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The Place of Theology in a World Come of Age:
A Comparative Analysis of the Writings of
Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Ramsey

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Masters of Arts in History

by
Dave Buckner
August 2008

Dr. Elwood Watson, Chair
Dr. Doug Burgess
Dr. Tom Lee

Keywords: Theology, Religion, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Ramsey

ABSTRACT

The Place of Theology in a World Come of Age:
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by
Dave Buckner

As the twentieth century dawned in the western world, there were voices both inside and out of the Christian Church that began to question religion's central place in man's daily life. Had humanity finally progressed to the point where religion was no longer necessary? Had we at long last developed the characteristics and perspectives that religion had attempted to engrain within us? Or were the rules and regulations of religion still needed to ensure the continued advancement of civilization? This is a study of two opposing voices in that debate: theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and ethicist Paul Ramsey. What follows is my attempt to examine, explain, and expound upon the philosophies of both men in an endeavor to more fully understand their perspectives and the implications each has for civilization and religion as we move now firmly into the twenty-first century and beyond.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would especially like to thank Dr. Elwood Watson, without whom this thesis would simply never have been possible. Sir, I am forever in your debt. I would also like to thank Dr. Doug Burgess for his patience and encouragement throughout this process. I have enjoyed our discussions immensely. I also wish to thank Dr. Tom Lee, whose insights into this project have helped me learn to trust my own. For that, sir, I am grateful. Finally, I want to thank my family, whose unwavering love and support has given me the belief and the opportunity to chase my dreams. I love you all.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the modernization of theology during the twentieth century as evidenced by the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Ramsey. I begin the essay with a brief examination of each man's life, including major theological and philosophical influences as well as a summary and description of major works. The heart of the essay, however, consists of a comparative analysis between Ramsey's and Bonhoeffer's theologies as witnessed in three primary areas of concern.

First, I examine the secularization, either real or imagined, of society in general during the twentieth century as envisioned by both men. For Bonhoeffer, the Church is simply "Christ existing as community," and therefore not subject to the restrictions placed upon it by any particular denomination. Thus, his concept of *Religionless Christianity* does not mean Christianity without God as it has so often been interpreted but rather Christianity without the divisions of sectarian theology. That being said, Bonhoeffer does not discount the significance of sociology in his theological studies but rather believes that a dialogue between the two would help the Christian community better understand its proper place in the world. Ramsey, on the other

hand, believes that it is this secularization that is responsible for the decline of moral thought and action in the twentieth century. He, instead, argues for a return to religious tradition and strict ethical constructs as a means of establishing governing rules and principles by which the Christian may live morally in an increasingly immoral world.

Second, I revisit the issue of “just war,” as both men dedicated sizable time and attention to the matter. Although Bonhoeffer began his scholarly career as something of an adherent to the tenets of pacifism, his exposure to the many atrocities committed in the Second World War quickly forced to him to change his position to one of “active resistance,” ultimately even leading him to participate (albeit passively) in an assassination attempt on Hitler. Ramsey, although also a proponent of “justifiable force” in the face of injustice, is quick to criticize Bonhoeffer for his use of situational ethics in his decision-making process (see below). Ramsey does spend a great amount of time discussing the limits of warfare in the Christian ethic as well as attempts to establish doctrines for the conducting of “just war” in the age of nuclear and insurgent warfare.

Finally, I examine the aforementioned use of situational ethics, of which Bonhoeffer availed himself and Ramsey staunchly criticized. It would be unfair to criticize Bonhoeffer for his failure to organize

formally many of his theological constructs into one overarching system, given his tragic and untimely demise at the hands of the Nazis. However, despite Ramsey's claim that Bonhoeffer is a strict "situationalist," upon closer inspection, the beginnings of a systematic theology can be ascertained. Unlike Bonhoeffer, who died at the age of thirty-nine, Paul Ramsey was afforded the gift of time in his intellectual studies (living to the age of 75). Although Ramsey himself has been criticized by subsequent scholars of the same "situationalism" of which he once accused Bonhoeffer, his ideas on ethical principles and justifiable warfare are considerably more developed than Bonhoeffer's. And, despite some changes in his thought as he matured, Ramsey established a preliminary set of moral guidelines for right Christian thought and action in the Modern Age. This fact notwithstanding, all of his theological writings, even his "just war" concepts, center on the theory of "selfless Christian love."

I conclude the essay with a brief analysis of what I have learned about the theologies of each man as a result of my studies and offer my own (humble) opinions about the direction of theology in the twenty-first century in the light of their contributions. My ultimate aim is to demonstrate that while Bonhoeffer and Ramsey tend to represent opposite ends of the theological spectrum, they in fact do have much

in common. By doing so, I hope to reveal that what is needed in theology today is not the strict adherence to any one particular religious doctrine, but rather a blended approach that combines the strengths of each while not being limited by the prejudices and shortsightedness of either.

CHAPTER 2

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

“It is the nature, and the advantage, of strong people that they can bring out the crucial questions and form a clear opinion about them. The weak always have to decide between alternatives that are not their own.”¹ These are the words of twentieth century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A witness to both World Wars, the rise and fall of Nazism, and the great schism of the German Christian Church under the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer spent the majority of his life attempting to understand the world in which he lived and struggling to find his place within it. Though his life ended tragically at the age of thirty-nine, his works have endured and have continued to exert a profound influence on the development of Christian theology and ecclesiastical history in the years since his death.

Unfortunately, the majority of public knowledge concerning Bonhoeffer’s theology has been limited to such fragmentary phrases as “Religionless Christianity” and “Costly Discipleship.” While these basic concepts are essential to understanding his overarching theological construct, many of these “catchwords” have been intentionally

¹ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Available from the Quoteworld website.
http://www.quoteworld.org/authors/dietrich_bonhoeffer Accessed 30 November, 2007.

misrepresented or simply misunderstood, taken completely out of the context and spirit in which they were written. As a result, they are wholly insufficient in describing Bonhoeffer's complex and sometimes seemingly paradoxical theological precepts in any meaningful way. Like St. Augustine, whose majority of theological writings were composed in direct response to the Visigoths' sack of Christian Rome in 410 A.D., so too were Bonhoeffer's writings influenced by and in reaction to the historical events of which he was a part. Therefore, before an intelligent discussion of Bonhoeffer's theology can begin, one must first attempt to understand the world in which he lived and the challenges he faced both as a man and as a Christian.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau, Germany, on February 4, 1906. His father, Karl, was a distinguished physician in the fields of psychiatry and neurology. His mother, Paula von Hase, was the daughter of a chaplain at the Emperor's court and the granddaughter of famous religious historian Karl von Hase.² When Bonhoeffer was six years old, his father was offered a professorship in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Berlin. Upon his acceptance of the University's offer, Karl Bonhoeffer relocated his family, including young Dietrich and his seven siblings, to the district of Grunewald in Berlin, a

² Rene Marle, *Bonhoeffer: The Man and his Work* (New York: Newman Press, 1967), 13.

community comprised primarily of faculty members from the University.³

These new surroundings provided young Dietrich with access to some of the country's finest academic minds, some of "the most distinguished exponents of German culture."⁴ During the remainder of his formative years, Bonhoeffer immersed himself in this new environment, attending musical evenings and participating in intellectual discussions with some of most respected professors from the University, including renowned ecclesiastical historian Adolf von Harnack, theologian Ernst Troeltsch, as well as Ferdinand Tonnies, and Max and Alfred Weber.⁵ By almost all accounts, his familial status made him an aristocrat by birth, but Dietrich's decision to avail himself of the many resources both culturally and intellectually afforded him to such an extent that many of his friends came to describe Bonhoeffer as "representative of an aristocracy of the mind, in the best sense of the word."⁶

³ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, Edwin Robertson, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), 10.

⁴ Marle, *Bonhoeffer: The Man and his Work*, 13.

⁵ Dallas M. Roark, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Available from the Religion Online website. <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2737&C=2484> Accessed 19 March, 2007.

⁶ Marle, *Bonhoeffer: The Man and His Work*, 14.

By the time he had reached adolescence, it was apparent to both family and friends that Dietrich would pursue a career in academic study, though an exact field was yet to be determined. When he was sixteen, Bonhoeffer decided that he wished to become a minister, a decision that made little impact upon his parents and drew criticism from several of his siblings.⁷ Undeterred, he enrolled in Tubingen University to begin his studies in theology. It was while at Tubingen that young Dietrich was introduced formally to the study of modern philosophy.⁸ Though Tubingen provided Bonhoeffer with the foundation of his formal education, he remained for only two semesters of study. In 1924, he returned to Berlin and enrolled in the University to study under such men as Harnack, Deissmann, and H. Lietzmann.⁹ Although it was Harnack who first recognized his potential for greatness in the field of ecclesiastical history, Dietrich was more drawn to systematic theology and chose instead to study under K. Holl and R. Seesburg, two of the University's leading professors in the newly revived field of Lutheran studies.¹⁰ It was Seesburg with whom

⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 22.

⁸ Marle, *Bonhoeffer: The Man and His Work*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Bonhoeffer most closely identified and under whose tutelage he pursued his "licentiate of theology, a degree comparable to the doctor of theology."¹¹ It was also during this time that Bonhoeffer became familiar with the published works of Karl Barth, a Christian theologian whose ideology closely resembled his own, though not without some variations, of course. In 1927, upon the completion and defense of his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, Dietrich left the University in order to take a position as curate in a German parish in Barcelona, Spain.¹² After holding the position for little more than a year, Dietrich returned to Berlin to begin work on his inaugural dissertation, a prerequisite to obtaining a full professorship at the University.

In 1930, after having successfully defended his thesis, *Act and Being: Transcendental philosophy and ontology in systematic theology*, Bonhoeffer was offered a full-time position in the department of theology. However, before he began his work, Bonhoeffer decided upon continuing his education once more, this time in America at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City.¹³ Although the

¹¹ Roark, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.

¹² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 57-58.

¹³ Roark, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.

educational training afforded him while in New York was by no means inconsequential to his continuing development, overall, Bonhoeffer was rather unimpressed with American theological trends and chose instead to focus his attention and energy in other areas. It was his experiences outside the classroom that were to have the most lasting impact on his character and subsequent theological works. During his stay in America, Bonhoeffer immersed himself in a society, indeed an entire culture vastly different from his own. Although intrigued by many different facets of American society, Dietrich found himself especially drawn to the issues of religion and race, which is not at all surprising considering his educational background as well as the current tumultuous social climate in his native Germany.¹⁴

Upon his return to Europe, Bonhoeffer traveled to Bonn to meet his mentor in absentia, Karl Barth. He would later comment that his only regret for the trip was that it had not been sooner.¹⁵ This initial encounter provided the foundation on which the two men would build a steadfast friendship in the years to come. Although Bonhoeffer's theology owed much to Barth, it would be incorrect to categorize his theological premises as strictly Barthian. Unlike so many of Barth's

¹⁴ Marle, *Bonhoeffer: The Man and his Work*, 21.

¹⁵ Roark, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.

students and admirers, Bonhoeffer had never been afraid to question his teachers or to criticize their ideologies when he deemed them unqualified or lacking in some regard.¹⁶ Though the two men disagreed on numerous occasions, their ability to maintain an open-minded and unpretentious dialogue only served to strengthen their friendship and admiration for one another. In fact, in the years to come when Bonhoeffer would face his greatest challenges, it was his friendship with Barth that would bring stability and clarity of thought to his life in an otherwise chaotic time.

