

**TO BE OR NOT TO BE RELIGIOUS:  
A CLARIFICATION OF KARL BARTH'S AND DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S  
DIVERGENCE AND CONVERGENCE REGARDING RELIGION**

*Joshua P. Steele*

**INTRODUCTION**

Christian theologians Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) inherited a particular understanding of religion. In the broadly post-Kantian milieu, nineteenth-century thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, and Adolf von Harnack defined religion essentially, anthropologically, and subjectively. That is, religion has a particular essence, and is in some manner inalienable from our humanity. The emphasis of this conception is on the experience of the religious subject, instead of the knowledge of religion's object (let alone its reality).<sup>1</sup> It is this notion of religion that both Barth and Bonhoeffer challenged.

However, despite the challenge they issued to their shared intellectual heritage, Barth and Bonhoeffer appear to diverge on both the definition and, therefore, the critique of religion – at least during the stage of Bonhoeffer's 1943-45 imprisonment. While Barth unleashed a thoroughgoing theological critique of religion as faithlessness [*Unglaube*], he also insisted that humans were always and unavoidably religious.<sup>2</sup> Barth maintained that, despite the liabilities of religion, we cannot and should not be religionless because we are not truly godless.<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer,

---

<sup>1</sup> See Christine Axt-Piscalar, "Liberal Theology in Germany," in *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, ed. David Fergusson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 468–85; Ernst Feil et al., "Religion," in *Religion Past and Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, vol. 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 31–55; James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2006). This is a new translation of §17 in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 280–361. Henceforth, all references to the *Church Dogmatics* will appear in the following form: CD I/1, 1.

<sup>3</sup> CD IV/1, 483.

however, spoke in 1944-45 of a desirably “religionless Christianity.”<sup>4</sup> This, despite the fact that he ostensibly intended to carry forward Barth’s theological critique of religion – which was, in Bonhoeffer’s opinion, Barth’s “greatest merit” as a theologian.<sup>5</sup>

Whether Barth and Bonhoeffer share a common theological critique of religion has been subject to intense scholarly debate. To answer this question, we need first to ask another: What did Barth and Bonhoeffer mean by the term “religion”? I propose that, although Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s *definitions* of religion diverge, their *critiques* of religion converge. Barth developed a systematic/dialectical concept of religion as self-justification, which the early Bonhoeffer inherited. However, in prison, Bonhoeffer developed a historical/psychological definition of religion as an inward and partial approach to human life. We must realize that these are two different definitions of religion, lest we compare apples to oranges, as it were, and conclude that Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s critiques of religion also diverged.

Once we realize the divergent definitions, we can see the convergent critiques of a particular essence of religion: the self-justifying projection of a deity – a projection which calls for theological analysis. That is, for both Barth and Bonhoeffer, at the heart of “religion” is the impulse to posit and make room for a “God,” in order to secure our own identities by means of and over against this deity. Although religion, thus understood, is inescapable, it is not constitutive of our humanity.

Although scholars have proposed several explanations of Barth and Bonhoeffer’s theological divergence, the precise differences in their definitions of religion have received relatively little recent attention. Therefore, after providing a brief survey of the main

---

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al., DBWE 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 361–67.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.

explanations of divergence in the Barth-Bonhoeffer relationship, I will examine their divergent definitions of religion in order to clarify their differences and offer a brief sketch of their convergent critiques of religion.

### **PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN BARTH AND BONHOEFFER'S DIVERGENCES**

The secondary literature on the Barth-Bonhoeffer relationship has tended to fall into predictable ruts in its various attempts to disentangle and differentiate the two thinkers, especially when it comes to the theological critique of religion.<sup>6</sup> However, although the literature is vast, the divergent definitions of religion have not been attended to sufficiently. The most recent study on the relationship between Barth and Bonhoeffer – specifically related to the nature of faith – is by Edward van 't Slot.<sup>7</sup> Focusing on the relationship between Bonhoeffer's early criticism of Barth

---

<sup>6</sup> Note that these “ruts” do not necessarily apply to works on either Barth or Bonhoeffer and religion. Works addressing Barth and religion include: Barth, *On Religion*; Matthew Myer Boulton, *God Against Religion: Rethinking Christian Theology Through Worship*, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 25–62; Joseph A. DiNoia, O.P., “Religion and the Religions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 243–57; Sven Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology as a Resource for a Christian Theology of Religions*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology (New York: T&T Clark, 2014); Garrett Green, “Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth's Theory of Religion,” *The Journal of Religion* 75, no. 4 (October 1995): 473–86, doi:10.1086/489678; Tom Greggs, “Bringing Barth's Critique of Religion to the Inter-Faith Table,” *The Journal of Religion* 88, no. 1 (January 2008): 75–94; Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 15–38; Geoff Thompson, “Religious Diversity, Christian Doctrine and Karl Barth,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 1 (January 2006): 3–24.

Works addressing Bonhoeffer and religion include: Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 99–202; Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, Revised (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 247–99; Jeffrey C. Pugh, *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Times* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2008); Peter Selby, “Christianity in a World Come of Age,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 226–45; Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); “The Influence of Wilhelm Dilthey on Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison,” in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. Peter Frick, vol. 29, Religion in Philosophy and Theology (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 167–73; Ralf K. Wüstenberg, “Philosophical Influences on Bonhoeffer's ‘Religionless Christianity,’” in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*, ed. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ Press, 2009), 137–55.

<sup>7</sup> Edward van 't Slot, *Negativism of Revelation?: Bonhoeffer and Barth on Faith and Actualism*, Dogmatik in Der Moderne 12 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

in his second dissertation, *Act and Being* (written in 1929-30),<sup>8</sup> and his later criticism (1944) in the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Slot lists twenty-four relevant studies on the Barth-Bonhoeffer relationship. They range from John Godsey's 1958 doctoral dissertation (supervised by Karl Barth) to Michael DeJonge's 2012 study, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation*.<sup>9</sup> To this

---

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt, DBWE 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> These are:

