

# Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Christian existence on the edge of the future

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with reflections on the relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's legacy for Christian existence in our present world. To do so, the author first concentrates on a specific aspect of Bonhoeffer's life, the continuous movement of return and new beginning, which is displayed by three stations of his life. Following, the author describes a single characteristic of Bonhoeffer's theology, the priority of questions over answers, shown likewise by three of his central questions. As in present times Christians are confronted with innumerable challenges that ask for an answer, this paper concludes by taking Bonhoeffer's three just interpreted questions as indicators for three case studies *en miniature* on Christian responsibility with regard to the future. In this way, the author wishes to present suggestions for an ethics of responsibility as part of public theology, inspired by the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

## **KEYWORDS**

*Christian Ethics, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Plurality, Public Theology, Responsibility*

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It is evidently appropriate to begin a conference in John de Gruchy's honour with reflections on the relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's legacy for Christian existence in our present world. John de Gruchy is a reader of Bonhoeffer's theology since 1958, when he first encountered "The Cost of Discipleship". He presented Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church in comparison with Karl Barth in his doctoral dissertation which led to a "life long dialogue" (De Gruchy 2006:18) not only with Bonhoeffer himself (s. especially De Gruchy 1984) and his friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge (De Gruchy 2005; cf. Hüneke/Bedford-Strohm 2011), but also with the worldwide network of scholars and friends in the International Bonhoeffer Society.

Since 1972 this association convenes International Bonhoeffer Conferences every four years. Since 1976 there was no International Bonhoeffer Conference without a substantial contribution from John's side. He hosted the International Bonhoeffer Conference 1996 in Cape Town (De Gruchy 1997) and will hopefully contribute one day – with the grace of God – to another International Bonhoeffer Conference on South African soil, hopefully in 2020 in Stellenbosch. De Gruchy's central place in Bonhoeffer scholarship was demonstrated by the fact that he was chosen as editor for the new presentation of "Letters and Papers from Prison" in the English edition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, published in 2010 (*DBWE* 8 [2010]). In this moment I feel like a messenger of the worldwide network bound together by the name and the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer – like a messenger with the task to express our gratitude for John's outstanding contribution to transform Bonhoeffer's legacy into a lived experience. It was De Gruchy who interpreted Bonhoeffer's theology in a way that made his relevance for the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa evident (De Gruchy 2005). The witness of Beyers Naudé, the contribution of Eberhard Bethge, but even more the contributions of John de Gruchy brought Bonhoeffer's theology so close to the South African context that some people even asked: When did Bonhoeffer visit South Africa? You all know the answer: De Gruchy brought him to South Africa.

However, it is not my task today to describe John's merits in Bonhoeffer research or to evaluate his contributions to public ethics in the spirit of Bonhoeffer. Nor is it my task to characterize the life and the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself. I moreover concentrate on a single aspect of his life, and I describe a single characteristic of his theology. The aspect of his life that I will illustrate is the continuous movement of return and new beginning. And the characteristic of his theology that I want to propose consists in a priority of questions over answers. I will end my presentation with a reflection on some challenges for Christian existence on the edge of the future.

In this way, I wish to present some suggestions for an ethics of responsibility as part of public theology, inspired by the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

## 1 RETURN AND NEW BEGINNING

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose short life of only 39 years lasted from 1906 to 1945, is all over the world remembered as a martyr of the German resistance against the crimes of Hitler and the Nazi-Regime. It is often described – lastly in Charles Marsh’s new book “Strange Glory” (Marsh 2014) – how he used his ecumenical contacts in order to facilitate the international recognition of the resistance movement. But this role was the result of a continuous return and new beginning. Let me mention three important stations for that.

There is first a return to the bible and a new beginning with the Sermon on the Mount. Bonhoeffer himself describes the existential experience of turning back to the Bible, in 1931/2, that means before the beginning of the Nazi Regime. The Sermon on the Mount gave him clarity in being a Christian and gave a clear direction for his responsibility in church and society. He summarizes this experience in 1935 towards his elder brother Karl-Friedrich, a scientist, with the words: “I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously ... Things do exist that are worth standing up for without compromise. To me it seems that peace and social justice are such things, as is Christ himself” (*DBWE* 13 [2007]:284 f.). These were the years when Bonhoeffer tried to mobilize his fellow Christians in the ecumenical movement of those days for a clear witness against the starting processes of rearmament and preparation for war and even called – in 1934, exactly eighty years ago – for an ecumenical convocation or council for peace.

