

THE TREE OF RELIGION:  
KARL BARTH AND DIETRICH BONHOEFFER ON THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE IN  
GENESIS 2:4–3:24

by

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## Introduction

The precise meaning of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (=TK) has long vexed interpreters of Genesis 2:4–3:24.<sup>1</sup> While the “tree of life” (=TL) is mentioned and alluded to throughout the Bible, the TK is explicitly mentioned by its full name just twice (Gen. 2:9, 17).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, because of the significant role that the TK plays in the narrative, both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth highlight the TK in their theological interpretations of Genesis 1–3. Furthermore, both theologians describe the TK and the knowledge of good and evil

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<sup>1</sup> For a sense of the endless debate, see the history of research in Nathan S. French, “A Theocentric Interpretation of *הדעת טוב ורע*: The Knowledge of Good and Evil as the Knowledge for Administering Reward and Punishment” (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 2018), 1–74. For other overviews, see Enrique Baez, “Tree of Knowledge,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016); John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1–11* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 41–44; Nancy deClaisse-Walford, “Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 5:659–91; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 160–66; Chris A. Vlachos, *The Law and the Knowledge of Good and Evil: The Edenic Background of the Catalytic Operation of the Law in Paul* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009), 138–43, 167–74; Howard N. Wallace, “Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life,” in *ABD* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:656–60; Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 86–96; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 62–64; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John B. Scullion, CC (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 211–14, 222–25, 242–48.

<sup>2</sup> For the TL elsewhere, see Gen. 2:9; 3:22, 24; Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4; 2 Esdr. 2:12; 8:52; 4 Macc. 18:16; Rev. 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19. For an overview of the TL in modern theological thought, including Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s treatments, see Daniel J. Treier, Dustyn E. Keepers, and Ty D. Kieser, “The Tree of Life in Modern Theological Thought,” in *The Tree of Life*, ed. Douglas Estes (Leiden: Brill, Forthcoming). The identity of the tree in question in Gen. 3 is debated. However, the prohibition from eating of the TK in Gen. 2:17 makes it very likely that the TK is the tree that is in view from 3:3–21.

(=KGE) in ways that resemble their theological critiques of “religion” as an improper response to divine revelation.

Before proceeding, I must first clarify what Barth and Bonhoeffer meant by “religion.” In *The Epistle to the Romans* and in *Church Dogmatics* (esp. *CD* I/2, §17, “The Revelation of God as the *Aufhebung* of Religion”), Barth developed a systematic definition of religion as idolatrous self-justification, which the early Bonhoeffer inherited.<sup>3</sup> As Barth defined it in the *Leitsatz* to *CD* §17, “the world of human religion” is “the realm of attempts by man to justify and sanctify himself before a willfully and arbitrarily devised image of God.”<sup>4</sup>

However, although maintaining an emphasis on religion as self-justification and idolatry, in prison Bonhoeffer developed a historical/psychological definition of religion as an inward, metaphysical, and partial approach to human life.<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer described “the age of religion” as

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<sup>3</sup> See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. from the 6th ed. Edwyn C. Hoskyns. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); idem, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green. London: T&T Clark, 2006); 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; Clifford J. Green, “Bonhoeffer’s Concept of Religion,” *USQR* 19 (1963): 11–21; Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 33; idem, *Church Dogmatics [CD]* I/2, 280; “[der] Bereich der Versuche des Menschen sich vor einem eigensinnig und eigenmächtig entworfenen Bilde Gottes selber zu rechtfertigen und zu heiligen.” idem, *Kirkliche Dogmatik [KD]* I/2, 304. This adequately summarizes what Barth meant by “religion” earlier in *Romans*. Arguably, the only new element in *CD* §17 is Barth’s willingness to consider how, despite its religious idolatry, Christianity is “the true religion.”

<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer’s “new” theology from prison—including his theological critique of religion—can be found in the text of the following “theological letters” from Bonhoeffer to Bethge in 1944: April 30 (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens, *DBWE* 8 [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009], 361–367); May 5 (371–74); “Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge,” May 18 (383–90; sent with the letter of May 18 to Renate and Eberhard Bethge); May 29 (404–07); June 8 (424–31); June 27 (446–48); June 30 (448–52); July 8 (454–58); July 16 (473–80); July 18 (480–82); July 21 (485–87); “Outline for a Book,” August 3

“the age of inwardness and conscience” which is now past.<sup>6</sup> He critiqued religion’s “metaphysical” emphasis on otherworldly escapism.<sup>7</sup> And, perhaps most importantly for what follows, he critiqued religion as a partial, fragmented, and segmented posture towards human life. In prison, Bonhoeffer wrote that “the ‘religious act’ is always something partial,” focused on distinctions between the outward and inward life, between human strength and weakness, and between religious and non-religious acts. However, for Bonhoeffer, “‘faith’ is something whole and involves one’s whole life.”<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, I argue (1) that Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s interpretations of the TK and the KGE help to explain the similarity and differences between their theological critiques of religion. For Bonhoeffer, the KGE is primarily “disunion.” What he would call “religion” in prison is an inward and partial response to the disunion caused by the KGE. For Barth, the KGE is primarily God’s prerogative to judge what ought and ought not to be. “Religion” is a repetition of humanity’s attempt to grasp the KGE and justify itself. Nevertheless, (2) given the text of Genesis 2:4–3:24, Bonhoeffer’s and Barth’s interpretations need some exegetical adjustments. Bonhoeffer’s view adequately describes the consequences of humans grasping the KGE, but it is