1. John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960).
  2. Franklin Sherman, "Act and Being," in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: Association Press, 1962), 83–111.
  3. J. Theo Witvliet, "Bonhoeffer's Dialog Met Karl Barth," *Kerk En Theologie* 16 (1965): 301–21.
  4. Benkt-Erik Benktson, *Christus Und Die Religion: Der Religionsbegriff Bei Barth, Bonhoeffer Und Tillich*, Arbeiten Zur Theologie, II/9 (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1967).
  5. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, Revised (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1967).
  6. Rainer Mayer, *Christuswirklichkeit: Grundlagen, Entwicklungen Und Konsequenzen Der Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers.*, Arbeiten Zur Theologie, II/15 (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1969).
  7. James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970).
  8. Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. German original was published in 1971. ET in 1985.
  9. Green, *Bonhoeffer*. First edition was published in 1972. Second, revised edition was published in 1999.
  10. Paul L. Lehmann, "The Concreteness of Theology: Reflections on the Conversation between Barth and Bonhoeffer," in *Footnotes to a Theology: The Karl Barth Colloquium of 1972*, ed. Martin Rumscheidt (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1974), 53–76.
  11. Michael Beintker, "Kontingenz und Gegenständlichkeit: Zu Bonhoeffers Barth-Kritik in 'Akt und Sein,'" in *Krisis und Gnade: Gesammelte Studien zu Karl Barth*, ed. Stefan Holtmann and Peter Zoicher (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 29–54. First published in 1985.
  12. John D. Godsey, "Barth and Bonhoeffer: The Basic Difference," *Quarterly Review* 7, no. 1 (1987): 9–27.
  13. Hans-Richard Reuter, "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition," in *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, DBWE 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 162–83. First published in 1988.
  14. Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). German original published in 1989.
- Followed by Andreas Pangritz, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 'Within, Not Outside, the Barthian Movement,'" in *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. Peter Frick, vol. 29, Religion in Philosophy and Theology (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 245–82.
15. Hans-Jürgen Abromeit, *Das Geheimnis Christi: Dietrich Bonhoeffers erfahrungsbezogene Christologie*, Neukirchener Beiträge zur systematischen Theologie 8 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991).
  16. Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
  17. Christiane Tietz-Steiding, *Bonhoeffers Kritik Der Verkrümmten Vernunft: Eine Erkenntnistheoretische Untersuchung*, Beiträge Zur Historischen Theologie 12 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

extensive list, I would add essays by James Burtness,<sup>10</sup> Clifford Green,<sup>11</sup> Tom Greggs,<sup>12</sup> Matthew Puffer,<sup>13</sup> and Ralf Wüstenberg.<sup>14</sup> Even then, the literature which mentions both Barth and Bonhoeffer exceeds the grasp of even the most comprehensive of bibliographies – for most books on the latter theologian will at least mention the former in passing.

To get a grasp, then, on the contours of the secondary debates, it is necessary first to simplify things a bit. Three main issues that serve as useful lenses are (1) actualism vs. concrete continuity, (2) Lutheran vs. Reformed, and (3) the “positivism of revelation.”

### **Barth’s Actualism vs. Bonhoeffer’s Concrete Continuity**

As Slot notes, there is a reasonable amount of consensus regarding Bonhoeffer’s early criticism of Barth in *Act and Being*: Bonhoeffer claims that Barth’s approach to human faith and divine

---

18. Jürgen Boomgaarden, *Das Verständnis der Wirklichkeit: Dietrich Bonhoeffers systematische Theologie und ihr philosophischer Hintergrund in “Akt und Sein”* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999).

19. Barend Kamphuis, *Boven En Beneden: Het Uitgangspunt van de Christologie En de Problematiek van de Openbaring Nagegaan Aan de Hand van de Ontwikkelingen Bij Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer En Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Kampen: Kok, 1999).

20. Tomi Karttunen, *Die Polyphonie Der Wirklichkeit: Erkenntnistheorie Und Ontologie in Der Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers*, University of Joensuu Publications in Theology 11 (Joensuu: University of Joensuu, 2004).

21. Franz Eichinger, “Zwischen Transzendentalphilosophie und Ontologie: Zur kritisch-systematischen Standortbestimmung der Theologie beim frühen Bonhoeffer,” in *Vernunftfähiger – vernunftbedürftiger Glaube: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Johann Reikerstorfer*, ed. Kurt Appel, Wolfgang Treitler, and Peter Zeillinger, Religion - Kultur - Recht 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), 65–86.

22. Wolf Krötke, *Barmen - Barth - Bonhoeffer: Beiträge Zu Einer Zeitgemäßen Christozentrischen Theologie*, Unio Und Confessio 26 (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 2009).

23. Greggs, *Theology Against Religion*. Published in 2011.

24. Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> James H. Burtness, “As Though God Were Not Given: Barth, Bonhoeffer, and the *Finitum Capax Infiniti*,” *Dialog* 19, no. 4 (1980): 249–55.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford J. Green, “Trinity and Christology in Bonhoeffer and Barth,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 60, no. 1–2 (2006): 1–22.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Greggs, “The Influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Karl Barth,” in *Engaging Bonhoeffer: The Impact and Influence and Impact of Bonhoeffer’s Life and Thought*, ed. Matthew Kirkpatrick (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Puffer, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Theology of Karl Barth,” in *Karl Barth in Conversation*, ed. W. Travis McMaken and David W. Congdon (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 46–62.

<sup>14</sup> Wüstenberg, “Philosophical Influences on Bonhoeffer’s ‘Religionless Christianity.’”

revelation is too “actualist” – at the expense of the continuity and concrete historicity of both.<sup>15</sup> The relationship between God and the world, for Barth, takes on the character of divine lightning strikes. Humans never have the ability to take revelation for granted. Bonhoeffer claims that this actualism threatens to destroy the concrete, continuous, historical relationship between God and the world – a relationship grounded upon the Incarnation.

Bonhoeffer was worried specifically about the ethical and ecclesiological consequences of Barth’s actualism. Without a theologically-grounded continuity for “knowledge of self and of God,” theology is “destined to remain essentially profane; it can only, in each event, stand ‘under God’s blessing’ (thus Barth).”<sup>16</sup> But Bonhoeffer insists that this actualism rests upon a flawed, overly-formalized notion of God’s freedom. Given how God has *actually* deployed his freedom in Christ, “God is free not from human beings but for them. Christ is the word of God’s freedom. God *is* present, that is, not in eternal nonobjectivity but – to put it quite provisionally for now – ‘haveable,’ graspable in the Word within the church.”<sup>17</sup> The concrete and continuous relationship between God and humanity in the Christian community of faith is, for Bonhoeffer, more ethically fertile ground than the actualistic lightning strikes that he saw in Barth’s theology.

This said, there is little agreement on whether or not this critique was justified, or carried through the prison writings.<sup>18</sup> Did Barth’s thoroughgoing “Christological concentration,” especially in the later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, answer Bonhoeffer’s objections? In prison, did Bonhoeffer continue or abandon his earlier critiques? It depends on whom one asks.

### **Reformed Barth vs. Lutheran Bonhoeffer**

---

<sup>15</sup> Slot, *Negativism of Revelation?*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 90–91.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 90–91.

<sup>18</sup> Slot, *Negativism of Revelation?*, 27–28.

There is even less agreement on the role of confessional differences – between Bonhoeffer as Lutheran and Barth as Reformed – and the corresponding differences between “the finite being ‘capable’ (*capax*) or not ‘capable’ (*incapax*) with regard to the infinite.”<sup>19</sup> Although scholars such as Woelfel and Abromeit have suggested that “Bonhoeffer’s discussion with Barth can be summarized in his – alleged – defense of the ‘Lutheran’ *capax* against a rigorously dialectic application of a ‘Calvinist’ *incapax*,” Slot argues persuasively that “Bonhoeffer stresses that the words *capax* and *incapax* are to be spoken of in the appropriate context: *incapax* if there is a danger of ‘objectification’ of revelation; but *capax* when doubt causes faith and revelation to evaporate.”<sup>20</sup> In Barthian fashion, therefore, Bonhoeffer preserves both the transcendence and reliability of divine revelation.

