

# Beyond Consolation: The Significance of Failure for Faith

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Christopher Morse, the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor Emeritus of Theology and Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, teaches how to “test the spirits,” not only of the tradition, but also of we ourselves, as theology witnesses our transformation into who God made us to be.<sup>1</sup> The following presentation, which I gave on April 25, 2013 at Columbia University’s Teacher’s College for non-theologians engaged in an interdisciplinary seminar series, shows how Morse’s work influences theology and theology’s engagement with other disciplines, so we can best find what it means to be human, or, as Bonhoeffer emphasized, following the apostle Paul, that “God is for us.”<sup>2</sup> In gratitude for all Morse has taught me about doing dogmatics as a “theology of freedom”—each one of us invited to test the evidence presented because God, as “the One who loves in freedom,” can be trusted to confirm or convict what we conclude—I write as a witness to what God is doing and the difference it makes in our lives and communities as my mentor has so faithfully done for decades.<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

Before turning to the theme of the day, I want to introduce my disciplines and method for this diverse group gathered for the interdisciplinary seminar. While not an ethnographer like many of my colleagues in the seminar series on “Religion and Failure” in the Anthropology of Religion at Teacher’s College, I am a clinically trained chaplain and scholar in the fields of Psychiatry & Religion and Systematic Theology. As a chaplain, my method for reporting clinical experience follows the standards of the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, which includes verbatim material (that maintains confidentiality), self-and-other reflection and theological interpretation. As the founder of Clinical Pastoral Education,

Anton Boisen wrote, people are “living human documents” which we can engage and exegete, or interpret, just as we do written texts.<sup>4</sup>

As a scholar, I integrate my work with people into my theoretical knowledge as a Christian theologian working in depth theology and dogmatics. Depth theology is an emerging discipline that reflects theologically on the insights of depth psychology, the study of the depths of the psyche, or “soul” in Greek.<sup>5</sup> Post-Enlightenment, what was once called the “care of souls” in the Christian tradition largely fell out of theology.<sup>6</sup> Depth psychology, or psychoanalysis, in the discovery of the unconscious, provided a new healing modality and what founder Sigmund Freud called “a cure through love.”<sup>7</sup> Some people of faith, whose traditions no longer worked for them, found help in this therapeutic method. Depth theology takes up a psychoanalytic critique within theology toward the healing transformation of the person and community in society.<sup>8</sup>

Within systematic theology, dogmatics is a discipline that adjudicates the testimony of the church, or the witness of those who speak in the name of Jesus Christ. Dogmatics, as theologian Christopher Morse writes, is simply the “testing” of dogma, or “decreed (authoritative) teaching,” and, as such, is “the antidote to dogmatism.”<sup>9</sup> The difference between dogmatics and dogmatism is that the former is a radically critical discipline and the latter demands allegiance to one’s own beliefs as if they cannot be critiqued. Christian dogmatics tests what people are saying and doing in light of what they are called to say and do in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, other faith traditions or ideologies can test what is faithful to their own teachings from within using dogmatics, which originated in Greek traditions of both theology, or *theologia*, logic or sayings about the gods, and *dogmata*, sets of teachings deemed authoritative.<sup>10</sup>

Following theologian and Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wanted social reality taken up “into the service of dogmatics,” and Morse, who has taken this work of Bonhoeffer forward, my work in dogmatics seeks to deepen social reality to include psychic reality, to consider not only the conscious and communal aspects of our lives and communities, but also the unconscious and

4 Anton T. Boisen, “The Period of Beginnings,” *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 5, no. 1, (Spring 1951), 13–19.

5 See Ann Belford Ulanov, *The Unshuttered Heart: Opening to Aliveness and Deadness in the Self* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 18. See also Amy Bentley Lamborn, “Figuring” the Self, “Figuring” the Sacred” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2009), 214–216.

6 Ulanov, *The Unshuttered Heart*, 64. When a pastor in Barcelona, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “It sometimes seems to me like all our work comes to grief on the care of souls.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 406.

7 Sigmund Freud wrote this phrase in a letter to C. G. Jung. See Bruno Bettelheim, *Freud and Man’s Soul* (New York: Knopf, 1983). For the history of the unconscious, see Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

8 See Heather Wise, “Depth Psychology and Dogmatics: Testing the Spirits in the Soul and in the Tradition” (working paper, Union Theological Seminary, 2012).

9 Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, xviii and, 14–31.

10 *Ibid.*, 14–20.

1 John 4.1–2. For more on “testing the spirits” and theological method, see Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief, 2nd Edition*. (New York: Continuum, 2009).