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(499–504; sent with the letter of August 3 to Eberhard Bethge). For important secondary discussions on Bonhoeffer’s view of religion, including the relevance of Bonhoeffer’s reading of Wilhelm Dilthey and others while in prison, see Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 160–202; Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 258–82; Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*. For Bonhoeffer on the “false god” in religion, see *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, *DBWE 3* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 106–108; *DBWE 8*:366–67; cf. 405-07, 479-80, 482.

<sup>6</sup> *DBWE 8*:362; cf. 364, 455–57.

<sup>7</sup> *DBWE 8*:364, 372–73, 447–48, 480, 485–86, 501.

<sup>8</sup> *DBWE 8*:482; cf. 455–57.

insufficient to the degree that it fails to describe the essence of the KGE, how the KGE is spoken of in the rest of the OT, and how the KGE is originally and properly God's. Barth's view is more exegetically robust, but it needs to be softened in order to make it clear how humans now have the KGE. Yet, despite these adjustments, (3) I believe that the TK and the KGE can be used to advance a theological critique of religion along the same lines as both Barth and Bonhoeffer.

### **Barth and Bonhoeffer on the Tree of Knowledge and a Critique of Religion**

Although the links are admittedly indirect and thematic, I argue that the same similarities and differences can be seen in (1) Barth's and Bonhoeffer's theological critiques of religion and (2) their theological interpretations of the TK and the KGE in Genesis 2:4–3:24.<sup>9</sup> Barth emphasized the relationship between the KGE (God's prerogative to judge) and humanity's idolatrous desire to justify itself. Although these elements are also present in some of Bonhoeffer's discussions, Bonhoeffer places much more emphasis on the relationship between the KGE (disunion) and the fragmentation of human life.

#### Bonhoeffer on the Tree of Knowledge and Religion

"Good and evil" played an important role throughout Bonhoeffer's theological career. Already in his February 1929 lecture, "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," Bonhoeffer was using Genesis 2–3 to defend the claim that "[t]he Christian message stands beyond good and evil" because it emphasizes unity with God as opposed to the duality suggested by the

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<sup>9</sup> With the exception of Barth's discussion of Gen. 1–3 in chapter 7 of *Romans*, neither theologian discusses Genesis at length in their central theological critique of religion texts (*CD* I/2, §17; *DBWE* 8). However, in many ways, this indirect/thematic link is to be expected, because neither theologian (esp. Bonhoeffer in prison) made a habit of comprehensively citing all the texts related to their theological argumentation.

oppositional pair “good and evil.”<sup>10</sup> Later, in January 1933, Bonhoeffer addressed the TK and the KGE in his lectures on Genesis 2–3.<sup>11</sup> In describing the primal state, Bonhoeffer emphasizes the unity of Adam’s life in “unbroken obedience to the Creator,” an “obedience that issues from freedom” to obey God’s command.<sup>12</sup> In terms that echo his insistence in the prison letters on speaking “non-religiously” of God “not at the boundaries but in the center,” Bonhoeffer interprets the prohibition against eating from the TK as God’s boundary/limit [Grenze] which encounters Adam in the center [Mitte] of his own existence.<sup>13</sup> According to Bonhoeffer, heeding the divine boundary in the middle of life was to secure human life in its unified totality. Instead, transgressing the boundary led to knowledge of good *and* evil, so that humans now “suffer from an inner split [Zwiespalt].”<sup>14</sup>

This emphasis, on disunion and fragmentation, is by far the strongest theme related to the TK and the KGE in *Creation and Fall*.

Good and evil, tob and ra, thus have a much wider meaning here than good and evil in our terminology. The words tob and ra speak of an ultimate split [Zwiespalt] in the world of humankind in general that goes back behind even the moral split, so that tob means also something like “pleasurable” [lustvoll] and ra “painful” [leidvoll] (Hans Schmidt). Tob and ra are concepts that express what is in every respect the deepest divide [Entzweiung] in human life. The essential point about them is that they appear as a pair, that in being split apart [in ihrer Zwiespaltigkeit] they belong inseparably together.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Douglas W. Stott, *DBWE* 10 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 363.

<sup>11</sup> His lectures on Genesis 1–3 during the winter 1932–33 term at the University of Berlin were later published as *Creation and Fall*, *DBWE* 3.

<sup>12</sup> *DBWE* 3:84.

<sup>13</sup> *DBWE* 3:86; cf. 8:366.

<sup>14</sup> *DBWE* 3:89.

