

Identity and solidarity in a pluralist society: A response to Alec Ryrie’s account of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s legacy

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Abstract

In his recent book *Protestants* (2017), historian Alec Ryrie argues that while Dietrich Bonhoeffer may have been “the bravest theologian of his generation”, the impact of his prison writings and his opaque vision of a “religionless Christianity” in a world come of age was disastrous for mainstream Protestantism in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. Ryrie’s analysis of the trajectory of Western liberal Protestantism needs to be nuanced by a more critical and contextual reading of both cultural processes of pluralisation and Bonhoeffer’s prison writings. Still, Ryrie’s sweeping claim goes to the heart of the question about the “usefulness” of Bonhoeffer’s thought and witness for the future of Christian discipleship and engagement in an increasingly post-Christian and multi-religious world. Can Bonhoeffer’s legacy assist Christians to negotiate the delicate balance between *identity* as disciples of Christ within faith communities and *solidarity* with people of other faiths or no religion affiliation?

Keywords

Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Alec Ryrie; non-religious Christianity; secularisation; Christian discipleship

In his compelling work *Protestants: The Faith That Made the Modern World* (2017), Alec Ryrie argues that the story of Protestantism in Western societies in recent decades “is one of steady decline, while secularization marches inevitably on.”¹ Ryrie is Professor of the History of Christianity at Durham

1 Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Faith that Made the Modern World* (New York: Viking, 2017).

University and an internationally recognised specialist on the Reformation in England and Scotland. Ryrie argues that in the immediate post-1945 period the Christian churches expressed confidence in their contribution to society, as a result of the perceived success of Judeo-Christian social values in restraining international fascism and communism. The churches played an influential societal role by providing the moral and social principles for the development of Christian national identity in the USA and of Christian Democratic politics in Western Europe. However, by the 1960s this role had been eroded, according to Ryrie, by the “powerful cultural headwinds” of secularization, exacerbated by mainstream Protestantism’s “fateful seduction by the half-developed notion of religionless Christianity” (314), a term taken from the prison letters of Lutheran pastor and anti-Nazi activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945).

Ryrie shines an unforgiving light on Bonhoeffer’s “inconclusive reflections” about the role of the Christian churches in a “world come of age” (303), and on Bonhoeffer’s legacy as his writings were taken up and applied by leaders of Protestant churches and student movements in the UK and the USA. The alignment of notions such as a “religionless Christianity” and a “world come of age” with civil rights and anti-war movements in the 1960s had disastrous consequences for the identity and role of the Christian churches, Ryrie argues. “By the 1970s, the established Protestant churches of the Western world were in free fall, bleeding members, clergy, and money, with the Catholic Church not far behind” (316). While there have been some conservative and evangelical attempts to reclaim a public role for Christianity in the USA, the situation of decline has persisted in most Western societies. In what follows I will investigate Ryrie’s assessment of Bonhoeffer’s prison writings and of their reception in the English-speaking world in the decades after his death. I will argue that the author reads Bonhoeffer through the lens of a rationalist secularization thesis, prolonging a misunderstanding that critical Bonhoeffer studies have long challenged. Then I will draw on Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology to respond to Ryrie’s important question about the possibility of a Christian identity that holds together the particularity of faith commitment with the openness and solidarity required for a public role in a pluralised Western society.

Ryrie's story of Bonhoeffer and his reception in Protestantism

Professor Ryrie is critical but sympathetic towards the plight of Protestants in Nazi Germany. He argues that in the face of increasing secularism and socialist anti-Christianity after World War I, “many Protestants saw Nazism as a stepping-stone to national revival” for the state church (274). Then, as the systematic violence and racism of the regime became evident, most church people were disinclined to show public resistance to the Nazi government due, on the one hand, to the “apolitical instinct” of loyalty to the state inherited from Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms (270) and, on the other, to the persistent harassment of church leaders and activities by the Nazi administration. In church elections organised by Hitler in 1933, the pro-Nazi *Deutsche Christen* won power in twenty-four of the twenty-seven regional churches. Even those Protestants aligned with the Confessing Church showed little collective resistance to the racist policies of the Reich government. Indeed, Ryrie claims, even Bonhoeffer himself, one of the few Protestant voices raised in public against these policies, struggled to articulate a theological basis for church resistance to the Nazi’s solution to the “Jewish question”. Although some church people, Bonhoeffer among them, were motivated by their Christian principles to act individually and in small collectives to protect the vulnerable and speak out against the Nazi state on their behalf, “the central and terrible fact of Protestantism in Nazi Germany is that most Protestants were either complicit or indifferent as unimaginable crimes unfolded around them” (289). And though today we would like to think we would react differently in those circumstances, the author claims, it is unlikely that we would. “There is only one reason why we do not share their guilt: we were not there” (290).