2 Romans 8.31b. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” For instance, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Christ the Center (Christologie) Summer, 1933” in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), 127.

3 Karl Barth said someone in the United States of America should do a “theology of freedom,” which would mean a “freedom for humanity.” Final words of a panel discussion in Chicago, April 26, 1962. <http://kbarth.org/audio>. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.1. Edited by Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 257–321.

personal dimensions, for understanding the whole human person in relationship.<sup>11</sup> Important to note, work with the psyche refers to its wider frame of reference in the term psyche-soma, as soul and body are inseparably connected and the psyche is not a discrete individualistic entity, but relational.<sup>12</sup> For Christians, theology must attend to psychosocial reality because God acts through Jesus Christ *apocalypsed* (Gk “revealed”) in the flesh and blood realities of this world. As psychoanalyst and theologian Ann Belford Ulanov writes, God also comes to us in the flesh of the human psyche.<sup>13</sup>

To “serve dogmatics” means to critically reflect upon related disciplines, such as history, ethics, philosophy, sociology, and psychoanalysis, in light of what God is doing and the difference it makes. Herein lies the difference between anthropology of religion and theological anthropology. Anthropology of religion studies humans and their communities of faith on their own terms, while theological anthropology studies humans from the standpoint of God’s action and its import in the world today. Christian theology says we are created human, but, under the influence of evil in this world, we fall away from our true humanity. We are called, as the apostle Paul writes in Romans and 2 Corinthians in the New Testament, to no longer live *kata sarka* (Gk, “according to the flesh”), but through Jesus Christ *en sarki* (Gk, “in the flesh”), which restores us to our true, embodied humanity.<sup>14</sup>

For a dialogue between religious studies and theology, the crucial question then is how to understand and test experience for what it actually means to be human. Both fields and their subfields have much to say on this which I cannot go into now, but I hope this paper will open up the conversation and be part of

11 Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 87. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, 1927 (New York: Harper Row, 1963), 20. See also Wise, “Depth Psychology and Dogmatics.” Eberhard Bethge notes Bonhoeffer did not wrestle with psychoanalysis, and was perhaps biased against it due to his father’s opinion and profession. However, Bonhoeffer recognized the need for the care of souls in the church. While he thought the church had a better language for healing with terms such as “sin,” I contend taking psychoanalysis “into the service of dogmatics” would answer his objection by allowing the person of Christ to be the ultimate dogmatic test. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography (Revised Edition)*, ed. Victoria Barnett, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 21–23. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. by Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 115.

12 C. G. Jung sees the psyche as relational and emphasizes individuation instead of individualism as how people become individuals in relation to one another. See especially C. G. Jung, “A Study in the Process of Individuation,” *Collected Works* 9 (New York and Princeton, NJ: Bollingen Foundation and Princeton University Press, 1968), 290–354. See also Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), xv. “And there’s no point sidling up crabwise with a *mea culpa* look, insisting it’s a matter of salvation of the soul. Genuine disalienation will have been achieved only when things, in the most materialist sense, have been returned to their rightful place.”

13 Ann Belford Ulanov, “Theology after Jung,” *Journal of Jungian Theory and Practice* Vol. 8, No. 1, (2006), 66.

14 See Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 38–40, 150–155. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:16, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.” See also Romans 8.

creating a bridge between them as church father Irenaeus said the glory of God is the living person.<sup>15</sup>

## Faith and Failure

This essay offers a philosophical, psychoanalytic and theological assessment of what happens when faith fails. Contrary to what many people realize, faith, as a human mode of trusting in God, is meant to fail. Like all idols we make of the things we love, faith fails because it does not transmit the ultimate, but merely points to it. So what do people of faith do in the face of failure when even faith itself no longer obtains?

Following philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s seminal essay “On Consolation” in *The Religious Significance of Atheism* in which he argues that God is beyond our consolation, and his explication of the function of symbols in *Freud and Philosophy*, I consider what we do when faith fails, our symbols break, and we still long for consolation. I also adjudicate group psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion’s theory of O (ultimate reality), K (finite reality; knowledge), and –K (the loss of both O & K) for what it offers to both science and religion for how we understand failure and possible responses to it. Relatedly, I investigate Bion’s column 2, which on his number and letter grid perhaps represents the place of necessary failure, and its connection with John Keats’ negative capability.