There is a second return that I call a return to the church and a new beginning with a “life together”. Bonhoeffer was well prepared for an academic career. He presented his doctoral dissertation already at the age of 21, his second dissertation followed only three years later. In the beginning church struggle he felt obliged to serve his church, but already in 1933 he decided to leave Germany for a pastorate in London. However, Bonhoeffer returned two years later in order to be really a part of this struggle and to prepare young theologians for the ministry. “Life together” in listening to the Biblical word was expected to prepare best for the ministry in church and society. “The most intensive concentration for ministry to the world” was his concept (*DBWE* 14 [2013]:96).

The third return was a return to politics; the new beginning was a conspiracy. In 1939 Bonhoeffer had once again the chance to leave Germany, in this second case in order to evade military conscription in Hitler’s army. But again he returned. He could not

stay in New York in a seemingly safe situation whereas Germany was on its way to aggression and war. Bonhoeffer anticipated with clarity the catastrophic character of this development. He was existentially overwhelmed by the insight that in such a situation his place was with his people because only then he could participate in the effort to hinder the evil and to work for the rule of law and for peace.

What follows seems in retrospective to be inevitable; in looking back we see the way to martyrdom as a necessity. Under the guise of a post in the Military Intelligence Bonhoeffer was in fact involved in the conspiracy, he became imprisoned in April 1943 and during his time in jail he had to acknowledge the failure of the attempt on Hitler's life on July 20, 1944. That destroyed all hopes to get liberated, to live, as he expected so ardently, together with his fiancée Maria, to see the dictatorship coming to an end and a new kind of political order emerging.

I have to add a last return and a new beginning of quite different character, transcending the three stations just mentioned. We know it from a report of Payne Best, an officer of the British Secret Service, who was among the last persons to see Dietrich Bonhoeffer living. At this occasion Bonhoeffer asked him to greet his friend George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, with the words: „Tell him that this is for me the end, but also the beginning – with him I believe in the principle of our universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national hatreds and that our victory is certain“ (*DBWE* 16 [2006]:468-69). In view of his death he returned to the confidence in God's grace, his last new beginning was a transcendent one.

## **2. PRIORITY OF QUESTIONS OVER ANSWERS**

The three returns and new beginnings just described were embedded in Bonhoeffer's life story. But they were at the same time of an extraordinary theological significance. It is the deep and strong connection between biography and theology that makes Bonhoeffer unique. His involvement in the church struggle as well as his role in the resistance movement is intertwined with an extraordinary theological productivity. The innovative character of his theology was promoted by his ability to ask new and unexpected questions. The fact that he did not grow up in a "churchy" environment enabled him to enter theological pathways far beyond the broad roads of the theological mainstream. His most remarkable works developed in times of struggle and even more: in times of crisis. The book on "Discipleship" reflected the formation of young pastors for the church struggle, "the most intensive concentration for ministry to the world". Even in the extremely dense times of political conspiracy, in the midst of all its challenges and disappointments, personal risks and political catastrophes Bonhoeffer found the concentration to work theologically. "Ethics" emerged from this situation, and Bonhoeffer regretted deeply that he could not

finish this book what he expected to be his central work, because he became arrested (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:181). But even this time turned out to be of a quite astonishing theological productivity. His “Letters and Papers from Prison” are written down in his Tegel cell. The innovative character of his theology did not diminish in the times of political involvement and even of custody. In the contrary: His theological reflection seemed to intensify under the pressure of conspiracy and imprisonment. His singularity has its roots in the close interrelation between his life and his thinking, his practice and his theological reflection. That makes his legacy a source of inspiration for today and tomorrow.

However, he is not a theological role model. The ways in which we others try to combine the praxis of the Gospel with theological reflection in our Christian life are different from his. Most of us would not dare to become members of a conspiracy and to work on a book on Ethics at the same time. Not many people have the strength to develop new theological ideas in prison. Everyone has to find his or her own way. But in the different ways in which we try to hold Christian life and theological reflection together we can be inspired by his example.

