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Against escapism. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's contribution to public theology.

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Good public theology does not directly need “a public.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer's delivered his most important contribution to public theology while he was locked-up behind a prison door and wrote personal letters, which had to be smuggled out secretly, to a friend. No large audience was intended anyway. However, by their authenticity, style and content, his *Letters and Papers from Prison* represented the kind of theology that most of today's practitioners of public theology should like to develop. Because it was an (1) *authentic* theology, not abstracted from the concrete personal life of the one who was doing it, but was rooted in an powerful Christian engagement; it was a (2) *dialogical* theology, not an isolated product of the interior monologue of an academic theologian in a study, but the experimental and fragmentary result of an open process of questioning and response; and above all, it was (3) a theology that spoke of God in the midst of life, not at its borders. It was a theology that asked believers to live a *worldly* life without reservations and without the escape into what Bonhoeffer called: “religion.”

1. Religion as escape: Inwardness and the living in two spheres

However, if we want to understand what makes Bonhoeffer's theology so relevant for public theologians today, we have to take a closer look at its theological content, rather than at its form and style.

What would have been Bonhoeffer's thoughts on hearing the - quite recent and trendy - term “public theology”? Probably, in the

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first place, that it refers to a theology that is not concentrated on the inner private life of the believer, but on God's transformative presence at the crossroads of common human life. To Bonhoeffer its opposite, private theology, represented a kind of escapism, in direct opposition to the spirit of the gospel.

In his letters and papers from prison Bonhoeffer developed some critical insights into European Christianity:

“Man has learnt to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the ‘working hypothesis’ called ‘God.’ (...) [I]t is becoming evident that everything also gets along without ‘God’ - and, in fact, just as well, as before. (...) ‘God’ is being pushed more and more out of life, losing more and more ground” (Letter of 8 June, 1944, LPP 113).

A month later, Bonhoeffer notes how in European history Christian faith became a private religion, and betrayed itself.

“The displacement of God from the world, and from the public part of human life, led to the attempt to keep his place secure at least in the sphere of the ‘personal’, the ‘inner’ and the ‘private’. And as every human still has a private sphere somewhere, that is where he was thought to be the most vulnerable. The secrets known to a man's valet [*die Kammerdienergeheimnisse*] – that is, to put it crudely, the range of his intimate life, from prayer to his sexual life – have become the hunting ground of modern pastoral workers.” (Letter of July, 8, 1944; LPP 123).

In European culture God became superfluous in the public domains of science, economy, politics and technology. Inwardness was the only place where the Christian God still seemed to be able to survive.

To Bonhoeffer, the theological affirmation of this cultural development in modernity – now globalising itself - signified a betrayal of the essentials of Christian faith. The rhetorical strategy with which he reminded Christian theology of its public relevance and responsibility was by creating a sharp distinction and opposition between “religion” on the one hand, and “faith” on the other. In his letter of 5 May 1944 he asked: “What does it mean to ‘interpret in a religious sense?’” and answered: “I think it means to speak on the one hand metaphysically and on the other hand

individualistically. Neither of these is relevant to the biblical message or to the man of today” (*LPP* 91f.).

To Bonhoeffer, “religion” stands for the escape from reality into the inner life of the individual soul (*Persönlichkeit*), the only place where the transcendent God can be metaphysically present. Already in his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer had analyzed this development by which Christian faith loses all of its public relevance. There he speaks of the “obstructing Colossus” that thinking in terms of two spheres represents to our reflection on the powerful reality of God as revealed in Jesus Christ:

“Since the beginnings of Christian ethics after New Testament times, the dominant basic conception, consciously or unconsciously determining all ethical thought, has been that two realms [*Räume*] bump against each other; one divine, holy, supernatural and Christian, the other worldly, profane, natural and unchristian. (...) Reality as a whole splits into two parts, and the concern of ethics becomes the right relation of both parts to each other” (*Ethics* (b) 55f.).