Against the backdrop of this “defining moral event of the modern age”, the Christian churches struggled to reassess their identity and role in Western societies in the years following the war. “The story of Christianity in the Western democracies since 1945 is largely the story of how this moral shock has been faced and assimilated, a process that is still underway” (298). One response identified by Ryrie stemmed from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who had been imprisoned by the Nazis in April 1943 and executed just before the war ended. Bonhoeffer, “the bravest theologian of his generation” (302), wrote letters from his Tegel cell to his friend and

colleague Eberhard Bethge, grappling with the nature of Christian faith and life in the wake of the collapse of Germany and its cultural and religious foundations. In fact, Bonhoeffer wrote, a major reason for this religious collapse was that people “simply cannot be religious anymore”² as a result of the gradual historical transition in Western culture from a religious and biblical interpretation of reality to an autonomous and scientific interpretation. Since the Enlightenment this “time of religion” had been under increasing pressure and yet, Bonhoeffer argued, the church had not been willing to face up to the challenge of reforming its identity and mission in relation to the world “come of age”. Now, with Christian Germany in ruins, the church must learn to embody a “religionless Christianity”, in Ryrice’s words: “to strip away hierarchies, forms, jargon, wealth, and power ... serving the world in weakness from the cross” (302).

When Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison were published in English in 1953, Ryrice continues, these themes of “religionless Christianity” and the “world come of age”, along with the sharp critique of the church’s ineffective response to Western modernity, were enthusiastically taken up by liberal Protestant church and student movement leaders in the United States and Great Britain. Bonhoeffer’s call for a “nonreligious” and “worldly” form of Christianity resonated with the anti-institutional and forward-looking spirit of the progressive social and civil rights movements of the 1960s, and many Christians found in Bonhoeffer’s ideas the language to express their impatience with a “churchiness which looks after its own institutional welfare rather than loving the world regardless of cost” and to motivate their quest for a more authentic way to express their faith (303). This enthusiasm took a fateful turn, in Ryrice’s view, when a more revolutionary and sensationalist use of Bonhoeffer’s language was made by radical theologians in the UK and death of God theologians in the USA, with the publicity surrounding Bishop Robinson’s *Honest to God* and Paul van Buren’s *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* in 1963, and Altizer and Hamilton’s *Radical Theology and the Death of God* in 1966.³ This quest for

2 See the letter to Bethge of 30 April 1944 in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. DBWE 8 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 361-365.

3 John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963); Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Thomas J. Altizer and William

a secular theology and a worldly form faith, indebted to Bonhoeffer though not his intention, has proven disastrous for progressive Christianity in general and the Christian Left in the United States in particular. Leaders of the mainstream Christian Church wielded “the principle of religionless Christianity to saw off the branch on which it sat” (317), as many of the faithful walked away from church membership and Christian identification while others took refuge in conservative countercultures, some of which, ironically, have found inspiration in their own reading of Bonhoeffer’s resistance to an unrestrained state. Looking to the future, Ryrie raises the important question whether established Protestantism in the West can balance its Christian distinctiveness with an openness to the pluralist and secular culture of today, and “find a way of asserting their religion’s meaning and power while maintaining their hard-won commitment to a genuinely inclusive society” (323).

Assessing Ryrie’s reading of Bonhoeffer

How should we assess Professor Ryrie’s use of Bonhoeffer’s ideas and legacy in this sweeping survey of Western Protestantism in the late twentieth century? Reviewing *Protestants* in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 15 December 2019, Arnold Hunt considers Ryrie’s claims that Bonhoeffer’s ideas in prison were “half-baked” and that the influence of those ideas on the 1960s reform movements was “utterly disastrous” to be a “jarring note” in an “otherwise genial and good-natured book”.⁴ While it seems to me that the main target of Ryrie’s criticism is the leadership and policies of the Christian Left in the 1960s Anglophone cultural context rather than Bonhoeffer’s own thought and context, the book *Protestants* does present a decontextualized and piecemeal account of Bonhoeffer’s theological work as well as a partial and uncritical analysis of Bonhoeffer’s legacy in the Western churches and, more recently, in global Christianity. I will briefly

Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (London: Penguin, 1966). See Eleanor McLaughlin, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Death of God Theologians,” in Matthew D. Kirkpatrick (ed.), *Engaging Bonhoeffer: The Impact and Influence of Bonhoeffer’s Life and Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 25–44.