Bonhoeffer’s challenging power has to do with an interesting treat in his way of doing theology. He represents a kind of thinking in which questions are even stronger than answers. He is enormously creative in the way to ask questions and remarkably experimental in his answers. He often acknowledges that his answers are of a provisional character, and that his theology is in its fragmentary character comparable with his personal life (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:306). But in this way he presents important or even decisive questions and opens a space for our own answers. His early reflections on the church are as good examples for this characteristic treat as his late reflections on religion.

The reflections on the church in his doctoral dissertation on the community of the saints (*Sanctorum Communio*) are driven by the question how we approach theologically the social reality of the church. He calls that “A Theological Study of the Sociology of the church” (*DBWE* 1 [1998]) – the original German title sounds even stronger and could also be translated as “a dogmatic investigation on the sociology of the church”. You will not easily find in Protestant theology before Bonhoeffer an author who addresses the visibility of the church as theological problem so urgently. Also after him only very few theologians confronted theology and sociology as directly as he did. His question continues to be challenging even if we hesitate to accept his solution, namely to understand the church as a “collective person” and to identify Christology and Ecclesiology in the formula that the church is “Christ existing as congregation”, or, as the English translation says, “Christ existing as church-community” (Cf. *DBWE* 1 [1998]:14 f.).

His late reflections on religion put unforgettably into question an attitude that takes religion as framework for Christian existence for granted. Bonhoeffer's question may be summarized as follows: Is it possible to understand the Gospel without the framework of religion as a specific sphere of life, of God as "deus ex machina" (the God who appears on the stage of the theatre by a sudden from the machine), of spirituality as a specific activity separated from the practices of daily life? Bonhoeffer asks, as Robert Vosloo says, in this context a sequence of "serious and penetrating questions" like the following: "How can Christ become the Lord of the religionless as well? Is there such a thing as a religionless Christian? If religion is only the garb in which Christianity is clothed – and this garb has looked very different in different ages – what than is religionless Christianity?" (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:363. Vosloo 2012:48). Since Bonhoeffer asked those "serious and penetrating questions", not many theologians addressed the relation of religion and faith as radically as he did. We may hesitate with regard to his diagnosis, namely that modernity leads to a religionless era. But this kind of hesitation does not diminish the importance of his questions.

Observations of this kind lead me to the assumption, that the questions of this theologian are even more interesting than his answers for us. But his answers help us to understand the questions better than we would do without them. However, if that is true we have to ask: What are Bonhoeffer's most important questions or even more: what is his decisive question? I restrict myself to three possible answers.

a) "Letters and Papers from Prison" starts with a "Prologue" that was formulated by the author still in freedom. He presented this text as a Christmas gift for his friends in the conspiracy. It contains some reflections "after ten years", namely ten years after the beginning of the Nazi Regime early in 1933. In this "Prologue" of Christmas 1942 we find a reflection on "success". Bonhoeffer accepts that the success never can justify an evil deed or reprehensible means, but he denies the idea that the results of our deeds are irrelevant and only our good motives count. Such an attitude does not dare to look into the future. Therefore a seemingly heroic posture in the face of an unavoidable defeat is not at all "heroic". Moreover, Bonhoeffer summarizes: "The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but how a coming generation is to go on living." He proposes to look on a situation not on the basis of principle but in concrete responsibility. And he adds: "The younger generation will always have the surest sense whether an action is done merely in terms of principle or from living responsibly, for it is their future that is at stake" (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:42).

b) Having Bonhoeffer's inclination to the young generation in mind it may be interesting to see, how he develops this "ultimately responsible question" when he



enters into dialogue with young people. We find a good example in a letter from prison to his nephew Hans-Walter Schleicher, who was a young soldier in the German army. The uncle is interested to know the topics discussed by these young soldiers, and he asks whether they address only daily questions or the important ones. The writer of that letter cannot resist to explain himself what he sees as the “most important question for the future”, namely “how we are going to find a basis for living together with other people, with spiritual realities and rules we honour as the foundations for a meaningful human life” (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:409).

c) Finally, I add a third example for the insistence with which Bonhoeffer tries to find the “most important” or the “ultimately responsible” question. On April 1944 he starts his series of theological letters to his friend Eberhard Bethge with the question that keeps gnawing at him. And this one question is: “What is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?” (*DBWD* 8 [2010]:362).