I relate the work of Ricoeur and Bion theologically to faith stories including the Judeo-Christian story of Moses not being consumed by the burning bush and the Christian story of what happens in the life span of Jesus Christ which includes incarnation, death on the cross, and resurrection. I remember Rachel’s refusal to be consoled when her children are killed and Job’s waiting for an answer from God. My thesis is that within these stories (and other faith stories) is healing insight into the place of failure within faith and resources we can discover for facing it head on.

## Experiences of Failure: What Happens When Faith Fails?

In my work as a hospital chaplain at the multi-faith, multi-ethnic New York Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center and Sloan Women’s Hospital/Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of New York in the summers of 2009 and 2012, I have had the chance to experience up close what happens when faith fails. While we all have experienced failure, and some of us even the failure of faith, the hospital provides an acute lens on what happens to us when we arrive at the end of our own resources, including our ability to have faith. Confronted with painful crisis situations, patients, families, and staff all experience a testing of faith that,

15 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 4, Chapter 20, Section 7. (Christian Classical Ethereal Library) <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.vi.xxi.html>

regardless of faith affiliation (including that of “no faith”), reveals the ground we actually stand upon, even if what is revealed is that we feel completely groundless.

A seven-year-old girl has been actively dying for several months. When I enter the room her father screams, “Why is God doing this to my little girl, to my BABY!” The girl cries out for more oxygen and a nurse helps her administer it to herself. Her mother, sitting anxiously over her daughter’s bed, rocks back and forth saying, “God, just please take her, take her, take her now.” She then yells, “God just save her! Save her!” Her father asks why God would do this after God saved his daughter from multiple defects at birth and through countless surgeries. Why give them seven, long, wonderful years of her life, only to take her now? He says, “Why is this happening to us, when there are a lot of bad parents in the world who do terrible things to their children?! Why doesn’t God take their children?” To add to this family’s loss, bankrupted by medical bills and out of work, they live in this hospital room with all their possessions and when their daughter dies at 3am on an upcoming day, they will be homeless by 4pm.

In another experience, I am the chaplain on-call and paged to rush with the entire medical team to the room of a 15-year-old oncology patient who has just had an unexpected heart attack. After trying to save her, the lead doctor declares the girl brain dead and tries to explain to her shocked mother that her daughter will not recover, in order to get her permission to end care. The mother refuses to end care, at first agreeing for the nurses to stop giving her daughter oxygen manually, but then, as she watches her daughter’s breathing and heartbeat slow down, insists they resume giving her oxygen. The mother starts praying aloud, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!” Standing a few feet behind her, I add to her prayer, in a nearly silent whisper, “Yes, Jesus.” She turns around enraged, “Do not say Jesus is here! Jesus is not here! Do not say he is here! Jesus is NOT here!”

In a final example, a teenage patient I worked with for weeks on one of my regular units, the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, attended the annual Children’s Hospital prom and was released to go home. Now, she returns to the PICU, and it is unclear whether or not she is actively dying, but she does eventually die a month later. Her mother, a very devout Spanish-speaking Christian wants me to visit frequently. I do visit and, though I do not speak Spanish, the mother and I communicate well and our visits seem to provide her comfort. However, her daughter, an English-speaker, no longer wants to talk and cannot be consoled by my visits. I try to engage the music she listens to, the TV movies she watches. Despite the fact that she is a teenager who might not want to interact with anyone, and quite possibly cannot process what is happening to her or is angry with God, her despair is palpable in the room and I feel like a complete failure, unable to offer her care. I no longer trust my own skills and start to lose faith.

What happens when faith fails? We come to the end of what has sustained us before, what we know as our connection to God, or the ultimate, and enter into a space in which nothing we can say or do can provide consolation either to ourselves or to others. As Morse writes, at the heart of theology we have to pay attention to the biblical Rachel, whose refusal to be consoled when her children are killed reminds us that we cannot offer easy consolation, or what Bonhoeffer

called “cheap grace.”<sup>16</sup> It is neither sufficient nor appropriate given the pain and injustice of suffering—whether personal or communal—to try to hop over the failure, whether we have caused the loss and it is our “fault,” or whether we suffer it having been either inflicted by another or as something no one could have prevented or predicted.

When faith fails, however, it feels like the end of the world, because psychologically it is. It is the end of the world, as we knew it. We cannot see beyond the failure, beyond the loss, and we still long for consolation, even as it eludes us. If we are not ushered into the “no place” of the loss of faith in the face of failure, perhaps our faith has not failed. But what does it mean to say that faith, as a human mode of trusting in God, is meant to fail? We turn now to investigate philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s insights into *The Religious Significance of Atheism* and the function of symbols in *Freud & Philosophy* as resources for people of faith who seek a consolation “beyond consolation.”