<sup>15</sup> *DBWE* 3:88. In a rare departure from his practice (in *Creation and Fall*) of not citing his interlocutors, Bonhoeffer here references Hans Schmidt, *Die Erzählung von Paradies und*

Bonhoeffer proceeds to discuss how, in human life, there is nothing pleasurable that exists apart from that which is painful, and vice versa. He writes that, “in all pleasure a person desires eternity, but knows that pleasure is transient and will end.” And, on the other hand, “in the depth of pain a person feels pleasure in transience, pleasure in the obliteration of apparently endless pain, pleasure in death.”<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer therefore draws a strong connection between the KGE and death as a necessary consequence.

Although Bonhoeffer later (in his discussion of Gen. 3:7) links the KGE with sexuality, the primary characteristic of KGE is still disunion. He writes that “the knowledge of good and evil is for Adam, who lives in unity, an impossible knowledge of duality, of the whole as torn apart.”<sup>17</sup> This can be seen in the shame and division that the KGE yields in the relationship between Adam and Eve. Although Bonhoeffer links the KGE to both shame and conscience, he repeatedly emphasizes division and disunion.<sup>18</sup>

This emphasis on disunion resembles the distinction Bonhoeffer later makes in prison between “the religious act” as something *partial* and faith which involves one’s whole life.<sup>19</sup> Religion distinguishes between (1) human strength, knowledge, and autonomy and (2) weakness, ignorance, and boundaries—exploitatively minimizing the former and emphasizing the latter.<sup>20</sup> ]

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*Sündenfall* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [P. Siebeck], 1931). The editors also note connections to Hegel and Nietzsche in this section.

<sup>16</sup> *DBWE* 3:90.

<sup>17</sup> *DBWE* 3:122.

<sup>18</sup> For shame, see *DBWE* 3:124–26. For conscience, see *DBWE* 3:128–30.

<sup>19</sup> *DBWE* 8:455–57; 482.

<sup>20</sup> *DBWE* 8:366, 405–7, 426–27, 450, 455–57, 475–78.

Bonhoeffer also writes of the religious distinction between private/inner and public/outer life, claiming that “[w]hat used to be the servants’ secrets—to put it crudely—that is, the intimate areas of life (from prayer to sexuality)—became the hunting ground of modern pastors.”<sup>21</sup> In response to such “religious blackmail,” Bonhoeffer argues that “the Bible does not know the distinction that we make between the outward and the inward life.”<sup>22</sup> Although he does not mention Genesis 1–3 here, I think it makes best sense to interpret what Bonhoeffer calls “religion” in prison as an improper response to the disunion ultimately caused by the KGE.

However, with such a strong emphasis on division, in what sense, if any, does the KGE make humans “like God” (Gen. 3:5, 22)? Bonhoeffer at least attempts to make the link:

There can at this point be no more doubt that the serpent was right in the promise it made. The Creator confirms the truth of that promise: Humankind has become like one of us. It is sicut deus. Humankind has got what it wants; it has itself become creator, source of life, fountainhead of the knowledge of good and evil. It is alone by itself, it lives out of its own resources, it no longer needs any others, it is the lord of its own world, even though that does mean now that it is the solitary lord and despot of its own mute, violated, silenced, dead, ego-world [Ichwelt].<sup>23</sup>

However, it is unclear (1) how this description coheres with Bonhoeffer’s earlier descriptions of KGE as the source of disunion and (2) how such disunion could be an appropriate description of God. In order to link the KGE to God, it appears as though Bonhoeffer had to momentarily step back from his emphasis on disunion.

In 1942, Bonhoeffer returned to a discussion of the TK and the KGE in *Ethics*, particularly in the manuscript titled “God’s Love and the Disintegration of the World.”<sup>24</sup> Here

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<sup>21</sup> *DBWE* 8:455.

<sup>22</sup> *DBWE* 8:456.

<sup>23</sup> *DBWE* 3:142.

<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, *DBWE* 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 299–338. On the dating of this



again the emphasis is on the KGE as a split/disunion—a *Zwiespalt*, *Zerfall*, and an *Entzweiung*. In knowing good and evil, Bonhoeffer argues, humans fall away from reality into possibilities, and from knowledge of God into knowledge of self.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, here Bonhoeffer, like Barth, links the fall to (1) humanity's desire to be its own judge and (2) divine election.<sup>26</sup> He also tries harder to describe how the KGE is God's knowledge:

In knowing good and evil, they now know what only the origin, that is, God, can and may know. Even Holy Scripture speaks only with the utmost reservation about God's knowing about good and evil. It is the first hint of the secret here of predestination, the secret of an eternal disunion that has its origin in the eternal One, the secret of an eternal choice and election by the One in whom there is no darkness but only light. To know good and evil means to understand oneself as the origin of good and evil, as the origin of an eternal choice and election. How this is possible remains the secret of the One in whom there is no disunion, since God is the undivided and eternal origin, and the overcoming of all disunion.<sup>27</sup>

As for how/whether humans become "like God" when they obtain the KGE, Bonhoeffer writes:

They have become like God—but opposed to God. This is the serpent's deceit. Human beings know what is good and evil. They are not the origin, however, but instead have bought this knowledge only by paying the price of disunion from the origin. Therefore the good and evil that they know is not God's own good and evil, but a good and evil opposed to God. It is a good and evil of their own choosing against the eternal election of God. As god-against-God [*Gegengott*], the human being has become like God.<sup>28</sup>

And yet, in the end, due to the KGE, "everything is pulled into the process of disunion [*Entzweiung*]."<sup>29</sup> Although Bonhoeffer arguably sounds a bit more like Barth when discussing

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manuscript to 1942, see *DBWE* 6:471–72.

