

Aristocratic Christendom **On Bonhoeffer and Nietzsche**

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“Christianity has sided with all that is weak and base, with all failures; it has made an ideal of whatever *contradicts* the instinct of the strong life to preserve itself,” Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *The Antichrist*, the book he composed in 1888 at the boundaries of insanity.¹ It was not the first time that he tangled with Christian faith, but here he did it more aggressively than ever before.

In Nietzsche’s eyes, the two thousand years of Christian culture represents the biggest moral injury ever committed in the history of humankind. Its history can be read as the paradoxical success story of the unsuccessful human being. It is the story of the cultural hegemony of the weak and powerless, who exalted and exploited the fear for living religiously to such an extent, that eventually they were ready to consider it as their force. In its preaching of the God of pity and the virtue of charity, Christianity patented the pathetic, crowned the failure.

Life hereafter, Nietzsche wrote, is a fantasy, a castle in the sky, constructed by people who are incapable of making their own earthly home inhabitable. The Christian ethic of serving the neighbor and obeying God is the servile interiorisation of a spineless morality. “Christianity is the rebellion of everything that crawls on the ground against that which has *height*: the evangel of the ‘lowly’ *makes low*,”² Nietzsche states. Away, then, with consciousness, away with the notion of sin, away with “spiritual life,” away with God! And long live the body, long live the senses; long live freedom, long live... the loss of all foundations. From now on, let us exploit the heights and depths of life, and no longer anxiously dream them away. Therefore, avoid the safe havens of metaphysics, the dusty attics of Christian theology. Whereas 19th Century German idealists still considered Christianity as the apotheosis of civilization and culture, Nietzsche, the son of a pastor, knew better now: Christianity is the summit of

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), section 5, 571.

² Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, section 43, 620.

decadence, the embodiment of an instinctive hatred of reality: “Life itself is to my mind the instinct for growth, for durability, for an accumulation of forces, for *power*: where the will to power is lacking there is decline.”³

Theology can react in two ways to this message, according to the young Nietzsche-amateur and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a lecture on the History of Systematic Theology in the 20th Century in the Wintersemester of 1931/1932. Either one can shrug one’s shoulders and ignore Nietzsche and say that he did not understand anything of Christian faith, or one can be apprenticed to him (DBW 11, 187). When we look at the whole Bonhoeffer’s theology, we can conclude that he himself chose the latter.

A Distaste for Weakness

That Dietrich Bonhoeffer found his natural conversation partner in Nietzsche is not entirely surprising. In the Berlin academic milieu of the twenties in which Bonhoeffer was raised, the reading of Nietzsche was as current as that of Goethe and Kant. But there is more: Bonhoeffer’s personality was so to speak built on Nietzsche’s philosophy. Bonhoeffer shared with Nietzsche a natural distaste for weakness, and showed little patience with complainers and moaners. Bonhoeffer developed this attitude during a childhood and adolescence within the very demanding pedagogical milieu of the Bonhoeffer family. The Bonhoeffers were educated as people with “backbone,” who should keep their *Haltung* in stormy weather too.

In April 1943, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned because of his resistance activities. From the beginning, the death sentence, which Bonhoeffer finally received on April 9, 1945, was hanging over his head and remained constantly in his mind. In his letters from prison, Bonhoeffer makes reference to the heavy pressure under which he is living. One might expect him to get disoriented under such extreme conditions, living now at the other end of the social spectrum. But his upbringing betrays itself even more in prison than at home. During air-strikes, Bonhoeffer loses his temper with people who – literally – are wetting their pants from fear. He simply despises them. In such a moment, he, the pastor, is incapable of uttering a simple consoling Christian word or saying a short prayer. “In ten minutes it will be over again,” is all he can say (LPP 199). In his letters to Eberhard Bethge, he mentions his “tyrannical nature,” with which he sometimes criticizes and bluffs fellow prisoners (DBW 10, 188, 214).⁴

Though he would not have liked to be called a bruiser, one can safely say that in Dietrich Bonhoeffer we have to do with a strong personality, a powerful man, who shared – by nature and by nurture – Nietzsche’s dislike of spineless and half-hearted life.

Bonhoeffer was raised in an atmosphere of almost instinctive distaste of petit-bourgeois narrow-mindedness. In his family, the word “*bürgerlich*” represented a responsible life style with grandeur,

³Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, section 5, 572.

