

JOEL BURNELL

Evangelical School of Theology

JONATHAN EDWARDS MEETS DIETRICH BONHOEFFER. TRUE RELIGION OR NON-RELIGIOUS CHRISTIANITY

To be, or not to be ... religious

At first glance, it would be difficult to find more diverse approaches to Christianity than those represented by Jonathan Edwards and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Gerald McDermott, in his article in this volume discussing Edwards' views on religious experience,¹ begins by citing John Smith's observation that "all of Jonathan Edwards's thought can be considered "one magnificent answer" to the question: What is true religion?"² Bonhoeffer in turn declared in his prison letters to Eberhard Bethge that, "people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore",³ and went on to articulate a critique of religion and sketch the outlines of non-religious Christianity. Clearly, it would seem, these two seminal thinkers stand on opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to religion.

Yet perhaps there is another side to the story. In *Seeing God: Jonathan Edwards and Spiritual Discernment*, McDermott cites Bonhoeffer fourteen times, not to critique Edwards but as a resource to develop and illustrate Edwards' 'unreliable'

¹ Gerald McDermott, "The Affections and the Human Person: Edwards on Religious Experience", in *Wratislaviensia* 7 (2012), 175.

² John E. Smith, "Editor's Introduction," in *Religious Affections*, volume 2 (revised) of The Works of Jonathan Edwards (hereafter WJE 2), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), WJE 2:2.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, volume 8 of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, (English edition; hereafter, DBWE), (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), DBWE 8:362.

and 'reliable' signs of religious affections. Could a meeting between Edwards and Bonhoeffer take the form of a constructive conversation rather than a critical confrontation?

Before we jump too quickly to label an encounter between Edwards and Bonhoeffer a dialogue rather than a dispute, we should note that McDermott's citations in *Seeing God* all come from Bonhoeffer's two most 'religious' works, *Life Together* and *Discipleship*⁴, which were written during his involvement in the Church Struggle against Hitler's Third Reich.⁵ References are absent to his early academic theses and lectures, and more importantly to his later works, especially the unfinished *Ethics*, which took shape during Bonhoeffer's involvement in the conspiracy against Hitler, and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, written following his arrest and imprisonment. How might Edwards' view of true religion fare when submitted to Bonhoeffer's critique of religion? How does it compare to Bonhoeffer's proposal for non-religious Christianity? These questions are addressed below; as we begin, a quote from Clifford Green suggests the possibility to reframe our protagonists' arguments for and against religion in a more positive way. As Green writes,

Discipleship is primarily "ecclesial theology" (though not isolated from its historical and political context), while *Ethics* is primarily public theology—or 'worldly theology'—and so are the reflections of the *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

What do I mean by calling *Ethics* 'public theology'? If *Discipleship* is primarily exegetical, interpreting the Sermon on the Mount and Pauline letters for the Christian community, *Ethics* is concerned with that same Christianity in the public world.⁶

If Green is right (and I believe he is), then perhaps an attempt to compare Bonhoeffer's *public theology* to Edwards' *ecclesial theology* is not doomed to failure from the outset.

Yet comparing Edwards and Bonhoeffer is neither easy nor straightforward. They lived in different intellectual eras (Enlightenment versus Modernism), grew up in different cultures (18th century Colonial America versus early 20th century German upper-class *burgertum*), and represented diverse ecclesial and theological

⁴ Five references are to *Life Together*, and nine to *Discipleship*.

⁵ When I asked Gerry about this, he explained that at the time he wrote that book he was more familiar with *Discipleship* and *Life Together* than the other books in the Bonhoeffer corpus.

⁶ Clifford Green, "Bonhoeffer's Quest for Authentic Christianity: Beyond Fundamentalism, Nationalism, Religion and Secularism", in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology for Today*, (Gutersloher Verlaghaus, 2009), 348.

traditions (Puritan/Reformed-Congregationalist-Pietist versus Lutheran). Philosophically, Edwards was an idealist and occasionalist, whom Wallace Anderson, editor of the *Scientific and Philosophical Writings in the JE Edition*, called a “phenomenological idealist” and an immaterialist⁷; Bonhoeffer in turn, operating out of what Clifford Green has called “post-critical realism”⁸, offered a sharp critique of idealism and “metaphysics”.

The differences in Edwards’ and Bonhoeffer’s backgrounds and perspective were partially offset by other factors. Both made it their task to keep abreast of the latest developments in science, philosophy, culture, and world events, and they shared an appreciation for beauty, art, literature and music. Although Bonhoeffer often criticized pietism, growing up, his nanny was a Pietist. He himself read daily from the *Losungen (Daily Watchwords)* published by the Moravian Brethren, and encouraged his seminary students at the Preachers’ College in Finkenwalde to do the same. Bonhoeffer was Lutheran, yet he was influenced by Karl Barth’s reformed theology, and his own Union Church of Prussia included both Lutheran and Reformed parishes. Both men had a high regard for Scripture, and they read and studied the Bible devotionally, exegetically, and theologically. While Bonhoeffer did not match Edwards’ prodigious output of sermons, he believed in the special efficacy of the ministry of the Word and preached regularly. The lives and work of both men are characterized by a living faith in Christ and a consistent Christological center.

