations to do so are quite understandable; he does not want to speculate about God behind the back of Jesus Christ. To Bethge he writes on August 21, 1944: ‘Alles, was wir mit Recht von Gott erwarten, erbitten dürfen, ist in Jesus Christus zu finden. Was ein Gott, so wie wir ihn uns denken, alles tun müsste und könne, damit hat der Gott Jesu Christi nichts zu tun.’ DBW 8, 572). Nevertheless, though Bonhoeffer is right in saying that we do not know God otherwise than in Christ epistemologically, ‘God’ and ‘Christ’ do not have to be mixed up with one another ontologically, at least if one wants those two symbols not to function merely as synonyms (as Bonhoeffer sometimes seems to let happen).14

2. A further reflection on his pan-en-theistic inspired concept of God – a second point to develop further – might also take away the suspicion that doing theology in the footsteps of Bonhoeffer definitely leads to a moralization of religion.15 Does theology become ethics? No, one might better conclude the opposite: ethics (understood in a broad sense as the way people relate to others and to themselves) gets religious again.16 For the struggle for the good

14 Though Bonhoeffer develops his Christology within a Trinitarian background, there is little explicit differentiation in his understanding of the works ‘ad extra’ of the Triune God. For Bonhoeffer’s pneumatology, see Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, The Cost of Moral Leadership. The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Grand Rapids 2003, 51-82, 51f.: ‘… even when there is no explicit mention of the Holy Spirit in Bonhoeffer’s texts, there is the tacit understanding the God is present in a Trinitarian outreach in which Father, Son, and Spirit act as one.’

15. In its farewell to theism, the theology of the ‘death of God’ in the 20th century, though inspired by Bonhoeffer (cf. John A. T. Robinson, Honest to God. London 1963), was defenceless to this reproach. One cannot develop Bonhoeffer pan-en-theism further without presupposing his persisting faith in a personal God.

and the combat of evil in which human beings are engaged, they are happening in the bosom of God. ‘Reality is the sacrament of the command of God,’ Bonhoeffer once wrote. 17 The secular is a vehicle of the divine.

3. A persistent reproach made to Bonhoeffer, that also deserves further reflection – a third point – is that he exercises a Christological reduction that might narrow the theological perspective, especially in our globalising world of religious pluralism. 18 Indeed, Jesus is the unique sacrament of God, Christians should continue to say. Participating in, and being transformed by his life and death, we experience how God wants to be present in humanity, suffering and healing. However, we should interpret Christianity as one religion among others in an exemplary, not in an exclusive way. The transforming Spirit of Christ event may be at work in all religions and cultures. I think therefore Bonhoeffer’s christocentrism should be rethought in an inclusive, encompassing way. ‘Committed pluralism’19 may be the right term, coined for that attitude. There are times – as Bonhoeffer’s – that one should say: ‘He who is not with me is against me’ (Lc.11,23), and there are times – as ours – that one should listen more to Jesus’ saying: ‘Who is not against us, is for us’. (Mc.10,40).

In conclusion: ‘Reject God, Follow Jesus’ – could that Hyde Park speaker’s motto be in line with Bonhoeffer’s theological legacy? Yes, I think, though with some clear restrictions. Reject God – indeed, the weakening and death of the supranaturalistic ‘God’ has to be confirmed. However, even after an apparent death of ‘God’ we have to go on speaking about God, let it be differently. The experience of the sacred continues even in a secular age and asks for theological engagement, for the distinction between good and bad ‘God talk’, and for a passionate plea for a non supranaturalistic theistic theology that stays in dialogue with other religious orientations. Follow Jesus? Yes, if that stands for more than imitating the man from Nazareth. Following Jesus, as we can learn from both Bonhoeffer’s theology and biography, refers to a way of life in which an unconditional surrender to the life with others is experienced as a participation in God in which we live, and move, and have our being.

---

17 DBW 11, 334 (Zur theologischen Begründung der Weltbundarbeit, 1932).


Zusammenfassung


In Speaker’s Corner in London’s Hyde Park verteidigt ein Laienprediger ein ‘christliches Atheismus’. An seinen Füssen hält er ein Brett mit darauf ‘Reject God, but follow Jesus’ geschrieben. Im Spur Bonhoeffers untersucht dieser Beitrag ob diese schroffe Botschaft die christliche Tradition in einem post-säkulieren Europa eine neue Richtung weisen kann.