4 Arnold Hunt, ‘Stripped Back: How England Experienced the Reformation,’ *TLS* (15 December 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/stripped-back/> [Accessed: 22 December 2019].

indicate three areas where Ryrie’s treatment of Bonhoeffer or his legacy in the West is particularly unsatisfactory.

The book’s first reference to Bonhoeffer deals briefly with his 1933 essay on “The Church and the Jewish Question”.⁵ Ryrie considers this essay to be a “blunt solution” to the issue of theological support for resistance to the Nazi’s racist policies, since Bonhoeffer’s thinking was enmeshed in the “classic two-kingdoms mode” of Lutheran theology, which tended to separate the requirements of temporal and the spiritual realms, and to limit the church’s right to speak on state policies to extreme situations in which a government might fail in its God-given obligations to uphold public order and lawfulness (271). Indeed, this early essay has been one of the most intensely debated writings of Bonhoeffer’s legacy. It has been criticised for “several equivocal and problematic paragraphs” that are neither “convincing nor compatible with contemporary, post-Holocaust political and theological perspectives.”⁶ Some Bonhoeffer scholars have highlighted Bonhoeffer’s emphatic critique of the dualistic and static model of “two-realms” thinking that prevailed in nineteenth century German theology, both in the ecumenical writings of the early 1930s and also in his later *Ethics* manuscripts.⁷ Victoria Barrett has suggested that Bonhoeffer’s concern in the 1933 essay is primarily the question of state legitimacy rather than concern for Jewish victims.⁸ Recently, Michael DeJonge has argued

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin 1932-1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins, *DBWE* 12 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 361-370.

6 Ruth Zerner, Church, State and the “Jewish Question,” in John Walter De Gruchy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 190-205.

7 For his early thought on this topic see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work 1931-1932*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, Mark S. Brocker and Michael B. Lukens, trans. Anne Schmidt-Lange, Isabel Best, Nicholas Humphrey, and Marion Pauck, *DBWE* 11 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012) and for his later reflections see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, *DBWE* 6 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), On this see Clifford Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 290; ‘Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,’ *DBWE* 6:21; Larry Rasmussen, The Ethics of Responsible Action, in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 206-225.

8 Victoria J. Barnett, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Relevance for Post-Holocaust Christian Theology,” in Peter Frick (ed.), *Bonhoeffer and Interpretive Theory: Essays on Methods and Understanding* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), 213-237.

that Bonhoeffer's critical retrieval of Luther's theology of the spiritual and temporal realms provided him with the theological resources to mount a personal and public stance of resistance to the inhumane actions of the Nazi state.⁹ In the light of ongoing Bonhoeffer scholarship, and in contrast to the dismissive remarks in *Protestants*, a balanced evaluation of Bonhoeffer's thought on the role of the German Protestant Church in the face of the *Judenfrage* requires a critical engagement with both his earlier and later writings on a range of theological themes – his critical retrieval of Luther's thinking on the two realms, his rejection of the orders of creation theory (*Ordnungstheologie*) promoted by pro-Nazi theologians, the theology of the divine mandates in his *Ethics* manuscripts, his relational and dynamic understanding of the relationship between church and state, his recognition of the church's guilt during the Nazi years¹⁰ – as well as the limited but effective actions he took individually and with others to advocate for and protect non-Aryan Christians and Jews at risk of harassment, deportation and death.¹¹

A second instance of the cursory and decontextualized treatment of Bonhoeffer's thought in *Protestants* is the discussion of the “new theology” of Bonhoeffer's prison letters. Ryrie states, in my view correctly, that when Bonhoeffer coined the term “religionless Christianity” he “did not mean some milk-and-water rationalization of the faith, stripped of revelation or divine power” (302). Indeed, in the author's opinion, his “diagnosis of a crabbed, formal institutionalization in the churches strangling the Gospel was authentically Protestant” (315). Still, the “groping”, “tentative” and “half-developed” notions Bonhoeffer produced in prison, left unresolved in his surviving letters, constitute a ticking bomb threatening a destructive future impact. Ryrie claims that Bonhoeffer never intended his “inconclusive

9 Michael J. DeJonge, Bonhoeffer's Two Kingdom's Thinking in “The Church and the Jewish Question”, in Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (eds.), *Christ, Church and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 2016), 141-160; *Bonhoeffer's Reception of Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); *Bonhoeffer on Resistance: The Word Against the Wheel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

10 *DBWE* 6:141.

