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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

A World Without God: An Investigation into Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Baptism Homily

By Geoffrey Watson

Abstract: What happens when faith communities fail to meet the moral obligations of their unique historical moment? Has the church then, by definition, lost its authority and right to speak or teach on Jesus' behalf? If so, what are the repercussions of those failings? In what specific ways do the failures of Christian communities call us to reflect on and evolve our theology? These were questions that must have dogged the Lutheran minister and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), as he sat in his German prison cell, awaiting his death sentence. Yet after the initial shock, Bonhoeffer accepted these harsh circumstances, wrestling deeply with his faith and the failings of his church, eventually earning the trust and respect of the guards, some of whom would later risk their lives on his behalf, and engaging in a series of correspondences and reflections that would outline a bold new vision of what it means to be a Christian in the modern era. Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, published six years after his death and carefully edited by his best friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, articulates a relevant, prophetic spirituality that strives to separate ethics from dogma in order to meet the actual needs of a suffering world. One of these letters in particular, a baptismal homily written to Bethge's son and Dietrich's namesake, offers some powerful insights into what Bonhoeffer's vision of a "religion-less Christianity" might look like. Whatever the differing social, political, or economic contexts, Bonhoeffer's core teaching remains a call to stand with and fight for the suffering ones in real time.

Keywords: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Religion-less Christianity, Prophetic Spirituality

What happens when faith communities fail to meet the moral obligations of their unique historical moment? Has the church then, by definition, lost its authority and right to speak or teach on Jesus' behalf? If so, what are the repercussions of those failings? In what specific ways do the failures of Christian communities call us to reflect on and evolve our theology? These were questions that must

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have dogged the Lutheran minister and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), as he sat in his German prison cell, awaiting his death sentence. Bonhoeffer had been arrested previously for his role in the German resistance movement during World War 2 and for his involvement in a secret plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

“It is horrible here,” he wrote his parents in 1943 from inside Tegel Military Prison. “Dreadful impressions often pursue me well into the night.”¹ His first months in jail were some of the most terrifying days of his life. In a later note, he went as far as to contemplate suicide, “not out of a sense of guilt, but because I am practically dead already.”² Yet after the initial shock, Bonhoeffer accepted these harsh circumstances, wrestling deeply with his faith and the failings of his church, eventually earning the trust and respect of the guards, some of whom would later risk their lives on his behalf, and engaging in a series of correspondences and reflections that would outline a bold new vision of what it means to be a Christian in the modern era. Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*, published six years after his death and carefully edited by his best friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, articulates a relevant, prophetic spirituality that strives to separate ethics from dogma in order to meet the actual needs of a suffering world.

One of these letters in particular, a baptismal homily written to Bethge’s son and Dietrich’s namesake, offers some powerful insights into what Bonhoeffer’s vision of a “religion-less Christianity” might look like. He begins the homily by explaining to his great-nephew the importance of place, family, and upbringing. “In the revolutionary times ahead,” Bonhoeffer advises, “it will be a priceless gift to know the security of a good home. It will provide a bulwark against all dangers from within and without.”³

Bonhoeffer himself came from a large, close-knit, religious family, whose members were allied in the fight against Adolf Hitler’s authoritarian rule. The son of a psychiatrist and grandson of a Protestant theologian, Bonhoeffer grew up highly educated and privileged, yet also civically minded. In

¹ Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 340-341.

² Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 342.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 181.

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fact, according to Bonhoeffer's sister, Susanne, "all children and children-in-law were united in their opposition to the Nazi ideology. All of them tried to act against the Nazi regime in their own contexts and according to their professional opportunities."⁴ After a promising academic career, Bonhoeffer was called to serve in a more dangerous, activist role as he and others fought to protect the integrity of church teachings against the growing influence of Nazi ideology. As religious leaders around him capitulated to the pressures of nationalism, Bonhoeffer became more radical in his critique of the government and was eventually imprisoned for his involvement with the German resistance movement.

