# Religionless Christianity[1]

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> You would be surprised and perhaps disturbed if you knew how my ideas on theology are taking shape . . . The thing that keeps coming back to me is, what *is* Christianity, and indeed what *is* Christ, for us today? . . . We are proceeding towards a time of no religion at all; men as they are now simply cannot be religious any more . . . Our whole nineteen-hundred-years old Christian preaching and theology rests upon the 'religious premise' of man . . . But if one day it becomes apparent that this *a priori* premise simply does not exist, but was a historical and temporary form of human self-expression, i.e. if we reach the stage of being radically without religion . . . what does that mean for Christianity . . . ? How can Christ become the Lord even of those without religion? If religion is no more than the garment of Christianity—and even that garment has had very different aspects at different periods—then what is religionless Christianity?[2]

In this passage, written from prison twenty years ago (30 April, 1944), Dietrich Bonhoeffer raised an issue to which wide currency has now been given by the Bishop of Woolwich in the chapter of *Honest to God* entitled *Worldly Holiness*. Not that the question is confined to that chapter alone. Indeed I believe it to be the central issue of the Bishop's whole book, more central in some way than the question of what image of God we are to have. For, if I am not mistaken, we have here the central anxiety which made Dr Robinson write his book.

Even a glance at the index to the Bishop's book will show how pervasive the theme is: under 'Religionless Christianity' there are references to every single chapter of the book. And much of the Bishop's contribution to the further volume *The Honest to God Debate* is taken up with it too.[3] In the Preface to *Honest to God* he tells us:

[1]This article is substantially the text of a lecture given at Cambridge in March as one of the Dominican Lectures which discussed various aspects of the Bishop of Woolwich's book, *Honest to God*.

[2]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 91. The page references given here are to the Fontana paper-back edition; in *Honest to God* the page references to Bonhoeffer's *Letters* are to the earlier S.C.M. edition.

[3]*The Honest to God Debate*, J. A. T. Robinson and D. L. Edwards, p. 241-278, and in particular p. 268 ff. I shall refer to this book as 'H.G.D.' and to *Honest to God* as 'H.G.'

> I am convinced that there is a growing gulf between the traditional orthodox supernaturalism in which our faith has been framed and the categories which the 'lay' world (for want of a better term) finds meaningful today . . . Not infrequently, as I watch or listen to a broadcast discussion between a Christian and a humanist, I catch myself realising that most of my sympathies are on the humanist's side. This is not in the least because my faith or commitment is in doubt, but because I share instinctively with him his inability to accept the scheme of thought and *mould of religion* within which alone that Faith is being offered to him . . . *My only concern* here is to plead for the recognition that those who believe their share in the total apologetic task of the Church to be *a radical questioning of the established 'religious frame'* should be accepted no less as genuine and, in the long run equally necessary, defenders of the Faith.[4]

At the end of the book he quotes with approval the editor of *Prism:*

> We have reached a moment in history when these things are at last being said openly and when they are said there is an almost audible gasp of relief from those whose consciences have been wrongly burdened by the *religious tradition.*[5]

And his own final comment on his book is this:

> It is a dialogue between *religious* man and secular man. And secular man is just as much inside the Church as out of it, and just as much inside myself. Indeed *my book was born of the fact* that I knew myself to be a man committed without reservation to Christ, and a man committed, without possibility of return, to modern twentieth-century secular society.[6]

I think it would be fair to gloss that last remark with 'I knew myself to be a man committed to Christ, and committed to the loss of religion'.

I must confess that when I first read *Honest to God* I did not notice how central this theme was. I inclined to dismiss it as a rather trivial plea to free genuine Christianity from the lace, frills and incense of a sacristy mentality. And I think I was not altogether to blame for this, because the only place where the Bishop made an explicit attempt to define 'religion' was (apart from an important footnote which we shall consider later) at the beginning of Chapter V:

> The 'religious', in the technical sense of the religious orders, is the

[4] *H.G.*, p. 9 (my italics).
[5] *H.G.*, p. 141 (my italics).
[6] *H.G.D.*, p. 275 (my italics).