During the 2011 International Jonathan Edwards Conference held in Wrocław, our discussion of Edwards’ views on religion was kicked off by McDermott’s paper on Edwards’ views of religious experience⁹, and wrapped up by his talk on the reliable and unreliable signs of true religion.¹⁰ This article grew out of that discussion, and draws on both those papers at several points during its summary of Edwards’ understanding of religious affections and his description of the “unreliable” and “reliable” signs of true religion. After discussing the nature of Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion, and what he meant when he proposed his vision of “non-religious Christianity”, an initial comparison of their respective positions is made. A more in-depth analysis is planned for the future; the goal of this paper is to define terms, identify the issues at stake, highlight key questions to answer, and to suggest some initial answers.

⁷ For immaterialism, cf. Wallace E. Anderson, “Immaterialism in Jonathan Edwards’ Early Philosophical Notes,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* XXV, no. 2 (April-June 1964), 181. For phenomenological idealism, cf. Wallace E. Anderson, “Editor’s Introduction,” WJE 6:112.

⁸ Green, “Bonhoeffer’s Quest”, 339.

⁹ Gerald McDermott, “The Affections...”, 175-184.

¹⁰ Gerald McDermott, “Sorting out the genuine from the counterfeit: Jonathan Edwards on testing the Spirits”, in *Wratislaviensia* 7 (2012), 199-204.

Edwards' understanding of religious affections

If all Edwards' thought is an answer to the question, "What is true religion?", his most sustained effort in this area is found in *Religious Affections* (hereafter, *RA*). He begins *RA* by clarifying what he understands religious affections to be, and why he considers them so important. As John Smith explains, "before Edwards could lay down criteria for distinguishing true affections from false he had first to establish their connection with genuine religion¹¹." Edwards' thesis is as bold as it is direct: "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections."¹²

Edwards defines the affections as "... the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul."¹³ The soul in turn is characterized by two faculties; (1) *understanding* (i.e. perception, discernment, judgment), and (2) *inclination* (which in its various activities is called the will, the mind, and the heart).¹⁴ Inclinations, which are either towards what is approved or pleasing, or against what is disapproved or displeasing, may be weak or strong; it is the latter, which move the soul to act "vigorously and sensibly", which Edwards calls *affections*.¹⁵

In Edwards' view, understanding and inclination are closely intertwined; neither functions independently, rather they are conjoined in the holistic activity and actions of the soul, which in turn is subject to "the laws of the union which the Creator has fixed between soul and body."¹⁶ Harking back to Plato, the trichotomic understanding of human nature prevalent in Edwards' day divided human beings into body, soul and spirit, with yet further distinctions made between mind, will, emotions, etc. In contrast, Edwards argues for a non-dualistic, holistic view of human nature; soul and body are an integrated union, and the fervent activities of the soul, which involve the actions of the mind and the will (inclination), are what we commonly refer to as the heart. As McDermott writes, "Edwards' position refused the dichotomies of either side, insisting on a soul whose affections shape not only feelings and choices but also the mind."¹⁷

McDermott has elsewhere provided a helpful comparison of "affections" with "emotions", and "beliefs".¹⁸ *Affections*, are "long-lasting, deep, consistent with beliefs"; they "always result in action, and involve mind, will and feelings". *Emotions*, on the other hand, are described as "fleeting, superficial, sometimes overpower-

¹¹ John Smith, WJE 2:7-8.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, WJE 2:95.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷ McDermott, "The Affections", 177.

¹⁸ Gerald McDermott, *Seeing God: Jonathan Edwards and Spiritual Experience*, (Vancouver, Canada: Regent College, 2000).

ing”, they “often fail to produce action”, and consist of “feelings, which are often disconnected from the mind and will.”¹⁹ Furthermore, *affections* “always influence behavior, influence feelings” and are characterized as “strong”, whereas *beliefs* “do not always influence behavior”, are often “disconnected from feelings” and “weak”.²⁰

Edwards defined *religious* affections as those that seek God and spiritual things, and claimed that there is no such thing as genuine religion without them.²¹ All godly affections, along with the actions that ensue from them, “are rooted in the basic affection of love.”²² But during the turbulent events of the Great Awakening’s revivals, which excited some and disturbed others, “hypocrites mimicked saints, and saints resembled hypocrites”, which led Edwards to conclude that “counterfeit love” produces “false affections”.²³ As Smith writes, it was Edwards’ “acknowledgement of counterfeit piety that forced him to find criteria for distinguishing false from true religion”.²⁴ In contrasting holy and unholy affections, McDermott once again emphasizes Edwards’ holistic understanding of human nature: *holy affections* “always inspire feeling, thinking and doing”; *unholy affections* may be “all feeling with no thinking”, “all thinking with no feeling”, or “mere doing with no thinking or feeling”.²⁵

Edwards’ “unreliable” and “reliable signs” of religious affections

Having defined affections in general, and established the nature of religious affections, Edwards goes on in Parts II and III of *RA* to describe twelve unreliable signs and twelve reliable signs of true religion. McDermott discusses these at some length in *Seeing God*, where he helpfully groups Edwards’ ‘unreliable signs’ into three categories i.e. those concerning religious experience, religious behavior and assurance of salvation. The first group of unreliable signs, which concerns religious *experience*, includes: (1) Intense religious affections; (2) Many religious affections at the same time; (3) A certain sequence in the affections; (4) Spiritual experiences not produced by the self; (5) Scriptures come miraculously to mind; (6) Physical manifestations of the affections.²⁶ Next come the unreliable signs involving religious *behavior*: (7) Much fervent talk about religion; (8) Fre-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

²¹ McDermott, “The Affections”, 176.