After his initial visit with Barth, Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin in 1931 to begin his lecturing tenure at the University. During the ensuing year, Dietrich spent the majority of his free time tutoring a group of adolescents in nearby Wedding, a working-class neighborhood not far from his own.¹⁷ This experience provided him with his first real exposure to the trials and tribulations of the German lower class. His observance of their living conditions both appalled him and inspired him to make a difference. Although his predecessors had proven uncomfortable and ultimately unsuccessful in this situation, under Bonhoeffer, the children flourished both academically and

¹⁶ E. H. Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), 4.

¹⁷ Marle, *Bonhoeffer: The Man and his Work*, 21.

socially. In addition to tutoring them in their studies, Dietrich organized and participated in numerous social and recreational events, even taking the majority of his meals with his students, followed by evening Bible study. Over time, this interaction not only began to foster a strong sense of community amongst his students but also to influence his own views on catechism and the true nature and purpose of the Christian Church, which was to occupy the majority of his thought for the remainder of his life.

Although his experiences in Wedding proved very influential to Bonhoeffer's still-developing ideology, perhaps an even greater factor in his intellectual and theological development presented itself in the political and social dilemmas facing Germany in the early 1930s. When Bonhoeffer had left Germany for America, the National Socialist (or Nazi) Party had been an insignificant player in German politics, but upon his return less than a year later, it had emerged as the single largest party in the country.¹⁸ The reason for the party's meteoric rise from relative obscurity to the pinnacle of the German political system was directly related to the economic depression that was currently ravaging Europe and most of the rest of the world in the early 1930s. As unemployment rates in Germany continued to increase, public

¹⁸ Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 6.

morale and support for the current national government began to wane. The opportunistic Nazi Party took full advantage of the situation, promising governmental and social reforms and the subsequent recovery of the German economy should the populace vote them into a position of authority. Viewed by many Germans as stronger and more capable than their Bolshevik opposition, the Nazis won election easily in 1932 and began to implement their reforms.¹⁹ The Nazi Party desperately sought the approval and support of the German Church in its quest to restore the nation to its former greatness. Whether enticed by its rhetoric or simply afraid of Bolshevik rule, many German clergymen pledged their support to the Nazi Party. However, Bonhoeffer and several other prominent churchmen viewed Hitler's proposed reforms as a "definite interference with the church and a molding of its theology."²⁰ As a result, they refused to support the Nazi Party and forced a schism in the German Church. Those who remained loyal to the Nazi Party became known as the German Christians, while Bonhoeffer and those who supported the church's need for dogmatic and theological independence from the political

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

process became members of what was to be known as the Confessing Church.²¹

Bonhoeffer quickly made his criticisms of the German Christians known, even before Adolf Hitler had been officially appointed High Chancellor of Germany. Finding fault with Hitler's attempt to install a national bishop to lead the church as well as with his now infamous "Aryan clauses" that promoted an ethnic cleansing of both Church and State, Bonhoeffer led the resistance to the Nazis and their German Christian supporters.²² Although his initial radio broadcast was shutdown mid-speech, Bonhoeffer continued to organize resistance against the German Christians, all the while attempting to garner support for the Confessing Church within the worldwide ecumenical movement. To that end, he took a temporary leave of absence from his duties at the University in order to accept a ministerial position for two German-speaking congregations in London.²³ Since his first verbal assault against Hitler and the Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer had been closely monitored and his communications habitually censored. Although his friend and mentor Karl Barth strongly and publicly

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 173-174.

²³ Marle, *Bonhoeffer: The Man and his Work*, 22-25.

objected to Bonhoeffer's decision to leave Germany when his presence was needed most, Bonhoeffer felt that he could achieve far more for the Confessing Church outside of Germany, where he still had the freedom to speak his mind and associate with whomever he chose.²⁴

Taking full advantage of this lack of restrictions, Bonhoeffer met with various members of the ecumenical movement, including the Bishop of Chichester, George Bell, and even attended the World Alliance of Churches meeting held in Fano, Denmark. When the conference was first convened, Germany was represented only by the German Christian sect, but through his many friendships in the ecumenical movement, Bonhoeffer was able to convince the Alliance to withdraw its support from the German Christians and instead align themselves with the Confessing Church. Despite all his accomplishments while traveling abroad, Bonhoeffer heeded the call of the Confessing Church for him to return to Germany to oversee the operations of the church's now illegal seminary for the training of new clerics. With Bonhoeffer at the helm, this new seminary in Finkenwalde quickly became the unofficial headquarters of the Confessing Church until the Nazis closed its doors in late 1937.²⁵ Though always a

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 8.

proponent of the ecumenical movement, Bonhoeffer had never been able to satisfy himself with their utter lack of theology. In an effort to remedy this shortcoming, Bonhoeffer used his position within the school to begin formulating a new theological foundation from which to launch his assault upon the German Christian Church. Arguing against such concepts as "cheap grace," Bonhoeffer instead petitioned his parish to practice "costly discipleship for Jesus Christ."²⁶ Although he did not believe that God called all of his disciples to martyrdom, Bonhoeffer did believe it was the duty of every Christian to follow Christ's divine example. "We are not Christs, but if we want to be Christians, we must show something of Christ's breadth of sympathy by acting responsibly, by grasping our 'hour,' by facing danger like free men, by displaying a real sympathy which springs not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer."²⁷

After the close of the Finkenwalde seminary in 1937, life became increasingly difficult for Bonhoeffer as more and more of his personal liberties were slowly being pierced by the Gestapo's ever-watchful

²⁶ Roark, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.

²⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1953), 30.

gaze. Persuaded by his friends' fears that to remain in Germany would cost him his life and rob the movement of one of its greatest voices, Bonhoeffer traveled to America briefly in 1939.²⁸ Although he had acquiesced to his friends' wishes, upon arriving in the New World, he knew immediately that his departure had been a mistake, and sought to return to Germany straight away. Despite knowing this decision could bring to bear terrible consequences for Bonhoeffer, he argued that were he to abandon his parishioners in their struggle against the Nazis, he would be entitled no say in their path to redemption. Upon his return, Bonhoeffer allied himself fully with the political resistance to Hitler and the Nazi Party.²⁹ No longer believing that his theological battles could remain separate from the political war now raging, Bonhoeffer adopted new tactics with which to fight. Since he was no longer permitted to lecture or publish anywhere within the growing German sphere of influence, he began an underground relationship with a group of officers within the German Military Intelligence Service who opposed Hitler and were making preparations for an assassination attempt. Disregarding his abhorrence for violence in all its forms, Bonhoeffer, no longer able to see any alternative, cast his lot with the

²⁸ Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 8-9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

dissenters. He would later justify his actions thusly: "It is not only my task to look after the victims of madmen who drive a motor-car in a crowded street, but to do all in my power to stop their driving at all."³⁰

As word of the secret plot to assassinate the High Chancellor reached the Gestapo, immediate retributive action was taken. All those known to have been involved in the plot, including Bonhoeffer, were arrested in April of 1943. Bonhoeffer spent the next eighteen months of his life in a German prison, unsure of his ultimate fate. In spite of this uncertainty, he occupied himself as best he could with correspondence to family and friends and with *Ethics*, an attempted justification of his recent actions in the attempted coup.³¹ With the aid of guards sympathetic to his cause, he maintained close contact with members of the resistance during his imprisonment. It was through these contacts that he learned of the second failed attempt on the Fuhrer's life that would ultimately result in his own execution. The High Chancellor, now determined not to allow his enemies a third opportunity at assassination, began a "Nero-like purge," of all those

³⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller, rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960), 22.

³¹ Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 11-12.

known to oppose him.³² Bonhoeffer was among the many who lost their lives as a result of Hitler's vengeance. After leading his fellow prisoners in one final service, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was led to the gallows of the Nazi prison camp in Flossenburg where he was executed on 8 April, 1945. He was thirty-nine years old.³³

Though Bonhoeffer's death proved unnecessary, his life had been anything but. His work in the fields of systematic theology and dogmatic principles has influenced the development of western theology and the world ecumenical movement in such dramatic fashion that neither would be recognizable in their present forms without his contributions. Now that the historical framework has been established, providing the context of his life and action, a more in-depth analysis of his theology can begin. Only after careful examination of Bonhoeffer's central theological constructs can his views on history, as well as his historical significance, be completely ascertained.

Bonhoeffer's first notable contributions to the field of Christian theology were presented in his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* (The Community of Saints). Largely written as a criticism of

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

the current theological tendency to classify the Church in purely sociological terms, *Sanctorum Communio* examines “whether and how the empirical Church and the Church in its true nature, from the logical, sociological and theological point of view be brought together in a single concept.”³⁴ For Bonhoeffer, the Church is simply “Christ existing as community,” and therefore not subject to the restrictions placed upon it by any particular denomination.³⁵ Thus, his concept of *Religionless Christianity* does not mean Christianity without God as it has so often been interpreted, but rather Christianity without the divisions of sectarian theology. That being said, Bonhoeffer does not discount the significance of sociology in his theological studies but rather believes that a dialogue between the two would help the Christian community better understand its proper place in the world. Because Christ is present in the Church and the Christ is a part of the world, Bonhoeffer logically concluded that Church must also be present in the world.³⁶ Rather than isolate itself from the evils of the outside world, the Church, like Christ, must brave the uncertainties of this world in order to bring divine salvation to the masses. Only then can

³⁴ Marle, *Bonhoeffer: The Man and his Work*, 42.

³⁵ Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 13.

³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, ed. and trans. by Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965), 97-99.

the Church ever realize its true nature and reason for existence. "The unity of the Church is both in its origin and in its goal; in fulfillment as much as in promise. Where the unity of the Church is forgotten as its origin, human organizations for union take the place of unity in Jesus Christ."³⁷ It was in response to just such an occurrence that Bonhoeffer began to develop his next theological concept: *Jesus Christ as the man for others*.³⁸

The schism of the German Christian Church in reaction to the rise of Nazism caused Bonhoeffer to become disillusioned with the Church's inability to discern its true nature and purpose in the world. Bonhoeffer began to adapt his theology to deal with the problems now facing the Christian community. Using scripture in the formulation of his new theological construct, Bonhoeffer argued that "All created things are through Christ and exist only in Christ (Col. 1:16). This means that there is nothing, neither person nor things, which stand outside the relation to Christ."³⁹ Therefore, Bonhoeffer's construct of

³⁷ Ibid., 99.

³⁸ Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Translated by Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 92-95.

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 262, as presented in Jurgen Moltmann and Jurgen Weissbach's *Two Studies in the Theology of Bonhoeffer* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 113.

Jesus Christ as the man for others was his attempt to demonstrate God's omnipresence in the physical world. Bonhoeffer argued that even if the Church had forgotten its true nature and replaced Christ with human organizations, its redemption through Christ was still possible.⁴⁰ Just as Jesus had been a light unto the world, so too, must his disciples. "That light is not simply something the community must hold aloft by its words. We must *be* the light, and if we cannot be seen to be it, then we are betraying our call."⁴¹ The duty of every Christian should be to help bring about the reformation of the Church and its reunification with Christ by following his divine example. For Bonhoeffer, this was accomplished with the restructuring of the Church's theology. One of his subsequent works, *No Rusty Swords*, deals primarily with how this objective might be achieved.

As Bonhoeffer's theologies continued to develop, an all-encompassing theory of history began to emerge. This theory is most clearly referenced in his theological construct of *The World Come of Age*. It is this concept that best defines Bonhoeffer's theology in terms of historical relevance. In short, Bonhoeffer's theory of history is Christocentric. And since for Bonhoeffer the Church was "Christ

⁴⁰ Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 59-61.

