

NOTES

BONHOEFFER AND THE CHURCH'S PROPHETIC MISSION

What is the meaning of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for the Church in a time of renewal and transition? The thought of this brilliant German theologian, hanged by the Gestapo in 1945 at the early age of thirty-nine, has been a seminal point of departure for many contemporary religious thinkers.¹ Some writers, capitalizing on such striking phrases of the later Bonhoeffer as "religionless Christianity" and "the world come of age," have termed him the father of today's death-of-God school.² Others have pointed to a radical break in Bonhoeffer's thought between his years as a deeply ecclesial theologian and his lonely, harrowing days in Hitler's prisons.³

A closer examination of Bonhoeffer's thought, however, would reveal that he was a far more traditional thinker than many who would now claim his mantle. Also, the whole span of his writings, while manifesting a definite modification in his outlook, does not disclose a radical discontinuity. Surely there are new insights and shifting emphases in his books; for Bonhoeffer the scholar was very much identified with Bonhoeffer the active Christian plunged into the great German Church struggle under the Third Reich. His thought was dynamically attuned to and shaped by these life changes. Moreover, it is precisely in the chastening experiences of the theologian who witnessed with his blood that the salutary message for the Church today is to be found. His story "belongs to the modern Acts of the Apostles,"⁴ and it has real significance for a Church seeking its prophetic place in the modern world.

If the Church, and Christians within it, were to fulfil their prophetic witness to God's redemption in Christ, Bonhoeffer saw that false religiousness and debilitating dualisms would have to be overcome. His own Lutheran Church had long been victimized by a too radical division between the orders of gospel and law, of creation and redemption, of Christian community and secular society. Unable to see God in Christ at the center of reality, the Church sought Him at the periphery of human existence. There, however, His hold as a God-in-the-gaps, as an occasional problem-solver,

¹ Strong dependence on Bonhoeffer's thought can be seen in such books as John A. T. Robinson, *Honest To God* (Philadelphia, 1963); Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, 1965); Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York, 1963); William Hamilton, *The New Essence of Christianity* (New York, 1961).

² William Hamilton, "A Secular Theology for a World Come of Age," *Theology Today* 18 (1962) 440.

³ Marc Ebersole, *Christian Faith and Man's Religion* (New York, 1961) pp. 53-54.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Death of a Martyr," *Christianity and Crisis* 5 (1945) 6.

became less and less firm. Maturing man was finding scientific solutions for many problems that had plagued his more primitive ancestors. During the German Church struggle, Bonhoeffer deepened his conviction that the Church had abdicated its responsibility to speak out and act prophetically. He saw the German Christians under Reichbishop Müller become the willing pawns of Hitler's Aryan madness. For Bonhoeffer, this sad outcome resulted from a long Church refusal to accept the world as incipiently transformed by the Incarnation. By this refusal the Church tended to abdicate its responsibility of serving and building that world as a reality touched by grace.

Bonhoeffer's criticisms of the Church's withdrawal from the center of a world come of age are chiefly directed at German Lutheranism, but his strictures have broader ramifications for other Churches today. He felt that the Church was largely unconverted to the prophetism of Scripture, which often called for risk and suffering. The Church, in Bonhoeffer's view, was for the most part relying on its own human resources to make peace with the Nazi *status quo*. It was no longer casting itself on the grace of the gospel, which alone could give it the strength to "be called again to utter the word of God with such power as will change and renew the world."⁵ Bonhoeffer felt that "During these years the church has fought for self-preservation as though it were an end in itself, and has thereby lost its chance to speak a word of reconciliation to mankind and to the world at large."⁶ He also maintained that the Church, in a certain sense, was an end in itself. But this end-in-itself did not consist in a primary concern for Church membership statistics or for the appeasement of secular powers. Rather, the Church was an end in itself when it truly existed for the sake of the world in a spirit of loyalty to the gospel, not to the dictates of National Socialism. Such was the courageous view of the Church that inspired men like Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer, and others to draw up the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church, which took its stand uncompromisingly on the gospel and not on the twisted interpretations of *Mein Kampf*.⁷

The cleavage between a nonprophetic Church and a world come of age was intensified for Bonhoeffer by Christianity's retreat into religiousness. It should be noted, however, that religion, in Bonhoeffer's perspective, must not be confused with radical faith in Christ or with a life lived accord-

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York, 1962) p. 188.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁷ Cf. John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia, 1960) pp. 91, 115-16.

ing to the gospel.⁸ Rather, religion was precisely a corruption of such faith and life. It represented the futile efforts of the Church to retreat to the periphery of human existence, where it might invoke a distant problem-solver deity to resolve the boundary issues of personal or communal tragedy. Thus, the Church preached a God to fill the gaps, but a God with little or nothing to say prophetically about the central concerns of human society. Western man, however, who found himself emancipated from ecclesiastical tutelage in political, cultural, and scientific realms, was busy filling those gaps by his own knowledge and its application. The process of the desacralization of nature—which had been spurred on by biblical religion—and of the declericalization of human institutions had given man a growing autonomy to set his own course in history. But this same evolutionary, cultural process was diminishing the need for the *deus ex machina* concept of God to which the Churches and religious people still clung.

