

# Christian Humanism and Moral Formation in “A World Come of Age”



# Christian Humanism and Moral Formation in “A World Come of Age”:

*An Interdisciplinary Look at the  
Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
and Marilynne Robinson*

Edited by

Jens Zimmermann and Natalie Boldt

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

## **Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke – German Edition**

- DBW 4 – *Nachfolge*
- DBW 6 – *Ethik*
- DBW 8 – *Widerstand und Ergebung*
- DBW 10 – *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika: 1928–1931*
- DBW 12 – *Berlin: 1932–1933*

## **Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works – English Edition**

- DBWE 1 – *Sanctorum Communio*
- DBWE 2 – *Act and Being*
- DBWE 3 – *Creation and Fall*
- DBWE 4 – *Discipleship*
- DBWE 5 – *Life Together / Prayerbook of the Bible*
- DBWE 6 – *Ethics*
- DBWE 7 – *Fiction from Tegel Prison*
- DBWE 8 – *Letters and Papers from Prison*
- DBWE 9 – *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918–1927*
- DBWE 10 – *Barcelona, Berlin, New York*
- DBWE 11 – *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*
- DBWE 12 – *Berlin: 1932–1933*
- DBWE 14 – *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*
- DBWE 15 – *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*
- DBWE 16 – *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*



# INTRODUCTION

## JENS ZIMMERMANN AND NATALIE BOLDT

From its religious and philosophical beginnings in antiquity through the Renaissance and to its modern secular variations, humanism has been centrally concerned with moral formation. Both the twentieth-century theologian and Nazi-resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer and, more recently, the acclaimed American novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson have built on this intrinsic connection between humanism and character formation. These authors have much to teach us about reconciliation, the sociality of the self, human solidarity, and community in a time when such thinking is sorely needed. Their writings are profoundly relevant to current debates about the role of religion for moral formation in modern, pluralistic Western societies. For reasons the essays in this volume make clear, Bonhoeffer and Robinson's views on moral formation in a secular age are best captured by the term *Christian humanism*. The goal of this volume is thus to examine the ways in which Christian humanism, as presented in the works of both authors, offers a way forward, beyond secular and religious fundamentalisms, to a religiously founded social ethic in a secular age.

The first half of this collection is based on presentations given at the 17<sup>th</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer Lectures on Public Ethics—*Christian Humanism and the Challenges of Moral Formation in “a world come of age”*—and features papers by Jens Zimmermann (Trinity Western University), Brad S. Gregory (University of Notre Dame), Barry Harvey (Baylor University), Wendy Fletcher (Renison University College), and Ryan Huber (Fuller Theological Seminary). The second half features papers from a graduate conference—*The Secular and the Sacred: An Interdisciplinary Look at the Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Marilynne Robinson*—held in conjunction with the major lecture series. The book concludes with a wonderful interview that Marilynne Robinson gave following her closing address at the main conference.

Together, the presenters' contributions cover a variety of intersecting topics, highlighting Bonhoeffer's, and now Robinson's, import as a resource for the relation of religion, culture and ethics in modern Western

societies as well as their relevance for contemporary discussion about the significance of the religious ideals that have shaped Western cultural values. Much current reflection on religion and culture continues to wrestle with the definition of modernity and the role of religious faith for moral consensus in modern society. Cultural commentators such as Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age*),<sup>1</sup> Jens Zimmermann (*Humanism and Religion*)<sup>2</sup> and Olivier Roy (*Holy Ignorance*)<sup>3</sup> have noted that the positive contribution of religious belief in plural societies depends on a religion's intrinsic link to the world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, long before the Second Vatican Council came to the same conclusion, already insisted that Christianity must exist in a secularized world, and that a robust this-worldliness requires a theological foundation. Bonhoeffer argued that since God reconciled the world to himself in Christ, Christians are to live fully in the world. Especially later in his life, Bonhoeffer argued that God's becoming human allows us to appreciate the intrinsic value of human qualities such as friendship, freedom, and sociality, including our dependence on others. Marilynne Robinson, in her various essay collections and novels, such as *Gilead* and *Home*, expresses a very similar view. Robinson shares with Bonhoeffer a love for this world and the sacramental intuition to seek God's presence in the ordinary. In her writing she esteems and defends the mystery of the human against cultural forces intent on flattening and distorting our humanity. Indeed, one can easily apply to her the description she bestows on Bonhoeffer's way of seeing the world: "To see divine immanence in the world is an act of faith, not a matter to be interpreted in other than its own terms, if one grants the reasonableness of the perceiver. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer thought and believed his way to a surpassing reasonableness."<sup>4</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, and it would seem for Robinson as well, "a world come of age" is not secularism, but a modern world that neither can, nor should, accept the tutelage of religion. At the same time, however, both remind us that society without religion becomes quickly dehumanized. Bonhoeffer's theological position in particular frames the contributors' attempts to answer the following pressing questions: how accurate are

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Jens Zimmermann, *Humanism and Religion: A Call for the Renewal of Western Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Marilynne Robinson, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 120.

current philosophical descriptions of Western culture as a “secular age” or as “post-secularity”? What do moral formation in general and responsible Christian ethics in particular look like in such a “secular age”? What role does religious ritual, and in particular the Christian sacraments and scriptural exegesis play in the pursuit of virtue? How do religious believers in general, and the Christian church in its multiple manifestations in particular, understand their identity within the world? How ought one to define nature or the natural? How do reason and faith, public and religious life, work together for a common good in pluralistic societies? It is our hope that the following interdisciplinary discussion of Bonhoeffer and Robinson’s Christ-centered humanisms will lay the groundwork for and begin to answer such questions.