> antithesis of the 'secular'. It relates to that department of life which is contrasted with 'the world'; and in its popular non-technical sense it includes all those activities which go on within the circle of the sanctuary, whether literally or metaphorically.[7]

If this was all that the Bishop meant by Christianity without religion I found it perfectly acceptable, but, as I have said, trivial. And it irked me a little to find the word 'religion' so sadly diminished, when I remembered the sense given to it by St Thomas Aquinas: 'The word '*religio*' may be taken as coming from '*religare*' (to bind), and this is why Augustine says in his *de vera religione:* Religion binds us to God, one and almighty'.[8] Religion is the essential relationship of creature to God, and has little to do with the inessentials of a sacristy observance.

However, when I came to write this paper and therefore tried to establish more exactly what the Bishop did mean by 'religion' I found myself more and more confused. He seemed to mean so many things. But gradually a common denominator began to appear, and I saw not only what he meant, but the importance of what he was saying. It will be useful, before examining in detail some of the main passages, to give in a rather free way the drift of my conclusions.

When a Christian, or at least a certain kind of Christian, takes stock of the world around him, it is easy for him to form a rather pessimistic judgment. Men in our modern world are a godless lot, they have little or no sense of sin, do not care for the salvation of their eternal souls, live at a wholly superficial level without regard to ultimates; under the threat of atomic extermination, they experience no dread of death (has it not become for most a clinical and of course vicarious experience behind hospital screens?); and the discipline of asceticism and other-worldliness makes no claim upon them. This is a condition to be found whatever their circumstances. At Clacton or Blackpool, how many give a thought to God, to sin, to death? Well, but these are not the places for sombre reality. But (and this is the frightening thing) even horrific circumstances call forth from modern men no greater profundity. What does God or sin or death mean to men at war? the flying men setting out on a raid? men in a concentration camp, whether staff or prisoners, the men encountered by Bonhoeffer? God? A swear-word. Sin? Material for bawdiness, or a lightly cynical joke. Death? Inevitable and squalid. Asceticism? A luxury for those whose lives are a pretence compared with immediate harsh realities. Ultimates? The will-o-the-wisp of intellectuals. There

[7] *H.G.*, p. 84-85.
[8] *Summa Theol.* 2-2. Q. 81.a.1.

are of course men of more reflective temperament, perceptive and sensitive. But we are concerned with the mass of men, the easy-going, the superficial, the fatalists, perhaps the eighty per cent. That is the picture it is easy for our Christian to have of modern men.

And over against that he may draw the picture of the elect, the very few. There is the godly church-goer, the placard-bearer 'Christ dies for your sins', the man for whom death is the dreaded abyss. There are withdrawn monks in cowls over hollow cheeks, men who care deeply for the spiritual life and personal salvation. There are intellectuals (of the softer headed variety) who ponder the absolute. But all these men of an eccentric minority are only half-real, bloodless shadows to the men of the philistine majority.

That is the problem for your Christian. He ranges himself with one or other of the minority cliques. And let us suppose that he is not of the type which looks on his fellow men, the great majority, with contempt or distaste. He looks on them with the eyes of Christ, longs to convey to them the message of the Gospel. At once there is the huge problem of communication. How is he to break through, to make contact? Is it possible (this is the great question) to recommend Christ to this careless and indifferent world without first forcing it back into the attitudes it has abandoned, without first inducing in men a basic religiosity, a sense of sin, of the importance of personal salvation, of the contingency and transitoriness of their lives, a spirit of renunciation and asceticism? Is a people without these attitudes a possible soil in which to plant the seed of the gospel?

If one is to take the evidence of much popular preaching and broadcasting the answer given to this question by the conventional Christian is fairly evidently that these 'religious' attitudes are indeed part and parcel of Christianity. The really apt material for the Christian preacher appears to be a people given to fear and unhappiness and insecurity. So much preaching appears to be directed to people who are, or should be, in hospitals or prisons. Guilt and sin become the staple of the diet offered. It used to be said: England's peril is Ireland's opportunity; we might say, Man's peril is God's opportunity.