However, DeJonge argues that the Lutheran/Reformed distinction can indeed be helpful in interpreting the Barth-Bonhoeffer relationship – if it is applied precisely to the alternative between Barth’s Reformed act-theology and Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran person-theology.<sup>21</sup> To clarify,

The Lutherans [and Bonhoeffer] define the ‘person’ of Christ as the historical God-man Jesus Christ, and it is in this person that divine and human natures are immediately united. For the Lutherans, therefore, the antithesis of divine and human natures is overcome here and now in history. Barth, too, sees the antithesis of divine and human natures overcome in the ‘person’ of Christ, but he defines this ‘person’ as the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Logos. For Barth, the antithesis of God and humanity is overcome in eternity, manifesting itself historically in acts.<sup>22</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, the antithesis of God and humanity is overcome in history, through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Lutheran Bonhoeffer and the Reformed Barth, although they agree on the “general problem of transcendence and theology’s need for a

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Slot, *Negativism of Revelation?*, 51.

contingent concept of revelation,”<sup>23</sup> they disagree on “their concepts of person, and specifically on their accounts of the Christological person.”<sup>24</sup>

### **The Positivism of Revelation Conundrum**

Finally, we must consider Bonhoeffer’s well-known accusation of the deficiency in Barth’s critique of religion. On April 30, 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the following regarding Karl Barth:

How can Christ become Lord of the religionless as well? Is there such a thing as a religionless Christian? If religion is only the garb in which Christianity is clothed – and this garb has looked very different in different ages – what then is religionless Christianity? Barth, who is the only one to have begun thinking along these lines, nevertheless did not pursue these thoughts all the way, did not think them through, but ended up with a positivism of revelation [*Offenbarungspositivismus*], which in the end essentially remained a restoration.<sup>25</sup>

He leveled a similar charge against Barth on May 5, 1944, saying that

Barth was the first theologian – to his great and lasting credit – to begin the critique of religion, but he then put in its place a positivist doctrine of revelation that says, in effect, ‘like it or lump it.’ Whether it’s the virgin birth, the Trinity, or anything else, all are equally significant and necessary parts of the whole, which must be swallowed whole or not at all. That’s not biblical. There are degrees of cognition and degrees of significance. [...] The positivism of revelation is too easygoing, since in the end it sets up a law of faith and tears up what is – through Christ’s becoming flesh! – a gift for us. Now the church stands in the place of religion – that in itself is biblical – but the world is left to its own devices, as it were, to rely on itself. That is the error.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, on June 8, 1944, Bonhoeffer claimed that, although Barth’s “greatest merit” was his theological critique of religion, “in the nonreligious interpretation of theological concepts he gave no concrete guidance, either in dogmatics or ethics. Here he reaches his limit, and that is why his theology of revelation has become positivist, a ‘positivism of revelation, as I call it.’”<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 364.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 429.

The *Letters and Papers from Prison*, therefore, contain three affirmations of Barth's theological critique of religion, followed by three accusations of a "positivism of revelation." Unfortunately, the accusations have often overshadowed the affirmations in the secondary literature on the relationship between Barth and Bonhoeffer. Furthermore, no one seems to know for certain what Bonhoeffer's charge of Barth's *Offenbarungspositivismus* means. Greggs adequately summarizes the confusion:

There is the scope for a monograph which attended singularly to the vast array of interpretations scholars have offered with regard to the way in which one should understand Bonhoeffer's three word (one in German) charge. Indeed, there is almost as much (if not more) reflection on this than the meaning of religionlessness and non-religious interpretation.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, both Greggs and Slot decide not to offer exhaustive treatments of the "positivism of revelation" debates, instead pointing readers to the earlier work of Pangritz and Wüstenberg.<sup>29</sup>

In searching for the origins of the term, both Krause and Pangritz have pointed to the 1929 work of Bonhoeffer's Berlin colleague, Erich Seeberg, on Martin Luther's theology.<sup>30</sup> Pangritz summarizes Seeberg, saying that "positivism of revelation" means "the 'irrational' assertion of divine revelation as the 'positively' given reality against all reason, in opposition to the possibility of natural knowledge of God."<sup>31</sup> In this interpretation of Luther's theology, the emphasis falls on revelation's positive givenness in the life of the Church. Pangritz continues: "According to Bonhoeffer [in *Act and Being*], Luther here clearly stands on the side of the 'ecclesial positivism' of late scholasticism and against Barth in that the revelation of God's

---

<sup>28</sup> Greggs, *Theology Against Religion*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*; Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*. See Greggs, *Theology Against Religion*, 56; Slot, *Negativism of Revelation?*, 208.

<sup>30</sup> Erich Seeberg, *Luthers Theologie: Motive Und Ideen*, vol. I (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1929); Slot, *Negativism of Revelation?*, 209; Gerhard Krause, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 7 (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 1997), 64; Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 72–76.

<sup>31</sup> Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 75.

word, in correspondence with the Lutheran ‘*capax*,’ is somehow ‘haveable’ in the church.” In this sense, Bonhoeffer in effect “chides Barth for *insufficient ‘positivism’* inasmuch as the positivity of revelation evaporates dialectically in him.”<sup>32</sup>

What changed for Bonhoeffer between the positive Lutheran positivism in *Act and Being* and the negative Barthian positivism in *Letters and Papers from Prison*? The number of possible answers seems to exceed the number of scholars who have commented on the issue!

As seen above, Bonhoeffer’s own words on the matter seem to accuse Barth of ignoring the world and flattening distinctions in the significance of doctrines. Karl Barth himself interpreted Bonhoeffer’s charge to concern the difference between “religious” and “non-religious” language, for “insiders” and “outsiders,” as it were.<sup>33</sup> “Positivism of revelation,” in Barth’s mind, meant that Bonhoeffer thought him guilty of relying too much on insider religious language, at the expense of the everyday common man. I agree with Slot, however, that this seems to be a downplaying and simplification of Bonhoeffer’s critique.<sup>34</sup>

Slot lists seven categories of definitions of *Offenbarungspositivismus*, before giving his own: Bonhoeffer thought that Barth’s theology “overemphasizes theological reflection on revelation, and neglects the simple, faithful ministry to a world that is not interested in theology.”<sup>35</sup> Greggs lists at least fifteen previous definitions, before stating his own: based on Schleiermacher’s definitions of “positive” and “revelation,” Bonhoeffer accuses Barth of closing the circle, as it were, between revelation and religion.<sup>36</sup> What makes Christianity unique (positive) “is not only *caused by* revelation, but *is* revelation.”<sup>37</sup> Finally, Pangritz is content

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 75–76.

<sup>33</sup> Slot, *Negativism of Revelation?*, 209–10; cf. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), 59.