⁴¹ Marle, *Bonhoeffer: The Man and his Work*, 82.

existing as community," it is the Church that exists at the center of history.⁴² Like Augustine before him, Bonhoeffer considered the "Christ event" to be the single most important event in human history.

"Having described the Fall as the breaking of the link between God and man, he shows that this leads to *the tearing of the fabric of humanity*.

The saving act of Christ is then seen, not only as the reconciling of man to God, but also as the restoring of the torn fabric of humanity."⁴³

However, unlike Augustine, Bonhoeffer does not believe that the ultimate salvation of humankind is contingent upon the second coming of Christ. Rather, he argues that since the Church is already "Christ existing as community," it is through the Church that the man's salvation will ultimately be attained.

In keeping with this line of thought, *The World Come of Age* is Bonhoeffer's method of describing the maturation of the Church in the time since the Christ event. For Bonhoeffer, the Middle Ages represent the Church's adolescence: a time when the Church "sought to subject the natural realm to the realm of grace."⁴⁴ He argued that to ignore the natural world in favor of the divine was to deny the prevalence of

⁴² Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁴ Moltmann and Weissbach, *Two Studies in the Theology of Bonhoeffer*, 117.

Christ in all things. "The world is not divided between Christ and the devil, but whether it recognizes it or not, it is solely and entirely the world of Christ."⁴⁵ In following this chronology, it was the Renaissance and Reformation that allowed the Church to progress from adolescence into early adulthood. Since, for Bonhoeffer, this move away from the Church as the sole source of knowledge and elucidation resulted in the secularization of the world, *Religionless Christianity* was merely his argument that "in the modern secular age the mission of the church must assume a secular style."⁴⁶ Rather than viewing this secularization as the downfall of the Church, Bonhoeffer views it as its ultimate salvation. When Man can envision God as present in all things and no longer confined only to certain aspects of life and of the physical world, only then can true unity between Man and God be realized and the promise of Christ fulfilled.⁴⁷

Although Bonhoeffer's untimely demise at the hands of the Nazis did not afford him the opportunity to finalize his theology and historical

⁴⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 70, available in Moltmann and Weissbach's *Two Studies*, 117.

⁴⁶ Paulose Mar Paulose, *Encounter in Humanization: Insights for Christian-Marxist Dialogue and Cooperation*, available from the Religion online website <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1572&C=1515> Accessed 19 March, 2007.

⁴⁷ Peter Vorkink, II, *Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 54-58.

theory, his influence on ecclesiastical scholarship is undeniable. Faced with the challenge of finding God in the secularized world of the twentieth century, Bonhoeffer found strength in the Church. When he believed that the Church had forgotten its true nature and purpose, he sought to reform it. When the Church was not ready to be reformed, he tried to change the world. And like many others who have undertaken such an incredible task, Bonhoeffer did not live to see the full fruition of his life's work, but that does not mean that he died a failure. Although an unintended martyr, he was able to draw strength from his beliefs and discern purpose from his hardships. "It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human command than to accept suffering as free, responsible men. It is infinitely easier to suffer with others than to suffer alone. It is infinitely easier to suffer as public heroes than to suffer apart and in ignominy. It is infinitely easier to suffer physical death than to endure spiritual suffering. Christ suffered as a free man alone, apart and in ignominy, in body and in spirit, and since that day many Christians have suffered with him."⁴⁸ Throughout his life, Bonhoeffer had advocated "costly discipleship for Christ." In the end, it was he who was to define this concept in the most inimitable fashion. A true proponent and follower of his own theology,

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 31.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer died as he had lived, leaving behind an undeniable legacy and cementing his place in history as one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 3

PAUL RAMSEY: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

“No matter how much heritage there is in it, Christian ethics has to do with the present and not with history that is past. This calls for a constructive elaboration of the way the data of morality and contemporary moral demands may be comprehended in the light of Christian faith.”⁴⁹ These are the words of Christian ethicist Paul Ramsey. Undoubtedly one of the most brilliant, analytical, and controversial minds of the twentieth century, Ramsey dedicated himself tirelessly to the formation of a Christian code of ethics that was socially, politically, and culturally relevant enough to sustain itself in the modern age. Examining a variety of issues including just war theory, racial equality, abortion, euthanasia, and genetic manipulation, Ramsey attempted to apply the “timeless” values of Christian love and selflessness to as many modern-day issues of morality and justice as his time and energy would allow. Although critics argue that his attempts at formulating a set of “exceptionless principles” never came to fruition, Ramsey’s unsuccessful endeavors nevertheless demonstrate not only his analytical brilliance but also his cultural significance. Fellow Christian ethicist James Gustafson once observed,

⁴⁹ Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), xiv.

“Paul Ramsey has been a towering and forceful figure for almost four decades; his writing has forced persons with alternative views to come to grips with his thought, and had a deep impact on a younger generation of authors.”⁵⁰ By the time of his death in February, 1988, Paul Ramsey had authored more than a dozen books and countless articles and treatises and established himself as one of the most influential Christian theologians of the twentieth century. Although this essay will focus primarily upon such major works as *Basic Christian Ethics* and *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*, an attempt will be made to sufficiently outline the ongoing intellectual and theological development of Paul Ramsey throughout his career in the hope of providing a more complete and representative analysis.

Paul Ramsey was born on December 10, 1913, in Mendenhall, Mississippi. His parents, the Reverend John Ramsey and Mamie McCay Ramsey, belonged to the Methodist denomination and raised young Paul in accordance with its tenets. Little academic attention has been given to Ramsey’s life prior to the beginning of his teaching tenure at Princeton University in 1944, save the mention of his marriage to Effie Register on June 23, 1937, and a brief discussion of his earliest works,

⁵⁰ James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* II, 84, as quoted in Laurens Wouter Bilkes’ *Theological Ethics and Holy Scripture* (Alberta, Canada: Inheritance Publications, 1997), 71.

including a message given in 1935 as student body president of Millsaps College, as well as an address to the Yale Philosophy Club circa 1940.⁵¹ The last two are of primary concern for academics in that they indicate a pacifist ideology, a position that Ramsey would spend the majority of his professional career attempting to refute. Criticized by many, including later himself, as symptomatic of the naivety and idealism of youth, Ramsey's 1935 address ended thusly: "to love peace enough to be willing to die for its preservation against the forces which tend to create war is Jesus' method of projecting his ideal into reality. Have we the courage to follow Jesus completely? Upon the answer we give to this hangs the destiny of our civilization."⁵² Written in the aftermath of World War I and in the ominous shadow of World War II, Ramsey's plea for pacifism was infused "with the idealism that characterized the Christian Church in America during the first part of the twentieth century."⁵³ Although the idealism of his youth would ultimately be replaced by the realism of his experience, Ramsey

⁵¹ Lauren Wouter Bilkes, *Theological Ethics and Holy Scripture*, 71.

⁵² Paul Ramsey, "Christianity and War," 1935a, 203, as quoted in David Atwood's *Paul Ramsey's Political Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992), 12.

⁵³ D. Stephen Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism: The Ethics of Paul Ramsey* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993), 6.

always struggled with “a pacifist conscience.”⁵⁴ His 1940 essay “The Use of Destructive Force is Never Justifiable,” although written after the commencement of hostilities in the Second World War, nonetheless demonstrates his continued attraction to pacifist ideology. However, the transparent naivety of Ramsey’s youth was slowly being tempered by the harsh realities of war and the influence of theologians H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr who mentored Ramsey while he was at Yale University.⁵⁵

It was also during his time at Yale, where he earned his Bachelor of Divinity Degree in 1940 and his Ph.D. in 1943, that Ramsey began to develop formally the structural outline of his first major work, *Basic Christian Ethics*. Influenced largely by the relativism of [H. Richard] Niebuhr and the waning pacifist tendencies of his own youth, both of which he would later refute, Ramsey’s early theological writings still demonstrate his newly-burgeoning commitment to the formation of a system of rules, or principles, from which the whole of Christian ethics could and should be derived. Like Niebuhr, who relied upon an essential theological and philosophical principle that he deemed “beyond ethics,” Ramsey’s basic approach to ethics was grounded in a

⁵⁴ David Atwood, *Paul Ramsey’s Political Ethics*, 12.

⁵⁵ D. Stephen Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism*, 12.

belief in two fundamental truths that he considered completely inarguable. The first principle is as follows: "God is good and all the beings whom he has created are good." The second principle is subordinate and entirely dependent upon the first: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor whom God has created and given thee."⁵⁶ While neither of these initial truths could be considered revolutionary in either content or connotation, they, in fact, provided the basic structure for one of the most innovative and thoroughly modern theologies of the twentieth century. And while these principles evolved with the passage of time, Ramsey's defense of them, in both theory and practice, remained largely unchanged.

Ramsey's professional career began in 1937 when, while still completing his Bachelor of Divinity Degree at Yale, he served as an instructor in the Social and Political Science Departments at Millsaps College. After completing his degree, Ramsey left his alma mater for Garrett Theological Seminary where he served as an associate professor of Christian ethics for two years. But it was not until the completion of his Ph.D. in 1943 and his subsequent appointment to the faculty of Princeton University that Paul Ramsey's theological career

⁵⁶ Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, as quoted in Stephen Long's *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism*, 12 .

really began to take the form that historians and theologians now associate with him.

Throughout the 1940s, Ramsey wrote a series of essays concerning the form and function of Christian ethics in the twentieth century. These would ultimately form the essence of his 1950 treatise, *Basic Christian Ethics*. Although the construction for his arguments had remained relatively intact since his address to the Yale Philosophy Club some ten years earlier, the essence of those arguments had changed. "In the 'Destructive Force' essay it is God's goodness and creation's goodness, whereas in *Basic Christian Ethics* it is God's covenant. From this first principle duties are derived which are then defensible."⁵⁷ Like the relativism of Niebuhr, Ramsey's argument, while guised in reason and logic, nonetheless remains "fundamentally non-rational," because at its base is a position that the author insists is beyond contestation.⁵⁸ And although *Basic Christian Ethics* has since been criticized by theologians as situationalist in nature, it nonetheless chronicles Ramsey's first attempt at creating a system of rules, or principles, by which the modern Christian should strive to live, and

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 13.

therefore, is still worthy of careful attention if one is to understand the complexities and contradictions of his later thought.

Attempting to build on his theory of the primary and derivative nature of principles in the study of Christian ethics, Ramsey opens his first major treatise with an interesting correlation: "It is impossible for every word in a dictionary to have derivative meaning; some words fundamental to all the rest must be given meaning "primitively" by *pointing*...'Christian love' is a similar fundamental notion in the theory of Christian ethics."⁵⁹ Once this idea has been founded, Ramsey then proceeds to outline the two primary sources of "Christian love" in order to establish the notion of "covenant" as the centrifugal consequence of that love and, consequently, as the primary theme for his work. "For a proper study of the origin and nature of Christian ethics, a distinction may be made between (1) God's righteousness and love and (2) the reign of this righteousness in the Kingdom of God. These are the two sources of 'Christian love.' Never imagine you have rightly grasped a biblical ethical idea until you have succeeded in reducing it to a simple corollary of one or the other of these notions, or of the idea of covenant between God and man from which they both stem."⁶⁰ And

⁵⁹ Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, xvi.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

since Ramsey's theory of ethics is primarily founded upon the New Testament, the covenant between God and man is necessarily personified in Jesus Christ.