Now what I think Bonhoeffer and the Bishop of Woolwich are saying is: No! you are to take men as they are, without religion. You are to give Christ to them in their godlessness, without playing up a sense of sin they no longer *can* have, without appealing to the terrors of death and insecurity, without asking them to forgo the mastery of their environment which has been irretrievably won as they have come to adulthood. Bonhoeffer tells us:

> The only people left for us to light on in the way of 'religion' are a few 'last survivals of the age of chivalry', or else one or two who are intellectually dishonest. Would they be the chosen few? Is it on this dubious group and none other that we are to pounce, in fervour, pique or indignation, in order to sell them the goods we have to offer? Are we to fall on one or two unhappy people in their weakest moment and force upon them a sort of religious coercion?[9]

If we attempt to reduce men to this condition we are, to use a graphic expression of Bonhoeffer's, like those who

> demonstrate to secure, contented, happy mankind, that it is really unhappy and desperate, and merely unwilling to realise that it is in severe straights which it knows nothing at all about, from which only they can save it. Wherever there is health, strength, security, simplicity, they spy luscious fruit to gnaw at or to lay their pernicious eggs in. They make it their object first of all to drive men to inward despair, and then it is all theirs.[10]

But he goes on to warn us that such methods will not work. This 'attack by Christian apologetic upon the adulthood of the world' will inevitably fail with all but a desperate minority. 'The ordinary man' (in another place he talks significantly of 'the working man')

> who spends his everyday life at work, and with his family, and of course with all kinds of hobbies and other interests too, is not affected. He has neither time nor inclination for thinking about his intellectual despair and regarding his modest share of happiness as a trial, a trouble or a disaster.[11]

Instead of this 'pointless', 'ignoble' and 'unchristian' apologetic Bonhoeffer has a quite different recommendation. The Christian:

> must plunge himself into the life of a godless world, without attempting to gloss over its ungodliness with a veneer of religion or trying to transfigure it. He must live a 'worldly' life and so participate in the suffering of God. He may live a worldly life as one emancipated from all false *religions* and obligations. To be a Christian does not mean to be *religious* in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism (as a sinner, a penitent or a saint), but to be a man. It is not some *religious* act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.[12]

[9] *Letters*, p. 91, cf. *H.G.*, p. 38.
[10] *Letters*, p. 107.
[11] *Letters*, p. 108.
[12] *Letters*, p. 123 (my italics), cf. p. 108, *H.G.*, p. 37.

I have quoted from Bonhoeffer rather than from *Honest to God*, but the Bishop makes several of these passages his own, and is largely indebted to Bonhoeffer for his idea of religionless Christianity. I shall however contend, later, that the Bishop, because of his drawing upon Tillich, is not entirely at one with Bonhoeffer.

In this outline, I have oversimplified in one respect. I have drawn the picture of Christians confronted by a religionless world and faced with a problem of communication. But it is not simply a problem, for our two authors, of communicating with men outside, but of a Christian's coming to terms with his own secular mind. As Paul van Buren, writing of Bonhoeffer, puts it, he was not 'only looking for a technique of communication or popular idiom to reach the man of today "out there", outside the church . . . He wrote as a citizen of this modern adult world . . . Modern man is not out there to be spoken to; he is within the being of every Christian trying to understand'.[13] Or as Dr Robinson puts it 'Secular man is just as much inside the Church as out of it, and just as much inside myself'.[14]

Let us now pursue in rather more detail what exactly the Bishop of Woolwich is discarding when he gets rid of religion. This will involve a kind of hunt, like Plato's hunt for the definition of a sophist. Not that I wish to press the notion of a definition, which Dr Robinson himself deprecates in relation to Bonhoeffer:

> How precisely Bonhoeffer would have defined 'religion' in his vision of religionless Christianity we shall never know. What is clear is that he did not mean what the Archbishop of Canterbury refers to under that name when he asks (*Image Old and New*, p. 7), 'Will not religion still be with us: reverence, awe, dependence, adoration, and penitence?' Bonhoeffer's answer would unquestionably have been 'Yes' . . . It is because I did not wish to force any premature definition on him and thereby fail to catch what he might be saying that I let him speak in his own words. And to those who are really prepared to feel the impact of his meaning I can only say, 'Go to his letters again, and particularly those of 30 April, 5 May, 25 May, 8 June, 16 July and 18 July, 1944'.[15]

No doubt we shall never know exactly what Bonhoeffer did mean. As he tells us himself:

[13] *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, p. 2.
[14] *H.G.D.*, p. 275.
[15] *H.G.D.*, p. 270.