²² *Ibid.*, 179.

²³ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁴ John Smith, *WJE* 2:11.

²⁵ McDermott, *Seeing God*, 41.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 45-55.

quent and passionate praise for God; (9) The appearance of love; (10) Zealous or time-consuming devotion to religious activities.²⁷ Finally, there are the unreliable signs involving *assurance of salvation*: (11) Being convinced one is saved; (12) Others being convinced that someone is saved.²⁸

As Smith notes, for Edwards the accidental nature of the unreliable signs resides “in the fact that they can be present without the Spirit’s presence.”²⁹ Indeed, “Edwards argues that they are to be found where there is no genuine piety and that they may be absent where genuine piety exists.”³⁰ Smith makes two key points concerning these signs. Contrary to views common in his day, which Edwards believed were false and misleading: (1) “The Holy Spirit is not bound to a definite order of operation”; (2) “nothing can be inferred about affections from the fact that they come to be accepted by other people as signs of saintliness.”³¹ Edwards thus both denies “the validity of many Puritan descriptions of salvation as involving a sequential process”, and rejects “the attempt to use ‘the approval of the godly’ as a criterion for judging the affections.”³²

In Part III of *RA*, Edwards’ lists twelve reliable signs (“distinguishing marks”) of true religion. As paraphrased by McDermott, they are: (1) A divine and supernatural source; (2) Attraction to God and his ways for their own sake; (3) Seeing the beauty of holiness; (4) A new knowing; (5) Deep-seated conviction; (6) Humility; (7) Change of nature; (8) A Christ-like spirit; (9) Fear of God; (10) Balance; (11) Hunger for God; (12) Christian practice.³³

As Smith writes, positive signs are those marks “through which the presence of the divine Spirit can be known.”³⁴ Edwards distinguishes between “the Spirit as operating *on* the self . . . and as *dwelling in* the self”; only the latter constitutes saving grace.³⁵ It is this distinction, argues Smith, which enabled Edwards to both support the revivals and to argue against the “abuses and delusions”³⁶ that accompanied them. What is needed is regeneration, a change of nature “in the self as a whole”; “a change in the heart”, which is then “manifested in every aspect of the self.”³⁷

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 56-65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 66-77.

²⁹ Smith, *WJE* 2:18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19

³¹ *Ibid.*, 19

³² *Ibid.*, 21.

³³ McDermott, “Sorting out the genuine”, 201-203.

³⁴ Smith, *WJE*:23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

On the one hand, regeneration brings with it a “new sense of the heart”, an intuitive knowledge and vision of divine things that results from new birth, yet “operates in and through natural sense faculties”, thus allowing individuals to “examine themselves to see if they delight in this divine beauty for its own sake.”³⁸ Yet for Edwards, new birth also leads inexorably to the twelfth and final sign of true religion, holy practice. McDermott summarizes the link Edwards makes between new birth and holy practice.

In *Religious Affections* the overriding sign of genuine religion is ‘holy practice’, which lies in the realm of action rather than perception or sensibility. The only set of affections that produces the habit of holy practice is the cluster collectively titled the ‘new sense of the heart’ . . . which the Spirit ‘infuses’ to enable saints to see God’s infinite beauty and glory.³⁹

This is the heart of Edwards’ position: religious affections result from regeneration and lead to holy practice. Each link in the chain is essential; if one is missing the others are too. Smith argues that Puritanism, in making religion a matter of the interior life, went even further than Classical Protestantism’s emphasis on faith and the inner working of the Spirit.⁴⁰ Edwards carried this trend forward, but at the same time deepened a strain present in most streams of Puritanism, which said that practice is the best test of faith.