11 See Zerner's “Chronicle of compassion and courage” in “Church, State and the ‘Jewish Question’”, 197; Elisabeth Sifton and Fritz Stern, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi: Resisters Against Hitler in Church and State* (New York: New York Review Books, 2013).

musings in private letters” to be a manifesto (315). While this is true to some extent, it is clear that Bonhoeffer was developing a line of thought connecting motifs like “the end of the time of religion”, “religionless Christianity,” a “nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts”, and the nature of Christian faith and church-community (Gemeinde) in a “world come of age”. These historical-theological terms were the heuristic tools Bonhoeffer used to develop his argument for what an adequate response by the church to its immediate context, which Bonhoeffer begins to synthesise in the “outline for a book” he intended to complete.¹² Indeed, he explicitly requested his correspondent Bethge to retain the letters in which he discussed these motifs so he could continue his work in the future.¹³ In *Protestants* no attempt is made to relate the language of “religionless Christianity” to Bonhoeffer’s well-developed reflections on the nature of Christian faith and the place of the church in post-Christendom society, both in the prison writings and in the large corpus of his earlier work, all of which is readily accessible in the German and English critical editions. Nor is there evidence of any engagement by the author with contemporary Bonhoeffer scholarship. Rather the book is content to treat these prison motifs as though they were, in Edwin Robertson’s memorable phrase, “sparks from the anvil as Bonhoeffer was hammered by the Nazis” rather than “the results of careful and prolonged thought in the years that lead up to the Nazi regime.”¹⁴

Thirdly, if Ryrie is critical but sympathetic towards German Christians in the Nazi years, he is even more critical and much less sympathetic towards the liberal Protestants who took up Bonhoeffer’s motif of “religionless Christianity” and transformed it into a war cry in the battle for civil rights, social reform, and anti-institutional emancipation during the 1960s. Here again, Ryrie gives a selective and decontextualized account of Bonhoeffer’s reception in the English-speaking world, focussing uncritically on the use of the terminology of *Letters and Papers from Prison*

12 DBWE 8:499-504.

13 See the letters to Bethge on 8 July, DBWE 8:458, and 18 July, DBWE 8:480.

14 Edwin H. Robertson, “Introduction,” in *No Rusty Swords* (London: Collins, 1965), 7.

by Bishop John Robinson in *Honest to God* (1963),¹⁵ by the leadership of British and American Christian students' associations and of the World Council of Churches, and on Bonhoeffer's hero-status in the American civil rights and other social justice movements. This promotion of a type of this-worldly and secular form of Christian discipleship contributed, in Ryrie's assessment, to the gradual diminishment of mainstream Protestant identity in Western countries and to a crisis of the Religious Left in the United States. Certainly, an alignment of Bonhoeffer's prison writings with English-language "death-of-God" theologies and the German-language demythologization hermeneutics of the 1960s is a feature of the early reception of his published works in the Anglo-American world. However, a fuller and more contextual account of the reception of Bonhoeffer's thought and reputation in Germany and the English-speaking world has been articulated by historians and theologians interested in Bonhoeffer's legacy over recent decades, greatly facilitated by the gradual appearance of German and English editions of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*. A central theme of this critical reappraisal of Bonhoeffer's legacy has been the need to locate the popular reception of Bonhoeffer's prison letters by radical and "death of God" theologians as well as by student and social justice movements in the 1960s within the much more complex process of Bonhoeffer's entire corpus becoming available to and engaged by academics, church leaders and a public audience.¹⁶ Recent studies reflect the diverse and interconnected patterns of reception of Bonhoeffer's theology in Germany, England and Scotland, North and South America, South Africa and beyond, in the decades after the war.¹⁷ Already in 1968, a Scottish theologian familiar with a wider range of Bonhoeffer's German

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- 15 For a critical reassessment of Bishop Robinson's book and the publicity it attracted see N. T. Wright, "The Honest to God Controversy," in Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 621-633.
- 16 See *Standing Responsibly Between Silence and Speech: Religion and Revelation in the Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and René Girard* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 5-33; John W. de Gruchy, "The Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 93-109; Martin E. Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). The Editor's Introduction to the various volumes of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works provide helpful information on the reception of Bonhoeffer's writings during and after his life.
- 17 Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, (ed.), *Engaging Bonhoeffer: The Impact and Influence of Bonhoeffer's Life and Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016); Philip G.

writings than the popular use of the prison motifs railed against the co-opting of the language of the prison writings by theological projects that were at odds with Bonhoeffer's overall vision: "Let us see how grotesque the current cult of "Bonhoeffer" is, when it resurrects him from the dead dressed up in the stolen garments of an existentialized and secularizing "Christianity" grounded upon the dualist assumptions that he overthrew."¹⁸ It is unfortunate that having drawn such direct attention to Bonhoeffer and his language of "religionless Christianity", Professor Ryrie fails to offer a more careful reading of the *Letters and Papers from Prison* and of the complex reception of Bonhoeffer's thought in the 1950s and 60s, instead prolonging this "cult" of Bonhoeffer as the progenitor of a de-confessionalized and non-ecclesial form of Christian life in Western societies.

