

# THE LIFE OF THE COUNSELS: RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY

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FEW ROMAN CATHOLICS have doubted, till recently at least, the appropriateness of the term, 'religious', as it is applied to those who consecrate themselves to God in lifelong poverty, chastity and obedience. If religion is man's relation to God, his response, by inner consecration and visible worship to God's word and offer of life, who in the world would seem to verify the notion of 'religious' better than those men and women in the Church whose very existence is specified by its concern for the things of the Lord?

Yet there is a genuine sense in which 'religious' are called to challenge and even destroy 'religion', not to exemplify it. In the context of a Church in the throes of renewal and reform, and of a world disillusioned with the products of religion, a plausible case can be made for discreetly dropping this traditional term in speaking of the charism of celibate christian community.

This proposal will seem less startling if one reflects, first of all, on how Jesus and his first disciples stood towards the contemporary religious establishment, jewish and pagan. The Synoptics and John disclose that the deadly enemies of Jesus were not libertines or agnostics but the most respected religious leaders of his time. We find that the constant direction of his preaching and practice is to relativize the existing religious code, cult and creed, and to designate a purer faith, by which men would serve God in spirit and truth and with compassion for the needy rather than by devout presence in the temple, as the touchstone of man's acceptance by God. It would be a distortion, to be sure, to depict Jesus, as some have done, as a reformer of secular life, or to neglect the primacy in his life and preaching of absolute obedience to the will of an all loving Father. It remains, however, that he stood among his contemporaries as anything but a 'religious' figure, and that the accusation which led to his execution was precisely blasphemy, *the sin against religion*.

A very similar picture emerges when one studies the writings of the apostle Paul, especially in such polemical works as *Galatians*.

The author of this article states Religion is the Papaver.  
Smelly if it is corrupt & leads to their defilement.  
many of the members have to pass the initial religion.  
the 12 apostles remain, and the title is meaningless  
unless he is now, brother defilement.

Paul did have occasion to rebuke those early christians who took advantage of the freedom Christ had won for them to live irreligiously, in the conventional sense. But he was much more concerned to keep the impressionable young churches he had founded free from the pseudo-religious attitudes and practices of the judaizers, that is, those early converts from judaism who would not or could not quite believe that the messianic promises now reposed in a universal family drawn from jew and gentile alike, regardless of racial descent or ritual practice. We shall return later in this essay to examine more in detail the pauline attack on the effort to convert the good news of justification by faith into a self-glorifying religion radically opposed to that good news.

Historical scholarship has, for a long time, been aware that the early christians were viewed with suspicion by religious contemporaries. There was a genuine basis to the charge of many that christians were 'atheists'. The God of christians, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, was no tribal god made to the tribe's image and having as his function the projection of the tribe's self-image into the sphere of ultimate meaning. As a God without consort, a God for all men, a God whose involvement in human life through his son Jesus took place without compromise of his mysterious otherness, a God who could be celebrated only by those who, in radical discipleship, were willing to walk the road of death and resurrection, he called men out of security to the pilgrim journey of faith. No wonder he did not meet the qualifications for divinity. No wonder his people were considered enemies of religion.

It is against the background of such beginnings that one can best appreciate the language and the intent of recent theologians, particularly Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when they speak pejoratively of 'religion' and 'being religious', and favourably of 'religionless christianity'. A brief examination of what these two famous protestant theologians are about will serve as useful context for a presentation of the life of the counsels which sees in it something quite different from the 'religion' which they criticize.

Barth's attack on 'religion' began, appropriately, in his celebrated commentary on *Romans*, and was continued, in somewhat more systematic form, in his *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>1</sup> What does Barth mean by 'religion'? The answer is not so easy, for, contrary to the over-

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, K., *Church Dogmatics*, vol 1, part 2, n 17, 'The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion', pp 280-361.

simplified version of his teaching often presented, he does not always view religion pejoratively. He does, however, begin his study of it by contrasting it with revelation. Whereas the term 'revelation' is expressive of God's initiative and gracious self-communication to sinful man through his Word, 'religion' is sinful man's effort to reach out for God with an initiative that anticipates the divine action. At the risk of missing Barth's nuances and reading into his paragraphs connotations alien to his thought, we might equate religion in his usage with the pelagian and semi-pelagian stance, and also with the attitude of justification by works or merit (as opposed to justification by faith through grace) which Paul excommunicates in *Romans* and *Galatians*. For Barth, then, the 'religious' posture is man's search for God undertaken in disregard of God's prior finding of man in the sending of his Son and Spirit. Religion in this sense stands for contempt of the gift-character of the economy of salvation. For Barth, revelation does not link up with a human religion already present and practised but rather contradicts it.

