
BONHOEFFER'S LEGACY: SHAPING POSTWAR THEOLOGY AND SECULARIZATION IN GERMANY

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS, PARTICULARLY
RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY, IN POSTWAR GERMANY?

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CONTENT

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Literature Review</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Methodology.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Chapter one: Bonhoeffer's life and theology</i>	<i>18</i>
Upbringing.....	18
Academic life.....	19
The rise of National socialism	22
Religionless Christianity	23
A Suffering God	26
After Bonhoeffer's death	27
<i>Chapter two: The context of postwar German theology</i>	<i>29</i>
National Socialism and Protestantism	30
Post-Holocaust theological thought	31
Secularization process in West-Germany	34
The emergence of the Death of God Theology.....	36
Theology of Suffering.....	37
<i>Chapter three: The impact of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on postwar theological discourse</i>	<i>39</i>
The interpretation of Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity in relation to Secularization	40
Bonhoeffer and the emergence of the Death of God theology.....	47
Bonhoeffer and the Theology of Suffering	49
Is Bonhoeffer still relevant?	51
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>54</i>
<i>Bibliography.....</i>	<i>59</i>

INTRODUCTION

We are approaching a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore... What does that then mean for "Christianity"? The foundations are being pulled out from under all that "Christianity" has previously been for us. – Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about a completely religionless age in a prison cell in his letter to his friend Eberhard Bethge on April 30, 1944. According to him, this called for a 'religionless Christianity,' which, despite sounding paradoxical, naturally arises from Bonhoeffer's critique of religion. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, pastor, and member of resistance (1906-1945), believed that Western society was "approaching a completely religionless age" (Bonhoeffer 2010, 586). Several questions emerge with this nonreligious interpretation of Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christianity. Why does Bonhoeffer reject traditional religion? What does he mean by 'religionless Christianity,' and does this concept hold contemporary value? Although Bonhoeffer was executed not long after having written about a religionless age in 1945, his theology and critiques of religion gained significant relevance in religious discourse in later decades. Particularly as Western Europe became increasingly secular and church attendance declined. Bonhoeffer anticipated a shift in religious influence in a time when Christianity was deeply integrated into society, and faith did play a significant role in people's daily lives. During the 1960s, when secularization was at its peak, Bonhoeffer's ideas were frequently discussed, particularly his notion of 'religionless Christianity' and 'a world come of age'. While we recognize that Europe is not entirely devoid of religion – religious institutions still operate, and many people continue to believe in a god – we nonetheless inhabit a predominantly secular society. This secular context, marked by individualism and

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¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge, Renate Bethge, Ilse Tödt, and John W. De Gruchy. *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 363.

humanism, presents significant challenges to maintaining personal belief in a god. Movements such as the 'death of God' theology, which emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, highlight these challenges posed for churches and theologians by an increasingly secular world. Amid these challenges, many theologians saw relevance in Bonhoeffer's theology, asking the question that Bonhoeffer also posed in his *Letter*: "What is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?" This question emerged in the theological discourse during the 1950s and formed a cornerstone of the secularization debate for churches and theology. This thesis delves into these challenges and examines the significance of theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, providing insights into the evolving religious discourse in twentieth-century Germany.

The citation this introduction begins with is in one of Bonhoeffer's letters that he wrote in prison considering God's position and the role of Christianity in a changing world. Following World War II, Germany grappled with a profound theological crisis, witnessing the collapse of moral and spiritual foundations within society. In this period, Bonhoeffer emerged as a significant figure, offering insights into faith, ethics, and the church's role. While he died in 1945, his theology remained alive. His motivations were deeply rooted in his Christian faith and commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ. He felt a Christian duty to resist evil, particularly under the Nazi regime (The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer 2019). Notably, his role in the resistance movement as a theologian was remarkable, considering the relatively passive stance of churches against the Nazis at the time. West Germany in the 1950s was centrally focused on 'secularization' in public and academic discussions as well as within Christian churches. This term was used to describe the evolving role of religion in modern society, influenced by the historical and political context of the time (Mittmann 2016, 158). Thus, during the 1960s, the existence of God was widely questioned, which had a profound impact on Christian faith during that time. Several West German theologians grappled with these issues concerning the role of Christianity, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer was frequently cited regarding these issues. Bonhoeffer thus advocated for a 'religionless Christianity,' suggesting that

Christians should embrace the secular world rather than oppose it. He argued that Christians should engage with the world using non-religious language to discuss their faith and God (Herzog 2006, 431). This notion would go on to inspire a generation of young theologians, providing a framework for grappling with the challenges of modernity (McFarland et al. 2011, 454). Bonhoeffer's ideas catalyzed a reevaluation of traditional theology in postwar Germany, inviting theologians to engage with the realities of a changing world.

This thesis aims to explore the effects of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ideas, specifically his concept of 'religionless Christianity,' on postwar religious discourse in Germany during the 1960s. This religious discourse mainly focuses on Christianity and theological implications; thus, this thesis mainly engages with churches, theologians and public discussions on Christianity. Furthermore, it seeks to answer how Bonhoeffer's thoughts influenced and shaped the religious landscape, theological discussions, and broader societal attitudes in a period marked by 'secularization' and the reassessment of the church's role after the Nazi era. Particularly, it focuses on how Bonhoeffer contributed to Germany's political and religious instability. Bonhoeffer is regarded as a prominent figure in Christian theology; his ideas challenge traditional religious beliefs, making it essential for modern thought to explore his implications for a redefined image of religion.

The main research question is as follows: How did Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological implications, particularly, his 'religionless Christianity', contribute to and shape postwar religious discourse in Germany during the 1960s?

This thesis consists of three chapters to describe his impact, through analysis of Bonhoeffer's notion of a religionless age, the postwar context and 'secularization' debate in the 1960s. Chapter one aims to answer the first sub question: What were the key aspects of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and what were the underpinnings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology, with a particular emphasis on his concept of 'religionless Christianity'? By examining the early life, education, and arguments of

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology, as well as his response to the rise of National Socialism and his concept of 'religionless Christianity'. It outlines his academic life and influences from other theologians or philosophers, his theological reflections during his imprisonment, and shortly the impact of his ideas on modern theology. The second chapter focuses on the second question: What were the main influences and factors that contributed to the development of theology in postwar Germany, and how did these shape the religious discourse? By investigating the complex and evolving post-World War II landscape in Germany, focusing on moral authority and theological reflections after the Nazi past. It highlights the role of both Catholic and Protestant churches during and after the Nazi era, the confrontations of the issues within German society and the developments including new theological perspectives. The chapter also addresses the rise of decline of religious influence in Germany, as 'secularization' became a prominent theme in both societal and theological discussions, challenging the churches to adapt to a more secular world. The sub question that belongs to the third chapter is: To what extent did Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological concepts and theories challenge or shape the landscape of postwar German theology, and how significant was his role in the emergence of 'Death of God Theology'? This chapter explores the influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on postwar theology, particularly through his writings in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. It discusses how his concepts and theories impacted prominent theologians such as Harvey Cox, Jürgen Moltmann, John A.T. Robinson, William Hamilton, and Dorothee Sölle, each integrating Bonhoeffer's insights into their own theological frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There were large developments in the second half of the twentieth century as European countries had to reconstruct themselves after the Second World War. Numerous studies have examined the state of Christianity, theology and secularization in postwar Germany. This thesis focuses on several key issues discussed by theologians and historians during this period. These include secularization, National Socialism and Protestantism, the theology of religionless Christianity, suffering and moral responsibility. There is a comprehensive body of scholarly literature that examines the political role of churches and the state of religion in Germany since 1945, and the evolution of theological discourse in postwar Germany. For instance, Susannah Heschel has extensively explored the theological discourse both during and after the Second World War. She critically examines postwar Protestantism and its stance towards Jews, highlighting the initial failure to recognize the entanglement of Christian theology with National Socialism. Although churches aimed to be the moral voice in the postwar era, their focus on German suffering often led to the neglect of crucial Christian-Jewish relations by the Protestant church (Heschel 2010). The shifts of the religious landscape of postwar Germany and the consequences of it have been studied by Thomas Großbölting in his book *Losing Heaven*, published in 2017. It reflects a comprehensive overview of the country's religious history of the decline of organized Christianity and the rise of pluralism in Germany's religious landscape. Großbölting concludes that, contrary to secularization theories which explain an automatic link between modernization and the decline of religion, the changes observed in the previous century in Germany have resulted from specific conflicts and decisions made by political authorities, churches, and social actors (Großbölting 2017, 291).

Thus, secularization is one of the issues this thesis will examine in relation to Bonhoeffer's theology and the postwar context in Germany. Recent studies have shown that when discussing the terms religion and modernity together, the concept of secularization often comes to the forefront. Secularization is a broad discourse

that many academics have written about. Charles Taylor with his book *A Secular Age* gives an analysis of what it means to live in the post-Christian era, in a pluralistic world of contrasting beliefs and the growing unbelief. Charles Taylor articulates secularity as “the retreat of religion in public life” and “the decline in belief and practice” (Taylor 2007, 423). He characterizes secularization as the transition from a society where religion holds unquestionable influence to one where it becomes a mere option (Taylor 2007, 3). His argument is that the emergence of secularity coincided with the potential for exclusive humanism, thereby expanding the available options for the first time and marking the end of an era characterized by ‘naïve’ religious faith. In essence, a secular age differs from earlier times because it is possible now to envision that a life solely focused on human happiness and fulfillment is seen as achievable for many people. This connection between secularity and a self-sustaining humanism is crucial, according to Taylor (Taylor 2007, 19-20). Casanova’s frequently cited analysis emphasizes the complexity of questions regarding secularization suggesting that there cannot be progress until we sort out the different aspects of secularization. Casanova argues that we need to separate the idea of secularization as a process of differentiation, from the idea of secularization as a decline in religious belief and practice, and from the idea of secularization as the marginalization of religion within society (Casanova 1994, 211). These scholars have played a central role in the discourse on secularization, particularly in more recent times. However, this thesis primarily focuses on the secularization discourse of the 1950s and 1960s, a period known as the postwar era. During this time, post-Holocaust thinking, with its emphasis on guilt and social justice, the decline of religion, and the political role of churches, were prominent topics among academics. For instance, Harvey Cox, a theologian who explored secularization and its implications for Christianity during a time characterized by urbanization, published his influential work *The Secular City* in 1965. Cox contextualized the process of secularization within the framework of urbanization, where he argues that religion is being challenged by the growth of cities and the increasing secular nature of public

life. However, this shift is not necessarily negative according to Cox; rather, it offers and opportunity for Christianity to evolve and remain relevant in contemporary society. Moreover, Cox argues that God can be found in the secular world and that faith should engage with 'secular' issues such as politics, and social justice (Cox 1965, 286-303).