Secularization, Bonhoeffer and the World come of Age

In *Protestants*, the author describes the appeal of Bonhoeffer's talk of "religionless Christianity" as a consequence of the broader phenomenon of progressive secularization within Western societies since the 1960s. After an initial post-war surge in Christian identification and practice, since the cultural upheavals of the late 1960s the churches have dramatically declined in membership and social influence "while secularization marches on" (291). In this context, secularization refers precisely to the process of removal of religion from the public sphere and the decline of religious faith and practice among individuals. Ryrie is aware that the oft-repeated assertion that secularization is an "unstoppable historical force" is "no more than prophecy" (316), and that the zero-sum dialectic of modernity and religion in the secularization thesis prevalent in sociological studies in the 1960s and 70s is a "myth" (291). Still, he seems to accept this understanding of the secularization and sees "no sign of the tide turning" (316). He argues that against the backdrop of increasing secularization,

Ziegler and Michael Mawson, (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

18 Thomas F. Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace," *The Baptist Quarterly* 22, no. 6 (1968): 290-311, here 304. By "dualist assumptions" Torrance is referring to the "two-spheres" thinking in Lutheranism that Bonhoeffer argues against in his ecumenical addresses and in *Ethics*.

Bonhoeffer’s language of “the end of religion” and “the world come of age” resonated as prophetic utterances for church leaders seeking to secure a role for Christianity in a secular society, and the quest for a “religionless” form of Christianity could only mean a Christianity without church structures, creedal beliefs, liturgical practices, or roles. However, as I and others have noted, the categories of the modern secularization thesis are foreign to Bonhoeffer’s thinking in the context of 1930s and 1940s Germany.¹⁹ Ralf Wüstenberg has outlined the consensus view of most commentators: “Bonhoeffer neither defines religion conceptually, nor develops any closed theory of religion.”²⁰ Rather, he uses the terms “religion” and “religionless” in a range of casual and more formal ways throughout his life, influenced deeply by Luther’s writings, by the nineteenth century critics of established Christianity such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and from 1925 by the theology of Karl Barth.²¹ In the prison letters to Bethge it is the historical and hermeneutical (*geistesgeschichtliche*) senses of the term “religion” that Bonhoeffer exploited in order to throw into relief his central concern: that of discerning the presence of the living Christ taking historical form *als Gemeinde* in the concrete circumstances of the here and now. Christoph Schwöbel has written that in the prison writings, Bonhoeffer uses the term “religion” as “a critical evaluative term for assessing the misguided response of theology and the church” to the end of Christendom as it progressively manifested itself in various spheres of social life from the seventeenth century on.²²

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- 19 See Lenehan, *Standing Responsibly Between Silence and Speech*, 107-119. Jan Bremmer describes the transformation of the term ‘secularization’ from a purely descriptive term into a normative paradigm during the 1960s in “Secularization: Notes Toward a Genealogy,” in Hent de Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 432-437. For an alternative reading of secularisation in the US context, see David Hollinger, “Christianity and its American Fate: Where History Meets Secularization Theory,” in Joel Isaac, James T. Kloppenberg, Michael O’Brien, and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen (eds.), *The Worlds of American Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 280-303.
- 20 Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 29.
- 21 See Peter Frick, *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in his Thought*, Religion in Philosophy and Theology 29 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).
- 22 Christoph Schwöbel, “Religion” and “Religionlessness” in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, in Kirsten Busch Nielsen, Ulrich Nissen and Christiane Tietz (eds.), *Mysteries in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007), 159-183, at 169.