A cursory glance through his prison letters reveals how vital family was to Bonhoeffer's identity. His journals are filled with endless, intimate correspondences to parents, siblings, his fiancé, extended family, associates, confidants, and friends. These were the people with whom he painstakingly formed and teased out his theology and the community through which he lived out his vocation. The familial tenderness of Bonhoeffer's correspondences, however, stands in stark contrast to his views of the German church, an institution which became the object of his frustration and scorn.

One can't read Bonhoeffer's baptism homily without reflecting on the profound disappointment he must have felt in the German Christian community's failure to respond to the ethical nightmare of the Nazi regime, as well as its complicity in the systematic murder of six million Jews. As Ferdinand Schlingensiepen writes in his biography, "For Bonhoeffer, the Church had to take the guilt upon itself, without any ifs or buts, because it was guilty of sin against the body of Christ."⁵ In order to understand how he arrived at this conclusion, however, and begin to understand the vision toward which he is calling the Christian community in these letters, it's helpful to begin with the theologies and influences that shaped Bonhoeffer's thinking and provided the foundations for his homily.

The Sources Behind the Text

As a privileged, white German Protestant, Bonhoeffer was deeply influenced by other European theologians like Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. It was Barth though, more than anyone, who articulated

⁴ Jutta Koslowski "Details from the Life of the Bonhoeffer Family: New Insights about the Biography and Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Memoirs of his Youngest Sister Susanne," *Theology Today* 77, no 1 (April 2020): 20.

⁵ Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 297.

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Bonhoeffer's most basic criticism of church teachings. Specifically, Barth "saw the grace of Jesus Christ as the ground, content and character of the command of God the creator,"⁶ and it is the church's failure to live up these Christian mandates that echoes prominently throughout Bonhoeffer's theology.

Specifically, Bonhoeffer argues that "rather than following abstract principles, our actions are shaped by the living God revealed in Christ incarnate, Christ crucified, and Christ risen."⁷ Here, the concept of 'abstract principles' is placed firmly at odds against real action, grounded in the inspiration of a vital, living God, permeating our reality—a God embodied specifically in the person of Jesus Christ. For both Bonhoeffer and Barth, the incarnate Christ is the organizing principle around which the Christian's life must be patterned. Theirs is a theology that doesn't fragment or cloud itself behind obscure, doctrinal hair-splitting, but instead attempts to separate what they judged to be lifeless ceremony, traditions, and teachings from emboldened, compassionate accompaniment with the poor and suffering in real and meaningful ways. For Bonhoeffer, Christianity was not simply a code of beliefs and strict adherence to routine, but rather an active way of relating to the world and responding to its needs.

Bonhoeffer's prison writings depart from Barth, however, in the vocabulary he uses to speak about the ethical life. As his thinking developed, Bonhoeffer was searching for language that could resonate with the modern world. Language that was not entombed in the cold, traditional trappings of an increasingly irrelevant doctrine. "The point," as John Holloway writes, "is not to do away with church, but rather, to interpret these things so that they can relate to the modern human being."⁸ In other words, church teachings are only effective to the extent that they speak to, support, and inspire real, compassionate action. In Bonhoeffer's view, "Barth did not go far enough in his critique of religion because in the nonreligious interpretation of theological concepts he gave no concrete guidance."⁹ Although the two theologians may have agreed in many foundational ways, Barth, according to

⁶ Arthur C. Cochrane, "Bonhoeffer & Barth vs Norman: Continuing the Discussion: A Politicized Christ," *Christianity and Crisis* 39, no 6 (April 1979): 87.

⁷ Nancy J. Duff, "'Stages on the Road to Freedom': A Brief Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Theology Today* 71, no. 1 (April 2014): 9.

⁸ John Daniel Holloway III, "Bonhoeffer's 'Catchy Phrases': Karl Barth's Reception of the Prison Letters Revisited," *Kerygma Und Dogma* 64, no. 1 (January 2018): 55.