Furthermore, theologians have delved into the role of Christianity, particularly the Christian churches in a society that seemed to be becoming increasingly secular. Christian religious communities in Germany have experienced substantial dechurching, resulting in a loss of significance in society. When exploring the situation immediately following the war, Germany's population for the most part identified with the Christian churches. Of the entire population, 95.8 percent held a membership, with 44.3 percent being Catholic and 51.5 percent Protestant. This was significantly different from before the Second World War, where the population leaned more towards Catholicism. The statistics indicate that in the two decades following the war, being a member of a church was accepted as a social norm, with only a small minority choosing to disaffiliate from either of the main confessional Churches (Großbölting 2017, 22). According to Mittmann, the secularization discourse in West German Churches can be divided into three stages. From 1945 to the late 1950s, 'secularization' served as a framework for navigating the reconstruction of World War II. It was primarily understood as a decline in religious influence. In the 1960s, there was a shift towards a 'theologization' of secularization, influenced by theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The goal was to implement a new understanding of secularization with the emphasis on adapting to a modernized society within the church model. The politicization of West German society during this period shaped theological debates within the churches. The last stage, emerging in the 1970s through the 1980s, was marked by the influence of sociological frameworks on the definition of secularization and churches recognizing the need for adapting to modern society (Mittmann 2016, 157-158). Mittmann outlines the context of secularization in postwar Germany. Initially, secularization was perceived

negatively by the churches, but over time it was viewed more positively as part of a reevaluation of the traditional church mode. The church recognized the need to adapt to modern society, viewing it as a transformation of Christianity rather than simply a loss of influence. Moreover, sociologist Thomas Luckmann, as quoted by Mittmann, argued during the 1960s that “religion does not disappear; rather, it is transformed into the private codes of ‘self-expression’ and ‘self-realisation’ in an invisible or private form of religion” (Mittmann 2016, 164). Due to several sociological insights that were brought into the church’s discussions, there were many new emerging perspectives on the process of secularization.

In relation to the process of secularization, there was also the rise of the ‘Death of God’ theology during the 1960s. This period was marked by significant philosophical and theological reflection, especially in response to the traumas of World War II and the Holocaust. The Death of God theology was part of that reflection. This reflection primarily highlighted a shift in people’s attitudes toward God. Daniel J. Peterson, with his book *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology*, makes a significant contribution to the Death of God literature by offering a comprehensive overview of its history. Peterson argues that radical theology must return to confront fundamentalist Christian doctrines, which he believes undermine critical thinking and clash with scientific progress. He emphasizes the urgency of this approach, arguing that silence or indifference is no longer an option and that only a radical approach, such as Death of God theology, can effectively address these issues (Peterson 2014, 3). German Protestant theologian Dorothee Sölle sees the experience of God’ death “as a painful condition of ongoing uncertainty that cannot be resolved by appeal to objective truth or a leap of faith” (Peterson 2014, 90). Thus, Sölle touches upon a deep existential crisis regarding the emergence of the death of God. This indicates how postwar Germany was dealing with theological and existential thought and in search for new ways to find meaning in a secularized world. After Sölle’s death, Sarah Pinnock investigates the impact of the Death of God theology using Sölle’s theological implications (Peterson 2014).

Generally, postwar German theology was deeply engaged with social and political issues. It grappled with grounded ethical questions arising from National Socialism and the Holocaust, alongside the stance of churches and Protestant theology during and after the Second World War. For instance, a strict sexual morality became central to the process of re-establishing Christian values after the Second World War in Germany. This included prohibitions against premarital sex, as well as maintaining the illegality of abortion and homosexuality (Heschel 2010, 53). Thus, during this period, German theology played a central role in shaping the country's social and political landscape. German theology also grappled with ethical questions raised by National Socialism and the Holocaust, and the stance of Christians towards Jews. One of the most influential theologians of this period was Karl Barth, who was renowned for his outspoken critique of Nazi ideology and his insistence that the church must stand against all forms of totalitarianism. When Barth asserted in 1949 that the Jews were chosen by God, and that the creation of the state of Israel affirmed the ongoing validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people, many Christians responded with unease. This discomfort derived from elements of Christian anti-Judaism, which had not been addressed by many German Christians at that time (Heschel 2010, 53). This period was marked by a struggle to balance traditional Christian beliefs with the need to reject the injustices during the Second World War.

In addition to Karl Barth, there were other influential figures in postwar German theology, one of the most prominent being Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer's theological contributions have been the focus of extensive scholarly analysis and debate. Numerous academics have explored his work, providing a range of perspectives on his theological insights and their implications. These studies emphasize the significance of Bonhoeffer's thought in shaping the theological landscape of postwar Germany and highlight the diversity of interpretations of his ideas within the broader theological discourse. Bonhoeffer's body of work continues to inspire scholars from various theological, philosophical, and interdisciplinary backgrounds. From a political perspective, Bonhoeffer's writings are used to explore

the relationship between religion and politics by drawing on his reflections on social justice and ethical responsibilities of religious leaders. For instance, Joshua Mauldin explains how Bonhoeffer dealt with modern politics in his time, and how he incorporates Nazism in considerations into his narrative of the modern age. He argues that portraying Bonhoeffer as a universal example of political resistance oversimplifies his ideas, particularly regarding the complex relationship between guilt and responsibility within his philosophical framework. Such oversimplification overlooks the moral dilemmas and societal pressures faced by many Germans during that time. Mauldin argues that this also reflects a larger issue in how contemporary society interprets National Socialism and the Holocaust. Often, the depth of Bonhoeffer's moral struggle is overlooked, and people distance themselves from the atrocities of National Socialism (Mauldin 2021, 66-67). Bonhoeffer is often portrayed as a hero who bravely opposed evil, but this portrayal can overshadow the lessons we can learn about human nature and moral responsibility from historical events today.

Furthermore, a crucial aspect of grasping Bonhoeffer's influence on the historical events involves examining his theological works like *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Which also offers insights into his view on Christian ethics and the role of religion in a secular age. Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's close friend and biographer, offers interpretations of his theology, emphasizing its relevance for ethical challenges after the war. One of these challenges was secularization. Bethge understood the significance of Bonhoeffer's words and actions, ensuring that his theology and life would be known worldwide. Additionally, through the portrayal of Bonhoeffer by many biographers, theologians and historians, there was a realization that his resistance during Nazi Germany was distinct. Unlike many Christians of his time, Bonhoeffer's actions derived from his commitment to obeying the will of God. Scholars have examined the influence of Bonhoeffer's life and ideas on theologians, particularly concerning themes such as the emergence of the Death of God theology in the context of secularization. Although he did not use the term secularization explicitly in the same way it is commonly understood today, his ideas are frequently

analyzed by theologians and other scholars in discussions on the topic. While Bonhoeffer could theoretically accept increased secularization, he believed it was crucial for secular societies to acknowledge the temporary and limited nature of their existence without attributing to it the metaphysical power (Mauldin 2021, 71). Moreover, his emphasis on a Christianity without traditional religious structures suggests that Christianity should move beyond traditional religious expressions to engage more deeply in the world (De Gruchy 1999, 226-230). Jeffrey Pugh extensively discusses the concept of religionless Christianity in his book *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in troubled times* published in 2009. Pugh investigates Bonhoeffer's idea of a faith that exists without the traditional religion. In essence, Pugh argues that Bonhoeffer's theology challenges Christians to reevaluate their faith in ways that are relevant to contemporary society emphasizing justice and solidarity with people who are oppressed (Pugh 2009, 70-95). Thus, Pugh argues that Bonhoeffer's ideas encourage a more socially engaged understanding of Christianity that is suited to the challenges of modern times.

Bonhoeffer's theology on the worldliness of Biblical concepts and the interpretation of Christianity outside the structures of traditional religion, has not always been understood correctly. Many publications throughout the twentieth century have attempted to explore Bonhoeffer's reevaluation of biblical concepts from a worldly perspective, this has resulted in varied interpretations. For instance, when discussing a religionless time, some scholars such as Harvey Cox labeled Bonhoeffer an atheist (Cox 1968, as cited in Wüstenberg 2019, 321), while others characterized him as a secularist (Loen 1967, as cited in Wüstenberg 2019, 321). Moreover, William Hamilton claimed him as the "father of the God-is-dead theology" (Hamilton 1968, as cited in Wüstenberg 2019, 321). Harvey Cox, who has been mentioned before, engages with Bonhoeffer's ideas in a way that challenges traditional theological thinking. Cox argues that Bonhoeffer's findings highlight a fundamental issue: the necessity for biblical faith to grapple with the concept of God. Cox argues that Bonhoeffer's inquiries are critical for understanding the evolving

religious discourse in the context of a secularizing world, while his inquiries capture not only the theological dimension but also sociological and political aspects (Cox 2014, 285-287). Later in this thesis, specific concepts such as 'religionless Christianity' and the 'Death of God' theology will be explored.

This analysis lays the foundation for further exploration in this thesis regarding secularization, National Socialism and Protestantism, the theology of religionless Christianity, suffering and moral responsibility. There is extensive literature on these concepts related to Dietrich Bonhoeffer already. However, it is crucial to delve deeper more specifically into his impact on the secularization debate, particularly through his concept of religionless Christianity, framed against the backdrop of the Holocaust's atrocities and the postwar era of reconstruction and moral instability.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis aimed at describing the impact that theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer had on the religious discourse in 1960s in Germany using qualitative data. This thesis mostly engaged with secondary material, essentially works by theologians, historians and biographers. This was used to analyze the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as well as how his ideas have been received and integrated. Many academics who wrote about Bonhoeffer discuss his impact, and this thesis similarly addressed that. This thesis delved into notions of 'religionless Christianity' and 'a world come of age', which are relevant ideas to the secularization discourse during the 1960s in Germany. This thesis incorporated the context in Germany regarding the reconstructing of the country, the stance of churches and the theological landscape in the aftermath of the Second World War. The main primary source this thesis uses is *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which was first published in 1951. The material within this work was collected and picked out by Bonhoeffer's close friend Eberhard Bethge. This work helps to illustrate Bonhoeffer's character and underpinnings through his time in prison, particularly on the upcoming of a so called religionless age. Other primary sources that have been used are Paul M. van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, John A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God*, Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton's *Radical Theology and the Death of God* and *Christ the Representative* by Dorothee Sölle. These sources were especially employed in the third chapter of this thesis to grasp the influence Dietrich Bonhoeffer had on theological discourse in the 1960s. The secondary sources this thesis engaged with include, for instance, John W. de Gruchy's *the Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, and *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. These sources have been used to explain Bonhoeffer's upbringing, academic life and theology. Dagmar Herzog's *The Death of God in West Germany: Between Secularization, Post fascism, and the Rise of Liberation Theology*, and Thomas Grossbölting's *Losing Heaven: Religion in Germany since 1945* informed this thesis on the postwar religious processes in Germany. Moreover, these sources facilitated the historical approach of this thesis to

contextualize churches in the postwar period. This thesis studies the history of the church focused on theology in Germany during the postwar period through original primary material, secondary sources and concepts and theories from during that time. It is important to consider that secondary literature is subjective to external factors, which disadvantages the study being historically comprehensive. This thesis needed to selectively determine the sources due to the substantial amount of works that have been written about Bonhoeffer. This is accomplished by prioritizing sources essential for providing direct answers to the main research question and the sub-questions of this research. Thus, this thesis incorporated a discourse analysis using *Letters and Papers from Prison* as primary source in combination to interpreters from the 1960s in Germany. For this thesis, I was limited by the availability of sources. Consequently, it is important to note that the thesis may not encompass all relevant literature. Accessing primary works of German theologians from the 1960s were challenging. Nonetheless, I made every effort to include extensive and relevant perspectives.

The first chapter delves into Bonhoeffer's upbringing, academic life and theological insights. It makes primarily use of a biographical approach to be able to set the stage for a deeper exploration of Bonhoeffer's theological contributions. The method used for the second chapter is a historical approach to situate the postwar period in Germany within its political, religious and social contexts. The chapter explores how specific events and developments influenced the theological discourse to provide a backdrop against which theological ideas can be understood and analyzed. The third chapter constitutes reception history, where this thesis specifically explores how theologians have received Bonhoeffer's theology, understood his ideas and integrated them into their own theological frameworks. This is done by identifying specific themes and concepts from Bonhoeffer that resonated with later thinkers and contributed to theological discourse. These thinkers are predominantly German for this research to focus on secularization in Germany.

