

**Two Martyrs
in a Godless World,
Dietrich Bonhoeffer
and Alexander Men**

with an afterword by
Olivier Clément

Michel Evdokimov


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Two Martyrs in a Godless World
Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alexander Men

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“In his cry, ‘My God, why have you abandoned me?’
Christ plunges into the experience of the absence of God.
He plunges into the ultimate depths of human agony,
which is to be separated from God.”

Michel Evdokimov

The Olive Garden

He went up under the grey leaves
quite grey and merged into the olive fields
and laid his dusty sweating brow
deep in his hot hands’ dustiness.

After all it comes to this—the end.
Now I must go while I grow blind,
and why do you will that I pretend
Thou art, when you I can no longer find?

I find you no more. Within me, none.
Not in the others. Not in this stone.
I find you no more. I am alone.

I am alone with all men’s grief
for which, through you, I sought relief.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(based on Matt 26:36–46)

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A Transitional Epoch

This book recalls two great witnesses to Christ who died as martyrs, victims of the violence of that cold monstrosity, the totalitarian state of the twentieth century. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran pastor, died in a Nazi concentration camp in 1945. Alexander Men, Russian Orthodox priest, was hacked down in 1989 by an ax blow from behind from an unknown assailant, one Sunday morning on his way to church.

These two men, molded by an unshakable faith, did not yield to these trials. They came into the world in what they called the “old times.” As we shall see, they sensed the coming of a new world, still in gestation. Before we enter this world, it may be useful to make a few comments about our present epoch, on which our subjects shine a prophetic light.

Some are alarmed by the situation of the Church today. What will happen to our faith in a world in which the life of the spirit has so changed? The shrinking number of believers and the loss of prestige of the Christian ideal in the twentieth century caused our two witnesses neither fear nor discouragement. They looked, full of hope, toward a future as yet unknown but indissolubly united to a good and kind Creator. Faith will always be with us; only it will be lived differently.

According to Bonhoeffer, we are living through the transition from a juvenile world, defined by the belief in a strong set of ecclesiastical institutions and a priesthood determined to corral believers, to a world-come-of-age, in which each individual can take control of their own destiny, in order to live to the full in the freedom in which they were created.⁷

Today in Africa, in Latin America, in Asia, the Christian faith is robustly alive. However, in the West, secularization is in full swing and relativism has a seductive hold on popular thinking. Traditional values are joyfully trampled down, because “it is forbidden to forbid.” The French philosopher and historian Marcel Gauchet has aptly depicted the world’s disenchantment with religion.⁸

But if it is indeed disenchantment, in what sense is the world disenchanted? The philosopher René Rémond notes that there has been no retreat from religion, only the adoption of new gods that are not those of the Bible. They are the occult, the esoteric, the economy, high finance, and multiple addictions.⁹ And when we have exhausted the delights of consumption and indifference to the world of the spirit, will we not see the emergence of disenchantment

7. Translator’s note: This idea has its origins in Immanuel Kant’s 1784 essay “Was ist Aufklärung?” (“What is Enlightenment?”).

8. Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

9. René Rémond, *Le Christianisme en Accusation*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000.

with secularism? What new form of human community will then be built?

The Christian faith has survived many trials in the long course of its history: in the beginning, martyrs, succeeded by the mixed benefit of theocracy, the rending apart of the Reformation, the modern-day rise of atheism and mass persecution. Christianity has come through every trial because its roots are elsewhere, in a world closed to all disenchantment. According to the second-century Epistle to Diognetus: “Christians inhabit the world, but they are not part of the world.”¹⁰ The message of our two martyrs rests on this foundation. Two witnesses chosen from many others, they call on Christians to confront the inevitable trials with courage, with faith in Christ triumphant over death, in a world of which they are totally part, while living as complete strangers to it.

10. *Early Christian Writings*, 2nd edition, Penguin Classics, 1987, 145.

The Inevitability of Secularization

We should not fear secularization: it is here for the duration. It has brought with it the winds of freedom. In fact, in the minds of our authors, there never was a “Christian Empire,” because every theocracy hid behind a wall of illusion and hypocrisy which is completely alien to the gospel ideals of love, peace, and equality. In the first centuries of its existence, the Church was a free assembly of believers gathered around the person of Christ. But from the fourth century on, the Church assembly was too often trapped in the net of habit and conformity.

Christianity brought love into the world, and love can bear no constraint. The joyful freedom with which the first Christians came to Communion faded away, and people turned away from the gospel commandments. In the fourth century, Saint John Chrysostom said there were two altars: the one on which the body of Christ lies in the form of bread and wine, and the other, the heart of the needy and dispossessed, which is Christ himself. “I was hungry and you fed me” (Matt 25:35). Because he protected the poor from the rich, Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed bishop of Constantinople, died from exhaustion on a forced march to exile in a distant province.

Bonhoeffer was also “exiled” to prison, and Alexander Men was placed far from Moscow, the Russian capital, in his first two parishes.