The book is divided into two main parts. **Part one** opens with an introductory essay by Jens Zimmermann, who describes the concepts of Christian humanism, religionless Christianity, and “a world come of age” in Bonhoeffer’s theology. Zimmermann situates Bonhoeffer within the greater tradition of Christian humanism extending back to the early church fathers, a tradition that understands the gospel to mean that God became human so that by being transformed into Christ-likeness, human beings can attain their true humanity. From this Christological, incarnational center, Bonhoeffer wrestles with the hermeneutical challenge that modernity and an increasingly secular world present to theology. God’s becoming human remains the consistent plumb line for his reflections on modernity and Christianity’s engagement of a modern world. Bonhoeffer interprets God’s authority and power through the infinite compassion for and solidarity with human beings that Christ’s incarnation demonstrates. He argues that Christian reasoning and moral action follow God’s own pattern of entering into the world, discerning the revelation in the rational and the sacred in the profane. This incarnational stance results in a theology that is interpretive rather than dogmatic and therefore involves the responsibility of discernment. Zimmermann notes the congruence of this interpretive theology with Charles Taylor’s notion of an “immanent frame,” within which both theists and atheists must engage each other in a public forum devoid of metaphysical or dogmatic knockdown arguments. Zimmermann concludes that the goal of Christian humanist ethics is transformational education into the new humanity accomplished by God in Jesus.

In chapter two, “Christian Discipleship, the Virtues, and Consumerism,” Brad Gregory argues that active Christian discipleship today is being threatened by politically protected consumerism. Rather than the difficulties of overt persecution that Bonhoeffer and his fellow believers

faced in Nazi-ruled Germany, the Western world faces the subtle seduction of advertising, which tells us that the good life is “the goods life” and “to buy” is what it means “to be.” Gregory states that this ethos is profoundly anti-Christian, drawing attention to the dehumanizing and destructive effects of consumerism. Consumerism cripples social relations, impedes personal moral formation, contorts our moral reasoning, and props up economically founded hierarchies of values and privileges. Without offering facile solutions, Gregory suggests that the kind of Christian humanism found in Bonhoeffer provides helpful insights for combating the prevalent consumerist mentality.

In chapter three, entitled “The Ironic Myth of ‘a world come of age,’” Barry Harvey takes up a typically humanist suspicion of instrumental reason. Harvey draws on Bonhoeffer’s critique of the modern world as a world obsessed with technology and organization in order to highlight the glaring irony of modernity, which is that the world, in trying to find itself, has been lost to the structures it has created for its self-protection. Harvey relies on the Canadian philosopher George Grant and Martin Heidegger’s critique of modernity’s theoretical stance toward the world to elucidate Bonhoeffer’s own, Christ-centered criticism of the same issues.

Chapter four takes us to the currently hotly debated topic of reconciliation over inhumane cultural practices in the name of religion, a topic of particular importance for post-*apartheid* politics in South Africa and the aftermath of the Canadian residential schools for First Nations people. In her chapter, “Bonhoeffer: A Post-Colonial Missiology for the Canadian Context,” Rev. Dr. Wendy Fletcher applies Bonhoeffer’s theology to a missionary strategy for Canadian churches in the wake of the residential school debacle. Widely recognized as the church’s mistake of equivocating evangelization with cultural assimilation, the residential schools affair calls for a similar reorientation of Christianity that Bonhoeffer counseled for the German churches after WWII. Fletcher argues that the damage sustained by Canada’s First Nations and the church’s failure to adequately deal with this issue requires a mental and spiritual change along the lines of Bonhoeffer’s religionless and this-worldly Christianity.

Part one concludes with chapter five, “Singular Community: The Changing Significance of Friendship for Spiritual Formation in Bonhoeffer’s Life and Thought.” In this chapter, Ryan Huber explores a topic traditionally dear to Christian humanists during the Renaissance, namely the formative role of friendship and good conversation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer often reflected upon the communal aspects of the Christian life, arguing that to have communion with Jesus as a disciple is to live in

community with other Christians. Phenomena such as “community” and “life together” seem to correspond with what Bonhoeffer’s dearest friend Eberhard Bethge has called “plural” friendships, but they may not reveal the deepest or most particular level of Bonhoeffer’s relational spirituality. Over the course of his adult life, “singular” friendship came to occupy a more important place in Bonhoeffer’s thought and practice. For Bonhoeffer, friendship became the deepest or highest form of community and a richer and more concrete extension of his earlier concept of brotherhood into all of life. Huber explains and analyzes the reasons for the changing concept, role, and importance of friendship for spiritual formation in Bonhoeffer’s life and thought and makes some suggestions regarding possible implications for spiritual formation today.