However, some are American or English, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Bonhoeffer's impact worldwide.

Ethical implications are particularly essential when studying the postwar context of a country, while it is reconstructing moral authority, the role of religion and other societal norms. For instance, the immense suffering that has been caused by the Nazi regime and the Holocaust need to be correctly recognized and not to be simplified. As well as the efforts and struggles in rebuilding German society, which could be apprehended sensitively. All historical events need to be accurately described considering correct sources and interpretation. Moreover, this thesis touches upon various perspectives towards religion in a modern culture, whereby it is crucial to avoid being biased against either secular or religious views. I aim to achieve this by incorporating sources with diverse perspectives on the subject by setting aside personal beliefs and opinions.

CHAPTER ONE: BONHOEFFER'S LIFE AND THEOLOGY

Bonhoeffer wanted to expose theology to 'the fresh air of modern thinking'. He insisted that the message of the Church must always apply concretely to the reality of the world. – Ferdinand Schlingensiepen²

In the past century, Bonhoeffer's predictions have proven true not only within Germany but also far beyond its borders. His life is characterized by family solidarity, faith, courage and ethical values. His writings are best interpreted within the context of his experiences in his upbringing, his academic life and in relation to the historical events of the Holocaust and National Socialism. This chapter illustrates the central themes of his life and theology and serves as a key to unlock the meaning of his ideas.

UPBRINGING

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau on 4 February 1906. His father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was a distinguished university professor and physician. He was Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology in Breslau. Dietrich's sister described the man as distant but having high expectations of his children. His mother, Paula von Hase Bonhoeffer, was dedicated to their large family. Both family trees belonged to great historical heritage. The father's ancestors consisted of distinguished scholars, such as doctors, clergy and lawyers. The mother's ancestors were more focused on theology, for instance, Dietrich's grandfather Karl Alfred von Hase was a Court Preacher and professor of practical theology in Breslau (Nelson 1999, 23-24). The mother dedicated significant time caring for her eight children. As a trained teacher, she personally provided primary education to five of her own children and some neighboring children (Schlingensiepen 2010, 2-3). Although the family did not regularly attend church, Dietrich and his siblings were introduced to the Christian faith by their mother and nannies. Moreover, grandfather von Hase positioned

² Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), xix.

himself often as the family pastor (Nelson 1999, 24). Eight children in ten years were not normal even then, but Karl Bonhoeffer stated that the size of the family did not feel overwhelming to the parents. He argued that they lived in a spacious house, that the children were growing up normally and that their approach to parenting was focused on providing a happy childhood (Schlingensiepen 2010, 5). The harmony within the family was interrupted by the death of Dietrich's brother, Walter. He died during World War I while serving in the German army. This had a profound impact on the family and especially on young Dietrich, who was only twelve years old at the time. In remembrance, Dietrich was given Walter's confirmation Bible which he held onto throughout his life (Nelson 1999, 25). It could be argued that this was Dietrich's first real encounter with Christian faith, and that because of his brother's Bible he developed his first interest in theology. At the age of fourteen, Dietrich made the decision to pursue being a minister and theologian, despite his father's and other brothers' disapproval. They attempted to dissuade him, because they thought that the church was unworthy of his dedication. However, Dietrich remained eager to reform the church as it was. Family life held great significance for Dietrich, as evidenced by his frequent references to it in his writings during his time in prison (Nelson 1999, 25-26). An important person in Bonhoeffer's life was his grandmother, Julie Bonhoeffer, who had been focused on issues regarding women and demonstrated against the injustice of the Nazis (Schlingensiepen 2010, 8). Julie and the rest of the family were against Hitler from the very beginning when Hitler came into power. On Julie's funeral three years later, Dietrich preached about her not being able to bear the fate of Jews in Germany. This sermon implied that Dietrich was influenced by her perspectives on the conditions of the Jews, and the injustices during the Nazi regime (Nelson 1999, 26).

ACADEMIC LIFE

Bonhoeffer's brother and sisters were educated by his mother initially, but when the family moved to Berlin, Dietrich and his twin sister Sabine were taught by

the sister of their governess. When Dietrich was seven, he went to the Friedrich Werner grammar school. Dietrich's studies were not focused on the sciences, unlike those of his older brothers. He was rather interested in philosophy and religion during his adolescent years. His musical talents were also practiced, as he could play Mozart sonatas at the age of ten (Nelson 1999, 27). When Dietrich was seventeen, he entered the Tübingen University. In two semesters, Dietrich had various courses on different areas mostly centered on modern philosophy, particularly epistemology (Bethge 2000, as cited in DeJonge 2019, 11). Bonhoeffer observed that since Descartes, philosophy had predominantly focused on epistemology, particularly emphasizing the role of the self in knowledge. Bonhoeffer noticed that within the search for knowledge about God, the world ultimately focused on the knowledge of the self. Bonhoeffer's critique of academic philosophy had significant theological implications, because he argued that the understanding of the self should not be used to understand the world. Bonhoeffer noted that this mindset distances them from God. However, he believed that through redemption in Christ, individuals are liberated from their self-centeredness to engage in genuine relationships with God, the world, and others (DeJonge 2019, 11-12). These implications were part of Bonhoeffer's evaluation of philosophy as a student.

During his education, Bonhoeffer spent three months in Rome with his brother, Klaus. According to Bethge, this trip had a significant role in the development of Bonhoeffer's attitude towards the church. After his journey, Bonhoeffer's studies continued in theology at the University of Berlin for three years. His theological journey was influenced by meeting famous scholars such as Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg. Bonhoeffer published his doctoral thesis in 1930, "Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church," which he wrote under Seeberg's guidance (Nelson 1999, 27-28). Seeberg was a historian of dogma and social ethics (DeJong 2019, 13). In 1928, Bonhoeffer worked as a curate at a Protestant congregation in Barcelona. Back in Berlin in 1929, he wrote his habilitation "Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic

Theology,” aiming to become a university lecturer. In 1930, Bonhoeffer went to New York for a year of post-doctoral studies at the Union Theological seminary. Despite his critical stand towards the seminary arguing “the shallowness of the theological atmosphere”, one of his mentors Reinhold Niebuhr challenged Bonhoeffer to contemplate the church’s engagement with the societal struggles (Nelson 1999, 27-28). In the winter of 1924/24, Bonhoeffer encountered the work of Karl Barth. In the early years of his career, Bonhoeffer’s first study of Barth’s theology had been a turning point. He thought that the Barthian movement was crucial, not for his own theological development but for the history of theology. Barth had profound impact on Bonhoeffer’s lectures in 1931/32, where Bonhoeffer split theology into two groups: Protestantism before the influence of Barthian’s theology, which aimed to fit the church within culture without cutting short on culture, and after the influence of Barth’s theology, which commits to God’s Word even as it is against culture. This idea that God’s Word and culture are contradictory was new for many theologians in Berlin. Barth believed that we cannot understand God by looking at the world, but, only through revelation from God. Barth argued that any efforts to ground theology in the world is destined to fail; especially attempts that ground theology in history and psychology. Discovering Barth was the beginning of Bonhoeffer’s process of his own theology, when Bonhoeffer picked up Barth’s idea of basing theology on revelation instead of history (DeJong 2019, 14-15).

Moreover, besides being a theologian and leader of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer was also a preacher. His view of preaching was fundamental to his conception of the church and his identity as a theologian and pastor. Bonhoeffer’s idea of preaching emphasizes two key elements according to David J. Lose: “the relationship of the gospel to Scripture and the relationship of Scripture to preaching.” Firstly, he argues that Christ is the central figure of Scripture, making the gospel the ultimate lens for understanding the entire story of the Bible. Secondly, while Scripture holds authority in the Christian faith, its primary expression is found not in reading but in preaching within a community (Lose 2019, 111). Through preaching,

believers encounter Christ in the present, bridging the gap between historical events and contemporary experience. Bonhoeffer emphasizes the preacher's role in interpreting Scripture to facilitate this encounter and describes preaching as "the office of the spirit" (Lose 2019, 112). In 'a world come of age', as Bonhoeffer calls his society, theologians and preachers must move beyond applying religious principles and instead consider what it truly means to follow Jesus Christ in a contemporary society. Bonhoeffer suggests that in today's world, people are more open to preaching that is authentic, concrete and relevant to worldly issues rather than attempts to restore the religious era (Lose 2019, 120).

THE RISE OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM

During the German Church Struggle (Kirchenkampf) from 1933 to 1945, Bonhoeffer took a bold stand that few in the Confessing Church were willing to follow. Bonhoeffer was experienced as problematic by the German Christians, their Nazi allies, and many church leaders. Although the defense and rescue of Jews were not central to the Church Struggle, Bonhoeffer was among the minority of church leaders who openly criticized anti-Semitism (Hockenos 2019, 52). Bonhoeffer remained adhering to the Lutheran theological framework, even though it contained elements of anti-Judaism. Initially, this presented a challenge for Bonhoeffer as he struggled to reconcile Lutheran teachings suggesting the rejection of Jewish people by God (Pangritz 2019, 105). A central theme in scholarship about Bonhoeffer's life and theology is his role in the 20 July conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. This part of his life has sparked debate, as some scholars perceive a contrast between his earlier pacifist beliefs and the involvement with violence by the conspiracy. Study often relies on Bethge's biography, which tracks Bonhoeffer's evolution from a young theologian to a pastor in the Confessing Church and ultimately a key figure in the resistance movement. Specifically on Bonhoeffer's role in the 20 July conspiracy, Bethge provides insights based on his experiences and meetings with various resistance groups (Barnett 2019, 65-66). In an essay from 1975, called "Christian Political

Involvement,” Bethge wrote that Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the resistance should not be overrated and that his role in the conspiracy was small (Bethge 1975, as cited in Barnett, 66). However, Bonhoeffer was one of the first theologians in 1933 to address the Protestant Church in Germany to participate in solidarity with the Jews (Bethge 2000, as cited in Pangritz 2019, 91). When the National Socialists took control in 1933, Bonhoeffer was driven to find ways to address this new government and its anti-Semitic policies. According to Victoria J. Barnett, there were several manners in which Bonhoeffer displayed his activism and clear opposition to the Nazi anti-Jewish measure, as well as his commitment to aid the victims. For example, he made efforts to convince European ecumenical leaders to convict the Nazi policies (Barnett 2013, as cited in Pangritz 2019, 92). Bethge states that Bonhoeffer’s main driving force for participating in active political conspiracy was the treatment of the Jews by the Third Reich (Bethge 1982, as cited in Pangritz 2019, 92). Haddon Willmer argues that Bonhoeffer, despite lacking a concrete plan to directly resist Hitler, possessed a strong morality and theological insights. While Bonhoeffer’s stance may not have been one of political pacifism in the traditional sense; it was deeply tied to his faith (Willmer 1999, 187).

The last two years of his life, Bonhoeffer was a prisoner of the Third Reich. The small cell was the setting in which his inspiring theological thinking was produced, as he introduced new theories to his friends and family. Most letters from Bonhoeffer were sent to Bethge, others were sent to his parents. After his time in prison, he was transferred to two concentration camps. In concentration camp Flossenbürg, Bonhoeffer was executed on Monday April 9th, 1945, together with other people from within the resistance (Nelson 1999, 43-44).

RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY

Already in his time, Bonhoeffer observed, “We are approaching a completely “age” and questioned “people really... become radically religionless... what does that then mean for ‘Christianity’?” (Bonhoeffer 2010, 586). Bonhoeffer anticipated on a future

where traditional religious structures and practices might no longer dominate, by posing critical questions about the essence and relevance of Christianity in such a context. For Bonhoeffer, the question of God revolved around “who is Jesus Christ actually for us today.” He argued that by participating in Jesus Christ through faith and recognizing Him as the one who “is there for others,” we are freed from a self-centeredness and experience the transcendence that reflects the God of the Bible. Which makes the reality of God meaningful (Bonhoeffer and Bethge 2010, 25). As Bonhoeffer stated: “Our relationship to God is not a ‘religious’ relationship to the 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” (Bonhoeffer and Bethge 2010, 501). Bonhoeffer did not view his mission as creating a “secular gospel” and adapting to modern thinking. Unfortunately, this was often how his ‘new theology’ was interpreted. Instead, he aimed for a recovery of the gospel’s true meaning within a new historical context, rather than reducing the essence of the message (Bonhoeffer and Bethge 2010, 25). When Bonhoeffer stated in a letter to Bethge that biblical concepts needed to be interpreted in a ‘worldly’ sense, the friends started discussing the concepts with the belief that a religionless time had begun. In formulating these concepts and ideas, Bonhoeffer aimed to establish an understanding of reality where Christ would be recognized as the ruler of the world. This perspective suggests that religion no longer serves as the basis for justification. More precisely, Bonhoeffer sought to move beyond metaphysical interpretations and traditional religious frameworks; he aimed to reexamine biblical concepts from a nonreligious standpoint rather than through religious and metaphysical lenses. Bonhoeffer uses the term religionless Christianity in three distinct approaches: firstly, in describing religion as something positive. Secondly, following Karl Barth, in employing it critically. Thirdly, Bonhoeffer approached religion in the way suggesting that the era of religion had completely ended. In this final sense, Christian faith is no longer opposed to religion – as in the second approach – but is now characterized as beyond religion altogether.

Bonhoeffer makes use of the three approaches one after another (Wüstenberg 2019, 321-322). Thus, Bonhoeffer has analyzed religion through different lenses, and concluded with the idea that faith is not opposed to religion but rather beyond religion. From regarding religion as a positive phenomenon, then, he views religion being problematic to faith. Bonhoeffer suggests that the era characterized by traditional metaphysical and inward approaches is coming to an end. This means that the traditional way of understanding and practicing religion, which emphasized inner experiences, is no longer as relevant in modern times (Wüstenberg 2019, 323).

In Bonhoeffer's interest in Jesus Christ and the modern age, he read the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey analyzed the ideas that had evolved during the Renaissance and the Reformation, he studied the way these periods had an impact on modernity. Generally, Dilthey concluded that there was a shift of interest from the 'otherworldly' transcendental sphere to the 'this-worldly' earthly sphere. Furthermore, Dilthey's philosophy of life emphasized that our understanding and perspective must be grounded in the realities of the present world rather than transcendent concepts. He argued that the shift led to a human moral and religious autonomy becoming the foundation of intellectual life. Bonhoeffer, drawing on Dilthey's critique of metaphysics, extended it to religion more broadly. He argued that the entire age of religion was passing away, while Dilthey stated that metaphysics had become irrelevant to certain religious and historical contexts. Bonhoeffer adopted Dilthey's historical analysis to critique religion and proposed the idea of a religionless age. Unlike Dilthey, Bonhoeffer viewed religionlessness positively, where he considered it a historical reality in which the era of religion had come to an end. In Bonhoeffer's perspective, after the Reformation and Luther's theology, the modern concept of religion displaced the strong concept of faith. Bonhoeffer viewed religion as a historical phenomenon, which opened the idea of a religionless Christianity, with the idea of the understanding of Christ without religion (Wüstenberg 2019, 323-324). Bonhoeffer's proposal for a religiousness interpretation of biblical concepts aimed to demonstrate how Christian faith could stay closely

connected to life the midst of the challenges of modernity and secularity. The implications of 'religionless Christianity' has had an impact on the emergence of the Death of God theology. This thesis will focus on the rise of this theological movement in Germany in the following chapter, examining its origins and key aspects. Additionally, it will explore the extent of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's impact on the Death of God theology in the third chapter.

A SUFFERING GOD

Bonhoeffer envisioned churches as being "open to the world" and in solidarity with others, reflecting Jesus Christ's "man for others" existence, especially open to those who are oppressed and suffering. Undoubtedly, he had in mind the persecution and death of the Jews in Nazi Germany. In this way, Bonhoeffer contributed to post-Holocaust theology and influenced the development of liberation theology that would later emerge (Bonhoeffer and Bethge 2010, 26). He desired the church to be known for its commitment to services, peace and justice, rather than merely for the religious doctrines and rituals (Bonhoeffer and Bethge 2010, 29). Bonhoeffer states that:

To this extent, one may say that the previously described development toward the world's coming of age, which has cleared the way by eliminating a false notion of God, frees us to see the God of the Bible, who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless. This will probably be the starting point of our 'worldly interpretation.' (Bonhoeffer and Bethge 2010, 479).

Thus, the image of God was false and needed to be cleared through an understanding of the weaknesses of God. In 1944, while in a Gestapo cell, Bonhoeffer discovered: "Only the suffering God can help." The idea that Jesus Christ helps earthly suffering not by his omnipotence, but by his own suffering. The paradox of this idea lies in the fact that the God who is at the center of the world, who engages with humans, is the

same God who, in Jesus Christ, willingly accepts weakness and powerlessness. Bonhoeffer sheds light on the difference between Christianity and other religions within this paradox:

God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us. This is the crucial distinction between Christianity and all religions. Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help. – Dietrich Bonhoeffer³

Bonhoeffer challenged traditional religious ideas by highlighting God's suffering in bringing genuine solidarity to humanity. The God of the Bible is not the god of religion; significantly, the God of the Bible is the "suffering God" (Bonhoeffer and Bethge 2010, 26). This emphasizes his notion of religionless Christianity, by moving away the image of God from religion.

AFTER BONHOEFFER'S DEATH

After 1960, Bonhoeffer's theology came to light as a young generation of theologians drew inspiration from his ideas. He had written books himself, but it was primarily his letters, poems, and thoughts that had a significant impact. These were compiled by his close friend Eberhard Bethge in 1951 under the title 'Resistance and Surrender'. Even when National Socialism still raged, Bonhoeffer began to contemplate a time in which humanity would seek to fulfill its life apart from God. According to Bonhoeffer, humans would no longer need God to resolve their mistakes and problems. He aimed to prepare the church for this shift by addressing

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1st English ed. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2010), 164.

the concept of Religionless Christianity, advocating for the message of Christianity to be preached in a more secular manner. However, it turned out not be simple to articulate Christianity in secular terms that were both positive and easy to understand into the modern era (Berkhof & de Jong 1975, 309-310). Furthermore, Bonhoeffer's call to actively confront the world's challenges and oppose injustice had a broad appeal. His message resonated not only with religious individuals but also with those who identified as non-religious, particularly those committed to resisting injustices in society. By emphasizing practical engagement and moral responsibility, Bonhoeffer was able to inspire a diverse audience.

Finally, with the unveiling of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke (DBW) and the English translation of this comprehensive edition (DBWE), there was now access to Bonhoeffer's entire body of written work. Bonhoeffer's writings not only served as a guide for intellectual and theological preparation for post-war German culture reconstruction, but also offer a glimpse into the disappearing world of the old social elites (Wayne 1999, 71). The significant role Bonhoeffer had on the decades following his death will be analyzed in the third chapter, but before delving into that, this thesis explores the context of postwar theology in Germany.

CHAPTER TWO: THE CONTEXT OF POSTWAR GERMAN THEOLOGY

The chance of a religious revival on the one hand and the fear of a godless communism on the other hand were the main topics of the secularization discourse in the postwar period. – Thomas Mittmann⁴

There is no other country in the world that has committed heavier crimes during the twentieth century than Germany. Thus, since 1945, Germany has grappled with the country's past and its consequences for different dimensions of society. Although German leaders have expressed remorse, they have also received praise for doing so. According to Thomas Berger, the narrative of Germany as "a former sinner cleansed through acts of penance" is, in many respects, misleading (Berger 2012, 36). German expressions of regret have often been accompanied by a sense of victimization, with compensation efforts being selective and partially driven by material interests. Additionally, it was not until the mid-1980s that Germany fully adopted a penitent stance, and significant efforts to address the broader range of victims only began in the 1990s. Despite these efforts, historical debates remain sensitive and controversial (Berger 2012, 36-37). Thus, it is important to explore why Germany has adopted such a negative view of its past. Is this stance driven by genuine guilt over the events of World War II, or is it a strategic move to benefit national interests? To understand this, we will consider different challenges Germany faced after their defeat in 1945.

In the immediate postwar years, most Germans had more urgent concerns than addressing questions of guilt or innocence. Their primary focus was on basic survival, seeking justice or reflecting moral responsibility was a 'luxury' and had to wait. Additionally, the widespread suffering within Germany itself led many to feel

⁴ Thomas Mittmann, "The Lasting Impact of the 'Sociological Moment' on the Churches' Discourse of 'Secularization' in West Germany," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 9, no. 2-3 (2016): 173.

that they, too, were victims of the war. This sense of victimization caused the feeling that they deserved help and sympathy, and often overshadowed feelings of guilt. Moreover, many Germans believed that they had little control over the events of the war, and they had limited knowledge of the atrocities committed. As a result, they did not automatically feel guilty for what had happened during the war (Berger 2012, 41-43). Thus, the immediate postwar mindset was more about recovering from the devastation and less about reflecting on the moral implications of the war.

NATIONAL SOCIALISM AND PROTESTANTISM

When examining the churches during and after the war, there are extensive critical debates regarding their involvement in the Nazi regime. From both Catholic and Protestant churches, leaders welcomed Hitler with a popular sense of nationalism as well as a sense of resentment towards the political and economic issues at the time (Sharples 2016, 86). Anti-Judaism in Christian teachings for centuries contributed to anti-Semitism and provided the nazis with theological justification for their actions. The churches also remained silent on Nazi racial policy, even though one could argue they had a Christian duty to morally condemn such acts (Sharples 2016, 85). The NSDAP program also wanted to reassure Christian voters and stated that they would protect traditional Christian values. This convinced many Christians in Germany that the Nazis were motivated by Christian beliefs and exhibited a Christian character. Not everyone was convinced, there were leaders in both churches who did withstand Nazism. When a group of church leaders left the German Christian movement, they created the Confessing Church in 1934. These leaders of the Confessing Church rejected the notion that Hitler could replace God in their loyalty. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of these leaders (Sharples 2016, 86-87).

During the war, though the German churches were not directly involved in the killing, they placed a facilitating role in the Nazi persecution of the Jews. After the Second World War, European church leaders travelled to meet with the EKD leadership in Stuttgart in an attempt to improve international reconciliation. In this

statement, the churches aimed to reassure their European relations that they were not a threat to the postwar order. This statement, called the Stuttgart declaration, consequently sparked remarkable public discussion about the recent past, but it only superficially engaged with Nazism and ignored the Church's early support for National Socialism (Sharples 2016, 92-93). Moreover, Heschel (2010) states that the Declaration of Stuttgart of October 1945 was created for an international audience to gain acceptance for the German Protestant church after the war. This did not address Nazi antisemitism, the Holocaust, or the Jews. Instead, it focused on the crimes of Christians during the Nazi era, attributing it to theological disloyalty. In the decades following the Second World war, both Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany largely avoided addressing the moral and theological implications of National Socialism and the Holocaust. This mirrored a broader societal reluctance to confront the past. Besides reparations that were made to Israel and a couple of Nazi trials, deeper complex questions were not brought to the attention for years. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that German society and the churches began to engage in widespread discussions about the Holocaust, addressing issues of Christian anti-Judaism and developing new theological perspectives in response to these events (Heschel 2010, 46-47). Thus, the churches' initial attempts to confront their past actions were rather unsuccessful. The following section will explore how the theological discourse on Christian-Jewish relation aimed for a more positive approach.