Against this sterile mentality, Bonhoeffer urged the Church to accept the coming-of-age of modern man and to avoid the older apologetic of attacking the adulthood of the world. He considered the somewhat fundamentalist reproach made by Christians against modernity to be pointless, because it tried to put a grown man back into adolescence. He felt that this ecclesiastical attitude was ignoble inasmuch as it tended to exploit man's weaknesses rather than appreciate his strength and his human strivings. He termed the older apologetic unchristian, because in place of a living and dynamic Christ at the center of things the Church was substituting and absolutizing one particular stage in the development of man's religious consciousness.⁹ Bonhoeffer also reacted against certain tendencies in Liberal Protestantism which tried to save something of the Church's position in the world by relegating Christ and God to those boundaries of human existence which dealt with death and eternity. He saw this as a dangerous capitulation which could only lead to a denial of God's place in Christ at the center of worldly affairs.¹⁰ Here is the root of Bonhoeffer's opposition to Barth's view of divine transcendence as "totally other." In place of such an epistemological transcendence, which would tend to make God irrelevant to human issues, Bonhoeffer stressed a social-ethical transcendence of an immanent deity, the beyond-within, who helps us to transcend selfishness

⁸ Cf. Clifford Green, "Bonhoeffer's Concept of Religion," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 29 (1963) 11.

⁹ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 197.

¹⁰ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York, 1965) p. 197.

in loving service of the neighbor, and thus to discover the transcendence of God in humanity.

Abandoning its place at the center of a world abuilding, the Church for Bonhoeffer had retreated into religiousness, which he saw as the supreme abdication of its task; for it meant a betrayal of the radicalness of Jesus' incarnation unto death and resurrection. Instead of educating Christians to be concerned for this-worldly values as already in some measures Christic, the Church was satisfied with producing the *homo religiosus*. This man of religion is characterized by two notes: individualism and metaphysics. These are correlative concepts and should be understood in Bonhoeffer's own context. Individualism amounts to a preoccupation with one's own salvation, with "deliverance from the boundary experiences in which our weakness and insecurity loom up before us."¹¹ Such individualism inclines the pious churchman to neglect his responsibility within and to the world. As Bonhoeffer stated it:

It is not some religious act that makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.

That is *metanoia*. It is not in the first instance bothering about one's own needs, problems, sins, fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up in the way of Christ, into the Messianic event. . . .¹²

Metaphysics is the overarching scheme that the man of religion imposes on reality. Bonhoeffer was certainly not opposed to searching for ultimate meaning in life. But he rejected the religious man's self-induced and provincial attempt to analyze the world from its periphery, to superimpose outworn concepts and facile syntheses on the complex human scene. Such metaphysics tends to legitimize the religious man's isolation from the hard social and ethical issues at the center of historical reality. By such "cheap grace" the religious man finds an easy escape to a supernatural realm.¹³ Such religion lulls man into a false sense of security, and it keeps him from confronting God in Christ at the center of human existence.

This confrontation takes place not at the boundaries of life in man's weakness only, but precisely in his strength: in his health, knowledge, power, and this-worldliness. Thus, it is in the center of life that man's sin is exposed and that he is called to discipleship. This prophetic discipleship means a participation in the suffering of Christ for the world. Repentance and

¹¹ Green, *art. cit.*, p. 16.

¹² *Letters and Paper from Prison*, pp. 223, 167-68.