### Ricoeur: “On Consolation” and the Function of Symbols

In his essay, “On Consolation,” in *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, Ricoeur considers that God is beyond both our accusation and consolation. He thinks faith that believes in the providential God, the moral God, must give way to what he calls a “tragic faith.”<sup>17</sup> He writes, “Atheism must mean the destruction of the moral God not only as ultimate source of accusation but as the source of ultimate protection, as Providence. But if atheism is to have any religious significance, the death of the providential God should point toward a new faith, a tragic faith, which would be to classical metaphysics what the faith of Job was to the archaic law of retribution professed by his pious friends.”<sup>18</sup>

First, Ricoeur says atheism means the destruction of the moral God, the providential God of accusation and consolation. God as both wrathful retribution and, as in classical metaphysics, the *summum bonum*, or the “highest good,” has been destroyed. What does this mean? Providence comes from the Latin word *provideo*, provides or foresees it, “sees to it.” God provides for God’s creation. What actually dies here, is not God as Providence, but providence as wish fulfillment. Many see God as simply a heavenly parent who will punish and reward. The cries of my seven-year-old patient’s parents express this type of God. They alternate between accusing God—“how could God do this to my baby!?”—and wanting God’s consolation and intervention—“God, please save her!” The law of

16 Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 9–12. For key scriptures pertaining to Rachel’s refusal to be consoled, see Genesis 35.15–20, Jer. 31.15, and Matthew 27.46. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 43–56. “Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace. Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate sacrament...grace without a price, without costs.” (43)

17 Paul Ricoeur, “On Consolation,” in *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, (Columbia University: NY, 1969), 82.

18 Ibid.

retribution, the talon law of eye for an eye, appeals to her father. He asks why God cannot take the child of a bad person instead.

While it is not Providence, but providence as wish fulfillment that is destroyed by a tragic faith, it is not God as the *summum bonum*, but God as the *summum bonum* understood by the philosophers to mean God is what is highest and best of our world that is destroyed. This is the sense in which Martin Luther said a “theology of glory” could be used to avoid suffering, or what he called the “theology of the cross.”<sup>19</sup> While we can trust a God who cares for creation and in whose glory we will participate as God’s beloved, we can mistakenly expect God to be found only in what is good to us and can sometimes end up worshipping human potential.<sup>20</sup> This does not allow for suffering, or a God who enters into it, such as perhaps when the mother of my patient who died of a sudden heart attack screamed, “Jesus is NOT here!” She may have expected to be able to call God down and to be protected and consoled, for God to intervene to save her daughter. Just as the law of retribution has to die because it is not the true law of God in the Torah, the God of the philosophers is not the God of the Gospel.

Ricoeur says for atheism to be significant for religion or faith means that it must point to a tragic faith. For Christian tradition, atheism would also signify the end of “religion,” in what Bonhoeffer called the need for a “religionless” Christianity.<sup>21</sup> The end of religion means the end of our human practices of getting to God in the face of what God is revealing to us through Jesus Christ made incarnate in the particular sufferings of our world.<sup>22</sup> Both point to this tragic faith that, for Christians, is found in the testimony of what happens with Jesus Christ through incarnation, death on a cross, and resurrection. We, in the failure of our faith, in the death and destruction we face, cannot get to God. Jesus Christ comes into the world, born in a stable, into the worst of our inhumanity and suffering, not out of the perfect mind of the philosophers.

Jesus Christ is then crucified on a cross, which means he suffers with us everything we suffer. But he suffers on our behalf, not to appease a bloodthirsty wrathful God, no, that is still retribution. He suffers for us, faith tells us, to put an end to all our human suffering. This does not mean our wounds go away or are trivialized. No, this faith is tragic. We carry our wounds with us. However, all that would reject us, all that we would reject, in our sin and suffering, evil and

19 See Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 21–22. Morse highlights the fact that Luther’s distinction between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross is not a matter of faith versus reason as often misunderstood, but “the capacity to recognize the premises of reasoning intrinsic to faith.” See also *NES* note 24, page 351. Martin Luther, “Disputation Held at Heidelberg, April 26, 1518,” rubrics 19–22 in *Luther: Early Theological Works*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 16:290–92.

20 Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 122.