⁹ Holloway, "Bonhoeffer's 'Catchy Phrases,'" 57.

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Bonhoeffer, failed to articulate what exactly this relevant, vibrant, new kind of Christianity might look and sound like.

What would it mean to pray in this emerging world? How do we form communities? Or worship effectively? And how can one speak about God in ways that a more mature, technologically advanced, and increasingly cynical world could actually connect with and understand? To answer these questions, Bonhoeffer looked to philosophy and history, rather than the theologians who had previously shaped his thinking.

While imprisoned at Tegel, Bonhoeffer became immersed, not in Tillich or Barth, but rather in the works of philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey and Dilthey's student, José Ortega y Gasset.¹⁰ These two thinkers, along with William James and Immanuel Kant, would influence how he began to speak about religion and the new ways in which Christianity would have to mold and adapt itself to a world that seemed to have outgrown its need for ineffectual, spineless religious beliefs and traditions.

What intrigued Bonhoeffer specifically about Dilthey was the historical lens through which he viewed human progress. "According to Dilthey's philosophy of life," writes Ralf Wüstenberg, "humans began to think autonomously from the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation. They no longer used God . . . as a matter of convenience, but used autonomous reason to explain politics . . . law . . . natural sciences . . . and other subjects."¹¹ In other words, the science, technology, and human advancement of the twentieth century made it unnecessary to accept truth without observation and experience. Civilization, at least the technologically advanced, European civilization that Bonhoeffer inhabited, had moved beyond its need to believe in God on blind faith and *a priori* understanding alone. From Dilthey's perspective, modern humans didn't need God anymore to make sense of their lives and answer the deep questions of existence. It was religion instead that needed to catch up to society.

By incorporating these ideas into his thinking, Bonhoeffer was trying to break from traditional theological language to land upon a religious vision that could embody the actual historical, social, and cultural trends of a suffering world. Or as Bonhoeffer himself puts it, "we cannot be honest unless we

¹⁰ Martin E. Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters and Papers from Prison": A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 69.

¹¹ Ralf K. Wüstenberg, "Religionless Christianity and Religious Pluralism: Dietrich Bonhoeffer 'Revisited,'" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 131 (July 2008): 10.

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recognize that we have to live in the world- “*etsi deus non daretur*.”¹² *As if there were no God*. Again, it’s vital to understand here that Bonhoeffer is not rejecting God outright. He is instead searching for a more honest, relevant, and courageous way to talk about God—to envision and exemplify who it is exactly that Christ is calling us to become. For Bonhoeffer, Jesus Christ would always be the embodiment and bedrock of the Christian life—the model on whom we construct our lives. So, the question then becomes, how do we continue to emulate Jesus in a society that has moved past its need for God? By forgetting the ethical example of Christ and focusing instead on outdated dogmas, trivial teachings and traditions, Bonhoeffer’s church was doing its best to make itself incomprehensible to large swaths of the modern world.

“During these years,” Bonhoeffer writes in his baptism homily, “the Church has fought for self-preservation as though it were an end in itself, and has thereby lost its chance to speak a word of reconciliation to [humankind] and the world at large.”¹³ What he means is that by failing to respond to the moral crisis of the Nazi regime, while focusing on survival and correct doctrine instead of justice, the church lost both its relevance and ability to stand up for the actual needs of a suffering people. In his prison letters, Bonhoeffer was trying to imagine what this new kind of “religion-less Christianity” might look like, as well as what this new language might sound like. The evolution of these ideas would continue to unfold, shift, and change long after his death.

Toward a New Vision

“By the time you are grown up,” Bonhoeffer continues in his homily, “the form of the church will have changed beyond recognition . . . the day will come when [humanity] will be called to utter the word of God with such power as will change and renew the world.”¹⁴ What exactly does he mean by this statement? What new form will the church take? To begin to answer these nuanced questions, it’s important to examine not just the context in which these letters were written, but also the initial and

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 478.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 187.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 188.