¹³ Cf. Eberhard Bethge, "The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Theology," *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 51 (1961) 33-34.

faith are to be looked for at the center of life;¹⁴ there man is invited to abandon being-for-himself in order to be-for-others. In such discipleship the Christian experiences a new transcendence of God, a transcendence not construed by human philosophies, but one that wells out of the joys and sorrows, the accomplishments and failures, of life itself. Thus, for Bonhoeffer, "God is the 'beyond' in the midst of our life."¹⁵ He speaks of finding the transcendent God in the this-worldly experience of a new life lived for others:

Our relation to God is not a religious relationship to a Supreme Being, absolute in power and goodness, which is a spurious conception of transcendence, but a new life for others, through participation in the being of God. The transcendence consists not in tasks beyond our scope and power, but in the nearest *thou* at hand. God in human form. . . man existing for others, and hence the Crucified.¹⁶

To appreciate more fully how both the Church community and the individual Christian disciple are to live in the world, one should examine more closely Bonhoeffer's thought about the relation of reality itself to the incarnation of Christ. The reality of God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ constitutes the ultimate reality in light of which both the world and the self are to be understood.¹⁷ Jesus Christ as reconciler and redeemer is the center, historical and transhistorical, for the reality of both the Church and the world. The reality of God and the reality of the world are in Jesus Christ once and for all, inasmuch as "in Him all things consist" (Col 1:17). Bonhoeffer cannot speak of God or of the world without speaking of Jesus Christ.¹⁸

This convergence of reality in Jesus Christ throughout history is one way in which Bonhoeffer heals the rift between theology and human existence. He rejects the too radical scholastic split between nature and grace, and he tries to correct the pseudo-Lutheran separation of two spheres, that of creation and that of redemption, of law and gospel, of Church and civil society. Such divisions allow the man of religion to live in two worlds that are more or less exclusive of one another. The reality of Christ is reduced to the religious sphere only.¹⁹ Such separations render a vital Christian ethic impossible for Bonhoeffer. Christian morality tends to degenerate into a

¹⁴ Cf. Green, *art. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 166.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-38; italics added to emphasize that I substituted the word "thou" for the word "thing"—as it appears in this text—on the authority of Eberhard Bethge, *art. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁷ *Ethics*, pp. 189-90.

¹⁸ *Ethic* p. 194.

¹⁹ *Ethics*, p. 196.

tissue of casuistic abstractions. It ceases to be a concrete conformity to Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified, and risen.²⁰ In this sense of conformity to Christ in the midst of the world, Bonhoeffer sees not only the formation of Christian ethics for the individual but also the very form of corporate, ecclesial moral endeavor:

So the church is not a religious community of worshippers of Christ, but is Christ Himself who has taken form among men. The church can be called the Body of Christ because in Christ's Body man is really taken up by Him, and so too, therefore, are all mankind. . . . But it is impossible to state clearly enough that the church, too, is not an independent form by herself, side by side with the form of Christ. . . . The church is nothing but a section of humanity in which Christ has really taken form.²¹

In the above quotation Bonhoeffer is pointing to the basis of Christian ethical action through the Church, which is a section of humanity that is more explicitly aware of what the Father has accomplished in Jesus in and for the sake of the world. Worth noting, incidentally, is the continuity of Bonhoeffer's thought concerning the Church as the corporate form of Christ in the world; for Bonhoeffer's earliest work, *The Communion of Saints*, dealt at length with the notion of Christ existing as a community, a new fellowship formed in the Holy Spirit and sustained by Him through the Church's preaching, sacraments, prayer, and service.²²

It should be recognized, however, that Bonhoeffer introduced an important corrective into his thinking about the convergence of the Church and the world in the reality of Christ. In his earlier work this corrective note was struck by his insistence on the communion of sinners that persists within the communion of saints.²³ Later he referred to a polemical unity of God and creation, the revelational and the rational, the Church and the world. He felt that the Church had to maintain a prophetic distance from the world for the sake of being able to shatter false idols that would prove destructive to both Church and society. And yet, Bonhoeffer would insist that the secular domain be respected for its own intrinsic values and that its autonomy be maintained. He wanted no facile sacralization of the secular, so that it might once again become subordinate to the ecclesiastical. In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer put the matter this way:

But between the two [the Christian and the secular] there is . . . a unity that derives solely from the reality of Christ, that is solely from faith in this ultimate

²⁰ *Ethics*, pp. 80–82. ²¹ *Ethics*, p. 83.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints* (New York, 1963) p. 92.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

reality. This unity is seen in the way in which the secular and the Christian elements prevent one another from assuming any kind of static independence in their mutual relations. They adopt a polemical attitude toward each other and bear witness precisely in this to their shared reality and to their unity in the reality which is in Christ.²⁴

Thus, both the Church and the secular are to keep each other from falling into the false independence of unrelated spheres. This polemical tension of interdependence and distinction is a needed polarity for realizing their mutual unity in the reality of God in Christ. At the root of this tension seems to be the mysterious polarity of the Incarnation itself; for in an analogous sense, just as there can be no identification of the human and the divine in Christ's nature if one is to preserve the fulness of the Christic paradox, so too there can be no collapsing of Church into world without distorting one or other of these realities. The Christian is called to live in the dynamic tension of a paradoxical situation; the Church organism needs this tension for its inner development and for its prophetic mission.