<sup>34</sup> Slot, *Negativism of Revelation?*, 210.

<sup>35</sup> See Ibid., 208–26, especially 225.

<sup>36</sup> See Greggs, *Theology Against Religion*, 56–64.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 63.

merely to say that “Bonhoeffer wanted above all to warn against the danger of saying too much in dogmatics and of becoming ‘loquacious.’”<sup>38</sup>

Suffice it to say that there is a lack of scholarly consensus on the meaning of Bonhoeffer’s accusation. This confusion is a shame. Perhaps an understandable one, given the cryptic and brief nature of Bonhoeffer’s prison remarks, but a shame nonetheless. The endless debate about the precise meaning of the term *Offenbarungspositivismus*, more than any other debate within the secondary literature on the Barth-Bonhoeffer relationship, has prevented both theologians’ theological critiques of religion from being carried through to full effect.

### **Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Religion***

Because they fail to focus on what I take to be the key divergence – Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s different *definitions* of religion – I will not be pursuing any of the three routes mentioned above. Instead, seeking to bring Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s theological critiques of religion together, my project is the closest to Tom Greggs’ work. He advocates that “both Barth and Bonhoeffer are travelling along the same trajectory with regard to the theological critique of religion.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, he even mentions that “it would seem wise to consider what religion is from a theological perspective.”<sup>40</sup> However, he does not focus on the similarities and differences between Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s definitions of “religion.” To be fair, he does admit the main surface-level difference between Barth and Bonhoeffer: “Undoubtedly, Barth does not think that it is ever possible to escape from religion (as Bonhoeffer at least seems to).”<sup>41</sup> But instead of offering precise definitions of “religion,” he focuses on the “distinctive moods of their theologies.”

---

<sup>38</sup> Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 114.

<sup>39</sup> Greggs, *Theology Against Religion*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

According to Greggs, “Bonhoeffer expresses his desire for a religionless version of Christianity as a hope (in the optative mood); Barth’s discussion of religion is a description of the current life of the Christian and the church (in the indicative).”<sup>42</sup> But this gives short shrift both to Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the current state of the Church (“Who is Christ actually for us today?”) and to Barth’s eschatological focus.<sup>43</sup> As we have seen, the criticism usually runs the other way. Bonhoeffer accuses Barth of ignoring the present, indicative world.<sup>44</sup>

In sum, although the secondary literature regarding the Barth-Bonhoeffer relationship is vast, I am persuaded that further clarity is necessary to comprehend fully their theological critiques of religion. And the best first step toward this clarity is to get clear on what “religion” means.

### **BARTH’S AND BONHOEFFER’S DIVERGENT DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION**

Barth did not think it was possible to be religionless. Bonhoeffer did. But that is because they were using (at least) two different definitions of the word “religion.” To be sure, they both inherited a definition of “religion.” However, they challenged it from different angles. And, moreover, their definitions of “religion” evolved over the course of their careers.

#### **The Definition of “Religion” that Barth (and Bonhoeffer) Inherited**

What is “religion”? It is easier to recognize than to define, because definitions can focus on any one (or combination) of different “dimensions of religiosity” – whether cognitive, social, ethical,

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 362. I largely share Garrett Green’s opinion of Greggs’ work. See Garrett Green, “Review of Theology Against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth,” *Theology Today* 71, no. 4 (January 2015): 470–71.

<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer accused Barth’s “positivist doctrine of revelation” of saying “like it or lump it” to the world. The result is that “the world is left to its own devices.” Ibid., 373.

ritual, institutional, aesthetic, or psychic.<sup>45</sup> Auffarth and Mohr isolate the following possible categories of definitions for “religion”:

- (1) *faith*: a *Weltanschauung* (‘worldview’) or a ‘belief system’
- (2) *church*: an organization
- (3) *ritual action*
- (4) *ethics*
- (5) *symbolic system*: a cultural ‘text’ (C. Geertz), or a communications system (N. Luhmann, F. Stolz, B. Gladigow)
- (6) *feeling*: an ‘oceanic’ thing (Freud, according to R. Schickele), a *tremendum* and *fascinatum* (R. Otto), a sense of being overwhelmed and subjected (‘complete dependency’; Schleiermacher).<sup>46</sup>

The current popular use of “religion” often refers to a combination of the first three definitions above – something close to the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition: “[b]elief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers (esp. a god or gods) which is typically manifested in obedience, reverence, and worship; such a belief as part of a system defining a code of living, esp. as a means of achieving spiritual or material improvement.”<sup>47</sup>

This is not quite the definition of “religion” which was in the (German) air at the end of the nineteenth century. Although the emphasis then, as now, was on subjective religious experience, religion was then defined *essentially* – an approach to religion which the postmodern turn has problematized, to say the very least.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, religion was viewed as *constitutive of our humanity*, thanks in no small part to Schleiermacher, whose definition of religion as “feeling (*Gefühl*) of absolute dependence [on the infinite]” loomed large.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> The “dimensions of religiosity” come from the work of American sociologists of religion Charles W. Glock, Rodney Stark, and Ninian Smart. See Christoph Auffarth and Hubert Mohr, “Religion,” *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1612–13.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1612.

<sup>47</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. “religion, 5.a.” accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/161944>.

<sup>48</sup> See Green, “Challenging the Religious Studies Canon,” 423n2.

<sup>49</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine L. Kelsey, and Edwina G. Lawler (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016).

Ritschl and Harnack, although they disagreed on various particulars, both followed Schleiermacher in emphasizing subjective religious experience. Ritschl disagreed with Schleiermacher's particular explanation of religious subjectivity, placing more emphasis instead on the historical gospel of Jesus. However, Ritschl still focused on religious experience – the experience of a spiritual freedom given by God, who nevertheless remains hidden apart from subjective religious faith.<sup>50</sup> Harnack, who was influenced by Ritschl's emphasis on history, also emphasized the inwardness of religion.<sup>51</sup>

Although the young Karl Barth was influenced by all three thinkers, Schleiermacher's definition proved particularly significant – as mediated through Barth's teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann. As McCormack helpfully notes, Herrmann was critical of (the later) Schleiermacher, “who made religion to be a constituent part of every human consciousness.” Instead, Herrmann insisted that “religion is not a trait of human nature *per se*. It is something which is found only in particular individuals.” Herrmann agreed that the feeling of absolute dependence is “an essential part of consciousness.” But he maintained that “such a feeling was not itself religion. Moreover, the object of that feeling was not the God of religious faith; it was rather the world and its life-forces on which our biological lives are dependent. The name of this object is fate, not God.”<sup>52</sup>

For Herrmann, “religion” was “a God-given ability to see the working of God in all the events of one's life.”<sup>53</sup> This ability or realization takes place through a self-authenticating “encounter with a Reality so overwhelming, a power so great, that the experience of it cannot be

---

<sup>50</sup> See Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 1:273–74.

<sup>51</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 90–91; Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 1:288–90.