How can modern people who do not want to withdraw like monks from the profane world (the Medieval “solution” for escaping the uneasiness of the sacred with the profane) take part in the experience of the divine? By withdrawing themselves into the private sphere. Their inner citadel functions as the religious refuge for the sacred in the modern world - an inner-worldly, though invisible space, the monastery cell of modern individuals. There they spiritually lick their wounds, inflicted in the profanity of secular life; there they feed their secular personality with “inspiration” and “meaning.” In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer already developed a severe critique of this thinking on two spheres. To begin with, this dichotomy was intellectually untenable.

“For the Christian there is nowhere to retreat from the world, neither externally nor into the inner life. Every attempt to evade the world will have to be paid for sooner or later with a sinful surrender to the world. (...) In the eyes of a worldly observer, there is usually something tragicomic about the cultivation of a Christian inwardness undisturbed by the world; For the sharp-eyed world recognizes itself most clearly at the very place where Christian inwardness, deceiving itself,

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dreams it is furthest away from the world" (*Ethics* (b) 61f.).

Escaping into and confining God to the interior sphere show not only a lack of courage; it not only is an act of weakness, it is an illusion. What seems to be private in this "inner world" is in fact public; what seems to be sacred is profane.

"It is thought that a man's essential nature consists of his inmost and most intimate background; that is defined as his 'inner life', and it is precisely in those secret human places that God is now said to have his domain!" (Letter of 8 July 1944, *LPP* 124)

You do not need to become a Freudian to discover that the most inward and private areas in the human mind are also governed by the rules of public profanity – places where one is confronted with the fantasies and desires of one's own conflicting self, in stead of with the transcendent God.

2. Faith as participation in the reality of God

But the escape into interiority not only is untenable for reasons of intellectual honesty. Above all it is untenable for theological reasons, because it contradicts the experience of God's active presence in Jesus Christ as witnessed by the biblical narrative. It shows a lack of confidence and courage of faith. It is a sign of weakness and unfaithfulness, not daring to share in God's turn towards the world as it was revealed in his incarnation in Christ. In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer stated:

"There are no two realities, but *only one reality*, and that is God's reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world. Partaking in [*teilhabend an*] Christ we stand at the same time in the reality of God and in the reality of the world' (*Ethics* (b) 58).

To Bonhoeffer, theology and Christology became almost synonymous. His whole theological existence consisted of engaged reflection on God incarnated, crucified and resurrected. To him, Christology did not only represent an element of theology, located in the doctrine of redemption. It formed the heart of theology, because it was the key to understanding both God and reality. What does the fact that God became human in Christ mean? It means that no longer two realities, the sacred and the profane, exist, but that the reality of God went into the reality of the world and accepted it

as his own. There is but one reality, and that is the reality of God-in-Christ. The Word became flesh. The God above us became the God amongst us. God is present in our reality or, in even stronger terms, he encompasses, includes our reality. Therefore, “All things appear as in a distorted mirror if they are not seen and recognized in God” (*Ethics* (b) 48). For Bonhoeffer, the task of theology consisted of struggling for a good definition of reality.² For the one who defines reality, decides reality. In his *Ethics* therefore, Bonhoeffer tried to elaborate on an ontology of the incarnated God. We cannot interpret reality, he said, without reading it through the lenses of the incarnation (that invites us to engage with humaneness), the crucifixion (that summons us to a struggle against evil), and the resurrection (that brings us hope for the future) of God in Christ. These three Christological principles function in *Ethics* as a kind of categorical grid, in the Kantian sense of the word, through which reality is structured and receives its ultimate meaning.

Radical implications for the act of faith do follow. In a two-sphere view of religion, God is believed to exist in heaven. Divine and worldly realities are ontologically separated and to enter into a relationship with God is only possible in the private, inward life of prayer and religious experience. If, however, our reality is encompassed by God’s reality in Christ, as Bonhoeffer said, then the act of believing consists in participating with our whole existence in this reality. Then “faith” no longer means holding for true (*assensus*), but is an act of *fiducia*: an existential trust in, a total surrender to, this reality.