> I am afraid the whole thing is very much in the initial stages. As usual I am led on more by an instinctive feeling for the questions which are bound to crop up rather than by any conclusions I have reached already.[16]

But at least we may hope to catch what his, and the Bishop's meaning may be.

In the chapter of *Honest to God* entitled *The End of Theism* Dr Robinson heads a section 'Must Christianity be "Religious".' The whole section draws heavily on Bonhoeffer to show that man 'come of age' has to learn to do without God. It is preceded by a passage where that author criticises Bultmann's demythologising not because he went too far but because he did not go far enough:

> It is not only the mythological conceptions such as miracles . . . that are problematic, but the 'religious' conceptions themselves. You cannot, as Bultmann imagines, separate God and miracles, but you do have to be able to interpret and proclaim *both* of them in a 'non-religious' sense.[17]

The religious conception of God is the one in which he appears as a *deus ex machina* to explain all sorts of things which we do not understand. This is the God of all too many books of apologetics which bring in God as the final 'explanation' of the universe (and let me say here that I take this to be a radically false line of apologetic. For though it sounds very like the traditional proofs for God's existence, I believe those proofs should be seen as pointing, not to be an ultimate explanation, but to an ultimate problem). This 'God' is what Bonhoeffer and the Bishop call 'a stop-gap or long-stop'.[18] As long as men live in a world they understand very little, the temptation is to throw all the burden of explaining it upon this 'god-hypothesis'. But as we increasingly learn to come to terms with our world, so the need and plausibleness of this hypothesis diminishes. In our own time man has come of age. In the words of Bonhoeffer:

> The movement beginning about the thirteenth century . . . towards the autonomy of man (under which head I place the discovery of the laws by which the world lives and manages in science, social and political affairs, art, ethics and religion) has in our time reached a certain completion. Man has learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis . . . Everything gets along without 'God', and just as well as before. As in the scientific

[16] *Letters*, p. 106.
[17] *H.G.*, p. 35, *Letters*, p. 94.
[18] *H.G.*, p. 37, *Letters*, p. 103.

> field, so in human affairs generally, what we call 'God' is being more and more edged out of life, losing more and more ground.[19]

There are, Bonhoeffer admits, 'nervous souls' who are afraid of this development; there is the clerical reaction of taking a *salto mortale* back to the Middle Ages but:

> There isn't any such way, at any rate not at the cost (? except at the cost) of deliberately abandoning our intellectual sincerity.... The only way to be honest is to recognise that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur* . . . God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him.[20]

But it is just this escape route to a 'God' on an increasingly remote periphery that constitutes, in this context, the 'religious' attitude. Dr Robinson writes:

> Now man is discovering that for most practical purposes he manages quite happily by himself. The *religious presupposition*, that one cannot get by without invoking the god, has yielded to the secular. He finds no necessity to bring God into his science, his morals, his political speeches. Only in the private world of the individual's psychological need and insecurity—in that last corner of 'the sardine tin of life'—is room apparently left for the God who has been elbowed out of every other sphere. And so the *religious* evangelist works on men to coerce them at their weakest point into feeling that they cannot get on without the tutelage of God.[21]

Here then is one (and I think a central) account of what our authors mean by religion. It is the tying up of Christianity with an image of God that is no longer viable. For this reason Dr Robinson's criticism of the 'supranaturalist' concept of God is basic to our present question. I cannot here go at length into that question, and must content myself with saying that in my opinion such a concept of God was never valid and was abandoned long before the thirteenth century, indeed from the moment that men gave serious theological attention to the question at all.[22] But the point I do wish to make here is that this idea of 'religion' ties up very closely with the idea of God 'out there'. Just as such an image of God points to the 'beyond' rather than to God 'in our midst', so religion *in this sense* is an

[19]*Letters*, p. 106, *H.G.*, p. 36; cf. *Letters*, p. 121.
[20]*Letters*, p. 121, *H.G.*, p. 38-39.
[21]*H.G.D.*, p. 271 (my italics); cf. *H.G.*, p. 38.
[22]I suspect that what Bonhoeffer was struggling with was not a traditional concept, but a pietist attitude which tends to escape human responsibility by the short-cut of 'taking it to the Lord in prayer'. cf. Canon Raven's remarks in *Praying for Daylight*, ed. by J. C. Neil-Smith, pp. 55, 57.