This is not to say that Ramsey's theory of ethics is entirely metaphysical in nature, but simply that it presupposes faith as a necessary condition for understanding it. In fact, Ramsey proceeds to rebuke those secular theorists and philosophers who argue that religion only brings mysticism to the study of ethics. "Whoever imagines that religion adds to ethics only the threat of supernaturally administered punishment has simply never read the Bible."⁶¹ He then proceeds to support this claim by drawing a distinction between the biblical definition of justice, as embodied in the personage of Jesus Christ, and the more limited interpretations of that term in modern society. Only by examining Christ's understanding and "redemptive" use of justice in the biblical context can one ever discover its meaning and implication for his own time and situation. "Jesus Christ must be kept at the center of all Christian thinking about justice – and precisely that sort of justice which should prevail in the 'world of systems,' in this world and not some other."⁶² Because, for Ramsey, Christ best

⁶¹ Ibid., 13.

⁶² Ibid., 17.

embodies these biblical notions of "love" and "justice" and completes this covenant between God and man, it is he who must serve as a model for Christians in every age and in every circumstance. And since Christ's conceptions of "love" and "justice" are unabashedly selfless in nature, so too must be those of his followers. In other words, "Christian love is: to be a Christ to our neighbors."⁶³ Only by placing the needs of one's neighbor above his own, can a Christian ever begin to understand the true meaning of "Christian love" and the full implication of his individual and communal covenant with God. For Ramsey, Christian ethics must necessarily be reduced to this basic concept. All else is secondary and derivative in nature.

Following his discussion of biblical "justice" and "disinterested [i.e. selfless] neighbor love," Ramsey continues on to discuss the ramifications of attempting to carry out these basic principles in the modern world. As Ramsey explains, the world of Jesus Christ and his followers had been completely apocalyptic in nature, and therefore unconcerned with the questions that an ethic of "selfless love" and "righteous justice" failed to answer. "Jesus himself did not think that the gospel of love would be sufficient by itself to resolve the totality of evil in many life-situations, or to defeat the demonic power of evil

⁶³ Ibid., 21.

encompassing even those purely personal relationships which in themselves are often amenable to love's persuasion."⁶⁴ Instead, Ramsey argued that because Jesus Christ and his followers had been so convinced of their own proximity to the end of days, it was useless to worry about such earthly concerns as retribution or vengeance because these issues would be addressed by God himself. It is here where Ramsey's split with Christian theological and ethical tradition, as well as his formal parting from pacifist ideology, can first be witnessed because it is precisely at this juncture when Ramsey states the problem with this ideology is that "there is always more than one neighbor and indeed a whole cluster of claims and responsibilities to be considered."⁶⁵ As theology professor Stephen Long notes, "In *Basic Christian Ethics* pacifism is a superior value that can no longer be normative because of the relatively more important need for lower values such as order in service to the neighbor."⁶⁶ In other words, in the non-apocalyptic world of modern society, pragmatism and concern for both worldly and divine justice must become a part of Christian ethics. While this, in and of itself, is still hardly radical, this "idealistic

⁶⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁶ Stephen Long, *Tragedy, Tradition, Transformism*, 17.

realism” nevertheless opened the door to Ramsey’s subsequent, and indeed revolutionary, discussions over the ensuing decades concerning the law and medicine, as well as social and political theory.

With his assertion that “Jesus Christ ‘finishes’ any ethic of conventional respectability, any customary code of conduct into which at least every man is born, any more or less philosophic definition of good and evil in which ‘at least everyone claimeth to be an authority,’” Ramsey firmly begins to establish his own particular brand of Christian ethics.⁶⁷ This claim further demonstrates his own contempt for and break from the traditional Christian and “natural law” codes of morality and justice, in favor of this selfless concern with the needs of one’s neighbor, regardless of the rules and regulations of law. In the words of St. Paul, “Love and do as you *then* please.”⁶⁸ And while this may seem an unusual starting point for the development of a system of basic “exceptionless principles” by which the modern Christian should strive to live, for Ramsey no contradiction or sense of duplicity existed. Rather, Ramsey concluded that Jesus “was not discriminating between the importance or unimportance of laws so much as between their

⁶⁷ Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 54.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

fundamental or derivative nature.”⁶⁹ As such, Ramsey then logically supposed that by basing his own system of ethical principles around the ideas of “Christian love” and “biblical justice,” he could deduce and then construct a viable code of conduct, able to withstand any situation, no matter how modern or complex. Interestingly enough, it was also this supposition that caused many of his critics to label Ramsey as a situationalist, including later even himself, but he would respond to these critics in his next major work on the subject: *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*. In any case, Ramsey spends the remainder of *Basic Christian Ethics* laying the groundwork for *Deeds and Rules* by outlining the various kinds of Christian love, the duties that each implies, the theological evolution of each over time, as well as the basic structure for his ethic of Christian resistance which he would more fully develop in the years ahead.

First published in 1967, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* comprises Ramsey’s second attempt at establishing a set of “exceptionless principles” by which the modern Christian should live. Written largely as a response to those who had labeled his *Basic Christian Ethics* as situationalist in nature, *Deeds and Rules* seeks to clarify and expound upon his theological and ethical positions of some

⁶⁹ Ibid., 64.

seventeen years earlier in the hope of better illuminating the heart of his argument. Composed in the finest philosophical tradition, Ramsey presents the case of each of his opponents and then methodically proceeds to refute them. Ramsey opens his work by responding to the 1963 essay *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*, which dealt primarily with the Church's position about when sexual intercourse between consenting adults could be viewed as right in the eyes of God. While the Quaker essay argues that the answer to this question relies entirely on the love shared between those persons involved and "that love cannot be confined to a pattern. The waywardness of love is part of its nature and this is both its glory and its tragedy. If love did not tend to leap every barrier, if it could be tamed, it would not be the tremendous creative power we know it to be and want it to be."⁷⁰ However, Ramsey counters, "How can Christians nourish the seeds of a wider social responsibility while seeming to praise only acts and never rules that embody personal responsibility between two parties to sexual relations?...No social morality ever was founded, or ever will be founded, upon a situational ethic."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Friends Home Service Committee, Friends House, Euston Road, London, 1963: Friends Book Store, 302 Arch St., Philadelphia, Penn., as quoted in Paul Ramsey's *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 16.

⁷¹ Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 20.

In the following chapter, Ramsey challenges the situationalist ethic of Bishop John A. T. Robinson, author of *Honest to God*. At first glance, Robinson's ethic seems to be largely in step with that of Ramsey's from his earlier work. "We are to be men for others as Jesus Christ was 'the man for others.' This means having absolutely no absolutes but his love, being totally uncommitted in every other respect but totally committed in this."⁷² Ramsey could only logically agree with this statement, given the primacy he had given the principle of "Christian love" in *Basic Christian Ethics*. However, Robinson believes this to be representative of situationalism in that love is and always must be the sole guiding force in the Christian's decision-making process. Ramsey, however posits that, "Robinson's voice is the voice of pure act-agapism, but his hands are the hands of rule-agapism."⁷³ He then goes on to say that "the work of Christian ethics in clarifying the categories – truth-telling, promise-keeping, theft, lying, murder – is not ordinarily a matter of love allowing an exception to a fixed definition of these terms but a matter of love illuminating the meaning of them."⁷⁴ In essence, Ramsey is not

⁷² J.A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: 1963), as quoted in Paul Ramsey's *Rules and Deeds*, 23.

⁷³ Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 22.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

refuting Robinson's argument so much as relabeling it. Both men agree that love must be at the center of all Christian morality and ethical responsibility, but while Robinson argues that this means all else is of little concern for the Christian moralist, Ramsey asserts that, by using love as the lens by which to view these other concepts, a greater understanding of these subordinate rules may be ascertained, and in the process a basic Christian ethic formed.

In the next chapters, Ramsey addresses Dr. Paul Lehmann's *Ethics in a Christian Context* and Professor William Frankena's "Love and Principle in Christian Ethics." He summarizes Lehmann's book thusly: "It is a book on the doctrine of the Church, on the methodology of Christian ethics, on messianism or christology, on justification, on divine and human freedom, on what God is doing in the world making for maturity and the new humanity."⁷⁵ And although Ramsey seems to applaud Lehmann for his attempt at understanding the contextual background of Christian ethics, he seems unimpressed with many of Lehmann's conclusions. For example, when Lehmann posits that "this is why it makes all the difference in the world...in what context your

⁷⁵ Ibid., 73.

ethical insights and practices are nourished,"⁷⁶ Ramsey counters, "still the soil is not the same as the tree, nor are its roots the branches; nor even the composition of the nourishment the same as the fruit expected."⁷⁷ In other words, while knowing the context of each individual situation is undoubtedly important, failing to understand the consistencies from circumstance to circumstance is, in effect, to remain always ignorant of the commonalities of human experience.

Because of what Ramsey deems the insufficiencies of Lehmann's thought, he next turns his attention to the work of William Frankena in a chapter he entitles, "An Unfinished Agenda." Frankena's work, to which Ramsey acknowledges his own indebtedness, is primarily concerned with the classification of the types of rules and principles that may be found in Christian ethics as well as the different forms of agapism that may be used in determining these classifications. Frankena's characterizations of "Christian love" into the categories of pure agapism, mixed agapism, and non-agapism seems, to Ramsey, a most logical place to begin in the formalizing of a structure of basic Christian ethics. And while Ramsey supports many of Frankena's ideas

⁷⁶ Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York and Evanston: 1963), as quoted from Paul Ramsey's *Deeds and Rules*, 51.

⁷⁷ Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules*, 51.

concerning these classifications, he is not convinced that the Christian must effectively choose one of these forms to the exclusion of the others. "The question to be debated is rather whether the 'orders' are to be understood only Christologically (pure-agapism) or *also* in some degree by natural reason (mixed-agapism). The latter possibility would seem to be entailed in the conviction that when Christ came He came to 'His own.'" ⁷⁸

Ramsey's next chapter, "Two Concepts of General Rules in Christian Ethics," remains his only real attempt throughout *Deeds and Rules* to formalize the structure of his "exceptionless principles" into any sort of working order. In it, he argues, "the reason for rules is that we know not every Christian – nor any of us all the time – is able to apply the law of love effortlessly and flawlessly." ⁷⁹ Continuing his thoughts on Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God*, Ramsey states, "the fact that nothing other than *agape* makes a thing right or wrong does not mean that nothing is made right or wrong. The fact that there is only one commandment [to love] and that every other injunction depends on it and is an explication or application of it, does not mean that there are no generally valid explications and applications in

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

'special ethics' of that one norm of general ethics."⁸⁰ Perhaps even more profound is Ramsey's statement that just because a Christian may be unaware of these general principles does not necessarily him a situationalist make.⁸¹ In fact, Ramsey goes so far as to suggest that situationalism, as it has been described by these theologians, simply cannot exist given the human condition of civilization. "Everywhere, and at all recorded times, practices precede individual choice. It is never a question of getting to the point where the logic of rules of practices begins to apply, or of getting to the crux of either justifying actions by the practices they fall under or else undertaking the reform of a practice as a whole. Every man already stands at this point."⁸²

While *Deeds and Rules* effectively refutes the situationalist perspective in contemporary Christian ethics, Ramsey fails to complete the formalization of his "exceptionless principles" much further beyond this point. While he does draw distinctions between his own theory of ethics and that of "legalism" and "natural law" in the closing chapters, he never offers tangible corrections to the errors he perceives. This has proven to be the greatest criticism of Ramsey's work both during

⁸⁰ Ibid., 129.

⁸¹ Ibid., 133.

