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Item Type	Article
Authors	Grounds, Vernon C.
Publisher	Evangelical Theological Society
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Download date	2026-11-18 20:22:26
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/163242

Pacesetters for the Radical Theologians of the 60s and 70s*

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III
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Born February 4, 1906, in Breslau, Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the son of a prominent psychiatrist. His mother was a loving, cheerful, artistic woman. Reared in bourgeois comfort and culture, the boy decided to enter the ministry despite strong paternal objections. After study at Tübingen and Berlin, he secured a licentiate degree when he was only 21 with his thesis, "The Communion of Saints," which Karl Barth called "a theological miracle." In 1930 he began to teach at the University of Berlin, leaving there, however, to spend a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York City as a Sloan Fellow. He was then appointed Youth Secretary of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches. With Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, Bonhoeffer became a leader in the Confessional Church. In 1935 he was asked to direct its seminary which started in Zingst and soon moved to Finkenwalde. Though urged to remain in the United States where he had influential friends, Bonhoeffer elected to cast in his lot with his own people and especially with the resistance movement. Following an abortive attempt to assassinate *der Feuhrer*, Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5, 1943, and sent to the military prison, Tegel, in Berlin. He was later removed to Prinz-Albrecht-Strase, shipped next to Buchenwald, and finally to Flossenburg where he was hanged on April 9, 1945, a week before Hitler committed suicide.

Something of Bonhoeffer's spirit, his candor, his faith, his struggle against doubt and despair during his years in Nazi hands, is shown in his moving poem, *Wer Bist Ich?*

> Who am I? They often tell me
> I stepped from my cell's confinement
> Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
> Like a squire from his country house.
> Who am I? They often tell me
> I used to speak to my warders
> Freely and friendly and clearly
> As though they were mine to command.

*Part II of a chapter from a forthcoming Moody Press book (1976) on *Tensions in Contemporary Theology* edited by S. Goudry and A. Johnson. Part I was published in the Summer issue of the *ETS Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1975.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly
Like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were
Compressing my throat,
Yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness
Tossing in expectation of great events,
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest O God, I am thine![1]

Shortly after Bonhoeffer's execution, one of his American admirers, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote about him feelingly and prophetically:

> The story of Bonhoeffer is worth recording. It belongs to the modern Acts of the Apostles ... Bonhoeffer was a brilliant young theologian who combined a deep piety with a high degree of intellectual sophistication ... less known than Niemöller, he will become better known. Not only his martyr's death but also his actions and precepts contain within them the hope of a revitalized Protestant faith in Germany.[2]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has indeed become better known, one of the best known of twentieth century theologians, exerting a decisive influence on the emergence of radical Christianity.

1.

It is difficult to know how we can succintly present and justly assess Bonhoeffer's work, truncated as it was by his tragic death at the age of 39. Thus in his definitive study, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*, André Dumas has this to say: "Bonhoeffer is a Barthian who is sensitive

1. Sabine Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffers: Portrait of a Family* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1971), p. 194.
2. Quoted by William Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1967), p. 265.

to the questions raised by liberal theology that Bultmann has never stopped asking, and so he is the key man in dealing with present theological situation."[3] That assessment of Bonhoeffer by a discerning scholar—"the key man in dealing with the present theological situation"—highlights his significance and at the same time indicates how formidable an assignment it is to do him justice. Because Bonhoeffer did not live to explain those cryptic and fragmentary letters, written at Tegel in a situation of excruciating pressure, one shares Karl Barth's uncertainty as to what exactly his young friend may have meant in many passages:

> What is the "world come of age"? What does "non-religious interpretation" mean? What am I to understand by "positivism of revelation"? I know everything, or at least a great deal of what the experts make of it up to Heinrich Ott. But to this day I do not know what Bonhoeffer himself meant or wanted by it, and I am even inclined to doubt a little whether Systematic Theology (I am also thinking of his *Ethics*) was his strongest field.... Even if I should be mistaken, I should still re-affirm that his letters from prison represent only one (in this case the last) of the stations in his intellectual and spiritual journey, a journey that was very turbulent from the beginning even though that was not its aim; that he might have been capable of the most astonishing evolution in quite a different direction; and that we do him an injustice when we suddenly place him in some line with Tillich and Bultmann and interpret him in relation to those passages (or as his own prophet based on these passages), whether in the sense of a very bourgeois liberalism or, as H. Müller sees it, as the precursor of the idealogy of the D.D.R., or, in R. Prenter's interpretation, as a new Lutheran Church Father.[4]

One appreciates, morever, the near-bewilderment which Dumas, a top-flight Bonhoeffer authority, admits to be his own reaction.

> It is somewhat disconcerting to see what those who enter into conversation with Bonhoeffer make of him, and what strange amalgams result from such encounters, sometimes with Luther, sometimes wtih Feuerbach, Freud and Nietzsche, and sometimes even with St. Thomas Aquinas, Teihard de Chardin and Karl Rahner! Barth's question is unavoidable: did this "impulsive young thinker" really have a systematic viewpoint if his readers can organize his thought into so many contradictory systems?[5]

Perhaps the wisest approach, then, will be to sketch Bonhoeffer's basic theological approach before focusing on some of his more controversial concepts, briefly elucidating those concepts without indulging in eisegesis insofar as that proves possible.

Let is be said at the outset that there seems to be little reason for assuming, as is rather frequently done, a discontinuity between

3. André Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 270.
4. Quoted by Dumas, *ibid.*, p. 242.
5. André Dumas, *ibid.*, p. 276.

Bonhoeffer's earlier work and the speculations he advanced while in Tegel. Continuity, rather than discontinuity, marks his thought throughout the three periods into which his closest friend, Eberhard Bethge, initially divided Bonhoeffer's career: the university period from 1927 to 1933; the period of the Confessional Church, 1933-1940; the period of political activity and of imprisonment, 1940-1945.

2.

Bonhoeffer agrees with Barth that God discloses Himself only in and through Jesus Christ. Nothing could be more explicit than his answer to the question, "Who is God?"

> Not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence, etc. That is not a genuine experience of God, but a partial extension of the world. Encounter with Jesus Christ. The experience that a transformation of all human life is given in the fact that "Jesus is there only for others." His "being there for others" is the experience of transcendence. It is only this "being there for others," maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection). Our relation to God is not a "religious" relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable—that is not authentic transcendence—but our relation to God is a new life in "existence for others," through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbour who is within reach in any given situation.[6]

Again, in one of his last letters to Bethge, Bonhoeffer reaffirms the Christocentricity of his faith:

> It's your birthday in a week's time. Once again I've taken up the readings and meditated on them. The key to everything is the "in him." All that we may rightly expect from God, and ask him for, is to be found in Jesus Christ. The God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with what God, as we imagine him, could do and ought to do. If we are to learn what God promises, and what he fulfils, we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings, and death of Jesus. It is certain that we may always live close to God and in the light of his presence, and that such living is an entirely new life for us; that nothing is then impossible for us, because all things are possible with God; that no earthly power can touch us without his will, and that danger and distress can only drive us closer to him. It is certain that we can claim nothing for ourselves, and may yet pray for everything; it is certain that our joy is hidden in suffering, and our life in death; it is certain that in all this we are in a fellowship that sustains us. In Jesus God has said Yes and Amen to it all, and that Yes and Amen is the firm ground on which we stand.[7]

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 381.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 391.