21 For more on “religionless” Christianity, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8: Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. By John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

22 See Christopher Morse, “Bonhoeffer and the Task of Theology Today” (Course Paper for Class Use, 2012), 3. For Bonhoeffer, who was committed to the Christian faith and “life together,” this “end” of religion signifies the primacy of God and the penultimate nature of human faith.

injustice, our inhumanity to one another and ourselves, is ultimately rejected and overcome.<sup>23</sup> This is the hope in the promise of the resurrected body of Christ, of which the whole world is considered a part.<sup>24</sup> The body maintains its scars, but no longer operates on the basis of them, as what we have lost has been regained through no effort of our own, but through God’s grace.<sup>25</sup>

It is easier to blame ourselves or others when faced with tragic loss, to turn pain into punishment. It is much harder to suffer it and allow it to potentially be transformed into a tragic faith. As I experienced with my patient, who I thought had been made well and would not be returning to the hospital, but then came back to die, it is hard to sit at the foot of the cross and suffer our loss of consolation, and our inability to console or be consoled, and wait for God, as Job did. Our faith fails because human faith, as a mode of trusting in God, is meant to fail. We cannot resurrect ourselves and have come to the end of our faith and wait with hope for what lies beyond consolation.

We now turn to Ricoeur’s essay on hermeneutics found in *Freud & Philosophy*, in which he explains how symbols function, and which I relate to stages of faith and failure’s place within them. The first phase of faith is a pre-critical stage, which Ricoeur calls the “first naiveté.”<sup>26</sup> In the first naiveté we are in a one-ness with our faith and its symbols. Symbols point to something beyond themselves and are alive “with the sound of music.” Faith feels meaningful. Important to note, some people will live their whole lives in this stage because their faith has not failed and they are able to remain in this primary relationship with it. We do not break people’s symbols or take away their faith.

But for many of us, life intervenes. Our symbols break and no longer transmit the ultimate to us. Ricoeur calls broken symbols “signs,” which are flat and univocal because they no longer convey anything beyond themselves.<sup>27</sup> This is the phase of demythologization and critical faith. We take what Ricoeur calls the “regressive vector” of the symbol and go back into its history to discover what

23 See Morse, “The Life to Come” in *Not Every Spirit*, 318–346. “Hell has no eternal dominion. If what God eternally rejects throughout all creation, with the fire of a love that remains unquenchable, is every opposition to our being loved into freedom, including our own, then the hellfire and damnation of Judgment Day is precisely the one true hope of all the earth. The old question of whether or not grace is “irresistible” only becomes a problem when theology forgets Who it is whose judgment is confessed to be coming. What else is the Crucifixion if not the resistance to grace? What finally does a Resurrection faith refuse to believe, if not that the resistance to grace is ever its cessation?” (341)

24 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. by Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 47–75. “When God in Jesus Christ claims space in the world—even space in a stable because “there was no other place in the inn”—God embraces the whole reality of the world in this narrow space and reveals its ultimate foundation.” (63)

25 Ibid., 144. See also Ann and Barry Ulanov, “Resurrection” in *The Healing Imagination* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 1999), 138–162.

26 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 19. He calls it “symbolic naivete.”

27 Ibid., 11–12.



lies hidden.<sup>28</sup> Examples of this stage include Thomas Jefferson cutting the miracles of Jesus out of his Bible, or, the theological turn, particularly following Rudolf Bultmann, to demythologization which sought to separate the kernel of truth from the husk of myth in relation to Christian *kerygma*, or proclamation.<sup>29</sup> While some will stay in this stage and seek a thoroughly historicized faith without any myth, this critical phase is on the way to a new kind of faith.<sup>30</sup> As Ricoeur said, if atheism has demythologized a certain kind of moralistic and providential God, its significance for faith must be something else.<sup>31</sup>

The third phase is what Ricoeur calls the “second naiveté.”<sup>32</sup> This is the stage of post-critical faith. If symbols are alive, they become remythologized here. We cannot make symbols come alive, or even decide what resonates as a symbol, but we participate in their remythologization by taking what Ricoeur calls the “progressive vector” of the symbol.<sup>33</sup> We ask, where is the symbol pointing? This is a return to faith, but not to the first naiveté. We cannot pretend we do not know what we discovered in the critical phase. But we now have a deeper faith, one might call it a tragic faith, as we see myth and history for what they are, but do not reduce faith to either perspective. As theologian Karl Barth wrote, the better term for history in relation to biblical faith, for instance, is “saga” because it evokes non-univocal history and myth and yet is more than the sum of its parts.<sup>34</sup> For Christians, we discover the saga of faith is that the story of what happens with Jesus Christ is our story. As symbols arise on their own, faith comes back to life on its own. We now turn to investigate psychic reality to consider further what it means that faith fails because it does not transmit the ultimate, but points to it.