In the opening chapter of **part two**, Derek Witten revisits Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion and his influence on Marilynne Robinson in his contribution “Humanism and the Spirituality of the Mundane in Marilynne Robinson and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” In this sixth chapter, Witten takes up the “non-religious” and yet deeply Christological humanism espoused by Bonhoeffer and examines it in relation to Robinson’s *Gilead*. He demonstrates that both authors, in their own way, maintain that in reaction to a “world come of age”—that is, a world that has adopted a secular paradigm—Christianity must have the courage to rediscover the overwhelming presence of transcendence within the mundane. For where Bonhoeffer argues theologically that in light of the incarnation humanity may encounter transcendence through experience of the world as one participates in Christ, Robinson *demonstrates* this by portraying the mystical experience of *Gilead*’s protagonist and narrator John Ames as he observes and interacts with the physical world. By first unpacking the Christology which informs Bonhoeffer’s spirituality of the mundane, Witten further establishes the ways in which the theologian’s participatory, Christ-centered, religious framework provides theological grounding for the spiritual path exhibited by John Ames—a path which sidesteps both excessive acculturation and excessive spirituality and grounds experience of the divine in the faithful actions and perceptions of everyday life.

In chapter seven, with her paper “Memory in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” Bernadette Roe introduces the topic of memory into our discussion of moral formation. Roe examines the importance of memory in Robinson’s *Gilead* using Hannah Arendt’s doctoral dissertation *Love and Saint Augustine* as a point of comparison. Like Arendt who uses Augustine’s theology to establish the idea that memory gives a unity and wholeness to man’s existence and thereby enables him to answer the question of himself, Roe explores the ways in which the memories of

Robinson's central character, John Ames, and, more specifically, the very act of remembering and recording those memories in his informal autobiography, enable him to find God, meaning and happiness in his history as well as identify the sacramental significance of certain life events. Yet while the composition of this memoir allows Ames to retroactively plot the trajectory of his spiritual journey, it is not without error, showing, in certain instances, a lack of analysis and self-examination. Thus Roe also addresses the ways in which redemption and grace—two of the work's prevailing themes—are allowed to enter the novel at weakest points of Ames' narrative.

After Roe examines the role of memory, Roger Revell dedicates chapter eight, "Imagination for Theology: Learning to Read Scripture Well with Bonhoeffer and Robinson," to the imagination, another classic humanist theme. Like the previous paper, Revell's chapter deals jointly with Robinson and Bonhoeffer, exploring the works of both authors in relation to such topics as Christian imagination and Christian engagement in the world. Given that the interface between doctrinal theology and the human imagination is no stranger to controversy, Revell begins with a brief survey of historic Reformed and Lutheran sensibilities about the place of imagination in both biblical interpretation and doctrinal formulation, thereby setting the stage for his examination of Bonhoeffer's Genesis commentary *Creation and Fall*. From here he engages with the thought of Bonhoeffer, using it as an avenue for exploring the function and positive potential of imagination in the task of theology. With Bonhoeffer's insights in mind, Revell addresses such questions as: Can theology be done without imagination? If not, how should imagination operate in the work of theological reflection that wants to be moored to Scripture? This appraisal transpires in conversation with Marilynne Robinson who has posed similar queries in her essay collection *When I Was a Child*. Revell then concludes his discussion by offering several guiding principles for the trustworthy exercise of the imagination in the theological enterprise.

In chapter nine, Karola Radler adds to the discussion of moral formation in a secular age with her consideration of the crucial link between human dignity, natural law, and politics. In her contribution "Equality and Human Dignity: Substantive Foci of Enduring Significance in Bonhoeffer's and Leibholz's Interdisciplinary Discourse," Radler, a former judge, examines what she has identified as the legal inspiration and basis for Bonhoeffer's understanding of human dignity and its impact on (post-)modern realities. In support of his interpretation of one's right to natural life in a community enriched by multiplicity and variety, Radler

argues that Bonhoeffer utilized the ancient Roman legal concept of *suum cuique* (“to each his own”). She further attributes this conflation of theological and legal principles to Bonhoeffer’s heretofore seldom-analyzed relationship with Gerhard Leibholz, a lawyer and his brother-in-law, suggesting that *suum cuique* is used by both in order to substantiate a philosophy of community which excludes arbitrary discrimination and honors diversity, inclusivity, and equality. Radler concludes her discussion by examining how the interdisciplinary cooperation between Bonhoeffer and Leibholz came to influence postwar Germany and post-apartheid South Africa.

Marlana Duggar’s paper, “Reemergence of the Self Through the Incarnate One: Hegel’s ‘Master-Slave Dialectic’ in Bonhoeffer’s ‘Who Am I?’” concludes the second main division of this book. This tenth chapter discusses Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christological theology in relation to continental philosophy—specifically the work of German idealist Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, which was the basis of Bonhoeffer’s dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*. Given the extent to which Bonhoeffer engages with Hegelian philosophy in this early work, Duggar traces the philosopher’s influence to his later poem “Who Am I?” suggesting that the piece is Bonhoeffer’s attempt to resolve the self/other conflict or “master-slave dialectic” famously described in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Duggar thus traces Bonhoeffer’s journey through Hegel’s stages of self-consciousness, ultimately arguing that Bonhoeffer overcomes the impasse of the master-slave dialectic by drawing the self into a relationship in Christ, a self-existent being different from Hegel’s God, but who is also paradoxically bound by the dialectic tension. For Bonhoeffer, she maintains, ultimate reality finds its way in and out of Christ who defines both its borders and the center of humanity.