What a contrast, you may argue. On the one hand the question, how a coming generation is to go on living or how we find the foundations for living together, and on the other hand this question of a quite different sound: “What is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?” But you remember his statement to his brother that “peace and social justice ... as Christ himself are things worth standing up for without compromise”. Christ and living together or fighting for the life of future generations have their place not in separated spheres, because Christ is God incarnated. The question of Christ is therefore not simply a pious or purely a theological question. In Bonhoeffer’s view the times are over in which this question could be answered only in religious words. And even more: this question can by no means be answered by words alone. It has to be answered by the witness of people, “who pray and do justice and wait for God’s own time” (*DBW* 8 [2010]:390). Bonhoeffer’s answer to the question what Christianity or who Christ is for us today, is often quoted in the shorter form: “to pray and to do justice” (This formula is also used by Bonhoeffer: *DBW* 8 [2010]:389). But by good reasons Bonhoeffer adds a third element and speaks about those “who pray and do justice and wait for God’s own time”. He posits human activity in the horizon of the divine action and sees the future as the space of human responsibility in the light of God’s future. He sees human persons not only as acting, but also as waiting and hoping. Doing justice is embedded in prayer and hope. That relates the human role as responsible actor to the comparably fundamental role as recipient. We receive before we act; we are gifted before we use what is given to us. Even the “ultimate responsible question” is penultimate. Then the ultimate horizon for all our fragmentary activities is God’s creative activity and his coming into our world, his incarnation in Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer's three formulations for *the* central question are closely connected. But they include also a process of translation, described so often as crucial for today's public theology. As Heinrich Bedford-Strohm and others argue, public theology has to be bilingual in translating the language of faith into the language of public discourse (s. for Bonhoeffer's relevance for public theology Bedford-Strohm 2008). In the case of Bonhoeffer that would mean that the question on the meaning of Christianity and of Christ for us today is translated into the question, how a coming generation is to go on living or what the foundations for a living together may be. But it seems that for him there exists also a process of translation in the other direction: He expects a time in which Christians may grasp anew und express publicly "what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ". He waits for a church born anew out of prayer, action and hope and therefore capable to bring "the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world" (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:389). Using his example for our efforts in public theology both directions are comparably important: responsibility for the living together on the earth that is given to us; and openness for a new understanding of the giver who entrusts to us the earth on which we live.

### 3. CHALLENGES FOR A CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE ON THE EDGE OF THE FUTURE

In present times Christians are confronted with innumerable challenges that ask for an answer. In order to select some of them I take Bonhoeffer's three questions, just interpreted in their inner connection, more separately as indicators for three case studies en *miniature* on Christian responsibility with regard to the future. What follows has nothing of a catalogue but is rather an experimental approach.

*a) The responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but how a coming generation is to go on living.* This statement came recently again to my mind when we discussed in Germany on the political answer to the terror and even genocidal actions of the "Islamic State" militia against Christians and Yezidi in the North of Iraq. The tension is obvious. Christian Ethics favours non-violence instead of violence, creative love for your enemy instead of confrontation, reconciliation instead of division. But what is the answer if men are decapitated brutally or women are raped and children misused before they are killed. A decade ago, the international community stated the "Responsibility to Protect" for endangered groups of people as a principle of international morals and law. That includes humanitarian assistance, asylum for refugees, diplomatic activities, economic boycott and the like. But what about stopping on-going massacres? Is there still a military option as last resort? In the German discussion, some argued with another statement of Bonhoeffer: There are situations, he says, in which it is not enough "to bind up the wounds of the



victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself” (DBWE 12 [2009]:365). In the concrete case the German government decided and the parliament accepted the decision to send weapons into the North of Iraq in order to allow the Kurdish Peshmerga troops to stop the deadly aggression of the “Islamic State”. I personally would have preferred an intervention authorized by the United Nations following the rules of the “Responsibility to Protect”. Nevertheless, nothing of this kind happened in time. In my conviction, pure passivity with regard to crimes against humanity is not among the principles of Christian peace ethics. The preparedness of radical pacifists to suffer violence without resistance can neither be transferred to others nor transformed into a right or even a duty of the political community to let crimes happen without any effort to stop them. Asked about the relevance of the fifth commandment for that debate I found myself in a position to answer that the commandment not to kill includes a responsibility to protect people from being killed and therefore to withhold people from killing. That is not a justification of violence or a return to the doctrine of just war, to which we said farewell in wide parts of Christianity, adopting instead a doctrine of just peace. But in our not yet redeemed world there are situations in which we cannot avoid to turn to violence as a last resort in order to save human lives. We are confronted with a challenge that was decisive for Bonhoeffer’s way into resistance.