As a principle of life, the Spirit shows itself in the true believer as a vital power; the form most appropriate to its nature is that of holy practice. What this means is that a man’s conduct is something more than the moral consequence of the religious relationship; it means that practice takes on a religious dimension. It may take its place as the chief among the signs of gracious affections because it is the Holy Spirit revealing itself as life in the world.⁴¹

Where Edwards modified the Puritan emphasis on the inner life, was in declaring outward practice a better, more faithful and reliable sign of true religion than the most remarkable religious experiences.⁴² Practice is the natural result of the new life imparted to believers at conversion by the Holy Spirit; holy actions become the “vital power” of the indwelling “Holy Spirit revealing itself as life in the

³⁸ McDermott, “The Affections”, 181.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁴⁰ Smith, WJE 2:43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2:42.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2:42.

world."⁴³ Edwards left his mark on religion in America, Smith declares, by "taking a long look at Protestantism's sacred domain—the inner life—and demanding that it be subjected to a public test."⁴⁴ left his mark on religion in America. Since his day, "American Protestantism has had no place for quietism; its robust strain of activity in the world can be traced to the strain of Puritan piety and not least to the interpretation of that piety by Jonathan Edwards."⁴⁵

Bonhoeffer's critique of religion and proposal for non-religious Christianity⁴⁶

On the surface at least, many parallels between Edwards's *Religious Affections* and Bonhoeffer's "ecclesial theology", represented by *Life Together* and *Discipleship*, come readily to mind. To name just one example, how many pious believers (religious or no), impressed and impacted by the legacy of both men, could avoid the perhaps all-too-ready temptation to compare Edwards' unreliable signs of true religion with what Bonhoeffer termed "cheap grace", or his reliable signs with Bonhoeffer's "costly grace"? Should they try? When we come to *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison* however, the path ahead becomes more difficult. Could it be that the "religion" Bonhoeffer was critiquing corresponds in large measure with Edwards' unreliable signs? What does Edwards' vision of true religion have in common with Bonhoeffer's non-religious Christianity? Before we attempt to provide even a preliminary answer to such questions, we must first have clearly in mind what Bonhoeffer meant.

In Tegel Prison, Bonhoeffer wrote an "Outline for a Book", which he never got the opportunity to finish. In it we read:

Faith is participating in this being of Jesus. (Becoming human, cross, resurrection.) Our relationship to God is no "religious" relationship to some highest, most powerful, and best being imaginable—that is no genuine transcendence. Instead, our relationship to God is a new life in "being there for others," through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbor within reach in any given situation. God in human form! Not . . . in the conceptual forms of the absolute, the metaphysical, the infi-

⁴³ Ibid., 2:42.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2:43.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2:43.

⁴⁶ Portions of this section draw on a lecture entitled "Duchowość Bonhoeffera dla nas dziś" ("Bonhoeffer's Spirituality for us Today"), which the author delivered during the 2013 Bonhoeffer Days conference held in Szczecin.

nite, and so on, . . . (b)ut rather “the human being for others”! therefore the Crucified One. The human being living out of the transcendent⁴⁷

In this passage, Bonhoeffer’s proposal for non-religious Christianity is clearly linked to his critique of religion. Yet at the same time it grows out of his spirituality (“faith”, “our relationship to God”), which expresses itself as a “new life in ‘being there for others’, through participation in the being of Jesus.” In his letter to Bethge (April 30, 1944), he writes:

What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today? The age when we could tell people that with words—whether with theological or with pious words—is past, as is the age of inwardness and of conscience, and that means the age of religion altogether. We are approaching a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore.⁴⁸

The questions to be answered would be: What does a church, a congregation, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life, mean in a religionless world? How do we talk about God—without religion, that is, without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, the inner life, and so on? How do we speak (or perhaps we can no longer even “speak” the way we used to) in a “worldly” way about “God”? How do we go about being “religionless-worldly” Christians, how can we be ἐκ-λησία, those who are called out, without understanding ourselves religiously as privileged, but instead seeing ourselves as belonging wholly to the world? Christ would then no longer be the object of religion, but something else entirely, truly lord of the world. But what does that mean? In a religionless situation, what do ritual [Kultus] and prayer mean? Is this where the “arcane discipline” [Arkandisziplin], or the difference (which you’ve heard about from me before) between the penultimate and the ultimate, have new significance?⁴⁹

Bonhoeffer, declaring that the “age of religion” is past, asks some far-reaching questions: “What is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?” “How do we speak . . . in a worldly way about ‘God’.” “How do we go about being ‘religionless-worldly Christians’?” “In a religionless situation, what do ritual and prayer

⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, volume 8 of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, (English edition; hereafter, DBWE), (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), DBWE 8:501.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8:362.

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8:364.

mean?" Several days later (May 5, 1944), in another letter to Bethge, he explains what he means by "interpreting religiously"; "What then does it mean to 'interpret religiously'? It means, in my opinion, to speak metaphysically, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, individualistically. Neither way is appropriate, either for the biblical message or for people today."⁵⁰ In these short texts we can find the key elements of Bonhoeffer's critique of religion, which Ralf Wüstenberg summarizes well in his book, *Theology of Life*.

The concepts "metaphysics" and "inwardness/individualism"—primary features of Bonhoeffer's late criticism of religion—are now interpreted from different perspectives: metaphysics under the aspects of "deus ex machina," "stopgap," and "working hypothesis 'God' "; "inwardness/individualism" under the aspects of "something partial," "religiously privileged," and guardianship of "God".⁵¹

We have space for only a brief sketch of how Bonhoeffer understood these terms, and what he proposed in their place. Instead of a metaphysical idea of God, who is far away and high above us, Bonhoeffer stressed the nearness and presence of God in the world, among us. We meet Christ in what we do, and above all in those whom we meet. As he wrote in "Outline for a Book", "our relationship to God is a new life in "being there for others," through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendent becomes "the neighbor within reach in any given situation."⁵² For Bonhoeffer, our relationship to God leads us to people; our union with Christ is worked out in participation in the being of Jesus, i.e. "being-for-others". Spirituality therefore need not chose between being in Christ and being for others; rather than isolating our relationship with God from our relationship with others, it encompasses and incorporates both.

