

### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

- 1 Having read this passage, how would you characterize Lossky's teaching on how God is known? What role does he ascribe to contemplation? How do you think that differs from the emphasis on rational reflection so characteristic of much western theology?
- 2 What point does Lossky make through the analogy of Moses ascending Mount Sinai?
- 3 On the basis of this passage, do you think that Lossky is saying that nothing can be known of God?

## 1.28 DIETRICH BONHOEFFER ON GOD IN A SECULAR WORLD

In this letter from Tegel prison, in which he was imprisoned during the final stages of the Second World War, the German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) spoke of the new challenge to Christianity in a world in which the existence of God is not taken for granted. He identified a central theme of Christianity, which distinguishes it from all other religions, in its focus in the sufferings of God in Christ. Bonhoeffer was one of the most vigorous critics of the idea that human “religiosity” is a point of contact for the gospel. The theme of a suffering God was of major importance to Bonhoeffer, as this passage makes clear. Bonhoeffer was executed at Flossenbürg concentration camp in April 1945. See also 1.20, 1.24, 1.27, 3.30, 3.35.

Now for a few more thoughts on our theme. I'm only gradually working my way to the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts; the job is too big for me to finish just yet.

On the historical side: There is one great development that leads to the world's autonomy. In theology one sees it first in Lord Herbert of Cherbury, who maintains that reason is sufficient for religious knowledge. In ethics it appears in Montaigne and Bodin with their substitution of rules of life for the commandments. In politics Machiavelli detaches politics from morality in general and founds the doctrine of “reasons of state.” Later, and very differently from Machiavelli, but tending like him towards the autonomy of human society, comes Grotius, setting up his natural law as international law, which is valid *etsi deus non daretur*, “even if there were no God.” The philosophers provide the finishing touches: on the one hand we have the deism of Descartes, who holds that the world is a mechanism, running by itself with no interference from God; and on the other hand the pantheism of Spinoza, who says that God is nature. In

the last resort, Kant is a deist, and Fichte and Hegel are pantheists. Everywhere the thinking is directed towards the autonomy of man and the world.

(It seems that in the natural sciences the process begins with Nicolas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno and the “heretical” doctrine of the infinity of the universe. The classical *cosmos* was finite, like the created world of the Middle Ages. An infinite universe, however it may be conceived, is self-subsisting, *etsi deus non daretur*. It is true that modern physics is not as sure as it was about the infinity of the universe, but it has not gone back to the earlier conceptions of its finitude.)

God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy and religion (Feuerbach!). For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated. A scientist or physician who sets out to edify is a hybrid.

Anxious souls will ask what room there is left for God now; and as they know of no answer to the question, they condemn the whole development

that has brought them to such straits. I wrote to you before about the various emergency exits that have been contrived; and we ought to add to them the *salto mortale* [death-leap] back into the Middle Ages. But the principle of the Middle Ages is heteronomy in the form of clericalism; a return to that can be a counsel of despair, and it would be at the cost of intellectual honesty. It's a dream that reminds one of the song *O wusst'ich doch den Weg zurück, den weiten Weg ins Kinderland*. There is no such way – at any rate not if it means deliberately abandoning our mental integrity; the only way is that of Matthew 18: 3, i.e., through repentance, through *ultimate* honesty.

And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi Deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do recognize – before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15: 34). The God who lets us

live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew 8: 17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.

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

### Comment

Bonhoeffer wrote this letter from prison shortly before his execution. The letter deals with the vulnerability of approaches to religion and theology which proceed on the assumption that humanity is intrinsically religious. For Bonhoeffer, the Nazi experience had called that presupposition into question.

The letter deals extensively with the issue of the autonomy of the world, and the apparent powerlessness of God, which Bonhoeffer regarded as exhibited on the cross. Bonhoeffer's brief account of intellectual history since the Middle Ages is concerned to bring out how the world has come of age and lives as if there were no God.

Note that the German song title referred to in the text is to be translated as "If only I knew the way back, the long way to the land of childhood." The Latin slogan *etsi Deus non daretur* ("as if God is not given") was used by the Dutch writer Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) and is widely seen as marking a recognition of the growing importance of secular trends in the west.

### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

- 1 What is the distinction between simply living "as if there were no God" and a firm commitment to atheism?

- 2 How does Bonhoeffer account for the world's "coming of age"? What factors does he see as leading to its development? Although Bonhoeffer does not directly address this issue in the passage, in what way does the Nazi period illustrate this point?
- 3 "Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us." Locate this passage within the text. What does Bonhoeffer mean by these words?

## 1.29 PAUL TILlich ON THE METHOD OF CORRELATION

Paul Tillich (1886–1965) was a German émigré who settled in the United States and became one of the most significant American theologians of the twentieth century. One of his primary concerns was apologetic. To ensure the continuing credibility of Christianity, he argued, it was necessary to correlate the gospel proclamation with the questions which secular culture raised, especially in North America. For Tillich, culture raised what he termed "ultimate questions," to which theology was obliged to respond. In this important passage, Tillich explored the general principles of correlating the Christian message with secular culture. See also 1.28, 1.34, 1.36.

The term "correlation" may be used in three ways. It can designate the correspondence of different series of data, as in statistical charts; it can designate the logical interdependence of concepts, as in polar relations; and it can designate the real interdependence of things or events in structural wholes. If the term is used in theology all three meanings have important applications. There is a correlation in the sense of correspondence between religious symbols and that which is symbolized by them. There is a correlation in the logical sense between concepts denoting the human and those denoting the divine. There is a correlation in the factual sense between man's ultimate concern and that about which he is ultimately concerned. The first meaning of correlation refers to the central problem of religious knowledge. [...]

The second meaning of correlation determines the statements about God and the world; for example, the correlation of the infinite and the finite. [...] The third meaning of correlation qualifies the divine-human relationship within religious experience. The third use of correlative thinking in theology has evoked the protest of theologians such as Karl Barth, who are afraid that any kind of

divine-human correlation makes God partly dependent on man. But although God in his abysmal nature is in no way dependent on man, God in his self-manifestation to man is dependent on the way man receives his manifestation. This is true even if the doctrine of predestination, namely, that this way is foreordained by God and entirely independent of human freedom, is maintained. The divine-human relation, and therefore God as well as man within this relation, changes with the stages of the history of revelation and with the stages of every personal development. There is a mutual interdependence between "God for us" and "we for God." God's wrath and God's grace are not contrasts in the "heart" of God (Luther), in the depth of his being; but they are contrasts in the divine-human relationship. The divine-human relation is a correlation. The "divine-human encounter" (Emil Brunner) means something real for both sides. It is an actual correlation, in the third sense of the term.

The divine-human relationship is a correlation also in its cognitive side. Symbolically speaking, God answers man's questions, and under the impact of God's answers man asks them. Theology