*b) The most important question is how we can find foundations and rules for living together.* In today’s Germany you will seldom witness a discussion on the future of society without an extended debate on the coexistence between Christians, Muslims and people of other conviction. Bonhoeffer could not have in mind the radical form of plurality that characterizes societies in our days. In a globalising world we become all strangers and live together with people who are alien for us – and we for them. Plurality reaches into the depth of convictions and values.

In South Africa the colours of the rainbow are used as symbols for the peaceful coexistence of the different. But the hint to the harmony of different colours in the rainbow does not substitute the search for common rules and for practicable forms of tolerance. Under the conditions of radical plurality the lack of an overlapping moral consensus shatters the social fabric of societies, and that promotes hostility against aliens and exclusion of minorities. Of course this phenomenon is linked to the problems of injustice and social discrepancy. When inequality mounts to a measure that disregards the equal access to freedom in society, the responsible use of freedom itself is endangered. Exploitation and exclusion are therefore poison for common life, whereas social justice, that means equal access to freedom, is essential for mutual recognition and respect.

But the edge on which we stay today, includes even more challenges not yet included in Bonhoeffer's way to speak about "living together": We share life not only with the members of our own country or our own generation. All humans are created into the image of God. Intergenerational justice and respect for coming generations in the use of resources belong therefore to the preconditions of living together.

And even more: Living together does not include only humanity but also other creatures. That goes also beyond Bonhoeffer's perspective. However, he offered an orientation even for this new task. Larry Rasmussen rightly summarizes a principle of Bonhoeffer's life and theology just from the beginning until the end in the sentence: "Fidelity to God is lived as fidelity to Earth" (Rasmussen 2013:85). Earthly love in all its sensuality is for Bonhoeffer one of the concrete forms of this fidelity to Earth. Rasmussen takes this togetherness of fidelity to God and fidelity to Earth as *Leitmotif* for what he calls *Earth-honouring faith* as the new key for religious ethics in our times. It transcends Bonhoeffer's thinking. But it is an answer to a question posed by him as "the most important question".

c) There is finally *the gnawing question, what Christianity, or who Christ is actually for us today*. In the troubles of our time, why should we refer to the insights of Christian faith and to Christ as person? John de Gruchy, Jens Zimmermann and others answer, that this is necessary for a renewal of humanism (De Gruchy 2006; Zimmermann 2012). To mobilise the universal egalitarianism of the Jewish-Christian tradition as source for a humanism of today does not exclude other traditions and their contributions. To remember unconditional love as empowering our empathy for the vulnerable and suffering other does not justify an exclusive Christian claim for such empathy. And whoever wants to strengthen this stance in Christian religion and ethics has to have in mind those traits in Christian history that promoted just the opposite. In Europe, we remember in these days the outbreak of World War I hundred years ago and of World War II seventy-five years ago. In these wartimes the gospel was misused, especially in Germany, to suggest the superiority of the own nation over others and to reclaim God's blessing for the success of the own arms. Or let us address the South African experience: You remember with excitement and gratitude the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the beginning of his presidency twenty years ago. But these events stood at the end of a period in which Christian faith was misused to justify racial discrimination on seemingly biblical grounds.

In remembering such examples, we have to acknowledge that Christianity and Christ himself mean for us today the task to humanise faith and religion. Our answers to Bonhoeffer's question have to include that we make the respect for the equal dignity of every human being a lived reality. By doing so, our answer may and must also include all possible efforts to make the humanisation of religion a common

effort of all religions on our globe. In this way, the inter-religious dialogue may at certain points be less comfortable as some people tend to expect. However, that is inevitable. Whenever religion is used again to mobilize hatred, to justify a feeling of superiority or to confirm the legitimacy of killing violence, open criticism and clear resistance are unavoidable. With regard to actual plans for an “Islamic Caliphate” in the Middle East a clear opposition in Islam itself is urgently needed. Such an Islamic protest against the misuse of the divine name deserves all possible solidarity from Christians and Christian churches all over the world.

The religious contribution to the renewal of humanism includes therefore the humanisation of religions themselves. This task needs courage, to which the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer contributes a lot.

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