Instead of religious "inwardness" and "individualism", Bonhoeffer proposes life with others, both in the Church community and society at-large, for "the church is church only when it is there for others."⁵³ God's sovereignty does not release us from responsibility for ourselves and for others, instead the living God calls us to freedom and responsibility, and invites us to participate in His presence and work in the world. In the place of the *deus ex machina* God, whose main purpose for existence (it would appear) is to rescue us—His dependent, helpless

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8:372.

⁵¹ Ralf Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity*, (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 22.

⁵² Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8:501.

⁵³ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8:503.

children!—from suffering and oppression, we find a God who encourages us to maturity and interdependence. Partiality is exchanged for solidarity with God and others, which often takes the form of participating in the suffering of God and in suffering with others. Bonhoeffer fights religious entitlement with the theology of the cross; being in Christ means humility and not pride, service and not privileges. As he writes, “The church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community—not dominating but helping and serving.”⁵⁴

As Wüstenberg shows, Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion was not a consistent, well-defined program; he could speak positively and not just negatively about religion. Furthermore, as tempting as it is to force his comments into a clear, chronological order (i.e. early positive statements about religion, a middle period where he adopts the critical approach of Karl Barth, and finally his prison theology from 1944 on, where he postulates religionlessness),⁵⁵ “positive statements, critical statements, and comments about religionlessness not only follow developmentally one upon the other, but also occur systematically juxtaposed.”⁵⁶ The reason for this, Wüstenberg argues, is that Bonhoeffer never offered (nor undertook) a programmatic critique of religion, and never provided a consistent definition of “religion”; rather than “integrating *religion* into his own theological thinking . . . ‘religion’ becomes the formal, negative foil against which other important ideas are substantively explicated.”⁵⁷

In a similar vein, Green insists that Bonhoeffer really meant what he said when he used phrases like “religionless Christianity” and “non-religious interpretation of biblical and theological concepts”.⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer shared Barth’s “critical judgment that religion was a ‘human path to God.’” But unlike Barth, “Bonhoeffer never had a doctrine of ‘true religion’. Authentic Christianity? Yes. True Religion? No.”⁵⁹ The reason for this is that Bonhoeffer’s theory of religion—in contrast to Barth’s “formal or phenomenological definition”, was “quite historical, particular, and above all functional, or behavioral. Religion as turning to the power-God in human personal crisis and intellectual problems, religion as born of human weakness, suffering, and ignorance, religion as devoted to a *deus ex machina* theology—this is what Bonhoeffer rejected.”⁶⁰

All of this suggests that while there is a relationship between Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion and his postulate of non-religious Christianity, the source of the

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8:503.

⁵⁵ Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, 26.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁸ Green, “Bonhoeffer’s Quest”, 349.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 349.

latter lies elsewhere. Wüstenberg discerns the source of Bonhoeffer's admittedly sketchy outline of non-religious Christianity, not in religion or its critique, but rather in Dilthey's philosophy of life.

[Bonhoeffer] adopts Dilthey's concept of life and interprets it christologically: life with Christ. The nonreligious interpretation is thus a Christological interpretation taking its reference point in life; what one might call a "life-christological" interpretation.⁶¹

Rather than separating life in this world from faith, Bonhoeffer seeks the proper relationship between them. In the May 5th, 1944 letter, it is clear that he does not intend to leave the Church. In an autonomous world-come-of-age, the reestablishment of an "arcane" or secret discipline within the church community turns out to be as important and essential for non-religious Christians as the practice of non-religious interpretation in the world.⁶² In the April 30, 1944 letter, he does not leave "Church, congregation, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life" behind, but rather asks about their place in a religionless world.⁶³ Similarly, in "Thoughts on the Day of Baptism", he writes to his godson Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge, that "we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings."⁶⁴ In words that recall Green's distinction between Bonhoeffer's ecclesial theology and his public theology, Wüstenberg explains,

The glorification of the mystery of Christ's person in prayer and worship corresponds externally to the responsible act, so that arcane discipline finds its „dialectical counterpart“ in the nonreligious interpretation. In the words of the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, arcane discipline and religionless are related like *the prayer and actions of the righteous*. Or to use a formulation from the *Ethics*, arcane discipline and nonreligious interpretation are related as the ultimate and the penultimate.⁶⁵

But what does this non-religious Christianity really look like? There are perhaps twenty interesting and useful books on my shelves alone, which seek to tell us how we might live out Bonhoeffer's vision today. Why so many, and why do the answers vary so much? Once again, we turn to Wüstenberg for the answer.

⁶¹ Ralf Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, 156.

⁶² Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8:373.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 8:364.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:389.

⁶⁵ Wüstenberg, *Ibid.*, 29.