POST-HOLOCAUST THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

In postwar Germany, a nation seeking to restore its moral authority, religious rhetoric became prominent in the public sphere. The 1950s and 1960s saw both Protestants and Catholics embrace their faith more actively, alongside the growth of lay religious groups. Germany experienced a period of 're-Christianization' after the war, including a strict sexual morality that had become a central notion of this re-Christianization. Both social conservatives and democrats endorsed Christian moral

teachings, though their concerns did not address Nazi crimes or church complicity in the Nazi regime. However, the discomfort among Christians in response to Karl Barth's assertion about Jews being chosen by God emphasized that classic elements of Christian anti-Judaism, which denied the continuing Jewish covenant with God and their national identity, remained unchallenged among most German Christians (Heschel 2010, 53). Thus, postwar debates among German theologians rarely mentioned the fate of the Jews, and when it was, the tone was generally dismissive. Postwar Christian theology essentially presented the expression of anti-Jewish sentiments, attributed to what was claimed to be impartial theological scholarship on Judaism, rather than to Nazi propaganda (Heschel 2010, 58). For instance, Bishop August Marahrens in 1945 acknowledged that Jews should not have been attacked inhumanely, but his comments also suggested some Jews had harmed Germans. Despite some criticisms of the Church's passive position, no one accused it of actively promoting antisemitism. A 1948 statement by German Protestants blamed the Jews for their own suffering, claiming that by crucifying Jesus, Israel lost its covenant. Contrarily, the Seelisberg Document of 1947, created by Jewish and Christian theologians. However, it remained obscure and had little immediate impact. In 1950, as antisemitic acts such as cemetery vandalism increasingly happened, German Protestant leaders finally acknowledged the church's complicity in passivity. This declaration, despite its shortcomings, marked a significant shift in Protestant theology and paved the way for more profound reflections on Christian-Jewish relations in the upcoming decades (Heschel 2010, 54-55).

During the 1970s and 1980s, theological responses emerged to address the events of the Holocaust and confront Christian anti-Judaism. A growing popular discussion of the Holocaust in West Germany during the 1980s provoked a reevaluation among Protestant and Catholic theologians concerning the importance of Judaism within Christian theology. Whereby, a group of influential Protestant theology professors began to refute the negative depictions of Judaism found within Christianity. Besides this, the West German church, including members of the

Judaism commission, created a theological document focusing on similarities between Christianity and Judaism in 1975. It also included differences in the historical context, Christian anti-Judaism and the problematic Christian mission to the Jews. Johann Baptist Metz argued that Christian theology could not be interpreted in the same way after the Holocaust; Christian theology must confront the historical significance of Auschwitz. This entailed acknowledging that Auschwitz demanded a radical reevaluation and transformation in Christian thought. Moreover, Metz aimed towards reconciliation and emphasized the shared roots that Christianity has with Judaism. (Heschel 2010, 60-62). Liberation theologians mostly focus merely on contemporary issues, however Dorothee Sölle began her address in 1982 to the World Council of Churches with a powerful statement: "I speak to you as a woman from one of the wealthiest counties in the world; a country whose history is tainted with bloodshed and the stench of gas that some of us who are Germans have not been able to forget..." (Heschel 2010, 62-63). Although she did not specifically mention the Holocaust and antisemitism, the statement shows that she acknowledges Germany's guilt and responsibility by directly referring to the atrocities of the Holocaust. Her address was met with widespread conviction in Germany, highlighting the discomfort many still felt with the idea of Christian responsibility for the Holocaust (Heschel 2010, 63). Jürgen Moltmann, who is a very famous German Protestant liberation theologian, emphasizes political and economic justice in his theology but avoids addressing Christian responsibility for antisemitism. Instead, he argues that Christians and Jews both have been victims of persecution (Heschel 2010, 63). Theologians and churches have had varied perspectives on Christian-Jewish relations and the involvement of Christians and churches during World War II. Most theologians have attempted to pursue a renewed positive connection between Christianity and Judaism. The church's complicity in the Nazi regime remains a more complex issue, requiring deeper examination of the historical and theological implications.

SECULARIZATION PROCESS IN WEST-GERMANY

Initially, there was a resurgence of Christianity in Germany, known as Re-Christianization, marked by an increase of religious engagement. The postwar period saw a renewed interest in Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic churches played significant roles in society, often acting as moral guides during the reconstruction of Germany. Subsequently, there emerged a theological reflection on the church's role during the Nazi regime and Christian attitudes towards Judaism became prominent. However, the latter half of the twentieth century saw a decline in church attendance and religious engagement, particularly in West Germany, as both Protestant and Catholic churches faced the challenge of adapting to a more secular society. These stages characterized the evolving landscape of Christianity in the twentieth century Germany. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the term 'secularization' became prominent in both public and academic discussions. Thomas Mittmann (2016) wrote a paper on the Churches' discourse of 'secularization' in West Germany, whereby he states that conservative theologians led these discussions in the churches during that time; viewing 'secularization' as a decline or replacement of Christianity in the modern world, which was a trend they expected would be continued. This view, validated by the ongoing decrease in church attendance, requested the need for the churches to re-Christianize society (158-159). However, as Mittmann states, there was also a more positive approach towards 'secularization'. For instance, Eberhard Stammler was a theologian who believed that secularization affects the church not only externally, but also the internal structure. He suggests that certain reforms could address the crisis within Protestantism, and that these reforms could offer a path for the church to adapt to the modern, secular world (159-160). This new understanding of secularization had profound impacts on the self-perception and actions of Christian denominations in West Germany. By accepting the autonomy of the secular world, the churches became more open to social and political issues. This shift was significant during the reform period of the 1960s, and helped Protestantism and Catholicism connect with emerging social movements in West Germany from the

1970s onwards. For instance, the churches became increasingly involved in the peace, environmental, and Third World movements. Protestant and Catholic theologians saw this opportunity to bridge the gap between the church and the secular world, ensuring the continued relevance of Christian institutions (161-162). By the 1970s and 1980s, the discourse on 'secularization' transitioned towards a more sociological approach in which the theological aspect was minimal as most discussions were shaped by sociological perspectives (Mittmann 2016, 157). Therefore, by adapting to a changing modern society, the churches improved their prospects from a sociological perspective.

The concept of 'secular religion' peaked in the 1960s and 1970, which aligned Bonhoeffer's theology of religionless Christianity. However, due to the limited success of religious reforms in the 1970s, there was a rise of new forms of spirituality. This paved the way for the concept of a 'post-secular age'. Several religious global conflicts during that time negatively impacted the perception of religion's future role as well. Liberation theology received attention in West Germany during that time, which influenced several theologians and public discussions in the church. These developments altogether contributed to a broader perception of religion in a 'post-secular world', which all challenged the 'secularization theory' that had been a dominant hypothesis since the 1950s (Mittmann 2016, 171-172). Peter L. Berger, a key figure in the secularization discourse, even acknowledged this in 2008, stating, "Secularization falsified." (Berger 2008, as cited in Mittmann 2016, 173). Thus, in postwar Germany, there were numerous shifts not only in the role and understanding of religion but also in debates regarding the concept of secularization. Mittmann states in his paper that "'Secularization' was the mirror image of past, present, and more important, of the future'" (Mittmann 2016, 173). This implies that 'secularization' reflects not only the past and present but also the future path of religious decline or revival. Secularization was viewed either pessimistically, as a decline of Christianity, or was approached more positively, suggesting that it could lead to necessary reforms within the church to adapt to the modern world. While

Germany was going through a postwar period, the relationship between religion and society was complex with its discourse attempting to comprehend the future role of religion in a secularized world.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE DEATH OF GOD THEOLOGY

The Death of God theology that emerged in the 1960s can be seen as a response to the challenges posed by secularization and the changing role of religion in German society. While some theologians in Germany were exploring ways to integrate secularization into a modern church model, the Death of God theologians took a more radical approach by challenging the foundations of traditional Christianity. The movement originated with William Hamilton, born in 1942, who was raised in liberal churches. Due to the death of two of his friends at fourteen years old, he questioned how a good God could allow this to happen. This led him to explore themes of God's death or absence in modern thought. Together with Thomas J.J. Altizer, they published essays titled 'Radical Theology and the Death of God'. Hamilton interpreted the death of God as the experience of God's absence in modern culture. In later years, however, he concluded that God is indeed alive and active, however, God being violent and unjust (Peterson 2014, 24-26). In 1964, some West German theologians began questioning whether it was time to say, "Goodbye to Christianity". During this period, the claims of Hamilton and Altizer regarding the death of God were intensely debated in West Germany. A year later, the young West German theologian Dorothee Sölle published her first book, *Stellvertretung (Christ the Representative)*, with a subtitle that claimed the need to develop a "Theology after the 'Death of God'" (Herzog 2006, 425). Many theologians found it troubling that even among believers, faith often resembled superstition; with God seen as some sort of "supernatural magician". Sölle moved away from the traditional idea of the omnipotent God, to address the absence of God (Herzog 2006, 426). Secularization was evident in West Germany and widely discussed in both secular and religious media. Regular church attendance was declining, with only 25 percent of the

population attending regularly. Finally, while the news of the death of God stirred much in postwar West Germany, 'religion' had to deal with several other significant aspects in this context. These aspects not only touch on the blurred boundaries between religion and politics but also on the specific roles of Christian churches in a post fascist culture. Many Christian leaders had engaged with Nazi antisemitism or took a passive stance. Even though some scholars in the postwar setting argued that Nazism was anti-Christian and that Hitler's success among the German population emphasized the secular issues. Another aspect is that the restoration of Christian morality in the postwar decades functioned as a manner to "master the past" (Vergangenheitsbewältigung), including the movement of sexual conservatism. Additionally, the complex debates on Christian-Jewish relations in the postwar era remain in conflict, even after numerous changes in Christian self-understanding (Herzog 2006, 429-430). The Death of God theology emphasized the profound challenges facing Christianity in a secularizing postwar Germany. It provoked critical reflections on faith and a redefined Christian morality. Therefore, this period focused on maintaining religious relevance as well as addressing moral responsibility in the twentieth century in West Germany.

THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

Part of post-Holocaust thought was the question of "How can a good, omnipotent God allow evil and suffering to exist?", particularly the suffering and evil that was experienced during the Second World War. This resulted in the theology of suffering that explored how faith understands and interprets human suffering; it attempts to reconcile the existence of suffering with the belief in an omnipotent God. Modern theologians often emphasized God's presence with those who suffer, through the theology of suffering. Rather than being distant, God is seen as suffering alongside humanity. Post-Holocaust theology specifically addresses the atrocities experienced by Jews during World War II and seeks to grapple with the theological implications of profound suffering. This theology challenges the traditional idea of

God's nature, and God's relation to human suffering and evil. An example of post-Holocaust theology is the theology of the cross that sheds light on God becoming human in Christ. In *Christ the Representative*, Sölle interprets the cross through the lens of Christ's role as "our representative". On the cross, Christ temporarily takes on our identity, enduring the consequences of our actions through suffering with us (Sölle 1967, 126). Sölle states that, "Christ's entire life is determined by unending identification with those who are the agents of their own punishment" (Sölle 1967, 121). Thus, as sinners, we need the representation of Christ on the cross that emphasizes both our dependence on God and our responsibility for our own actions. This representation of Christ marks the absence of God. Sölle suggests that God's absence can be understood in two ways: either as a sign of his non-existence, God being dead, or as a potential way of expressing his presence in a manner that is focused on us (Sölle 1967, 131). Bonhoeffer states this in his book *Ethics*:

The reality of the world has been marked once and for all by the cross of Christ, but the cross of Christ is the cross of the reconciliation of the world with God, and for this reason the godless world bears at the same time the mark of reconciliation as the free ordinance of God. The cross of atonement is the setting free for life before God in the midst of the godless world; it is the setting free for life in genuine worldliness. – Dietrich Bonhoeffer⁵

This shows that Jesus' crucifixion changed the world, according to both Bonhoeffer and Sölle, by reconciling between humanity and God. Even in a world full of sin and separation from God, it sets people free to live their lives genuinely in the midst of all the challenges in life. According to Bonhoeffer, it is through the cross that this secular world finds reconciliation with God.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 292.