⁴ Cf. Bonhoeffer’s letters from November 18 and 28, 1943.

and not the small-minded scrupulosity of a clerk existence, commonly associated with it. The members of the family were all intended for leading positions in German society. The children were raised with the values “freedom” and “responsibility”; “humility” and “obedience” were not ranked high in the virtue catalogue of the Bonhoeffers. Thus, when Dietrich declared that he wanted to study theology and become a pastor, instead of lawyer or natural scientist (like his brothers) or psychiatrist (like his father), he received little support among his own kin. “Does he want to bury himself and his talents in that stuffy institution?” “Bad air! Bad air!” his brothers could have exclaimed, borrowing Nietzsche’s words.

In the Weimar period, the Bonhoeffers made a clear choice for democracy. Though convinced democrats in politics, culturally they never were. They turned up their noses at mediocrity, the taste of the masses. In this circle, “elite” was not a dirty word, but an honorific. And the more the ‘mob’ took possession of power in the thirties in Germany (was the Nazi movement not above all pushed forward by the resentment of the lower middle classes?), the more a “sense of quality” becomes manifest in Bonhoeffer and his family.

Nietzsche and the End of Metaphysics

What does the theology of someone who feels so close to Nietzsche look like? It must lead to some kind of “aristocratic Christianity.” This very term occurs in Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison, on the back of a letter of Bethge from June 3, 1944 (LPP 318). Especially during the last period of his life, which he spent in prison, Bonhoeffer tries to develop a theology that integrates the heart of Nietzsche’s critique of religion – a Christianity that might respond to the call of Zarathustra: “I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes!”⁵ A dignified faith, which does not try to force its way through the backdoor of human weakness, but knocks properly at the front door and stays courteous, even when it might not be shown in.

In the eyes of Nietzsche, Christian faith escapes earthly reality by constructing a duplicate world, where one can comfortably withdraw for a while when life is getting too rough. Religion, Nietzsche says, cannot handle this one world, and must therefore add a second one – a double, “real,” but invisible world, transcendent and divine. It complements the world we experience: the visible one, but – as is clear now – only really in appearance. Though it is palpably near, it cannot be the true world. Truth and illusion, the metaphysical and the physical world – from Plato until Kant the one and only world is, according to this religious mechanism, divided in shadow and substance.

In his Parable of the Madman, Nietzsche executes the death blow to this dualist construction, which apparently formed the “natural niche” for almost twenty centuries of Christian theism:

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 125.

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!"—As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?—Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?⁶

There is only one world, and that's ours. Whoever says goodbye to metaphysical dualism wipes out the horizon that separates This Side and the Other. Then religion suddenly appears to be an illusion, and God to be dead. Why? Who is responsible for that event? Well, Nietzsche argues, we did that all by ourselves. We killed God, because, eventually and finally, we became honest with ourselves. We did it by admitting that up till now we were fabricators of gods, metaphysical machines who lacked the courage to face clearly the human condition, the reality of death and finitude, of unrealizable desires, of loneliness, and therefore compensated for the earthly human shortage with a divine credit in heaven. Because we cannot hold out in this world, we become dreamers and builders of castles in the air. We create for ourselves a "spiritual life," promise ourselves a life hereafter, and bathe ourselves in the warm, imaginary sun of the grace of a God, or of an eternal Truth, or of an unshakable foundational Being.

To the one who once has passed beyond this dualism, the notions of truth and illusion, substance and shadow, have lost all meaning. There is just life, will to power, body, pain, death. That truth is not pleasant. Who has the courage to say unconditionally "yes" to that naked life? "I am still waiting for a philosophical *physician* in the

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.

exceptional sense of that word—one who has to pursue the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity—to muster the courage to push my suspicion to its limits and to risk the proposition: what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all ‘truth’ but something else—let us say, health, future, growth, power, life.”⁷ Nietzsche himself, constantly goaded by his bad health, liked to take on this role of the great physician of Western culture.

Faithful to the Earth

A few decades later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, son of a physician, felt himself called to purge Christian faith in the spirit of Nietzsche and make it healthier. He grew up in the twenties, when the German intelligentsia had already exchanged its 19th century idealism for a philosophy of life, a hymn on the irrationality of the lived life, which proceeds and transcends reflection. Not the reasonable steadiness of the wise old man, but the spontaneity of the playing child – for Nietzsche the image of his “*Übermensch*” – is the model in which the cultural elite mirrored itself in those years.