Bonhoeffer further agrees with Barth that God's self-disclosure must control our understanding of ontology and epistemology. He emphasizes God not as He may be *a se*, but as He is *pro nobis*, God as He freely enters into relationship with man.

> In revelation it is a question less of God's freedom on the far side from us, i.e., his eternal isolation and aseity, than of his forth-proceeding, his *given* Word, his bond in which he has bound himself to historical man, having placed himself at man's disposal. God is not free *of* man but *for* man. Christ is the Word of his freedom. God *is there*, which is to say: not in eternal non-objectivity but ... "haveable," graspable in his Word within the Church.[8]

In James Woelfel's opinion, Bonhoeffer makes this view of divine self-disclosure and self-humilation absolutely central: Christology is the very heart of his theology.

> *Finitum capax infiniti* could well be the theological motto of Bonhoeffer's whole theological development. His writings show him pushing this "material" doctrine of the Incarnation in an ever more concrete direction with creative passion and rigor. Here is the key to Bonhoeffer's whole theological method, including the final "non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts": God is God become man, the man Jesus Christ, and that is all we can concern ourselves with as men. The only majesty, sovereignty, glory, and freedom of God which we know are what he has revealed in Jesus Christ. God is God-turned-toward-man in the Incarnation. He is "haveable," "graspable" in the concrete, historical affairs of men, not "eternal non-objectivity," related to the world only formally and tangentially through bare acts.[9]

Hence Christology likewise determines Bonhoeffer's doctrine of the Church. Drafting the outline of a book shortly before his death, he writes:

> The church is the church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. In particular, our own church will have to take the field against the vices of *hubris*, power-worship, envy, and humbug, as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak of moderation, purity, trust, loyalty, constancy, patience, discipline, humility, contentment, and modesty. It must not under-estimate the importance of human example (which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so important in Paul's teaching); it is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power.[10]

8. Quoted by James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1970), p. 138.
9. James W. Woelfel, *ibid.*, pp. 141-142.
10. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 382-383.

This Christological approach to the whole range of theology and ethics, a complex and dialectical perspective, obviously requires a much fuller treatment than is here being attempted. Yet even this superficial treatment may facilitate a better understanding of Bonhoeffer's more radical ideas. What, specifically, are they?

3.

One is that the world in our twentieth century has come of age. Philosophically and technologically it is now *eine mündige Welt,* a mature or adult world, a world which man can run autonomously without the need of either divine truth or divine grace. It is the stage of human development described by the renowned scientist F. von Weizacker in his book *The World View of Physics* which Bonhoeffer mentions explicitly as one text he had been reading in prison. At this stage of history the God-hypothesis no longer required to account for reality; it functions, therefore, as, in Woelfel's phrase, "an evershrinking stopgap"; and hence too it functions only privatistically in the purely personal and psychic areas of human life. "Every scientist," Weizacker says,

> must certainly set himself the goal of making the hypothesis "God" superfluous in his field. God and the faded, half-religious concepts which have often been substituted for him in recent times, always designate as scientific hypotheses for the explanation of particular facts, only the incomplete points in science, and therefore with the advance of knowledge they find themselves in continuous and dishonourable retreat.[11]

One hears echo of Weizacker in Bonhoeffer's letter of June 8, 1944, addressed to Bethge and smuggled out by a friendly guard.

> Man has learnt to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the "working hypothesis" called "God." In questions of science, art, and ethics this has become an understood thing at which one now hardly dares to tilt. But for the last hundred years or so it has also become increasingly true of religious questions; it is becoming evident that everything gets along without "God"—and, in fact, just as well as before. As in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally, "God" is being pushed more and more out of life, losing more and more ground.[12]

The world come of age, Bonhoeffer realizes, a world that is godless, proves to be nihilistic. It is a world without idols, a world that worships nothing, a world completely devoid of religious illusions, even the inverted religion of Marxism, a world that refuses to bow down before man in an act of self-deification. Bluntly Bonhoeffer declares: "We have experienced too clearly the frailty and invalidity of all things, of all men, and of ourselves for us still to be able to deify them."[13] Yet this world come of age is, as Bonhoeffer sees it, not a world of despair, chaos, and

11. Quoted by James W. Woelfel, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.
12. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.* pp. 325-326.

violence, a world which provides opportunities for evangelism in keeping with the pious dictum, "Man's extremity is God's opportunity." While Bonhoeffer is neither optimistic nor utopian about *ein mundige Welt*, he refuses to deny that a self-sufficient secularism may be creative and healthy, possessing its own virtues and values. Bethge defends him against the charge of a naive over-confidence in the possible achievements of a godless society:

> Bonhoeffer never pointed to an optimistic analysis of man as becoming better and better.... The main notion for Bonhoeffer is "responsibility," the unreversible capability and duty of adults individually to answer the questions of life in their own particular fields and within their own autonomous structures. This includes, to be sure, the joy which follows when human beings grow into their own manhood, but it also includes the integration of historical determinations, guilts, failures, even when they turn childish, immature, or tyrannical.[14]

Whatever one's appraisal of *eine mündige Welt*, Christianity has no option but to adjust its witness gratefully to this emerging phenomenon of Western history. To oppose it in the name of faith, Bonhoeffer warns, is to do faith a grave disservice.

> The attack by Christian apologetic on the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second place ignoble, and in the third place unchristian. Pointless, because it seems to me like an attempt to put a grown-up man back into adolescence, i.e. to make him dependent on things on which he is, in fact, no longer dependent, and thrusting him into problems that are, in fact, no longer problems to him. Ignoble, because it amounts to an attempt to exploit man's weakness for purposes that are alien to him and to which he has not freely assented. Unchristian, because it confuses Christ with one particular stage in man's religiousness, i.e. with a human law.[15]

Not only is opposition to the world's maturity an apologetic blunder: it is likewise proof of spiritual blindness, a failure to perceive God's will and purpose in the course of human affairs:

> We cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do recognize—before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the god before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross.[16]

13. Quoted by Woelfel, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 306, note 49.
15. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 327.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

4.

Another of Bonhoeffer's troubling concepts is that of religionless Christianity. Suppose we set down a major passage which brings out this arresting paradox.

> What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience—and that means the time of religon in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. Even those who honestly describe themselves as "religious" do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by "religious." Our whole nineteen-hundred-year-old Christian preaching and theology rest on the "religious *a priori*" of mankind. "Christianity" has always been a form—perhaps the true form—of "religion." But if one day it becomes clear that this *a priori* does not exist at all, but was a historically conditioned and transient from of human self-expression, and if therefore man becomes radically religionless—and I think that that is already more or less the case (else how is it, for example, that this war, in contrast to all previous ones, is not calling forth any "religious" reaction?)—what does that mean for "Christianity"?[17]

Exactly what, we wonder, does Bonhoeffer have in mind when he refers to religionless Christianity.

One clue is his insistence that he himself is not religious. In an June 1942 letter to Bethge, he expresses a growing disdain for "all religiosity":

> Again and again I am driven to think about my activities which are now concerned so much with the secular field.... I feel the resistance growing in me against all religiosity, sometimes reaching the level of an instinctive horror—surely, this is not good either. Yet I am not a religious nature at all. But all the time I am forced to think of God, of Christ, of genuineness, life, freedom, charity—that matters for me. What causes me uneasiness is just the religious clothing. Do you understand? This is no new concept at all, no new insights, but because I believe an idea will come to burst upon me I let things run and do not offer resistance. In this sense I understand my present activity in the secular sector.[18]

Notice that, despite this vigorously expressed disdain of religion *per se*, Bonhoeffer confesses that "all the time" he is thinking of "God, of Christ, of genuineness, life, freedom, charity," matters which he evidently identifies as non-religious! A year and a half later, in November 1943, he voices an even stronger repugnance for religion.