⁸² Ibid., 144.

his career and in the years since his death: that he spent so much time and energy describing the fallacies of others' thoughts that he never finalized his own. However, what Ramsey was able to accomplish was to establish the primacy of "Christian love" in the moralist's decision-making process, as well as to establish that this concept does in fact represent a basic rule, and that this rule does support and inform certain lesser principles, which are also equally present and quite necessary for the study of ethics if the model of Christ is ever to be achieved. Perhaps this is accomplishment enough. At any rate, confident at the very least that he had effectively demonstrated the errors of situationalism, Ramsey then turned his attentions to a variety of topical issues of his day, including race relations and the theory of "just war" in the 1960s, and then to medical and biological ethics in the 1970s, before returning once more to the issue of "just war" in the 1980s, all in an effort to accomplish what he had, thus far, failed to do: apply the theoretical ethics of Christian principles to contemporary real-world problems. What follows is a brief summary of some of his most important works in these fields.

Let us first turn our attentions to Ramsey's writings on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, best embodied in his 1961

manuscript, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*. In the introduction, Ramsey maintains that while he acknowledges the sit-in movement as both a societal and Christian struggle, he nevertheless believes that “there is a place for reflective examination of any social movement and for self-examination even in the best of causes.”⁸³ As a result, Ramsey’s book is primarily an analysis of the movement and its implications for society as well as an attempt at defining the certain Christian principles that must be applied if it is to be conducted in a responsible and ethical manner. It is of interest to note that Ramsey is able to draw a direct comparison between the non-violent resistance of the sit-in movement and the theory of “just war” in the Christian theological tradition. For example, while discussing the broader ramifications of the economic sanctions initiated by the sit-in movement, Ramsey asserts, “Indiscriminating boycotts are the moral equivalent of obliterating people in warfare in order to get at their government, or to a direct attack upon a man’s wife and children in order to restrain his own murderous intent.”⁸⁴ Instead, he argues, “Action located where the evil is concentrated will prove most decisive

⁸³ Paul Ramsey, *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (New York: Association Press, 1961), x.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

and is most clearly legitimate.”⁸⁵ Ramsey cautions against the secularist tendency of allowing the ends to justify the means, no matter the nature of the struggle. Consequently, he maintains that such uses of resistance, whether non-violent or otherwise, must always be exercised with extreme caution and care. In summation, Ramsey posits, “The justification in Christian conscience of the use of any mode of resistance also lays down its limitation – in the distinction between the persons against whom pressure is primarily directed, those upon whom it may be permitted also to fall, and those who may never be directly repressed for the sake even of achieving some great good.”⁸⁶ In effect, while still making his support for the sit-in movement known, Ramsey still is able to offer critical insight into the practicable ethics of such a movement in a way that causes even the most well-intentioned participants to reexamine themselves in the hope of preventing the deterioration of the movement into a less-than-Christian struggle. Having sufficiently addressed the ethical concerns of the Civil Rights Movement, Ramsey then turned his attention to the issue of “just war” as represented in the then-current struggle with Vietnam.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 108-9.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 113-14.

Given that an entire chapter of this thesis will later be dedicated to Ramsey's work concerning "Just War," what follows here is only the briefest of summaries concerning his work on the subject. "Ramsey's writings on war and politics, as well as his sustained attention to the need to protect persons most liable to exploitation and abuse, reflect a stance toward the human condition that takes the human tendency to evil very seriously."⁸⁷ Building on many of the concepts from his social theology in *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In*, Ramsey dedicated himself tirelessly throughout the 1960s to providing guidelines by which modern-day Christians could conduct themselves justly and morally in the sometimes-necessary evil of international warfare. As theologian Charles Curran once noted, "Ramsey accepts the famous dictum of Reinhold Niebuhr that man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."⁸⁸ In similar fashion, Ramsey's work on the justification and limitation of war within a Christian context demonstrates his belief that for warfare ever to be conducted humanely and as morally as the

⁸⁷ William Werpehowski and Stephen D. Crocco, eds., as quoted from *The Essential Paul Ramsey* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), xx.

⁸⁸ Charles Curran, *Politics, Medicine, and Christian Ethics: A Dialogue with Paul Ramsey* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 12.

situation allows, a system of basic rules and principles must be firmly established.

Ramsey's major works on this subject include *War and the Christian Conscience* (1961), *Who Speaks for the Church* (1967), *The Just War* (1968), and his final work, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* (1988). Again, all of these works are discussed in greater detail in the ensuing chapters of this essay, so for now, a summation of his overall war ethic, as represented in his most thorough treatise on the subject, *The Just War*, will have to suffice. Himself a proponent of the "Just War Theory" of both medieval and modern Catholicism, Ramsey "sought to drive a wedge between 'pacifists' who reject war because it has no limit and 'realists' who insist that wars must in justice be fought, *albeit* (and tragically in the modern age) without limit."⁸⁹ By doing so, Ramsey hoped to establish both the justification and the limitation of moral warfare in the modern, nuclear age.

In order to demonstrate the fallacies of pacifism as a national political policy, Ramsey recounts the biblical story of the Good Samaritan, but with an added literary twist for effect. In this retelling, he asks, "what do you think Jesus would have made the Samaritan do

⁸⁹ William Werpehowski and Stephen D. Crocco, eds., as quoted from *The Essential Paul Ramsey*, 60.

if he had come upon the scene while the robbers were still at their fell work?"⁹⁰ What Ramsey is attempting to demonstrate is that while pacifism and non-resistance on a personal scale can indeed be morally justified, pacifism on an interpersonal level can never be so. In other words, while it may be morally and ethically appropriate to "turn the other cheek" when confronted with oppression, it is inherently immoral and unethical to turn the cheek of your neighbor in a similar situation. With this correlation, Ramsey not only effectively demonstrates the problems with pacifism on a national scale but also encircles his own brand of resistance in the bonds of Christian neighbor love. Having done so, it is only another small step for Ramsey to apply this "principle" to a national, and indeed global, stage. "Thus, participation in war (and before that, the use of any form of force or resistance) was justified as, in this world to date, an unavoidable necessity if we are not to omit to serve the needs of men in the only concrete way possible, and to maintain a just enduring order in which they may live."⁹¹

⁹⁰ Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1968), 143.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Having adequately shown that the use of resistance can, at time, be both morally and ethically justified, Ramsey then turned his attention to the modernization of the just war theory in the nuclear age. To those that would argue that nuclear weapons have invalidated the "just war" claim, given their unprecedented capacity for destruction and inability to discriminate, Ramsey countered that while the direct attack of non-combatants is always unethical, what is needed is a modification of the Just War theory, not its abdication. To that end, Ramsey goes on to discuss the theory of "nuclear deterrence." While Ramsey does acknowledge that there is truth in the pacifist's position that "in the nuclear age all forms of limited war raise the risk of general war, whether intended or not," he argues against their belief that deterrence is morally wrong, given its inherent deception and implied consent to do reciprocal harm.⁹² He does this by drawing a distinction between deception and underlying intent, and bases this distinction on the belief that, "the intention to deceive is certainly a far cry from the intention to murder society, or to commit mutual homicide."⁹³ Although he would later waver from this position, *The Just War* nevertheless demonstrates his gallant attempt to

⁹² Ibid., 254.

⁹³ Ibid., 255.

modernize the “just war” theory in the nuclear age. Again, like his *Basic Christian Ethics* and *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*, the argument can be made, and has been made by his detractors, that he never completed his objective. However, at the very least, by reexamining the *possibility* of a “just war” ethic, Ramsey furthered the discussion. And that, after all, is always the most desired result of the work of any ethicist.

Let us finally turn our attentions to Ramsey’s work on biological and medical ethics, with which he primarily concerned himself during the 1970s. Examining such issues as birth control, abortion, genetic manipulation, and assisted suicide, Ramsey wrote prolifically throughout this decade. His more famous treatises on medical and biological ethics include *Fabricated Man* (1970), *The Patient as Person* (1970), *The Ethics of Fetal Research* (1975), *Ethics at the Edges of Life* (1978), *Three on Abortion* (1978), as well as dozens of articles and pamphlets. Again, because of the staggering quantity of his work in this field, only a summary of his major works and ideas may be presented here with enough attention to detail as to prove useful to the reader. Furthermore, given the commonalities of these works, a subject matter discussion would seem to be more desirable at this juncture as opposed to a chronological analysis.

With that in mind, let us first turn our attentions to Ramsey's discussion of the bonds between human sexuality and procreation. In *Fabricated Man*, Ramsey asks, "whether sexual intercourse as an act of love should ever be separated from sexual intercourse as a procreative act?"⁹⁴ Ramsey argues against what he perceives as the majority's position when he states, "the fact that God joined together love and progeny (or the unitive and procreative purposes of sex and marriage) is held in honor, and not torn asunder, even when a couple for grave, or for what in their case is to them sufficient, reason adopt a lifelong policy of planned *unparenthood*."⁹⁵ Consequently, Ramsey then proceeds to voice his support of voluntary eugenics, including both birth control as well elective vasectomy. However, on the other side of the proverbial coin, Ramsey seems unwilling to give his support to artificial insemination because he feels that this, unlike the other forms of eugenic manipulation, does violate the covenant between man and woman and subsequently between man and God.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Paul Ramsey, *Fabricated Man: The Ethics of Genetic Control* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 32-3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-51.

Let us next shift our focus to Ramsey's writings on the issue of abortion. For Ramsey, this is an issue of easily definable moral requirements. After spending an inordinate amount of time discussing the various arguments about the beginnings of life, including implantation, segmentation, as well as fetal development, Ramsey then proceeds to say, "by 'When does human life begin?' we, of course, mean to ask and possibly to answer this question in the medical-ethical context... 'when is there human life deserving respect and protection like any other?'"⁹⁷ Ramsey then references Harvard Divinity Professor Ralph Potter, who stated, "The fetus symbolizes you and me and our tenuous hold upon a future here at the mercy of our fellow men."⁹⁸ Ramsey then counters the prevailing theory that the "breath of life" (a baby's first breath) should remain the only factor in determining whether life, in fact, exists, by noting, "'The breath of life' is today taken to be the sole evidence that a woman has a child or that a man and a woman have become parents, while 'the breath of life' is

⁹⁷ Paul Ramsey, *The Essential Paul Ramsey*, 165.

⁹⁸ "The Abortion Debate," *The Religious Situation 1968*, ed. Dwight Culver (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 157.

more and more minimized among the tests for whether that same child grown and now terminal is still alive.”⁹⁹

Finally, let us turn our attentions to Ramsey’s work concerning the relationship of medical ethics to his concept of covenant. In the preface to his *The Patient as Person*, Ramsey says, “I hold that medical ethics is consonant with the ethics of a wider human community. The former is (however special) only a particular case of the latter.”¹⁰⁰ He goes on to say that, “To take up the questions of medical ethics for probing...is to engage in the greatest of joint ventures: the moral becoming of man.”¹⁰¹ Just as he had been unwilling to condone abortion, given the inability of the fetus to protect its life and its fellow man’s neighbor-love obligation to do so in its stead, Ramsey also argued against the use of children for medical research because of their inherent inability to consent.¹⁰² Similarly, Ramsey found himself unable to condone the “death with dignity” theory that maintained that the decision to withhold life-sustaining

⁹⁹ Paul Ramsey, *The Essential Paul Ramsey*, 166.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Ramsey, *The Patient as Person* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), xi.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1-17, 35-40.

medication or treatment or to participate actively in another's suicide could ever be morally justified. However, Ramsey closes his argument thusly, "Together, medical men and ethicists need most urgently to renew the search for a way to express both moral recoil from any arbitrary shortening of life, and moral recoil from any arbitrary prolongation of dying."¹⁰³ This call to "renew the search" arguably remains Ramsey's greatest contribution not only to medical ethics, but to ethics in general.