<sup>25</sup> *DBWE* 6:300.

<sup>26</sup> *DBWE* 6:301.

<sup>27</sup> *DBWE* 6:301–302.

<sup>28</sup> *DBWE* 6:301–302.

<sup>29</sup> *DBWE* 6:308.

the KGE in *Ethics* (as opposed to in *Creation and Fall*), Bonhoeffer still retains a distinctive emphasis on the KGE as the source of all disunion—with God, with others, and with ourselves. What he would later call “religion” in prison is an inward and partial response to this disunion.

### Barth on the Tree of Knowledge and Religion

Although Bonhoeffer offered a lengthy exposition of Genesis 1–3 over a decade before Barth, Barth had previously addressed these chapters of Genesis in his discussion of Romans 7:7–13 (“The Meaning of Religion”) in the second and subsequent editions of his *Römerbrief*.<sup>30</sup> In *Romans*, Barth interpreted the KGE as the divine secret that humans are merely humans. Such knowledge

is God's secret. Men ought not to be independently what they are in dependence upon God; they ought not, as creatures, to be some second thing by the side of the Creator. Men ought not to know that they are merely—men. God knows this, but in His mercy He has concealed it from them. So long as ignorance prevailed, the Lord walked freely in the garden in the cool of the day [Gen. 3:8], as though in the equality of friendship.<sup>31</sup>

Without undermining the creator/creature distinction, Barth nevertheless maintains that, before the fall, humans were (and ought to have remained) ignorant of the distinction. The prohibition of eating from the tree of knowledge *concealed* the creator/creature distinction and was meant to enable a direct relationship between God and humans. Instead, human disobedience revealed the distinction and led to the rise of religion, an independent action over against their creator.<sup>32</sup>

However, Barth’s interpretation of the TK in *CD* differs sharply from his previous interpretation in *Romans*. Instead of referring to a divinely *concealed* distinction between creator

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<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 240–57.

<sup>31</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 247.

<sup>32</sup> See Barth, *Romans*, 240–57.

and creatures, the knowledge of good and evil is *revealed*—precisely through the prohibition of eating from the TK—as God’s ability and prerogative “to distinguish and therefore to judge between what ought to be and ought not to be” (*CD III/1*, 257). This revelation of the creator/creature distinction was meant to prompt humans to acknowledge and praise their creator, thereby enjoying full fellowship with God. Instead, humans disobediently attempted to abolish the distinction. They thereby became like God, for “[t]o know good and evil, to be able to distinguish and therefore judge between what ought to be and ought not to be, between Yes and No, between salvation and perdition, between life and death, is to be like God, to be oneself the Creator and Lord of the creature.”<sup>33</sup> This usurpation of God’s KGE is a burden that creatures are unable to bear. It leads to the rise of religion as the idolatrous and self-justifying worship of false gods—including self-worship. But it also necessarily leads to death, for “[i]t is impossible for any other being to occupy the position of God. In that position it can only perish.”<sup>34</sup>

Barth returned to Genesis 3 at some length in *CD IV/1*, §60, “The Pride and Fall of Man.” The *Leitsatz* for §60 describes the sinful human “who willed to be as God, himself lord, the judge of good and evil.”<sup>35</sup> Barth continued to interpret the KGE as God’s ability and prerogative to judge. Furthermore, in Barth’s interpretation of Genesis 3 in *CD IV/1*, the primary concealment is not God’s concealment of the creator/creature distinction, but rather the serpent’s and humanity’s concealment of the pernicious nature of wanting (1) to be like God, (2) to be lord, (3) to be one’s own judge, and (4) to help oneself.<sup>36</sup> Regarding the desire to be one’s own

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<sup>33</sup> *CD III/1*, 257–58.

<sup>34</sup> *CD III/1*, 262.

<sup>35</sup> *CD IV/1*, 358.

<sup>36</sup> *CD IV/1*, 418–78.

judge, Barth argues that, not only do humans lack the capacity to judge between good and evil, they actively choose evil. And although the creator is in fact the judge, he is not the egotistic victor in need of approval that humans make him out to be in their endeavor to join him in judging. That is a false god, an idol. Instead, the true God is the self-sacrificial judge who gives himself to be judged in our place.<sup>37</sup>

### Similarities and Differences between Barth and Bonhoeffer

The first similarity between Barth and Bonhoeffer on the TK and the KGE is that both theologians' explanations of the TK/KGE correlate with their theological critiques of religion. For Bonhoeffer in prison, religion is an inward and partial attempt to address the disunion caused by the KGE. For Barth, religion is the same kind of idolatrous self-justification as humans grasping after God's KGE. And yet both theologians speak of self-justification and a false idea of God at the fall. Given the paucity of citations of Genesis 2–3 in Bonhoeffer's prison letters, it would be very difficult to "prove" that their differences on the TK and the KGE directly "caused" their differences on religion, but the correlations here should not be ignored.

