

## **Religionless Christianity: God's Presence in Our Faith**

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Throughout history, countless wars and acts of violence can be attributed to disagreements around the subjects of religion and spirituality. However, many disputes around these issues have been contrastingly peaceful. These times of questioning are often when we learn the most about our faith and at the same time create new beliefs and paths of worship. Two men who showed such rebellious thought lived during a time when their faith was not the only thing being drastically changed. These men were German theologians Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They contemplated an idea that at first seems paradoxical but which they made valid. 'Religionless Christianity' is a concept that is not only still relevant today, but illustrates an important element of the Christian faith.

When speaking of the tendencies of German philosopher Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Karl Barth said "One can not speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice" (Haynes and Hale 6). This statement came not simply from an opposition to Schleiermacher's way of thinking, but also from a frustration with the philosophical views at that time. Specifically, both Bonhoeffer and Barth were fighting a new and very popular movement called German idealism. An aspect of German idealism that both men strongly objected to was the idea that human beings are more important than anything else on this planet. Their justification for this claim was that we do not need anything else to make us significant. Everything else in this world would be insignificant without humans. For example, where nature is just an object with no traces of the divine and no value except for the needs of humans, humans stand alone as being ends in themselves. According to Bonhoeffer, this view not only cancels our ability to see the Holy Spirit in nature and in our lives, it also eliminates the possibility of revelation and discovery.

Another problem with the new movement was the idea that humans have the ability to find God completely. Barth counters this by saying "the human being to whom God reveals himself is the human being to whom God cannot be revealed" (Wustenberg 46). We flatter ourselves by thinking we can comprehend our eternally transcendent God. In this way, we make it harder to become the unselfish beings we want to be and again push away true revelation and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

With these criticisms of the new beliefs and teachings of German idealism came a new way of thinking for both Barth and Bonhoeffer. For Bonhoeffer, it inspired him to write of a new ideal for Christian life called 'religionless Christianity'.

To understand 'religionless Christianity', it is first important to understand the difference between religion and Christianity as well as to understand that the meaning and use of the word religion has changed over time. Essentially, it begins with the exchange of the word *religion* for the word *faith*. Before and during the Reformation, the word *religion* was used, after the Reformation religion it was replaced by the word *faith*. Because of the time of this exchange, we can see that after the reformation the words religion and faith were opposites. This polarity is even expressed and explained by Bonhoeffer: "True, God 'is' only in faith, but it is God as such who is the subject of believing. That is why faith is something essentially different from religion . . . it is faith given and willed by God, faith in which God may truly be found" (Wustenberg 44).

This idea is where the criticism of religion begins, and in effect the allure of a 'religionless Christianity'.

Many people think of the words *religion* and *Christianity* as interchangeable. Indeed, during the Wilhelminian age (1888-1918) the two words were thought of as equal to each other by the majority of people. However, Bonhoeffer defines them very differently. To Bonhoeffer, Christianity is simply a word for the community in which we "share God's sufferings in the world" a community where we are meant to "share in the sufferings of all those Others who meet us, make an ethical claim on us, [and] demand a response from us" (Haynes and Hale 84). Religion, on the other hand refers more to the concept of church and aspects pertaining to human need and human selfishness. Barth expresses both his and Bonhoeffer's feelings in the following quote: "Religion offers not spiritual healing, but only illness with respect to God. [Religion] perpetually risks believing that it has God, or knows about him, albeit in complete humility and moderation" (Wustenberg 54).

While it is relatively easy to accept and even respect the concept of 'religionless Christianity', it is indeed much harder to live it. Bonhoeffer requires things that seem revolutionary even now.

One of the main barriers to true Christianity that we have as humans is our selfishness. Bonhoeffer acknowledges and notices that as a result of this we often call on God only when we need something. It may be a simple 'Please God, help me find my car keys', or a more desperate seeking for an answer to a virtually unanswerable question, but we all find ourselves pleading for God's help at many points in our lives. Bonhoeffer suggests as a part of his 'religionless Christianity' that we as Christians try to think of God during the joyous times of our lives, and call on God not for our own benefit, but simply in thanks. To be a true Christian means that God is a part of your life always, and that includes the good times.

As complicated as Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity' seems, his main message is of a hope for simplicity. To Bonhoeffer, 'religionless Christianity' in general simply refers to Christianity stripped down to its simplest form. We must focus on the most basic aspects of Christianity, which are our relationship to God through Christ and in turn, our aspiration to live like Christ. In this way, we can remember what our faith really has to offer and also recognize in a more powerful way what Bonhoeffer intended. To be a Christian is a lifelong commitment. It is not a commitment you make to church every Sunday, or a commitment you make to a prayer before dinner. It is a commitment you make to every single hour of every single day.

Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity is more relevant than ever before in a world where people don't have time to go to church or even pray. I think as modern Christians we forget what it means to simply put our faith in God. As our lives become more complicated and Christian people become more separated by differences and sects, we must remember to simply love our neighbors and to uphold our Christian ideals. Instead of a God who helps us we must think of a God who is with us always, sharing in our pain and our success. This is the only way we can truly understand Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity.'

#### Works Cited

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