Although the preceding could hardly be considered an exhaustive analysis of Ramsey's work, it is still enough to provide the reader with a basic understanding of his most important ethical theories. Additionally, while the reader is most likely aware that Ramsey asks far more questions than he answers, it is imperative to remember that encouraging the discussion remains the primary focus of any ethicist in any age. In that respect, notwithstanding his failure to organize his ethical treatises into a system of "exceptionless principles," as had always been his fervent hope, Ramsey's work on the political, social, and medical problems of the twentieth century more than warrants his place as one of the greatest and most probing minds of the last hundred years. Although criticized for the inconsistencies of his

¹⁰³ Ibid., 156.

thought throughout the course of his career, Ramsey's work is still important because it is representative of the edification process that all men must go through if ever they are to achieve the greatest version of themselves. Whether Ramsey ever reached this personal summit is irrelevant. Instead, what is important is that he marked his path sufficiently well so that others may follow his lead.

CHAPTER 4

A THEOLOGY FOR THE MODERN WORLD

Now that substantial effort has been made to provide the reader with sufficient insight into the lives and works of both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Ramsey, a more thorough theological analysis can begin. Although any number of theological and ethical issues could be examined through the lenses of these two remarkable Christian thinkers, for the purposes of this essay I have chosen only three. First, I analyze each man's view of the secularization process that society has undergone in the modern era. While both men do acknowledge that such a process has occurred, and is in fact still occurring, they feel very differently about its impact upon the Church. Bonhoeffer, because of his simplistic and worldly view of both Christ and the Church, believes that secularization is not something to fear but rather something to embrace. On the other hand, Ramsey, whose views on ethics and Church dogma are far more traditional, views this secularization as responsible for the moral decline of western society. He argues that only by rejecting the strictly secular and returning to the spiritual realm for guidance can humanity begin to solve the problems it now faces. While I do tend to agree more with Bonhoeffer's view on this particular issue, I do believe that Ramsey's

arguments do hold some merit. I believe that societal secularization, in the wake of scientific, technological, and sociological progress, is inevitable, and therefore pointless to oppose. However, I also think that secularization left untempered by the deliberation of tradition can potentially change too much too quickly and perhaps take not only religion out of the proverbial equation but God as well. Therefore, while I believe that on this particular issue Bonhoeffer's view is the view of the future, I think it must be examined through the lens of more traditional thought, such as Ramsey's, so as to ensure that the Church is able to accept and embrace these societal changes in a manner that allows it to remain an integral part of that society and not another become casualty of "progress."

Secondly, I examine the Church's "just war" theory as evidenced by the lives and writings of both men and as it relates to the modern forms of warfare. As has already been stated, both men began their professional careers as pacifists. And although both men eventually changed their views on this issue, neither man truly ever lost his affinity for non-violence. For Bonhoeffer, his theology and his life ultimately became so entwined as to be indistinguishable from one another. Although Ramsey's experiences were far more academic than Bonhoeffer's, both men inevitably discovered that while pacifism is

undoubtedly one of the most Christ-like behaviors any Christian might exhibit, pacifism as political policy is simply unsustainable. Bonhoeffer realized this at the peril of his Church, and indeed his own life, at the hands of the Nazi regime. Ramsey realized this, from a more intellectual perspective, but the results were ultimately the same. And while both men finally came to embrace armed resistance as a necessary evil in the post-modern world, the nature of the resistance manifested itself quite differently in the lives and works of each man. Again, while my views on this issue more closely coincide with those of Bonhoeffer, I cannot ignore the significance of Ramsey's treatises on the subject for they delve more deeply into the substrata of human conflict than any theologian before or since. For Bonhoeffer, resistance took on something of an individualistic nature, while for Ramsey resistance became a far more methodical and calculating process; not surprising, I suppose, given their respective views on theology in general.

Finally, I examine what I believe to be at the heart of each man's theological argument: structure. For Bonhoeffer, the use of reason and the example of Jesus Christ were sufficient tools in the moral decision-making process. As a result, he has been labeled by both friend and foe as a "situationalist." Ramsey, however, believed

that by understanding the basis of God's love for others, a more concrete Christian ethic could be ascertained and followed. Consequently, he is thought to represent the opposite end of the theological spectrum in this regard. After briefly outlining, and perhaps reiterating, the basic ethical and theological constructs of both men, I hope to demonstrate that this characterization is not only misrepresentative, but also that the theologies are in fact much closer to one another in both action and in theory than either man would probably care to admit.

Ultimately, what I hope to demonstrate is not that one man's views on theology and ethics should hold more sway over society in the coming generations, but rather that both men had as the essence of their arguments the same basic concepts and constructs. And rather than drawing a line in the sand and declaring our allegiance to one man or the other, we might realize that such a line no more separates the fundamental nature of our convictions than it does the spirit of our faith.

Religionless Christianity

It has already been shown that Bonhoeffer believed that the Church is simply Christ existing as community, and therefore not subject to the restrictions placed upon it by any one particular

denomination.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, “what matters in the Church is not religion but the form of Christ, and its taking form amidst a band of men. If we allow ourselves to lose sight of this, even for an instant, we inevitably relapse into that programme-planning for the ethical or religious shaping of the world, which was where we set out from.”¹⁰⁵

This line of thought, essential to his “situationalist” ethic, is also fundamental to his concept of secularization. Bonhoeffer argued that ethicists’ greatest failure in their warning against the dangers of secularization stems from their own inability to see the world in its totality. By insisting that the world is somehow divided between the natural and the divine, the spiritual and the secular, ethicists have missed the essence of Christ and of Christianity because they failed to recognize the inherent correlation between them. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in Bonhoeffer’s critique of one of Ramsey’s greatest theological influences, Reinhold Niebuhr.

The same holds true of the distinction which has been drawn by Reinhold Niebuhr, the American philosopher of religion, in his use of the two concepts ‘moral man’ and ‘immoral society’. The distinction which is intended here between individual and society is a purely abstract one, just as that between the person and work. In such a case one is tearing asunder things which are inseparable and examining separately parts which in isolation

¹⁰⁴ Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 13.

¹⁰⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 21.

from each other, are dead. The consequence is that complete ethical aporia which nowadays goes by the name of 'social ethics'.¹⁰⁶

That is why, for Bonhoeffer, secularization is not something to be feared by the Church, but instead a process to be embraced and treasured. Because of his belief in the presence of God in all worldly things, secularization, while not religious in the strictest sense of the word, does in fact possess a spiritual quality. Rather than condemn science, technology, literature, and popular culture as symptomatic of society's moral decline, Bonhoeffer believed the Church should strive to see God's will in all things and to broaden its message of Christian love and brotherhood to encompass such worldly endeavors in the hopes of better understanding the totality of God's love in our lives. "The world, the natural, the profane and reason are now all taken up into God from the outset. They do not exist 'in themselves' and 'on their own account'. They have their reality nowhere save in the reality of God, in Christ. It is now essential to the real concept of the secular that it shall always be seen in the movement of being accepted by God in Christ."¹⁰⁷ In other words, the task of the Christian is not to separate the world into spheres of secular and spiritual but to

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 58.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 64-5.

understand that such a separation invalidates the true purpose of Christianity. "His worldliness does not divide him from Christ, and his Christianity does not divide him from the world. Belonging wholly to Christ, he stands at the same time wholly in the world."¹⁰⁸ Therefore, embrace the world. Embrace its changes. Only by doing so can the Church ever fully embrace the message of Christ. Bonhoeffer believed that this was absolutely essential if the Church is to survive in the modern age, which he believed it must if ever we are to achieve divine salvation. "The renewal of the western world lies solely in the divine renewal of the Church, which leads her to the fellowship of the risen and living Jesus Christ."¹⁰⁹ But this renewal is not to be a return to dogmatic traditions and a renunciation of contemporary trends and technologies, but rather a coexistence of the two in such a way that both may prosper and become more complete versions of themselves as a result. Bonhoeffer notes how it is only in the western world where science and religion are always seen to be at odds with one another. In Asia and the Middle East, for example, science and technology continue to serve the will of "God." This is not a weakness of their cultures but a great strength. Because these societies and the religions

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 67.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 52.

within them recognize the inherent spirituality of such enterprises, they do not feel threatened by or in competition with one another. If western society would only follow that lead, maybe not science and religion, but certainly science and God, might once more be seen as complementary, not contradictory. Even more hopeful, he believed he was beginning to witness such a trend. "Justice, truth, science, art, culture, humanity, liberty, patriotism, all at last, after long straying from the path, are once more finding their way back to the fountain-head."¹¹⁰ This return to the fountain-head, as he called it, was not the result on the Church turning inwardly and shunning the outside world, but rather by embracing that world and reclaiming it for Christ.

Secular Crisis

I am one who believes that the Church has more to witness to, more to say, than to itself or by cultivating its own inner life for Christ's sake or for witness. The Church should not *of itself* cease to influence public policy having grave moral import for its own members and for the community at large. It ought not to *seek* to have such influence no longer, nor should it *avoid* what little it may still have or *void* what it may yet regain in God's afflictive and overruling providence.¹¹¹

This statement alone is almost sufficient to summarize Ramsey's views on what he deemed the modern-day secular crisis in western society.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹¹¹ Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*, 127.

Unlike Bonhoeffer, who believed the Church should acquiesce itself to this secularization and assume a position of lesser prominence within the culture at large, Ramsey argued that the Church must remain at the center of human civilization. Otherwise, "Moral perspectives emergent from the Gospel will be replaced by what's 'preachable' or can gain a hearing today. This way lies apostasy, new versions of 'culture Christianity,' and, instead of the church, a web of organizations still called 'churches' and 'Christian' that bear no resemblance to past visible communities having the same names."¹¹²

In other words, while I believe Ramsey would have acknowledged the potential for seeing God in all things as Bonhoeffer claimed, he would have argued that without the Church to mediate the balance between the secular and the spiritual, God could quite easily become lost in the shuffle. In fact, Ramsey feared that God had potentially already been made culturally irrelevant in the "new" society.

'Denominations' once rightly supposed they were relevant, and they were generally acknowledged by others to be relevant, on public questions...Those days are gone forever, all of them. Some of us were at the bedside when God culturally died; he passed away so slowly it was hardly noticed. Many now say they have no regrets over his passing, only freedom at last. Some of us may

¹¹² Ibid., 127.

have helped to kill that god. And a few (formerly the most faithful) continue to stab at Christ's cultural embodiments here and there, attempting desperately to render humankind better than in the Christian ages.¹¹³

Making a direct reference to Bonhoeffer, Ramsey states, "After three centuries in which every revival of Protestant Christianity has revived less of it, and after the recent decades of an increasingly Christ-less religiousness in the churches, it was predictable that celebrated theologians would begin their futile search for a religion-less Christianity to proclaim in a secular world that is supposed to have 'come of age'."¹¹⁴ Therefore, rather than embracing this secularization as inevitable as Bonhoeffer does, Ramsey believes the Church must hold to its traditions and to the doctrine that has sustained it throughout the centuries. By abandoning those traditions in an effort to amend itself for the modern world, Ramsey believes the Church would be effectively selling its soul. The Church, he believed, cannot secularize without losing something of itself in the process. "Surely it is not mean-spirited or anti-clerical for me to suggest that many people, both in and outside the churches in this secular age, do not understand 'the signs of the times' in context with the sense of approaching Presence it has in the Scripture. Thus only when

¹¹³ Ibid., 126.