### Bion: “Becoming O” and Necessary Failure

In *Attention and Interpretation*, British group psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion theorizes the way ultimate reality and finite reality function together psychically by extrapolating from empirical research he conducted with his analytic patients. Bion calls ultimate reality O, for an unbroken circle of the whole of reality, and finite reality K, for the knowledge we have of the ultimate. In his theory, O is becoming K, or knowledge. We only know ultimate reality once it enters the realm

28 Ibid, 524–551. Ricoeur calls the regressive and progressive vectors of symbols the archaeology and teleology of the symbol, its genesis and eschatology. (525)

29 Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, (New York: Scribner’s, 1958), 18. Hans Werner Bartsch, Rudolf Karl Bultmann, and Reginald H. Fuller, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (London: S.P.C.K., 1957), 5. See Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 37–41.

30 Some want to reduce the *kerygma* to “historically verifiable materials.” John A. McGuckin, *Recent Biblical Hermeneutics in Patristic Perspective*, 13.

31 Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, 82.

32 Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 543.

33 Ibid, 524–551.

34 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.1, 81, 83, 84, 90–91. See Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 41–44.

of finite knowledge and cannot know it on its own terms.<sup>35</sup> In Christian theology, this would be the fact that we only know God through Jesus Christ incarnate in the flesh and blood realities of this world, and only one day will see God “as if in a mirror, face to face.”<sup>36</sup> We cannot “be” or identify with O, or we would go mad, as we would lose our hold on reality, on our lives in this world. But we can open to “becoming O.”<sup>37</sup> Bion writes,

“The religious mystics have probably approximated most closely to expression of experience of it. Its existence is as essential to science as to religion. Conversely, the scientific approach is as essential to religion as it is to science and is as ineffectual until a transformation from K into O takes place.”<sup>38</sup>

For O to become K and K to become O, Bion says we have to leave behind memory and desire.<sup>39</sup> While faith traditions seek to balance historical memory with contemporary insights, Bion says, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, that when we are not attached to memory or desire we can see what is really coming into view. A way to think of this transformation of K into O is to consider science. In a scientific method we have a hypothesis but then we test that hypothesis to see if it bears out in reality. K, what we consider the knowledge we have already attained, becomes the scientific method when we open to it being transformed into O. This is how we get new insights and new data. O is becoming K, the knowledge of our new data, which in turn is, again, becoming O.

In another example, Christian dogmatics as a discipline functions much the same way as science in this regard. The testing of whether dogmatics is faithful to the teaching of the Gospel is whether it coheres with the spirit of God coming though Jesus Christ *apocalypsed en sarki* (“revealed in the flesh”).<sup>40</sup> Dogmatics then is not a set of rote church doctrines, but rather a dynamic discipline constantly being tested by the spirit of Jesus Christ in our midst today. Morse writes that “because of a just and gracious God who tests all human testing” we can get on with the human work of theology.<sup>41</sup>

If the transformation of O does not happen, we lose both ultimate and finite reality in what Bion calls –K. In an example from the New Testament, The Lord’s Prayer says, “Give us this day our daily bread.”<sup>42</sup> In the Christian sacrament of

35 Wilfred R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation: a Scientific Approach to Insight in Psycho-Analysis and Groups* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 26. “It is darkness and formlessness but it enters the domain K when it has evolved to a point where it can be known.”

36 1 Corinthians 13.12. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

37 Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 26–27.

38 Ibid., 30.

39 Ibid., 30–33, 41–54.

40 1 John 4.2. “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (*en sarki*) is from God. See Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 139–170.

41 Ibid, 28.

42 Matthew 6.5–14. See also Luke 11.3.

the Eucharist, we eat our daily bread today. It cannot be baked too far ahead of time, and if you try to eat it too long after the fact, it will have become stale and you will break your teeth on it. -K is the loss of knowledge, and with it, the loss of becoming O. We cannot hoard what we know, which is why Bion says we must surrender memory and desire; not because we do not hold onto what we have, but we cannot crush it or we lose it. Theologically, Morse calls this living what is “at hand, but not in hand.”<sup>43</sup>

In its most basic terms, from a theological standpoint, Bion’s theory paints a psychic picture of how immanence and transcendence work. On the one hand, we have our human religion, in Latin *religare*, “that which binds one back to oneself.”<sup>44</sup> On the other, we have the self-revelation of God. The two are in a mutual relationship, which theologians have imagined in various ways. Paul Tillich said we have an ultimate concern that originates from and gets taken up into God’s Ultimate Concern.<sup>45</sup> Barth said we have “tokens of revelation,” where God reveals God’s self to us but we cannot hold onto the tokens as if we can capture God in them.<sup>46</sup>