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long-term responses to its material, including the reinterpretations and misinterpretations along the way. To do that, one must begin with the book's editor and midwife, Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's one time student, spiritual confidant, and chief interpreter of his theology.

Much like Theo van Gogh, who maintained and curated his brother's art after Vincent's death, without the work of Eberhard Bethge, most of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ideas would have died with him on his execution day in 1945. It was only through painstaking efforts on his friend's behalf, as well as the careful editing, interpreting, and systematizing of Bonhoeffer's theology that these ideas still bear any application in our world today. To put it another way, Eberhard Bethge is as integral to the legacy and development of Bonhoeffer's ideas as the man who wrote them. As Bethge states about these papers, "this was not a theological essay on radical themes but genuine letters . . . tinged as they are with all the emotions, sometimes more and sometimes less rigorously controlled, of a man in a prison cell."¹⁵ Bonhoeffer himself felt the ideas were too clumsy for publication.¹⁶

What's more, because of Bonhoeffer's role in the political resistance against and assassination attempts of Adolf Hitler, and because he left no comprehensive systematic theology, established German theologians initially discounted the more radical elements in his prison writings.¹⁷ And those theologians who did respond to the work often misinterpreted its core ideas, some "exploiting Bonhoeffer's ideas in the interest of Marxism,"¹⁸ while other North American thinkers used it to expand on "a bizarre 'death of God' theology."¹⁹ And while these theologians did pave the way for the prison letters to become more popular and controversial, their initial responses also contributed to some creative misrepresentations of Bonhoeffer's ideas along the way.

A major reason that Bonhoeffer's work resonated so deeply within many varying cultures has not only to do with its sharp critique of institutional religion, but also its openness to thinking about and questioning God in new ways. In East Germany, for example, a Communist society marked by atheism

¹⁵ Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters and Papers from Prison,"* 33.

¹⁶ Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters and Papers from Prison,"* 41.

¹⁷ John W. De Gruchy, "Eberhard Bethge: Interpreter Extraordinaire of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 3 (July 2007): 356.

¹⁸ Eberhard Bethge, "The Reception and Interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 3 (June 1973): 15.

¹⁹ De Gruchy, "Eberhard Bethge," 359.



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and strict authoritarianism, a small band of East German scholars saw in Bonhoeffer's letters, "attempts to square . . . some form of Christian witness and service with . . . many aspects . . . of the Communist regime."²⁰ They interpreted a vision that could exist outside the constraints of traditional Christian language and dogma, while still being grounded in selflessness and love. Likewise, in the United States and Great Britain, two cultures remarkably different from East Germany, Bonhoeffer's ideas took shape in a whole new way. His books and letters spoke across these cultural barriers to people struggling against oppressive institutions—those fighting in the civil rights movement, for example, and anti-war protests. This new generation of thinkers and theologians saw in Bonhoeffer a symbol and a rallying cry. A hero in the mold of Dorothy Day, Gandhi, Thomas Merton, or Martin Luther King.²¹ A visionary, deeply critical of expanding empires, rampant materialism, and apathy in the face of injustice. A prophet who saw a complacent church relegating itself to the sidelines. These were pastors and lay people who, in the words of South African theologian John de Gruchy, were "disenchanted with a Christianity that seemed out of touch."²²

But how did these ideas develop? How did a relatively obscure, if promising, German theologian, a casualty of war, martyred in a military prison, come to be considered one of the most celebrated martyrs of the twentieth century? A thinker on par with Martin Luther King and Oscar Romero? For those answers, we turn again to Eberhard Bethge.

The Role of Eberhard Bethge

As mentioned, it was Eberhard Bethge who not only shepherded his good friend's message into the world but continued to reinterpret its core ideas, allowing the space for the theological conversation to unfold and adapt, while offering the restraint necessary to protect its foundational teachings. Bethge's dedication and vigilance allowed Bonhoeffer's theology to evolve, expand, and mature to fit the shifting landscapes of different time periods, societies, and cultures to which they could be applied. Yet he always guarded Bonhoeffer's central message—the universal "frustration of [the modern person] over . .