The book concludes with Marilynne Robinson’s reflections on Christian Humanism and Bonhoeffer, captured in an interview conducted at the end of the conference. Robinson also presented a paper at the conference entitled *Challenges We Face Now*; however, since a later version of this paper has recently been published as “Value” in her essay collection *The Givenness of Things*,<sup>5</sup> we could not publish it here. In its stead we have included this excellent interview conducted by Regent Professor Dr. Iwan Russell-Jones because we feel it encapsulates both Robinson’s conference paper and her attitude towards Christian Humanism and moral formation more broadly. The published essay

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<sup>5</sup> See: Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 172–87.

“Value” does provide some background for the interview, and so we would encourage readers to look it up, but, in what follows, we offer the reader a brief description of Robinson’s Humanism in order to provide the intellectual framework for “Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation.”

The label “humanism,” or “religious humanism,” appears with increasing frequency in Robinson’s interviews and works. In a recent interview with U.S. President Barack Obama, she explained her conviction that religious humanism, the belief that human beings are created in God’s image, grounds her hope in democracy as the best form of political governance: “Well, I believe that people are images of God. There’s no alternative that is theologically respectable to treating people in terms of that understanding. What can I say? It seems to me as if democracy is the logical, the inevitable consequence of this kind of religious humanism at its highest level. And it [applies] to everyone. It’s the human image. It’s not any loyalty or tradition or anything else; it’s being human that enlists the respect, the love of God being implied in it.”<sup>6</sup>

In her recent essay, “Humanism,” Robinson affirms, again in the name of theistic humanism, her refusal to concede to naturalism the dissolution of the mystery of our human existence through reductionistic materialistic and scientific assessments of our humanity.<sup>7</sup> Her literary work and essays are perhaps best understood as the affirmation of the mystery of our humanity and as her resistance toward the banishment of this mystery by the limited imagination of scientism. Scientism is not unlike John Ames’ grandfather in *Gilead*, the fiery abolitionist preacher whose one-eyed gaze stands for his religious outlook that is intense but also intensely one-sided: the vision of scientism may be well intended, and even brilliant, but narrow and non-reflective, and thus potentially dehumanizing. Scientism is not the only enemy of humanism for Robinson. There is much in modern culture, not least the collective amnesia of traditions—especially religious traditions that have shaped our social values—that threatens our humanity. Robinson believes that Bonhoeffer, her favourite modern theologian, experienced a similar situation: “I do believe that we stand at a threshold as Bonhoeffer did, and that the example of his life obliges me to speak about the gravity of our historical moment as I see it, in the knowledge that no society is at any time immune to moral catastrophe.”<sup>8</sup> Robinson, however, is a profoundly *Christian* humanist, and her understanding of God’s image in human beings and her profound sacramental sense of

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www2.nybooks.com/articles/s3/2015/nov/05/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation.html>

<sup>7</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, 14–15.

<sup>8</sup> “Value” in *The Givenness of Things*, 174.



God’s grace at work in the midst of life’s most agonizing moments embues her writing with a deep sense of hope for the future.

We trust that this volume will stimulate readers to think more deeply about the roles humanism, religion, and moral formation will inevitably play in the future of our various cultures.

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# **PART ONE**

## CHAPTER ONE

# BONHOEFFER'S CHRISTIAN HUMANISM IN "A WORLD COME OF AGE"

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### **Introduction**

By way of introduction to the contributions to this volume, I will reflect on the meaning of the central terms that make up our book's title: "Christian humanism" and "world come of age." What does Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism entail, and what did Bonhoeffer mean by "a world come of age?" The contributors to this volume discuss three main issues: 1) Bonhoeffer and the idea of Christian humanism, 2) Bonhoeffer's interpretation of modernity or "a world come of age," and 3) the way in which his (or any) Christian humanism should address the challenges of selfhood, sociality, moral reasoning and character formation in such a world. I will mainly concentrate on the first two aspects (Christian Humanism and "world come of age"), and touch on character formation in my concluding remarks.

### **Part I: Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism**

I will venture a definition of Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism by first delineating the theological roots of Christian humanism in the formation of early Christian theology and then considering Bonhoeffer's theology in relation to these roots. So where does Christian humanism begin? Christian humanism is the evangel as interpreted by the Christology of the church fathers. Their theology is perhaps best described as Christ-centered realism, a grand, Christological vision of God's relation to the world that

interprets God, self, and world through the mystery of the incarnation.<sup>1</sup> For seminal theologians of the early church—such as Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, the Cappadocian fathers (Gregory of Nyssa, St. Basil, Gregory of Naziansus),<sup>2</sup> and even for Augustine—the gospel is best expressed in Athanasius' pithy summary statement that "God became a human being so that human beings might become god."<sup>3</sup> It will be helpful for our discussion of Christian humanism

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<sup>1</sup> I am using "incarnation" in the broader meaning still alive in eastern Orthodox theology, as including the entire Christ event of cradle, cross and resurrection. Bonhoeffer also uses the term this way, insisting that all three events constitute the Christ event that founds Christianity.