> Don't be alarmed; I shall not come out of here a *homo religiousus*! On the contrary, my fear and distrust of "religiosity" have become greater than ever here. The fact that the Israelites *never* uttered the

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 279-280.
18. Quoted by Woelfel, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-106.

name of God always makes me think, and I can understand it better as I go on.[19]

This anti-religious attitude, however, exists simultaneously with his own profoundly devout discipline of Scripture reading and prayer, his love of liturgy, particularly hymns, and his sustaining sense of God's presence. Hence the ambiguity of his references to religion is glaringly patent, contradicted, it would seem, by the whole orientation of his life.

That ambiguity lessens, though it by no means completely disappears, when we probe deeper into Bonhoeffer's thinking with respect to this complicated issue. He concurs with the New Testament and Karl Barth in viewing religion as the supreme manifestation of human disobedience and idolatry. For religion is, first, a matter of speculative metaphysics, an attempt, as in German idealism, to deduce a kind of Supreme Being from finite reason, arguing that man with his capacity for God is really one with God in the depths of his psyche. Man is thus elevated to deity, while God is identified with humanity. Religion, so contrued, is a metaphysical affair which devotes itself to an explanation of reality, a matter of hairsplitting and logic-chopping over the nature of whatever is. Secondly, religion is individualistic or privatistic; it concerns itself almost exclusively with inwardness, the subjective, the emotional, and the moralistic. Third, religion, limited as a rule to the "spiritual," the otherworldly, the post-temporal dimensions of human experience, is segmental. It does not embrace the whole man and all of life; it does not demand a total response from its devotees. Fourth, religion tends to be magical, viewing God as a *deus ex machina* Who intervenes in moments of crisis, answering prayer, solving problems, providing miraculous escape-hatches for an elect ingroup. It thus likewise tends to minimize man's responsibility and discourages his self-activity, inculcating a childish dependency hard to distinguish from slavish servility. Finally, religion with its ingroup of the elect invariably fosters an attitude of pharisaic superiority, it assumes an aristocracy of true believers separate from the lost world except for occasional evangelistic forays into that God-forsaken territory. It is this interpretation, then, which motivates Bonhoeffer to affirm that, as a matter of inelectable destiny, "We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more."[20]

Once more, however, we wonder whether we understand such a statement correctly. If religion is ritualistic ecclesiasticism, pietistic world-denial, and an idolatrous ideology which serves as a tool for the preservation of the *status quo*, who will bemoan its obliteration? But if the religious premise is man's need for God self-revealed in Jesus Christ, then no matter now mature man becomes, the disappearance of religion will spell the frustration of human fulfillment.

So, to intensify the ambiguity, there are times when Bonhoeffer acknowledges and praises true religion. After sharing in a service at the

19. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

Riverside Church in New York City, he muses: "Do people not know that one can get on as well, even better, without 'religion'—if only there were not God himself and his Word?"[21] Ah! "God himself and his Word," are here, as with Barth, exempt from the category of religiosity. Perhaps what Bonhoeffer desires, therefore, is reinterpretation of Christianity which will bring it into alignment with God and his Word. He intimates that, at any rate, in setting himself against Rudolf Bultmann's demythologization.

> I expect you remember Bultmann's essay on the demythologization of the New Testament? My view of it today would be, not that he went "too far," as most people thought, but that he didn't go far enough. It's not only the "mythological" concepts, such as miracle, ascension, and so on (which are not in principle separable from the concepts of God, faith, etc.), but "religious" concepts generally, which are problematic. You can't, as Bultmann supposes, separate God and miracle, but you must be able to interpret and proclaim *both* in a "non-religious" sense. Bultmann's approach is fundamentally still a liberal one (i.e. abridging the gospel), whereas I'm trying to think theologically.[22]

And this intimation is reinforced by an apparently unequivocal assertion.

> Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. This will probably be the startingpoint for our "secular interpretation."[23]

Does Bonhoeffer demand, consequently, the religion which the Bible demands, traditional religiosity transformed into true religion by a total human response to God's revelation in Jesus Christ? As he puts it in one of his earlier writings, *Act and Being*:

> It must be plainly said that within the communion of Christ faith takes shape in religion, that therefore religion is here called faith, that, as I look on Christ, I may and must say for my consolation "I believe"—only to add, of course, as I turn to look on myself, "help Thou my unbelief." All praying, all searching for God in his Word, all clinging to his promise, all entreaty for his grace, all hoping in the sight of Christ, while it is still the work of man, it is God-given faith, faith willed by God, wherein by God's mercy he may really be found.[24]

Yet, as later on in prison he ponders the possibility of a religionless

21. Quoted by Woelfel, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
22. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 285.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 361.
24. Quoted by Woelfel, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

Christianity, he has his misgivings:

> In what way are we "religionless-secular" Christians, in what way are we the *ecclesia*, those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favoured, but rather as belonging wholly to the world? In that case Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, really the Lord of the world. But what does that mean? What is the place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation? Does the secret discipline, or alternatively the difference (which I have suggested to you before) between penultimate and ultimate, take on a new importance here?[25]

Does he realize the probable outcome of his ambiguous position? William Kuhns doubts it.

> Bonhoeffer himself hardly perceived the extremes to which his questions would drive him. He probably saw, if somewhat vaguely, that to overthrow the area of "religious understanding" meant to topple the usual manifestations of God to men—in other words, to leave Christians without the older ways of "sensing God." The result was almost inevitable, a recognition of "Christian atheism," a realization that to discover God in nature, in the "unknown" that science stands on the brink of knowing, or in man's deepest failings is not really to discover God at all. Such efforts to perceive God in the "unknown" result in a false and unnecessary religious delusion. A "Christian atheism" would challenge such efforts. Whether Bonhoeffer actually anticipated such a movement there is no way of knowing; the prison letters suggest that the would have welcomed it, provided, of course, it kept the proper christological perspective.[26]

Andre Dumas, on the other hand, is sure that Bonhoeffer would not have sanctioned the extreme conclusions drawn from his writings:

> The expression "the death of God" does not occur as such in Bonhoeffer's writings. He speaks of the world "without God," *etsi Deus non daretur,* using Anselm's expression, where the *etsi* (as though God were not given) is combined with the *coram Deo* (before God) of Lutheran faith. He also speaks of a suffering, powerless God being "pushed out" of the world while preserving the act of his presence in God's annihilation on the cross. If "the death of God" is meant to signify simply his effacement, his withdrawal and his absence, it does not do justice to the fullness of Bonhoeffer's paradoxes, since it would lead either to secularization or mystical silence, both of which are foreign to the Old Testament and therefore to Bonhoeffer himself.[27]

Perhaps Paul Van Buren, William Hamilton, and Thomas J. J. Altizer may very plausibly claim that they are Bonhoeffer's legitimate heirs.

25. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-281.
26. Kuhns, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
27. Dumas, *op. cit.*, p. 191, note 53.

5.