escape from ordinary life to a special realm 'beyond'. It makes for an other-worldliness which has nothing to do with this world and its problems. And this involves what Dr Robinson calls the 'current trivialisation of God':

> As Werner Pelz has said 'We must realise that when we use the word "God" we are talking about something which no longer connects with anything in most people's life, except with whatever happens to be left over when all the vital connections have been made.[23]

Understanding 'religion' in this sense, it is easy to see why there is so much triviality and unreality in certain forms of religiousness, and an inclination to make a separate, churchy, unreal department of life in which to practise it.

But this is a caricature of religion. Like a good caricature it has quite a real foundation in fact. There are people, all too many of them, whose 'religion' takes this escapist form. There are people, particularly amongst those whose religious allegiance is quite conventional, or who have no religion at all, for whom this is the proper shape of religion—people who require that it should be made to be and to look quite different from ordinary life, so that they are shocked if, for example, a church does not look like 'a church' (gothicky and ecclesiastical), or a clergyman does not look every inch a clergyman. But this is *not* what religion in practice has meant to those who have taken it seriously, whether in the past or present. Very far from escaping their secular role they have been men and women up to their necks in the world. And there seems to be something suspect about the suggestion that religionless Christianity, Christianity without *this kind* of religion, is something new. Indeed I am puzzled by a curiously ambiguous passage of Dr Robinson's:

> Bonhoeffer's insistence, which echoes that of classical spirituality all down the ages, is that Christ must be met at the centre of life—*but at the centre of a life where a religious sector can no longer be presupposed as a special point of entry or contact.* This is the new factor, and why I believe Bonhoeffer's contribution is probably the most radically original . . . and could not have been made before the middle of the twentieth century.[24]

The Bishop here admits that it is part of 'classical Christian spirituality' that Christ should be met at the centre of life. But he suggests that until our own day there was always a 'sector' of life, the properly religious sector, which was privileged as a point where man and God made contact.

[23] *H.G.D.*, p. 229.
[24] *H.G.D.*, p. 271-272.

He seems to be having it both ways: Christ to be met at the centre of life, but at the same time (in classical thinking) religion as the point at which man escapes from this centre to God. I think what has happened is that the Bishop has erected the Aunt Sally of a particular and bad way of thinking of God and then made men who did not so think of him, and whose spiritual attitude proves that they did not, bear the responsibility for so thinking.

To the extent that religionless Christianity is to be interpreted as meaning that we are to do without God as a *deus ex machina* it may be said to be 'godless'. But this is only to say that it must do without a false way of thinking of God. It is no part of Dr Robinson's message to do away with God altogether. But if this is so, there is great danger of confusion in the use of rhetorical expressions like 'God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him' or Tillich's 'You must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself'.[25] And this kind of rhetoric becomes even more misleading when Bonhoeffer writes that the Christian 'must plunge himself into a life of a godless world, without attempting to gloss over its ungodliness with a veneer of religion'. For the question is whether the godlessness of the world today is the absence of the sense of God truly, or of an idol *deus ex machina*. The rhetoric comes full circle when Bonhoeffer writes: 'Now that it has come of age the world is more godless, and perhaps it is for that very reason nearer to God than ever before'.[26] Both he and the Bishop seem to be a little too ready to suppose that when a false image of God has been disposed of, we are left quite simply with a true one; we may be left with nothing at all. The same kind of thing has to be said about their advice to live a 'worldly' life. It can lead to men understanding not only that they are to be *in* the world, but also *of* it in a quite un-Johannine sense.[27]

But let us continue our pursuit of the meaning of 'religion'. Dr Robinson writes:

> Suppose men come to feel that they can get along perfectly well without 'religion', without any desire for personal salvation, without any sense of sin, without any need of that (god) hypothesis.[28]

Here, besides the sense of 'religion' we have already seen, it is equated with desire for personal salvation, and sense of sin. These ideas too come

[25]cf. *H.G.*, p. 17.
[26]*Letters*, p. 124.
[27]Jn. 17.14 ff.
[28]*H.G.*, p. 23.