While Ryrie is alert to the limits of the classical secularization thesis, he offers no alternative hermeneutical framework in *Protestants* for interpreting the dramatic social and religious changes in Western democracies since World War II. His account of the decline of Christianity in the West relies notably on Hugh McLeod's *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*,²³ including McLeod's insistence on the importance of Bonhoeffer for the Christian student and civil rights movements of the 1960s. Ryrie does not follow McLeod, however, in developing his hermeneutical framework from a Christianity-versus-secularism theory to a more complex account of the pluralisation and individualisation of worldviews in late modern societies. According to McLeod, "the 1960s brought an explosion of new ways of understanding the world", including Christian, socialist, scientific, other world religions, new spiritualities (including Eastern mysticism and charismatic or Pentecostal forms of Christianity), as well as secularist and atheistic worldviews.²⁴ Peter Berger, a former proponent of the modernist secularization thesis, agrees that this shift to a paradigm of pluralization and individualization in the West is required. "Today you cannot plausibly maintain that modernity necessarily leads to secularization ... On the other hand I would argue that modernity very likely ... leads to pluralism, to a pluralization of worldviews, values, etc., including religion."²⁵

It seems to me that this recognition of the plurality of religious, nonreligious and hybrid worldviews is a more useful interpretive frame for reading Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and for the reception of Bonhoeffer's theology in an increasingly global Christianity, than is the secularization thesis prevalent in the late twentieth century. A hermeneutic of pluralisation helps to contextualise Bonhoeffer in his various familial, cultural, ecclesial, and professional settings, including his relationships

23 Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

24 McLeod, *The Religious Crisis*, 242-246.

25 Charles T. Mathewes, "An Interview with Peter Berger", *The Hedgehog Review* 8, nn. 1-2 (2006): 152-161, at 152-153; Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); "Faith in a Pluralist Age," in Kaye V. Cook (ed.), *Faith in a Pluralistic Age* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 11-18. See also Harvey Cox, "The Myth of the Twentieth Century: The Rise and Fall of "Secularization", in Gregory Baum (ed.), *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 135-143.

with co-conspirators and co-prisoners in his later years. The pluralisation paradigm is also more effective than the zero-sum secularization thesis as a context for interpreting the complex and often contradictory reception of Bonhoeffer's legacy, not only in Western (post-Christendom) countries but also in the various global contexts where Bonhoeffer's theology and witness continue to have an impact.²⁶ Already in his *Secular Christianity* (1966), Ronald Gregor Smith has argued – against the “death-of-God” theologians – that it was necessary to distinguish between “secularization” as an historical phenomenon in the West, of “secularism” as reductionist ideology imposed on society, and “secularity” as an intentional stance within a pluralistic setting of religious and nonreligious worldviews.²⁷ More recently other scholars, such as McLeod, José Casanova²⁸ and Charles Taylor,²⁹ have since reinforced the need for a hermeneutic of multiple modernities and differentiated secularizations in assessing the social changes of the last century.

However, Ryrie's account of the decline of mainstream Protestantism in the West culminates in an important question in this context of cultural and religious pluralisation. It is the question of whether Christian churches and faith communities can “discover a way to be genuinely pluralist while still having an identity of their own” (323). This issue of holding together the *particularity* of a confessional worldview or religious identity with an open and inclusive *solidarity* with people of other worldviews and identities goes to the heart of the question about the “usefulness” of Bonhoeffer's thought and witness for the future of Christian discipleship and public engagement in increasingly post-Christian and multi-religious societies, and of his

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- 26 See Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter, (eds.), *Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013); Kirkpatrick, *Engaging Bonhoeffer*; Ziegler and Mawson, *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*; Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers*, 178-210; Raimundo C. Barreto, Jr, “Bonhoeffer in Latin American Liberationist Christianity and Theology”, in Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (ed.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 193-210.
- 27 R. Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1966). On this see Keith W. Clements, “A Tale of Two Bonhoeffers?”, in *Engaging Bonhoeffer*, 11-12.
- 28 José Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective”, *The Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1-2 (2006):7-22.
- 29 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

fundamental concern for how “a coming generation is to go on living.”³⁰ Let me suggest that Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology offers valuable resources for taking up the theological-practical task of articulating a way of being church within pluralising and secularising societies today.

Christian identity and ecclesiology in pluralistic societies

Bonhoeffer himself posed the question of the tension between communal identity and solidarity with others at the end of the preface of *Discipleship* (1937). “Today it seems so difficult to walk with certainty the narrow path of the church’s decision and yet remain wide open to Christ’s love for all people, and in God’s patience, mercy, and loving-kindness (*philanthrōpia*, Tit 3:4) for the weak and the godless. Still, both must remain together, or else we will follow merely human paths.”³¹ The “narrow door” of the church’s confession and the “wide open stance” towards others must “remain together” in any authentic embodiment of discipleship and church community. Even in the increasingly precarious and risky circumstances of his church context, with both external and internal pressures mounting, Bonhoeffer insists that the church, the community of the cross, must hold the tension between identity and solidarity in its attempt to follow its Lord evermore deeply into the world of its time. Why does Bonhoeffer think this way, when so many of his contemporaries were opting either to protect and isolate the church from external threats or to integrate the church more fully into the operations of the state regime?