In 1928, as a vicar in Barcelona, Bonhoeffer preaches with an unbiased, youthful rhetoric, preaching in this spirit, about the earth as our mother and God as our Father. “Only those who are faithful to their mother, may lay themselves down eventually in the arms of the Father,” he states in a lecture for his parish recorded in *Basic Questions of Christian Ethics* (DBW 10, 345). In that context, he refers to the Greek saga of the giant Antaeus, the son of Poseidon and mother earth, Gaia. Antaeus was said to be invincible, because every time he touched his mother, he received new force. Heracles, however, discovered Antaeus’ secret and conquered him by lifting him up from the earth.

To a Christianity unfaithful to the earth, Bonhoeffer proclaims, the same will happen. It will weaken and die. Nietzsche considered Christian morality as nothing but a servile duty-ethic, a slavish legalism that follows blindly the divine commands. The young Bonhoeffer, however, pictured the Christian rather as a Nietzschean hero, who creates his own Tables of Law in his God-given freedom. “The human being who loves is the most revolutionary human being on earth. He is the subversion of all values, the dynamite of human society, the most dangerous human being,” he writes in a sermon in 1932 (Sermon on John 8: 32, July 24, 1932 – DBW 11, 461).

One can say: Here Nietzsche is so mixed in with Luther that the anti-Christian venom of the former is so diluted that it has lost all its force. What do we have here? A reckless flirt with philosophy, a theological juvenile sin? But the more ripened Bonhoeffer continues to share Nietzsche’s distaste of an unworldly Christianity, even radicalizes it. If the Christian message, concerning the God who, in Jesus Christ, becomes human, really means something, then the Christian perspective will be exactly the opposite from the “religious”

⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 35.

one: Not away from the earth toward heaven, but the other way around. The metaphysical “God” is a religious wish construction that sanctions escape from this world, but the God in which Jesus Christ did put his trust does not estrange us from life, but – Jesus himself proves it – sharpens our eyes for the contours of reality. In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer paints Christian faith as a perspective on life in which the extremes of anger and love, death and life, suffering and joy, crucifixion and resurrection are plumbed to the bottom, kept together, and lived through in a dynamic, contradictory unity.⁸ The God of Jesus does not sanction the narrow-minded fear for life, but, on the contrary, unmasks and dismantles it. In the eyes of Bonhoeffer, Christian faith finally has but one content: Jesus Christ. Being a Christian does not imply the adherence to a metaphysical belief-system; it only means that one puts all one’s cards on Jesus, and sides with his God. This is a comprehensive life practice, not a partial and inward religious act.

A Religion Leaving Religion Behind

In the virulent attack on Christianity that Nietzsche undertakes in his *The Antichrist*, Christians get it hot. But the tone attenuates when the One whom they follow, Jesus, comes up. For he too was a “free spirit,” and belonged to the kind of people Nietzsche liked so much. When Jesus and his followers are compared to one another, the whole of Christianity appears to be one big misunderstanding:

...in truth, there was only *one* Christian, and he died on the cross. ... only Christian *practice*, a life such as he *lived* who died on the cross, is Christian. ... Such a life is still possible today ... genuine, original Christianity will be possible at all times. ... Not a faith, but a doing; above all, a *not* doing of many things, another state of *being*.⁹

But Christianity betrayed the cause of Jesus. “What has been called ‘evangel’ [*Evangelium*, good message, fdl] from that moment was actually the opposite of that which *he* had lived: ‘*ill tidings*,’ a *dysangel*.”¹⁰ The whole theology of Nietzsche – if one may call it that – is entirely wrapped up in an analysis of the Christian betrayal of Jesus’ life practice. One can say that Bonhoeffer’s critical theology, though in a more constructive manner, has the same content. Reduced to its kernel, it actually consists of two things: a Christology (a vision of Jesus) on the one hand and a critique of religion (a coming to terms with a derailed Christendom) on the other. Christians following the path of Jesus, Bonhoeffer stated in a lecture in 1933, do not have a world in reserve at their disposal. They cannot live as – and Bonhoeffer uses a term coined by Nietzsche – “*Hinterweltler*,” residents of a duplicate world, as is so common in religion (DBW 12,

⁸ Cf. especially the chapter on “History and the Good,” DBW 6, 250f.

⁹ Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, section 39, 612-13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 612.