<sup>2</sup> This article by J. A. McGuckin shows that the Cappadocian's idea of *theosis* was a conscious re-reading and adaptation of Origen's *theoria*, of the soul's ascent to and vision of the divine nous. McGuckin offers this helpful clarification of *theosis*: "Deification (Greek: Theosis, Theopoiesis) was a bold use of language, deliberately evocative of the pagan acclamations of Apotheosis (humans, especially heroes, great sages, and latterly emperors, being advanced to the rank of deity) although that precise term was always strictly avoided by Christian writers because of its fundamentally pagan conceptions of creatures transgressing on divine prerogative: a blasphemous notion that several of the ancient Hellenes themselves, not least Arrian, found worthy of denunciation. Deification in classical Greek Christian thought is always careful to speak of the ascent of the creature to communion with the divine by virtue of the prior divine election and divine summoning of the creature for fullness of life. In other words, in all Christian conceptions of the notion, the divine initiation and priority is always at the basis of the creaturely ascent (at once both a moral and ontological ascent) and that progress is part and parcel of the very understanding of what salvation is. Deification theory is, therefore, a basic element of Greek patristic theology's articulation of the process of salvific revelation: put more simply, how the epiphany of a gracious God is experienced within the world (more precisely within the Church), as a call to more abundantly energised life. It is in this juxtaposition of the ideas of life and revelation (the revelation of life that is) that Christian deification theory assumes its true grandeur, for it breaks down, at least in the best of Greek patristic thought, the limiting "differentiation" between soteriology and creation theology. In speaking of fullness of communion as the "true life" of the creature, deification language shows that the restoration of communion (salvation as redemption) is at root one and the same movement and motive of the God who seeks to disburse the gift of the fullness of life to his rational creatures: the gift of life and the experience of divine communion being synonyms for the enlightened saint who finally sees the purposes of creation (and the motives of redemption) as they really are." <http://www.sgtg.org/Writings/Patristics/Deification.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *Saint Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria, On the Incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 93. In all fathers, Latin and Greek, early and late, we find the designation of Christians

if we translate this ancient formula, without sacrificing its essential teaching, into language adapted for modern Christians ears: “God became human so that by being transformed into Christ-likeness, human beings can attain their true humanity.”

If this definition of the gospel sounds strange to us, this may be because our ears are accustomed to the accents of modern evangelicalism, which has focused so much on theological *boundaries* that it may have lost view of the actual *goal* of Christianity: the becoming fully human through communion with God. What I mean is that evangelicals are so preoccupied with access to salvation that neither sermons nor sacraments speak any longer of the goal of salvation as true life and true humanity in communion with God. Reducing the gospel to justification by faith or even to mere obedience may have acted in evangelicalism similarly to the doorman in the law parable of Kafka’s novel *The Trial*. Instead of providing access to the fullness of life, the gospel becomes itself the gate at which we linger without ever entering into the mansion that is life with the Trinitarian God. Indeed, Christ died so that we are justified by faith, and certainly, He has defeated sin and death by *His* death and resurrection, but the end of salvation is not justification, nor a renewed ability to obey God’s commands; any willing slave can obey commands. For the fathers, the end of salvation is *life* or new creation; and this new humanity is characterized by union with God through divine adoption, so that our being increasingly reflects God’s own humanity, embodied in Christ as divine philanthropy.

We should not let a premature dismissal of patristic theology as Platonic distortion of a more earthbound, Jewish Christianity blind us to the overall trajectory of patristic humanism—namely the metamorphosis of our entire being, body and soul, into Christ-likeness.<sup>4</sup> This transformative anthropology is generally known as *theosis* or *deification*. Early theologians took their cue for this interpretation of the gospel from the New Testament interpretation of the Genesis passages that speak about human beings as made in God’s image. I am referring to the passages that speak of Jesus as the true image of God, as for example, in Colossians 1:15, but also in Hebrews 1:3, which presents Jesus as the exact expression of God’s

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as gods who, as Tertullian writes, “have become sons of God by faith.” (*Adversus Praxean* ANF 3, p. 608).

<sup>4</sup> Even patristic emphases on *theoria* or the beatific vision with its attendant image of ascent, describe essentially ontological, participatory views of union with God and the consequent transformation of our being into-Christ likeness.

essential being.<sup>5</sup> Based on these passages, the fathers' humanistic logic unfolded like this: human beings had been created from the very first in the image of Christ, who is the true image of God. Had human beings not sinned, they would have gradually transformed fully into Christ's image as glorified human beings. Humanity did sin, however, and so the true image of God, Christ the eternal word and wisdom of God, became human to set things right; Christian salvation does not, however, simply turn back the clock, "resetting" humanity to its original starting point. Rather the fathers argued that human beings, by participating in the divine-human nature of the God-man Jesus, are already now in communion with the reality they were formerly to reach gradually, thus now experiencing as assured promise a foretaste of the glorious transformation that is to come. In short, salvation is participation *now* in the living reality of the new humanity accomplished by God in Jesus.

The Christian life thus becomes divine education or *paideia*. The purpose of this divine education is to complete the inborn image of God by uniting our natural abilities of reason, knowledge, and sociality with the moral character of Christ to attain God-likeness. In the words of the church father Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330-379), "as you have that which is according to the image through your being rational, you come to be according to the likeness by undertaking kindness."<sup>6</sup> Basil repeats here a common distinction in patristic humanism between the image of God (our rational and relational natures) and the likeness of God (our spiritual orientation and moral character). Christianity is the graced process of putting on Christ, of becoming truly human in becoming like God as revealed in Christ. For patristic writers, Christianity is the process of becoming truly human by participating in God's recapitulation and reconciliation of humanity in Himself through the work of Christ. Basil sums up this humanistic interpretation of the gospel thus: "What is Christianity? Likeness to God as far as is possible for human nature."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> ὃς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ (who, being the radiance of his glory and exact expression [or impress] of his essence [or subsistence—i.e. that which makes something stand up, subsist, and thus constitutes its essence]).