Holy worldliness is still another of Bonhoeffer's controversial concepts as he places in juxtaposition an adjective and a noun which traditional Christianity has struggled to keep hermetically sealed off from each other. In his *Ethics*, for instance, he alludes to what Kuhn calls "a new style of Christian holiness."[28]

> A life in genuine worldliness is possible only through the proclamation of Christ crucified; true worldly living is not possible or real in contradiction to the proclamation or side by side with it, that is to say, in any kind of autonomy of the secular sphere; it is possible only "in, with and under" the proclamation of Christ.[29]

While controversial, this notion of a Christomorphic worldliness is really ambiguous. Bonhoeffer is pleading against the background of his Christology that the natural life, human life here and now, be valued and enjoyed to the full because God shows His valuation of it in Jesus Christ. "Natural life," he argues,

> must not be understood simply as a preliminary to life with Christ. It is only from Christ Himself that it receives its validation. Christ Himself entered into the natural life, and it is only through the incarnation of Christ that the natural life becomes the penultimate which is directed towards the ultimate. Only through the incarnation of Christ do we have the right to call others to the natural life and to live the natural life ourselves.[30]

God's valuation of the present world is dramatically shown again in the resurrection of Jesus Christ which adumbrates the future transformation of existence here and now rather than functioning solely as a guarantee of life beyond the grave. The people who comprise the Christian community, Bonhoeffer declares, do not consider themselves

> superior to the world, but persevere together in the midst of the world, in its depths, in its trivialities and bondages. They persevere because in this kind of existence they now demonstrate their loyalty in their own curious way, and they steadfastly keep their eyes on that strange place in this world where they perceive in utter amazement God's breaking through the curse, his unfathomable "Yes!" to the world. Here at the very center of this dying, disrupted, and desirous world something becomes evident to those who can believe—believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.... It is just in this occurence that the old earth is affirmed and that God is hailed as Lord of the earth.... God's kingdom is the kingdom of the resurrection on earth.[31]

Thus Christians are human beings who do not seek to escape from the much-maligned secular life by a world-denying pietism or mysticism. They are, *per contra* authentically worldly. In Bonhoeffer's words:

> By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties,

28. Kuhns, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
29. Quoted by Kuhns, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
30. Quoted by Woelfel, *op. cit.*, p. 249.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

> problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is *metanoia*; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian (cf. Jer. 45!).[32]

Shocking, then, as it may sound to pious ears, a Biblically informed faith, taking Luther as its paradigm, will use the help of secularity to secure a better Christianity and will use Christianity to secure a better secularity!

> Luther was protesting against a Christianity which was striving for independence and detaching itself from the reality of Christ. He protested with the help of the secular and in the name of a better Christianity. So, too, today, when Christianity is employed as a polemical weapon against the secular, this must be done in the name of a better secularity and above all it must not lead back to a static predominance of the spiritual sphere as an end in itself.[33]

For in the end the Christian aspires merely to be a man, not a saint, not a particular human type, but a man with everything that genuine manhood implies from an incarnational standpoint.

> During the last year or so I've come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but simply a man, as Jesus was a man—in contrast, shall we say, to John the Baptist. I don't mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness, characterized by the discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection. I think Luther lived a this-worldly life in this sense.[34]

And when a Christian lives as a man, loving the earth, loving his neighbors regardless of their secularism, and loving God, his experience is a polyphony.

> What I mean is that God wants us to love him eternally with our whole hearts—not in such a way as to injure or weaken our earthly love, but to provide a kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint.... Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and plain, the couterpoint can be developed to its limits. The two are "undivided and yet distinct," in the words of the Chalcedonian Definition, like Christ in his divine and human natures. May not the attraction and importance of ploypohony in music consist in its being a musical reflection of this Christological fact and therefore of our *vita christiana*?... Only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness and at the same time assure us that nothing calamitous can happen as long as the *cantus firmus* is kept going.[35]

32. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 370.
33. Quoted by Kuhns, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
34. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 369.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 303.

One more passage must be added to round out Bonhoeffer's concept of holy worldliness. For with all of his emphasis on the present life, he does not ignore the world to come. He never allows the temporal to negate the reality of the eternal; neither does he allow the eternal to negate the value of the temporal.

> I believe that we ought so to love and trust God in our *lives*, and in all the good things that he sends us, that when the time comes (but not before!) we may go to him with love, trust, and joy. But, to put it plainly, for a man in his wife's arms to be hankering after the other world is, in mild terms, a piece of bad taste, and not God's will. We ought to find and love God in what he actually gives us; if it pleases him to allow us to enjoy some overwhelming earthly happiness, we mustn't try to be more pious than God himself and allow our happiness to be corrupted by presumption and arrogance, and by unbridled religious fantasy which is never satisfied with what God gives. God will see to it that the man who finds him in his earthly happiness and thanks him for it does not lack reminder that earthly things are transient, that it is good for him to attune his heart to what is eternal, and that sooner or later there will be times when he can say in all sincerity, "I wish I were home." But everything has its time, and the main thing is that we keep step with God, and do not keep pressing on a few steps ahead—nor keep dawdling a step behind. It's presumptuous to have everything at once—matrimonial bliss, the cross, and the heavenly Jerusalem, where they neither marry nor are given in marriage.[36]

If this is holy worldliness, then, please God, may it begin to dominate Christian thought and life.

These three controversial concepts which embody the quintessence of Bonhoeffer's radicalism reveal why he has been a tantalizing problem to his interpreters. As Dumas remarks, he raises questions which he leaves unanswered—or which, to be charitable, he did not live long enough to answer. Correspondingly, these concepts reveal why this paradoxical thinker has exerted so divergent and ambivalent an influence. How appraise justly a theologian whom Christian radicals applaud while evangelical Christians find their piety deepened by his *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*?

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

For Further Study

Among Bonhoeffer's writings the following are essential for a full-orbed understanding of his evolving theology.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (St. James Place, London: Collins, 1963).

Act and Being (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1956).

Christ the Center (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1960).

Ethics (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962).

Life Together (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954).

The Cost of Discipleship (London: SCM Press, 1948).

No Rusty Swords (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1947).

The Way to Freedom (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1966).

Three secondary sources, in addition to those mentioned in the text, are indispensable: Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970), a monumental biography and interpretation by Bonhoeffer's closest friend; Heinrich Ott, *Reality and Faith: The Ideological Legacy of Deitrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), a speculative extrapolation of Bonhoefferian themes in an existential mode; and *World Come of Age,* ed. R. Gregor Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), a collection of the insightful discussions by outstanding scholars.

IV
Paul Tillich

If any one man has decisively shaped the development of contemporary theology, that man is Paul Tillich. Reinhold Niebuhr describes him as "the Origen of our period, seeking to relate the Gospel message to the disciplines of our culture and whole history of culture."[1] Walter M. Horton calls him "one of the principle architects of the new theological structure that has been erected on the ruins of idealistic liberalism."[2] John Herman Randall, Jr., applauds him as "the ablest Protestant theologian of the present day."[3] And eulogistically, Theodore M. Greene sums up the sweep and depth of the herculean work performed by this most "enlightening and therapeutic theologian of our time."

> He analyzes our conscious problems and our unconscious needs more profoundly, and he shows us how these problems can be solved and these needs satisfied more constructively, than any recent or contemporary thinker. His critique of historical Christianity would, if taken seriously, provoke revolutionary changes in the Church and in present-day theology. No less significant is his diagnosis of our secular culture and his affirmative answer to the recurrent question: How can we, with complete integrity, reinterpret religion and, through such reinterpretation, recapture the spiritual and cultural vitality which modern secularism has so largely lost?[4]

In brief, then, the course of contemporary theologizing cannot be understood apart from an understanding of Paul Tillich's massive influence.