CHAPTER THREE: THE IMPACT OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER ON POSTWAR THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

But a strong case can be made that the most decisive theological influence on the younger generation of Protestants today is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred by the Gestapo on April 9, 1945. – William Hamilton in 1966⁶

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has become a significant theologian during the last century, as this thesis has already mentioned. Particularly *Letters and Papers from Prison* have profoundly influenced many readers. This collection is where Bonhoeffer introduced concepts such as ‘a world come of age,’ and ‘religionless Christianity.’ Consequently, it is within *Letters and Papers from Prison* that individuals seeking to interpret the Christian faith considering contemporary thought patterns have found significant inspiration (De Gruchy 1999, 226).

The use of Bonhoeffer’s prison letters created a somewhat distorted image of him, which needed a deeper study of his entire body of work. This sparked debates about the consistency of his writings, his involvement in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, and the potential evolution of his thoughts. The central question in these discussions was what the truth of Bonhoeffer entailed (Pugh 2008, 5). Did his ideas bring fresh insights for future generations? Did he foresee themes that are still relevant in theology, or are we just twisting his thoughts to suit our own purposes? According to Jeffrey C. Pugh, we need to be cautious about applying Bonhoeffer’s ideas to modern issues without acknowledging the differences between his time and ours. It is important to understand the historical context of his work to avoid misinterpretation and ensure that we are genuinely building on his insights rather than distorting them for contemporary purposes (6).

⁶ Altizer, Thomas J.J., and William Hamilton. *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966.

Moreover, several theologians in the 1960s drew upon and integrated Bonhoeffer's theological insights and ideas into their own work. His concepts significantly influenced the theological discourse of that era, inspiring many scholars to reframe their understanding of traditional religious frameworks. For instance, Harvey Cox explores how to speak of God in a secular manner, using the concept of 'religionless Christianity' to support his argument. Jürgen Moltmann, inspired by Bonhoeffer's rethinking of God's nature, emphasizes the idea of God as a suffering being and connects this to the challenges of modernity. John A.T. Robinson, as a bishop and thus, church insider, focuses on a holy worldliness inspired by Bonhoeffer's idea of worldliness. William Hamilton builds on Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity, arguing that religion is unnecessary, and that humanity does not need God or the gods to fulfill their needs. Dorothee Sölle adopts a Christological perspective, aligning with Bonhoeffer's view of a God who suffers alongside humanity. These theologians will be explored further to grapple the theological landscape that Bonhoeffer had an impact on.

THE INTERPRETATION OF BONHOEFFER'S RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY IN RELATION TO SECULARIZATION

The concept of 'religionless Christianity' represents a profound rethinking of Christian faith. Emerging from his reflections during his imprisonment in Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer envisioned a form of Christianity moving away from traditional religious structures and more deeply embedded in the realities of everyday life. He challenged traditional Christianity, which was primarily focused on religious rituals and dogmas, focusing instead on living out the teachings of Jesus in practical ways. His concept and understanding of the "world coming of age," influenced prominent theologians such as Harvey Cox, Jürgen Moltmann, and John Robinson. This impact will be explored to understand Bonhoeffer's vision of faith during a period of growing Western secularism in the 1960s.

Beginning with Harvey Cox, who wrote *The Secular City* in 1965 in which he articulated his theological perspectives. Cox is a Research Professor of Divinity at Harvard University, and most known for his book *The Secular City*. He argues that modern urbanization and secularization are not threats to Christianity, but instead, opportunities for the church to redefine its missions and relevance in the contemporary world. Pointing to Bonhoeffer's man's coming of age, Cox notes that "if secularization designates the content of man's coming of age, urbanization describes the context in which it is occurring" (Cox 2014, 5). Referring to Bonhoeffer, Cox argues that "we must learn, as Bonhoeffer said, to speak of God in a secular fashion and find a nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts." Whereby "it will do no good to cling to our religious and metaphysical versions of Christianity in the hope that one day religion or metaphysics will once again be back." Moreover, Bonhoeffer dismissed the idea that a person must become religious to hear the Gospel. Cox emphasizes this perspective, as he advocates for a nonreligious interpretation of the Gospel for secular man to be able "to understand and communicate with our present age" (Cox 2014, 4). This idea is discussed in the final chapter of his book; *To Speak in a Secular Fashion of God*. In this chapter, Cox addresses the sociological problem, the political issue and the theological question regarding 'speaking of God'. Bonhoeffer's question in one of his letters "How do we speak about God without religion?" is called a painful question by Cox. He asserts that faith based on the Bible, must speak of God. And particularly, Cox states that "Bonhoeffer's question also reminds us, however, that the word God means almost nothing to modern secular man." The aim of his book is fundamentally to stress the importance of redefining God in a secular age, based on the belief that "a God to whom human words cannot point is not the God of the Bible" (Cox 2014, 1). Moreover, Cox argues that if we cannot make God relevant to the secular person, then it undermines the thesis that secularization is God's work and regarding it as an opportunity to reassess it. Cox emphasizes that secularization is not a threat to religion, aligning with Bonhoeffer's perspective (Cox 2014, 285). Similarly,

Bonhoeffer, even in his time, anticipated on a future where traditional religious structures might decline in influence, emphasizing the essence of Christianity in such a context.

Like Harvey Cox, Paul M. van Buren in his book *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, engages with Bonhoeffer's ideas on nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts. Van Buren adopts a linguistic analysis for religious concepts to give a secular meaning to theological ideas. The function of Biblical concepts can show how aspects of the language of Christian faith can be understood, otherwise the risk is that religion only exists in the private spheres (Van Buren 1963, 196). Moreover, he argues that it is of importance to share the core message of the Gospel in the lives of all people, regardless of their religious background. Van Buren's work represents a significant contribution to secular theology, pushing forward the project that Bonhoeffer initiated with his call for a nonreligious interpretation of Biblical concepts. However, Van Buren differentiates his approach by emphasizing the historical aspect and focusing on Easter as the key event. He states:

As we have said at the very beginning, Bonhoeffer hoped that a 'non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts' would both overcome the weakness of liberal theology and at the same time do justice to its legitimate question. Our method is one which never occurred to Bonhoeffer, but our interpretation may nonetheless serve to justify his hope (Van Buren 1963, 171).

Van Buren points out a methodological difference between his approach and Bonhoeffer's. While, according to Van Buren, Bonhoeffer called for a non-religious interpretation to address the weaknesses of liberal theology, he proposes a method of linguistic analysis to discover the functional meaning of the gospel. Van Buren focused more on the personal and subjective aspects of faith within a secular framework, emphasizing the historical importance of Easter and arguing that this fulfills Bonhoeffer's potential (Van Buren 1963, 171).

Jürgen Moltmann was theologian who approached Christian theology through the lens of modern world's challenges. He significantly influenced the history of postwar German theology. His book, *Theology of Hope*, is a landmark in theological literature, establishing him as a leading figure in new Protestantism. He views theology as a transformative practice driven by the hope of Jesus Christ. Consequently, Christianity, is inherently political and focused on worldly engagement (Moltmann 2016). The book *Two Studies in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, published in 1967, delves into the influence of Bonhoeffer's theology on Moltmann's own theological development. It also explores Bonhoeffer's concepts and gives an extensive understanding on particularly 'religionless Christianity' and a 'suffering God'. In the chapter *Theocracy and Christology*, Moltmann cites Bonhoeffer on the role of theology: "Theology thus becomes not only a 'function of the church,' but the function of the dominion of God as it was made manifest in Christ and destined for the world" (Moltmann 1967, 58). Both theologians stressed the importance of engaging with the world through Christ. Moltmann and Bonhoeffer share a Christological focus. As Bonhoeffer asks himself "How can Christ become the Lord for the religionless as well?" (Bonhoeffer 2010, 363). Moltmann reflects this concern by stating:

Behind the political and social crisis of the church, behind the growing crisis of its credibility in public statements and its institutional form, lies the Christological question: Who is Christ for us today?... Within the Christological question about Jesus ultimately lies the question about God: Which God motivates the Christian faith: The Crucified One or the gods of religion, race, and class?⁷ (Moltmann 2016, 185).

Bonhoeffer and Moltmann address the relevance of Christ in the contemporary world, persistently asking, "Who is Christ for us today?". Moltmann asserts that Bonhoeffer views "the dominion of Christ and 'authentic worldliness' as

⁷ Translated into English.

interchangeable terms” (Moltmann 1967, 65). This aligns with Bonhoeffer’s positive interpretation of ‘a world come of age.’ Additionally, Moltmann agrees with Bonhoeffer on the fundamental problem of religion and disagrees with the idea that there needs to be theological order and that the worldly interpretation begins with that. Instead, Bonhoeffer explains ‘worldly life’ as “a life of discipleship, following Christ and participating in the suffering of God in the world, ‘sharing in the life’ of Christ (Bonhoeffer cited in Moltmann 1967, 66). As Bonhoeffer saw religious frameworks becoming increasingly irrelevant to many people, he argued that true Christianity entails a direct engagement with the world’s realities. This is what true worldliness meant for him, living in the world and engaging with its social, political and ethical dimensions. Moltmann explores whether ‘true worldliness’ implies a Christianization of the state in response to Western secularism, as suggested by Bonhoeffer. This could lead to a new relationship between Christianity and the state, whereby Moltmann questions in which shape Christ must bring about the renewal of Western Christianity (Moltmann 1967, 67). Moltmann further contributes to responsibility of the church in engaging with the world:

The church will always present itself in the forum of God and the world. It stands for God before the world and for the world before God. It stands in critical freedom toward the world and owes it the credible revelation of new life. At the same time, it stands in solidarity with all people before God and owes them a shared cry from the depths for life and freedom⁸ (Moltmann 2016, 15).

Both theologians emphasize the church’s responsibility for the engagement with the world’s realities. Particularly, the need for every Christian to embody Jesus Christ’s teachings within secular challenges without relying on traditional religious structures.