The close relationship between the Church and the world is also described by Bonhoeffer under the aspect of the "ultimate" and the "penultimate." The ultimate signifies the final and justifying word of God, which is effective through grace and faith in some relation to the Church.²⁵ But this ultimate does not invalidate the penultimate realm of man's life in the world. The penultimate is that which precedes the justification of the sinner by grace, and it is also the Christian life lived in the eschatological tension of the "already" and the "not yet." This realm of the penultimate, therefore, constitutes a witness to the historical event of grace in Christ and also to the eschatological fulfilment to come. The Church and the Christian are called to respect and to foster the development of the penultimate, both for its own sake and as a preparation for the coming of the ultimate. Perhaps an example from Bonhoeffer will clarify the ultimate-penultimate relation. He speaks of a depth of human bondage, poverty, and ignorance which impedes the merciful coming of Christ, just as this graced coming of Christ into human affairs is also hampered by the abuses of those who have wealth and power.²⁶ Thus, the Church must champion the penultimate domain of human freedom and justice and peace among individuals and communities at home and abroad. The Church should do this both with deep respect for the intrinsic merits of the penultimate and for the fuller realization of the ultimate. But in both instances the Church must speak and act with the prophetic liberty and courage of a community

²⁴ *Ethics*, p. 199. ²⁵ *Ethics*, pp ff. 120. ²⁶ *Ethics*, p. 135.

that has firmly placed its confidence in the power of the ultimate. Only then will the Church not become a slave to the penultimate; only then will the Church be truly free to promote the things before the last.

This difficult task of being fully in the world though not of it demands that Church communities cultivate an intensity of discipleship in conformity to the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord. Bonhoeffer's book *The Cost of Discipleship* has been seen by some as a withdrawal from the Christian involvement that he later espoused in *Ethics* and in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. But *The Cost of Discipleship*, though reflecting Bonhoeffer's period of disillusionment with the German Church under Hitler, is actually a rejection not of sound worldliness for man come of age, but rather a renunciation of the sick, unevangelical worldliness existing within the Church itself. The discipleship of costly grace in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount was not intended to draw men from the world into monastic seclusion.²⁷ "The Risen Lord," Bonhoeffer wrote, "had returned to the earth to be nearer than ever before. The Body of Christ has penetrated into the heart of the world in the form of the church."²⁸ The Church was in the world "to prove to the world that it is still the world, the world which is loved by God and reconciled with Him."²⁹ But such preaching of a prophetic word to the world could not be done by Churches that settled for "cheap grace":

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.³⁰

In his quest for true discipleship, Bonhoeffer was urging his fellow Christians and their Churches to abandon the kind of grace that is cheap because it "is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves."³¹ Although Bonhoeffer later recognized the dangers of an overly withdrawn life, he was prepared, even in his prison letters, to stand by what he had previously written in *The Cost of Discipleship*.³²

True discipleship in a world-oriented Church also required what Bonhoeffer referred to as "the arcane discipline." This consisted of the important

²⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, 1963) p. 212.

²⁸ *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 290.

²⁹ *Ethics*, p. 202.

³⁰ *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 47.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³² *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 226.

dimension of worship in the ecclesial community through word and sacrament. The importance of a communal faith-response to the word spoken with spiritual power can be seen in Bonhoeffer's earliest work.³³ A life of Christian faith and service in the world was hardly possible for the author of *The Cost of Discipleship* without prayerful meditation on the Bible.³⁴ One of Bonhoeffer's most influential writings on prayer and communal spirituality is the small volume *Life Together*, which reflects his period as director of Lutheran seminarians at Finkenwalde in Germany just prior to World War II. This work stressed the need for prayer, silence, mutual confession, and service, as well as communal worship of word and sacrament in the ecclesial community.³⁵ Although Bonhoeffer's inner life of arcane discipline had of necessity to become more hidden in Berlin's Tegel Prison, a deep and unpretentious prayer life undergirds his prison papers. Reflecting on the obsolescence of much Christian language and its inability to speak with power to men in the twentieth century, Bonhoeffer wrote from his cell: "So our traditional language must perforce become powerless and remain silent, and our Christianity today will be confined to praying and doing right by our fellow man. Christian thinking, speaking and organization must be reborn out of this praying and this action."³⁶

Right to the end, Bonhoeffer was a man of this arcane discipline. He was taken away to be hanged shortly after conducting a worship service for his fellow prisoners on the Bible verses for the day, April 8, 1945; these passages were on the theme of death and resurrection.³⁷

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological view of the prophetic Church and of the Christian disciple deeply involved in this-worldly ministries has much kinship with the new directions of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. Especially as seen in *Pacem in terris* and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the Catholic Church is being summoned today to do God's work of building the city of man and of making the human family more humane.