<sup>52</sup> This critique did not, however, apply to the earlier Schleiermacher of the *Speeches*, “for this Schleiermacher treated religion as a historical phenomenon which is to be found only in particular, already existing individuals.” McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 57.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

doubted.”<sup>54</sup> This religious encounter is individual, dynamic, and *hidden* – inaccessible to a Neo-Kantian epistemology.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, Herrmann’s views on religion were an example of his “existentialized Schleiermacherianism,” which was influential on the young Barth.<sup>56</sup>

Bonhoeffer, though twenty years younger than Barth, inherited much the same “Schleiermacherian” view of religion during his studies at Tübingen and Berlin.<sup>57</sup> As Wüstenberg observes, “A survey of Bonhoeffer’s references to religion prior to 1927 reveals an interesting picture insofar as hardly a single statement aims at any critique of religion as such.”<sup>58</sup> Things would begin to change after Bonhoeffer’s discovery of Karl Barth’s writings in 1924/1925. The first critique of Schleiermacher’s view of religion comes in Bonhoeffer’s 1927 dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*.<sup>59</sup>

### **Barth’s Systematic/Dialectical Concept of “Religion” (which Bonhoeffer Adopted)**

Barth’s infamous break with liberalism affected his definition of religion. Although his teacher, Herrmann, regarded religion positively as “the ability of the individual to see the working of God in the events of her life,” Barth already saw religion as “a much more ambiguous affair” in his 1913 Safenwil sermons.<sup>60</sup> In one of these sermons, he compares religion to “the colour that is painted over wood or stone. Outwardly, the wood or stone is pretty but underneath everything remains the same. In the same way, religion is very often simply a façade of belief which conceals the greatest unbelief.”<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 60–61.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>57</sup> Notably, he studied under Harnack at the latter university. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 65–77.

<sup>58</sup> Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>60</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 98.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 99.

Barth developed his self-criticism of religious experience in 1915, partially as a result of his interaction with Christoph Blumhardt and his increasing disappointment with the political stance of Leonhard Ragaz.<sup>62</sup> For Barth, *contra* Harnack, religion was no longer identifiable with the Kingdom of God. Instead, “Religion stands on this side of the great divide separating God from the world of men and women.”<sup>63</sup> In his 1916 lecture, “The Strange New World Within the Bible,” Barth defined religion as a posture predicated on “what we are to think concerning God, how we are to find him, and how we are to conduct ourselves in his presence.”<sup>64</sup>

A similar definition of religion was carried over into the first edition (1919) of Barth’s *Römerbrief*, where it is frequently paired with the concept of morality.<sup>65</sup> In the thoroughly revised second edition (1922), “what had been a favourite but nontechnical term in the first edition becomes a structural element,” especially in the discussion of Romans chapter 7.<sup>66</sup> There, the section headings are now “The Frontier of Religion” (Rom. 7:1-6), “The Meaning of Religion” (Rom. 7:7-13), and “The Reality of Religion” (Rom. 7:14-25).<sup>67</sup> In the 1922 *Römerbrief*, the notion of “boundary,” “limit,” or “frontier” (*Grenze*) proved decisive. As “the last human possibility,” religion stands at the boundary between possibility and impossibility.<sup>68</sup>

Religion is

a limited possibility: and, because limited, peculiarly dangerous, since it bears witness to, and is embraced by, the promise of a new and higher order by which it is itself severely limited. Beyond the humanism which reaches its culminating point in religion we encounter the freedom which is ours by grace. Grace, however, is not another possibility.

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 121–25.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>64</sup> In Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 41.

<sup>65</sup> Garrett Green, “Introduction: Barth as Theorist of Religion,” in *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, by Karl Barth, trans. Garrett Green (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.; Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 229–70.

<sup>68</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1922), 230.

Grace is the impossibility which is possible only in God, and which is unencumbered and untouched by the final possibility, the ambiguity of religion.<sup>69</sup>

As Green notes, “the controlling metaphor is of a realm (the human) whose outer boundary (religion) is at once its limit and its point of contact with that which lies beyond it (the divine).”<sup>70</sup>

Like his theological forbears, Barth still identified “the essentially human with the essentially religious. But unlike those theologians, he characterizes [religion] in dialectical, even contradictory terms.”<sup>71</sup>

Barth’s mature view of religion is found in §17 of the *Church Dogmatics*, titled “The Revelation of God as the *Aufhebung* of Religion.”<sup>72</sup> Green has emphasized the unfortunate translation of *Aufhebung* as “abolition” in the paragraph’s title, because it ignores the dialectical meaning of the German term, and implies Barth’s utter rejection of religion.<sup>73</sup> For this reason, Green translates *Aufhebung* as “sublimation.” Building upon Green’s work, Ensminger has provided the most the most thorough explanation of Barth’s use of *Aufhebung*:

- (1) ***Revelation will single out religion*** insofar as it bears witness to the name of Jesus Christ (this will be Barth’s argument particularly in the third section of §17 on the true religion).
- (2) ***Revelation will restrain or suspend religion*** in order to ensure that it is aware that it cannot stand on its own (this will be Barth’s argument particularly in the second section of §17 on religion being unbelief).
- (3) ***Revelation will uphold and preserve religion*** insofar as it is true to the revelation in Jesus Christ (this is slightly different from the first point as this is more an ongoing process, also evident in the third section of §17, but one of the central concerns of *Church Dogmatics* as a whole).<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 230–31.

<sup>70</sup> Green, “Introduction: Barth as Theorist of Religion,” 8.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 8–9.

<sup>72</sup> *CD I/2*, 280–361.

<sup>73</sup> Green, “Challenging the Religious Studies Canon”; Green, “Introduction: Barth as Theorist of Religion”; Garrett Green, “Religion,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth*, ed. Richard E. Burnett, The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 180–81.

<sup>74</sup> Ensminger, *Karl Barth’s Theology as a Resource for a Christian Theology of Religions*, 52. Emphasis added.

In the first section, “The Problem of Religion in Theology,” Barth maintains that, although God’s revelation takes place in the realm of human religion, revelation must be allowed to determine religion’s meaning, and not the other way around.<sup>75</sup> Giving religion the priority to determine revelation is, in Barth’s opinion, the primary theological error regarding religion in previous centuries – especially the nineteenth.<sup>76</sup>

In the second section, “Religion as Faithlessness (*Unglaube*),” Barth “develops the great negative thesis that religion is the concern of *godless* humanity: it represents the human *resistance* to God’s self-revelation,” and it must, therefore, be sublimated.<sup>77</sup> This sublimation occurs in the third section, “The True Religion,” which opens with the following clarification: “[W]e can speak of ‘true’ religion only in the sense in which we speak of a ‘justified sinner.’ Religion is never true in itself and as such.”<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, “There is a true religion: just as there are justified sinners. If we abide strictly by that analogy – and we are dealing not merely with an analogy, but in a comprehensive sense with the thing itself – we need have no hesitation in saying that the Christian is the true religion.”<sup>79</sup>

To summarize, after his break with liberalism, Barth’s definition of religion develops a common core as a systematic/dialectical concept: religion is *idolatrous self-justification*. On this matter, the following passage is exemplary:

Precisely the religion of man as such, however, is exposed by revelation, by faith in revelation, as *resistance* to it. Religion, seen from the viewpoint of revelation, becomes visible as the enterprise by which man anticipates that which God wills to do and does do in his revelation, putting a human contraption in place of the divine handiwork. In other words, in place of the divine reality that offers and presents itself to us in revelation, religion puts an image of God that man has willfully and arbitrarily devised for himself.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> *CD I/2*, 280-97.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 290-91.