Bishop John A.T. Robinson was also focused on the role of the church in the modern world. Robinson became famous with his work *Honest to God*, which he

⁸ Translated into English.

published in 1963. This book had a significant influence on the theological landscape. Robinson recognized Bonhoeffer and prominently referenced him by elaborating on the question “Who is Christ for us today?” Robinson was a New Testament scholar, who has guided many in understanding Christian identity and the role of the church in the modern world. “The Man for others” is a chapter title in *Honest to God* where Bonhoeffer’s description of Christ is used. In the chapter, Robinson identifies this as the response to the question of “Who is Christ for us today?” He cites Bonhoeffer: “What do we mean by God? ... Encounter with Jesus Christ, implying a complete orientation of human being in the experience of Jesus as one whose only concern is for others.” Robinson expands on this statement, “Jesus is the man for others, the one in whom Love has completely taken over, the one who is utterly open to, and united with, the Ground of his being” (Robinson 1963, 76). He contends that the idea of “a supernatural Being coming down from heaven to ‘save’ mankind from sin, is frankly incredible to man ‘come of age,’ who no longer believes in such a *deus ex machina*” (Robinson 1963, 78). Regarding Christ, Robinson suggests it is not about religion, but “simply the embodiment of this new being as love.” In which Robinson returns to Bonhoeffer’s focus on the engagement with the powerlessness of God in the world, because that is what being a Christian is about for both Robinson and Bonhoeffer.

As a bishop, thus therefore ‘church insider’, Robinson perceived that the revolution the church was being called in, as a challenging one. Nonetheless, this shift involved questioning the entire religious framework through which Christianity has traditionally been presented (Robinson 1963). Certainly, that perspective aligns closely with Bonhoeffer’s ideas regarding religionless Christianity. Robinson analyzes a nonreligious approach to both worship and prayer. While Bonhoeffer states “The Christian life, the life of ‘the man for others’, must be a ‘worldly life’.” Robinson adds that it also must be “a life of holy worldliness, of sacred secularity” (Robinson 1963, 101). This means to be available to meet God through worship and prayer. Robinson argues that man must know the value of persons, let him feel the love of Christ;

because then “the chances are that that man’s life will have an inner discipline more effective than of any artificial rules” (Robinson 1963, 104). Robinson highlights the relevance of finding holiness in the world through the love of Christ, suggesting that we should explore what it means to be godly even when traditional religion is less present.

I would see much more hope for the Church if it was organized not to defend the interests of religion against the inroads of the state but to equip Christians, by the quality and power of its community life, to enter with their ‘secret discipline’ into all the exhilarating, and dangerous, secular strivings of our day, there to follow and to find the workings of God (Robinson 1963, 139).

Robinson advocates for the churches to focus on preparing Christian to actively participate in secular society. By ‘secret discipline,’ Robinson likely refers to practices such as worship and prayer. Robinson aligns with Bonhoeffer on the responsibility that the churches must motivate Christians to live out their faith in worldly contexts.

William Hamilton, who will later be introduced as one of the Death of God theologians, states that we do not truly know what Bonhoeffer meant by ‘religion’ in his notion of religionless Christianity. However, there have been two interpretations of Protestant religionlessness. Considering the John Robinson’s *Honest to God*, religion refers to ‘religious activities’ such as liturgy, attending church and prayers. Being religionless, therefore, could mean that there are alternative ways for Christians to engage in these activities, or it might even suggest that these activities are no longer necessary. Many people, according to Hamilton, use Bonhoeffer’s religionlessness in this practical sense (Altizer and Hamilton 1966, 39) Hamilton’s interpretation, however, is less practical. He argues that religion is “any system of thought or action in which God or the gods serve as fulfiller of needs or solver of problems.” He further notes that “Bonhoeffer states that in the world come of age,

we can no longer be religious, if religion is defined as that system that treats God or the gods as need-fulfillers and problem-solvers” (Altizer and Hamilton 1966, 116). Hamilton is rejecting traditional theistic notions of God, particularly emphasizing human independence. Building on Bonhoeffer’s concept of religionlessness, Hamilton argues that religion is unnecessary if it assumes that humans need God.

BONHOEFFER AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE DEATH OF GOD THEOLOGY

Although Bonhoeffer did not explicitly articulate the ‘death of God’ theology, his thoughts on the need for a new understanding of God’s presence in a secular world paved the way for the Death of God theologians. Bonhoeffer’s religionless Christianity and other theological reflections laid the groundwork for the development of the Death of God theology. This movement, which gained prominence in the mid-20th century, was shaped by a diverse group of theologians, including Dorothee Sölle, William Hamilton, and Thomas J.J. Altizer. These thinkers built upon Bonhoeffer’s critique of traditional religious structures, and their work broadens the horizon of contemporary theology pursuing a reevaluation of faith in the context of a secular society.

As mentioned, Dorothee Sölle is one of the prominent ‘death of God’ thinkers. Sölle was a Protestant German liberation theologian. Her broad body of work, such as *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology after the ‘Death of God,’* made her well-known among scholars and the public as the first feminist German theologian. Dorothee Sölle traces the concept of the death of God back to Hegel and Nietzsche, highlighting that it is not just an intellectual idea but a significant sociological phenomenon influencing Western history. She observes that secular society fails to fulfill human needs for meaning and identity, leading to feelings of insecurity and loneliness as secularization progresses. Following Bonhoeffer, Sölle critiques traditional theism for its attempts to fill the gaps left by scientific understanding (Peterson 2014, 88-90). Bonhoeffer states this on fillings the gaps using God: “Religious people speak of God at a point where human knowledge is at an end or

when human strength fails... I'd like to speak of God not at the boundaries but in the center, not in weakness but in strength" (Bonhoeffer 2010, 366-367). Bonhoeffer realized that "the 'God hypotheses was no longer needed to explain reality and meet human need" (Bonhoeffer 2010, 24). Sölle considers it logical that society has attempted to take over the "main functions of the God previous periods," yet society remains with an unfulfilled religious need:

But it is just as obvious that the substitute which society offers for God is incomplete. Society is unable to satisfy a religious longing which always reaches beyond it, the longing for meaning and purpose in life, the longing for personal identity and for the kingdom of identity (Sölle 1967, 132).

Sölle argues that this period of post-theism emphasizes the significance of the fact that Christ represents the absent God, as being "God's forerunner" (Sölle 1967, 134). Which adds up to Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ's crucifixion for humanity, which he argued, would empower people to have faith again in the God of the Bible, in the middle of worldliness (Bonhoeffer 2010, 26). They both contend that through Christ, connection to God can be restored, even during periods when He appears absent or even dead.

Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton co-authored the book *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, which addresses the new theology that embraces contemporary times and acknowledges the historical destiny by first assessing the significance of the death of God. While they argue that the death of God is an historical event; "While there is no immediate necessity in assuming that the God who has died is the God of 'faith,'..., but rather the God of the historic Christian church, and beyond the Church, of Christendom at large" (Altizer and Hamilton 1966, 12). The new theology aims to establish a fresh understanding of theology while offering guidance and support to Christian atheists in the context of the death of God. In one chapter, Hamilton elaborates on Bonhoeffer, emphasizing the relevance

of his work *Letters and Papers from Prison* for the 1960s and 1970s. He notes, “In this country (America) he is communicating to many young Protestants today because his are the only theological words written in the recent past that can help us understand the new era into which we are moving” (Altizer and Hamilton 1966, 114). Hamilton appreciated Bonhoeffer’s attempt to challenge the traditional Christian reliance on language, argument, and debate, pushing instead towards a focus on the quality of Christian life (Altizer and Hamilton 1966, 118). Furthermore, Hamilton notes that Bonhoeffer observes there are people “who can make it today without God and without despair and guilt. And their success is just as real as the fulfillment of those who live happily and have a God” (Altizer and Hamilton 1966, 118). As discussed earlier, Bonhoeffer did not intend to create a ‘secular gospel’, because he was focused on the real essence of Christ being the ruler of the world. Instead, he sought to address the reality that people might no longer rely on God to solve their problems, aiming to prepare the church for this shift through his concept of religionless Christianity. Therefore, Hamilton’s view that Bonhoeffer was advocating for a Christianity completely without of any need for God can be seen as an overstatement. Bonhoeffer still valued a deep, existential connection to God, but one that might not fit traditional religious forms.

BONHOEFFER AND THE THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

Bonhoeffer’s ideas regarding suffering, particularly his concept of the ‘suffering God’ who participates in the pain of humanity, have significantly impacted postwar theology and Post-Holocaust thinking. For Bonhoeffer, a nonreligious interpretation of Christianity began by the identification with Christ in his sufferings. This theology of suffering, which emphasizes the presence and solidarity of God in human suffering, has resonated deeply with theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle.

In addition to his concept of religionless Christianity, Bonhoeffer also influenced Moltmann’s theological reflections regarding suffering and the presence

of God in the world. According to Jürgen Moltmann, Bonhoeffer initiated a rethinking of God's nature by focusing on God's suffering rather than His omnipotence (Moltmann 1997, 8). During Bonhoeffer's imprisonment, Bonhoeffer realized that only a suffering God can help. In of his letters, Bonhoeffer states: "God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us" (Bonhoeffer 2010, 497). Moltmann developed this idea further in his own "theology of the cross," which asserts that God identifies with human suffering through Jesus Christ's crucifixion. He states, "Christian theology finds its relevance in the thoughtful and practiced hope for the reign of the Crucified One, suffering with the 'sufferings of this time' and making the cry of the tormented creature its own cry for God and freedom"⁹ (Moltmann 2016, 29). Moltmann contends that this thinking about a suffering God makes Christian theology contemporary, because it means suffering alongside society: "Christian identification with the Crucified One means solidarity with the suffering of the poor and the misery of the oppressed as well as with the oppressors"¹⁰ (Moltmann 2016, 29). Bonhoeffer argued that Western Secularism had helped discover the "true knowledge of Christ." In a way that its transforms the image of God, and "it opens our eyes to the God of the Bible, who conquers power and space in the world by his weakness" (Moltmann 1967, 66). Bonhoeffer discusses God encountering humanity during life's challenges, including its suffering and injustices. Moltmann quotes him, saying;

Whoever professes to believe in the reality of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God, must in the same breath profess his faith in both the reality of God and the reality of the world; for in Christ, he finds god and the world reconciled (Moltmann 1967, 60).

⁹ Translated into English.

¹⁰ Translated into English.

In addition, Moltmann states that “this reconciliation unites the world and man” (Moltmann 1967, 60). Moltmann draws from Bonhoeffer’s assertion that in Christ, God reconciles both humanity and the world. This reconciliation, as Moltmann interprets it, involved God entering the suffering of the world through the act of the cross. Moltmann applies Bonhoeffer’s insights to articulate the presence of God in the face of human suffering and injustice.

Dorothee Sölle focuses on aspects of Bonhoeffer’s Jesus as the “man for others” who is to be encountered in the suffering power of the cross. She asserts that God’s death and absence create an opportunity to speak about God differently, compelling us to find new ways to discuss Jesus as the Christ and his mission in the world. For Sölle, even though direct experiences of God are no longer accessible and fail to offer immediate certainty, God can still be represented. She explores the image of Christ as a “representative” in her Christology (Pinnock 2003, 113). Sölle understanding of God’s suffering is an elaboration on Bonhoeffer’s statement that “only a suffering God can help.” She expanded on Bonhoeffer’s argument that God does not help through omnipotence but through His powerlessness and suffering on earth; she agrees with this notion and emphasizes that God is not an almighty controller but a suffering entity who experiences the world’s pain alongside humanity. Moreover, Sölle suggests that because God is not omnipotent, humans are called to participate in God’s suffering and collaborate in His redemption. Where she aligns with Bonhoeffer in emphasizing human responsibility for God’s work on earth (Moltmann 1997, 9). Sölle’s Christology thus portrays Christ as a ‘representative’ who embodies God’s presence amidst suffering and human struggles. Both Sölle and Bonhoeffer call for an active engagement in the world’s challenges, where God’s power is seen through his solidarity with humanity.

IS BONHOEFFER STILL RELEVANT?