It is true, as we have indicated, that Barth does not always speak pejoratively of religion. His thesis conceives the Church as the locus of true religion. Still, she is this only in a dialectically qualified sense, similar to the sense in which we may legitimately speak of the justified sinner (*simul justus et peccator*). It is through grace that the Church lives by grace, and only to that extent is she the locus of true religion. Revelation is thus both judgmental and reconciling; it is man with his blasphemous 'religion' that God reconciles and saves.

Bonhoeffer, who derives much from Barth, does not simply repeat the latter's critique of religion; in fact, Barth himself comes under the critique of the later Bonhoeffer. But in an earlier work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer has not yet come to his conception of 'religionless christianity'. Nor is it the threat of semi-pelagianism which is his main concern. On the contrary, he severely criticizes the excesses or distortion of his own lutheran tradition of 'justification by faith'. His impassioned contrast of 'cheap grace' and 'costly grace' sees in the former the unwillingness or inability to acknowledge that faith calls for works, that true discipleship includes obedience as well as faith. His accent, then, is just the opposite of what we have seen in Barth. It is in this connection that Bonhoeffer pays tribute to but also criticizes monasticism. The monks, he says, were christian in realizing that grace was costly, but they erred in making the road of costly grace the prerogative of an élite, instead

of the vocation of all the baptized. One hears in this echoes of Luther's polemic.

Later, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer has changed his accent, and has to some extent transcended the dialectic of faith and works in his concern for a christian faith responsive to the needs of contemporary man. Here, like Barth, he attacks 'religion', but understands by it something different from Barth, and something more complex. Religion for Bonhoeffer means: 1) Individualism or the mystique of inwardness, an asceticism which, in the quest of private salvation, abandons the world to itself; 2) metaphysics, understood here not in the sense of the philosophy of being, but rather as the view that there is another world necessarily completing this one, that God or the divine is the superstructure for being, and that reality must somehow be completed by the 'supernatural'; 3) a province of life, a religious *a priori*, a border existence, religion as a 'sphere'; 4) a *Deus ex machina*, God as the provider of answers for man's problems, with the result that actual godlessness is covered up with pietism and religiousness; 5) privilege, so that the *ek-klesia* becomes not those who are called out but the favoured ones, an élite which enjoys the luxury of devotion. Such pseudo-religion is for Bonhoeffer just the opposite of Christ and the faith which he bestows on his disciples. Against individualism Christ is 'the man for others'; against 'metaphysics' he is lonely and forsaken without escape in the transcendent; against religion as a province of life he stands for worship in the midst of life; against the *Deus ex machina* he does not experience the God of rescue.

What is common to both Barth and Bonhoeffer in their rejection of 'religion' is a contrast between it and christian faith. They both stand in the main stream of the reformation tradition, which makes the acceptance and proper understanding of justification by faith normative. And it is in terms of justification by faith that we must understand the life of the counsels. Our present concern is to show that the religious life, far from conflicting with the mentality of justification by faith, far from being 'religious' in the sense in which Barth and Bonhoeffer blame it, represents in the Church a very special witness against 'religion' and for justification by faith. It would be obviously absurd to understand this statement as attributing to religious a deeper faith than other christians. What is in question here is a basic human and christian situation, a life-form, a situational grace. The contention is that the life of the counsels lived in ecclesial community is, precisely as a life-form, a special

verification of and witness to the pauline doctrine of justification by faith.

What does Paul mean when he speaks of justification by faith, as he does especially in *Romans* and *Galatians*? In abbreviated form we may say that he is understanding faith as a total personal response to God revealing himself to sinful man, with special accent on the acknowledgment of man's inability to save himself without the gracious and free initiative of God in Christ Jesus. It is only in the acknowledgment of his own poverty and weakness, says Paul, that man can be enriched by God. And to accept salvation from God means to accept that man has nothing of his own in which he is able to boast over against God. 'What do you have that was not given to you? And if it was given, how can you boast as though it were not?'<sup>1</sup> For Paul, nothing is so inimical to the spirit of the gospel as the spirit of the self-made man. And no attitude is more appropriate for the christian disciple than gratitude, which recognizes that all is grace, all is gift.

