

## **Speech at the opening of the International Bonhoeffer Congress University of Wroclaw, Poland**

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in no way a theologian who wished to be defined by negations. In his prison letters, he deplores the tendency of religious apologists to concentrate on the weaknesses of the secular world-view. The gospel must address people in their strength not only their weakness, he says, and the Word of God is too 'aristocratic' to take advantage of weakness. Nor was he in other ways a man of negation or (in the traditional sense) asceticism. His watchword, even in his early theology, even in the intense atmosphere of Finkenwalde, was involvement. Yet it may be that we best understand his challenges to us now by reflecting on some of what he did, after all, say no to.

### **Culture**

Bonhoeffer was a typical upper bourgeois German of his generation, deeply cultivated, familiar with the repertoire of European civilisation in art, music and literature. The prison letters display, quite casually, a ready knowledge of the mainstream of German culture: in a number of letters in March 1944, he discourses freely on this cultural legacy, on iconography and music and theories of history. He is a resolute 'classicist' in many ways, expressing his unease about Rilke to Maria von Wedemeyer when she shares her enthusiasm; Rilke is 'unhealthy', a diagnostician of the darker, more flawed and ambiguous regions of the spirit (yet he admired at least some of Dostoevsky). It is still Mozart, Beethoven and Goethe who occupy the central territory of his imagination. But, while he may have no taste at all for any kind of modernism in the arts, he is someone whose mind is uncomplicatedly formed by a cultural environment which is not questioned, doubted or resented. If we allow ourselves to borrow the rather questionable typology of Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer is definitely not to be located in a 'Christ against Culture' category.

Yet it was precisely such a powerful and deeply rooted cultural identity that complicated the whole question of resistance to National Socialism. The legacy of 'high culture,' of course, cannot in any way be linked with the neo-barbarism of the Third Reich; yet enough people steeped in that culture were able to tolerate the Reich, even to support it. And the sense of national destiny and national uniqueness had proved a good ally for the ideology of blood and soil. The cultural legacy either supported this ideology or else provided a private space into which the sensitive spirit could retreat from the necessary brutalities of political or military life.

Bonhoeffer has no theory of culture, but he does have a clear theological conviction that no cultural or historical pattern can uncover the will of God. No less than Barth, he believes that there is one story which contains all others; and the centre of that story is the perpetually displaced God who addresses us from the edge of human affairs, who has chosen the place of the excluded. Culture is not to be rejected or given theological legitimacy; it is a fact with which we have no choice but to engage. However, our engagement as Christians must be determined by the question of who or what the culture is currently forgetting, since it is there that we are likely to find God waiting for us. This cannot therefore be a prescription for liberalism or for conservatism. The more fashionable a cause, the more likely that the crucified God has moved

on; the more embedded a practice or trend, the more likely that God is elsewhere. There is nothing to be recommended except the daily development of the mind of the crucified, what some recent theologians like James Alison (following Rene Girard) have come to call 'the intelligence of the victim.'

## **Piety**

Bonhoeffer's critique of piety is probably what most people remember him for -- those, at any rate, who encountered the prison letters at a certain age or in a certain cultural environment. Just as culture cannot be a private refuge, piety is a tempting but ultimately unreal hiding place. We have to look forward to a 'non-religious' era in Christian language. It is a frequently misunderstood notion: Bonhoeffer is in fact saying at least two things here. The first is that he will not allow the language of the gospel to become the dialect of a minority 'interest group'; it must be language that permeates all human discourse in one way or another. It cannot be only a set of conventional terminology that can be learned by the relatively small number of people who decide that they will take an interest in it. In a sense, what Bonhoeffer is arguing is the exact opposite of what most people think of as liberal reductionism. We are to look for a non-religious language for the gospel not because the distinctive claims of the gospel must be muted and ultimately lost in the face of public secularism, but because the gospel makes so large a claim that it cannot be reduced to a 'tribal' speech, understood only by an inner circle. The life of faith is in no way a leisure activity, a mere option.

The second point depends on this first. Religious language as a way of naming and discussing certain problems in theology, a language for cataloguing and analysing, has no active effect. It observes and identifies, but leaves unchanged the situation in which it is spoken. Yet the language of Jesus, as Bonhoeffer says in his great baptism letter of May 1944, transforms what is possible. How are we to recover a language that makes a difference?