Second, both theologians interpret the prohibition from eating from the TK as a gracious gift of God meant to secure a truly free relationship with human beings. Instead of God planting and then prohibiting the TK as a temptation or test, both Barth and Bonhoeffer claim that the divine command secures human freedom. God gives humans the opportunity to freely obey him and, therefore, to enjoy full fellowship with him.

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<sup>37</sup> *CD IV/1*, 450–53. Although Barth does not use the term "religion" very often here in *CD §60.2*, the thematic resonances (particularly "unbelief," "self-justification," and "idolatry") with his mature theological critique of religion in *CD I/2*, §17 make it likely that he has the problematic aspects of religion very much in view here. Compare Barth's section on "Religion as Unbelief [Unglaube]" (*CD I/2*, §17.2, 297–325) with his description of "the pride of man" in terms of "unbelief" (*CD IV/1*, §60.2, 413–18).

Third, both theologians are trying to make sense of the contours of the passage, which seem to indicate that the KGE is (1) originally and properly God's knowledge and (2) something that humans now have (Gen. 3:5, 22). But here is where their differences also begin to emerge. Bonhoeffer's definition of the KGE in terms of disunion makes better sense of (2) than (1). That is, it is easier to understand how humans suffer from disunion post-fall than it is to understand how such disunion was originally and properly God's. Barth's definition of the KGE in terms of judgment and decision makes better sense of (1) than (2). It is easier to understand how God has the prerogative to judge between what ought to and ought not to be than it is to understand how humans now have such an ability.<sup>38</sup>

### **An Exegetical Evaluation of Barth and Bonhoeffer on the Tree of Knowledge**

So far, I have argued that the similarities and differences between Barth and Bonhoeffer on the TK and the KGE help to make sense of the similarities and differences between their theological critiques of religion. I will now evaluate their interpretations of the TK and the KGE in light of the text of Genesis 2:4–3:24.

Regarding the meaning of the KGE, there have been several proposals, to say the least. Because every overview of the proposals slightly differs in order and scope, I find it most helpful to consider the proposals along a spectrum between those which make the most sense of how

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<sup>38</sup> Another difference is that Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the KGE was demonstrably influenced by Nietzsche. See *DBWE* 3:87–93; cf. 10:363, 366–67. For a good overview and analysis of Nietzsche's influence on Bonhoeffer's thought, see Peter Frick, "Friedrich Nietzsche's Aphorisms and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology" and "Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Bonhoeffer's *mündiger Mensch*: Are They of Any Use for a Contemporary Christian Anthropology?," in *Understanding Bonhoeffer* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 78–104; 105–26. Although both Barth and Bonhoeffer felt free to appreciate and critique Nietzsche, Barth's interpretation of the KGE was arguably much less influenced by Nietzsche than Bonhoeffer's. Note the lack of "beyond good and evil" language in Barth's discussion of the TK and the KGE in *CD*. For Barth's appreciative critique of Nietzsche, see *CD* III/2, 231–42.

*humans* now have the KGE and those that make the best sense of how the KGE was originally and properly *God's* knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Moving roughly from the human to the divine, then, scholars have proposed that the KGE means: (1) sexual/carnal knowledge, (2) ethical discernment, (3) cultural advancement, (4) moral autonomy, (5) knowledge of everything or omniscience. There is also (6) the “consequence” view that the TK and the KGE are “a description of the consequences of obeying or disobeying the commandments.”<sup>40</sup> I do not have space to give all the arguments for and against these positions. However, as an example of the reasoning often used to adjudicate between the positions, regarding the KGE as sexual/carnal knowledge fails to make sense of how the KGE was originally and properly *God's* knowledge.<sup>41</sup> And regarding the KGE as omniscience fails to make sense of how humans now have the KGE.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> My overview of positions here is nowhere near exhaustive. See Day, *From Creation to Babel*, 41–44; French, “A Theocentric Interpretation,” 1–74; Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 162–66; Vlachos, *The Law and the Knowledge of Good and Evil*, 167–74; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 62–64; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 242–45.

<sup>40</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 63.

