BONHOEFFER'S LEGACY AND TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS

THOMAS M. DICKEN

It is clear that the issues raised over twenty-five years ago in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*[1] are still very much with us. Though much has been written about Bonhoeffer's thought, it is my contention that the emergence of Transactional Analysis as a major form of psychotherapy provides a new framework for interpreting the issues raised by Bonhoeffer's argument which can be exposed by applying the concepts of Transactional Analysis.

In his letters, Bonhoeffer spoke of "man's coming of age," man's becoming "mature." Just as the individual's coming of age demands a new relation with his human parents, so humanity's coming of age demands a new relation with God. The mature individual no longer "needs" his parents; God, wrote Bonhoeffer, is "teaching us that we no longer need him." God has been conceived in ages past as a *deus ex machina,* as a "problem-solver." Man saw his relation to God as one of dependency. Man's coming of age means that he takes responsibility for his own life; he seeks to solve his own problems.

To be aware of man's coming of age means to celebrate man's strength and responsibility. Bonhoeffer charges that Christianity has sometimes sought to keep man weak in order to keep man dependent on God. By way of contrast, the biblical faith emphasizes man's strength as well as his weakness, man's goodness as well as his sin, man's knowledge as well as his ignorance. The faith must be set in the center of man's strength, not at the edges of his weakness. Otherwise, God becomes a "God of the gaps," occupied with filling the space left by man's inadequacies. If God is defined exclusively in terms of man's limitations, then God is edged out of the picture as man increasingly comes of age, responsible for his life. If mankind does seek to maturely take responsibility for its life, how does one conceive man's relation to God, who for too long has been defined in terms of man's inadequacies?

The theological debate of the last two decades has been preoccupied with Bonhoeffer's legacy. The theological mood has involved a shift "from anxiety to responsibility."[2] The problem of conceiving God

THOMAS M. DICKEN is Professor of Christian Thought, Rocky Mountain College, Billings, Montana.

[1]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967).

[2]Thomas Ogletree, "From Anxiety to Responsibility: The Shifting Focus of Theological Reflection," in Martin Marty and Dean Peerman, eds., *New Theology No. 6* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1969).

has been central to theological debate, and this debate has assumed that man is increasingly assuming responsibility for his destiny.

In Transactional Analysis, the ego is conceived as being made up of three component states: the Parent, the Adult, and the Child. These components represent states of the self, not relations between separate persons in the external world. The internal Parent is the body of attitudes and beliefs which have been programmed into the self by external authority figures.

The Adult is the capacity for rationally and empirically assessing data, for making mature, responsible judgments. The Child is the impulsive component, which seeks immediate satisfaction. In the Child is programmed the archaic responses from the individual's own childhood. When there is a transaction between two individuals, any one of these three components in one individual may be responding to any of these components in the other individual. By analyzing our psycho-social transactions in light of these components, blocks between people can be altered and communication can be facilitated.[3]

Bonhoeffer's very language – "coming of age" – suggests that it might be appropriate to analyze his position in terms of a psychological theory which emphasizes the Child and the Adult as categories. When he suggests that man is coming of age, he is saying that in some sense the race is moving from a stage dominated by the Child to a stage dominated by the Adult. In celebrating this movement, he agrees with Transactional Analysis, which seeks to strengthen the Adult component of the self, thereby emphasizing man's responsibility for his own life.

However, Transactional Analysis can help us locate some ambiguities in Bonhoeffer's suggestions; we may be able to define more precisely the proper relation of man to God in the twentieth century.

With all the emphasis on adult responsibility and coming of age, one phrase in Jesus' teaching remains disturbing. "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). In some sense, salvation involves a child-like quality, as opposed to adult maturity. Indeed, Transactional Analysis insists on this very point; its concept of Child is not a simple concept. There is a good aspect of the Child in human selfhood which needs to be strengthened: this is the natural, spontaneous Child. The natural Child

---

[3]Cf. Eric Berne, *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy* (New York: Grove Press); Eric Berne, *Principles of Group Treatment* (New York: Grove Press, 1969); Eric Berne, *The Games People Play* (New York: Grove Press, 1964); Thomas Harris, *I'm OK—You're OK* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). My discussion of Transactional Analysis in this essay presupposes only the most general ideas of this school. When the terms "Parent," "Child," or "Adult" are capitalized, the reference is to component states of a personality, not to actual individuals who in their relationships may be parents, adults, or children.

is capable of spontaneous, fulfilling play. It is this aspect which makes us delight in the presence of children, and it is this component of our personality structure which oftens needs to be liberated. We need to be more free to be spontaneous and playful, whether in our sex lives, our leisure time, or even in our daily "work." Such an interpretation of Jesus' teaching would suggest that he meant to say, "Unless you become as a natural Child, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."