Why do we maintain that the life of the counsels is a special verification of and witness to this central pauline doctrine? Primarily because in following the life of the counsels, a christian freely puts himself, at the divine call, in a basic human and christian situation in which salvation (read 'human fulfilment'), if it comes at all, will come clearly not from the immanent unfolding of human resources but from the power and wisdom of God. This will appear if one regards the commitment to celibacy, poverty and obedience from the viewpoint of the renunciation and risk involved. Ordinarily, it is through marriage and family, property (or its equivalent in contemporary society) and personal independence that man finds his way to human fulfilment. Written deep in the humanity of each one of us is the powerful drive to fulfil oneself in the intimacy of marital and parental love, and especially in order to achieve this, to deal creatively with the material world and to safeguard one's personal autonomy. There is always an element of tragedy when this magnificent potential is frustrated for an individual (the eunuch, the psychological bachelor) or for large groups (the underprivileged classes, races and nations). Apart from the call of transcendence, we quite rightly are distressed or suspicious when a man or woman is unwilling or unable to embark on this adventurous road of human fulfilment. And all too often we witness with a sense

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 4, 7.

of tragedy how lives can be stunted in the absence of a fulfilling family relationship.

To follow the call of the counsels, therefore, is not only renunciation but also risk. It is to put oneself in a situation which, apart from faith, offers only privation not fulfilment. The very meaning of this situation is, then, to verify that human fulfilment (read 'salvation') is the gift of God, and not an autonomous human achievement.

We are not in the least suggesting that only the celibate christian community lives by faith, or even that it lives by a deeper faith. The religious profession is but a deepening of the baptismal profession, in which *every* christian decides to risk fulfilment for the sake of the gospel. It is obviously true also that many married christians live out of faith with a much greater intensity and depth than many religious. It remains, however, that the two situations are not entirely parallel. Even prior to the call of the gospel to live by faith, marriage is inscribed in our humanity; celibacy is not. Only if Christ is risen, only if his kingdom be the destiny of mankind, does this life-form as such make sense.

The life of celibate christian community is, then, a special form of 'religionless christianity', in the sense that, as a life-situation, it verifies and witnesses to the fact that human fulfilment, justification, salvation, is the gift of God. In this sense, it is pre-eminently a life of *faith*. It is possible to explore this aspect of the life of the counsels by showing how each of the three counsels is a mediation of faith, and, as a basic attitude, almost identical with faith.

First, virginity or celibacy is an embodiment of faith. Within the New Testament itself there would seem to be no explicit connection made between faith and the praise of virginity. Yet those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven do so quite obviously from a motive of faith.<sup>1</sup> And Paul's praise of virginity couples it with concern for the Lord's affairs.<sup>2</sup>

In the Fathers of the Church, there is a close connection between the theme of virginity and that of faith. St Augustine conceives that it is by faith (or by faith, hope and charity) that the entire Church and each of her members verify the notion of virginal motherhood. The special class of *virgines* is thus giving special witness to a faith-virginity which is characteristic of the whole Church. We may note also Augustine's stress on *humility* as a basic virtue characteristic of

<sup>1</sup> Cf Mt 19, 12.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 7, 32; 7, 34.

the true virgin. This humility is not just a modest opinion of oneself, but the acknowledgment that whatever grace one has is God's gift. Thus augustinian humility and pauline faith are akin.

The notion of *poverty* is also related intimately to the notion of faith and equally opposed to self-justifying 'religion'. This is true especially if we broaden the notion beyond concern for the christian use of material things, and conceive it according to the biblical notion of the *anawim*. These are, it will be recalled, those men and women who, in the midst of social and economic privation, remain faithful to God and put all their trust in his undying fidelity, not in human resources. The attitude of the *anawim* thus practically coincides with that of pauline faith, and is the opposite of self-glorifying religiosity. From this viewpoint, too, 'religious' are called to be anything but 'religious'. Commitment to a celibate existence in a celibate community, with the congruous privation regarding material goods (poverty in the narrower sense) and regarding personal independence (obedience), puts a christian in a special *anawim* situation: he is to look to God alone for fulfilment in the experience of human privation. Once again, the counsels are seen to verify pauline faith, and not barthian 'religion'.

*Obedience* is explicitly related to faith by Paul.<sup>1</sup> This use of the term obedience in connection with faith highlights the fact that the directive principle of the disciple's life is the invisible God through his Spirit, and not autonomous self-direction. From this point of view, the instrument of expression of this radical faith-obedience to God in the life of the counsels is the celibate *community*, a community of ignorant sinners, especially as represented through the bearers of authority. When the celibate christian entrusts his destiny to the human weakness of such a community, and does so at the special call of the Spirit, he is exercising a faith-obedience which is the direct opposite of 'religion'. Other human communities come together on the basis of natural attractiveness and rich human resources. This community comes together, on the contrary, on the basis of human poverty and weakness, with the members hoping against hope that God's power and wisdom will manifest itself.