Participation in the reality of God, as Bonhoeffer conceived it, seems to be synonymous with what St. Paul called “living in Christ.” The task of Christian ethics is asking how we can live “in the reality of God.”

“...the question is how the reality in Christ – which has long embraced us and our world within itself – works here and now or, in other words, how life is to be lived in it. What matters is *participation in the reality of God and the world of Jesus Christ today*, and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God” (*Ethics* (b) 55).

² Cf. Dumas, André. 1968:236.

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To Bonhoeffer, to have faith in God is to get involved in his incarnation, to share in the life of Christ, to take part in his suffering in the world. Both in his *Ethics* and in his letters and papers from prison, Bonhoeffer develops a centripetal, worldly oriented spirituality. The dynamic of God is one that stretches from the inside outwards, from the self toward others, from inwardness to outward concreteness. Faith means the dynamic sharing of this movement.

“Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world. (...) He must live a 'worldly' life, and thereby share in God's sufferings. (...) It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. That is *metanoia*: not in the first place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event” (Letter of 18 July 1944, *LPP* 129f.).

The spirituality of the thinking in two spheres undergoes a complete reversal: faith does not consist in the partial withdrawal into private interiority, but in the total surrender (“an act of life”) to life with others. “Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life” (Letter of 18 July 1944, *LPP* 131).

Bonhoeffer's first and most important contribution to public theology is this uncompromising concentration on the Christological heart of the gospel. Theology's task is to depict the movement that the incarnated God has made towards the world in the here and now. Since he had read Barth's volume of articles *The Word of God and the Word of Humans* in 1925, Bonhoeffer's thought was decisively affected by the turn that Barth had taken in theology – from God to the world, and not the other way round, as liberal theology did - and became his critical ally. Theology is based on the premise *Deus dixit*. “Only where God alone speaks, do we know something about God” (*DBW* 11, 199). God is subject of faith before he is its object.

However, whereas Barth initially placed all emphasis on the act of God's sovereign freedom in his speaking, Bonhoeffer accentuated that God has *given* his word in Christ and is present amongst us in those who share his life. This starting point in Christology is a structural element in all of Bonhoeffer's theology. Christ represents for him the presence of transforming, liberating transcendence in

the world. It becomes even more emphatic the as his theology deepened and developed. To Bonhoeffer, the presence of God in Christ not just stood for a theological construct, but represented a living reality. Believing meant to him partaking in that reality with unconditional commitment.³ Without this authentic personal engagement and this theological substance, the role Bonhoeffer played in his time and context as “public theologian” *avant la lettre*, cannot be understood. In 1936 he admitted to a close friend, Elisabeth Zinn, that he was no longer the ambitious academic theologian of the earlier years. He had changed during the last few years.

“For the first time I discovered the Bible. (...) I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the Church, and talked and preached about it - but I had not yet become a Christian...” (DBW 14, 113).

Bonhoeffer's theology cannot be comprehended apart from this “conversion” – as Bethge calls it in his biography. Though he used the expression for the church as a whole, one might say that Bonhoeffer personally also experienced what it meant to be “drawn ceaselessly into the event of Christ” (*Ethics* (b) 66).

Sometime during the thirties the turn – what he later called – “from phraseology to reality” took place (Letter of 22 April 1944, *LPP*, 85). The two must be connected in some causal way or another - the discovery of the reality of Christ on the one hand and a realistic theological style on the other. The change in style revealed itself in the way Bonhoeffer wrote. While his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* en habilitation *Akt und Sein* were written in the learned language of the German professor, later on Bonhoeffer developed a simple (*schlicht*), albeit dense German style, accessible also to an audience of non-academics. From then on Bonhoeffer also tried to evade any escape into theological style and language.

3. ‘Who is Christ for us today?’