And thus we arrive at the question of how this life for others really looks. [...] In his fragmentary Tegel theology, Bonhoeffer equipped us with the guiding questions regarding the correct relationship between life come of age and Christian faith—this was his theme, and was the essence of the questions of nonreligious interpretation. Both the church and theology will have to struggle ever anew to find the appropriate answer.⁶⁶

In the end, or perhaps the beginning, Bonhoeffer has left us much. We have the testimony of his life and death, his texts on following Christ and living in community, his ethics, and last but not least his “fragmentary” prison theology. It is left to us, however, to take up our cross and follow Jesus, to live with and for others, both in the community and in the world. And we ourselves must “struggle ever anew”, to answer the questions about the “correct relationship between life come of age and Christian faith.”

True religion or non-religious Christianity?

Much more could be written about Edwards’ and Bonhoeffer’s views on “religion”—and already has. However, our purpose here is to compare their views regarding true religion and non-religious Christianity. Are they speaking of the same thing, or two different things? Do they complement or contradict each other? Can they help us understand religion in post-Christian Europe? How can a meeting between them be arranged, what form might it take, and where would it lead?

The path of least resistance is to look for parallels between *Religious Affections* (RA) on the one side, and *Life Together* (LT) and *Discipleship* (D) on the other. Following that line, but breaking RA down into the reliable and unreliable signs, one could compare LT and D to the unreliable signs, and *Ethics* (E) and *Letters and Papers from Prison* (LPP) to the reliable signs. Or perhaps within Bonhoeffer’s resistance ethics and prison theology (E and LPP), we can distinguish between his critique of religion (which we compare to Edwards’ unreliable signs), and his proposal for non-religious Christianity (which we compare to Edwards’ reliable signs). The possibilities seem endless. Whichever path we chose, the full journey must wait for another trip.

In the space remaining, I would like to first suggest a shopping list of topics to explore, containing just a few of the many issues that could and should be raised in a meeting between Edwards and Bonhoeffer. I will then bring this initial conversation to a close by addressing four questions: (1) Edwards’ and Bonhoeffer’s

⁶⁶ Ibid., 146.

public and private theology. (2) Edwards' emphasis on regeneration and Bonhoeffer's focus on "God's righteousness and kingdom on earth". (3) Edwards' true religion and Bonhoeffer's non-religious Christianity. (3) Edwards "holy practice" and Bonhoeffer's "prayer and righteous action". The comments below are all too brief, a fault that I hope to correct in the future.

Edwards meets Bonhoeffer: some topics to explore

- Both critique religious experience: To what extent is Bonhoeffer's critique of "pietism", inwardness, partiality etc. similar or parallel to Edwards' critique of the religious experiences/excesses of the Great Awakening?

- Both are consistently non-dualistic (e.g. no division of body/soul, sacred and secular).

- Edwards speaks of a new knowing or spiritual sight, of seeing the beauty of Christ and the gospel; Bonhoeffer writes of "understanding the world better than it knows itself", of seeing reality, i.e. the world as reconciled to God in Christ). The terminology and traditions are different, are the concepts nevertheless parallel?

- Both taught and practiced self-examination without falling into introspection. Edwards stressed that the signs are not for the purpose of judging others but rather to examine one's self. Did he avoid morbid introspection? Probably. Bonhoeffer spoke against inwardness, and declared that Christ wants to meet us in our strength and not just in our weakness. Yet he introduced private confession among the students at the Preachers' seminary in Finkenwalde.

- How significant are their philosophical differences (phenomenological idealism versus post-critical realism)? Do their differences here undermine views and positions that might otherwise seem compatible?

- Following Luther, there is a strong element in Bonhoeffer of apophatic or negative theology—which leads to recognizing God in Christ, and to the theology of the cross. This is where we meet, see, and know God. How does this compare to Edwards' more kataphatic or positive theology, to his epistemology?

- Edwards was obsessed with salvation history, saw revivals as God's plan for furthering His Kingdom, and laid the foundation of a grand meta-history of redemption. How does this compare to Bonhoeffer's understated (though real) eschatology, to his "dialogical view" of God's sovereignty?

- Edwards' vision of the beauty of God drove all of his theology. How does this compare e.g. to Bonhoeffer's idea of Christ as the *cantus firmus*?

- For Edwards, true religion is to love Jesus, not just have correct doctrine about him. He was captured by the beauty of Christ and the gospel. Bonhoeffer's Christological center is well known; in his next to last letter to Bethge he wrote (Aug.

21, 1944): “We must immerse ourselves again and again, for a long time and quite calmly, in Jesus’ s life, his sayings, actions, suffering, and dying in order to recognize what God promises and fulfills.” Christ is at the center of both men’s theology; what are their differences, similarities?

- Both saw Christ as Lord of the whole world, not just the church. However, by Bonhoeffer’s day, the church had become not just assailed or embattled, but—at least in much of Europe, which is the context Bonhoeffer spoke of when referring to “the world come of age”—the church had become a marginalized ghetto, largely irrelevant. How does this change of perspective impact their respective views?

