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A Poor Church in Service of “the World“ The Utopian Dimension in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Ecclesiology

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

While Dietrich Bonhoeffer is well-known in German speaking countries and to a certain degree in the Protestant churches of English speaking countries, this is not the case in Catholic Latin America. Thus, a few introductory pointers may help to understand Bonhoeffer’s theology in context.

Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran theologian and Pastor who was part of the resistance against Hitler which was not only church-based but also military, i.e. the group of Admiral Canaris and Colonel von Stauffenberg that undertook the assassination attempt on Hitler on July 20, 1944. Although by that time Bonhoeffer had been in prison for more than a year, his implication had been discovered. He was put to trial and then executed in the Nazi concentration camp of Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945, one month before the end of World War II.

It is interesting to note that during his time in prison Bonhoeffer did not turn to a theology of the “beyond”, seeking freedom from the world, but to a radical “this-worldly” theology, seeking freedom and justice in and for the world. Ever since his “Letters and Papers from Prison” have become publicly known in the 1950s he is considered as the theologian of this-worldliness par excellence.

If we read and study Bonhoeffer more profoundly we can find interesting analogies to theology of liberation; but with the exception of Franz Hinkelammert, whose teacher Helmut Gollwitzer had been strongly influenced by Bonhoeffer, his contribution to Latin American

theology is rather modest.¹ This may be due to the fact that Bonhoeffer's thinking is utterly Lutheran, so most of Latin American theologians would not get to know it easily.

Bonhoeffer is interesting for political theologies and liberation theologies because he is very much interested in the role of the institutional church and its mission in politically precarious times. In his dissertation "Sanctorum Communio" (1924 – a critical time, economically as well as politically, although Hitler was not yet on the rise) Bonhoeffer describes the church as intermediate actor between God and humankind; he even calls the church "body of Christ" and "Christ existing as church-community"².

That notion is not to be understood in spiritual but essentially in practical and ethical terms: Christ is the incarnate God-with-us and God defines himself in the book of Exodus as God-for-us. So being-for-others, being "pro me" and "pro nobis" is God's very character.³ And the human person, created in the image of God, is also characterised as being-for-others, being in relationship with other persons – this is how we transcend our ego. Relating to others provides us with the true experience of transcendence. At the same time relationship entails responsibility, thus, Bonhoeffer speaks of the "ethical transcendence"⁴ of the human person. So it is logical that Bonhoeffer's theological thinking began to concentrate more and more on ethics. And from the experience of the totalitarian Nazi dictatorship he concluded that ethics

¹ Cf. Santa Ana, Julio de: Der Einfluß Bonhoeffers auf die Theologie der Befreiung. In: Pfeifer, Hans (Hg.): Genf '76. Ein Bonhoeffer-Symposium (IBF 1), München 1976, 151-163; Gutiérrez, Gustavo: Die Grenzen der modernen Theologie. Ein Text von Bonhoeffer. In: Conc(D) 15 (1979), 291-297.

² DBWE 1 (Sanctorum Communio), 121.

Bonhoeffer is quoted according to the English edition of his complete works: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. 17 volumes. Edited by Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski, Minneapolis 1996-2014 (abbr.: DBWE). For Bonhoeffers ecclesiology cf. among others: Außermair Josef, Konkreteion und Gestalt. „Leiblichkeit“ als wesentliches Element eines sakramentalen Kirchenverständnisses am Beispiel der ekklesiologischen Ansätze Paul Tillichs, Dietrich Bonhoeffers und Hans Asmussens unter ökumenischem Gesichtspunkt, (KKTS 67), Paderborn 1997; Huber, Wolfgang: Wahrheit und Existenzform. Anregungen zu einer Theorie der Kirche bei Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in: Feil, Ernst/Tödt, Ilse (eds.): Dietrich Bonhoeffers Kirchenverständnis heute, München 1980, 87-139; Igrac, Marie-Therès: Ekklesia: Herausgerufene in die Welt hinein. Der Weg Dietrich Bonhoeffers jenseits von Fundamentalismus und Säkularismus, in: de Gruchy, John W. et al. (eds.): Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology Today. A Way between Fundamentalism and Secularism, Gütersloh 2009, 274-291; Ludwig, Hartmut: Von der Kirche als Leib Christi zur „Kirche für andere“. Die Wandlung des Bildes der Kirche in der Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers, in: Schmitz, Florian/Tietz, Christiane (eds.): Dietrich Bonhoeffers Christentum (FS Christian Gremmels), Gütersloh 2011, 176-193; Peters, Tiemo R.: Kirche – Wagnis für andere. Impulse für die Ekklesiologie im Werk Dietrich Bonhoeffers, in: StdZ 204 (1986), 485-497; Müller Gerhard L., Für andere da. Christus – Kirche – Gott in Bonhoeffers Sicht der mündig gewordenen Welt (KKTS 44), Paderborn 1980.