Bonhoeffer could have stayed in the lee of an academic existence, even during the turbulent years of the rise of Nazism and the war. Like many of his colleagues he might have withdrawn himself in an *innere Emigration*. In the summer of 1939 he had the chance to leave the scene, to flee danger and save his own life by accepting a

³ In this respect a public theologian differs from a public intellectual: the theologian is bound, the intellectual is *freischwebend*.

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professorship in the USA. However for him personally, the theologically confessed participation in the reality of the incarnated God implied the concrete decision "to share the trials of this time with my people" – as he clarified his motives for returning to Germany in a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr (*DBW* 15, 210).

As only an academic, Bonhoeffer could not have written the theology he did. For the central question in it was not what the Christian faith means in general, but – as Bonhoeffer formulated in his famous letter written in prison 30 April 1944 – "who Christ really is, *for us today*" (*LPP*, 88 – italics added).⁴ Speaking theologically about God is therefore always localized and embedded in a concrete context ("for us today"). "The God that exists in general, does not exist," Bonhoeffer already wrote in his habilitation *Akt und Sein*. [*Ein Gott den "es gibt," gibt es nicht*]. In his effort to make the ecumenical movement an effective instrument of peace, he noted:

"The church is not allowed to preach principles that are always true; only commandments that are true today. Because what 'always' is true, is not true 'today': God is 'always' *God* to us *today*." [*Gott ist uns "immer" gerade "heute" Gott.*] (*DBW* 11, 332, *Zur theologischen Begründung der Weltbundarbeit*, 1932)

At that time Bonhoeffer was preparing for an academic career, and the phrase might have stayed a witty *bon mot*.

However, the careful planning of a controlled career was ended by his enduring theological concentration on the here and now as the find-spot of God. Since Bonhoeffer was convinced that God reveals himself at the crossroads of concrete reality, a theologian cannot barricade himself in the lee of the library. Even when he/she does that for a while – in fact this is needed in order to be a good theologian – it is done only temporarily "in inner concentration for the outward directed service" [*in innerste Konzentration für den Dienst nach aussen*] (*DBW* 14, 77; letter of 6 September 1935 on the establishment of the Finkenwalde seminary). Partaking in the living reality of God is a dynamic process as that reality itself is dynamic.

⁴ Cf. Ethics (a) 99: "We can and should not speak about what the good is, can be, or should be for each and every time, but about *how Christ may take form among us today and here.*"

Both Bonhoeffer's biography and theology give an account of this dynamic mobility. The rather chaotic image they represent to us now, as witnesses after the fact, not only is the expression of a young, ambitious spirit that loved traveling new horizons, or just a consequence of the political turbulence of the thirties and forties; it also reflects a theology that circles around a God who constantly reveals himself anew, every time incarnated in a different place. Bonhoeffer is continuously searching for God's actual command for that specific time ('Gebot der Stunde'). Only in penetrating the reality that imposed itself in all its concreteness did he trace the presence of God. "Reality is the sacrament of the command of God," Bonhoeffer once wrote (*DBW* 11, 334 [*Zur theologischen Begründung der Weltbundarbeit*, 1932]). Bonhoeffer always did theology "at the given place" (*Ethics* (b) 268, *am gegebenen Ort*) – be it in the church, the university, or in prison – and at every specific spot he tried to understand God's concrete reality and to respond to it appropriately.

4. Contextuality and communicability

As a theologian, Bonhoeffer was extremely sensitive for time and place. One should be conscious of the *kairos*, the decisive sacred moment for acting.

"The main thing is that we keep step with God, and do not keep pressing on a few steps ahead – nor keep dawdling a step behind," he writes in prison (*LPP*, 46).

In an essay he wrote in prison on telling the truth, Bonhoeffer stated that

"telling the truth' may mean something different according to the particular situation in which one stands. Account must be taken of one's relationship at each particular time. The question must be asked whether and in what way a man is entitled to demand truthful speech of others" (*Ethics* (a) 326).