<sup>6</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *On the Human Condition*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Harvard University Press, 1926), 45.

<sup>7</sup> Basil, *On the Human Condition*, 44. Gregory has a similar definition: "Christianity is an imitation of the divine nature. "We should not object to this high calling, says Gregory, for "the first man was constituted as an imitation of the likeness of God. So Moses, in philosophizing about man, where he says that God made man, states that: 'He created him in the image of God,' and the word

Another church father, Clement of Alexandria, writes that Christ's desire is to confer his very self on us. Clement has Jesus exhort all nations with these words: "I call to the whole race of men, whose creator I am, by the will of the Father . . . For I want to impart to you this grace, bestowing the perfect boon of immortality; and I confer on you both the Word and the knowledge of God, My complete self . . . I desire to restore you according to the original model, that ye may become also like me."<sup>8</sup> And since Christ died for the life of the world, early Christian humanism often demonstrates a perhaps surprising public emphasis on the common good of society.<sup>9</sup> Christianity is nothing less than *imitatio Christi*, living out the incarnational divine pattern of philanthropy. Gregory of Nyssa summarizes this path as follows: "imitate the Master by loving one another and do not shrink from death or any other punishment for the good of each other. But the way which God entered upon for you, do you enter upon for Him, proceeding with one body and one soul to the invitation from above, loving God and each other."<sup>10</sup>

Education in Christ likeness, of course, entailed suffering, just as Christ had suffered in and for his philanthropy. Did not the author of Hebrews, after all, tell us that those who have no part in the divine *paideia* or "correction [or discipline]," as many English translations have it, are not children of God but bastards? Love of God, as Gregory of Nyssa taught, "does not come to us automatically, but through many sufferings and great concern in cooperation with Christ."<sup>11</sup> Participation in the reality of the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ naturally entailed sharing in God's burden for and solidarity with all of humanity. Basil of Caesarea's preaching on social justice provides a concrete example of this revolutionary humanitarianism. He argues that Christ's incarnation inaugurated a new social order,<sup>12</sup> in which the poor are the true image of

'Christianity,' therefore brings man back to his original good fortune" ("To Call Oneself a Christian," 85).

<sup>8</sup> Clement of Alexandria, "Exhortation to the Heathen," in ANF 2, pp. 171–206, 205.

<sup>9</sup> Clement of Alexandria writes, for example, that "God's gifts are for the common good" in *Stromata*, ANF 2, p. 369 (2.19).

<sup>10</sup> Saint Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Christian Mode of Life," in *Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 147f.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory, "On the Christian Mode of Life," 148.

<sup>12</sup> "τῆς κατὰ Χριστὸν πολιτείας" in Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, *Basil II: Letters 59–185*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, The Loeb Classical Library, vol. 2 (New York: Harvard University Press, 1926), 361.



God, because God himself became poor in Christ, so that every human being might benefit from the riches of his grace. Unfortunately, says Basil, the rich are often oblivious to this new social order. The rich, chides Basil, can easily detect the fake image of a counterfeit coin, but they ignore the poor who bear the genuine image of God.<sup>13</sup>

The Christological foundation for human solidarity is perhaps most evident in the developing Eucharistic theology of the early church. In his book *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, sums up the first four hundred years of Eastern and Western Eucharistic theology as an ethics of human solidarity. The Eucharist reminds participants of their "being-in-Christ" and thus of their bond with all other human beings. Communion with him who died for the life of the world conforms the Christian to the incarnational pattern of divine philanthropy. The Eucharist impresses upon us the humanitarian, other-oriented structure of the Christian life. The sacramental communion with the incarnate, glorified Jesus was regarded as an effective aid in shaping the Christian's character as "being with" and "being for others."<sup>14</sup> The Lord's Supper thus becomes an important tool for Christian education as Christ-formation.

Finally, we must mention the early humanist conviction that reason and faith worked together for education in Christ-likeness.<sup>15</sup> Following Augustine rather than Tertullian, patristic humanists harnessed every cultural resource for understanding self, world, and God. Following the gospel of John, patristic humanists asserted a Christological foundation of reality. Without question, the Christian is reborn by a supernatural act of grace, but the God of grace is also the very ground of human rationality. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God's eternal wisdom and Word through whom all things are created and by whom all things are sustained. Patristic humanists were thus unabashedly logos-centric in holding that every truth, whatever its source may be, reflects the light that enlightens every human

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<sup>13</sup> Basil, *On Social Justice*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> J. M. R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), xiv.