Piety, in Bonhoeffer's eyes, is always something that tempts us to passivity unless it is anchored in a clear doctrine of the transforming word. Hence the spirituality which he sought to inculcate at Finkenwalde was inseparable from the call to resistance. To read the Bible together and to practice confession and meditation are necessary for human beings who are free to say no to the culture around them; they are ways of learning and absorbing the 'culture' of Christ's Body - not as a trivial alternative, an option alongside others, but as the resource out of which will come a humanity more fully equipped to be human alongside those whom the culture forgets or despises or terrorises. So if the challenge in respect of culture is to seek always to find who is being forgotten or pushed to the edges, the challenge in respect of piety is so to absorb the reality of the new world of Scripture and of living prayer in Christ that this sort of discernment becomes more possible. If we are inhabitants of a larger world than any contemporary culture can define, we are more free to see what such a culture seeks to educate us to ignore.

So to live in the climate of authentic spiritual discipline is to be 're-educated'. To adore God for God's own sake, to bring one's sins daily before God and the neighbour, to make one's own the language of Scripture, especially psalmody -- all this apparently irrelevant activity is part of opening ourselves up to the transforming word. It is useless and worse than useless when it becomes a way of protecting believers or of denying the acuteness of the world's pain; so, when

the Confessing Church began, step by step, to 'normalise' its relations with the Reich, Bonhoeffer spoke out against it as he had spoken out against the state church of the mid-thirties. But this does not mean that he thought the disciplines of Finkenwalde had been a mistake or a false start.

In a context where, as we are so often reminded, spirituality has become a major interest, Bonhoeffer obliges us to ask what the transforming potential is of any practice or tradition. Does it transform only the individual's sense of well-being? Then it is merely 'piety'. But if it enables each believer to stand alongside other and alongside the forgotten, it is on the way to allowing the action of God to make itself manifest. And that is the entire point of spiritual discipline -- not the cultivation of a private self, but the renewal of the world by God, a transformation of all the conditions of human speaking and relating. 'The event of Whitsuntide thus does not consist primarily in a new religiousness, but in the proclamation of a new creative act of God...It is not for a moment a matter of putting the religious before the profane, but of putting God's act before both religious and profane' (The Way to Freedom, 47).

## **Ecumenism**

If this is what life in the Spirit demands of us, a number of questions arise to do with the unity of the Church. Bonhoeffer made a wide circle of friends in the ecumenical movement during the thirties, and several were of the greatest importance to him in the years of deepest crisis. But by the mid-thirties, he was already challenging the conventional wisdom of ecumenical dialogue; and the failure of the ecumenical structures to give the Confessing Church the support for which he begged was a deep wound. For him the reality of a church whose horizons were wider than the local struggles of the Protestant communities of Germany was more and more a crucial element of his thinking. Yet the last thing he wants from such an international network is a bland fellowship extended to all those communities without discrimination, as if the international scene simply relativised the seriousness of the struggle against the Reich.

'Is church union and fellowship in the Word and Sacrament created by the Holy Spirit, or is it the union of all well-disposed, honourable, pious Christians whether their observances be German Christian, that of the church committees or that of the Confessing Church? Is church union founded only on the truth of the Gospel or on a love uncontrolled by the question of truth?' (The Way to Freedom, 112) This is how Bonhoeffer phrases the challenge in 1936, in a paper in which he argues that the whole idea of 'confession,' taking a stand for truth at the cost of visible unity, needs to be revisited by the Protestant churches in the context of a new threat to Christian integrity. The notion of a status confession in the Reformation era is precisely about letting the Church be judged by Scripture, about the Church's radical readiness for self-criticism; thus the historic confessions cannot just be turned into timeless deposits of truth independent of the Scriptures to which they point. And the Scriptures in a new situation may demand of us a new determination of the Church's limits. The principle of confession both requires us to recognise that there may be occasions when visible unity matters less than fidelity -- and that the point at which this becomes a question will not necessarily be the same from age to age.