Rebalancing the Human and the Divine

In his 1924 book *The New Middle Ages* (the English translation is titled *The End of Our Time*), Nicolas Berdiaev articulated a premonition of secularization. At the height of Byzantine theocracy in the Middle Ages, he said, there was a strong emphasis placed on God, with the result of trampling man. By contrast, in the Renaissance there was a strong emphasis placed on man, with the result of trampling God. Coming to our own times, those who abolished God, those heralds of the “death of God” and the emergence of a new humanity—Marx, Nietzsche, Freud—have given rise to a multitude of disciples. It is with those disciples that Christians are now invited to enter into dialogue. What if, in accordance with Berdiaev’s vision, we stand on the eve of a new era, in which the hostile confrontation between the human and the divine will cease? What if a new equilibrium will be established, in the spirit of the Council of Chalcedon, which tackled this theme in the context of how God became man? In this regard, Father Alexander proclaimed that “Christianity is only at its beginning.”

Secularization in Process

How can we live through this transition from the wholly religious to the wholly secular? There is no sense in being scared of secularization. It is better to accept that it has enlarged the zone of possibilities for the free development of human potential, on which Christians can stamp their own specific orientation. One thing only is essential: we should resolutely oppose any attempts to lessen or destroy the value of the human being. To restore the person to their full dignity is the surest way to rediscover the road that leads to God, who alone is able to give meaning to life.

On our own, we cannot come to terms with our pitiful human nature. We are either crushed—as in Sartre’s *Nausea*—or we find our presence in the world to be incongruous—as in Camus’s *The Stranger*—or else we conjure up the images of disjointed puppets with which painting, dance, literature, and music are filled. Estranged from our own inner life, we project ourselves onto the television screen, onto the internet, onto the smartphone, headphones clamped tightly to our ears, as though we fear being face-to-face with ourselves. In public places we are subjected to constant background music. I once asked a supermarket cashier if she did not tire of the constant noise. “You have to put up with it,” she said. That is to say, you have to make your living at the expense of being chained to noise. Noise, continual disruption, and agitation—are these not linked to the strange increase in psychological illnesses that we see?

Man is not an island alone on a vast ocean. Created in the image and likeness of God, he lives in close dependence with the Creator and with every other human being, who bears the same image. Despite the fall, Christian faith is oriented toward the kingdom to come. This kingdom, the evangelist Luke tells us, is already among us (see Luke 17:21). The proclamation of the death of God squeezes out life, leading to a dull uniformity, the blurring of differences between nations and between man and woman.

The Eternal Human Being

The Everyman¹¹ of modern times, in search of his own identity, orphaned from his heavenly Father, may be contrasted to the inflexible “just man” of the Old Testament, whose faith was indomitable. The “just man” (see Gen 6:9) is kin to those who “through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, . . . and stopped the mouths of lions” (Heb 11:33). The first Christian martyrs appeared as if purified, as if transfigured by their suffering, as did the martyrs of the concentration camps, gulags, and totalitarian systems. The great Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae said of his imprisonment under Ceaușescu that he had never before prayed as much as when he was locked inside those four

11. Translator’s note: The name comes from the medieval play, an allegorical accounting of the life of Everyman, who represents all mankind. The Everyman theme has been repeatedly revisited in novels and plays.

walls. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said the same of the final period of his incarceration. The faith of Alexander Men never wavered, despite the persecutions to which he was subjected.

In Western society, there are many, believers and non-believers, who refuse at all cost to bow down before the idols of money, pleasure, and success. Through their prayers and their closeness to the word of God, Christians can raise their minds above the sea of common opinion, and can turn toward the Holy Spirit, who makes his home in the human heart. Against the *a priori* claims of rationality, seriousness, and cost-effectiveness, they plead the value of what is free—the sense of joy, the celebration of being together. An unexpected visitor to Father Alexander Men once apologized for interrupting him at work. “But you are my work,” Men replied, always glad for the opportunity to weave a human relationship. The human being, with the fullness of their joy and of their suffering, is here because they are loved by God.

Proclamation of the Word

The ethical implications of emerging scientific practice require fundamental debate: experiments on embryos, “test tube” babies, genetically modified organisms. The Church is not in a position to make an infallible pronouncement. However, in the light of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Church should make clear that the pursuit of technological progress for its own sake can have a fatal logic that leads to barbarism. Christians should not impose their moral values,

but at the same time, they should adopt an unambiguous position on such social issues as the defense of human rights and freedom of speech.

There is a general crisis of language, which becomes a crisis of the word. We are bombarded by multiple streams of words through media, smartphones, advertising, etc. This crisis of language is also rampant in the Church, where heavy, ingratiating, light-deprived pronouncements rain down. In the Orthodox Church, the time has come to fundamentally review our liturgical language in order to make it more accessible and better fitted to winning souls. Father Alexander was well aware of this, but nothing could change during his lifetime. At that time in the Soviet Union, all catechesis, all theological teaching outside of church services, was prohibited, and sermons were strictly monitored by KGB informants. A Christian from the West asked Father Alexander one day what the Church could still do to keep the flame burning. His response was very clear: to proclaim the Word through the liturgy.