<sup>15</sup> I am well aware that Christianity has always contained a tension between what Étienne Gilson has called the Tertullian and Augustine families concerning the relation between revelation and reason. Fortunately, Tertullian's polemical opposition of faith and philosophy has been dwarfed by the overwhelming acceptance of Augustine's principle that, beginning with faith, belief seeks understanding through the application of reason. In: *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1938), 16–17.

being. Consequently, the best of non-Christian virtues, philosophy and literature were important in training human reasoning to receive the higher truths of biblical revelation. Profane learning, as Basil the Great counselled young Christians, “should ornament the mind, as foliage graces the fruit-bearing tree.” Indeed, insofar as Christians should emulate pagan virtues and heroic lives dedicated to the pursuit of right living, Basil asserts that the sacred is found in the profane.<sup>16</sup>

For those of you who are familiar with Bonhoeffer’s work, the similarities between his theology and the Christian humanism I have sketched thus far will be readily apparent. Space here is too short to show these parallels in detail with adequate references, so simple assertions will have to suffice. Let me begin the comparison by insisting that in patristic theology Christianity *is* a humanism because the good news is the announcement of our adoption into the divine life for the completion of our humanity through participation in Jesus the Christ, the true image of God. We find very similar assertions in Bonhoeffer, who writes, for example, that “In Jesus Christ, in the one who became human, was crucified, and rose from the dead, humanity has been renewed. What happened in Christ, happened to everyone, because he was *the* human being [par excellence]. The new human being is created.”<sup>17</sup> Christianity, for Bonhoeffer, is participation in this new humanity: “Christian life means being human [*Menschsein*] in the power of Christ’s becoming human, being judged, and pardoned in the power of the cross, living a new

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<sup>16</sup> “Almost all who have written upon the subject of wisdom have more or less, in proportion to their several abilities, extolled virtue in their writings. Such men must one obey, and must try to realize their words in his life. For he, who by his works exemplifies the wisdom which with others is a matter of theory alone, ‘breathes; all others flutter about like shadows.’ I think it is as if a painter should represent some marvel of manly beauty, and the subject should actually be such a man as the artist pictures on the canvas. To praise virtue in public with brilliant words and with long drawn out speeches, while in private preferring pleasures to temperance, and self-interest to justice, finds an analogy on the stage, for the players frequently appear as kings and rulers, though they are neither, nor perhaps even genuinely free men. A musician would hardly put up with a lyre which was out of tune, nor a choregus with a chorus not singing in perfect harmony. But every man is divided against himself who does not make his life conform to his words, but who says with Euripides, ‘The mouth indeed hath sworn, but the heart knows no oath.’ Such a man will seek the appearance of virtue rather than the reality. But to seem to be good when one is not so, is, if we are to respect the opinion of Plato at all, the very height of injustice” (*To Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*, VI).

<sup>17</sup> DBW 6, p. 78.

life in the power of the resurrection."<sup>18</sup> We also recall his insistence on the ecclesial, social nature of this new humanity in Christ: "The church is nothing but a piece of the new humanity in which Christ has truly taken shape. . . . The church is the new human being [*der neue Mensch*] who has been incarnated, judged, and brought to new life in Christ."<sup>19</sup>

Bonhoeffer also fully recognizes the broader social implications of this humanist interpretation of the Gospel when he links the new humanity to the restoration of God's image in every human being through Christ:

In the becoming human of Christ the entire humanity regains the dignity of being made in the image of God (*Gottesebenbildlichkeit*). Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance. In community with the incarnate one, we are once again given our true humanity. With it, we are delivered from the isolation caused by sin, and at the same time restored to the whole of humanity. Inasmuch as we participate in Christ, the incarnate one, we also have a part in all of humanity, which is borne by him. Since we know ourselves to be accepted and borne within the humanity of Jesus, our new humanity now also consists in bearing the troubles and the sins of all others. The incarnate one transforms his disciples into brothers and sisters of all human beings.<sup>20</sup>

Like the church fathers, Bonhoeffer also depicts Christian ethics as being shaped into the image of Christ by participation in Christ. We recall the many passages in *Discipleship* and his *Ethics* that speak about Ethics as participating in the reconciliation of the world to God in Christ, and about the formation of Christ's image in every believer and in the church as a whole: "[Christ] Formation occurs only by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ, by *being conformed to the unique form of the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen*. This [happens] [. . .]<sup>21</sup> as the form of Jesus Christ himself so works on us that it molds us, conforming our form to Christ's own (Gal. 4:9)."<sup>22</sup> In unison with earlier Christian humanists, Bonhoeffer stresses the importance of the sacraments for the Christian life. Christ-formation happens within the church when God

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<sup>18</sup> DBWE 6, p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> DBW 6, p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> DBW 4, p. 301; cf. DBWE 4, p. 285. Translation slightly altered to emphasize the "becoming human." The English translation has "incarnation" and "incarnate one."

<sup>21</sup> Cut: "[this] does not happen as we strive 'to become like Jesus,' as we customarily say, but . . ."

<sup>22</sup> DBWE 6, p. 93.

becomes present through the sacraments of baptism, Eucharist, and the preaching of the word.

Bonhoeffer also shares with earlier Christian humanists the Christologically-based correlation of faith and reason. He expresses the Christological unity of reality in these words: “Christ is the center and power of the Bible, of the church, of theology but also of humanity, reason, justice, and culture. To Christ everything must return; only under Christ’s protection can it live.”<sup>23</sup> Concerning the relation of faith and reason, Bonhoeffer’s Christology puts him squarely into the Augustinian rather than Tertullian camp; since God and World are united in the incarnation, the “revelational” is found only in the rational, the sacred only in the profane. Bonhoeffer writes, “I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world, without the reality of God.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, to anticipate my main point, the central question that motivates Bonhoeffer’s theology, the question to which his religionless Christianity in a world come of age forms the answer, is the hermeneutical challenge “of participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today.”<sup>25</sup> This question “who is Jesus for us today” and “what is he saying to us concretely in our time” is Bonhoeffer’s fundamental, driving concern that unifies his theology and is traceable from his earlier works right into the prison letters.