It is an uncomfortable message for anyone committed to ecumenism. Just as culture and piety are put into perspective by the immediacy of a threat to the very integrity of the gospel, so is church unity. Yet it is a very difficult discernment that is called for here. It is not that division in the

Church is imperative for the sake of some abstract truth; Bonhoeffer is cautious about whether the Reformation disputes over the Eucharist are now quite what the churches should be giving priority to. The issue is whether the gospel of God's action -- and the reality of God's action -- can be manifest and effective. As with the questions about culture and piety, this challenge too requires us to think very carefully about what might constitute a 'pseudo-church' -- not just a church that teaches erroneous doctrine but one that in its actions and words denies the grace of God.

So that, as with our earlier categories, we have to recognise a question that unsettles both the liberal and the conservative, and which should prompt all engaged in interchurch dialogue to reflect on what it is that might make a pseudo-church. And to answer that, we need not a more exact calibration of the purity of other Christian groups but first a freedom for self-criticism in the presence of Scripture and secondly a keen eye for what is challenging the Church in the contemporary world and what menaces its integrity in this particular environment.

In sum: Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a man immersed in a specific cultural heritage, and untroubled by the fact; he was a person of profound and rigorous (and very traditional) personal spirituality; he was someone committed to the ecumenical perspective from very early on in his adult life. But his witness involved him in raising some very stark questions about the value of a culture when it became part of a tyrannous and racist ideology; in challenging the ways in which traditional piety could be allowed to become a protected and private territory, absolving us from the need to act, or rather to let God to act in us; and in insisting that the search for visible unity as an ideal independent of truth and integrity could only produce a pseudo-church.

He stands as an example of just that 'yes and no' to his environment which St Paul sketches in I Corinthians, and it is why his example is both so widely effective and so little bound to any one programme in the Church, why he does not easily let himself be claimed by any party.

The resolution of these tensions was, for him, not a theoretical matter, but the bare fact of witness. And this means that we who celebrate his memory cannot extract from it a 'Bonhoefferian orthodoxy' that will tell us what policies we are to adopt now at a time when the churches face profound division. The temptation -- as Alasdair Macintyre pointed out many years ago, discussing Bishop John Robinson's discussion of Bonhoeffer -- is that we borrow Bonhoeffer's language to give dignity and seriousness to some of our current controversies, when the truth is that it is only in the face of a real anti-church that these matters come fully into focus, when there is an active programme aimed at destroying the Church's integrity and expelling or silencing those who hold to that integrity. And Bonhoeffer himself warns us about being too ready in advance to spell out what would constitute an anti-church. What is essential is the work that prepares us for discernment: the common life of adoration and confession, the struggle to bring acts and policies to the judgement of Scripture, the freedom, above all, to stand against what actively seeks, inside or outside the Church, to prohibit the proclamation of the Gospel, confident in what God has irrevocably given to the community of faith.

In October 1938, Bonhoeffer addressed a conference of younger pastors associated with the Confessing Church and serving in illegal pastorates; his subject was the question of what obedience to Scripture meant. He warns against using Scripture to demonstrate the rightness of

an action or policy, making Scripture serve a programme of our own, a conception of our righteousness. It is not that we can solve the dramatic personal question, 'What shall I do?' by a simple appeal to the Bible, so that we are relieved of the burden of human ambiguity and even human sinfulness and error. The Bible, says Bonhoeffer, is not interested in resolving personal dramas of choice. What matters is that what we say or do or choose points to the truth of Christ. In itself it is always going to be in some degree in need of forgiveness; but it is 'right' to the extent that it displays the truth of Christ. 'It is our way to let Jesus Christ find us in this way. Christ is the truth. The sole truth of our way is that we should be found in this truth' (The Way to Freedom, 176). As a programme, as a set of solutions, this is not going to be the answer to our divisions and quarrels as churches today. But if this is the language in which we are prepared to think about and pray about our struggles, we shall have learned from Bonhoeffer what above all he has to teach us: Christ equips us to say no to those falsehoods which allow us to ignore the places where he is to be found. Christ can lead us through culture and piety and ecumenism to a place where we must say no to any aspects of them that make falsehoods easier. Christ will find us as and when we are ready to be found by him, and not when we are certain that we can make him speak for our party or our programme, left or right. Inexorably, we are led to that twofold commendation of prayer and justice with which the Prison Letters leave us -- a commendation not of abstract spirituality and busy activism, but of immersion in Christ through Scripture and the struggle to act so that God's act will be visible.

It is a legacy that will not easily let us be satisfied with ourselves; which is why it is a gift from Bonhoeffer's Lord and ours.

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