The son of a Lutheran minister, he was born on August 20, 1886, in Starzeddel, Germany. His own life, Tillich suggests, can be divided into four periods: (1) the early years until 1900; (2) the pre-war years from 1900 to 1914; (3) the post-war years in Germany from 1914 to 1933; (4) the American years (these ended with his death on October 22, 1965). After serving as an Army chaplain in World War I, Tillich was a professor of philosophy and theology at Berlin, Marburg, Dresden, and Frankfurt. Driven from Germany by the Nazi takeover, he emigrated to the United States at the age of 47, mastered English, and taught successively at Union Theological Seminary, Harvard University, and the University of Chicago.

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation in Tillich's Theology," Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), p. 217.
2. Walter M. Horton, "Tillich's Role in Contemporary Theology," *The Theology of Paul Tillich, op. cit.*, p. 26.
3. John Herman Randall, Jr., "The Ontology of Paul Tillich," *The Theology of Paul Tillich, op. cit.*, p. 161.
4. Theodore M. Greene, "Paul Tillich and Our Secular Culture," *The Theology of Paul Tillich, op. cit.*, p. 50.

1.

Tillich's self-imposed task was to communicate the abiding truth of the Christian message in terms that would be intelligible and challenging to modern culture. Thus in the last chapter of his book, *Theology of Culture,* he asks:

> How shall the message (which is presupposed) be focused for the people of our time? In other words, we are concerned here with the question: *How* can the Gospel be communicated? We are asking: How do we make the message heard and seen, and then either rejected or accepted? The question *cannot* be: How do we communicate the Gospel so that others will accept it? For this there is no method. To communicate the Gospel means putting it before the people so that they are able to decide for or against it.[5]

Effective communication necessitates, as with Bultmann, the removal of "the wrong stumbling block in order to bring people face to face with the right stumbling block and enable them to make a genuine decision."[6] And, of course, the wrong stumbling block is literalistic supernaturalism, blind to the need for a breaking of the Biblical myths and a decoding of the Biblical message. Karl Barth's revelational Christomonism must therefore be repudiated, and, as an option to that updated yet outdated orthodoxy, a new theological structure must be erected which will synthesize human wisdom and experience with Biblical religion, employing the full resources of science, history, literature, art, and depth psychology, as well as classical and modern philosophy, especially the existentialism of Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Tillich's compendious system, Guyton Hammond tells us, discovers and expounds "continuities and relationships among diverse regions of reality and diverse areas of human thought and action," interpreting man's existence synthetically, "as the fulfillment of the drive of nature (indeed of all being) towards individualization and self-relatedness."[7] Leonard Wheat shares Hammond's opinion but speaks much more in detail about "the great synthesis" which as a Halle student Tillich hoped could be effected "between Christianity and liberalism."

> Synthesis—this is the challenge that fires Tillich's imagination. His response, one which could only come from a prodigious imagination, is a four-level synthesis (1) disciplinary, (2) ontological, (3) historical, and (4) personal life. The foundation level is the broad disciplinary synthesis of theology and philosophy. This supports what might loosely be termed an ontological synthesis, which combines the two absolutes, God and being. The ontological synthesis leads to a historical one. It is a merger of theology's eschatological history—Eden, sin, and the Kingdom of God (or salvation)—and the dialectical histories of Hegel and Marx. On this same level are subsidiary syntheses of Eden and

5. Paul Tillich, *The Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 201.
6. *Ibid.,* p. 213.
7. Guyton B. Hammond, *Man in Estrangement* (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 1956), p. 180.

> essence, sin and estrangement (existence), and the Kingdom of God and utopia (Hegel's Germanic monarchy, Marx's world communism, and so on). The top level is a "life" synthesis, in the sense of a personal life. Here the theological story of the Son's going out from and returning to the Father ("separation and return") is correlated with philosophy's dialectical movement of affirmation, negation, and negation of the negation (Yes-No-Yes).[8]

Understandably, then, Tillich chooses to operate "on the boundary" between religion and culture. ("Religion," he writes, "is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion"),[9] theology and philosophy, faith and doubt, Christianity and world religion, Protestantism and Catholicism, American empiricism and European existentialism. Autobiographically, Tillich reflects on his stance of always having a foot in both of two traditionally antagonistic camps.

> The "boundary" concept is an apt symbol for my whole personal and spiritual development. Almost everywhere it has been my fate to stand between two existential possibilities, not entirely at home in either and not able to reject one or the other completely.[10]

Understandably, too, his method is that of correlation, showing how the symbols of the Christian message provide answers to the questions raised by contemporary analyses of the human situation. This method, Tillich explains,

> makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions.... These answers are contained in the revelatory events on which Christianity is based, and they are taken by systematic theology from the sources, through the medium, under the norm. Their content cannot be derived from the questions, that is, from an analysis of human existence.... There is a mutual dependence between questions and answers. In respect of content the Christian answers are dependent on the revelatory events in which they appear; in respect of form they are dependent on the structure of the questions which they answer.[11]

It is his insistence that the answers to man's problems "cannot be derived from the questions, that is, from an analysis of human existence. They are 'spoken' *to* human existence beyond." This, consequently, is the essence of Tillich's method: "The questions of human existence are answered by divine revelation."[12]

Thus (1) the problem of human reason finds its answer in revelation. (2) The problem of being finds its answer in the Christian

8. Leonard E. Wheat, *Paul Tillich's Dialectical Humanism: Unmasking the God above God* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 87, cf. p. 104.
9. Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 57.
10. Quoted by Arne Unhjem, *Dynamics of Doubt, A Preface to Tillich* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 1.
11. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 26-27.
12. *Ibid.,* p. 64.

concept of God. (3) The problem of existence finds its answer in Jesus as the Christ. (4) The problem of life finds its answer in the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit. (5) The problem of history finds its answer in the Christian concept of the Kingdom of God.

2.

Not quite so understandable, however, is another key-element in the Tillichian technique of theological systematization—dialectics, a baptized employment of a thesis/antithesis/synthesis formulation, reminiscent, needless to comment, of Hegel and Marx. The dialectical approach as explicated by Tillich, is this:

> One element of a concept drives to another. Taken in this sense, dialectics determine all life-processes and must be applied in biology, psychology, and sociology. The description of tensions in living organisms, neurotic conflicts, and class struggles is dialectical. Life itself is dialectical. If applied symbolically to the divine life, God as the living God must be described in dialectical statements. He has the character of all life, namely, to go beyond and return to himself.[13]

What is the range of this triadic movement? Tillich holds it to be all-encompassing, a principle which governs reality *en toto.* That is why we encounter this kind of formulation at every turn in Tillich's speculation:

> Affirmation/Negation/Negation of Negation
> Innocence/Sin/Salvation
> Ultimate/Concrete/Concrete Ultimacy
> Heteronomy/Autonomy-Theonomy
> Union/Estrangement-Reunion
> God/Man-Godmanhood
> Supernaturalism/Atheism/God beyond God

Wheat helps us again to penetrate beneath the imposing surface of Tillich's theology and discover its essentials. "Dialectics," he observes,

> is the workhorse of the system. This means the Hegel-Marx dialectics of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, not Barth's nonsequential and unresolved oppositions. Cleverly disguised dialectical formulations permeate every corner of the system. Estrangement is thus identifiable as the antithesis of an ontological dialectic moving from (a) the thesis of *potential* human unity, or essence, to (b) the *actual* separation of man from man, or existence, toward (c) *actualized potentiality,* where man realizes himself as God, and where essence = existence. Again, in the symbolic conglomeration that passes for an analysis of "reason and revelation," everything revolves around the dialectic of union, separation, and reunion. "Subjective reason" (individuals) and "objective reason" (humanity) start out essentially united as "ontological reason" (thesis), then are

13. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 90.