<sup>41</sup> I agree with Day that the sexual knowledge view is the easiest to refute, because—although “to know” can refer to sex and the couple becomes aware of their nakedness after eating from the tree of knowledge—KGE is not used elsewhere to refer to sexual knowledge and God, whom the couple becomes “like” after eating (Gen. 3:22), is not portrayed in Scripture as a sexual being. Day, *From Creation to Babel*, 43. It is also difficult to understand how humans were to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28), or how Adam was to “cling to his wife, and ... become one flesh” (2:24) without sexual knowledge. For arguments for variations of the sexual knowledge view, see I. Engnell, “‘Knowledge’ and ‘Life’ in the Creation Story,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East Presented to Professor Harold Henry Rowley*, VTSup 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 114–19; Robert Gordis, “The Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Old Testament and the Qumran Scrolls,” *JBL* 76 (1957): 123–38.

<sup>42</sup> Although the omniscience view seemingly has support from other biblical passages (see 2 Sam. 14:17, 20; Job 15:7–8; Ezek. 28:3, 12) and makes good sense of “good and evil” as a merism, I agree with Day, who argues that this interpretation is out of keeping with the rest of Genesis 3, “which provides aetiologies of the state of humanity as the Israelites knew it, which was not omniscient.” Day, *From Creation to Babel*, 43.

In terms of the framework I have just summarized, Bonhoeffer held a “consequence” view and Barth a “moral autonomy” view. Put simply, I think that Bonhoeffer’s view has difficulty explaining whether/how the KGE is God’s knowledge, and Barth’s view has difficulty in explaining whether/how the KGE is now also humanity’s knowledge. That is, an exegetical difficulty that both Bonhoeffer and Barth share is in making sense of Genesis 3:5 alongside 3:22. Taken together, those verses seem to suggest (1) that the KGE is a kind of knowledge that is appropriate to God and (2) that, though inappropriately seized, humans now have the KGE.<sup>43</sup>

I will begin by evaluating Bonhoeffer’s interpretation. As for Bonhoeffer’s claim that “[g]ood and evil, tob and ra, thus have a much wider meaning here than good and evil in our terminology,” he is correct (in both German and English).<sup>44</sup> However, Bonhoeffer seems to be on much shakier exegetical ground when he claims that “[t]he words tob and ra speak of an ultimate split [Zwiespalt] in the world of humankind in general that goes back even behind the moral split, so that tob means also something like ‘pleasurable’ [lustvoll] and ra ‘painful’ [leidvoll] (Hans Schmidt).”<sup>45</sup> Although in Hebrew “good” can mean “pleasurable” and “evil” can mean “painful,” to arrive at such an “ultimate split” conclusion, one would have to consider whether or

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<sup>43</sup> I acknowledge that (1) is contested by those who claim that Gen. 3:5 and 3:22 depict the KGE as belonging to “gods” or “divine beings.” This relates to the contested meaning of the first-person plural in Gen. 1:26. Nevertheless, I think that Gen. 3:5 and 3:22 are about God himself, as opposed to gods, divine beings, a divine council, etc. It seems most natural to take both occurrences of אֱלֹהִים in 3:5 as referring to the same person, and the first occurrence seems to refer to God, as opposed to divine beings. Gen. 3:22 is more difficult to adjudicate, but I take the first-person plural there as a plural of deliberation for much the same reasons as in Gen. 1:26. However, even if a divine council is in view, the KGE is still something that God properly has. For the arguments for and against the major positions here, see Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 132–34, 208–209; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 27–28, 85; and Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 144–45, 272–73; cf. Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §114e.

<sup>44</sup> *DBWE* 3:88.

<sup>45</sup> *DBWE* 3:88.

not this makes sense of how “good” and “evil” are used elsewhere in the Old Testament.<sup>46</sup> But Bonhoeffer fails to do so.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the KGE as an “inner split” and “disunion” clearly makes good theological sense of post-lapsarian human life. However, this seems to have more to do with the *consequences* of the KGE, and less with the *essence* of the KGE itself. Otherwise, it is difficult to understand how God has always appropriately had the KGE. Granted, Bonhoeffer does attempt to explain how humans are now like God: “Humankind has got what it wants; it has itself become creator, source of life, fountainhead of the knowledge of good and evil. It is alone by itself, it lives out of its own resources, it no longer needs any others, it is the lord of its own world. . . .”<sup>48</sup> However, it is difficult to understand how this coheres with his previous (and arguably primary) explanation of the KGE in terms of “pleasure” and “pain” always going together in “ihrer Zwiespaltigkeit.”<sup>49</sup> If, as Bonhoeffer suggests, the KGE means a *Zwiespalt*, *Zerfall*, or *Entzweiung*, then God’s words in Genesis 3:22 make little sense. The same goes for Bonhoeffer’s explanation of the KGE in terms of sexuality and shame.<sup>50</sup>

And yet Bonhoeffer’s interpretation is not far off from a “consequence” view of the KGE. As Kidner puts it:

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<sup>46</sup> See *HALOT* 2:370–72; 3:1250–53.

<sup>47</sup> Was Solomon asking God for an ultimate split in 1 Kgs. 3:9? Or consider the often-cited verses where “to know,” “good,” and “evil” occur together (Deut. 1:39; 2 Sam. 19:36 [English: 35]; Isa. 7:15–16). It is hard to see how they would be referring to an ultimate split that is present in human life, yet absent from both childhood and old age. Do not children and the elderly know both pleasure and pain?