Bonhoeffer’s insistence on holding together ecclesial identity and solidarity with others flows from his fundamental theological understandings about the nature of the church as the place where the crucified and risen Christ, the living Word of God, becomes historically concrete in the here and now. For Bonhoeffer, adjusting a maxim of Hegel’s, the church is “Christ existing as community” (*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*) both locally

30 Bonhoeffer, “After Ten Years”, *DBWE* 8:42.

31 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, *DBWE* 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 40.

and universally.³² Therefore, the church community participates in both the identity and the mission of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer explores these two dimensions and their implications for contemporary Christians in *Discipleship*, whose first part is a meditation on the mission of Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), and whose second part is a theological study of St Paul's teaching on the church as the Body of Christ. At the conclusion of *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer underlines the union of identity and mission by two wordplays. Because the Christian disciple bears Christ's image (*Bild*), Christ's solidarity with others is the example (*Vorbild*) they follow. Thus by being the follower (*Nachfolger*) of Jesus one becomes the imitator (*Nachahmer*) of God.³³

So, in Bonhoeffer's view, for the church to adopt public strategies that focus exclusively either on the purity of its communal identity or on alignment with state policies was to risk its faithfulness to this Gospel-informed tension between identity and solidarity, between belonging and mission. By choosing either sectarianism or accommodationism the church becomes invisible in the public eye, either in self-referential irrelevance or in compliant impotence. Bonhoeffer argues for the more difficult stance of existing in between visibility (identity) and hiddenness (solidarity with others). His rationale for this argument is theological: since his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit exist between the visibility of the world and the hiddenness of the divine life.

Although they cannot be developed fully here, we can identify a number of key motifs in Bonhoeffer's theology can help to build an understanding of the church as both identity and mission in a pluralistic setting:

- the personalist and dialogal anthropology Bonhoeffer develop in his Berlin dissertations and lectures, partly in reaction to the idealist and metaphysical systems of nineteenth century Protestant thought, but also to express the scriptural vision of humanity created in relation

32 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, *DBWE* 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 189.

33 *DBWE* 4:281-288.

to God, others and the world, a relationship Bonhoeffer explains through an *analogia relationis* between the Creator and the creature.³⁴

- the personalist and historical understanding of divine revelation Bonhoeffer develops through interaction with the theology of Luther, Hegel, Harnack and Barth, among others, in which the saving address of God to the world in the event of Christ and the Spirit, always in the conditions of visibility and hiddenness, becomes concrete in the *hic et nunc* of the believing community.³⁵
- the personalist and incarnational Christology Bonhoeffer outlines in the early Berlin lectures and develop in various ways throughout this life up to the prison writings, in which Christ, as the event of God’s self-revealing address to the world, is the divine-human person-existing-for-others, living as the centre (*Mitte*) and mediator (*Mittler*) of all relationship within creation.³⁶
- the personalist and relational ecclesiology that Bonhoeffer develops on the basis of these understandings of anthropology, revelation, and Christology, in which the graced relationality of the church community mediates a personal relationship with the living Christ and relationships of *caritas* with others, as the church receives its place in the world through discipleship and discernment.³⁷
- the dynamic and non-dualistic understanding of reality Bonhoeffer outlines in his ecumenical and academic lectures, rejecting a dualistic two-kingdoms thinking and insisting on God’s continuous creative and reconciling relationship with all creation in Christ, and develops

34 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, *DBWE* 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 1997, 65.

35 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt, *DBWE* 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 59-61. On this see my “Saying the Right Word at the Right Hour: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Reading the Signs of the Times,” *Pacifica* 25 (June 2012):141-160.

36 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lectures on Christology, in *Berlin 1932-1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins, *DBWE* 12 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 314- 327.

37 See Bonhoeffer’s 1932 Berlin lectures on the nature of the church in *DBWE* 11:317-28.

further in the *Ethics* where he explores the incarnational unity of the mystery of God and the mystery of the world.³⁸

- Bonhoeffer’s reframing of Luther’s doctrine of the estates in his theology of the divine mandates, distinct yet dynamically interacting concrete expressions of human response to God’s Word (see below).
- the necessity of discernment in Christian discipleship and in the church’s relationship with its others, in practices that bring together simple obedience (*einfältige Gehorsam*) to the One who calls through the Gospel and the use of critical reflection through rational enquiry.³⁹