<sup>77</sup> Green, “Religion,” 181.

<sup>78</sup> *CD I/2*, 325.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>80</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 57–58.

The arbitrary image of God will prove important to my exposition of Barth's and Bonhoeffer's convergent critiques of religion below. However, we must first consider Bonhoeffer's divergent definition of religion.

### **Bonhoeffer's Historical/Psychological Concept of "Religion" (which Barth Never Used)**

Feil took up the discussion of Barth's and Bonhoeffer's divergent definitions of religion in *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.<sup>81</sup> The German original was published in 1971. In 1996, Wüstenberg advanced Feil's work in the German original of *A Theology of Life*. Wüstenberg's work is by far the most thorough analysis of Bonhoeffer's views on religion and religionlessness. A summary of the insights of Feil and Wüstenberg will be helpful before I suggest how I think their combined account should be augmented.

Wüstenberg claims that Bonhoeffer's liberal understanding of religion began to change in 1925, under the influence of dialectical theology and Karl Barth.<sup>82</sup> In fact, "prior to 1944, every statement Bonhoeffer makes that is critical of religion can be traced back to Barth's *theological critique* of religion."<sup>83</sup> Therefore, the first change in Bonhoeffer's understanding of religion was "from a positive evaluation of religion to a critique of religion."<sup>84</sup> This began to take place around 1925. The second change was "from a critique of religion to religionlessness."<sup>85</sup> This occurred in prison, beginning in 1944.

To avoid misinterpretation, then, we must remember that Bonhoeffer, like Barth, was a moving target. Wüstenberg rightly concludes that "Bonhoeffer neither defines religion

---

<sup>81</sup> Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 160–202.

<sup>82</sup> Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, 41.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–68.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 68–97.

conceptually, nor develops any closed theory of religion.”<sup>86</sup> However, Bonhoeffer did develop the theme of religion throughout his career.

What, then, was the main difference between Barth and Bonhoeffer when it came to religion? According to Feil, “The crucial difference between Bonhoeffer’s concept of religion in his prison letters and that of Karl Barth is this: Bonhoeffer no longer conceived of religion as being a term of systematic theology but as one of *Geistgeschichte* [intellectual history].”<sup>87</sup> That is, in prison, Bonhoeffer viewed religion as “a historically conditioned and transient phenomenon.”<sup>88</sup> Wüstenberg thinks that this is a false dichotomy between a systematic and a historical approach. Instead, he argues that Bonhoeffer creatively and eclectically combines the two – both in his prison letters and throughout his earlier career.<sup>89</sup> But this element of continuity in Bonhoeffer’s thinking does not remove the shift toward *Geistgeschichte* and away from Barth which took place in prison.

In prison, Bonhoeffer did not merely say that religion is historically conditioned. He also described certain thematic components of religion. As both Feil and Wüstenberg observe, Bonhoeffer viewed religion as an *inward, metaphysical, and partial* approach to life.<sup>90</sup> Wüstenberg adds the themes of *individualism* and *autonomy*.<sup>91</sup> But what does this mean?

Here we must augment the work of Feil and Wüstenberg with the work of Clifford Green, who argues that Bonhoeffer’s final definition of religion is “a *psychic posture* with three aspects:

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>87</sup> Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 175.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 173. Both Feil and Wüstenberg have shown that this transition in prison was due to the influence of Wilhelm Dilthey’s philosophical historicism. However, just as Bonhoeffer did not appropriate the theology of Barth uncritically, neither did he do so with the philosophy of Dilthey – which contained no critique of religion as such. Bonhoeffer agreed with Barth’s critique of Dilthey’s view of religion, but agreed with Dilthey’s historical philosophy of life, which he felt could overcome both Barth’s and Dilthey’s disjunctions between faith and the world. See Ibid., 186; Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, 144–45.

<sup>89</sup> Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, 90–97.

<sup>90</sup> Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 174; Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, 76–84.

<sup>91</sup> Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, 77–79.

weakness, dependence, and the power God.”<sup>92</sup> That is, religion generates a view of human existence that emphasizes weakness, and a view of God that emphasizes strength. For this reason, Bonhoeffer “can describe the secular activities of certain psychotherapists and existentialist philosophers as ‘religious’; they may have nothing to do with the ecclesiastical institution or with Christian content, but their approach to people involves the same psychic posture as religion.”<sup>93</sup> According to Green, this psychological posture manifests itself in eight ways:

- (1) Religion is *episodic* – “a crisis phenomenon, an emergency device”
- (2) Religion is “*peripheral* or parochial” – addressing an ever-shrinking part of life
- (3) religion is “*subjective* and inward” – a subset of the previous manifestation
- (4) Religion is *individualistic* – especially in its soteriology
- (5) Religion is *otherworldly* – seeking an escape beyond the boundary of death
- (6) Religion is *intellectually dishonest* – positing God at the end of human knowledge
- (7) Religion is *humiliating* – manipulative apologetics and proselytism
- (8) Religion is *self-centered* – permeating the previous manifestations.<sup>94</sup>

In prison, then, Bonhoeffer defined religion as a particular posture toward life, which could take place either within or without explicitly religious institutions.

### **Summary: Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s Divergent Definitions of Religion**

Although Barth and Bonhoeffer inherited a common definition of religion, they challenged (and changed) it from two different angles. Whereas Barth defined religion systematically and dialectically as *idolatrous self-justification*, Bonhoeffer finally defined religion historically and psychologically as an *inward and partial approach to life*.

What is the significance of this divergence in definitions? According to Clifford Green, Bonhoeffer’s distinct definition of religion is the reason for his theological separation from

---

<sup>92</sup> Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 262.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. For evidence, he cites Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 326, 341, 344f., 346.

<sup>94</sup> Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 263–65.

Barth, despite the fact that Bonhoeffer claimed to extend Barth's theological critique of religion.<sup>95</sup> This implies that Bonhoeffer was mistaken – that his theological critique of religion ended up being fundamentally different from Barth's.<sup>96</sup> I disagree. Precisely *because* Bonhoeffer is using a different *definition* of religion, his *critique* of religion – although it sounds rather different – does carry forward Barth's critique.

