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## WW '72: CHAPTER 1 WORSHIP IN AN AGE OF CHANGE

### II ~ *HOMO RELIGIOSUS*: "BONHOEFFER WAS WRONG!"

Throughout my days at SEMINARY as a downy-cheeked post-adolescent, I remember, most of my professors of divinity didn't think much of the term "religion". I can still recall them clucking their tongues and wagging their heads when the word was mentioned. The term, for them, was not only inaccurate when applied to Christian faith. It was also out of date. Passe. Defunct. Extinct. Nobody took "religion" seriously any more. This was 1954, after all, the "Post-Constantinian Age." Nobody was "religious" any more.



I'm older and wiser now. So it's another conviction of mine, strongly informing these pages, that human beings remain irrepressibly RELIGIOUS, in spite of the turmoils of an Age of Change. I am convinced that yes, in this "Post-Constantinian" age, in this "Age-after-Christendom," those who name the name of Jesus Christ will find themselves once again, as in other ages, part of a minority among all the plurality of the world's peoples.

But although many in our present age will perhaps not identify themselves as Christians, I am persuaded they will almost certainly NOT cease to be religious.

In a sense, this conviction runs COUNTER to much prevailing opinion today, both inside and outside the church. A case in point: Popular opinion in many circles interprets

Dietrich Bonhoeffer to assert that, in this increasingly secular age, vast numbers of men and women are no longer aware of the heights and depths of human life, no longer concerned about enacting their deepest sensitivities to those heights and depths in what could be called cult or ritual. In a word, modern specimens of *Homo sapiens* are no longer “religious.” This was Bonhoeffer’s insight, it’s often assumed. And he was right.



He was wrong, according to the conviction expressed here. More precisely, his interpreters at least are wrong, since it is not certain that Bonhoeffer himself would have argued as his interpreters often do. Human beings REMAIN irrepressibly religious, I am convinced, in spite of secularism. In fact, secularism itself has become a kind of religion. “The human mind is an idol-factory,” said John Calvin, with the implication — just as true today as in his day — that if you are not worshiping the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, then in most cases you will only be worshiping some other god, enacting some other liturgy.

The fact that great numbers of people today choose not to worship the God of Jesus Christ remains as much a JUDGEMENT on the failures of faith within the Christian community as on the tides of secularity awash in contemporary culture. It does not mean that human beings have ceased being religious. Most of us have merely exchanged one god for another, one liturgy for another.

Yes, even today the honest-to-God ATHEIST is a pretty rare bird; Most of us are still irredeemably *Homo religiosus*. And, as it should be quite clear by now, that is not necessarily good news to the Christian, any more than it is necessarily bad news.

Again, it would not be difficult to document the case. Anyone who has spent any time at all in a modern urban environment will be able to recognize at once certain religious and even liturgical aspects of secular life.

Consider the situation on a university CAMPUS. Undergraduate athletics can easily assume the dimensions of religious preoccupation. Athletic contests and disciplines take on the character of ritual enactments or cultic rites. A visit to a science laboratory can be like a pilgrimage to a shrine — the hushed silence, the white lab-coat vestments, the sacramental concern with apparatus and equipment. You almost expect to be invited to take off your shoes!



The religious elements in secular life today are not only individually perceived and enacted; they are also CORPORATE. Consider these occasions: a Fourth of July or Victoria Day patriotic parade; the Opening Night of a symphony orchestra season; a family reunion picnic in a village park; a University Academic Honors Convocation; a protest march to City Hall; even the “mosh pit” in a Friday evening rock concert. Your

list can extend to the boundaries of the human imagination and experience.

Yet each of these can be considered an occasion for secular, corporate “LITURGY” of the highest significance. They cannot be laughed at or brushed aside as only some aspect of adolescence. Modern men and women of great sophistication, education, intellect, and maturity continue to discover recurring opportunities for enacting their deepest convictions about human life in these occasions. No matter how secular or sophisticated we’ve become, we refuse to let these “liturgies” go. In fact, we are constantly inventing new ones. “The human mind is an idol factory” indeed.



The question, then, is not so much, “Shall we worship?” That question is pretty well settled, simply in the nature of our common humanity. Whom or what shall we worship? — that is the issue, now as always. Nor is the question, “Shall we use liturgical forms in our worship?” That question, too, has been settled, somewhere deep within our humanity.

A wise teacher once pointed out how, for the Christian, the witness of the Spirit will always be CHRISTO-CENTRIC. Christ is at the centre of our worship and witness.

At the same time, that witness will also always be “THEO-ULTIMATE” — Jesus came, after all, to “show us the Father.” And although Christ remains for us the Way Through to the God (*theos*) of love, it is ultimately that Divine Parent whom we are to serve, as Jesus served. Or else we run the danger of Christo-monism, “Jesus-ism.”

To this typology I would add one further word: The Spirit’s witness is finally and always ANTHROPO-MORPHIC. It is incarnational. It takes the shape (*morphos*) of a human being (*anthropos*). Because I believe that to be human is to be religious, I would be bold to suggest that the Spirit’s witness among us, today as always, is therefore not only anthropo-morphic, it is also “religio-morphic.” It can take the shape of “religion.”

In the next chapter, we’ll look at the distinctions between religion and the Christian revelation. And suggest that even today the term “RELIGION” does not have to be a naughty word.