I hope these parallels with the humanism of the early church convince you not only that Bonhoeffer is a Christian humanist, but also that his humanism is very much continuous with, rather than opposed to, the patristic view that the gospel concerns the deification of humanity. In his very fine introduction to Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, Clifford Green argues that Bonhoeffer “reverses” the patristic dictum that God became human in order that humans might become divine to assert instead that, “God became human so that human beings could become truly human.”<sup>26</sup> As my brief sketch of patristic humanism has shown, however, we do not have to oppose Bonhoeffer’s Christological anthropology to that of the fathers. Becoming truly human is precisely what deification means for Athanasius and Augustine. Patristic deification never abolishes the ontological distinction between God and creature, but preaches Christ-likeness, as far as is possible, for human nature.<sup>27</sup> Deification speaks of true humanity

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<sup>23</sup> DBWE 6, p. 341.

<sup>24</sup> DBWE 6, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> DBWE 6, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> DBWE 6, “Editor’s Introduction,” 1–44, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory of Nyssa clarifies this teaching when he says, “The gospel does not order nature to be compounded with nature, I mean the human with the divine, but

through Christ-formation. We can thus affirm Bonhoeffer's spiritual kinship with a long-standing Christian humanist tradition.

## **Part II: A World Come of Age and Religionless Christianity**

### ***1. Introduction: A Secular Age and "a world come of age"***

Let us now try to define what Bonhoeffer might have meant by the phrase "a world come of age." In the prison letters, "a world come of age" is paired with the notion of religionless Christianity, and the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts. In my view, the obvious question to ask is how Bonhoeffer's conceptual bundle of a mature world and religionless Christianity relates to our current debates about religion and the secular.<sup>28</sup> We might ask, for example, whether Bonhoeffer's "world come of age" is similar to Charles Taylor's "secular age." Taylor's "secular age," does not imply the ideological dogma of *secularism* but describes a shared "secularity" within an "immanent frame" of reasoning as the common social imaginary of Western cultures. Within Taylor's secular, immanent frame, religious articulations of human flourishing are as legitimate as are non-religious proposals. As social imaginary, the immanent frame is not necessarily closed to transcendence, and thus "a secular age" does not necessitate the disappearance of religion.<sup>29</sup> This necessity follows only, and falsely, from the secularists' own narrative of intellectual history, which Taylor calls the "subtraction narrative" of secularization. According to this subtraction narrative, human progress toward moral maturity is

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it does order the good actions to be imitated in our life as much as possible" ("To Call Oneself a Christian," 87).

<sup>28</sup> For the standard explanation of Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity and non-religious interpretation, see Ralf Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> "What we share is what I have been calling 'the immanent frame'; the different structures we live in: scientific, social, technological, and so on, constitute such a frame in that they are part of a 'natural' or 'this-worldly' order that can be understood in its own terms, without reference to the 'supernatural' or 'transcendent.' But this order of itself leaves the issue open whether for purposes of ultimate explanation, or spiritual transformation, or final sense-making, we might have to invoke something transcendent. It is only when the order is 'spun' in a certain way that it seems to dictate a 'closed' interpretation" (*A Secular Age* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2007], 594).

proportionate to the disappearance of religion. Under the spell of the powerful imagery of humanity's emergence from the infantile stage of religious beliefs into the maturity of rational adulthood, believers in this narrative cannot but regard religion as primitive, an irrational throwback to the Stone Age. But such secularism is not the only option in "a secular age." It is indeed true that in our secular age it has become possible for "masses of people" to envision human flourishing without any reference to God.<sup>30</sup> A secular age thus describes a social imaginary, a collective cultural consciousness no longer reliant on God or on metaphysics to ensure the stability of scientific or moral reasoning. At the same time, however, for Taylor, self-sufficient humanism, or what he also calls "exclusive humanism" does not define "a secular age";<sup>31</sup> rather, our time features manifold visions of human flourishing stretched between the two extreme poles of secularism and monotheistic religions, which currently shape the debate about religion and culture in a secular age.<sup>32</sup>

In trying to relate Taylor's "secular age" to Bonhoeffer's "world come of age," it may be helpful to draw out two of Taylor's main ideas. First, the immanent frame as the common social imaginary of our secular age is not necessarily closed or immanentist. Whether we regard this frame as open or closed to transcendence depends on our often unconsciously held assumptions about reality. Taylor, it seems to me, holds out a hermeneutic hope for dialogue based on the absence of knock-down arguments. Neither atheism, nor scientism, nor naturalism, nor religious belief should any longer enjoy the status of common sense. Taylor may be too optimistic in this, but he envisions a common hermeneutic sensibility by which interlocutors acknowledge their view of reality as historically developed; thus deprived of epistemological shortcuts, such as metaphysical or revelational trump cards, debaters will more easily recognize the force of different visions and arguments, thereby enabling genuine dialogue between religious and non-religious people.<sup>33</sup>

Taylor's second idea worth highlighting for our purpose is his warning against the danger of secularism and the eclipse of religious contributions

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<sup>30</sup> Taylor gives us this "one-line-description" of the term "secular age": "A secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people. This is the crucial link between secularity and self-sufficient humanism" (Ibid., 19–20).

<sup>31</sup> "I don't want to claim that modern secularity is somehow coterminous with exclusive humanism" (Ibid., 19).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 549.