The religious life is a life of the counsels under *vow*, or some equivalent binding consecration. Very legitimately it may be asked: Does the *vow* of life-time celibacy, poverty and obedience go ary to the doctrine of justification by faith? And one must confess

<sup>1</sup> Cf Rom 1, 5; 16, 26.

that there is a way of speaking of the security of the religious life which invites religious themselves and others to view this life as a kind of insurance policy. But it need not be so. Furthermore, if one looks at the inherent dynamism of the life itself, in contrast to the motivation of any given individual (and what form of life cannot be distorted or corrupted by wrong motivation?), then it must be said that a vowed christian existence is a special verification of and witness to justification by faith. The lifetime vow puts one in the condition of insecurity and risk, not of smug security. The commitment to fidelity until death in the way of the counsels is not a cautious contract with a party on whom one makes demands corresponding to one's own commitment, but, like the marriage vows, a covenant of fidelity 'for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death'. The element of risk in faith is enhanced by the fact that the partner is the unseen Lord. There is reliance on his promise to bring fulfilment, but this confidence is at the opposite pole from the assurance arising from a contractual relationship. From every point of view, then, the religious life goes directly contrary to what Barth describes as 'religion', that is, a quest for fulfilment in God undertaken from a purely human initiative and in reliance of human resources. It is no mere hankering to be contemporary which prompts the statement that the vowed life of the counsels is a distinctive form of 'religionless christianity', that is, of existence in christian faith.

But what of Bonhoeffer's understanding of 'religion' and of its opposite in true discipleship? I will leave it to the reader to reflect, in the light of what has already been said, on whether and how the life of the counsels is opposed to each of the five elements in Bonhoeffer's notion of 'religion'. I personally have no doubt of the results of such an analysis. Someone has pointed out that there is a certain affinity between the genuine mystic and the atheist or agnostic: both insist on putting aside or leaving behind any divinity shaped to man's image, any god who is merely the projection of aspirations for which man is unwilling to take responsibility. Not every religious is a mystic, but the very structure of religious life, as a constant invitation to base one's fulfilment not on the seen, the heard, the felt, but on the power of the invisible God, draws one to plunge into that 'dark night' which is the lived equivalent of the classic 'negative theology' – the only genuine 'christian atheism'.

This brings us, finally, to the important question whether the celibate christian community has anything special to say to the

world of today, particularly in the context of secularization, the secular mission of the Church, and the challenge posed by atheistic humanism, both as ideology and as lived human existence. The answer, as I see it, is a decided affirmative, on condition that religious communities really fulfil their role as a focus of radical christian faith and as a battering ram against what Barth and Bonhoeffer describe as 'religion'. Within the Church, first of all, a dynamic life of the counsels can provide that sometimes disturbing, always challenging invitation to the entire Church really to be the pilgrim people of God, never settling down in comfortable security through fixed forms and formulations of the faith. From this point of view, religious life is intended as an antidote for piosity, for social quietism, for the elitism which always tempts some in the Church.

To those outside the Church, as well as to the important minority within the Church which is being tempted, in one way or another, to reduce the Church's contribution to human life to a bland semi-theism or to a radicalism conceived in purely humanistic terms, the life of celibate christian community witnesses to the paschal mystery, to the need of walking the road of faith-poverty, faith-virginity and faith-obedience, if the human person and the community of mankind are to realize their potential. From this point of view, what the religious life contributes is a lived refutation of the charge, which one finds in various forms in Marx, Proudhon, Sartre and many others, that man abdicates his birthright when he plunges into the mystery of God. Faith is not religion; the journey in the night to find the God who is man's true future is no flight from the world; and the sacred pledge to live as celibate, poor and obedient christians until death is a magnificent witness that justification comes by faith.

The witness is indeed magnificent, but we religious are anything but magnificent! How oppressed we are today with this sorry realization. The answer, however, is not in an orgy of self-recrimination, or in sad, sad prophecies of the demise of this form of the christian life. What Karl Rahner has said of the issue of priestly celibacy is also true of the life of the counsels in religious community. Let us not ask about the survival of religious life in general. Let each one of us who are religious ask *himself* about the depth and quality of his own commitment. *I* must ask *myself* whether I understand and live my commitment in religiosity or in faith. I must be honest enough to acknowledge that there has been too much religiosity and too little faith. And I must plead with the Lord, as one who desires, at least, to recognize his radical poverty: 'Lord, I do believe. Please help me in my unbelief'.