> existentially separated in three "conflicts in reason" (antithesis), and finally are brought back together through the "revelation" that the "depth" of both forms of reason is God (synthesis). The many and the one are merely two sides—human and divine—of the Tillichian God.[14]

Wheat's inventory of the dialectical formulations in this vast system covers page after page in his devastating critique, *Paul Tillich's Dialectical Humanism,* entirely justifying the conclusion that Tillich seems afflicted with an overwhelming passion for dialectics: "Thesis, antithesis, and synthesis permeate his thought."[15] To grasp this fact is to be prepared to discover and keep on discovering that the most intractably irreconcilable antithesis are by some subtle logic amalgamated with one another in this all-inclusive synthesis.

3.

We are now ready to sketch Tillich's profoundly original reiterpretation of the Christian message—and only a sketch is here possible like a simple pencil drawing that intimates the grandeur of a Rocky Mountain landscape without aspiring to recreate its heights and vastnesses.

Man, as the being who wonders about Being, must be our starting-point, man the questioner who seeks answers to the mystery of his own being. Tillich argues, accordingly, that man occupies

> a pre-eminent position in ontology, not as an outstanding object among other objects, but as that being who asks the ontological question and in whose self-awareness the ontological answer can be found. The old tradition—expressed equally by mythology and mysticism, by poetry and metaphysics—that the principles which constitute the universe must be sought in man is indirectly and involuntarily confirmed, even by the behavioristic self-restriction. "Philosophers of life" and "Existentialists" have reminded us in our time of this truth on which ontology depends.[16]

Man, the being who inquires concerning the mystery of his own being and all being, experiences the unconditional, the holy, the absolute. In so affirming, Tillich is following Rudolph Otto with his stress on the *mysterium tremendum* as *sui generis,* incapable of subsumption under any other category. Tillich, therefore, postulates this ontological principle as basic to the philosophy of religion: *"Man is immediately aware of something unconditional which is the prius of the separation and interaction of subject and object, theoretically as well as practically."*[17]

Man's awareness of "something unconditional" has a concomitant and inescapable corollary, the experience of ultimate concern or "unconditional demand." Out of this springs those concerns which are unique to human experience:

14. Wheat, *op. cit.,* pp. 189-190.
15. *Ibid.,* p. 192.
16. Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. I., p. 24.
17. Tillich, *Theology of Culture, op. cit.,* p. 22.

> Man, like every living being, is concerned about many things, above all about those which condition his very existence, such as food and shelter. But man, in contrast to other living beings, has spiritual concerns—cognitive, aesthetic, social, political. Some of them are urgent, often extremely urgent, and each of them as well as the vital concerns can claim ultimacy for a human life or the life of a social group. If it claims ultimacy, it demands the total surrender of him who accepts this claim and it promises total fulfillment even if all other claims have to be subjected to it or rejected in its name....it is also the promise of ultimate fulfillment which is accepted in the act of faith. The content of this promise is not necessarily defined. It can be expressed in indefinite symbols or in concrete symbols which cannot be taken literally, like the "greatness" of one's nation in which one participates even if one has died for it, or the conquest of mankind by the "saving race," etc. In each of these cases it is "ultimate fulfillment" that is promised, and it is exclusion from such fulfillment which is threatened if the unconditional demand is not obeyed.[18]

The concept of ultimate concern Tillich regards as an abstract translation of Mark 12:29, the command highlighted by Jesus; and this concept, Tillich affirms, "transcends the cleavage between subjectivity and objectivity."[19] It is the negative and formal principle of his entire theology, paralleled by the positive and material principle of the New Being.

4.

But ultimate concern, the "dominating center" of personal life, implies God. Indeed, Tillich informs us that "the fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern is God." Again, defining faith as "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern," he goes on to remark that "God is the name for the content of the concern."[20]

If God is to be known, however, revelation is imperative. But the concept of revelation like all other aspects of theology, Tillich charges, has been grossly misunderstood and distorted by traditional Protestantism. In its most elementary definition, "revelation is the manifestation of what concerns us ultimately....the manifestation of the depth of reason and the ground of being." It points, rather, to the reality which underlies all human experience. Thus it is not a matter of words and propositions but of events which break into human existence and disclose ultimate being. Discussing "the many words from the Lord which are recorded in the Old Testament," Tillich reduces them to revelatory events.

> They are not promises of an omnipotent ruler replacing political or military strength. They are not lessons handed down by an

18. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1957), pp. 1-2.
19. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, p. 12.
20. Cf. Wheat, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115.

> omniscient teacher, replacing sound judgments. They are not advices of a heavenly counselor, replacing intelligent human counsel. But they are manifestations of something ultimate breaking into our existence.

At all costs, then, revelation must not be identified with the very words of Scripture. Even and especially in the case of the final revelation in Jesus as the Christ, there lurks the danger of that identification. But "if *Jesus as the Christ* is called the Logos, Logos *points to a revelatory reality, not to revelatory words....* Taken seriously, the doctrine of the Logos prevents the elaboration of *a theology of the spoken or the written word, which is the Protestant pitfall.*"[21]

Not limited to words, revelation is not limited, either, to the Hebrew-Christian Scripture. On the contrary, since everything participates in being, everything can serve as a medium of revelation. According to Dr. Bernard Martin,

> Revelation occurs when anything becomes transparent to its own depth, to being-itself as distinguished from the structure of being. Natural objects, historical events, groups, and individual persons—all have been, and may be, media of revelation.... Nothing, however—neither natural objects nor historical events nor groups nor persons nor words—can be a medium of revelation unless it appears in a "miraculous" constellation which shakes the mind and serves as a sign-event, and unless it is existentially received in a state of ecstasy.[22]

Neither is revelation limited to any one religion. It occurs in all religion; it likewise occurs apart from religion. "Prophetic criticism, and promise," Tillich avers, "are active in the whole history of the church.... They are active in religious revolutions and foundations outside Christianity, as in the religion of Zoroaster, in some of the Greek mysteries, in Islam, and in many smaller reform movements."[23] Disclosing as it does the very ground of being, revelation comes necessarily in symbols and myths which Tillich actually refers to as "the center of my theological doctrine of knowledge." Tillich, therefore, admits that "no definition of the contents of revelation is possible." He adds, similarly, that "the revelation is *not* definitely definable, although the one pole of the revelatory correlation—namely, Jesus as the Christ—is final, definite, and beyond change."[24] So where does this leave us? We are left wandering in a semantic bog without a revelation that imparts definable doctrine. For Martin discerns that the so-called divine revelation of God is

> in no sense supernatural. Both "ecstasy" and "miracle" are natural events. Events which are called miracles are extraordinary only in

21. Quoted by R. Allan Killen, *The Ontological Theology of Paul Tillich* (Kampen, Holland: J. H. Kok, 1956), pp. 64-68.
22. Bernard Martin, *Paul Tillich's Doctrine of Man* (Digwell Place, Welwyn, Herts: James Nisbet and Company Limited, 1966), p. 63.
23. Quoted by Killen, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
24. Paul Tillich, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," Kegley and Bretal, *op. cit.*, pp. 332-333.

> the sense of being experienced as particularly weighted with the sense of the depth and mystery of existence.