from Bonhoeffer. Writing of 'metanoia' (repentance) he insists that it means participation in the suffering of God. 'It is not in the first instance bothering about one's own needs, problems, sins, and fears'.[29] He insists on Jesus' fellowship with sinners, on the fact that the woman who was a sinner makes no 'specific confession of sin', and that many came similarly to Jesus without such confession—the centurion of Capernaum, the rich young man, the eunuch etc. They are anything but 'existences over the abyss'.[30] He writes of 'the time of *inwardness and conscience*, which is to say the time of *religion*'.[31] At first sight we seem to have here a rather different conception of religion; religion consists in a sense of sin (and more generally of weakness, as, for example, death, another suggestion he makes). But there is, in fact, a close enough connection with what we have already seen.

> Religious people speak of God when human perception is . . . at an end, or human resources fail; it is in fact always the *deus ex machina* they call to their aid, either for the so-called solving of insoluble problems or as a support in human failure—always, that is to say, helping out our human weakness or on the borders of human existence.[32]

It is the playing up of man's despair in order to bring in the god-hypothesis that makes the concern for sin a characteristically 'religious' preoccupation.

> Efforts are made to prove to a world . . . come of age that it cannot live without the tutelage of 'God'. Even though there has been a surrender on all secular problems, there still remain the so-called ultimate questions—death, guilt—on which only 'God' can furnish an answer.[33]

Now here there seems to me to be, as before, a dangerous confusion. There is no doubt a temptation to the Christian preacher to employ these terroristic tactics, this 'methodism' as Bonhoeffer sometimes calls it. And the strong emphasis on the utter corruption of man, which came in doctrinally with Luther, but was psychologically prepared for in the Middle Ages, lends itself particularly to Bonhoeffer's contrary reaction. But it is necessary to distinguish more carefully between an overwhelming obsession with sin and the proper sense that any Christian must have (in the context of a perfectly valid concept of God) of his offence against God. True, the world is, as Bonhoeffer says, 'atoned for and made new',[34]

[29] *Letters*, p. 123.
[30] *ibid.*
[31] *Letters*, p. 91 (my italics).
[32] *Letters*, p. 93 cf. p. 104.
[33] *Letters*, p. 107.
[34] *Letters*, p. 95.

as the whole Catholic concept of justification insists, but there is, surely, a sense in which the acknowledgment of guilt is a privileged moment in man's encounter with God (even with God 'in depth'). Bonhoeffer's selection of New Testament passages in this context is extraordinarily one-sided. The primitive teaching of the Apostles as witnessed by Acts was that the gospel was preached 'for the remission of sins'; and Jesus' ministry was incessantly to sinners and to those who, in contrast with the Pharisees, acknowledged their sins.[35]

In the passage quoted earlier from Dr Robinson, not only was religion equated with a sense of sin, but also with the desire for personal salvation. Here too he is drawing upon Bonhoeffer:

> What do I mean by 'to interpret in a religious manner'? In my view that means to speak on the one hand metaphysically, and on the other individualistically. Neither of them is relevant to the Bible message, or to the man of today. Is it not true to say that individualistic concern for personal salvation has almost completely left us? . . . It is not with the next world that we are concerned but with this world as created and preserved and set subject to laws and atoned for and made new.[36]

In other places Bonhoeffer speaks of this as 'inwardness'[37] which belongs to the 'time of religion'. Here too there is a connection with the 'religious' idea of God 'out there'. It is not with the next world that we are concerned, but with this. Once again I think Bonhoeffer is simply in reaction against his pietistic and subjectivist background rather than against a larger tradition of theological thought. It is in this particular connection, I think, that he so often remarks that Barth was the first to have started on the line of religionless Christianity.[38] As Paul van Buren says:

> He wanted to retrieve from the smothering arms of the religious subjectivity of 'liberal' theology the concern of traditional theology for God's work in Christ.[39]

Here I should accept without difficulty the rejection of 'religion', but without any sense that it would be engaging in a new departure. Personal salvation has never been understood in sound theological tradition except in subordination to God's purpose; there could be no question of 'using' God. St Augustine has the classic formula: *Non deo utitur sed*

[35]For a really balanced treatment of sin and guilt, see K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. II, p. 265 ff.
[36]*Letters*, p. 94–95.
[37]*Letters*, pp. 91, 92.
[38]*Letters*, pp. 91–92, 95, 109.
[39]*op. cit.*, p. 2, and p. 82.