³ Cf. DBWE 12, 314 f.

⁴ Cf. DBWE 1 (Sanctorum Communio), 46.

has to concentrate on free responsible action, taking over responsibility for others – to the point of “vicarious representative action”⁵ (Stellvertretung) on behalf of the others.

The more Bonhoeffer realises that the world has “come of age”, and therefore having done away with religion, the more his theology becomes “this-worldly” and “religionless”. That does not mean a theology without God, but it means to theologize in a world that has learned to live without God: “The religionlessness of the human being who has come of age. ‘God’ as working hypothesis, as stopgap for our embarrassments, has become superfluous.”⁶ For modern society that means: “‘Jesus’ disappears from view. Sociologically: no impact on the broader masses; a matter for the lower and upper-middle classes. Heavily burdened by difficult, traditional ideas. Decisive: Church defending itself. No risk-taking for others.”⁷ Bonhoeffer’s criticism of the church is quite strong: The church itself is responsible for this development because it tends to stick to its own problems and ideas and has given up caring for others, taking risks for others. But that is exactly the core of Christian faith: to follow Christ in risking oneself for others.

From what I have learned from Bonhoeffer I want to pose a question and a notion: (1) The question: How should the church be and act to fulfil its calling? What guiding concepts do we find? And (2) the notion: The concentration on responsibility here and now provides a critical position vis-à-vis utopian concepts.

2. “Christians stand by God in God’s own pain”: Religion and faith

To understand Bonhoeffer’s theology let us start with a poem he wrote in prison:⁸

Christians and Heathens

1. People go to God when they’re in need,
plead for help, pray for blessing and bread,

⁵ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 257 ff.

⁶ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 500.

⁷ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 500.

⁸ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 460 f.

for rescue from their sickness, guilt, and death.
So do they all, all of them, Christians and heathens.

2. People go to God when God's in need,
find God poor, reviled, without shelter or bread,
see God devoured by sin, weakness, and death.
Christians stand by God in God's own pain.

3. God goes to all people in their need,
fills body and soul with God's own bread,
goes for Christians and heathens to Calvary's death
and forgives them both.

2.1 Religion and faith

Bonhoeffer stresses the difference between “religion” and “faith”, following Karl Barth's understanding of “religion” as the attempt of the human person to actively reach out to God – a futile attempt, because the human can never reach God that way. All he/she will find are his/her own projections and ideas, which leads to an image of God according to our own ideas. But Bonhoeffer also sees the need of humans to do that, since they find themselves in all kinds of distress and so turn to God – all of them do, Christians and “heathens”. The difference between the two can be found in the fact that Christians do not only turn to God in their own needs, but they turn to God also in *His* own need. So they stand under the cross – not in a mystical way, but in reality, in our own reality: the cross of hunger, poverty, homelessness, weakness, sickness, oppression, and death. Bonhoeffer especially speaks of the reality of sin, too, which is crucial at that point: Sin is the ultimate reason for death and of course for poverty etc. In that context Bonhoeffer defines the Christian vocation in compassion, sharing Christ's suffering, which is suffering with the world.⁹

Bonhoeffer himself explains his idea:

⁹ Cf. Zimmermann, Jens: Suffering with the World. The Continuing Relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology, in: Green, Clifford J. et al. (eds.): Dietrich Bonhoeffer Yearbook 3. 2007/2008, Gütersloh 2008, 311-338.

“The human being is called upon to share in God’s suffering at the hands of a godless world. Thus we must really live in that godless world and not try to cover up or transfigure its godlessness somehow with religion. Our lives must be ‘worldly,’ so that we can share precisely so in God’s suffering; our lives are *allowed* to be ‘worldly,’ that is, we are delivered from false religious obligations and inhibitions. Being a Christian does not mean being religious in a certain way [...]. Instead it means being human [...]. It is not a religious act that makes someone a Christian, but rather sharing in God’s suffering in the worldly life. That is ‘meta/noia’, not thinking first of one’s own needs, questions, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be pulled into walking the path that Jesus walks”.¹⁰

Thus, for Bonhoeffer it is essential to understand incarnation not in the sense of Greek mythology but as obligation to this world: “The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God.”¹¹ That means that in Christ our history has truly become history of salvation: “Christian life means being human in the power of Christ’s becoming human, being judged and pardoned in the power of the cross, living a new life in the power of the resurrection. No one of these is without the others.”¹² So the incarnation of God in the human person has a twofold meaning: Christians encounter Christ in the suffering people, so they turn to the suffering God. But it is also the other way round: The poor and oppressed encounter God in those who turn to them in their need; they experience God in the solidarity of others. Theologically “the incarnation is the end of all dualism”, which in consequence leads to the ethical notion: “Christ is the measure for our humanity”¹³.