264ff.).¹¹ Already at this early point in his development, Bonhoeffer becomes aware that Christian faith actually represents a paradox, a kind of impossible possibility. Not as the history of decadence and decay, as Nietzsche would say, but as a religion that, in the doctrine of the incarnation, carries its own impossibility in itself. It is a religion, so to say, that in its proclamation of the Word become flesh turns the premise of religion (a God enthroned in heaven) upside down. So it is a religion that leaves behind the land of religion (“*une religion de la sortie de la religion*”).¹²

In his general critique of religion, Nietzsche – the philosopher with the hammer – hits the Christian nail right on the head. Christian religion has been practicing the denial of this-worldly life, an escape from earthly responsibilities. But Nietzsche has a second grievance against Christian faith, concerning Christianity’s morality of charity and pity. Here, in its ethics, Christianity really shows itself a unique religion. The losers in life, the “*Schlecht-hinweg-gekommenen*,” succeeded in making a virtue of necessity within Christianity, by sanctioning and glorifying their own incapability. So, we don’t measure up to life? We don’t need to; God takes care of the weak. Do we despise ourselves? Good! In the command of neighbor love, we can escape the burden of being someone on our own. Are we enjoying our bodies? Fortunately, we have a bad consciousness. Are we dying? No fear! God offers us an immortal soul. Humble service to the neighbor, servile obedience to God – that is what Christian morality is in its kernel. A morality for cowards, afraid of life.

Who is Lazarus?

The aristocratic theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer does not recognize himself at all in this picture of Christian ethics. Obviously he has much difficulty in identifying himself with the pathetic person, who wallows and fosters self-pity in himself. In Christian sermons on the rich man and the poor Lazarus, the hearers are usually allowed to identify themselves with the suffering Lazarus, who ends up in the bosom of Abraham (Luke 16.19–31). In his sermon on this parable, held in Berlin in 1932, Bonhoeffer refuses that common rhetorical strategy (DBW 11, 426-435). Instead he identifies his addressees with the rich man: “How should a gospel be our concern that is addressed to the weak, the common, the poor and the sick? We are men, healthy and strong, we despise the masses of Lazarus, we despise this gospel of the poor. It spoils our pride, our race, our power” (DBW 11, 430f.). Only at the end of the sermon does he allow the question: “You think you are Lazarus yourself?” The question receives an unexpected answer: “Who is Lazarus? Always the other, the crucified Christ who comes to you in a thousand despicable figures” (DBW 11, 434).

¹¹ Cf. John D. Godsey, “Thy Kingdom Come,” in *Preface to Bonhoeffer: The Man and Two of His Shorter Writings* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1965), 27-47.

¹² Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde: Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 133.

It is a hard gospel that Bonhoeffer preaches here, no comfortable oasis for a weakened spirit. Yes, eventually, ultimately, when everything has been done and said, then the rich man perhaps, as a “last possibility,” is a Lazarus as well (DBW 11, 434). But grace is an ultimate word and has to remain so. “You should not speak the ultimate word before the penultimate. We live in the penultimate and believe the ultimate, don’t we?” Bonhoeffer wrote ten years later in prison, after he had extensively analyzed the relationship between the ultimate and penultimate shortly before in his *Ethics* (LPP 157; cf. DBW 6, 137-162).

While Nietzsche’s own ethic requires an extreme creativity from individuals in order to realize their authenticity, Bonhoeffer also makes high demands upon free, strong human beings—not, however, for their own self-realization, but for the other, the weak and poor Lazarus. In his sermon, Bonhoeffer exploits an idiom that reminds us of Levinas’ severe ethics of responsibility. So does this reintroduce the familiar Christian glorification of weakness, after all? It depends on what you understand by weakness. There are at least two different meanings of the same word. Weakness can be understood as a synonym of culpable incapability, proceeding from spiritual laziness and lack of courage. In that case, people take the role of victim because it fits them well. This weakness Bonhoeffer holds, together with Nietzsche, as contemptible. But there is also a weakness for which people cannot be held responsible. It simply happens to them, when they are struck by fate. By bad luck, they happen to be right at the spot where evil and misfortune hits them, without having been able to build up resources to cope with it. They are the real victims. In order to develop a real relationship with these sufferers much Nietzschean courage, power, and health will be needed, even more than is necessary for one’s own self-realization. For these weak live in the dark, and normally, “those in darkness one does not see” (“*die im Dunklen sieht man nicht*,” Bertold Brecht).¹³ You have to put a lot of energy into looking them closely in the eyes. “Who is Lazarus? You know it yourself: the poor, the people who, outwardly and inwardly, cannot cope with life; often stupid, often insolent, often intrusive, often godless, yet infinitely needy, and conscious of that fact or not, suffering human being” (DBW 11, 434). You really have to be confronted with one of them to understand their suffering, to listen to their call, and to forget about your repugnance (DBW 11, 431).