However, Bion’s column 2, on his complex number and letter grid, which I will not go further into here, perhaps denotes the place of necessary failure. In this column, Bion assigns all statements made during analysis by the patient and analyst that are knowingly false. They cannot help but make them. For Bion, our inability to do otherwise means we are close to knowing the truth, and column 2 is a resistance to and dread of transformation in O.<sup>47</sup> Theologically, for instance, in the Judeo-Christian story of Moses in Exodus 33.18–33, he discovers he cannot see God “face to face” and live.<sup>48</sup> Does this mean we have to turn away when too close to seeing God?

In Luke 22.31–34, Jesus tells Peter that he prays Peter’s faith will not fail. But then Jesus essentially tells him that his faith is going to fail and that when he comes back to faith, he should strengthen his brother apostles. Peter protests that there is no way he will fail Jesus—he is ready to go prison with him and die with him. But Jesus says, no, the cock will not crow this day “until you have denied three times that you know me.”<sup>49</sup> This devastates Peter who denies Jesus and weeps bitterly over it.<sup>50</sup>

What if we cannot help but fail, like Peter, and cannot overcome our limitations on our own? O is the overcoming of column 2, the ultimate rejection of

43 Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 23.

44 Jung uses this definition of religion as pertains to the psychic function of religious experience. See Jung, *Collected Works* 8, 221. See also *CW* 5: 429.

45 See Paul Tillich. *Systematic Theology, Vol. I.* (New York and Evanston: The University of Chicago Press and Harper & Row, 1967), 61, 110.

46 Karl Barth, “II.” In *Revelation*. Edited by John Baillie and Hugh Martin (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 79.

47 Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 97. Wilfred R. Bion, *Transformations* (London: Karnac Books, 1984), 147–171.

48 Exodus 33.20. “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”

49 Luke 22.34.

50 Luke 22.54–62.

our obstruction and resistance to being transformed in O. Theologically, Jesus Christ, through the cross, enters into what is false and failed in order to transform it. Could the overcoming of column 2 be a psychic picture of what happens when Christ goes into the far country of hell for us, to transform us and bring us back to ourselves? For Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus Christ means resistance to grace is not the final word, or, in the words of Romans 8, “nothing can separate us from the love of God.”<sup>51</sup>

For Bion, while we come up against our resistance to transformation in O, what poet John Keats called “negative capability,” the ability by which we are “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reason,” expresses the practice of opening to becoming O.<sup>52</sup> Going into negative space, being in the place of failure, or the “no place” where we feel groundless and nothing new has yet arisen, we open to what is new, to God coming, and to our faith being renewed.

### Facing Failure

One definition for failure is “fault.” In Christianity, fault is associated with sin. *O felix culpa*, the tradition says, *O blessed fault that merited so great a Redeemer*. Christian faith maintains that rather than never having failed or left the Garden of Eden, our falling away from God and returning to God’s open arms like the prodigal child give us far more than if we had stayed in our innocence. In the Christian faith, this is the promise of salvation. As one sings in the hymn “Amazing Grace,” “I once was lost, but now am found.” Or, as Barth put it, the only sin known as such is forgiven.<sup>53</sup> We only know our loss and its significance after having regained in relation to what we lost.

In both Ricoeur and Bion, something happens which is not of our making. The word “religion” in the New Testament primarily refers to human practices that we create in order to get to God contrasted with the revelation of Jesus Christ as God coming to us.<sup>54</sup> Though many interpret faith as presented in the New Testament to be a set of beliefs, or the act of believing, faith, or *pistis*, has a deeper connection to unbelief, *apistis*, (“I believe, help my unbelief!”) and to that which is “hoped for, but not seen.”<sup>55</sup> What seems clear in the New Testament is that

51 Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 341. Romans 8.35–39.

52 Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 125. See John Keats, *On Negative Capability*, ‘Letter to George and Thomas Keats,’ 21 December 1818. See also Joan and Neville Symington, *The Clinical Thinking of Wilfred Bion* (London: Routledge, 1996), 169.

53 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.2, 768. “It is only forgiven sin that we know that it is recognized as sin, that it is sin. What we may more or less know apart from forgiveness is perhaps defect, error or vice. But to know sin as sin, as our rebellion against God, as our transgression of [God’s] command, we must know its forgiveness.”