And Martin adds that what we have in the end is

> nothing more than symbols and rites and myths; and since we are given no clear-cut criteria by which to distinguish the true (or valid) among these from their opposites, how can we know with certainty that those of the Christian revelation are among the former?[25]

Assuming, nevertheless, that God, the ultimate concern behind and beyond other idolatrously absolutized concerns, breaks through in revelatory event, what is disclosed concerning the nature of the unconditioned Being? One fact stands out in blinding clarity. God is certainly not the God of traditional theism, that one-sided and lopsided concept which "must be transcended."

> The God of theological theism is a being beside others and as such a part of the whole of reality.... But every statement subjects him to them. He is seen as a self which has a world, an ego which is related to a thou, a cause which is separated from its effect, as having a definite space and an endless time. He is being, not being-itself. As such he is bound to a subject-object structure of reality; he is an object for us as subjects.[26]

Not a being *per se*, "God is being-itself," Tillich contends, the "God above God,"

> the basic and universal symbol for what concerns us ultimately.... Everything we say about being-itself, the ground and abyss of being, must be symbolic.... Therefore it cannot be used in its literal sense. To say anything about God in the literal sense of the words used means to say something false about Him. The symbolic ... is the only true way of speaking about God.[27]

Thus aside from this one nonsymbolic statement, "God is being-itself," every statement about God must be symbolic. But symbols, obviously, must be interpreted and deliteralized courageously. The symbol of person, for instance, is permissible with respect to God; it is, in fact, indispensible. Yet this symbol can easily be misconstrued and degraded into a gross anthropomorphism.

> The concept of a "Personal God," interfering with natural events, makes God a natural object besides others, an object among objects, a being among beings, maybe the highest, but nevertheless *a* being. This, indeed, is the destruction, not only of the physical system, but even more the destruction of any meaningful idea of God. It is the impure mixture of mythological elements (which are justified in their place, namely, in the concrete religious life) and of rational elements (which *are* justified in their place, namely, in the theological interpretation of religious experience). No criticism of this distorted idea of God can be sharp enough.[28]

25. Martin, *op. cit.*, pp. 74, 77.
26. Tillich, *The Protestant Era, op. cit.*, pp. 184-185.
27. Quoted by Wheat, *op cit.*, p. 39.
28. Tillich, *Theology of Culture, op. cit.*, p. 130.

God, furthermore, as being-itself, transcends the being/non-being dichotomy, dialectically embracing and conquering non-being.

> If one is asked how nonbeing is related to being-itself, one can only answer metaphorically: being "embraces" itself and nonbeing. Being has nonbeing "within" itself as that which is eternally present and eternally overcome in the process of the divine life. The ground of everything that is, is not a dead identity without movement and becoming; it is living creativity. Creatively it affirms itself, eternally conquering its own nonbeing.[29]

Hence in view of God's indefineable and dialectical nature as being-itself, to speak of his existence is to indulge in absurdity. As being-itself, "God does not exist. He is beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists," Tillich dogmatizes, "is to deny him."[30] In Tillich's opinion, "a God about whose existence or non-existence you can argue is a thing beside others within the universe of existing things."[31] Regardless, then, of how heretical it may sound, the statement that God does not exist is both warranted and required.

Whatever else may be said concerning Tillich's view of God, it is plainly a repudiation of what that name has historically denoted. Tillich, who avows that "the antisupernaturalistic attitude" is fundamental to all his thinking, sets himself unequivocally to the destruction of the traditional concept.

> Self-transcending realism requires the criticism of *all* forms of supra-naturalism—supra-naturalism in the sense of a theology that imagines a supra-natural world beside or above the natural one, a world in which the unconditional finds a local habitation, thus making God a transcendent object, the creation an act at the beginning of time, the consummation a future state of things. To criticize such a *conditioning of the unconditional,* even if it leads to atheistic consequences, is more religious, because it is more aware of the *unconditional character of the divine,* than a theism that bans God into the supra-natural realm.[32]

5.

Tillich's desupernaturalized concept of God dovetails with his reinterpretation of Christology. The revelation and the salvation mediated by Jesus as the Christ are possible because of "an eternal unity of God and man within the divine life."[33] But this unity was compromised, not dissolved (as if indeed it could be!) by sin; for sin, if we may "use a concept which everybody understands," is "estrangement from oneself, from the other man, from the ground out of which we come and to which we go."[34]

29. Hammond, *op. cit.,* p. 99.
30. Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. I, p. 205.
31. Tillich, *Theology of Culture, op. cit.,* p. 5.
32. Quoted by Wheat, *op. cit.,* p. 38.
33. Quoted by Hammond, *op. cit.,* p. 137.
34. Tillich, *Theology of Culture, op. cit.,* p. 210.

The man Jesus, however, remaining transparent or open to being-itself, did not succumb to the estranging forces of human existence. He rose above the alienating contradictions which are, with his exception, the common experience of humanity: he somehow maintained an unbroken oneness with God. Tillich dwells at length, consequently, on the victory of Jesus over all negativities—concupiscence, unbelief, *hubris,* even death. Maintaining unbroken his unity with God, Jesus also maintained unbroken his unity with man.

> His loneliness and his frustrated attempts to be received by those to whom he came do not suddenly end in a final success; they are taken into the divine acceptance of that which rejects God, into the vertical line of the uniting love which is effective where the horizontal line from being to being is barred. Out of his unity with God he has unity with those who are separated from him and from one another by finite self-relatedness and existential self-seclusion.[35]

Thus, as Tillich interprets or actually re-interprets the Gospel,

> The New Being is manifest in the Christ because in Him the separation never overcame the unity between Him and God, between Him and mankind, and between Him and Himself.... In Him we look at a human life that maintained the union in spite of everything that drove Him into separation.[36]

Tillich reiterates and elaborates this interpretation in his *Systematic Theology* where Jesus as the Christ, the symbol of New Being, becomes the positive and material principle of the Tillichian system:

> In all its concrete details the biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ confirms his character as the bearer of the New Being or as the one in whom the conflict between the essential unity of God and man and man's existential estrangement is overcome. Point by point, not only in the Gospel records but also in the Epistles, this picture of Jesus as the Christ contradicts the marks of estrangement which we have elaborated in the analysis of man's existential predicament.[37]

Notice, though, that it is the *picture* of Jesus *as the Christ* which is revelatory and salvific. And this picture, Tillich contends, is "the concrete absolute" which furnishes us with the final revelation.

> The paradoxical Christian claim is that this picture has unconditional and universal validity, that it is not subject to the attacks of positivistic or cynical relativism, that it is not absolutistic, whether in the traditional or the revolutionary sense, and that it cannot be achieved either by the critical or by the pragmatic compromise. It is unique and beyond all these conflicting elements and methods of existential reason.[38]

Yet Tillich admits that the historicity of Jesus is extremely dubious. He does not hesitate, as a matter of fact, to impugn the veracity of almost

35. Quoted by Hammond, *op. cit.,* p. 165.
36. Quoted by Wheat, *op. cit.,* p. 178.
37. Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. II, pp. 125-126.
38. Quoted by Martin, *op. cit.,* p. 67.

the entire Gospel record.