Truth depends on who says something, on behalf of whom and to whom.

"The truthful word is not in itself constant; it is as much alive as life itself. If it is detached from life and from its reference to the concrete other man, if 'the truth is told' without taking into account to whom it is addressed,

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then this truth has only the appearance of truth, but it lacks its essential character.”

Every word should have its place and context.

The question whether Bonhoeffer's oeuvre forms a unity only becomes a problem when its concrete historical context is lost out of sight. For a long time in the reception of Bonhoeffer's thought the question dominated whether one should speak of continuity or discontinuity in his work. However, it seems far more rewarding to read his work synchronically in the context of its time, rather than diachronically as an unbroken development. One still may discern in his theology three periods, in which, depending on what dominated the agenda of that time, simultaneous already acquired basic intuitions were maintained and new themes arrived at.

Even when interpreted in a chronological perspective, the decisive criterion for evaluating Bonhoeffer's theology should not be its systematic consistency in time, but rather whether it adequately responded to the questions of its day.

The concentration on the Christ event represents a basic intuition in all of Bonhoeffer's work that only became stronger and deeper. His understanding of faith as participation in that event inspired his doctrine of the church from *Sanctorum Communio* (“Christ existing as community”) through to his letters and papers from prison (Jesus as the man for others, the church for others). But the questions for the church changed. Though they did not establish the content of his theology, they decisively determined its agenda and style in different periods:

- The first period – in which Bonhoeffer published *Sanctorum Communio* and *Akt und Sein* – was dominated by the development of a theological response to the democratic experiment of the Weimar Republic, and the search for social cohesion and social justice. Christ is present in the poor and the working class people, the lonely and powerless. Bonhoeffer's location was still the university. The means he used were mainly academic – dissertations and lectures.
- The second period, after Hitler came to power, in which Bonhoeffer wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*, was the time of growing dictatorship, a persecuted church, and the flagrant violation of humanity. Christ was to be recognized in the Jew. Bonhoeffer's theological location was the Confessing Church. The means he uses were largely church related –

sermons, letters, meditations and theological publications for a large church audience such as *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Living Together*.

- In the final period, resulting in the posthumous publication of *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, the moral and religious sources for the resistance by civilians and military officers may apply as the central question in his work and the construction of the fundamentals for a new society after the war was the main concern. Christ was to be recognized in the good citizen who takes responsibility. Bonhoeffer's theology was located in the living room of the Bonhoeffer family and later in the prison cell. He writes memoranda, moral investigations, poems, letters, and plans for the future of church and society.

A constant factor in all these periods is Bonhoeffer's willingness and eagerness to communicate, even though he was not a social animal who only could survive in the company of others. He perceived in himself a certain reticence, which hindered him in his social relationships (Letter of 18 January 1944, *LPP* 54; Letter of 7 May 1944, *LPP* 93). Despite his fascination with the monastic life, once he was imprisoned he soon had to admit that he was "not a born Trappist" (Letter of 15 May 1943, *LPP* 5). His intense relationship with Eberhard Bethge however, shows that he had a great talent for friendship. Raised in a large, close family, he acknowledged that to him "human relationships are the most important thing in life" (Letter of 14 August 1944, *LPP* 141). Bonhoeffer's search for communication is mirrored in his theology, which is in its totality described by Clifford Green (1999) as a "theology of sociality." He interpreted Christ as the human being for others; the church a Christ existing as community ("*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*"); he knew how important it was to practice the art of being alone for a while, but only because it serves life with others; he knew the importance of being silent, but only because it qualified speaking with others; in his practice of theology he was constantly looking for partners, teachers, family, friends, and students, with whom he could sharpen his insights and put them to a test; the books he wrote can be counted on the fingers of one hand, however, his letters number in the thousands.