*fruitur*,[40] man is not to use God, but to enjoy him, where *frui* (enjoy) is defined as cleaving in love to an object *for its own sake*. The man who is 'religious' in the sense of being preoccupied with his own salvation is, so far from being religious in any proper sense, deeply irreligious.

I have already mentioned earlier the rather obvious sense of 'religious' which refers to 'all those activities which go on within the circle of the sanctuary'.[41] In this sense religiousness is equivalent to what one might call 'churchiness', and it is this use perhaps which occurs most readily to Englishmen. Here rather than cite Bonhoeffer, I must refer to Dr Robinson. Bonhoeffer hardly mentions it except as the subject of an occasional query. The Bithop suggests that religion in this sense refers to 'a particular area of experience or activity into which a man may turn aside or "go apart" and which has its own psychology and sociology'. I think we may associate with this sense all the forms of withdrawal, asceticism, private religious experience mentioned by our two authors as manifestations of 'religion'. But more particularly we are concerned with liturgy and worship.

> Liturgy and worship would, on the face of it, seem to be concerned essentially with what takes place in a consecrated building, with the holy rather than the common, with 'religion' rather than 'life'. They belong to . . . that area or department of experience which appeals to the 'religious type', to those who 'like that sort of thing' . . . Worship and churchgoing except as an expression of an interest in religion would not seem to most people to be meaningful.[42]

Here yet again we find 'religion' associated with the concept of a God 'out there' divorced from real life, on the fringes. It is this kind of departmentalised activity (Sunday best as opposed to weekday, religious 'slot' as opposed to general broadcasting, etc.) which makes 'religion' only half real to modern men. That Christianity should become 'religionless' in this sense is indeed devoutly to be wished for. But to treat worship in this way is, as the Bishop himself points out, the essence of the 'religious' perversion, or as I should prefer to say, of the perversion of religion. In a fine passage on Holy Communion the Bishop points out that when it 'ceases to be the holy meal and becomes a religious service in which we turn our backs on the common and the community'[43] we have reached the high point of this perversion; for we are turning what should be the

[40]St Augustine, 83 *Quaestiones*, q. 30.
[41]*H.G.*, p. 85.
[42]*H.G.*, p. 85-86.
[43]*H.G.*, p. 86.

supreme moment of community, of personal relationship at which we encounter the depths of our being, God in Christ, into an escape route to the old idol of the 'god-hypothesis'. Certainly if this is what is meant by religion, I should agree that our Christianity must be religionless. But is this what religion must mean? Here at last the Bishop admits that we do not *need* to understand religion in his sense. In a footnote on p. 86 of *Honest to God* (and how much is packed into this one footnote!) he explains that he has so used it throughout his book 'in order to bring out Bonhoeffer's critique', and he allows that the whole discussion for and against religion is bound to be a matter of definition, of how we are using the word. Of course, but there is more to the use of words than free choice. The Bishop writes as if his use of the word 'religion' were 'the customary sense of the word'. I have tried to show that it is in fact a highly individual and specialised use. And when it is so used, it carries overtones of a fuller meaning, especially as 'religionless' suggests to the ordinary reader the abandonment of religion not only in Dr Robinson's specialised uses, but in any sense at all. Less justified still is Dr Robinson's further suggestion that his understanding of the word is not merely customary, but traditional, and his implication that we have had to wait for the enlightment of a secular twentieth century to use it in any other way. To hold this is in effect to deny that the meaning is a matter of free choice, and to say that men have *not been able* to use 'religious' in any other way till the present.

There is one respect in which, as I wish to argue, Dr Robinson parts company with Bonhoeffer. The Bishop's whole position in regard to a proper understanding of God comes not from Bonhoeffer but from Tillich. According to this, God is the 'ultimate depth of all our being'.[44] In the note to which I have just referred the Bishop is prepared to admit as an acceptable sense of 'religion' (so that Christianity need not be religionless) Tillich's definition 'Religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all its fullness'. Now in this Dr Robinson seems to me to be (a) less radical than Bonhoeffer, (b) able to save himself from a naturalism that I find it difficult to see Bonhoeffer avoiding had he had time to think his position through, and (c) forced to sell out Bonhoeffer's and his own position.