²⁰ Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters and Papers from Prison,"* 90.

²¹ Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters and Papers from Prison,"* 107.

²² Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters and Papers from Prison,"* 113.

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. the great classical formulations of the Church, and the chasm lying between theological statements and the experiences of the [layperson].”²³

Whatever the differing social, political, or economic contexts, Bonhoeffer’s core teaching remains a call to stand with and fight for the suffering ones in real time. Therefore, if the Church can no longer provide the blueprint and justification to inspire action and courage in its followers, then that church, according to Bonhoeffer, has lost its moral authority. Because of Bethge’s intimate understanding of his friend’s work, as well as his privileged position as the person to whom Bonhoeffer had always confided, Bethge was able to speak across these societal barriers, “separating those who live for others from those who do not, whatever group they may belong to.”²⁴ Regardless of the circumstances to which Bonhoeffer’s theology is applied, Christ must always be at the center of it, or, as Ralf Wüstenberg writes, “ignoring the Christological center in Bonhoeffer's theology means misconstruing him altogether.”²⁵

Conclusion

Before concluding, it is important to remember that Bonhoeffer’s diagnosis of a religion-less world does not and cannot apply across all cultures. He was, after all, only speaking as one man in a prison cell—a man profoundly disenchanted with the failures of his own religious communities in the face of an ethical mandate. Even more, he was a white man, responding to a largely white, European-centered view of religion. One that could not account for the “massive shift of the Christian population from the north (Europe and North America) to the south (Africa, Asia, and Latin America).”²⁶ Religion less, however, “meant for Bonhoeffer the absence of a theory of religion, more than the total disappearance of the word religion itself.”²⁷ As it’s been stated, his baptism homily, like so much of his later theology, was an attempt to break from what he saw as a flimsy tradition—one centered on what

²³ Bethge, “The Reception and Interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 8-9.

²⁴ Bethge, “The Reception and Interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 8.

²⁵ Wüstenberg, “Religionless Christianity and Religious Pluralism,” 6.

²⁶ Peter C. Phan, “Doing Theology in World Christianity: Different Resources and New Methods,” *Journal of World Christianity* 1, no. 1 (2008): 28.

²⁷ Wüstenberg, “Religionless Christianity and Religious Pluralism,” 14.

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would happen in the next world, rather than a spirituality grounded in the very real pains and needs of this one. This is a truth that has profound implications for Christian life across a wide multitude of cultures, countries, and societies.

In his book, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, David Tracy writes that “we converse with texts . . . We inquire. We question . . . Just as there is no purely autonomous text, there is no purely passive reader. There is only that interaction named conversation.”²⁸ Thus, Bonhoeffer’s ideas have inspired widely different interpretations, from Eastern Germany to Apartheid South Africa, to the United States, yet the central theology, thanks in no small part to the work of his friend Eberhard Bethge, continues to endure. Ultimately, Bonhoeffer teaches that Christians are defined not by their ability to recite dogma or take part in tradition, but by their willingness to bear responsibility for the world in which they live.

The questions Bonhoeffer raises in his baptism homily are as universal as they are uncomfortable. They should be. They are the conversations we must continue having with ourselves, our communities of accountability, and especially our young people. Amid the staggering wealth inequality, ecological nightmares, and devastating legacies of racism, Bonhoeffer’s work remains a relevant, vital challenge. His life and teachings continue to invite us out from behind our masks of self-satisfaction, half-baked grievances, and complacency, forcing us to ask ourselves the one, vital and necessary question: Is what I’m doing in church each Sunday translating into a Christ-centered life? One that’s grounded in generosity, ethical courage, and love?

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²⁸ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 19. As quoted in Martin E. Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters and Papers from Prison": A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 26.

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