5. The Church as basis and audience

A final remark on the church: In some concepts of public theology, the term "public" stands against "church oriented" since public theology is a theology that does not have the church as its sole or

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main audience, but speaks about God in the public domain. Public theology searches for dialogue with the academy, society, culture, and – in any case not exclusively – with the church. Bonhoeffer also had this wider theological horizon in view. He agreed with Karl Barth that theology had to be church *based*. However, that did not mean that it should be exclusively church *oriented*. It also would be wise for Christians not to put all their eggs in one basket. Raised in the open air of liberal theology, Bonhoeffer showed an openness towards the world of science, philosophy, art – an attitude and knowledge of that he reappraised in prison. He then discussed theology as easy as literature and music. God is present in the midst of life, and serving the church is just one divine mandate amongst others. In a letter of 3 August 1944, in which he enclosed the outline for the book he was writing in prison, he said to Bethge:

“The church must come out of its stagnation. We must move again into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world, and risk saying questionable things, if we are to get down to the serious problems of life. I feel obliged to tackle these questions as one who, although a “modern” theologian, is still aware of the debt that he owes to liberal theology” (*LPP* 137, Letter of 3 August 1944).

The church also made itself guilty of religious escapism by withdrawing into its own spiritual domain.

“Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world” (“Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge,” *LPP* 101).

So Bonhoeffer defended no church-centered theology. From the beginning he aimed at the liberation of human beings unto “genuine worldliness,” a struggle in which the church often was an obstacle, rather than a support. The Christian is not a goal in him-/herself; a christianization, ecclesialization or divinization of reality is not at all what God desires. Bonhoeffer became a theologian because he became more and more convinced of the fact that without Christ no genuine worldliness, no real humaneness was possible (*Ethics* (b) 400v.).

Despite his critical stance on the church, it is striking how Bonhoeffer remained a man of the church and addressed it as his

main audience till the end. Occasions where he directly addressed a non-ecclesial public were relatively rare (a radio address, a lecture at the technical high school and an account of ten years of resistance comes to mind). His criticism of the church as being too narrowly church-centered usually is directed at ... the church. Though Bonhoeffer defended no church-centered theology, his theology nevertheless remained church oriented. His “public theology” did not turn its back to the church, but it put almost all its efforts into the preparation of the church for its task in the world.

A Christian does not live only in the church; Bonhoeffer the conspirator knew this as no other. In his *Ethics* he depicted the church as one divine mandate next the mandates of work, marriage, and government. These spheres of life do not relate hierarchically to each other, but fulfill their divine task in being with-one-another, for-one-another, and over-against-one-another (*Ethics* (b) 394). In each of them a Christian has to fulfill his or her vocation. The church has no right to clericalise the world. At the same time, the church has a special and unique mission to preach Christ and be that part of the world where Christ is obeyed and concretely takes form amongst and in people. The church is no goal in itself, but was to Bonhoeffer nevertheless indispensable as a means to realizing Christ’s transformative presence. In the church, Christ exists as community. Does the real existing church ever meet these standards or is it just an unreachable ideal?

Bonhoeffer’s expectations of the church were uncommonly high. For him, Christology and ecclesiology were inextricably bound, up to the point of identification (Christ = church). At the end of his life Bonhoeffer must have been disappointed in his expectations of the church. The Evangelical Church succumbed to Nazism; the ecumenical movement failed to be an instrument of peace; the Confessing Church only struggled on behalf of itself and not on behalf of the Jews. Bonhoeffer held the church directly responsible for the fact that the liberating Word of God had become powerless. “That is our own fault”, he analyzed (*LPP* 101). But despite this, up to the very end, he kept believing in a church that lived for others, as Christ himself did, and encouraged the church to become such a church, even though he would never experienced it.

“The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human social life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell people of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others” (“Outline for a Book”, *LPP* 140).

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Maybe a public theologian can only relate in a similar, paradoxical way to the church: as someone who, on behalf of and in love for the church, constantly reminds it of the fact that God is more concerned about its witness to and participation in God's liberating transformation of the world, than about its security.

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