Throughout history it has been the liturgy that has kept alive the faith of believers, most notably at times of barbarian invasions. The churches of the Soviet Union were the only public spaces in which, in the celebration of the liturgy, it was possible to speak of God. The Church, in effect, returned to the first millennium, to the time before the invention of the printing press, when the liturgy alone was responsible for the development of the Christian faith. But it is also true that language alone does not express the full reality of the spiritual world. One must also learn to

enter into silence. The poet Paul Claudel said, “people love to sunbathe and therefore why not to bathe in silence?” Bonhoeffer experienced this inside the four walls of his prison. Father Alexander would ask his flock to quiet the seething voices of the world before entering into prayer. After all, does not the Holy Spirit proceed from the eternal silence of the Father?

Love as Language

Love can offer a new language that brings life. The younger generation were attracted by our two men of faith, because they felt welcomed and loved for who they were. “As long as one is not loved, one remains incomprehensible to oneself,” said Dumitru Stăniloae. Love is the best proof of one’s own existence and of that of God. Dostoevsky told of a student who wrote before killing himself: “I am dying because after my death there is no one who will mourn me.” A world without love is, no doubt, the source of the philosophy of the absurd, of nihilism, of despair. In Christ, love drives out hate. Christ on the cross joins those who cry out in pain on their own cross.

The pervasive secularism of the West needs to open up, creating space for religious diversity, in which all can express themselves freely. Christians should get to know their Judeo-Christian heritage, the Bible, the liturgy, and the treasury of Christian thought that reaches back to the Church Fathers. Even agnostics recognize the importance of preserving this heritage. Christians must also proclaim

that Christ has conquered death and hell, that each human face reflects the image of God, that life will prevail over the forces of darkness, that sadness and ugliness will yield their place to the joy and beauty of the Resurrection. The love that is given to us by God is ours to share with those who do not belong to our faith, and with those who have no belief. Following the old spiritual axiom, we should “see the face of God in the face of every person.”



Life as Community

Those who were with Bonhoeffer in the Finkenwalde community learned to live together, as did those who were with Father Alexander in the parish of Novaya Derevnya. Was it not said of the first Christians “see how they love each other”?¹² This great challenge of love was powerful enough to lay low the paganism that dominated the powerful Roman Empire. In our day, are Christians sufficiently credible to lay low the dead weight of indifference which one meets at every turn?

The firestorm of love, so much needed by humanity, has much more power than the atomic bomb, which can be simply mastered with the right formula. But there is no formula for how to set the human heart on fire. In today’s world, each person formulates their own creed. Instability, uncertainty, rootlessness, and the loss of a sense of tradition are pervasive. One can sense an emerging new demand for life in community, which intersects with the new trend of globalization. Believers affirm that life in community is still possible. The Holy Trinity reveals to us a paradigm of

12. The second-century theologian Tertullian, citing a pagan official, in *Apology*, chap. 39.

human communion, in which the unfathomable distinctness of the three Persons is made one in perfect unity. Overflowing love, which is at the heart of the Trinity, is offered to humanity, spreading the ideal of community life across the globe.

The mystery of life, of beauty, of the freedom of the children of God, can be awakened in every human being. For many years, a hermit lived in the village of Onzain, in central France. From time to time he would walk in the streets. The local residents, people of no particular religious faith, would say that when they spoke to him, he made no reference to God, and yet they would find themselves thinking of God. Silence may sometimes be the best way to evoke the presence of the divine, and to place the divine in relationship with the human. All human beings, whatever their conduct and outlook, are created in the image of God.

IV

Dialogue with Atheists

In his inability to prove the existence of God, our modern Everyman no longer even feels the need to speak of God. God has no place in our modern, secular, mundane thinking. The gospel has lost its power to shock. Atheism has become pervasive. Formerly to proclaim oneself an atheist was a declaration of choice: now it is to be one of a crowd. Ignorance has settled in. But perhaps we should speak of indifference rather than of atheism. Pure atheism is rooted in hard certainties, whereas indifference is “like a wave of the sea, that is driven and tossed by the wind” (Jas 1:6). It has become fashionable to place faith and doubt on the same level. In our day, we love to cultivate doubt, to feed on instability and the loss of firm values. The apostle James’ injunction “let your yes be yes and your no be no” (Jas 5:12) is hardly heard anymore. Father Alexander would claim that some atheists are more secure in their convictions than many Christians. As do convinced Christians, so do atheists die at peace.

But let us clear up some misunderstandings. An atheist may say that he knows nothing about God and that therefore God does not exist. What is at issue here? For a Christian, God is not principally an idea or an explanation,