Central to Bonhoeffer’s theological vision is the personalist and relational model of church that he explored in his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* and that he applied in various contexts throughout his life, up to the “Outline for a Book” he sketched in prison in August 1944. In his *Habilitationschrift* published as *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer dismisses as inadequate the models of the church based on (a) theoretical systems, (b) self-consciousness, or (c) institutional forms (whether Catholic or Protestant). Rather, through God’s self-donation as grace in the event of Christ and in the hearts of believers, God creates and relates with a person-like community (*personhaften Gemeinde*) that becomes the place of the ongoing incarnation of the Word in the world. The recreated relationality of the church community, among its own members and in its relations with those beyond its boundaries, becomes the locus of God’s ongoing revelation and incarnation in the world. “Hence the Gospel is somehow held fast there. God’s freedom has woven itself into this person-like community of faith, and it is precisely this that manifests what God’s freedom is: that God binds God’s self to human beings.”⁴⁰

38 DBWE 6:83.

39 See “Discerning Discipleship in Pluralistic Societies: Bonhoeffer’s Strategy for Post-Ideological Engagement,” in Nikolaos Asproulis and Stuart Devenish (eds.), *In-Breakings: Instances of Christian Spiritual Life in a Supposedly Secular Age* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 25-42; Joshua A. Kaiser, *Becoming Simple and Wise: Moral Discernment in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Vision of Christian Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

40 DBWE 2:112.

This relational model of the Christian *Gemeinde* and its mission in the world is applied in Bonhoeffer's ethical reflections about the four mandates, those human and social forms in and through which we respond in faith to God's Word in the concrete circumstances of life: church, family, work/culture, and government. The mandates are dynamically relational in both form and content; they are "with" and "for" each other and also "over against" each other (*Miteinander, Füreinander, Gegeneinander*). They are both oriented towards one another and mutually limiting, held in a tensive unity in the "one reality" of God and the world.⁴¹ The church community, as a "distinct corporate entity" brought into being by the Word of God does not rule the world, but serves the proclamation of the Word throughout all spheres of humanity as the "instrument and means" but also the "goal and centre" of God's reconciling and saving action in history.⁴² This sacramental understanding of the church is echoed in the "Outline for a Book". Here the relational and incarnational character of the church orients *Gemeinde* towards all humanity as "church for others", including its foes and persecutors, the dismissive and disinterested, in an existence of "being there for others", in relationships of solidarity in the tasks of life, of genuine service and support *in imitatione Christi* and of his ministry. This will require the church to confront its own privilege and wealth, hubris, love of power, envy, and illusory self-perception, and relate to others with authenticity, trust, faithfulness, patience, humility and self-discipline.⁴³

What is at stake is the need to discern the appropriate embodiment of particularity and solidarity, of visibility and hiddenness, to which the church is called by the living Word becoming incarnate in today's context. Bonhoeffer reflects on this practice of discernment throughout his life and it is a driving concern of the *Ethics* and the prison writings. Central to authentic discernment for churches is the tension between deepening the identity of believers in encounter with the living Christ in and through the *Gemeinde* and strengthening the solidarity of the *Gemeinde* with those others to whom the Lord leads in each historical and cultural context. This holding in tension of identity and solidarity, of particularity and

41 DBWE 6:393.

42 DBWE 6:404.

43 DBWE 8:500-504.

universality, is the work of *ecclesiogenesis*,⁴⁴ in which church communities become more faithfully the Body of Christ by way of ever-new and ever-stronger relationships with those beyond the community's boundaries. This understanding of strengthening identity in and through relationships of encounter, dialogue, and care, is central to Bonhoeffer's theological vision. It has been given recent and compelling expression in the teaching of Pope Francis.

However, Christendom is "a hard habit to break";⁴⁵ the social processes of transforming a Christendom-based understanding of the church and its relationships with those outside itself to a post-Christendom recognition of otherness and plurality in a range of intersecting religious and nonreligious worldviews within the public sphere are complex and unpredictable. The individualisation, de-traditionalization and pluralization of worldviews and identities in the global context presents a major challenge to all traditions and communities. The churches are challenged to respond to this new context through the patient practice of discerning the relationships, human and nonhuman, to which the Lord is leading in this time and place. Bonhoeffer urges us to be willing to live in the tension, between identity and solidarity, between visibility and hiddenness, in the image of the incarnate, crucified, and glorious Lord Jesus. "I hope that in doing so I can be of some service for the future of the church."⁴⁶

44 See for example Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997).

45 Barry Harvey, "A Hard Habit to Break: Re-Imaging Public Theology in a World After Christendom", *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: The Australasian Journal of Bonhoeffer Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018): 1-17.

46 *DBWE* 8:504.

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