¹¹⁴ Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*, 50.

interpreted in the light of the Gospel do the signs of the times give grounds for hope.”¹¹⁵

Because of the Church’s inability to recognize that its secularization would ultimately mean its demise, Ramsey argues that the Church must once more attempt to separate itself from the world in order to remain a viable entity within it. He states that, “Roman Catholicism, which has its roots in medievalism, seems today in a pluralistic society better able to distinguish the church herself from the state, and seems to have greater respect for the integrity of the public realm and for the office of political prudence.”¹¹⁶ This, he argues, is precisely what the Protestant Churches must do if they are to survive the secular crisis: distinguish themselves from the states. Only by separating itself once more from the world can the Church rediscover its place and purpose within it.

So I say we need to continue to try to design the ecclesial procedures that will release that voice, drill again for the substance of Christian practice that can be the church (and not other voices) speaking to itself and to the world concerning justice and the common life. This search of mine for the authentic voice of the church speaking *for* the church *to* the church *and to the world* of today on public questions comes, as I said, not from any particular view of political society, but from within my

¹¹⁵ Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*, 127-8.

¹¹⁶ Paul Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church?*, 128.

understanding of the Christian community of pilgrimage through many ages, times, and political systems.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

“We live in a post-liberal, post-idealist, atomic age in theology. Philosophy and theology alike are being compelled to face their traditional problems in such a radical way that the question even arises: are our traditional problems the real ones?”¹¹⁸ To this question, I believe both Bonhoeffer and Ramsey would have answered no. But I believe there is an underlying difference in their responses. For Bonhoeffer, if traditional problems are no longer the real ones, then why must the Church cling to tradition to solve the challenges it now faces? For Ramsey, while traditional problems may no longer be the real ones, it was the Church’s traditions that sustained it in past crises and it is these same traditions that will sustain it in its present predicament.

Ramsey would also argue that the Church has sacrificed too much already and cannot hope to sustain itself should it continue to mold itself after secular trends. “Protestant ethics points every which way in search of the useful and prudent thing to do. We call by the

¹¹⁷ Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*, 128.

¹¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, iii.

name of 'social ethics' our wanderings over the wasteland of utility since the day we completely surrendered to technically political reason the choice of the way to the goals we seek."¹¹⁹ Bonhoeffer would counter, and I would agree, that the Church's realization that everything in this world, by its very existence, is spiritual and not secular is sufficient grounds for the advancement of religion beyond doctrine and dogma. Rather than cling to tradition in the modern age, the Church must embrace this world in its current form and realize that to ever truly fade from prominence within it is not a loss for the Church, but a triumph for the world. Secularization is not the loss of morality at the expense of the Church but the advancement of society (beyond the need for institutional morality) for the benefit of Christ. Rather than reverse this trend, Ramsey and those like him, must seek to temper the transition from the institutional Church to the worldly Church to ensure that the best characteristics of the institution survive into the new age of the world to shape its development.

Pacifism

[Because it has already been noted that both Bonhoeffer and Ramsey began their careers as ardent pacifists, and because

¹¹⁹ Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, 6.

sufficient attention has already been paid to Ramsey in this regard, this section will deal primarily with Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the matter as they relate to his arguments against justified Christian warfare.] Bonhoeffer's early adherence to pacifism is best exhibited in his treatise, *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he notes, "The right way to requite evil, according to Jesus, is not to resist it."¹²⁰ Instead, like Christ, we must willingly endure it. "The only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for...when evil meets no opposition and encounters no obstacle but only patient endurance, its sting is drawn, and at last it meets an opponent which is more than its match."¹²¹ Bonhoeffer believed this was the only way to truly defeat evil. Paraphrasing one of Jesus' own parables, he states:

When a man unjustly demands that I should give him my coat, I offer him my cloak also, and so counter his demand; when he requires me to go the other mile, I go willingly and show up his exploitation of my service for what it is. To leave everything behind at the call of Christ is to be content with him alone, and to follow only him. By his willingly renouncing self-defense, the Christian affirms his absolute adherence to Jesus...the exclusiveness of this adherence is the only power which can overcome evil.¹²²

¹²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 127.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 127-8.

However, Bonhoeffer does note that others have interpreted the scriptures somewhat differently. His discussion on “the Reformers” is of particular interest here. The Reformers, like Ramsey, made a distinction between personal suffering and the suffering of others in the service of Christ. They argued that while it is indeed Christian to endure personal suffering in the face of injustice, it is wholly unchristian to tolerate the suffering of others when the ability to intercede exists. They argued that “if we want to act in a genuine spirit of love we must do the very opposite, and meet force with force in order to check the assault of evil.”¹²³ Upon this principle, the Reformers have been able to rationalize warfare and justify other forms of divine retribution in a Christian context. However, Bonhoeffer then posits what he believes to be the central flaw in their logic: “[Jesus] addresses his disciples as men who have left all to follow him, and the precept of non-violence applies equally to private life and official duty.”¹²⁴ In other words, attempting to distinguish between the public and private aspects of Christian life is to relegate Christ to only one aspect or the other and thus to diminish his overall significance. Instead, Bonhoeffer would argue that, as Christians, we must be

¹²³ Ibid., 128.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 129.

willing to accept and endure suffering not only as private individuals, but also as a community of believers in Jesus Christ. Only by collectively sharing in this suffering and by denying the right of retributive justice in all its forms can the Christian, and therefore the Church, ever truly conquer the forces of evil.

Although Bonhoeffer's views on pacifism would change with the rise of the Third Reich in Germany, his hope for world peace remained constant. During his first trip to America in 1930, Bonhoeffer said:

As a Christian minister I think that just here is one of the greatest tasks for our church: to strengthen the work of peace in every country and in the whole world. It must never more happen that a Christian people fights against a Christian people, brother against brother, since both have one Father...let us consider that the judgment comes for every man and woman, boy and girl, in America and Germany, in Russia and in India; and God will judge us according to our faith and love. How can the man who hates his brother expect grace from God?¹²⁵

Despite his words of warning, such a war was once more on the horizon. His belief in non-violence and his love for peace notwithstanding, Dietrich Bonhoeffer found himself caught in the midst of a struggle not only for political and military dominance but also for spiritual and social freedom. Although he has since been criticized for abandoning his own pacifist teachings in favor of the resistance,

¹²⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 83-4.

Bonhoeffer justified his actions thusly: "It is not only my task to look after the victims of madmen who drive a motor-car in a crowded street, but to do all in my power to stop their driving at all."¹²⁶ Does this statement contradict his earlier message of pacifism? It would certainly appear to. But like all theologians and philosophers who are charged with putting their own ideas into practice, Bonhoeffer was forced to reexamine his positions time and again to determine if they still held merit for each particular circumstance. His adherence to "situationalism" makes such a reexamination not only possible, but also quite reasonable. Peace was still the ultimate goal and pacifism still the ultimate ideal. He merely believed that this particular situation called for another course of action, one that he could not forsake no matter the personal suffering he must endure as a result. After all, Bonhoeffer believed he was only following the example of the cross, and, "the cross is the only power in the world which proves that suffering love can avenge and vanquish evil."¹²⁷ And while some would argue that makes him a martyr, Bonhoeffer would likely argue that it only makes him a Christian.

¹²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 22.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

"Just War"

"[Pacifism] teaches people to make no distinction between the shedding of innocent blood and the shedding of any human blood. And in this way pacifism has corrupted enormous numbers of people who will not act according to its tenets. They become convinced that a number of things are wicked which are not; hence, seeing no way of avoiding 'wickedness,' they set no limits to it."¹²⁸ Although once a proponent of pacifism in his youth, Ramsey spent the majority of his professional life attempting to refute its tenets. While he acknowledges early Christians' adherence to pacifism as being in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ, he argues that their eventual adoption of the "just war" ethic was not so much a corruption of this teaching as a change in circumstance. "The primitive pacifism generally practiced by early Christians so long as they were in a minority giving way to what were judged more effective means for assuming responsibility for the whole of organized society...it would be a great mistake to regard Christianity's accommodation to Constantine's empire as necessarily a

¹²⁸ Walter Stein, *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience* (London, Merlin, 1961), 56, as quoted in *The Essential Paul Ramsey*, 66.

compromise of its genius or a 'fall' from the pristine purity of its ethic."¹²⁹

Despite this position, Ramsey does admit that pacifists and "just war" proponents do share some common ethical ground. "The one thing Christian pacifists and just warriors have in common is that, if anything is shown to be *per se* a moral atrocity or to have no 'just cause' *now*, it should be given Christian endorsement *no moment more*."¹³⁰ However, while pacifists would consider warfare to be such a moral atrocity, Ramsey would argue that it is, "an unavoidable necessity if we are not to omit to serve the needs of men in the only concrete way possible, and to maintain a just enduring order in which they may live."¹³¹ Moreover, while pacifists would argue against the regard for the well-being of one neighbor over another, Ramsey would counter, "'Out of neighbor-regarding love for one's fellow man, preferential decision among one's neighbors may and can and should be made."¹³²

¹²⁹ William Werpehowski and Stephen D. Crocco, eds. *The Essential Paul Ramsey*, 49.

¹³⁰ Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*, 63.

¹³¹ William Werpehowski and Stephen D. Crocco, eds. *The Essential Paul Ramsey*, 63.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 71.

Because he believes conflict to be inherent in the human condition, and therefore the arguments about the generic morality or immorality of war to be irrelevant, Ramsey wishes to define the principles by which warfare may be conducted justly in a Christian context. Here again, he acknowledges the contributions of pacifism to the "just war" theory. "Pacifist Christians may have been wrong in the religious and political judgments they made in refusing direct participation in war; but they were certainly not wrong in discerning a significant distinction between civilian and combatant status...on this distinction hangs the discrimination between war and murder, between limited and unlimited war, between barely civilized and wholly uncivilized, even if technically efficient, military action."¹³³ Ramsey argues that it is precisely by limiting warfare that a Christian may participate in it justly. "Thus, a love-inspired justice going into concrete action fashioned rules for practical conduct – at once justifying war and limiting it."¹³⁴

While certain pacifists still maintain that it is the duty of the Christian to hate the sin but love the sinner, Ramsey argues, "The evil and the one who does it are in any actual situation bound so closely

¹³³ Ibid., 81.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 71.

together that a person who, in one-one relationship to an enemy-neighbor, wishes not to resist the evildoer can find no way of resisting evil, and a person in multilateral relationships with more than one neighbor who wishes for their sakes to resist evil will be unable to avoid resisting the evildoer as well."¹³⁵ Here, Ramsey takes the argument a step further, asserting that not only must the Christian sometimes defend one neighbor at the expense of the other; sometimes he must defend himself at the expense of another. "A Christian does what love requires, and the possibility cannot be ruled out that on occasion defending himself may be a duty he owes to others. Whenever sacrificing himself, or in any degree failing to protect himself and his own, actually would involve greater burdens or injury to others, surely then a Christian should stick to his post whether he wants to or not."¹³⁶

This is a break from the traditional "just war" theory of the Catholic tradition, but one Ramsey consciously wished to make. Only by asserting that no difference between private and public morality existed could Ramsey ever hope to demonstrate the validity of his claims. Because how can what is never right for the individual ever be

¹³⁵ Ibid., 47.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 53.

right for the nation? "Just war" is a necessary aspect of Christianity if the continued survival of its congregation is to be ensured. Rather than to shun unequivocally all use of violence, it is the duty of the Christian to understand the difference between morally justifiable and morally reprehensible courses of action. Like all of Ramsey's ethical constructs, the "just war" theory is centered on the concept of faith working through love in the service of one's neighbor. He would argue that so long as this concept remains central to the Christian's decision-making process, warfare is not only justifiable, but sometimes necessary.