As the artist of life, Nietzsche may be highly demanding; but as the preacher of Jesus’ gospel, Bonhoeffer seems to demand even more. In the Christian perspective, developed in Bonhoeffer’s sermon on the strong and the weak, the strong should look upwards to the weak and not down on them. For the weak is Christ, our crucified Lord. This view also represents a “revolution of all values” (*Umwertung aller Werte*), but one that is diametrically opposed to the

¹³ From Brecht’s song *Mackie Messer*, in *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*).

one Nietzsche stood for. Nietzsche only felt disgust, not respect, for the weak. However, one should add: Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the weakness of the Other and the responsibility of the self is also at right angles to the sort of Christianity that pretends to "glorify in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12: 9), but only to cover its laziness and indolence.

The Fullness of Life

In Bonhoeffer's letters from prison the Nietzschean elements in Bonhoeffer's thinking become even more manifest. "The sense of quality doesn't let itself be killed, it just gets stronger year by year," he writes to Eberhard Bethge from his cell (LPP 271). This applies not only to his personality, but to his theology as well. His distaste for metaphysical speculation and his critique of the division of reality into two spheres, already expressed and analyzed in his *Ethics*, are being ratcheted up now, together with a growing resistance against a Christianity that unfolds as an apology for human weakness. The aristocrat Bonhoeffer now finds himself right at a spot where evil and misfortune hits him heavily. He, a born leader, perceives the world now from the opposite side, from "the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short from the perspective of those who suffer" (LPP 17; TF 486). But once in that position, Bonhoeffer refuses to let this "view from below" "become the partisan possession of those who are eternally dissatisfied" (LPP 17; TF 486).

Confronted with the possibility of death near at hand, Bonhoeffer develops a theology of life, which celebrates health and strength.¹⁴ In these letters we read, for example, that while lying in the arms of a woman, it is distasteful to long for heaven (Letter of December 12, 1943). We also read that the world has come of age and "people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more." We should speak of God "not on the boundaries but at the center, not in weaknesses but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man's life and good" (LPP 282; TF 501, 503). A Christian apologetics that wants to attack this *Mündigkeit* is senseless, not Christian, and—not aristocratic (*unvornehm*) (LPP 324-29; cf. 343-46). We read that the weakness of people (their stupidity, *Dummheit*) is a greater danger than their wickedness, and that Christ not only makes human beings "good" but strong as well (LPP 391-92). Still, in the same letters we read that God should not be used as a stop-gap, a *Lückenbüßer*. Christian "soul grubbing" of modern spiritual care, trying to trace out a contaminated spot of sin in simple and innocent happiness, is a kind of religious black-mail (LPP 343-46). Christian faith is not a religion of salvation, and the hereafter for the immortal soul is not a Christian doctrine. Resurrection means: the divine affirmation of earthly life, which we may exploit for the full hundred percent (LPP 374-75). We read that Jesus was not a pitiful dropout, unfit for life and thus ending at the cross, but "'the one for others!,' and *therefore* the Crucified"

¹⁴ Cf. Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

(LPP 380-83). The questions at the boundaries of life should be left unanswered, and grief and suffering un-interpreted (LPP 203).

These are fragments of a theology in which some central Nietzschean intuitions are tentatively integrated. Bonhoeffer, perhaps a little too confidently, called it a “non religious interpretation” of Christian faith. When we want to think further in his track, where do we end up? With a vitalistic “muscular Christendom,” which is blind when life enters its periods of night? I don’t think so. This is why Bonhoeffer emphasized so heavily the *fullness* of life, and embraced in his theology all its dimensions: the yes and the no, the suffering and the joy, the cross and the resurrection altogether. I do think, however, that we might end up with a theology that, because of its demanding and critical character, at least leads to a radical fitness program for Christianity. For, once the escape into a dualistic “metaphysics” has been rejected, Christian faith no longer fills the role of a religious belief-system, in which the basic life questions are answered once and for all. It keeps them alive, to be sure, but from that moment on its strength lies elsewhere—in its dedication to the fullness of life, as once embodied in and by Jesus.