> The only factual element in it having the immediate certainty of faith is the surrender of him who is called the Christ to the ultimate consequence of existence, namely, death under the conditions of estrangement. Everything else is a matter of historical probability, elaborated out of legendary interpretation.[39]

How final, then, is this picture, the historicity of what Tillich elsewhere confesses to be "a very faint probability"?[40] Evidently the historicity of Jesus does not constitute a life-and-death problem for Tillich. He relates that in 1911, after interacting with Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus,* he read a paper to a group of theological friends in which, to quote his own words,

> I raised and attempted to answer the question, how the Christian doctrine might be understood, if the non-existence of the historical Jesus should become historically probable. Even today I maintain the radicalness of this question over against compromises, which I encountered at an earlier time, and are now attempted again by Emil Brunner. The foundation of Christian belief is not the historical Jesus, but the biblical picture of Christ.[41]

So Martin is right in asking whether this historically vague and debatable picture of Jesus as the Christ, a picture which fails to include many major elements of the New Testament account, entitles us to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the New Being, "the ultimate criterion of every healing and saving process"? Martin's conclusion seems irrefutable.

> Surely, this is nothing more than an existential commitment of a Christian theologian. Those uncommitted to the Christian revelation as Tillich defines it might find equal saving power in the contemplation of the life and death of a Socrates, a Rabbi Akiba, or a Mahatma Gandhi—to mention only a few.[42]

6.

Many other areas of Tillich's theology ought to be explored in depth: his views of the Trinity, man, demonism, *chronos* and *karios*, symbolism, deliteralizing, a term which he prefers to demythologizing, his argument that justification applies to doubt no less than sin, and his denial of absolute truth in the name of the Protestant principle.

But enough of his theologizing has been presented to make any student of this system appreciate the relevance of Nels Ferré's probing criticism:

> Tillich, to be sure, uses both the words "transcendent" and "transcendental," but his consistent stress on (1) there being no Being above or besides other beings, (2) his doctrine of eternity as the unification and purification of meaning, (3) his declaration

39. Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 166.
40. Quoted by Killen, *op. cit.*, p. 151.
41. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 197, n. 17.
42. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

> that, regardless of historic, explanatory power, love is finally indefinable, and (4) his total stress on symbolism in relation to being and the abyss makes questionable any genuine Christian doctrine of incarnation. This is certainly true in the classic Christian sense of (1) a supernaturally transcendent realm of being, (2) a genuine creation from beyond this cosmic realm, and (3) a goal-centered historical process with personal destinies beyond physical death, into which the incarnation came as its center of meaning, judgment, and salvation.[43]

And Ferré proceeds to ask some very searching questions which strike at the heart of Tillich's great synthesis, exposing its irreconcilability with Biblical faith.

> If Tillich can be counted ontologically as thoroughly within the Christian perspective, he must be ranked as one of our greatest Christian thinkers. Unfortunately, there are grave doubts on this point.... Does he actually operate within the transcendental perspective, rather than within the transcendent? His refusal to accept the great, immemorial Christian perspective of supernaturalism at least seems to convince us of this, whatever his use of occasional words may be. Is God *in fact,* the Creator of process, *and in this sense,* above, before, and behind it? Is He personal Spirit in the sense of a separate consciousness and an eternal being, beyond all created beings, and therefore other than and beside all else, however different in kind? Is supernaturalism, *defined in this sense,* to be taken as normative, including secondarily all truths of naturalism, or are both to be transcended in terms of some formal realm of meaning, or in terms of some relation of being and the abyss to which we can refer finally only in terms of myth and symbol?[44]

An impressive intellectual achievement, this correlation of theology and philosophy gives us a concept of God which has no relationship except in the name with the living God of the Bible: Tillich's God is a God to whom we cannot pray and with whom we cannot fellowship. We cannot, in fact, even properly allude to being-itself as He, since being-itself lies beyond all predication. This system, which rules out Biblical trinitarianism, rules out as well a veritable incarnation, advancing a Christology which is a peculiar species of adoptionism. Since it postulates no historical fall and equates sin with estrangement rather than rebellion, its soteriology ignores a substitutionary sacrifice which obtains the sinner's justification. This system transforms unbelievers into unconscious believers by imputing to every human being some ultimate concern. It places no more value on faith than it does on doubt since being-itself embraces all men equally, accepting them though they are unacceptable. It repudiates on the ground of Tillich's Protestant principle any claim to absolute truth and offers us a deliteralized Bible which, instead of supplying revelational data that can be propositionally

43. Nels F. S. Ferré, "Tillich's View of the Church," Kegley and Bretal, *op. cit.,* p. 251.
44. *Ibid.,* p. 266.

formulated, turns out to be a farrago of symbols and myths. This system holds out no prospect of personal immortality and so brings us to death with the same bleak hopelessness that marked Tillich's own end. His wife Hannah relates that in the hospital, as he was terminally ill,

> He wanted to know what happens to his centered self after death; there would be no memory of his person as a person. I tried to tell him that his thought-images would be there, that his thoughts, having changed the substance of our cosmos, would enter the circle of the spiritual powers, which created the images of the world. He spoke about the Tibetan Book of the Dead. "Go after the clear light," I said, "the clear light will guide you, not any self-centered immortality." We talked about the Buddha powers which have the same spiritual unity—if you look through a many faceted crystal you seem to see many Buddha images, but if you forgo the crystal, there is one Buddha spirit and as much as you are the spirit you will be joined with it.[45]

Her comment, as she reflects upon his death, is this:

> I had not brought anything to the hospital since he had been ill, except his Bibles—a small Greek New Testament, a German Bible, which had been his from his first year of life, and an English version. I had hoped to read from the Bible to him when he became restless, if he wished me to, but he had only touched the Greek version with his frail hand. He did not wish to see the other Bibles or to have the Bible read to him. I was glad. He belonged to the world, to the cosmos, not to one book.[46]

With no presumptuous intention of exercising God's prerogative of judgment, we seem entitled to conclude that Tillich does not, for all his eminence, belong to the faith set forth in that one Book, the Bible. His great synthesis has been variously designated a system of gnosticism, naturalism, pantheism, and atheism, and all these designations are more or less accurate. Thus Wheat is surely justified in arguing that

> No matter what the theological and philosophical inputs at each level, the output—Tillich's synthesis—is always humanism. T + P = H is the rigid formula.... Here is Tillich's thought in a nutshell. He who frees himself from the tyranny of the false God, the God of theism, finds God in man.[47]

Assume the correctness of Wheat's assessment and the pieces of the Tillichian puzzle fall into place—only the pattern which emerges is not that of Christian supernaturalism. Tillich, therefore, "through his attacks on the God of theism helped prepare the way for a later generation of theologians" and also "undoubtedly helped nourish the God is Dead theology."[48]

45. Hannah Tillich, *From Time to Time* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), p. 222.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
47. Wheat, *op. cit.*, pp. 87, 111.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 269.

For Further Study

The *summa* of Tillich's thought is his three-volume *Systematic Theology,* published by the University of Chicago Press in 1951, 1957, and 1963 successively. This, together with his *A Complete History of Christian Thought,* Carl E. Braaten, ed., (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1968) will furnish practically all the materials required for an adequate grasp of Tillich's Christianized ontology. But some of his shorter works cannot be ignored:

The Religious Situation (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932).

The Courage to Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955).

The Eternal Now (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

Morality and Beyond (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963).

Of value, also, are the essays published posthumously in *The Future of Religions,* Jerald C. Brauer, ed., (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966). Both interesting and revealing is the record of interchanges with student questioners in D. Mackenzie Brown, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965). Interpretative perspectives are brought together by Walter Leibrecht in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1959).

The chief secondary sources are mentioned and criticized by Leonard F. Wheat.