Public versus ecclesial theology

The first question I want to comment on stems from Green’s distinction, raised above, between Bonhoeffer’s ecclesial (LT, D) and public (E, LPP) theology. The relationship between LT and D, written during the period of Bonhoeffer’s active involvement in the Church Struggle against the all-inclusive claims of the Nazi state, and E and LPP, written during his involvement in the conspiracy and following his arrest in 1942, has long been debated by Bonhoeffer scholars. A few have claimed that nothing really changed, others that nearly everything changed; most observers today recognize a basic trajectory of Bonhoeffer’s thought throughout his life (continuity characterized by natural growth and development), together with the appearance of new ideas or concepts that move in original and striking directions. By focusing attention on the context and audience, Green’s distinction between Bonhoeffer’s ecclesial versus public theology provides a helpful approach, which reduces the tension within the Bonhoeffer corpus without removing it altogether. Does adopting the ecclesial versus public theology distinction indicate that we should stick with comparing RA with LT/D? Or rather that we should incorporate E/LPP into the discussion, since differences between Bonhoeffer’s earlier and later works are—to some degree at least—a matter of differences in terminology, resulting from the shift in context (church struggle versus conspiracy) and audience (church community versus society at large)?

Our answer to those questions is complicated by the fact that Edwards also had a robust public theology, which as McDermott has pointed out, stems “from his philosophy of being and his theology of love.”⁶⁷ In *The Nature of True Virtue*, Edwards’ “described the structure of being as a vast network of interrelations

⁶⁷ Gerald McDermott, “Public Theology, Society, and America”, chapter 32 in Michael McClymond and Gerald McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, (Oxford University Press, 2012), 513. For a fuller treatment, cf. Gerald McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The public Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1992).

wherein every entity is related to every other.”⁶⁸ Edwards believed that God, the “Being of beings” was the source and goal of beings, and the Being in and through whom all other beings are related. Nevertheless, in *True Virtue* he never cites the Bible, arguing instead from conscience, moral benevolence, and aesthetic perception, which he believed are common to all human beings, to lay the foundation for a “common moral philosophy”, which in turn would function as a framework for “cooperation of Christians and non-Christians in social projects with moral ends.”⁶⁹ So, we may conclude, although the public and ecclesial theology distinction works for approaching both Edwards and Bonhoeffer, and offers much promise in comparing the two, at this stage of our enquiry it raises as many questions as it answers, and points to the need for more in-depth research and analysis.

Regeneration versus “God’s righteousness and kingdom on earth”

We saw above the importance Edwards placed on regeneration (new birth), by virtue of which believers receive that collective set of religious affections or “new sense of the heart” which the Holy Spirit “‘infuses’ to enable saints to see God’s infinite beauty and glory”⁷⁰, and which in turn issues in holy practice. For Edwards, regeneration, religious affections, and holy practice are interrelated and inseparable, and they lie at the very heart of “true religion”. What then is their place or role in Bonhoeffer’s vision of non-religious Christianity? As he wrote from prison, there are “more important things to talk about than . . . saving our souls”.

Hasn’t the individualistic question of saving our personal souls almost faded away for most of us? Isn’t it our impression that there are really more important things than this question (—perhaps not more important than this *matter*, but certainly more important than the *question*!)? I know it sounds outrageous to say that, but after all, isn’t it fundamentally biblical? Does the question of saving one’s soul even come up in the Old Testament? Isn’t God’s righteousness and kingdom on earth the center of everything? And isn’t Rom. 3:24ff. the culmination of the view that God alone is righteous, rather than an individualistic doctrine of salvation? What matters is not the beyond but this world, how it is created and preserved,^[10] is given laws, reconciled, and renewed. What is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there *for* this world—not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystical, pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of the creation and the incar-

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 513.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 514-515.

⁷⁰ McDermott, “The Affections”, 180.

nation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁷¹

Is Bonhoeffer here denying the need for regeneration (rebirth)? If so, then regardless of whatever other similarities we might discover between them, the two men would appear to have quite different things in mind when they speak of “true religion” and “non-religious Christianity”. Once again, however, we must make the effort required to understand what Bonhoeffer was trying to say, not least from the perspective of his death-row prison cell in the Third Reich. He qualifies his declaration, first by saying that there are more important things to talk about than the *question* of salvation, not the *matter* of salvation itself. Furthermore, it is the “*individualistic* question of saving our personal souls.” And he goes on from there to talk about the Old Testament theme of God’s righteousness and His Kingdom on earth, to speak (in a very Lutheran manner) about God’s righteousness, and to paraphrase in a brief sentence or two, both the heart of his vision of “this-worldly” Christianity and the critique of the “religious” views—“the beyond” (i.e. “metaphysics” and “otherworldliness”), “liberal, mystical, pietistic, ethical theology”—it replaces. Once again, the differences in culture, tradition, historical-intellectual-political context, as well as terminology, make the conversation more nuanced than it seems at first. In one sense we moved ahead, in another we find ourselves back where we started, with the question of true religion or non-religious Christianity still before us.