(a) He is less radical than Bonhoeffer. The latter writes as if he will no more allow talk of 'ultimate concern' than any other 'so called ultimate question', e.g. sin, death, etc. Of Tillich he says:

[44] *H.G.*, pp. 46, 47 and *passim*.

> Tillich set out to interpret the evolution of the world itself—against its will—in a religious sense, to give it its whole shape through religion. That was very courageous of him, but the world unseated him and went on by itself.[45]

Indeed one may wonder as one reads, for example, Tillich's sermon *The Shaking of the Foundations* whether Bonhoeffer would not apply to him the words he used to describe existentialist thinkers 'who demonstrate to secure, contented, happy mankind that it is really unhappy and desperate'.[46] What I am suggesting is that Tillich's appeal to 'the depth of history, the ground and aim of our social life, what you take seriously in your moral and political activity' (with which Dr Robinson makes so much play)[47] would be in Bonhoeffer's eyes just as 'religious' an attitude as any other 'methodism'.

(b) Dr Robinson does possibly save himself by his acceptance of the concept of depth of being (at least as he develops it in terms of God being Love rather than Love God[48]) from naturalism. If he did not make this move, I do not see what account of Christianity he could give which would not empty it out not only of 'religion' but of God in any sense whatever. And I do not see how without such a move Bonhoeffer can escape that consequence.

(c) But in making this move I suggest that Dr Robinson sells out his whole position in the matter of religionless Christianity. For to the extent that this ground of our being is transcendent (and unless it is transcendent we are left with humanism *tout court*) the Bishop must surely face the fact that man's relationship to this ground opens up the whole question, over again, whether there is not (I will not say a special department or sector) a special dimension of his life which should properly be called religious as opposed to profane—the dimension in which God 'in the midst' makes his intrusion. Indeed one might suggest that it is precisely the sacramental aspect of Christianity which especially manifests this dimension.[49]

To conclude, by religionless Christianity, Dr Robinson appears to reject all attitudes which result in or further the making of God into a

[45] *Letters*, p. 108-109.
[46] *Letters*, p. 107. Compare Tillich's *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 55, 'It is not an exaggeration to say that today man experiences his present situation in terms of disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness, and despair in all realms of life'.
[47] *H.G.*, p. 22, p. 47.
[48] *H.G.*, p. 52 ff.
[49] In this connection, see H. McCabe, *The New Creation*, p. 200 ff.

god-hypothesis on the fringes of life. In so far as this is meant, I have little quarrel with the concept. But this appears an arbitrary and untraditional use of the expression, fraught with possibilities of misunderstanding. Certainly the Christian is to be godless, if such be the 'god'; certainly we are not to promote this concept by the terroristic tactics of obsessing him with sins, death, etc. Certainly we should rid Christianity of false withdrawal and empty religious worship, and of selfish seeking of salvation. But none of this is to do away with God, with the recognition of our sin before God, of the contingency of this life, and of the realisation in human ways of the community of Christ's Body; none of this is to do away with true religion.

# Graham Greene's Indirection

ROGER C. POOLE

This article presents a parallel to my previous article[1] entitled 'Dante's Indirection'. Both are attempts to study a certain method of achieving effects in a reader, a method to which Kierkegaard gave the title 'Indirect Communication'. Both articles are concerned basically with Kierkegaard's technique, due to the angle from which I approach indirect methods in other writers. The expression 'Indirect Communication' is ambiguous, as was its use in Kierkegaard's own hands, and sometimes in studying it, in and for itself, one's attention is drawn to parallel and much clearer uses of the principle, when one finds it in poets or novelists of less involved theoretical pretensions. Such a man is Graham Greene, novelist, Catholic, individual. It is to him that I turn for further illustration of the principle which seems to defy (in Kierkegaard's case at least) all attempts at analysis and capture. Critics for over a century, from all countries in the world, have tried to solve the enigma of Kierkegaard's use of Indirect Communication. Perhaps his Indirection can only be approached indirectly. This essay on three novels of Graham Greene is such an attempt.

What did Kierkegaard mean by 'Indirect Communication'? This he sets forth in a book called *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, a book

[1] BLACKFRIARS, April 1963.