Conclusion

Bonhoeffer once noted:

It was a belief in a just, divine government of the world which made it possible to dispense with the perhaps effective but certainly un-Christian practices of killing the innocent – torture, extortion, and the rest. War now always remained a kind of appeal to the arbitration of God, which both sides were willing to accept. It is only when Christian faith is lost that man must himself make use of all means, even criminal ones, in order to secure by force the victory of his cause. And thus, in the place of a chivalrous war between Christian peoples, directed towards the achievement of unity in accordance with God's judgment in history, there comes total war, war of destruction, in which everything, even crime, is justified if it serves to further our own

cause, and in which the enemy, whether he be armed or defenseless, is treated as a criminal.¹³⁷

Ramsey no doubt would agree with this statement. It is only when faith is lost that such action is ever possible. However, he would argue that what is needed is not the adherence to pacifism at the expense of justice, but rather faith in the principle of Christian love to dictate the action which that love requires.

Like both Bonhoeffer and Ramsey, I would prefer to remain a pacifist if at all possible. But like both men, I have come to realize that there are circumstances in this world that make it impossible to remain both a Christian and a pacifist. Bonhoeffer argued, "At this point it becomes evident that when a Christian meets with injustice, he no longer clings to his rights and defends them at all costs. He is absolutely free from possessions and bound to Christ alone."¹³⁸ However, because Christ was "the man for others," even to be bound to Christ alone is still to be bound to one another in his love. Therefore, while Christians can free themselves of their possessions, they can never free themselves from the bonds of humanity and the responsibilities those bonds entail.

¹³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 30.

¹³⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 127.

"Situationalism"

"The good is no more than what is expedient, useful and advantageous to reality. From this it follows that there is no universal good but only an infinitely varying good which is determined in each case on the basis of 'reality.' This conception is undoubtedly superior to the idealist conception in that it is 'closer to reality.' Good does not consist here in an impossible 'realization' of what is unreal, the realization of ethical ideas. It is reality itself that teaches what is good."¹³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these words from a Nazi prison cell in 1941 following his participation (albeit passively) in a failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler. While critics have insisted that this statement is nothing more than an attempt to justify his ostensibly un-Christian actions, I would argue that it is absolutely essential to understanding the very foundations of his theology.

Posthumously branded by both his supporters and his detractors as a "situationalist," Bonhoeffer never did concern himself with the formation or the formalization of a strictly Christian ethic, believing it to be nothing more than the idealism of theological extremists. "The fanatic believes that he can oppose the power of evil with the purity of

¹³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 60.

his will and of his principle. But since it is part of the nature of fanaticism that it loses sight of the totality of evil and rushes like a bull at the red cloth instead of at the man who holds it, the fanatic inevitably ends by tiring and admitting defeat.”¹⁴⁰ While he did acknowledge that certain experiences, cultural and societal traditions, etc., often did provide a framework within which moral decisions could be made, he remained reluctant to relinquish completely his use of reason in favor of a series of abstract principles.

Certainly there is a necessary time and place in human existence for the so-called ‘ethical phenomenon’, that is to say the experience of obligation, the conscience and deliberate decision between something which is, on principle, good and something which is, on principle, evil, the ordering of life in accordance with a supreme standard, moral conflict and moral resolve...but the delimiting of the place and of the time is of crucial importance if one is to prevent a pathological overburdening of life by the ethical, if one is to prevent that abnormal fanaticization and total moralization of life which has at its consequence that those processes of concrete life which are not properly subject to general principles are exposed to constant criticism, fault-finding, admonition, correction and general interference.¹⁴¹

In other words, while Bonhoeffer acknowledged that principles do have their proper place in the study and practice of ethics, that place can never be the center. That is because, for Bonhoeffer, the center of Christian ethics, indeed the center of Christianity itself, must

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 233.

always be found in the person of Jesus Christ. And, "Jesus Christ cannot be identified with either an ideal or standard or with things as they are. The hostility of the ideal towards things as they are, the fanatical putting into effect of an idea in the face of a resisting actuality, may be as remote from good as is the sacrifice of what should be to what is expedient."¹⁴² Furthermore, while principles may have their proper place in the ethical discussion, "exceptionless principles" do not. "Timeless and placeless ethical discourse lacks the concrete warrant which all authentic ethical discourse requires. It is an adolescent, presumptuous and illegitimate declamation of ethical principles, and however intense may be the subjective earnestness with which it is propounded, it is contrary to the essential character of ethical discourse in a way which is clearly felt, even though it may be difficult to define."¹⁴³

Bonhoeffer's great concern for ethicists who occupied themselves primarily with the formation of a set of exceptionless principles is that they would become so absorbed with their task that they would ultimately disregard the centrifugal force and central purpose of Christian ethics: following the example of Jesus Christ. "For indeed it is

¹⁴² Ibid., 61.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 238-9.

not written that God became an idea, a principle, a programme, a universally valid proposition or a law, but that God became man.”¹⁴⁴

The last part of that statement is so crucial to understanding Bonhoeffer’s “situationalist” approach to ethics: “God became man.” Similar to other theologians’ arguments to “hate the sin, but love the sinner,” Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on God’s love for humanity as represented in the embodiment of His Son, Jesus Christ, is Bonhoeffer’s way of saying trust the humanity inside of each of us to live as Christ lived. Because Jesus Christ became man, embraced the all the challenges that entailed, and lived and died as “the *man* for others,” he and he alone must serve as our inspiration and our guide as we tread the waters of moral uncertainty. “Everything would be ruined if one were to try to reserve Christ for the Church and to allow the world only some kind of law, even if it were a Christian law. Christ died for the world, and it is only in the midst of the world that Christ is Christ.”¹⁴⁵ In conclusion, Bonhoeffer would argue, “it is not a question of applying directly to the world the teaching of Christ or what are referred to as Christian principles, so that the world might be formed in accordance with these. On the contrary, formation comes only by

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 71.

being drawn in into the form of Jesus Christ. It comes only as formation in His likeness, as *conformation* with the unique form of Him who was made man, was crucified, and rose again.”¹⁴⁶

Ethical Principles

“A Christian cannot but rely, in deep humility, upon guiding rules, upon the cumulative experience of one’s own and other people’s obedience. It is this bank of experience which gives us our working rules of ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ and without them we could not but flounder.”¹⁴⁷ This was Paul Ramsey’s steadfast belief. In order for the Christian to properly “do ethics,” one must not only avail himself of this bank of experience but also realize that these experiences, when collectively viewed and critically examined, hold the foundations for a system of ethical principles by which a Christian can and should live. Criticizing situationalism for its failure to grasp this basic truth of human existence, Ramsey argued that, “In fact, there can be no such thing as Christian social ethics, or any social ethics at all, unless there are practices having general validity, unless there are moral institutions...the crucial question in whether in morality there are only

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴⁷ Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*, 27.

*tactical directives to the players. Are there not also rules of the game itself?"*¹⁴⁸

To continue this sports metaphor, the baseball player's understanding of the rules of the game dictates that he be allowed three strikes per at bat. It would create innumerable problems for both himself and the game at large if this issue had to be reexamined for every player and at every at bat, claiming this player deserves four and this one only two. Rather, it is generally understood to be a valid rule that each player receives only three strikes. This continuity is not a weakness, but rather a strength. So, too, it is in morality. That is not to say that things must always continue as they are now, but rather that while "exceptions are not justified within the practice itself...agape may work to change the rules of the game."¹⁴⁹ While Ramsey's opponents might argue that this sounds a great deal like situationalism, if only thinly veiled, Ramsey would counter, "It is a common and basic error of Christian situationalism to begin with the premise that agape in its freedom cannot bind itself unreservedly and change not."¹⁵⁰ "Each person is in principle always entitled to

¹⁴⁸ William Werpehowski and Stephen D. Crocco, eds. *The Essential Paul Ramsey*, 20.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁵⁰ Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics*, 32.

reconsider the correctness of a rule and to question whether it is proper to follow it in any particular case. This he does by making a fresh application of the general norm of agape to the case in point.”¹⁵¹

And while Ramsey’s entire Christian ethic was founded upon the principle of agape, or “faith working through love,” that is not to say that this principle alone is sufficient to characterize his thoughts on the subject. Having established the primacy of love for his Christian ethic, Ramsey then asked, ““In addition to the standard that is distinctive and also primary in Christian ethics, are there any principles, or sources of moral wisdom, that while secondary and not distinctive are nevertheless necessary in a complete Christian theory of ethics?”¹⁵² Ramsey would unequivocally answer yes. “There is a shape which the engendered deeds take from engendering event of Christ; and the contours of the Christian life may be articulated in terms of certain rules, principles, or styles of conduct.”¹⁵³ Just because obedient love for one’s neighbor is central to this system of ethical principles does not mean it is the only criterion for decision-making within the system. That, too, would be situationalism. Rather, Ramsey argues that, “The

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 124.

¹⁵² Ibid., 29.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 125.

ethics of Paul, indeed Christian ethics generally, seems always in peril of opening the floodgates of anarchy and license in the name of freedom from the law..."¹⁵⁴ However:

In place of rules for conduct, instead of 'the law' which Christianity entirely finishes, comes not irregularity, but self-regulation, and not merely the self-regulation of free, autonomous individuals but the self-regulation of persons unconditionally bound to their neighbors by obedient 'faith working through love.'...A Christian says 'nevertheless' and 'in spite of this' to every circumstance, persistently finding the works of love obligatory. The commands of love are as stringent as the needs of the world are urgent: sensing this, let any man *then* do as he pleases.¹⁵⁵

In other words, while love is primal, from it can be derived an entire system of secondary principles and constructs that, when taken together as a whole, can be most beneficial to the Christian in his efforts to live rightly and morally in today's society.

Conclusion

While I must admit that I was initially torn between these two seemingly opposite ideologies, upon closer inspection I began to realize how similar they truly are. Bonhoeffer argued, "It is not by astuteness, by knowing the tricks, but only by simple steadfastness in the truth of God, by training the eye upon this truth until it is simple

¹⁵⁴ William Werpehowski and Stephen D. Crocco, eds. *The Essential Paul Ramsey*, 4.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

and wise, that there comes the experience and the knowledge of the ethical reality.”¹⁵⁶ He labeled any man who would attempt to base Christian ethics on exceptionless principles as an extremist, stating, “even if his fanaticism serves the high cause of truth or justice, he will sooner or later become entangled with non-essentials and petty details and fall into the snare set by his more skillful opponent.”¹⁵⁷ Ironically, this is what ultimately happened to Ramsey. He never realized his dream of an entire system of exceptionless principles but instead only served to establish obedient love for one’s neighbor as the center of that unfinished ethic. So ultimately, for Bonhoeffer the essence of ethics is God’s truth. For Ramsey, it is God’s love. Personally, I cannot envision a circumstance when these two ideals would be in conflict with one another. As a result, I do not feel the need to subscribe to one at the expense of the other. Rather, by acknowledging that if Christians allow themselves to be guided by the search for truth and in the service of love, their actions, and consequently their lives, will be the better for it.

¹⁵⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 4.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

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