Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as deus ex machina. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help. To this extent, one may say that the previously described development toward the world’s coming of age, which has cleared the way by eliminating a false notion of God, frees us to see the God of the Bible, who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless. This will probably be the starting point for our “worldly interpretation.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison

The previous chapter gives an impression of the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In this chapter, Hillesum’s diaries and letters are compared and contrasted with Bonhoeffer’s Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft (E.T., Letters and Papers from Prison). The study introduces Hillesum in the light of Bonhoeffer’s theology of a “powerless and suffering God” (die Ohnmacht und das Leiden Gottes), that is to say,

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of a God who shares in the world’s suffering. While Hillesum and Bonhoeffer both had to come to terms with Nazi Germany’s totalitarian deformation of society, one understands the critic who doubts that bringing a renowned Protestant theologian and Christian ethicist into conversation with “a Jewish girl student from Amsterdam,” who wrote a collection of diaries and letters is a promising direction for research. Certainly, Etty Hillesum did not know Bonhoeffer or his theology, and although she read several ‘Christian writings,’ his works make no appearance in her diaries. Moreover, if she had come across Bonhoeffer’s 1937 masterpiece Nachfolge (E.T., The Cost of Discipleship), which came out the year she moved into Han Wegerif’s home in Amsterdam, she would in all likelihood have put the book aside, due to dense theological language and the highly Christocentric style. This is not to say that Christianity and Jesus did not interest

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4 E.T., 19. Hillesum refers to herself as “a Jewish girl student from Amsterdam.” [Het Werk, 20: een Joodse studente uit Amsterdam.]

5 Smelik, “Notes,” 687, 688, 694, 695, 731–732, 740. Hillesum read the Old and New Testament and the works of (ascetic) Christian writers, such as (1) the author Thomas á Kempis (1379/80–1471), of Imitation of Christ, with its strong leanings towards the Devotio Moderna movement [Het Werk, 58, 121, 179, 729]; (2) the Christian Latin author St. Augustine (354–430), of the Confessions, an autobiography written in 397–400 [Het Werk, 121, 388, 393, 401, 404, 406, 420, 427, 460, 470, 579, 736, 766]; (3) St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226), that is to say, a fragment from an early twentieth-century poem mistakenly attributed to him [Het Werk, 108, 576, 735]. Additionally, she quoted from Walter Schubart and his work Europa und die Seele des Ostens (Luzern: Vita Nova Verlag, 1938, 71); and from Friedrich Rittelmeyer’s Briefe, über das Johannesevangelium (Stuttgart: Verlag Urachhaus, 1938, 195). [Rittelmeyer (1872–1938) was a German clergyman in Würzburg, Nürnberg and Berlin. In 1922 he founded the Christen-gemeinschaft movement for religious reform, based on the ideas of Rudolph Steiner.] In note 397 of E.T. (p. 732), Smelik points out that Spier also recommended books by Eli Stanley Jones (1884–1973) to his acquaintances, such as The Christ of the Indian Road (1925), Victorious Living (1936) (devotional), The Christ of Every Road—A study in Pentecost (1930) and Christ’s Alternative to Communism (1935) [US title]. [Jones was a 20th century Methodist Christian missionary and theologian, who arrived in India in 1907 and worked there as evangelist. Jones being a radical pacifist established Christian ashrams where they strove to develop a typically Indian interpretation of Christianity.] Etty Hillesum was probably acquainted with the work of Jones prior to meeting Spier, through her friend Johanna Kuiper, who had translated a number of his books into Dutch.

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