<sup>48</sup> *DBWE* 3:142.

<sup>49</sup> *DBWE* 3:88.

<sup>50</sup> *DBWE* 3:122–26.



[i]n the context, however, the emphasis falls on the prohibition [2:17] rather than the properties of the tree. It is shown to us as forbidden. It is idle to ask what it might mean in itself; this was Eve's error. As it stood, prohibited, it presented the alternative to discipleship: to be self-made, wresting one's knowledge, satisfactions and values from the created world in defiance of the Creator (cf. 3:6). . . . In all this the tree plays its part in the opportunity it offers, rather than the qualities it possesses; like a door whose name announces only what lies beyond it.<sup>51</sup>

As Vlachos notes, this “consequence” interpretation makes good sense of (1) עֵץ as meaning experiential knowledge, (2) the consequence that actually takes place in 3:7, and (3) that the TL and the TK both seem to get their names from their effects—eating from the TL yields life, and eating from the TK yields the KGE.<sup>52</sup> So, perhaps Bonhoeffer's interpretation is not as wide of the mark as it originally sounds.

And yet, there is the problem of Genesis 3:22. If Bonhoeffer is correct, how is the KGE originally and properly *God's* knowledge? Even if 3:22 does not require an exact correspondence between human and divine knowledge, there seems to be something more going on here than just God knowing in advance what would happen if humans disobeyed. Therefore, while I do not think that Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the TK and the KGE is in serious error (when viewed as a description of the *consequences* of human disobedience), it is insufficient. We need to make better sense of (1) how “good” and “evil” are used in the OT and (2) how the KGE is God's.

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<sup>51</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1967), 63. A similar view is held by Benno Jacob, *Genesis: The First Book of the Bible*, abridged, ed., and trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (New York: Ktav, 1974), 18–20; Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 123–24.

<sup>52</sup> Vlachos, *The Law and the Knowledge of Good and Evil*, 138–43. Vlachos also argues that this view makes good sense of Deut. 1:39 (“. . . your children, who today do not yet know right from wrong . . .”) but I am not convinced by this. Instead, I think that either moral discernment or legal responsibility is in view there. See W. A. M. Clark, “A Legal Background to the Yahwist's Use of ‘Good and Evil’ in Genesis 2–3,” *JBL* 88 (1969): 274.

These are both strengths of Barth's interpretation of the TK and the KGE in *CD III/1*. Before arriving at the exegetical small print section, Barth relates the Eden narrative to the subsequent history of Israel.<sup>53</sup> Then, in the small print section, Barth first cites with approval the interpretations of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. The common thread in their interpretations is, according to Barth, that "the tree itself has nothing whatever to do with evil, but like the prohibition is . . . a kind of test. Everything depended on its formal fulfillment, so that there is no need to ask concerning its meaning and content and therefore the nature of the tree."<sup>54</sup> This resembles the "consequence" view of which Bonhoeffer was a proponent. Overall, Barth agrees with this interpretation that the TK was meant to establish "a proof of obedience and faith in the initiation of a relationship between man and God accomplished in man's conscious decision."<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, I agree with Barth that, because the TK is given a particular name and is said to mediate particular knowledge—a knowledge that led to death after humans disobeyed—"all this deserves much fuller consideration than is given to it on this view."<sup>56</sup> So, Barth then addresses the meaning of the KGE. He argues against the view(s) that (1) it relates to "science and our general knowledge of things," (2) the prohibition of eating from the TK is about

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<sup>53</sup> See *CD III/1*, 267–76. For Barth, the "decisive parallel" is between the two trees and the revelation of God to his people. On the one hand, God's revelation resembles the TL—the sign of God's goodness and provision. On the other hand, it resembles the TK—a warning sign of God's judgment. Barth links the KGE to the idolatry of the other nations from which Israel was supposed to keep herself distinct. Much like the prohibition from eating of the TK was meant to graciously protect humans from the inevitable consequences of usurping God's role as creator and judge, God's revelation to Israel graciously prohibits idolatry in order to protect Israel from necessarily dying when left to her own devices.

<sup>54</sup> *CD III/1*, 284–85.

<sup>55</sup> *CD III/1*, 285.

<sup>56</sup> *CD III/1*, 285.

“progress from childish innocence” to the KGE as moral decision and “intellectual maturity,” and (3) the KGE refers to sexual knowledge and desire.<sup>57</sup>

