

## Religionless Christianity

Bonhoeffer was a middle class intellectual with a love of music and poetry. He chose to study theology at the age of sixteen - much to the surprise of his family who were not particularly religious. Influenced by Karl Barth, he was a fairly orthodox Lutheran until he began to wrestle with the political problems in Germany at that time.

The main themes of Bonhoeffer's thinking which were highlighted in 'Honest to God' were the 'religionless Christianity'; pacifism; 'man come of age' and 'the cost of discipleship'.

It is difficult to be certain with regard to Bonhoeffer's vision of what Christianity would be without religion. There can be little doubt however that the lack of witness of the National Church to the gospel at a time when Hitler was actively persecuting the Jews, was a significant factor in Bonhoeffer's attitude to religious institutions. The setting up of the so called 'Confessing Church' was evidence of this protest and his involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler was almost a parallel to Jesus' attack on the religious establishment of his time.

The question arises therefore 'Is it possible to separate Christianity from its religious elements.?' In its broadest sense Christianity may be defined as the 'moral and ethical dimension of the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth'. The 'sermon on the mount', the 'beatitudes' and the parables of Jesus form a substantial platform on which we can base a non-religious Christianity. Matthew's parable ascribed to Jesus, in which the sheep are separated from the goats on the basis of their attitude to the poor, is also a fair justification for a social gospel in which benevolent actions are the essence of discipleship. ( Matthew 25 )

The 'Society of Friends' otherwise known as the 'Quakers' is a good example of a Christian Community which has placed this ideal as central to their 'creed'. Here the Eucharist is to be experienced at every meal and the indwelling Spirit is the ultimate source of authority.

The 'Progressive Christian Network' (PCN) is an organisation which encourages a non-religious interpretation of traditional Christianity. An active network of local groups, they subscribe to an eightfold statement of faith. Accordingly they claim to have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus. They recognise the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the gateway to God's realm, and acknowledge that 'their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us'. The sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name is understood as a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all people. Above all they recognise that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

The world of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is not our world, with its global communication network and its computer aided weapons of war. Yet his experience is a stark example of the failure of the Christian Church to speak out and to proclaim the gospel of peace and reconciliation. It is therefore **incumbent** upon the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be equipped as best as it can be for the challenges of our times. Adrian Alker, in his books *A Jesus Shaped Faith* and *A Jesus Shaped Church* draws our attention to the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was an itinerant preacher, a healer and a prophet, who espoused a reformed Judaism. The so called *Sermon on The Mount* and his teaching in parables affirmed this and the fact that he was executed for his opposition to the established religion of his time is beyond and reasonable doubt. However, Alker suggests that this spirit-filled prophet was later clothed in a

supernatural garment by the early church especially by the author of the fourth gospel and later by the councils of the church – notably the Council of Nicea. Hence we have the ‘I Am’ sayings of St. John which claimed the status of divinity for Jesus and subsequently the doctrine of the Holy Trinity which claimed that Jesus was God Incarnate. Adrian Alker, along with many other contemporary theologians, claims that this development owed more to Greek Philosophy than to Judaism. The question therefore arises, ‘Have we lost sight of the *Prophet* Jesus and replaced him with a supernatural figure who is concerned more with the next world rather than the present one?’ This I suspect is the thinking behind Bonhoeffer’s plea for a Christianity which is more faithful to the original prophet from Nazareth who identified so completely with the poor and the blind and the lame.

‘I was hungry and you fed me; when thirsty, you gave me drink ....’ ( Matthew 25:31f ).

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