This, then, is the core of my argument. Bonhoeffer's definition of religion as a *psychic posture*, instead of Barth's underlying theological concept of religion as *idolatrous self-justification*, removes the main difficulty in correlating their critiques of religion: Barth did not think it was possible to be religionless. Bonhoeffer did. However, Barth meant that it was not possible to escape idolatrous self-justification on this side of the eschaton. Bonhoeffer meant that it was possible and desirable to escape a particular psychic posture – but this psychic posture was only a small subset of what Barth meant by "religion."

To a large extent, then, Barth and Bonhoeffer were speaking past each other when it came to "religion." On the one hand, I believe that Bonhoeffer was zeroing in on a particular aspect of religion which he felt Barth had failed to critique adequately. Defining religion as a particular psychic posture allowed Bonhoeffer to emphasize and oppose the ways religion can be used to dominate the inner lives of others – an ethical critique of religion that Barth never made. On the other hand, although I agree with Bonhoeffer that Barth left this particular aspect of religion underdeveloped, I believe that Barth's definition and critique of religion can incorporate Bonhoeffer's insights. That is, I believe that Barth would still be able to call Bonhoeffer's

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 258–59.

<sup>96</sup> Green made the same claim in 1963: "Indeed, while Bonhoeffer praised Barth for his critique of religion, a comparison of their positions shows that even they cannot be identified; but to pursue this comparison, instructive and suggestive as it is, lies beyond the present subject." I am, therefore, pursuing precisely this comparison in order to demonstrate an underlying convergence. See Clifford J Green, "Bonhoeffer's Concept of Religion," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 19, no. 1 (November 1963): 11.

“religionless” Christianity “religious,” for there are more ways to be idolatrous than through an individualistic, inward, and partial approach to life.

### **BARTH’S AND BONHOEFFER’S CONVERGENT CRITIQUES OF RELIGION**

Barth and Bonhoeffer diverged on their *definitions* of religion. Nevertheless, their *critiques* of religion converged. I will now offer a brief sketch of two shared concerns in their critiques – although I acknowledge the possibility that even more common concerns exist. First, religion involves the self-justifying projection of a deity to secure one’s own identity. Second, religion – thus understood – is not constitutive of our humanity.

#### **Religion Posits a False “God” to Secure One’s Identity**

In Barth’s 1922 *Römerbrief*, religion is associated with the projection of a false god – the “No-God” (*nicht Gott*). The defining characteristic of the No-God is that he affirms the course of the world without judgment – and, therefore, without redemption.

What men on this side [of the] resurrection name ‘God’ is most characteristically not God. Their ‘God’ does not redeem his creation, but allows free course to the unrighteousness of men; does not declare himself to be God, but is the complete affirmation of the course of the world and of men as it is. This is intolerable, for, in spite of the highest honours we offer him for his adornment, he is in fact, ‘No-God.’<sup>97</sup>

Because the No-God is a false god, “[t]he cry of revolt against such a god is nearer the truth than is the sophistry with which men attempt to justify him.”<sup>98</sup>

Tragically, however, humans “prefer their ‘No-God’ to the divine paradox” of judgment and redemption.<sup>99</sup> This is because the worship of the No-God is but a thinly veiled worship of the self. As Barth clarifies, “Secretly we are ourselves the masters in this relationship,” and “when

---

<sup>97</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1922), 40.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

we set God upon the throne of the world, we mean by God ourselves. In ‘believing’ on Him, we justify, enjoy, and adore ourselves.”<sup>100</sup> It is, therefore, no wonder that the No-God is close at hand and directly observable, whereas the real God, for Barth, is hidden. Of course, because we are neither worthy or capable of taking God’s place, “the enterprise of setting up the ‘No-God’ is avenged by its success.... Our conduct becomes governed precisely by what we desire. By a strict inevitability we reach the goal we have set before us.... And now there is no higher power to protect them from what they have set on high.”<sup>101</sup> Religion’s self-justifying, God-positing venture is a vicious circle.

Although Barth largely drops the phrase “No-God” in the *Church Dogmatics*, religion’s god-positing essence can be seen in the *Leitsatz* to §17 of the *Church Dogmatics*. Green’s translation reads: “God’s revelation in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the judging, but also reconciling, presence of God in the world of human religion – that is, in the realm of attempts by man to justify and sanctify himself before a willfully and arbitrarily devised image of God [*einem eigensinnig und eigenmächtig entworfenen Bilde Gottes*].”<sup>102</sup> As mentioned above, this “human contraption” is put “in place of the divine handiwork. In other words, in place of the divine reality that offers and presents itself to us in revelation, religion puts an image of God that man willfully and arbitrarily devised for himself.”<sup>103</sup>

“For himself” refers to the human impulse to secure our own identities by means of and over against this posited deity. As Barth describes it, “The image of God is always that reality of perception or thought in which man assumes and asserts something unique and ultimate and

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>102</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 33. The original English translation reads: “... in the realm of man's attempts to justify and to sanctify himself before *a capricious and arbitrary picture of God.*” *CD I/2*, 280. Emphasis added.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 57–58. For the original English translation, see *CD I/2*, 302.

decisive either beyond or within his own existence, *by which he believes himself to be posited or at least determined and conditioned.*”<sup>104</sup> Therefore, both the knowledge of God and of ourselves that result from this religious God-positing enterprise are false. The realization of this falsehood is the first step toward true knowledge of both God and self, but this realization itself is only possible through divine revelation.<sup>105</sup>

Later, in §60 of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth clarifies that the ‘God’ whom humans want to be like is not the real God, but merely the posited and projected inverse of our weakness. “The error of man concerning God is that the God he wants to be like is obviously only a self-sufficient, self-affirming, self-desiring supreme being, self-centred and rotating about himself. Such a being is not God.”<sup>106</sup> Why not? Because although “God is for Himself...He is not only for Himself.” That is, “God is *a se* and *per se*, but as the love which is grounded in itself from all eternity. Because He is the triune God, who from the first has loved us as the Father in the Son and turned to us by the Holy Spirit, He is God *pro nobis.*”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, in religion, humans both fail to worship the true God and, in our veiled worship of ourselves, worship a false deity.<sup>108</sup>

Although Bonhoeffer’s final definition of religion differed from Barth’s, it still involved the self-justifying projection of a false deity. This was already the case during Bonhoeffer’s 1932-33 lectures on Genesis 1-3, found in *Creation and Fall*. In his theological exegesis of Genesis 3:1-3, Bonhoeffer explains that the serpent’s temptation of Adam and Eve involved the positing of a false God. “The serpent knows of a more exalted God, a nobler God, who has no need to make such a prohibition [against eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and

---

<sup>104</sup> *CD I/2*, 302. Emphasis added.

<sup>105</sup> “It is an anti-God who has first to be known as such and discarded when the truth comes to him. But it can be known as such, as a fiction, only as the truth does come to him.” *CD I/2*, 303.