54 See Morse, “Bonhoeffer and the Task of Theology Today,” 2–5. See also note 8, page 9.

55 Mark 9.24: “Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” Hebrews 11.1:

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

any faith comes from God. 2 Thessalonians says, “Not all have faith, but God is faithful.”<sup>56</sup> No one can chastise anyone for not having faith; it is a gift. Believing and faith belong to God, so rather than saying “You must believe in Christ!” we might say, “Hallelujah! Christ believes in you!”

What does this amount to in non-Christian terms? It means a post-critical faith lets O be manifest in us and in our world, and opens us to seeing ourselves as not the ultimate source of our blame or consolation, or for what happens when tragedy confronts us, but as part of a wider frame of reference. We have our practices of faith, but we see now we do not create them, but relate to them and participate in shaping them as we are shaped by the world. We understand, with Bonhoeffer, that success is not what faith is about.<sup>57</sup> Faith is living K open to O, even as column 2 resistance and –K are part of the reality we face.

### Beyond Consolation

Toward the end of my time at the hospital, I taught Ricoeur and Bion to fellow chaplains. The question was pressed upon me, “But what about people who still want consolation?” As I pondered this question, I was asked to conduct a service for an enormous, mostly Spanish-speaking Christian family of a beloved woman and mother being taken off life support. We planned to pray and sing over her as she died. When I met with her son to plan the service and find out exactly what scripture or songs he wanted included, he said he wanted only one thing. “Consolation.” I laughed to myself because in that moment I saw what lies beyond consolation. It is a consolation we do not provide, which is not authored by us, but in which we participate and witness.

Witnessing is what one does when one merely stands as a presence with those who are suffering. When I was with my seven-year-old patient and her parents, I found the story of Moses and the burning bush helpful in this regard. In Exodus 3, an angel speaks to Moses from a burning bush that is not consumed. Moses turns aside to look to see how it is that the bush is still standing. Then God calls his name and Moses replies, “*Hineni*.” “Here I am!” God tells Moses to take off his shoes for he is standing on holy ground.<sup>58</sup> Though the family burned with grief and rage, I thought about how God promised the bush would not be consumed. I took off my metaphorical shoes to stand with them on the holy ground of their suffering into which God was about to enter.

In another instance, I was witnessed *to* and provided unexpected consolation. In the PICU, I worked with a woman from China whose son was gravely ill and his condition uncertain. Not affiliated with any religion, she told me a friend

56 2 Thessalonians 3.2b–3.

57 God’s faithfulness to us rather than our success is a primary theme for Bonhoeffer. For instance, see Bonhoeffer, “To the Brethren of Finkenwalde and the Pastors of the Confessing Church: Circular Letters in the Church Struggle and War Years (1936–1942)” in *A Testament to Freedom*, 475–476.

58 Exodus 3.4.

had given her a Bible in Chinese and reading it was helping her. I asked her if any particular books or characters spoke to her. She could not name them in English, she said, so I clarified that maybe she could tell me the story that she felt helped her. With no background in the text or a faith community, she told me the story of Job and how his being open to what was beyond our understanding had ushered her into a relationship with God, who she felt comforted her now. I asked her how and she said it opened her to not knowing what would happen—whether her son would live or not—but to trusting God is bigger than that and is not a tyrant or evil or blaming us, but reaches out to us from the whirlwind.

I hope to have shown that failure is an integral part of faith philosophically, psychoanalytically, and theologically. We are limited human beings, though not without agency and capacity, and can open ourselves to receive what, or Who, wants to be made known to us and through us. While we never stop wanting consolation, our desire gets taken up into a wider frame of reference, which enables us to endure failure and see its fruitful capacities, even in the face of devastation that cannot be undone.

With Bonhoeffer, we can remember the point of faith is not our success. Rather, in the midst of the worst tragedies of life, wherever we are, we can try to witness what God is doing and the difference it makes. Bonhoeffer lived this faith all the way to the end of his life when he was hanged at Flossenbürg concentration camp by the Nazis just two weeks before the liberation of the camp by Allied forces at the end of World War II. A doctor at the camp reported seeing him pray before he went out to the gallows, and then again as he climbed the stairs. The doctor wondered who is this Rev. Dr. Bonhoeffer that he could do such a thing?<sup>59</sup> Indeed, who? But Bonhoeffer would want us to see that what lies beyond consolation, as the significance of failure for faith, is nothing less than the Living God, coming into our particular situation, to transform us and reconcile the world.

59 Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 927–928.