We should not leave behind the natural Child in our coming of age, and this emphasis is the key to one of the important influences in recent theology. I refer here to the "theology of play." We have become aware, through the work of J. Huiziniga, of the importance of play in many aspects of culture. David Miller has outlined the dominance of the "game" metaphor in recent thought (including Transactional Analysis, which analyzes the "games people play"). Robert Neale has argued that man's essence needs to be conceived in terms of his capacity for play as much as in terms of his capacity for work. His childlike capacity for play is as basic to his being as his adult capacity for work. Religion should be conceived as "full play," which Neale defines in terms of psychic harmony, as opposed to the psychic disharmony which turns an activity into work.[4]

Bonhoeffer has suggested that God is teaching us that we no longer need him. What alternative relation can there be to God? I would suggest that just as an adult no longer "needs" his human parents, but hopefully can learn to enjoy them, it might be possible to conceive a relation to God of enjoyment, as opposed to need. This is a playful image of the God-man relation, as opposed to the work-image of a useful God, meeting man's needs. If man's role is to "glorify God and enjoy him forever," he needs to retain his natural Child component, to be liberated from solemnity and seriousness and enabled to play, even at the level of his ultimate concern.

A second dimension of the concept of Child in Transactional Analysis is the "rebellious Child." The rebellious Child is to some extent a component of the personality structure of each of us. This is the aspect of the self in rebellion against the authoritative Parent. When the Parent is critical, the Child rebels simply to preserve some degree of independence and dignity. The critical Parent creates such a "not O.K." awareness in the self that the Child must rebel. However, this is a childish tactic (as opposed to the *childlike* behavior of the natural Child). It would be preferable for the Adult component of the self to

[4]Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); David Miller, *Gods and Games* (New York: World Press, 1970); Robert Neale, *In Praise of Play* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

rationally examine the dictates of the Parent, assessing the validity of its dogma, and responding in a mature, adult manner. The rebellious Child does not rebel on rational grounds; it rebels simply because it resents any command.

Much of Bonhoeffer's thought seems to call for a movement to adult maturity away from childish rebellion against God. Repeatedly, Bonhoeffer argues that God has been defined in terms of man's inadequacies, particularly his sins of weakness. God, in other words, has been conceived as the critical Parent: the Judge. When Bonhoeffer writes of the "'priestly' snuffing around in the sins of men in order to catch them out," he is giving an exact description of the feelings of the rebellious Child over against the critical Parent.[5]

If God is conceived as the critical Parent, and man's self-image is of the rebellious Child, one possible tactic is submission to the Parent. This produces a temporary feeling of great relief and satisfaction. The energy expended on rebellion is released for other uses. By becoming an adaptive Child, there is an intense gratification of feeling approved by the Parent. However, this feeling soon wears off, and so the Child finds itself rebelling again, partly to maintain the dignity of independence, but also perhaps to make it possible to again experience the gratification of submission. This pattern of submission-backsliding-submission is a recognizable pattern in some religious experience.[6]

If God is conceived after the image of the critical Parent, it is natural for the Child in our nature to rebel. At the extreme limit, this rebellion may involve an attempt to slay the critical Parent. We need to be sensitive to the valid resistance of atheism to the idea of God as one who suffocates man, one who stands against human fulfillment. The emergence of a death of God theology is a protest against a God conceived as a critical Parent. The important point is that Bonhoeffer's theology affords an alternative to atheism; death of God theology is *not* a natural development of Bonhoeffer's thought. Rather, it is what results when Bonhoeffer's alternative is not grasped. Bonhoeffer was groping for a view of God in which God is teaching us that we no longer need a critical Parent-God. In celebrating man's coming of age, his mature adulthood, Bonhoeffer was moving beyond the response of the rebellious Child. If man can take responsibility for his own life, celebrating his strength, knowledge and virtue, he does not need to engage in infantile rebellion against God; he does not need to proclaim the death of God.

But there is another role for the Parent than the role of critical

[5]Letter of July 8, 1944 in *Letters and Papers from Prison.*
[6]Cf. Harris, *op. cit.*, pp. 234-235.

Parent. There is also the nurturing Parent, the Parent which succors and cares for the Child. In responding to the nurturing Parent in another individual, the Child becomes dependent. In applying this model to the God-man relation, it is clear that God has often been conceived as a nurturing, caring God on whom man depends.

It is at this point that a crucial issue is raised, not only for Bonhoeffer's theology but for any view of the God-man relation. Does an image of God as a nurturing Parent, a heavenly Father, on whom we depend, keep man immature and irresponsible? Is man come of age past any need of such a God?

I would like to probe this question by drawing on a source of data rarely used by contemporary theology: the experience of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA does have a theology which is basic to its understanding of the alcoholic's problem and its program of therapy. Its theology is so simply stated that its significance has perhaps been neglected. Yet it is a theology which has profound meaning for hundreds of thousands of people. Founded in 1939, it undoubtedly represents contemporary experience; its theology is meaningful to many modern men in a way that few others are.

AA encourages the alcoholic to rely on "God as you understand him to be"; the only direction given to this understanding is that this is the Power greater than yourself. It is important to note that this moves in the opposite direction from Bonhoeffer's thought; God is conceived as a Power. He is not powerless; he is able to solve a critical human problem. Further, an attitude of reliance and dependency on this Power is encouraged.