2.2 Faith as worldly practice

“In the last few years I have come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus* but simply a human being, in the same way that Jesus was a human being [...]. I do not mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the bustling, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness that shows discipline and includes the ever-present knowledge of death and resurrection.”¹⁴

¹⁰ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 480.

¹¹ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 55.

¹² DBWE 6 (Ethics), 159.

¹³ Zimmermann: *Suffering with the World*, op.cit. 320.

¹⁴ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 541.

Please note that Bonhoeffer is in prison facing a death sentence. Usually we would expect a person in those circumstances to turn to the “hereafter” the “next world” seeking freedom in a faith “beyond”. Not so Bonhoeffer. It is precisely the prison experience that shapes his theology of this-worldliness: He does not look for a “religious” escape but looks for the transcendent precisely within *this* world. Here God is nearer than in an imaginary “religious” world. And therefore the task of Christians – and the church! – is to follow Christ in his incarnation and his way to the cross. Christian faith is always eschatological, but not in the sense that we anticipate the “ultimate” in an idealistic or dualistic way but we accept the significance and importance of the “penultimate”.¹⁵ “We must travel the road, even though there is no road to this goal, and we must travel this road to the end, that is, to the place where God puts an end to it. The penultimate remains in existence, even though it is completely superseded by the ultimate and is no longer in force.”¹⁶

That does not mean that Bonhoeffer *reduces* faith to ethics. The ultimate not only keeps its value, in fact, it is the very reason why the penultimate also has value. So Bonhoeffer rejects not only the “religious” evasion from the world but also “secularism”. *Both* of them are in contradiction to God’s kingdom:

“He who would flee from the world, seeking in the kingdom a place removed from his troubles, does not believe. Nor does the one who presumes that he must establish a worldly kingdom. Whoever evades the Earth finds not God but only another world, his own better, lovelier, more peaceful world. He finds a world beyond, to be sure, but never God’s world, which is dawning in this world. Whoever evades Earth in order to find God finds only himself. Whoever evades God in order to find the Earth does not find the Earth as God’s earth; he finds the jolly scene of a war between good and evil, pious and impious, which he kindles himself – in short, he finds himself. He who loves God, loves God as the Lord of the Earth as it is; he who loves the Earth, loves it as God’s earth. He who loves God’s kingdom loves it entirely as *God’s kingdom*, and he loves it wholly as *God’s kingdom on Earth*.”¹⁷

This notion expresses a strong criticism of utopian Ideologies. Of course we must not stay indifferent or passive vis-à-vis the world. But when we try to erect God’s kingdom on our own, we do not build *God’s* world, but a world according to our own interests. And it is our own sin that manifests itself in those structures. So we cannot do more than preparing the way of the Lord here and now, i.e. concrete steps, always one step further, and in the process

¹⁵ For a thorough study of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the “penultimate” (das Vorletzte) und the “ultimate” (das Letzte) cf. Prüller-Jagenteufel, Gunter M.: *Befreit zur Verantwortung. Sünde und Versöhnung in der Ethik Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s* (EThD 7), Münster 2004, 282-392.

¹⁶ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 151.

¹⁷ DBWE 12, 288.

reorienting ourselves anew after every single step. “No one has the responsibility of turning the world into the kingdom of God, but only of taking the next necessary step that corresponds to God’s becoming human in Christ. [...] God became human. That is why responsible action has to weigh, judge and evaluate the matter within the human domain.”¹⁸ This is by no means idealistic; in fact, it is very concrete:

“The hungry person needs bread, the homeless person needs shelter, the one deprived of rights needs justice, the lonely person needs community, the undisciplined one needs order, and the slave needs freedom. It would be blasphemy against God and our neighbour to leave the hungry unfed while saying that God is closest to those in deepest need. We break bread with the hungry and share our home with them. [...] If the hungry do not come to faith, the guilt falls on those who denied them bread.”¹⁹