Having found these views unsatisfactory, Barth proceeds to survey what the OT has to say about the KGE. He argues that Deuteronomy 1:39, Isaiah 7:15–16, 2 Samuel 19:35 [Hebrew: 36], and even Jonah 4:11 are examples where the KGE “means the capacity—not yet possessed in childhood and perhaps no longer possessed in old age—to be responsible and to act.”<sup>58</sup> However, Barth presses beyond this meaning, noting how other passages (Lev. 27:33; Gen. 31:24) seem to indicate decision and judgment. Furthermore, for Barth it is very significant that Solomon asks God from the ability to discern between good and evil, so that he might be a good ruler and judge (1 Kgs. 3:9). And, in 2 Samuel 14:17, David’s ability to discern between good and evil is compared to “the angel of God.” For Barth, these last two passages link the KGE to a judicial capacity of God.<sup>59</sup> He then cites a long list of other passages from across the OT to demonstrate that “primarily and ultimately it is to God alone that this capacity belongs.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Regarding (1), Barth thinks the phrase is much more specific/concrete. He also wonders why God would prohibit such knowledge, and why it would lead to death. As for (2), Barth points out that the knowledge comes from eating from the TK, not from avoiding it. It is also unclear why such moral discernment would be deadly. Regarding (3), Barth admits that the KGE results in the distortion of the sexual relationship between man and woman, but he denies that the OT anywhere condemns/discredits awareness of the sexual relationship. Even if the first consequence of the KGE was sexual, Barth argues that “the knowledge itself and as such is deeper and more embracing and cannot possibly be equated with sexual knowledge or its perversion.” *CD III/1*, 285–86.

<sup>58</sup> *CD III/1*, 286.

<sup>59</sup> Barth’s argument here is remarkably similar (and two decades prior!) to Clark’s. See “A Legal Background,” esp. 267–69.

<sup>60</sup> *CD III/1*, 286. In the order he mentions them, Barth cites: Job 2:10; Jer. 4:26; Isa. 45:7; 41:23–24; Jer. 10:5; Zeph. 1:12; Exod. 7:2f.; 1 Sam. 2:6–7; 1 Kgs. 22:9f.; Job 1:6f.; Deut. 30:15; Josh. 24:20; Zech. 8:14–15; Num. 24:13.

Based upon his survey, Barth returns to Genesis 2:16–17 and concludes that

[t]o transgress the Word of the Lord means to do good or evil after one's own will. But this is something which must not be done because it is God who must decide concerning good and evil, commanding the one and prohibiting the other, whereas man, choosing after his own heart, cannot attain good but will do evil. This, then, is what God prohibited. This is the possibility indicated by the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden but also prevented by the commandment.<sup>61</sup>

Barth concludes that to know good and evil “is to know right and wrong, salvation and perdition, life and death; and to know them is to have power over them and therefore over all things.”<sup>62</sup>

Here Barth comes very close to the view that “good and evil” is a merism, although he places more emphasis on discernment, judgment, and even omnipotence than on omniscience.

Nevertheless, Barth's moral autonomy view is perhaps cast in such strong terms that it suffers from the same weakness as the omniscience view. Although I am persuaded that, given how “good” and “evil” are spoken of in the rest of the OT, something like moral autonomy (stronger than mere ethical discernment) must be in view, the KGE should be defined as “mere” moral autonomy—the ability to make decisions about what is right and wrong—in order to help make it clear that, although humans now possess the KGE, it is but a pale imitation and coveting of God's absolute KGE.

### **Conclusion: The Tree of Knowledge and a Biblical/Theological Critique of Religion Today**

In this paper, I have argued that (1) Barth and Bonhoeffer's interpretations of the TK and the KGE help to explain the similarity and differences between their theological critiques of religion. For Bonhoeffer, the KGE is primarily “disunion”—with God, with others, and with ourselves. What he would call “religion” in prison is an inward and partial response to the

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<sup>61</sup> *CD III/1*, 287.

<sup>62</sup> *CD III/1*, 287.

disunion caused by the KGE. For Barth, the KGE is primarily God's prerogative to judge what ought and ought not to be. "Religion" is a repetition of humanity's attempt to exercise the KGE and justify itself.

Based upon the text of Genesis 2:4–3:24, (2) both Barth's and Bonhoeffer's interpretations need some exegetical adjustments. Bonhoeffer's view makes the best sense as describing the *consequences* of humans grasping the KGE, but it is insufficient to the degree that it fails to describe the essence of the KGE, how the KGE is spoken of in the rest of the OT, and how the KGE is originally and properly God's. Barth's moral autonomy view is much more exegetically robust, but it needs to be reined-in a bit in order to make it clear how humans now have the KGE.

Given these adjustments and a moral autonomy view of the KGE, (3) can the TK be used to advance a theological critique of religion along the same lines as both Barth and Bonhoeffer? Yes. With both theologians, we can maintain that the point of the TK was obedience to God's command—a command which was also an instance of divine self-revelation. God is not against human beings acquiring ethical discernment and wisdom, but they are to do so through reverent worship and obedience in response to divine revelation, and not through attempting to seize godlike autonomy. If humans had obeyed God's command, then the TK would have remained a tree of worship and wisdom, as it were, securing the unity and the freedom of human life. Instead, both in Eden and today, the error of religion is to grasp after God—to justify oneself before one's own idea of "god," instead of obeying and worshiping God as he has revealed himself to be. Because humans tried to grasp moral autonomy through consumption, instead of through worship and obedience, the TK thereby became the tree of religion. It would take an act of reverent obedience on a different tree to solve humanity's religious predicament.

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