The alcoholic is encouraged to rely on this Power greater than himself, because it is important that he see himself as powerless over against his addiction. If the alcoholic has not "reached bottom," if he still thinks that he has control of his life, if he thinks he has power to remain sober, then nothing can be done for him.

The alcoholic's problem is that he has tried to control his life; he has followed the "good advice' 'of his friends who encourage him to try harder. The very fact that he remains sober for a while gives him confidence; he can do it. Then the story is all too familiar; having done it, he has just one drink, and his world collapses around him again. The AA program is to reverse this whole pattern; he is not encouraged to try harder. It is not until he admits profoundly to himself that he is a hopeless alcoholic that hope is possible. Having admitted his powerlessness, he can find power through the Power greater than himself.

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson has written a brilliant article

analyzing this problem.[7] Bateson suggests that humans enter into two basic forms of relationship: symmetrical and complementary. If a relationship is symmetrical, the behaviors of A and B are *similar* and more of "the given behavior by A stimulates more of it in B." Examples Bateson gives of symmetrical relationships range from armaments races through boxing matches to "keeping up with the Joneses." If a relationship is complementary, the behaviors are *dissimilar,* but are also linked so that the given behavior by A stimulates the appropriate or fitting behavior in B. Examples of complementary relationships range from gift giving-gift taking through nurturance-dependency to sadism-masochism.

Much of our cultural drinking pattern is symmetrical. If one person has a drink, so do the people he is with. Drinking behavior stimulates symmetrical drinking behavior. When a person has a drinking problem, the problem itself becomes a challenge. He is encouraged to try to measure up to the problem. He develops a symmetrical relationship to his own problem. The bigger the problem seems, the harder he tries. When he succeeds in remaining sober, the challenge disappears. There is no possibility of a symmetrical increase in his behavior in response to the problem. At that point, the challenge becomes, not to stay sober, but whether he can have a drink. The vicious cycle of this symmetrical behavior—which is based on the attempt to take responsibility for his own life—has to be broken. The experience of AA is that it can be broken when there is a shift to a compementary pattern: the powerless alcoholic relying on a Power greater than himself. By drinking, he becomes part of a larger group; he is enabled to enter into things. So the drunken state represents a kind of solution to life's problem; it makes one belong. But it is clearly a vicious solution. By relying on the Power greater than himself, a more adequate solution is found. He has a sense of belonging to a greater whole. His powerlessness is related to the Power greater than himself. Participation in the AA group itself supports this sense of "belonging." He is no longer trying to "try harder"; he is no longer competing with a challenge.

It may be argued that this data is irrelevant, that the alcoholic is such an exceptional case that it is unfair to argue from his experience to the experience of "modern man." But it may also be that all men need not only to *take responsibility* for themselves in symmetrical relationships, but also to *live responsively* in complementary relationships.

---

[7]Gregory Bateson, "The Cybernetics of 'Self': A Theory of Alcoholism," *Psychiatry,* Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 1-18, 1971. Reprinted in Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).

Is the nurturing Parent-dependent Child relationship valid only on the intra-human level? Or does man need such a relationship with the Power greater than himself? Are there limits to the responsibility man can take for his own life? Are there needs for reliance and dependence at the level of his ultimate concern which, if met, liberate him to live more maturely, more responsibly? These are profound questions that need to be probed further. I do not believe that we can generalize glibly about "modern man."

I have argued that Bonhoeffer raises important questions about an adequate model for the relation of God and man in the contemporary world. I have suggested that the Parent-Adult-Child construct in Transactional Analysis provides a framework for exploring more precisely Bonhoeffer's thoughts about "man's coming of age" and God's teaching us "that we no longer need him." The fact that the concepts of Parent and Child in Transactional Analysis have several aspects implies that certain ambiguities may be detected in Bonhoeffer's thought. (1) Therefore, I have argued that in man's coming of age, we should not neglect the spontaneous, natural Child. The emphasis on a theology of play suggests that the natural Child is being affirmed in recent theology. (2) I argued that the rebellious Child often seeks to slay the critical Parent, and this may be a root of much contemporary disbelief. I affirm with Bonhoeffer that we no longer need an authoritarian Parent-God, increasing our sense of guilt and rebellion. Rather than slaying God, we need to "come of age" and take adult responsibility for our moral lives. We no longer need an image of God which serves only to provoke our rebellious Child. (3) Finally, I argued that there is some evidence that modern man still needs an image of God as a Power greater than himself. He needs at times a relationship of dependency on God; it is not true that we no longer need a nurturing Parent-God. I believe that at this point there is a disagreement between Bonhoeffer's suggestions and my argument. If I read Bonhoeffer correctly, he was seeking to move away from such an image of God. He saw such dependency as a threat to man's maturity and responsibility. I have argued that responsiveness to such a God may actually liberate man to live more responsibly. I have offered some evidence from the experience of AA to support my contention. At any rate, the use of a framework borrowed from Transactional Analysis has at least made it possible to define the issues with greater precision.