But Bonhoeffer does not reduce Christian action to charity. Bonhoeffer’s option is clearly a political one and it obliges not only single persons but the church as a whole: “The church has an unconditional obligation toward the victims of any societal order, even if they do not belong to the Christian community.”²⁰ This obligation has of course a Christological basis: “Christ has taken on this human form. [...] Whoever now attacks the least of the people attacks Christ. [...] The incarnate one transforms his disciples into brothers and sisters of all human beings.”²¹

To sum it up: Christian action has to be concrete, not idealistic and not ideological, but none the less, political. When Bonhoeffer got to know the “Social Gospel” in the USA and the Afro-American communities in Harlem he wrote: “The principle of voluntary charity as a means of social aid [is] immoral.”²² Later he would coin his famous phrase: The church is obliged “not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel”, but if the situation requires “to seize the wheel itself.”²³

3. Christ for the other – Church for the other: Ecclesiological consequences

¹⁸ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 224 f.

¹⁹ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 163

²⁰ DBWE 12, 365.

²¹ DBWE 4 (Discipleship), 285.

²² DBWE 10, 318.

²³ DBW 12, 353.

According to Bonhoeffer to believe in Christ means to participate in his being (incarnation, cross, resurrection) by preparing the way for the arrival of God's kingdom *on earth*, among us. That means that “our relationship to God” is not a “religious” relationship to “some highest, most powerful and best being imaginable”, on the contrary: it is “a new life in ‘being there for others’, through participation in the being of Jesus.”²⁴ That and that alone is “genuine transcendence”²⁵.

So the concrete “other”, today and here, is the transcendent one – “God in human form”²⁶. This idea implies a profound theological shift: We no longer say, “the human person becomes truly human inasmuch as he/she believes in God”, but “the human person becomes truly human inasmuch he/she is there for the other”.²⁷ This “christological, incarnational humanism”²⁸ bears ecclesiological consequences: It is only in this world, in the concrete calling of the times, in the *nunc et hic* that the church encounters the call of Christ. And only in answering that call the church becomes truly church. Church is ekkle/sia, called out, called out of her self-reference and self-reliance into the world, i.e. being there for *others*.²⁹ So Bonhoeffer specifies the main political task of the church: responsibility. This means always and foremost “vicarious representative action”³⁰ for the poor and oppressed: “Speak out for those who cannot speak.”³¹ This idea plays a central part in Bonhoeffer's “confession of guilt” of the church:³² “The church was mute when it should have cried out, because the blood of the innocent cried out to heaven.”³³ And why is that? It is because of the church's fear to lose safe ground: “Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself.”³⁴ So the church has committed the most grave

²⁴ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 501.

²⁵ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 501.

²⁶ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 501.

²⁷ Cf. Geist, Matthias: Gott und unsere Not. Was bedeutet Bonhoeffers Botschaft von einer „Kirche für andere“ heute, in: Eichinger, Franz/Berger, Johann/Eichmeyer, Hansjörg (eds.): Glauben Lernen in einer mündigen Welt. Linzer Bonhoeffer-Symposium 2006, Wien 2006, 171-179, 177.

²⁸ Zimmermann, Jens: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism in Philosophical and Theological Context, in: de Gruchy, John W. et al. (eds.): Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology Today. A Way between Fundamentalism and Secularism, Gütersloh 2009, 369-386, 369.

²⁹ Vgl. Igrec, Marie-Therès: Ekklesia: Herausgerufene in die Welt hinein. Der Weg Dietrich Bonhoeffers jenseits von Fundamentalismus und Säkularismus, in: de Gruchy, John W. et al. (eds.): Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology Today. A Way between Fundamentalism and Secularism, Gütersloh 2009, 274-291, 288 f.

³⁰ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 257 ff.

³¹ DBWE 13, 217.

³² DBWE 6 (Ethics), 138 ff.

³³ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 138.

³⁴ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 389.

sin: It has concentrated on itself and lived quite literally the “*cor curvum in se*”: “The church confesses that it has coveted security, tranquillity, peace, property, and honour to which it had no claim.”³⁵

4. Only a poor church can truly serve others

Bonhoeffer draws radical conclusions: If tranquillity, security and possessions hinder the church to fulfil its true task, our only way out is giving up all these to become totally poor and powerless:

“The church is church only when it is there for others. As a first step it must give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the freewill offerings of the congregations and perhaps be engaged in some secular vocation [Beruf]. The church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community – not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell people in every calling [Beruf] what a life with Christ is, what it means ‘to be there for others.’”³⁶

So the only way for the church is to become a “truly a free church, that is ‘a church without privileges’.”³⁷ “In particular *our* church will have to confront the vices of hubris, the worship of power, envy and illusionism as the roots of all evil.”³⁸ To undergo this radical conversion, we have to take four steps:³⁹

1. To be “church for others” means to stop all collaboration with political and economic powers and to ally itself with the poor and powerless of our time.
2. The church has to live and act not only *for* the poor, the prisoners, the refugees, the oppressed, and those in need, but more than that, *with* them.