<sup>106</sup> *CD IV/1*, 422.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

evil].”<sup>109</sup> And regarding the serpent’s question (“Did God really say?”), Bonhoeffer maintains that “were the question to come to us with its godlessness unveiled and laid bare, we would be able to resist it. But Christians are not open to attack in that way; one must actually approach them with God, one must show them a better, a prouder, God than they seem to have, if they are to fall.”<sup>110</sup>

For Bonhoeffer as for Barth, the history of religion is a history of the human fall into this temptation – to set up a false deity in order to justify ourselves. As Bonhoeffer notes,

[W]here human beings use a principle, an idea of God, as a weapon to fight against the concrete word of God, there they are from the outset already in the right; at that point they have become God’s master, they have left the path of obedience, they have withdrawn from being addressed by God.<sup>111</sup>

Bonhoeffer agrees with Barth that the positing of a God unavoidably involves self-justification.

In the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer speaks of religion’s false God as a “*deus ex machina*,” a “stopgap,” and a “working hypothesis.” These descriptors all refer to the religious impulse to posit a god on the other side of a felt human boundary. The following quote is exemplary:

Religious people speak of God at a point where human knowledge is at an end (or sometimes when they’re too lazy to think further), or when human strength fails. Actually, it’s a *deus ex machina* that they’re always bringing on the scene, either to appear to solve insoluble problems or to provide strength when human power fail, thus always exploiting human weakness or human limitations. Inevitably that lasts only until human beings become powerful enough to push the boundaries a bit further and God is no longer needed as *deus ex machina*. To me, talking about human boundaries has become a dubious proposition anyhow. (Is even death still really a boundary, since people today hardly fear it anymore, or sin, since people hardly comprehend it?) It always seems to me that we leave room for God only out of anxiety. I’d like to speak of God not at the boundaries but in the center, not in weakness but in strength, thus not in death and guilt but in human life and human goodness.<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, DBWE 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 106.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>112</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 366–67; cf. 405–07, 479–80.

The problem, then, is that humans posit false gods on the other side of boundaries which they themselves draw. The real God is found on the cross, at the boundary between Creator and creature which is still in the midst of our existence, just like the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden.<sup>113</sup>

In fact, Bonhoeffer argues, “This is the crucial distinction between Christianity and all religions. Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help.”<sup>114</sup> The whole point and purpose of “religionless Christianity” and “the world come of age” is to clear the way “by eliminating a false notion of God,” and to free “us to see the God of the Bible, who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless.”<sup>115</sup>

Therefore, Bonhoeffer agrees with Barth that we are not ontologically godless, but only relatively so, for Bonhoeffer’s description of the “godlessness of the world” primarily refers to its increasing realization that the posited *false gods* were merely human constructions. For this reason, Bonhoeffer can maintain that “the world come of age is more god-less and perhaps just because that closer to God than the world not yet come of age.”<sup>116</sup> Although Barth’s No-God emphasizes the transcendence of the real God, and Bonhoeffer’s God-as-stopgap emphasizes divine immanence, both theologians viewed the self-justifying projection of a deity as part of the essence of religion. This is their first shared concern and critique of religion.

### **Religion, As Such, Is Not Constitutive of Our Humanity**

---

<sup>113</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 146.

<sup>114</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 479.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 479–80.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.

The second concern is a corollary of the first. Religion, understood as the self-justifying projection of a deity, is not constitutive of our humanity. For Bonhoeffer, this is an easy point to prove. In fact, he claimed that religion is antithetical to our humanity. Even before his talk of a desirably “religionless” Christianity in 1944, he had already made clear, in the 1932-33 *Creation and Fall* lectures on Genesis 1-3, that Adam and Eve’s religious transgression of the proper boundary between Creator and creature destroys their creatureliness.<sup>117</sup> The ethical consequences of religion are therefore disastrous. Although the other (Eve) was created to help one (Adam) bear the proper limit between God and humanity, after the Fall “a person then desires only, in an unbounded way, to possess the other or to destroy the other.”<sup>118</sup> God alone can reconstitute our creaturely being, in spite of our religious attempts to do so ourselves.

The case is harder to make with Barth. However, although Barth thought that religion was inescapable, and therefore that religionlessness was impossible, I do not believe that he viewed religion as a theologically constitutive part of what it means to be human. After all, he agreed with Bonhoeffer that, although religion tells us differently, we humans are not supposed to justify ourselves or secure our own identities. Consider Barth’s warning:

It is true, of course, that man can and should help himself in many things, both outwardly and inwardly. It is true that the means and capacities to do so are given to him, and constantly given again, by the goodness of God the Creator. But there is a limit to this. And beyond that limit man cannot help himself. And if it is one thing to help oneself to this thing or that thing, it is another to help and preserve and liberate oneself, to give oneself a position and a being, to maintain and accompany and rule oneself in one's creaturely being as leader and guardian and saviour, to give life and freedom and joy to one's soul. This is what man thinks he can do. But this is what, in fact, no man has ever been able to do.<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>117</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 115–16.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>119</sup> *CD IV/1*, 459.

Instead of religiously grasping for their own being, humans were made to receive their being as a gift from God, acknowledging him as both Creator and Judge.<sup>120</sup> After all, Barth maintains, “It is impossible for any other being to occupy the position of God. In that position it can only perish. It can only be made to realise that it is not God. Placed there in its creatureliness, it cannot continue as a creature.”<sup>121</sup> The false promise of religion – self-justification – is, therefore, contrary to our creaturely identity.

Finally, to revisit the previously mentioned analogy of speaking of the “true religion” only in the sense of a “justified sinner,”<sup>122</sup> I believe that Barth could have said about religion what he said about sin in *Church Dogmatics* §44: “Sin is undoubtedly committed and exists. Yet sin itself is not a possibility but an ontological impossibility for man.”<sup>123</sup> That is, just as Barth acknowledged that, although sin is inescapable, it is not constitutive of our humanity, he had the theological room, as it were, to acknowledge that, although religion is undoubtedly committed and exists, religion itself is not a possibility but an ontological impossibility for man.

## CONCLUSION

Although Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s *definitions* of religion diverge, their *critiques* of religion converge. In fact, it is precisely because their definitions diverge that their critiques nevertheless converge – although the critiques sounded quite different in their final forms. Barth did not think it was possible to be religionless. Bonhoeffer did. However, because Barth defined religion as *idolatrous self-justification*, he meant that it was not possible to escape idolatrous self-justification on this side of the eschaton. And, because Bonhoeffer defined religion as an *inward*

---

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 460.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>122</sup> CD I/2, 325-26.

<sup>123</sup> CD III/2, 136.

*and partial approach to life*, he meant that it was possible and desirable to escape a particular psychic posture – but this psychic posture was only a small subset of what Barth meant by “religion.”

To a large extent, then, Barth and Bonhoeffer were speaking past each other when it came to “religion.” However, despite their differences, both Barth and Bonhoeffer recognized and critiqued a particular essence of religion: the self-justifying projection of a deity. Although religion, thus understood, is inescapable, it is not constitutive of our humanity. Barth and Bonhoeffer agree that humans were not created to posit and make room for a “God,” in order to secure our own identities by means of and over against this deity. In this specific way, Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s critiques of religion converge.