True religion and non-religious Christianity

As Green declared above, “Bonhoeffer never had a doctrine of ‘true religion’. Authentic Christianity? Yes. True Religion? No.”⁷² Nevertheless, we may still ask whether “true religion” and “non-religious”, “this-worldly”, *authentic* Christianity have much in common. The answer, I believe is yes, but as we work this out, we must keep our heads—and our terminology—clear. We discussed above what Bonhoeffer was rejecting in his critique of religion. Green goes on to add:

. . . if somebody wants to operate with a different definition of religion . . . that would be a whole different discussion. And for certain purposes we do need different definitions. But there is no way, I insist, to theologically rehabilitate and legitimate the sort of religion Bonhoeffer described, nor impute to him a second positive concept of religion.⁷³

⁷¹ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8:372-373.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 349.

⁷³ Green, “Bonhoeffer’s Quest”, 351.

Three observations come to mind: (1) It is legitimate to ask what Edwards meant by (true) religion; (2) In comparing Bonhoeffer to Edwards we must not rehabilitate the “religion” he rejected—or if we insist on so doing, at least avoid calling it *Bonhoeffer’s* view of religion; (3) It is not correct to call anything *Bonhoeffer’s* view of true religion.

Bonhoeffer and Edwards are speaking of two different things when they speak of religion. Edwards speaks of true religion in his “reliable signs”; Bonhoeffer not only rejected what he considered the false religions of his day, but went on to argue that religion, as a historical phenomenon, had run its course. The world, he declared has “come-of-age”, and “we are approaching a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore.”⁷⁴ Without a theory of religion, Bonhoeffer could speak of non-religious, this-worldly or as Green suggests “authentic” Christianity, but not of “true religion”, which makes comparing him with Edwards at once more difficult and more intriguing.

It is important to note that Bonhoeffer was not claiming that—from here on out—the “age of religion” is past for all people, everywhere; rather he was describing the European context of his day. It may be argued that his comments retain much of their validity in today’s post-Christian Europe; we may debate their relevance in other contexts. It is another matter entirely to ask how they do (or do not) apply to religious phenomena in Edwards’ day, in the two-thirds world, etc. Yes, we may employ Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion to evaluate Edwards’ “true religion”, we may compare non-religious Christianity with Edwards’ positive marks of true religion, etc. We may also turn the tables and critique Bonhoeffer’s this-worldly Christianity from the perspective of Edwards’ reliable and unreliable signs of true religion. But the meeting we arrange between Bonhoeffer and Edwards must not take place in a theoretical, ahistorical vacuum. We must keep their historical-cultural, intellectual-philosophical, geo-political, and ecclesial-theological contexts clearly in mind, along with our own. Only then may we properly and profitably ask what they have to teach us about following Christ in our individual lives, our community and our society today.

“Holy practice” versus “prayer and doing justice among human beings”

Our last question concerns the relationship between Edwards’ twelfth sign or “holy practice” on one hand, and on the other hand the classic opening to Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship*, (where he contrasts “cheap” and “costly” grace), together with Bonhoeffer’s declaration from Tegel prison that in post-Third-Reich Europe “we can be Christians in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among

⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8:362.

human beings.” Edwards declares that there is no more reliable way to recognize true religion than by observing the nature of its fruit. Accordingly, Christians should talk less and do more, should serve others rather than defend their own privileges. Bonhoeffer in turn declares that the church, by defending its own freedom and privilege rather than defending the innocent and helpless, has lost the authority—or at least the credibility—to speak. What remains, for now, is the practice of “secret discipline” within the community, and righteous action without. Wherever they start (and the consensus on both men is that they start with Christ), they seem to end up in roughly the same place. There certainly seems to be common ground to explore here.

Conclusion

Great people tend to rise above their era, to overcome and surpass the limitations of their tradition and worldview. Thus in the history of the Church, we find time and again that great theologians and pastors—despite their very real differences—are often closer to the heart of God, and hence to each other, than many who claim to be their followers. This indeed appears to be the case with Edwards and Bonhoeffer. May the conversation continue; for now I close with a quote from Bonhoeffer, in words which Edwards himself could have written.

It is not for us to predict the day—but the day will come—when people will once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed. It will be in a new language, perhaps quite nonreligious language, but liberating and redeeming like Jesus’s language, so that people will be alarmed and yet overcome by its power—the language of a new righteousness and truth, a language proclaiming that God makes peace with humankind and that God’s kingdom is drawing near. “They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for them” (Jer. 33:9). Until then the Christian cause will be a quiet and hidden one, but there will be people who pray and do justice and wait for God’s own time. May you be one of them, and may it be said of you one day: “The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day” (Prov. 4:18).⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8:390.

A b s t r a c t

It seems that Jonathan Edwards and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are on opposite ends of the religious spectrum. But is that really the case? This article explores how Edwards' *Religious Affections* might fare when subjected to a Bonhoefferian critique of religion, and compares his views on true religion to Bonhoeffer's proposal for non-religious Christianity. Are they speaking of the same thing, or two different things? Do they complement or contradict each other? Can they help us understand religion in post-Christian Europe? How can a meeting between them be arranged, what form might it take, and where would it lead?