³⁵ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 140.

³⁶ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 503.

³⁷ de Grouchy, John W.: Being Christian: Being Human. Interpreting Sanctification in a “Worldly” Way, in: Schmitz, Florian/Tietz, Christiane (eds.): Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christentum (FS Christian Gremmels), Gütersloh 2011, 37-47, 46.

³⁸ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 503.

³⁹ cf. Geist, Matthias: Gott und unsere Not. Was bedeutet Bonhoeffer's Botschaft von einer „Kirche für andere“ heute, in: Eichinger, Franz/Berger, Johann/Eichmeyer, Hansjörg (Hg.): Glauben Lernen in einer mündigen Welt. Linzer Bonhoeffer-Symposium 2006, Wien 2006, 171-179, 177.

3. The church maintains a living relationship with Christ, which means to give up outdated and highly theoretical dogmatism in order to become free for the surprising tasks that we encounter here and now.

4. The church does not strive in the self-gratification of bourgeoisie communities but opens up and frees itself from the burden of cathedrals, synods and financial planning.

Thus, according to Bonhoeffer we see a twofold task for the church – a task that might be in a sense utopian and at the same time a critique of utopian models.

4.1 Only a poor church puts its faith solely in God

Looking back on his life Bonhoeffer writes about his experience encountering Christ in the midst of the world.

“Later on I discovered, and am still discovering to this day, that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. If one has completely renounced making something of oneself – whether it be a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader (a so-called priestly figure!), a just or an unjust person, a sick or a healthy person – then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities – then one takes seriously no longer one’s own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane. And I think this is faith; this is meta/noia. And this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian.”⁴⁰

And that, of course, is a challenge for the church: No longer trying to “make something of itself” but to live radically its vocation, the calling to serve the world in very concrete ways – and not in some twisted way, such as the conservative idea, “But we serve the world best if we stick to our traditional views!” That idea is nothing more than an ideology, which stems from the separation of the natural and the supernatural and neglecting the penultimate for the ultimate. Instead, we have to bear in mind Bonhoeffer’s notion – inconvenient as it may be: “The ultimate responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but [how] a coming generation is to go on living.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 486.

⁴¹ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 42.

4.2 Only a poor church is free to serve others

Secondly, the church is obliged to serve the victims of our times: victims of violence and war, victims of economic structures, victims of natural disasters, etc. And the church will only be able to live and act according to this obligation, if it frees itself from everything that distracts her from these tasks. “Vicarious representative action and therefore responsibility is possible only in completely devoting one’s own life to another person. Only those who are selfless live responsibly, which means that only selfless people truly *live*.”⁴² I would call this an *eu*-topia in contrast to all *ou*-topias. The radical vocation for the church is not an idealistic one nor does it want to draft a totalitarian system. It strictly concentrates on the situation here and now and has to be set into motion step by step:

“The objective is not the application of some kind of limitless general principle. Thus, in the given situation it is necessary to observe, weigh, evaluate, and decide, and to do all that with limited human understanding. We must have courage to look into the immediate future; we must seriously consider the consequences of our actions; and we must attempt seriously to examine our own motives and our own hearts. It cannot be our task to revolutionize the way the world operates, but at a given place to consider reality and do what is necessary.”⁴³

Surely, this is no easy task. The concrete reality is never clear, it is always obscured in the “twilight”⁴⁴ of sin and salvation. Therefore, we are never able to ascertain “the clearly recognized good and the clearly recognized evil”⁴⁵; every responsible action is a “risk” to be taken: “The absolute criterion of what is good in and of itself – provided that such a concept can even be conceived without contradiction – turns what is good into a dead law, a Moloch, to whom all life and freedom are sacrificed.”⁴⁶ Indeed, Bonhoeffer recognizes the messiness of real life in which adherence to ethical principles can do more harm than good and he points out the root of such an attitude: “... to look noble and morally squeaky-clean”⁴⁷. And thus, he points out that we have to be very clear about one thing: “We can be Christians today in only

⁴² DBWE 6 (Ethics), 259.

⁴³ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 268.

⁴⁴ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 222.

⁴⁵ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 247.

⁴⁶ DBWE 6 (Ethics), 247.

⁴⁷ Zimmermann, Jens: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian Humanism in Philosophical and Theological Context, op. cit., 332.

two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ DBWE 8 (Letters and Papers from Prison), 389.