Of course, this is not a totally new direction; social encyclicals and charitable work have long been a part of Catholic ministries. But a this-worldly spirituality and action have often been subordinated in Catholicism to otherworldly and legalistic forms of religiosity. A certain kind of worldliness we have indeed had in the Church. But this is what Bonhoeffer would

³³ *The Communion of Saints*. p. 178.

³⁴ *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 190.

³⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, 1954) p. 49.

³⁶ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 187-88.

³⁷ Cf. Godsey, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

call a hopeless godlessness, lacking the true dimensions of living faith and commitment, rather than the hopeful worldliness of the true disciple.⁸⁸ Instead of an adapted and intense arcane discipline of liturgical and private prayer, we have too frequently settled for relatively empty rote forms and rigid rubricism. We have concentrated more on fulfilling heavily-sanctioned obligations and perhaps on placating a distant deity than we have on creative worship, which could be a source of worldly mission and a joyful, adaptable response to our prophetic ministries.

Too often we have been concerned with Church or religious-order membership statistics, the size of our real estate, and the prestige of our dignitaries rather than with the altruistic service of persons and communities. In the name of institutional stability, we have curtailed human freedoms and failed to promote persons for what they were meant to be rather than for what they could contribute to the institution. Although we have had the tradition of papal social encyclicals with us for nearly eighty years, we have largely paid lip service to them in our ordinary ministries. With the excuse of preserving our tradition, we have sealed ourselves off from other religious traditions, which might have challenged and enriched our own. In the name of patriotism, we have not questioned seriously our own bellicose self-righteousness as Church communities and as American communities in matters of war and peace. In the name of social respectability and other prejudices, we have not opened our hearts to those of other races, classes, and creeds. In the quest for our own comfort, we as Christians and as Church communities pay little heed to the greatest dilemma of the last third of the twentieth century, the dilemma of world hunger and poverty, coupled with the rising aspirations of men and nations for self-determination and a more humane life. In brief, we must admit that the Church has too often looked like an institution whose main purpose was to constrain a compartmentalized and otherworldly deity into legitimizing the nonprophetic conduct of Bonhoeffer's "religious people."

Thanks, however, to the renewal and hope engendered by the spirit of Pope John and the incipient directions of Vatican II, both individual Christians and Church communities have gained a fresh awareness of Christ's prophetic mission in and for the world. This vision is similar to that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who toward the end of his life described the contemporary Christian as a worldly man who shares in the sufferings of God in the service of his brothers:

... it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe. One must abandon every attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, a

⁸⁸ *Ethics*, p. 103.

converted sinner, a churchman . . . a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. This is what I mean by worldliness—taking life in one's stride with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness. It is in such a life that we throw ourselves utterly in the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith, that is *metanoia*, and that is what makes a man and a Christian.³⁹

What he said of a prophetic Christian living for others in the world, Bonhoeffer also applied to the Church. Some of the proposals in this final quotation concerning the Church may seem radical, and perhaps they do not constitute the best practical approach toward modern ministries. But what is more important is the underlying spirit and style that he calls upon the Church to exhibit in its dealings with contemporary man. He exhorts the Church to abandon sterile religiousness for a truly prophetic and evangelical style:

The church is her true self only when she exists for humanity. As a fresh start she should give away all her endowments to the poor and needy. The clergy should live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. She must take her part in the social life of the world, not lording it over men, but helping and serving them. She must tell men, whatever their calling, what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. And in particular, our own church will have to take a strong line with the blasphemies of *hybris*, power-worship, envy and humbug, for these are the roots of evil. She will have to speak of moderation, purity, confidence, loyalty, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility . . . and modesty. She must not underestimate the importance of human example, which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus. . . . It is not abstract argument, but concrete example which gives her word emphasis and power.⁴⁰

University of Santa Clara

EUGENE C. BIANCHI, S.J.

³⁹ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 226–27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 239–40.