

Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), xiv + 242 pp. \$39.95.

Barry Harvey
Baylor University

In the aftermath of the twentieth century, the bloodiest and most violent in human history, scholars and lay people alike have sought to identify and root out the sources of division and animosity. Their motivation typically springs from a deep and, for the most part, commendable commitment to bring the violence to an end and to foster peaceful relations between persons and peoples. Many have identified “religion” as a chief culprit in the warfare and bloodshed that continues to plague the world’s peoples. Though a few have called for the abolition of this putative human phenomenon, most have sought to find ways to make it (whatever “it” is) less of a threat to the harmonious functioning of the global community.

In a proposal to make Christianity safe for the peace of the world, British theologian Tom Greggs examines the works of two of the most venerable names in twentieth century Protestant theology on this question of religion: Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His interpretation of these two theologians is primarily programmatic rather than historical in nature. It is guided by a desire to allow their work to inform theology today, a task that he rightly says is true to the method of both. The extent to which the contemporary context and constructive task are primary is clearly indicated in his introduction, where he points to the social realities of secularism, pluralism, idolatry, and fundamentalism as the determinative setting for his theological investigation into the nature of religion. Within this context, he seeks to hold on to Christianity’s particularity while at the same time deflating theological claims to define the realities of God and salvation in decisive and exclusionary ways.

The book is divided into three parts, the first of which is a survey of Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s respective critiques of the concept of religion. Though Greggs acknowledges that there are differences between Barth and Bonhoeffer, he nonetheless contends that attempts to sharply distinguish between them on the question of religion have been overemphasized. His treatment of Barth is, for the most part, adequate, focusing on the second half of the first volume of *Church Dogmatics*. He notes, correctly, that Barth regards religion as a strictly human phenomenon, the attempt to reach God on our own effort, apart from revelation, and also that Barth includes Christianity in this category of religion. From Barth’s Christological point of view, religion is unbelief, and yet there is a way to speak of true religion, namely as the graced response of humans to God’s sovereign action on humanity. Barth thus refers to the abolition (*Aufhebung*) of religion, such that Christianity—which, as a form of religious expression, is the contradiction of revelation—is enabled by God’s grace to function as a real subjective appropriation of revelation.

Greggs’ reading of Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, leaves a good bit to be desired, especially his conflation of Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion with that of Barth’s. He does admit that Bonhoeffer “seems to think” that, unlike Barth, it is possible to escape from religion, but he contends nonetheless that the younger theologian “does not realize how closely and how much in

step he and Barth are walking” (63). He justifies these claims by arguing first that Bonhoeffer is on a theological pilgrimage for which his prison correspondence is only the midpoint, the end of which he is able to determine. This then allows Greggs to argue that the implicit grammar informing Bonhoeffer’s statements about religionless Christianity are “optative,” that is, expressing a wish or desire that is not possible this side of the fall. There is little evidence in the text of *Letters and Papers from Prison*, however, that Bonhoeffer would agree with Gregg’s insistence that “[i]t is clearly not the case that one can speak of God in a fully religionless manner” (9). Every indication is that this is precisely what Bonhoeffer believes is possible.

Greggs tips his hand early on in the book with regard to what he takes the fundamental character of religion to be. He states that throughout Scripture “there is an ambivalent relationship expressed with regard to religion and religious observance” (4). This is indeed an odd assertion, given that nothing resembling the concept appears at all in the Old Testament, and anything remotely resembling it in the Greek New Testament is extremely rare. In his Latin New Testament, Jerome uses the term *religio* six times to translate several different Greek terms. The King James Bible uses the English derivative only five times, and then not always in the same ways that Jerome does.

Such considerations do not deter Greggs, as he goes on to state that pure religion is in fact a biblical category, but that it is defined in terms of moral conduct rather than “in terms of correct ritualistic engagement” such as the offering of sacrifice, as it presumably was for the surrounding peoples (see 4). He then concludes that it possible to discern within Scripture a development “to some degree...from a religious to a non-religious or anti-religious expression of God” (4). Religion, in other words, has principally to do with rituals and belief in a deity or deities (though he includes Buddhism within this category in spite of the fact that some forms do not refer to a god or gods). It is clear that Greggs presupposes rather than makes a case for the continued viability of “religion” as a normative concept, the meaning of which is stable enough to distinguish neatly between certain human phenomena (Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, etc.) and other types of activities and groups (trade union, political parties, and non-governmental organizations).

Greggs fails to take into account a variety of studies, beginning with Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s *The Meaning and End of Religion*, which have shown that “religion” as a concept denoting a distinct aspect of human life and behavior is an invention of the modern West. One looks in vain for anything like the modern concept of religion in the working vocabularies of virtually every ancient civilization—Israelite, Greek, Egyptian, Aztec, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese. To be sure, these societies engaged in a variety of activities that a world come of age routinely classifies under the category of religion, but they did not see activities associated with political institutions, family and tribal groupings, and civic obligations as “secular” in contrast with specifically “religious” rites and beliefs. These studies, carried out from a wide variety of disciplines, also demonstrate that characteristics that are supposedly unique to religion, such as the use of myth and ritual, are also found in other areas of modern human life, above all in politics and economies of unencumbered production and consumption. Commodity fetishism and nationalistic fervor are but two of the ways that idolatry survives in a world that prides itself on coming of age. (Of Gregg’s many theological concerns, this may be the one that troubles him the most.)

What the concept of religion concretely does is sequester any tradition, practice, or institution that threatens to disrupt the functioning of a liberal capitalist social order, above all with what Greggs himself labels “the totality of the state” (see 147-170). With these traditions safely ensconced in the separate sphere of religion, however, the state and the market are free to form women and men into “individuals” who are industrious, perform useful work, are reliable, and above all, who fit predictably into the new global reality. It has been the willingness of Christian communities over the centuries to align themselves with these other social realities—and not the theological practices and convictions held by them—that accounts for the propensity to engage in the kinds of idolatry and exclusion that fuel our human propensity for fear, enmity and violence.

One last comment is in order related to the concept of religion as it functions in this book. The modern invention of this concept has been shown to be a factor in the second wave of supersessionism that swept through Europe beginning in the eighteenth century, as Christianity and Judaism no longer referred to bodies of people but to sets of beliefs that were more (Christian) or less (Jewish) enlightened. This concept also plays a role in the current accusations leveled all too often against Islam as supposedly an inherently violent religion. Though those of us who are Christian can embrace with Greggs a desire to lessen the hold that the forces of exclusion, triumphalism and violence have over many Christian communities, it is neither clear that he has given us an accurate diagnosis of the problem nor prescribed the correct remedies.

The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning, Volume 14, Number 1 (June 2015)
© 2015 Society for Scriptural Reasoning