As we have encountered in this chapter, Bonhoeffer’s concepts of ‘religionless Christianity’ and a ‘world come of age’ have been subject to varying interpretations

by different scholars. While he introduced these ideas in his letters to his friend Bethge, he did not extensively clarify, leaving room for diverse interpretations and applications by theologians in the 1960s. This has led to a wide range of scholarly work seeking to understand and apply Bonhoeffer's ideas in various contexts. In his book *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Times*, Jeffrey Pugh discusses the challenges of translating Bonhoeffer's ideas to our contemporary context. Pugh acknowledges that the unique circumstances of Bonhoeffer's time, particularly the atrocities of Hitler's regime, make direct application to the present time difficult. However, he also points out that we currently live in an era where faith no longer holds a central role in society, and churches go through challenges of defining faith in Christ in the 'world come of age' that Bonhoeffer argued would come (Pugh 2008, 11). Pugh is critical of the ways in which Bonhoeffer is sometimes used to justify specific actions or argue for perspectives (Pugh 2008, 3-4). He suggests that Bonhoeffer can serve as a "source of reflection on contemporary events as long as we are able to see that the same dynamics of power operative in his age are always present in human culture, though they assume different forms in different systems" (Pugh 2008, 10-11). While the suffering caused by contemporary governments cannot be compared to the scale of the Holocaust and World War II, Pugh states that the dynamics of power structures in both eras can be similar suggesting that Bonhoeffer's insights remain relevant and can be used to understand or respond to modern issues. In more a theological sense, Peter Selby in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* highlights Bonhoeffer's crucial contribution through his statement that humanity's progression beyond the era of religion signifies both emancipation and historical development, which aligns with God's purpose revealed in Christ. Bonhoeffer argued that discipleship could be genuinely worldly without conforming to the world. He viewed this 'coming of age' as part of humanity's destiny, consistent with the Christian vision, where Christ's presence persists without accommodating to the world. Additionally, Bonhoeffer perceived participation in the church struggle and resistance to Hitler as fulfilling humanity's calling to be

responsible in the world, speaking for those who had lost their voice (226-243). The concept of worldly engagement, which involves maintaining Christ's presence within a secular world and embracing moral responsibility, remains relevant for Christians today in the political context, as well as in their daily lives. Global challenges today require ethical guidance, and Bonhoeffer's encouragement for Christians to reflect moral values and engage with societal issues can provide this necessary direction.

Moreover, Ralf Wüstenberg in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, points out the parallels between Bonhoeffer's thoughts and Charles Taylor's more recent analysis of secularity. Taylor, in his work *A Secular Age*, characterizes secularization as the transition from a society where religion holds unquestionable influence to one where it becomes a mere option (Taylor 2007, 3). He examines the implications of living in, what Bonhoeffer would call, 'a world come of age,' where belief in God is no longer the norm and faith is just one option among many. Wüstenberg observes that both Bonhoeffer and Taylor critique religious individualism and stress the importance of community and interconnectedness in human life. They each seek to address the challenges of living meaningfully in an increasingly secularized society. Meanwhile, they do acknowledge the significance of secularization, where Bonhoeffer attempts to transform traditional frameworks and advocates for an honest engagement with the modern world, Taylor aims to reintegrate the transcendent dimension into the modern worldview. Despite being from different eras, Bonhoeffer offers critiques of religion and proposals for understanding its role in a secular age that resonate with Taylor's perspectives. Bonhoeffer's ideas, particularly those addressed in his *Letters*, continue to be discussed in the secularization discourse, focusing on how to navigate the societal changes brought about by modernity.

CONCLUSION

From God to reality, not from reality to God, goes the path of theology... The way of Jesus Christ, and therefore the way of all Christian thinking, leads not from the world but from God to the world (Bonhoeffer quoted in Moltmann 1967, 98).

These statements from Bonhoeffer in his works *Act and Being* and *Ethics* illustrate his deep sense of loyalty towards God in approaching his theology. While his theology has been interpreted in various ways, even to the extent of calling him an atheist, this clearly asserts that he argues for a theology based on the reality of God. Since Bonhoeffer did not have the opportunity to further investigate his concept of religionless Christianity, it remains a rather flexible idea that can be applied to various theories concerning the role of Christianity. Throughout this thesis, it became clear that Bonhoeffer did not attempt to produce a secular gospel, as he was committed to the live out the teachings of Jesus Christ, and as his focus was to acknowledge God in the center of his life: “Religious people speak of God at a point where human knowledge is at an end or when human strength fails... I’d like to speak of God not at the boundaries but in the center, not in weakness but in strength” (Bonhoeffer 2010, 366-367). Due to this deeply rooted commitment to the Christian faith, he rejected religion as he believed it did not foster a living faith in Christ. These insights emerged in theological discourse in the 1950s and 1960s. This thesis essentially explored the reception history of Bonhoeffer’s insights of religionless Christianity, and a world come of age, examining how theological discourse has received and applied his ideas. This research stumbled upon the fact that many theologians and scholars have incorporated Bonhoeffer into their frameworks, engaging with a wide range of discourses on the decline of religion, post-Holocaust thought, National Socialism and Protestantism and the death of God theology.

In examining Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s impact on postwar Germany, this thesis has delved into his life and theology, the political and religious situation of postwar Germany and eventually theologians who referred to Bonhoeffer during the 1960s.

First, focusing on his life and theology, it became evident that his upbringing, academic pursuits, and theological reflections were deeply intertwined with his commitment to engaging the church with the realities of the modern world. Bonhoeffer's concept of religionless Christianity and his vision of a world come of age highlight his anticipation of a future where traditional religious structures might lose their dominance. He questioned the relevance of Christianity, proposing that genuine Christian faith involves participating in the being of Jesus and living for others. His theological reflections during his prison years further focused on his belief in a suffering God, emphasizing the powerlessness of God as the foundation for a worldly interpretation of the Bible. Although Bonhoeffer's life was cut short by his death in 1945, his theology remained alive in postwar Germany. The postwar period in Germany presented a unique context for theological reflection, marked by the country's struggle with the Holocaust and the reconstruction of moral and political stability. This period saw a complex connection between guilt, victimization, and a selective approach to reconciliation often with political motivations. The relationship between National Socialism and Protestantism was critically investigated as the churches' silence and complicity during the Nazi regime led to the absence of addressing Anti-Judaism and the Holocaust. Efforts such as the Stuttgart Declaration of 1945 were steps toward reconciliation but fell short of completely confronting the theological and moral implications of the Nazi era. Simultaneously, the process of secularization and the increasing decline of church attendance became central themes in postwar Germany. The discourse regarding secularization evolved from viewing it as a decline of Christianity to seeing it as an opportunity for the church to reform and adapt to modern society. Many believed that this shift allowed churches to engage more actively with social and political issues. The emergence of Death of God theology in the 1960s further challenged traditional Christian beliefs, and the theology of suffering and post-Holocaust thought grappled with the presence of evil and suffering in the world. The themes from this period – guilt, reconciliation, secularization and the re-evaluation of Christian theology considering the Holocaust –

shaped a transformative period in German religious thought. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* have left an enduring legacy in that religious thought, particularly through his notions of 'a world come of age' and 'religionless Christianity.' Additionally, Bonhoeffer is renowned for his resistance within the Nazi regime, where he sought to motivate the churches to take moral responsibility and address the atrocities of the Holocaust. His respect and influence compass various interpretations and applications of his theology. Harvey Cox, for instance, embraced Bonhoeffer's idea of discussing God in secular terms, viewing secularization as an opportunity rather than a threat. Jürgen Moltmann, influenced by Bonhoeffer's perspective on a suffering God, developed a theology that emphasizes God's solidarity with human suffering. John A.T. Robinson with his work *Honest to God* drew on Bonhoeffer's thoughts to advocate for a Christianity deeply engaged with the secular world, while emphasizing a 'holy worldliness'. Bonhoeffer's ideas also paved the way for the death of God theology, with theologians such as Dorothee Sölle and William Hamilton expanding on his critiques of traditional theism. Sölle, like Moltmann, emphasized the significance of God's suffering and perceived absence of modern faith, while Hamilton explored the implications of a theology without a traditionally omnipotent God. Despite the diverse interpretations and applications of his ideas, Bonhoeffer's central concern remained constant: how to live out an authentic Christian faith in a secularized, post-religious society. The question that is part of Bonhoeffer's concern, is: "Who is Christ actually for us today?" Which has been posed by Bonhoeffer, and part in numerous theological discussions. Bonhoeffer's response, as cited by Pangritz, explains his Christological perspective:

'God revealed in the flesh,' the God-man Jesus Christ, is the holy mystery which theology is appointed to guard. What a mistake to think that it is the task of theology to unravel God's mystery, to bring it down to the flat, ordinary human wisdom of experience and reason! It is the task of theology

solely to preserve God's wonder as wonder, to understand, to defend, to glorify God's mystery as mystery (Bonhoeffer cited by Pangritz 1999, 134).

The essence of theology lies in honoring the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ, instead of reducing it to the shallowness of human understanding, according to Bonhoeffer.

In conclusion, focusing on the central question of this thesis: How did Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological implications, particularly, his 'religionless Christianity', contribute to and shape postwar religious discourse in Germany during the 1960s? We must first consider that Bonhoeffer, among the theologians and scholars who engaged with secularization, emerged as a forerunner discussing 'a world come of age' during his time. Many young theologians faced a time of reconstruction and moral instability, grappling with the complex changes in society. During this turbulent period, they discovered essential elements within Bonhoeffer's theology that provided them with a framework to view these societal changes in a positive light. Bonhoeffer's ideas offered them the tools to translate the challenges into a meaningful purpose of active engagement in the world. His Christology led to a focus on the suffering of God in the world, which helped society to acknowledge and embrace the suffering of others. His notions of a suffering God challenged the traditional view of God as distant, omnipotent, and impersonal. Instead, Bonhoeffer argued for a personal relationship with God through Christ, portraying God as one who suffers alongside humanity rather than intervening as a *deus ex machina*. His theology can inspire individuals to take moral responsibility and actively confront the challenges of the world, instead of being indifferent to the conflicts in the world. Moreover, Bonhoeffer advocated for interpreting God and Biblical concepts in a secular manner to make faith accessible to the secular individual. Sölle supports this approach, stating, "Society is unable to satisfy a religious longing which always reaches beyond it, the longing for meaning and purpose in life, the longing for personal identity and for the kingdom of identity" (Sölle 1967, 132). This underscores

the importance of translating religious ideas, practices and language into forms that are comprehensible and relevant to the everyday, secular person. Ultimately, Bonhoeffer's focus on the relevance of Christ's teachings in everyday life, the concept of a God who suffers with humanity, and the need for a nonreligious interpretation of Christianity continued to resonate with theologians during the 1960s. Bonhoeffer's theology challenges believers to engage with the world, not through traditional religious structures, but by embodying the teachings of Jesus in practical, meaningful ways.

Further research could delve deeper into Bonhoeffer's entire body of work to gain a comprehensive understanding of his theology. For instance, looking into his ethical implications for political justifications. As Bonhoeffer has often been portrayed as a hero who bravely opposed evil, this possibly stands in the way of the deeper message that Bonhoeffer wanted people to be aware of. His lessons on human nature and moral responsibility provide a source that can positively influence the approach to historical events today. Furthermore, it would be beneficial for believers to uncover what Bonhoeffer meant by living out the moral teachings of Christ in practical ways. This exploration could also shed light on how his ideas can practically be applied to contemporary issues in Christian ethical thought and societal engagement. Moreover, religious institutions could inspire members to be able to fulfill Bonhoeffer's wish that the church would become known for its commitment to services, peace and justice.

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